

English

Julien Gracq

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-
-
-
- 7 **Au château d'Argol**
[Château d'Argol]
- 10 **Un beau ténébreux**
[Dark Stranger]
- 12 **Liberté grande**
[Great Liberty]
- 15 **André Breton. Quelques aspects de l'écrivain**
[André Breton: some aspects of his writing]
- 17 **Le Roi pêcheur**
[The Fisher King]
- 19 **Le Rivage des Syrtes**
[The Opposing Shore]
- 23 **Un balcon en forêt**
[Balcony in the Forest]
- 26 **La Presqu'île**
[The Peninsula]
- 30 **Préférences**
[Preferences]
- 33 **Lettrines, Lettrines II**
[Dropped Capitals, Dropped Capitals II]
- 36 **Les Eaux étroites**
[The Narrow Waters]
- 38 **En lisant en écrivant**
[Reading / Writing]
- 40 **La Forme d'une ville**
[The Form of a City]
- 42 **Autour des sept collines**
[About the Seven Hills]
- 44 **Carnets du grand chemin**
[Notes from the High Road]
-
-
-

Chronology

- 1910: the July 27th Louis Poirier is born at Saint-Florent-le-Vieil. The two branches of the family hail from the Val de Loire and Mauges. His father travels on behalf of the family business, a haberdashery wholesaler's.
- ≈ 1916: a happy childhood spent in a family spared by the war: precocious reading, school, games on the island Batailleuse, holidays at Pornichet.
- 1921: enters the first form at the Lycée Clemenceau at Nantes, beginning a life as a boarder which will continue until 1935 in khâgne (preparatory class) and then in the *École normale supérieure*. The emotional separation, causing a deeply felt wrench in his life, is compensated for by brilliant academic success.
- 1928: the pupil of Alain at the lycée Henri-IV. He discovers Paris, the cinema, and modern art.
- 1929: he discovers Wagner thanks to a performance of Parzifal.
- 1930: obtains a place at the *École normale supérieure*, choosing to study geography with Emmanuel de Martonne, whilst working towards a diploma in political science. He reads Nadja and the Manifeste du surréalisme.
- 1936: first appointment as a fully qualified history teacher at the *lycée* in Nantes. He joins the French Communist Party and plays a leading role in the branch of the CGT (association of French Trade Unions) at his *lycée* at Quimper (1937-1939).
- 1937: he writes Au château d'Argol.
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- 1938: Julien Gracq finds his name and his publisher: after a refusal from Gallimard, Au château d'Argol is published by José Corti, close to the Surrealists.

- 1939: André Breton sends him a stimulating, perhaps decisive letter. The two men meet at Nantes. On hearing of the Germano-Soviet pact, Gracq returns his membership card to the communist party.
- 1940: the German offensive in Flanders takes Gracq's regiment by surprise. Gracq is taken prisoner, interned in Silesia until February 1941, then repatriated for health reasons.
- 1941-1945: Gracq is a *lycée* teacher, then assistant lecturer in geography at the University of Caen. He writes Un beau ténébreux, Le Roi pêcheur and the poems of Liberté grande; these books are to appear after the war.
- 1946: he leaves the university; in 1947, he is appointed teacher of geography and history at the lycée Claude-Bernard in Paris, a position he will occupy until his retirement in 1970. His life is henceforth divided between Paris and Saint-Florent, between work and vacations, teaching and writing, these forming two separate but smooth-running halves in his life. He writes his essay, André Breton, and begins Le Rivage des Syrtes.
- 1949: Le Roi pêcheur is performed at the Théâtre Montparnasse and panned by the critics, with whom Gracq gets even by writing La Littérature à l'estomac.
- 1951: Le Rivage des Syrtes wins the Prix Goncourt, which Gracq refuses as he had announced that he would.
- 1953: he begins to write a novel that he will not finish; ten years later he will publish a fragment of it, «*La Route*».
- 1955: he begins to write notebooks: impressions from his travels and his reading, personal fragments, disconnected texts. These will provide the raw material for his volumes of collections, from Lettrines onwards.
- 1958: publication of Un balcon en forêt here, Gracq transposes to the Ardennes his experience of the «phoney war».
- 1961: under the title Préférences, Gracq collects critical essays written since 1946.
- 1967: publication of Lettrines. Adaptation for television of Un beau ténébreux by Jean-Christophe Averty.
- 1970: his last work of fiction, La Presqu'île, grouping together «*La Route*», «*Le Roi Cophetua*» and a lengthy short story from which the volume borrows its title. Gracq takes his retirement, and spends the summer as guest professor at the University of Madison, Wisconsin.
- 1971: screen adaptation by André Delvaux of Le Roi Cophetua, with the title «*Rendez-vous à Bray*».
- 1974: publication of Lettrines II, a collection of notes since 1965. A separate fragment of this same whole will become Les Eaux étroites, published in 1976.
- 1978: adaptation of Un balcon en forêt for the cinema by Michel Mitrani.
- 1980: the publication of En lisant en écrivant is well received by the press, which acts as though it is rediscovering a forgotten author.
- 1985: publication of La Forme d'une ville, a major contribution by Gracq to social geography, and an oblique autobiography.

- 1988: publication of a book about Rome, Autour des sept collines.
- 1989: publication of volume I of his complete works in the «Bibliothèque de la Pléiade» collection; the second volume to appear in 1995.
- 1992: publication of his Carnets du grand chemin, which continue Lettrines.
- 1999: Julien Gracq living at Saint-Florent-le-vieil.

Au château d'Argol

Julien Gracq wrote Au château d'Argol during the summer of 1937. After Gallimard refused the manuscript, Gracq contacted no other publishing house until a chance meeting led him to submit it to José Corti, a publisher and bookseller close to the Surrealists. Corti accepted the work and the book appeared in December 1938.

Au château d'Argol stands on the threshold of Gracq's work: the interruption brought about by the war and captivity separates it from the rest of his work, like a proud portico constructed in a more archaic style. It is nevertheless a youthful work dominated by the desire for self-explanation and the wonder felt by the writer who is discovering his powers. At first glance the book appears to be an «extraordinary tale» in the manner of Edgar Allen Poe, but one in which the mechanisms of the fantastic seem to have been pressed into the service of aesthetic or moral preoccupations. The plot brings together a heroic trio in a Breton manor house, between the sea and the forest: there is a pair of young men, Albert and Herminien, and a woman, Heide, who passes from one to the other, and whom they take turns to demoralise before coming together in a stabbing, when there are no longer any means of mediation. It is not so much the woman – soon reduced to the role of an object despite her charms – who constitutes the focus of the book, but rather the «necessary union» of these two men, each one representing for the other «the phantom both of his double and of his opposite»: Albert and Herminien are opposites like light and dark, mind and matter, speculation and action. The story is a drama of incarnation and reversibility; the contagion of a sexual wound is spread, from the kiss «stolen» from Albert by Heide to the rape of Heide and Herminien's wound, inflicted by a blow from his horse. In the engraving

discovered in Herminien's room representing the mystery of the Grail, the glorious blood of the Grail and the putrefied blood of the wounded king, Amfortas, are mingled, closing the cycle upon itself with no resolution or overcoming of the question of the «sacred» (despite the insistent references to Hegel); the «sacred» is in fact the name that Gracq gives to that immanent but dark status of «supermanhood» or surreality, in whose vision salvation is confused with damnation.

Gracq's first book is more abstract, more violent and more revealing than his later works. The chapters follow each other without any transition, each one naming an event or a place («*Le bain*», «*La chapelle des abîmes*», «*La forêt*»). The décor is treated with a mixture of sensuous intensity and forced idealisation. Anthropomorphism reigns supreme here, and the moments of solitude unceasingly express the movements of the heart. As for the château, as extravagantly sumptuous as it is wild, it is both a Breton manor house and an ideal palace in the manner of William Beckford, but one that a modernist architect seems to have laid out following no other logic but that of the play of light.

The narration enters into the thoughts of the heroes without explaining or judging them. As there is no dialogue, it is the narrative which gives the book its unique tone, the «even, unbroken flow» of magnificent rhetoric. The conventional epithets of the sublime, often grouped in pairs or extended into periphrases, sustain the boldness of the sentences, now abrupt, now venturing out into precariously balanced constructions. In stylistic terms, this is the manner of Lautréamont; behind it, one recognises the manner of Poe, and through this irony one sometimes gets that innocent feel of sheer romance (like that sentence which enchanted André Pieyre de Mandiargues: «They undressed among the tombs»).

The «Word to the Reader» which precedes the narrative was written several months after the latter. The product of rereading and calculation, it fulfilled its purpose, since it has durably influenced the reception not only of Argol, but also of Gracq's fictional work as a whole. His intention comes down to three theses. The first lays claim to the book's «visible kinship» with a «literary school» in which one tacitly recognises Surrealism: from Surrealism comes the «new light» with which the book aims to illuminate the question of salvation. The second thesis mentions Wagner as the «pioneer» of that same perspective, and presents Argol as a «demonic version» of Parzifal. The third thesis concerns the approach to reading: Gracq rejects any symbolic interpretation of his narrative, whilst accepting the parodic status of a form of writing, the figures of which «enchant us by their complete familiarity».

However, these elements, which Gracq seems to make the keys of his work, are fairly well external to it. Surrealism above all serves as a mediator with Romanticism and the Gothic novel. The references to Parzifal provide the narrative with an emblem rather than a creative model: the elements of the legend, redistributed and scrambled, are only brought together in the description of an engraving. Finally, the book does not aim in the slightest to subvert literature: on the contrary, the thought of the «traditional signs» under which he must conquer inspire in the writer «a feeling at one and the same time of creative exhilaration, melancholy and glory».

Au château d'Argol won the immediate enthusiasm of André Breton, who saw in the book an «outcome» of Surrealism, the moment in which Surrealism «turns freely upon itself to measure itself against the great perceptive experiences of the past». This decisive literary recognition would soon turn into friendship.

Un beau ténébreux

Gracq's second book was written in two separate bursts. The short prologue was written in the autumn of 1940 in a prison camp in Silesia. Freed for health reasons at the beginning of 1941, Gracq returned to Angers and wrote the novel during 1942, at the same time as the poems of Liberté grande. The book would not be published until after the Liberation in 1945.

It is in the prologue that the writer says «I» for the first time, and that we hear the timbre of his style: «During these fleeting, elusive days of the end of autumn, I evoke with particular pleasure the avenues of this little beach that, with the waning of the season, have suddenly been strangely invaded by silence.» He paints himself as the «stealer of mummies» who returns to the scene of the drama and wanders around an «empty theatre» which fiction will fill once more with people.

The story opens (there is a marked difference of tone) with «Gérard's Diary»; two thirds of the way through the book this is interrupted and the thread is taken up by an anonymous narrator whose voice does not coincide with that of the prologue. The action takes place during the season of the *Hôtel des Vagues*, in the ultimately realistic décor of a Breton coast. It concerns a group of holidaymakers, among whom Gérard stands out, «a young university academic with a bright future» – an ironic double of the author – along with the blonde Christel, a «distant princess» or a «highly acceptable Atala». She represents a fairly stereotyped female figure, but complements Gérard, while Gracq lends her a number of his own personal memories (boarding-school, the taste for opera). In the middle distance appear a «deliberately complicated» adolescent, named Jacques, and a young couple, Henri and Irène, who will soon be separated by elective affinities. It is into this little world that

the dark stranger makes his appearance: Allan is the face, indeed almost the angel, of temptation. Apart from charm, which he dispenses liberally, he attracts through the mystery represented by his presence there and his idleness. He is a transparent enigma for the reader, as we soon understand that he has made a suicide pact with the *femme fatale* who serves as his occasional companion, Dolorès; but the ingeniously delayed avowal of this secret gives the narrative its backbone.

The subject of the book is not Allan himself, but the question which he embodies; fiction enables one to understand the effects produced on a closed group by the presence of one who embodies an absolute. It is not death which is sought after, but the momentary condition of superman conferred by the commitment made to death. Through the intermediary of Gérard's diary, the text multiplies the reflections on this schema: on passion as «the daughter of the crowd», on theatricality, on rituals of sacrifice (like bull fighting). The heroic impulse is not primordial, it only fills a tragic role in response to the expectations of the crowd: the tempter is first of all the one who gives in to that temptation, before being caught in his own game and dying while being pushed towards the exit.

It is here that a profound ambivalence arises, of which the title is emblematic: Allan, a «prince of life», is at the same time the last offspring of a literary lineage – a new Amadis, a new Nerval, but also the resurgence of more vulgar types like Pierre Frondaie's *L'Homme à l'Hispano*. The double suicide is inspired by a poem of Vigny's, which in turn elaborates on the romantic death of Kleist and Henriette Vogel. But Allan's destiny also evokes the suicides of Surrealism, Jacques Vaché and Jacques Rigaut; it seems to be a negative reply to the discussion launched in 1925 by the review, *La Révolution surréaliste*, under the title, «Is suicide a solution?». However, Gracq grants

his hero a sufficiently long stay of execution to allow those who have been able to participate in the game to be carried beyond the limits of their own selves. Whether it be bourgeois adultery (Irène), oneiric drifting through real life (Henri), the giving of oneself (Christel), or retreat behind the screen of the novelist (Gérard), each one meets their truth. The epic exaltation of the quest is fed by the tragic role from which it is inseparable. And contrapuntally, through the literary masquerade appear figures of perfection: Christ at the time of Emmaus, between Resurrection and Ascension, and, at another level, the poets: Rimbaud, the Chateaubriand of La Vie de Rancé, and looming up on the margins of this lineage one can sense the unspoken presence of André Breton.

This ambivalence is not entirely mastered by the synthesis of the work of art. A superabundant stock of reflections and images is shared out among the characters, in dialogues which are sometimes disproportionate and curiously incongruous in tone. The interruption of Gérard's diary, technically necessary for a final scene to be staged between Allan and Christel, impoverishes the text and makes the dénouement seem more artificial. Finally, the relation with literature in Un beau ténébreux remains once more a tangled one: all the raw material of the critical texts can be found there in embryo, but it interferes with the basic question of the novelistic work: what kind of hero, and what language, for what novel? For this second book is also for Gracq a laboratory for the novel; it constitutes his most radical questioning of the enterprise of writing, its means and its meaning.

Liberté grande

Julien Gracq has published a single collection of poems, Liberté grande, which he enlarged in the course of its

three successive publications between 1946 and 1969. The book is divided into two sections. The first series, which gives the book its title, is made up of 40 short texts, written between 1941 and 1943 and partially published in reviews favourable to Surrealism, like Fontaine or Les Quatre Vents. A second series is formed by the short collection «*La terre habitable*» (1951), to which is added «*La sieste en Flandre hollandaise*» (1951), a sort of existential meditation which is one of Gracq's masterpieces, then two isolated texts, «*Gomorrhe*» (1957) and «*Aubrac*» (1963).

With its paradoxical tension, the title of Liberté grande lays claim to an ethics of writing founded on an individualism that is at once aristocratic and libertarian, whilst at the same time defining the system proper to poetry. Unlike the novel, the poem is not based on duration. Writing and invention coincide; short circuits, images that burst forth, collages turn the poem into a theatre for apparitions and collapses. These stories in miniature recall the «slide-events» and the «precipice-events» in Breton's Nadja and maintain the subversive spirit of Surrealism. However, the urban phantasmagoria, like the mainly wintry décor, owe more to Rimbaud. Gracq, who in an epigraph quotes Rimbaud's «citizen of a metropolis thought to be modern», is here composing his own Illuminations.

The poetic text is a kind of laboratory: there Gracq develops fables, forms and figures which constitute matrices for his work as a whole. Fables like that of «*Truro*» where «the growth of the mineral sapwood shrinks the available space into the interior of the rooms»; forms like the insidious reversal of Isabelle into the negative profile of Elisabeth («*Isabelle Élisabeth*»); figures like the «obsessive vignettes» enumerated by «*Le grand jeu*», making an inventory of the disparate

elements of a self-portrait within the closed framework of a poem. Two themes have a wider scope. That of the city as a form that generates the self will only be completely developed in *La Forme d'une ville* (1985): but the introductory text to *Liberté grande*, «*Pour galvaniser l'urbanisme*» (1941) prepares the ground by associating a vision of Paris like a ghost ship, with a reverie about Rimbaud's «*Circeto des hautes glaces*» and the evocation of the «real city» of Saint-Nazaire, gliding into the sea with the liner which she has constructed. Moreover, these poems written during the war are haunted by the vision of cities evacuated before an imminent catastrophe, the moment when appearances «falter and topple over into another image completely».

Ten years later, «*Les Hautes Terres du Sertalejo*» and above all «*La sieste en Flandre hollandaise*» mark an evolution. Surrealism recedes, along with its trapdoors and breaches in meaning; the writing draws closer to prose. The city steps aside for nature; the externalisation of the self through the bursting forth of images gives way to a form of reverie bearing the stamp of Gaston Bachelard: material imagination, cosmic intimacy, a poetics of space. Far removed from history, it is for this vegetal, immemorial side that Gracq claims the rights of the «human plant». These two texts of *Liberté grande* meet in the almost phenomenological description of an experience of being-in-the-world. On one side lies the imaginary Sertalejo, the archetype of the high plateau, where lying «with open palms in the icy grass», the poet feels himself become «a mere site of exchange and alliance». On the other side is found the almost familiar world of Dutch Flanders, where the polder forms an enclave in which the vegetation closes up again after man has gone by «as when a finger passes through fur». The intelligence is absorbed and exuded by the body;

thought «flows back from all sides to the boundary of the sheer consciousness of being». Here ecstasy does not lead to any catastrophe: in the last chamber of the labyrinth there grows a «fine bubble of transparency» which encloses the ideal home of the self.

The long fragment of «*La sieste en Flandre hollandaise*» will receive a reply much later on in Les Eaux étroites (1976), a brief story recounted at length, stretching out a slight narrative element. These elements of scale and duration suffice to outline the domain of poetry. Gracq has never written a line of verse: his work has its place in the modern evolution of a form which is the poem in prose, to the extent where, in disappearing, it becomes indistinguishable from literature.

André Breton. Quelques aspects de l'écrivain

The essay which Julien Gracq published at the beginning of 1948 was written in a few months in a surge of admiration and sympathy. It has the full value of a commitment, at a moment when Breton, very isolated after his return to France, was striving to re-launch the Surrealist movement. It also marks the culmination in Gracq's work of critical mediation, in which Breton's portrait as the conqueror of true life is doubled by a self-portrait in negative profile. However, Gracq's adherence to the Surrealist movement is that of a reader, not a member of the group; at this level there is nothing to separate the essay on Breton from the texts on Chateaubriand or Balzac.

As the subtitle shows, Gracq does not aim to go over the history of Surrealism. Of course, the group is evoked, but in as far as it is a milieu, a hardly differentiated whole. Gracq does not devote a single line to Aragon and Éluard – who, it is true, had gone over to the Stalinist camp – and the same goes for Artaud, Desnos and

Max Ernst. He neglects the internal and external debates which make up the backbone of the history of Surrealism; he brushes aside Marxism, treated as an appendage of Hegel's system. It is «action through the pen» that attracts Gracq's interest; he takes the structure and style of this from his critical discourse.

The essay is constructed as a series of arabesques around topics corresponding to the quotations which form the titles of the chapters. «All that which must burst into feathers at the ends of my fingers» takes its cue from Bachelard's method in studying the figures of electromagnetism, but situating them in the history of the imagination of the nineteenth century and emphasising the kinship between Surrealism and German Romanticism. Magnetism leads Gracq from polarisation to the dialectic, and from Hegel to Freud; in both cases the amalgam between philosophy and poetry, which follows Breton's approach, is brought about to the detriment of philosophy. The chapter entitled «Rattling like a door» concerns Breton's books. Gracq sees in the Manifestoes and Nadja the «unusual attempt to superimpose directly on to the recording of daily life the progressive writing of a destiny». He finds in Breton's trajectory the epic theme of the quest, for the Golden Fleece or the Grail, of which the stake, transposed into the social realm, would be to break out by sheer effort from the human condition. This metaphysical adventure, by comparison with which the discoveries of existentialism pale into insignificance, takes the form of a «madness for poetry». Poetry, at one and the same time «affective memory of a lost way of living» and a tool designed to shatter all limitations, communicating on the one side with full-blown hysteria, and on the other with the revolution, poetry, then, is the foundation of a new myth, which the modern artist simultaneously embodies and constructs: the poet is he who creates his own legend.

All the threads spun by the author are woven together in the final chapter dealing with Breton's style. Gracq shows style to be both an instrument of discovery and a means of communication – a communication «as arresting as a hand placed on your shoulder». He brings out the two essential processes: the movement of the «surging» sentence, and an energetics of the word manifested by the use of italics. On the way he evaluates the essential basis of automatism and the modalities of its integration into a conscious form of writing. An «identical wave length» carries style through writing and through life: the essay hence returns to the fundamental experience of reading.

Gracq's essay is the fruit of a relatively rare conjunction and it occupies a place apart. With regard to Surrealism, Gracq found himself at once inside and outside; he had approached Breton more closely perhaps in his books than in life, but he knew him and appreciated him.

The commentary unfolds in that ambiguous, vibrant space in which Gracq found himself more at home than ever.

Le Roi pêcheur

Le Roi pêcheur was written in 1942-1943, but was only published in 1948, one year before being performed in the theatre in disappointing conditions, with a fairly heterogeneous cast in which the scepticism of Lucien Nat (Amfortas) thwarted the brilliance of Maria Casarès (Kundry). The result was the slating by the «duty roster Aristarchs», Jean-Jacques Gautier and Robert Kemp. Gracq, who must have experienced this as a failure, would not return to the theatre except to write an adaptation of Kleist's Penthesilea (1953) at the request of Jean-Louis Barrault.

The play takes up the theme of the Grail and constitutes Gracq's «version» of Wagner's Parzifal,

completed with Wolfram von Eschenbach's German source; it continues Au château d'Argol in the direction indicated in his «Word to the Reader». Gracq's Grail is explicitly anti-Christian: the appropriation of the myth by Christianity is denounced as an act of deceit; in the play the hermit Trévrizent sets out to give a caricatural vision of Christian dogma inspired by Nietzsche's criticisms. Gracq wishes to tear the sacred free from transcendence, which leads him to distort the ending of his play. The two trials which the hero must undergo are condensed into a single trial, in the course of which Perceval remains mute and withdrawn. The final formula, «Redemption to the Redeemer», closes the cycle upon itself and leaves the king's wound gaping open.

To the possession of the transcendental Grail the play opposes the thought of the possible, which resides entirely in immanence and which renders null and void the dialectic of sin and redemption on which Wagner's drama was based. Like the surreal, the possible has more value than reality itself, but it remains within reality instead of aiming at a «point of the mind» where contradictions would be resolved. If the possible is Perceval's choice, the wound is the lot of Amfortas. In this, one should not see the stigma of sin, but the counterpart of royalty, that is to say participation in the sacred; through this, says the Introduction, Amfortas embodies «the condition of man» struggling with the divine which he has «dragged from within himself».

This Introduction, written in 1947 for the publication of the text, uses a polemical simplification to oppose, on the one hand, the «closed» Greek myths whose structure, having the inevitability of a time bomb, is simply a «substitute for original sin», and on the other hand, the «open» myths of the Middle Ages, like the stories of Tristan or the Grail. The latter are myths with pre-Christian roots, which speak of «permanent

and rewarded temptations». This polarisation accentuates the conquering optimism of the myth, and it commits a text that was darker and less confident to a cause explicitly identified with Surrealism. André Breton would moreover see in Le Roi pêcheur «a completely Surrealist work» and set it above everything else that Gracq had written.

For his sole attempt at theatre, Gracq sought concentration and rigour, with a limited number of characters and a broad exposition in the form of a diptych (Perceval pitted against Trévrizent, then against Clingsor) opening up a linear plot based on the progressive unveiling of the truth. Gracq's familiar themes are worked through, according to a theatrical rhetoric made up of contrasts and symmetries. But Le Roi pêcheur only contains one great role, that of Amfortas, and does not entirely avoid the didacticism of the *pièce à thèse*. The characters justify themselves too much, as though they had to take charge of that orchestration which in the novel is provided by the narrative voice; now, in the theatre, one cannot describe without being discursive. No doubt Gracq lacked confidence in the power of theatre; for this fine text has so far failed to find an appropriate director and audience.

Le Rivage des Syrtes

Circumstances have made Le Rivage des Syrtes Julien Gracq's best known book and, for readers, the one which represents the whole of his work. In fact it is the most ambitious project completed by Gracq, the only one where he attempts «the conjunction of a great era, a great format and a great style». All that the previous works had achieved is brought together here: the narrative technique, the art of orchestrating the themes, the oblique dialogue with Surrealism over the question of myth. His later development is announced by the diminishing role of

the narrative and the growing share given to landscape; on the other hand, the invention of the Seignory of Orsenna and its history constitutes the high point of the novelist's «dream» in Gracq's work.

Le Rivage des Syrtes transposes into this invented world the process which led to the unleashing of war, the same process Gracq had lived through between 1936 and 1939. The fiction isolates a «spirit-of-History» whilst keeping current events at a distance. The Seignory of Orsenna, where the action takes place, is like Venice a mercantile republic that has fallen into decline. Aldo, the hero and narrator of the novel, gets himself posted to the South, «on the Syrtes front», in order to get away from the idle, empty life of a patrician. There he discovers a forgotten war with Farghestan, a fabulous Orient which stretches across the sea. The fascinated expectancy gives rise to signs and then to acts: the contemplation of maps, a sail glimpsed then found again in the ruins of Sagra. Aldo struggles against captain Marino who governs the «ruinous fortress» of the Admiralty and maintains the status quo at the cost of a tension with no respite. In the capital of the province of the Syrtes, Maremma – a «Venice of the Syrtes» propagating the Symbolist clichés in its decomposing waters – Aldo finds Vanessa Aldobrandi, the crown princess of a faction of adventurers and traitors. She takes him to the island of Vezzano, from where one can see a volcano that dominates Farghestan; and in obscure terms consonant with the Gnostic sermon which Aldo is to hear on Christmas night, she gives him a mission. Aldo's destiny is realised: a reconnaissance «cruise» takes him to the other side of the sea in a calm exaltation which seems to reconstruct the world and restore a lost meaning to it. But at the moment of «reaching» Farghestan, three cannon shots are fired and the ship turns around.

The impetus that had carried the book along is thwarted, as if the author himself had been touched by the contradiction between the thrust of desire and the forces of death which it releases. He nevertheless continues the momentum he has worked up, showing how opinion grips the mediator who has «objectified in the form of will» scattered impulses: through the interplay of the versions in circulation and the fictions of politics, the process set in motion leads by itself to acts of war and to the incidentally announced destruction of Orsenna. Marino is driven away and, either through an accident or suicide, disappears in the lagoon; Aldo will take charge in the Syrtes.

We are to learn nothing more. Much later, Gracq confides to us that the book «up to the last chapter marched to the sound of the cannon towards a naval battle which never took place». But it is right from Aldo's withdrawal that the narrative enters a reflexive phase composed of two stages. The first is a dialogue between Aldo and the «envoy» from Farghestan; History is there interpreted in terms of «impassioned relationships», like a fatal game of seduction and defiance. The second phase corresponds to the last chapter, which Gracq wrote after an interruption of 18 months. A kind of epilogue brings Aldo back to Orsenna. He sees once again his father, a caricatural politician, and describes at length the general state of mind, while a burlesque agitation, in the manner of the last moments of the French Third Republic, is mingled with a mystical expectation of the Great Day. He finally meets the elderly Daniello, the hidden instigator of his action, symbolically his father and his double: but Daniello is still a mediator, the catalyst of an evolution the reason of which is elusive, and to which neither the organic analogies, nor the historical examples, nor the myths which are superimposed and entangled in the text, provide the key.

The precious substance of the text is formed by the poetry of places and moments. The descriptions are maintained as the narrative line unfolds: every landscape is traversed or contemplated in a state of watchfulness. The very landscape of the Syrtes shore, both concrete and symbolic, is a flat moor covered with bulrushes, «sliding towards complete spoliation». The cities, Orsenna, Maremma, ruined Sagra, lend the story its Italian colour. One seeks in vain some sign of economic activity. Trade is relegated to the past; the city is reduced to the human masses in the streets, in the patrician residences and in the blockhouses of the powerful: we are offered the marginal perspective of a stroller mixed with a poet of History.

The style accentuates the «decline of the West» atmosphere which permeates the whole novel. Many pages are imbued with a slightly archaising decorum, of which there is no equivalent anywhere else in Gracq's work. The opulence of the sentences, the modal variations («it seemed to me»), the veneer of epithets, the cases of hyperbole, lend the writing a theatrical dignity, shot through from time to time with a hint of irony. Added to the recurrence as leitmotifs of the images of waking, sleep, emptiness, expectancy, exaltation, this tense style, shimmering like silk, increases the autonomy of the fiction and confers on the book a more intimate coherence, because it is itself the emblem of a composite culture, fragile, but capable of cunningly taking advantage of its own decline.

Published in September 1951, Le Rivage des Syrtes was awarded the Prix Goncourt, which its author refused. Gracq did indeed consider himself to be committed to the acerbic criticism of literary prizes which he had just given vent to in La Littérature à l'estomac. As soon as the first rumours began to circulate, he informed the jury of this fact. The jury ignored the warning, trapping

the writer in his own combat for the dignity of the literary work, since his refusal could only increase the fuss around the work. Gracq was to remain marked by what he considered to be an «abuse of power». He would choose to abstain from any direct intervention on the literary scene, even if it meant reining in his talent as a polemicist.

Un balcon en forêt

Seven years separate Le Rivage des Syrtes from the publication of Un balcon en forêt (1958), a latency period during which the novelist's work underwent a decisive, but not deliberate change of direction. Indeed, Gracq had begun a novel around 1953, of which he had written about two thirds; then the writing was interrupted never to be resumed. The fragment published under the title «*La Route*» (collected in La Presqu'île) shows that this novel was meant to be situated in an imaginary world, made up of historical elements arranged as emblems. This was following in the direction of Le Rivage des Syrtes, but here the elsewhere leads nowhere.

Using diversionary tactics, Gracq then undertook to transpose his own experience of the «phoney war» and the defeat of 1940 to the area between the Meuse and Belgium. The genesis of Un balcon en forêt was to take two seasons. It was marked by the abandoning «of a *messe de minuit aux Falizes*, which [...] would have given the book [...] a completely different basis». Gracq left the religious on one side, just as he had renounced imaginary worlds. The absence of the midnight mass breaks the parallelism between Un balcon en forêt and Le Rivage des Syrtes which are punctuated in the middle by an identical episode; they are not two versions of a single story. In 1940 the collectivity dissolves with the defeat, without a collective impulse arising: myth fades away, heroism has no longer any object. The individual takes centre stage.

Un balcon en forêt recounts the «phoney war» from the «blockhouse» of Falizes, an isolated outpost in the Ardennes forest. The narrative begins in October 1939 with the appointment in charge of officer cadet Grange, and ends in the evening of May 13th 1940, after the German attack; a cannon blast has torn the blockhouse apart, killing two of the garrison and wounding Grange, who falls asleep at the end – perhaps not to wake up again. The fictional universe thus comes closer to its author, to whom the officer cadet Grange, freed from all attachments by military life, supplies a credible *alter ego*. The book is built on a subtle balance between being present to oneself and being distant from oneself. The internal perspective is objectified by the third person narration, but we see everything through the eyes of Grange and his optical devices: the slit of the blockhouse, the sight belonging to the antitank cannon, the openings of light in the forest paths, the panorama of the «theatre of war» from the natural balcony that dominates the Meuse valley.

The approach of the preceding narratives has been inverted: history and geography henceforth provide the raw material of the dream. The suspension of the phoney war superimposes its linear, cumulative duration on the cycle of the seasons. In the last third of the book, the rhythm changes: the departure of the families halts the cyclical time; the irruption of History with the arrival of the German tanks slows down the narrative, which will go over the last four days in detail. The action takes place in the décor of the Hercynian forest. The latter supplies both a physical structure (the unbroken tissue of little trees which creates an element comparable to the sea), an archetype of the universe of tales, and the place where, against all expectations, the modern strategy of blitzkrieg was to be unleashed. But it is around the blockhouse that the subject of

the novel crystallises. The blockhouse surmounted by a sort of mountain chalet offered a «perfectly improbable» conjunction: war on the ground floor, peace on the first floor. A whole interplay of ambivalent oppositions is here organised around the poles of up and down, the open and the closed, inside and outside: a treacherous refuge which Grange is delighted with and which fixes his destiny.

The charm of the book comes from this superimposition of realism and myth. Gracq recounts with humour the daily life of this idle little garrison which colonises the hamlet of Falizes, providing for the women an «exemplary interim». The relationships within the group, those with the garrison at Moriarmé or the troops who are passing through, are rendered with an almost ethnographic acuity. Un balcon en forêt also contains a veritable love story – even if the women are sent away before the battle. Grange meets Mona in the forest, in the rain; she has something of the fairy about her, as well as the woman-child: «How old are you? he would sometimes say to her... – but he knew that his question had no meaning and that here youth had nothing to do with age; it was rather a fabled species, like the unicorn». Mona's bedroom constitutes the second interior in the narrative. It is in this luxurious encampment, made light and airy by disorder, that she «captures» Grange; it is here that he will return to lie down, exhausted by his wound, at the end of the narrative. Mona, a creature detached from any social ties, whose every gesture is interpreted through vegetal or animal analogies, is the veritable incarnation in Gracq's work of the human plant.

The war, which draws ever nearer throughout the book, belongs to the same order as meteorological phenomena; influencing the course of events seems impossible, even incongruous. Here the differences from Le Rivage des Syrtes are profound. At the collective level, there is no polarity governing the relations between France and

Germany: we are no longer in the domain of «impassioned relations». Moreover, Germany is scarcely spoken of, and Nazism is never mentioned. The military operations as such will be limited to the vain search for the hoppers meant to protect the blockhouse, the riding past of the cavalry – in good order on the way out, in disorder on the way back – and an exchange of cannon fire. Grange is a «deserter», overlooking the war from his «balcony», using trickery to preserve his territory. As the threat grows, he becomes more inward, to the point of taking on the radical character of imaginary solutions: Grange dreams of being passed over by the battle and forgotten by History; failing that, he makes more and more excursions at twilight, in a mental poaching intoxicated with the approach of a death that is itself fabulous in character.

Un balcon en forêt is Gracq's great novel of expectation, magnifying moments lived on a knife edge. But this novel of the war does not realise the synthesis of poetry and History: «What is there between the war and me?», wonders the hero. The unity of the book thus hides a deep flaw, one that constitutes its subject.

La Presqu'île

The volume, which was published in 1970, brings together three texts: «*La Route*», a fragment of the novel begun in around 1953 and left unfinished; the long short story which gives the collection its name; and a shorter narrative, «*Le Roi Cophetua*». Here ends Gracq's fictional work. The limit, an objective one, is also internal; each of these texts in its own way recognises a frontier.

In «*La Route*» one senses the weight of the book. Set in motion with considerable élan, the text remains in suspension, without reaching completion or returning

to its point of departure. We are in an «intermediary period» of History; one divines the presence of a dismembered empire, of great invasions. The story of Le Rivage des Syrtes seems here to be continuing, still in the first person, after the catastrophe. The road is both direction and remnant. Human intentions come to terms with the natural forces of the earth and vegetation, and their survival as a trace enables one to measure the «return to savagery». Following this thread, the text gradually digresses: from the road to the lands it travels through, to the abandoned hamlets it passes by, then to the «highly mixed human sediment» which meets on its margins, finally to the woman about whom it sketches – forgetting the theme of the chapter – a singular utopia of the relations between the sexes. It is this conjunction – at once motivated and obscure – of the road and woman which makes the text unbalanced and testifies to the problems of «tonality» which Gracq says he encountered.

«*La Presqu'île*», however, continues the «realistic» vein of Un balcon en forêt. The limit reached here is that of fiction, just one step further and we would topple over into the autobiographical essay. Indeed the plot is a mere outline: Simon is waiting for Irmgard to arrive on the 12:53 train; as she has not yet arrived, he goes to reconnoitre the places where he intends to take her. He goes around the peninsula as far as the port of Kergrit, where he occupies a room at the Hôtel des Bains. Then he returns to meet the 19:53 train, but delayed by his reveries, he remains a little far off: «How to meet her? he thought, disorientated». Simon, who rediscovers the places where he spent his childhood holidays, is a double of the author: he wanders over the Guérande peninsula, between Savenay (the station at Brévenay) and Piriac-sur-Mer (Kergrit). The places are recognisable,

but the transposition of their names situates them in a Celtic zone within a mythical order: hence the Marais Gât, which is Brière.

«*La Presqu'île*» is the narrative of time lived from within: governed by the final end-point, it is constantly compressed by the feeling of urgency (I shall be late) or, at the opposite extreme, dilated by the euphoria of anticipation (I have all the time in the world). This rhythm is combined both with the movements (driving, stopping, walking, parking, setting off again) and the alternations of mood: the feeling of pleasure, which remains the dominant note, is interrupted by depressing «little plunges». A fundamental discrepancy («Emotion never coincided with its cause: it was before or after – before rather than after») governs the love relationship, with the woman and with the sea: Simon deceives the one with the other. The «owner's tour of inspection» which he carries out is for him alone. On the other hand, the dispersal of desire fills the narrative with female figures on the borders of the field of vision, in a frame surrounded by darkness, and objects made erotic by metaphor, like the flare of the refinery, with its «luxurious scarf of streaming soot».

On the literary plane, this text should be appreciated in connection with the *nouveau roman* (which Gracq considers to be a mere derivative of Sartre). By its minimalism and its rigorous linearity, by the highly flexible organisation of perspectives and voices within a sustained realist framework, it offers a challenge to novels subject to an artificial technique – particularly those of Robbe-Grillet. Gracq in no way renounces the novel, but he does not believe in a renewal of the genre through a combinatory method or through form.

«*Le Roi Cophetua*» is turned towards the past rather than the future. It is a strange text, in which Gracq seems

close to pastiching himself, but which does not betray an exhaustion of the creative vein.

In the centre of the narrative is a woman who gives herself: «Simply thus» – these two words are repeated like a leitmotiv. This unnamed woman is the servant-cum-mistress of Jacques Nueil, a dandy who is an aviator and an avant-garde composer. It is All Saints' Day, 1917, at the point when the war leads up to the first images of the Russian Revolution. Nueil, who is serving in a bomber squadron, has arranged to meet the narrator at his country house to the north of Paris, La Fougeraie. But he is absent, and the text implies that he will not be coming back. The evening is spent waiting for him, in that «museum-residence» which resembles a theatre where the décor appears to have been substituted for the actors.

The characters submit: the woman dresses for the dinner in the ritual ornaments of domestic service. After a pretty fruitless attempt to go out, the narrator waits, overcome by a kind of bewitchment, for the moment when this woman, constantly presented in negative profile, leads him to her bedroom: but on the morning of the Day of the Dead, it is he who flees «in a panic of haste», before the ritual closes «irretrievably» around him.

One recognises in this canvas a variant of the story of Percival. The fiction is arranged like a trap to lead the narrator to take the place of the king, which is the place of the dead man. The woman is tempter, mediator, mystagogue, but it is the absent man who creates the mystery and seems to observe its unfolding. These secrets are contained in images: an engraving by Goya, «La Mala Noche», which provides the key to Gracq's eroticism; and the painting, inspired by Burne-Jones, which represents in a «sordid annunciation» King Cophetua and the beggar girl with whom he is in love. The bewitchment is fixed in this frame, into which it seeks to draw us but from which it cannot escape. This last short story

resembles a conjuration: one finds in it traces of the Grail, triangular relationships, expectancy, and many other echoes of his work. But it returns to this past in order to free itself therefrom: this is the price paid by Gracq in order to be able to undertake books in which the novelist speaks in his own name.

Préférences

In 1961 Préférences brought together the critical essays written by Gracq since the end of the war: the pamphlet La Littérature à l'estomac (1950), the radio interview «*Les yeux bien ouverts*» (1954) and the lecture, «*Pourquoi la littérature respire mal*» (1960). The latter are joined by articles on single writers (Chateaubriand, Poe, Lautréamont, Rimbaud) or single books: «*Béatrix de Bretagne*», «*Ricochets de conversation*» (on Barbey d'Aurevilly's Les Diaboliques), «*Le printemps de mars*», the introduction to his translation of Kleist's Penthiselea, «*Spectre du Poisson soluble*», or the study of «*Novalis et Henri d'Ofterdingen*», which reveals his talents as an author of prefaces. The diversity of these texts is circumstantial in origin: brought together in a book, they display the continuity in Gracq's critical thought and the consistency of his tastes.

La Littérature à l'estomac has been noted above all for its satire of literary prizes. This only constitutes one aspect of the polemic. Gracq attacks the system for promoting literature which «hoodwinks us»: a system which falsifies the relationship between the reader and the work, the relationship which confers on literature its legitimacy. Without uncovering the economic and sociological foundations of this system, Gracq develops a historical explanation: the ideological flattening caused by the war, the messianism of «the new times», add their effects in

his view to those of the expansion of knowledge. The success of Existentialism demonstrates the case: the appearance of «star» writers and «people in the news» changes the nature of the literary relationship which draws closer to parliamentary democracy and scientific popularisation. Against the irruption of the market economy into the preserve of «true» literature, governed only by personal relationships of «preference» and «intercession», Gracq thus defends the cause of reading, which he presents as a love affair, taking up a point of view which Breton had developed with reference to painting. The polemic, which advances by polar oppositions, and the radicalism of the refusal, display a kinship with the Surrealists' pamphlets. La Littérature à l'estomac sparkles with a cold eloquence, at once restrained and vibrant, and one begins to regret the fact that a writer who was so gifted in this genre should have retired prematurely from the arena.

The radio interview entitled «*Les yeux bien ouverts*» was written during that time of latency which followed Le Rivage des Syrtes. Here Gracq talks of reverie, which is indistinguishable from literary work; «blank» hours of pure sensory experience which are apparently «in their own way the real subject of [his] books», «inevitable themes» which polarise the «poor dream» of the poet – the launching of a ship, the point of view of one on watch, intrusion into an empty bedroom. This reflection seeks to capture the forces which gave birth to writing. The images evoked are thus an imaginary matrix of the work, not a key which one could apply to the work.

The lecture «*Pourquoi la littérature respire mal*» takes up once more, in a less vehement tone, the thread of polemical reflection. It is perhaps the text in which Gracq comes closest to Spengler. The loss of contact with the

fund of common Latin and Christian culture, the invasion of technology and reflexivity – here it is the *nouveau roman* which is on trial – the corollaries of an exhaustion of the vital energies, the decline of poetry, are symptoms described in Le Déclin de l'Occident. In the face of works which propagate the «feeling of negativity» – Sartre and La Nausée head the list, followed by Malraux and Robbe-Grillet – it is less a question of combat than of cure; Gracq evokes «the warrior of the Falaises de marbre, who has withdrawn from the world, who botanises on the edge of the conflagration of a world that is ending»: such is doubtless the place where he sees himself in this panorama of literature.

The critical essays mark out the territory of «preferences»: the only absence is that of Stendhal. Gracq's culture is clearly outlined: a preponderance of the nineteenth century; Romantic affinities which explain the space given to Germany (Novalis, Kleist, Jünger); the presence of Surrealism, but shorn of its «precursors» Lautréamont and Rimbaud. The span is not tremendously wide, but the furrows are deeply marked, characterising an individual's subjectivity.

Here the choices of books are worked out: out of the whole of classical theatre, Gracq only selects Racine's Bajazet, from Balzac only Béatrix; these are exotic works amid their authors' productions, just as Penthiéselea is in Kleist's. The interplay of preferences brings together these very disparate books: the same waves thrash Béatrix and Chateaubriand's Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe; in Racine and Kleist Gracq sees the radiance of the same «dark core» of feminine Sadism. Criticism also starts to vibrate in unison with fiction; in a more intimate register, it communicates with autobiography through digressions. The years as a boarder are evoked in the light of the «puerile reverse side of things» which shines from out

Lautréamont's Les Chants de Maldoror; the meeting with André Breton at Nantes, in an epilogue to the study on Béatrix.

Préférences also contains exemplary literary studies. In «*Spectre du Poisson soluble*» the thematic reading is freely inspired by Bachelard: the gaze travels over the surface of the text, allowing the «great rosaces of images» to organise themselves in their own way; without forcing the text through interpretation, this reading circumvents it, as is fitting for so elusive a prey. «*Ricochets de conversation*» offers us a model stylistic study; the short circuit created between the enunciatory method of Les Diaboliques and the figure of the «Constable» Barbey d'Aurevilly illustrates in a truly demonstrative manner the relation between «life style and style itself». Here one thinks of Proust (especially his pages on Flaubert): there is the same reader's point of view, the same vision of the revealing detail, which display the talent of the critic as much as that of the novelist.

Lettrines, Lettrines II

Since 1954 Gracq had been keeping notebooks in which he scribbled short notes and copied up more developed fragments. It was from these notebooks that he was to extract four collections, after partial publications in reviews: Lettrines (1967) and Lettrines II (1974), En lisant en écrivant (1980), and finally Carnets du grand chemin (1992).

This does not represent material in a state of gestation any more than a personal journal. The excessively romantic term «fragments» is hardly more appropriate for the texts gathered together, which are better described by the term «notes» or simply «pages». Each text constitutes indeed a work in reduced format, both finished and open, communicating with other texts written and read as much

as with experience and personal memory:
in comparison with the fiction, the difference is more one of scale than of writing. The note is linked, not to a generality like the aphorism, but to the singularity of a moment or a state of consciousness. This singularity is underlined by the title Lettrines: the ornamental letter solemnises the event constituted by each introduction. In the body of the book the equivalent is the italic lettering associated with a nominal construction which reveals the impact on thought of the object («*Clemenceau*: what strikes one above all about that personality bristling with spikes...»). The counterpart of the discontinuity of form is the continuity of the activity which gives rise to it. The note is the writing of the «margins» and the «pathways»; its natural register is that of a familiar conversation with oneself, in which the reader is associated on an equal footing.

The first volume of Lettrines proceeds at a more leisurely pace than collections that followed. The two great series which are composed of the evocation of books and that of places are intertwined around a properly autobiographical core. On the margins of essential remarks about the novel or its genesis, many notes go to make up Gracq's poetics, but by ricochet, like that remark that opposes hunters who track to bird-catchers in the pursuit of the most appropriate word. Such remarks mingle with fine homage paid to those who have passed on: Marguerite Jamois or Jean-René Huguenin give the book a human density which subsequently will be absent.

The autobiography is divided between childhood and the war. The latter provides only the narrative of a moment of unreality the author lived through, the episode of the «night of the drunkards»; the comparison with Un balcon en forêt which forms a kind of parallel version, shows clearly that it is the novel which has drawn upon

the living springs of memory. This is not the case with childhood, a domain which the fiction had left untouched. The story of the boomerang is a truly revelatory text: it unveils the laws of an individual personality concerning the relation between desire and act, between original and copy, between knowledge and experience, between past and present. The attraction of the work lies too in the style, which covers an astonishing variety of registers. A frequently mocking alacrity alternates with an unaffected sincerity: one is never bored, and, of all Gracq's volumes, it is doubtless the one that one opens again the most willingly.

Lettrines II appeared in 1974. Material of the same type is distributed between rubrics discreetly entitled «*Chemins et rues*», «*Littérature*»: it is the sign of a re-composition of the work, where books of a new type will soon emerge, like Les Eaux étroites (the first elements of which come from these notebooks) and La Forme d'une ville.

The tone of the book is set by the central section, «*Distances*»: «The intrusive superimposition of what has been over what constitutes the melancholy and pulpous gift of growing old.» Here it will be a question of certain figures close to the author: a great aunt, a neighbour, being the prelude to the evocation of the father in a text of singular beauty, in which all the affective ties are recreated by the natural, but exclusive mediation of «poetry which rises up from the Earth». Old age closes some doors, but it offers the best vantage-point over the paths already travelled: soldiers' quarters, paths across lower Normandy during the war, roads through the Landes. The range of places spreads wide enough to offer a map of Gracq's France, with its points of attraction, like Aubrac or the Raz, and its points of repulsion, like the Rhone valley or the Roussillon. The pages on America, which Gracq discovered in 1970, impress through the

permeability with which the text accepts all kinds of native words; but these pages strike a dryer note because they lack the accompaniment of books the author loves; the American novel is remarkable for its absence – barring Lovecraft, who is anyway another denizen of Gothic Europe, a minor Edgar Allen Poe. Among the extremely diverse notes on literature (Paul Valéry comes to mind), there stand out those that are related to autobiographical narrative: the introduction to poetry at school, and above all a love story with one book, Stendhal's Le Rouge et le Noir. One finds here a clear delineation of the relationship which Gracq maintains with books: what he finds is more than a mere environment, it is an incubating milieu, and this milieu opens out on all sides on to experience and the world. An average image of the author emerges from this collection which is less free and sometimes less inspired than its predecessor: this is the book which comes the closest to his conversation and the interviews he has given.

Les Eaux étroites

Gracq said of Chateaubriand that he had had «the supreme good fortune: masterpieces given in old age». This remark comes to mind when one opens the short and unexpected masterpiece that is Les Eaux étroites. We are here among the family of the writers of memory, Chateaubriand, but Nerval too, as well as Proust who is evoked in the first sentence by the expression «early».

Les Eaux étroites are Gracq's «Combray». Here he recounts «the favourite outing of all» from his childhood, the one where one «goes out on the Evre», a small tributary of the Loire near Saint-Florent-le-Vieil. The outing offers a sequence of images, a sort of diorama which unfolds alongside the boat: the *Chemin Vert*, the wash-shed of the Guérinière, the dramatic episode of

the *Roche qui boit*, the moor covered with gorse, and finally the «pictorial» appearance of a water-mill. These images serve as the basis for a very free associative reverie into which digressions are fitted. The fullest of these digressions allows us to relive Balzac's *Les Chouans*, in an evocation where the text reflects itself as in a *mise en abyme*: passing through the gateway to the public garden at Fougères, the writer «suddenly enters the heart of a book»; in a magic conjunction of space and time «everything begins anew, everything is true».

The elements juxtaposed in *Lettrines* are here subordinated to the principle of coherence which is the strength of a novel. The objects which serve as «interchanges» in the mental film are treated with a refinement which Gracq had never attained before. They are of course images: the caption of an illustrated book, motifs in Chinese painting, a canvas by Titian; but also some verses by Nerval, or simply gestures, or a certain quality of the light or the silence. The register of personal writing engages in a subtle game of proximity and distance, through the slippage between I and we, or by the ambiguity of the present, which decks out in the same colour the past that is relived and the commentary which grasps it as an object of thought.

The recognition of places is a means for investigating oneself: in places one finds laid out the images of which the re-appropriation forms the face of the self. But the current, the boat, the return to the original well-springs, the hours of the day, the ages of life, also constitute rich common-places which take their places in a space of which the miniaturist variety is underlined by the text: the district of the Evre is a natural emblem in Gracq's colours. This symbolism carries no message. The initiatory structure, explicit in the «dark corridor» beneath the *Roche qui boit*, is employed to aesthetic ends, «in a movement of sheer theatre»; and shortly before

the end of the journey the text delves into another excursion into the *Val sans retour*, a place in the real world (near to the «sordid hamlet of Tréhorenteuc») but where life is transformed into an «anonymous and misty legend». Nevertheless this melancholy dizziness, in which fiction and memory collapse in silence, is here only a moment on the margin of a remark which recovers control and finishes under the sign of a belated embellishment, before taking leave. Detached from its author, the book lies at the heart of the work as the latter's most successful accomplishment: its abridgement and its talisman.

En lisant en écrivant

Published in 1981, En lisant en écrivant brings together texts written in the 1970s. This book dedicated to the glory of literature marks a turning-point in the public reception of Gracq: his audience grew wider, while critics became conscious of the timeliness of a work that showed little concern for compromise with its age. A second image of Gracq appears, which covers without erasing the image of the «flamboyant novelist» created by Le Rivage des Syrtes: that of an ideal critic, a reader who apparently accompanies himself in his reading, like a «polite third party».

The title of the collection unites reading and writing in a continuous process with no origin: one writes because one has already read, and because others have written; every reader is a potential writer, a creator in his or her own way; every writer is a reader in actuality. However, this book appears, unlike Lettrines, as a more homogeneous block, more compact and heavier. It admittedly contains landscapes, among which Italy, visited through Stendhal or Berlioz, occupies the largest place; novelistic fragments, including a striking paraphrase of a Germanic episode from Tacitus;

a posthumous evocation of André Breton in his home. But all these images of the world are caught as in a sulphide between the pages of the books. Compared with *Préférences* or *Lettrines*, Gracq's aim is broadened out rather than renewed. It includes, apart from reflections on the links between literature and the visual arts, painting and the cinema, two main aspects. On the one hand, a poetics which is founded upon the basic acts of reading and writing, as well as on the properties of the genre of the novel and the relationship between the writer and his language. On the other hand, a history of literature, or rather of a moment in literary history which is restricted to the series «Stendhal-Balzac-Flaubert-Zola», continued up to «Proust considered as an end-point»; in the same way poetry goes from Baudelaire to Surrealism. This history is that of a decline of the novel, or more precisely of what feeds the novel at the deepest level, the novelist's inspiration, the «provocation to desire». Gracq takes the view at the antipodes from a generally current vision which traces from Flaubert to Proust and Joyce (and in a parallel manner from Baudelaire to Mallarmé) an ascending evolution towards absolute modernity and the total work. In his eyes Flaubert is the evil genius of the novel; he contains in embryo the three disasters that one meets in Proust, Existentialism and the *nouveau roman*: the inversion of perspective which causes the genre to slip from «prospection» to «nostalgic rumination», «the fascination for the inert» and the invasion of the novel by the «logistics» of its «directions for use». This struggle against the obsessive fear of ossification gives the book its deep unity, and feeds the most original of its analyses, such as those that Gracq makes of description and landscape, or, through a debate with Valéry and Breton, a defence of the arbitrary nature of the novel («*La marquise sortit à cinq heures*»).

En lisant en écrivant, by its date, also offers an overview of Gracq's work as a whole. This turning in upon oneself is directed above all at the novelistic fiction and the critical discourse which accompanies it, leaving aside the fragmentary writing. However, the final, almost derisive mention of the eighteenth century, which «illuminated everything and sensed nothing», situates Gracq's reflections in a precise context, that of the end of Marxism. Gracq celebrates in the novel his fervour for the possible at the very moment when the illusion of a bright new tomorrow collapses. Henceforth, our share of the future and dreaming is contained entirely in the novel, which is living literature.

La Forme d'une ville

Published in 1985, the most original book of Gracq's later output is about Nantes. It begins with a quotation from Baudelaire which Gracq repeats and distorts: «The form of a city, as we all know, changes more quickly than a mortal heart». What has been transformed, the physiognomy of Nantes, turned upside down by the filling in of the Erdre and the branches of the Loire, is in fact less important than what has changed the heart of the child «by subjecting it while still brand new to its climate and its landscapes». It is because the city has a form that it can have been a form, in the sense in which this word designates, with reference to hats or typography, «that which gives a specific form», and that the book is in its own way a novel of training or education.

In Gracq's work the imprints of places determine mental moods, that is to say potential events, instead of constituting the trace of acts already lived out. The Ancien Observatoire, for example, or the greenery of the Jardin des Plantes serve as imaginative staging-posts between the novels that the child reads and those that

the adult will read. It seems to Gracq as if nothing will have happened in this town, which Jacques Vaché and André Breton continue to haunt, and Rimbaud behind them, and of which Breton had felt the imaginary hold in the Parc de Procé: there are no memories in the ordinary sense of the word, no encounters, except circumstantial ones in which Gracq afterwards deciphers his own mental landscape. Coincidence then short-circuits time in a convulsive attitude: «I have remained the child glued to the window-pane of the carriage...» For this reason the eternal object of desire is embodied – without assuming distinctive features – in the city itself, which spreads through its streets «the warmth of a bed that has been slept in», but which also offers the «blunt», unbearable face of prostitution or erotic provocation.

If the image of Nantes is that of a «city evacuated», it is because of the sequestration in the boarding school, which removes the child from his home environment, and places him in a town in which he does not live and whose «life passed far out to sea» leaving him «stranded on the shore». Structure is imposed on the book, but without giving rise to resentment; even the pages dealing with the school are impartial in such a way that the pathos is filtered through humour. Moreover Gracq speaks little of himself. It is the concrete experience of the child which is revealed to us, not his inner life: the distribution of the spaces, their hierarchy, their attraction or their lifelessness, the laws which govern access to them, and the habitual imprint which all this makes on the sensibility. The pages on the outings and the «tropism of the boundaries», the consecration of the opera-house, the «quietistic illumination» in which thought feels the self-importance or the indifference of being there, – these pages describe fundamental experiences which illuminate from within the writer's thematics.

However, the subject of the book is indeed Nantes, reconstructed from a remembered image in which the Lycée Clemenceau occupies the centre. Next there follow the «radial avenues» walked along during the prescribed school recreation periods; then the districts of the town arranged in between these axes; next the waterways, the Erdre and the Loire and the port; finally the relation between Nantes and the hinterland, giving rise to the idea of the «big city» cut off from the countryside and set against it. The threads are woven together at the end of the journey with the appearance of a set of discontinuous elements making up the spectre of the city in the latter's absence: these are both the names of the places and the snapshots of «documents from personal archives», mental images in which the city is preserved in its initial form. Despite these multiple forms of purchase, the city remains an elusive entity, unfaithful to itself; this is the charm of Nantes: «Neither completely terrestrial, nor completely maritime: neither flesh nor fish – just the necessary to form a siren.»

Autour des sept collines

Gracq waited 66 years before visiting Italy, where he only knew Venice, and more than ten years before gathering together his impressions in a book, which was published in 1988: for Rome, he says, «the later the better». The tone of Autour des sept collines is dictated by the confrontation between, on the one hand, a country and a city imagined through paintings and books, and on the other, perceived reality; it is also marked by an extraterritorial relationship: nowhere in Italy is the spectacle seen through the lens of personal history. The gaze is a disengaged one, light to the point of impertinence, with which Gracq surveys places clogged up with admiration and memory. The tower of the Palazzo

Vecchio in Florence is compared to the funnel of an aircraft carrier, Trajan's Column to «a sequoia which has wandered by mistake into a municipal garden»: but this incongruity is a product of history and not a stylistic effect.

Several notes in Lettrines were already devoted to the period when Rome remained a city after Gracq's heart: retrospective jealousy of Goethe, Chateaubriand or Stendhal sets the scene for an imminent confrontation and is linked directly to the pages written «far from Rome», after the return. The substance of the book is made up of these intersecting planes. Even in the central section, «À Rome», the immediate aspects of the city occupy little place and are often eroded between the analogies which give them form and the images thrown up by memory; hence the centre of the Rome of the Popes is compared by the author to «a compact urban cake cooking under the sun», then compared to the «lanes full of staves and barrels the Saint-Florent of [his] childhood». Through this oscillation, the style converts into pleasure an experience which was often not very pleasurable. What Gracq liked in Rome was very often its faults. The «chaos of the centuries» has made of the city a «luxurious bric-a-brac» lacking force lines and confined within a narrow space; even Saint Peter's «seems to have come into the world as if it had been pushed in between two pre-existing buildings». On the horizon is projected the purely negative image of a land without windows, a «ghetto made sacred by the frozen museological preservation».

Indeed everything separates living from visiting. If Italy nevertheless procures some pleasures, these come from the relation between man and his surroundings: hence the «transparent» cuisine or the churches which share the familiar life of the street. Just as the museum-city is detestable, so the «city which is the museum, but a museum where people eat, drink, smoke, daydream, have

a siesta, accost women» is agreeable. The imagination works also to deepen the fault lines by which the city «breathes»: the urban fallow land of the Capitol and the Pincio, or the Piazza dei Cavalieri di Malta loaded with sibylline secrets. And the better to construct this «lacunary» city, memory has recourse to Romantic engravings, to the prelude to the last act of *Tosca*, to the lives of the landscape painters in the Rome of the seventeenth century.

From this reinvented Rome two lessons are derived. The first is aesthetic in nature and valorises realism in art, without prejudice to a predilection for the chimerical. After Courbet and Corot, mentioned in *Lettrines II*, here it is Caravaggio who, in an entirely gastronomic demonstration, «abandons a Venus, who has just been brought to him freshly dug up, in order to sketch a gypsy girl in the street».

The second lesson lies in the process of «building-constructing», which at each stage of the story reorganises the landscape, ready if necessary to treat the ancient city as a marble quarry. Now, «one only truly inhabits the house one has built oneself»: the prejudice in favour of conservation is one of the facets of the perversity of our age, the other facet being the prefabricated habitat which imposes on the human species a site which is «not chosen and not destructible». The book leaves us in front of some «innards of rusty iron», an obscene image of a dead past but one impossible to transmute into history, warning us that this past is our future.

Carnets du grand chemin

So far the most recent book by Julien Gracq, published in 1992, this volume could have been entitled «*Lettrines III*». It brings together notes of which the oldest, like the fine text on London, «*Souvenirs d'une ville inconnue*», are

contemporary with Lettrines II. Moreover, the two books are closely related in their substance, rhythm and style. However, the Carnets du grand chemin seem less to continue the work than to overhang it, sending back a sombre echo.

The opening pages carry us off to a familiar territory, in a sort of condensed version of Gracq's typical landscape. The accentuation of the stylistic traits draws forth a constant resonance – when talking about modest places in the Massif Central or Sologne – which is the fundamental tone of the work, that of Le Rivage des Syrtes.

We decipher and see exactly the hotels of Lucerne through the Aldobrandi palace, or the Montpellier-le-Vieux circus through the natural castle keep of the island of Vezzano. This ostentation is not without irony, and in that regard the reinvention of the Gers via the Trois Mousquetaires seems to offer a last flowering – too beautiful to be true – of the romantic aura for which Gracq's heart has beaten so. These landscapes speak to us too, in an almost allegorical way, about the present condition of the writer. The lofty but anxious refusal of a degeneration identified with the banalisation of the modern world transcends, in Gracq's work, the melancholy of age whilst feeding off it. Just as Ernst Jünger is destined to carry to the grave two centuries of Prussian military greatness, along with the order *Pour le mérite* of which he is the last to bear, so Gracq gathers around him images of that old nature which he created for himself in his work: those villages of Sologne still haunted by the ghost of a noble and violent activity, «residual Edens», little towns of books of hours, roads along which one thinks one is pursuing «the finally established reign of a pure element».

The autobiographical fragments are less loaded with obsessive anxieties. There one can observe, juxtaposed with the good-natured account of the militant years spent in a Communist Party that was more provincial than

revolutionary, the discreet appearance of the women of the family: the mother, the grandmother, the young girls from the neighbourhood, around a child who is fed «with a little Barbary egg matching his size and served in a little egg-cup». One has a presentiment of the importance for a «stay-at-home writer» like Gracq of a domestic universe where the tutelary figures, beneath the finery of a «fluted, starched, immaculate» head-dress, are shown in all their glory.

The work moves then by the persistence of its dreams. The most original inflexion of these Carnets is provided by a presence which has hitherto been far from insistent and which henceforth resounds with a crepuscular majesty: that of Latin. This means the poets, Propertius and the Virgil of the descent into Hell – Gracq cites the latter twice without translating; but what returns from the very heart of childhood are the liturgical hymns, the *Vexilla regis* or the *Pange lingua*, which are the subject of a magnificent page. A deep impregnation of Catholicism is revealed in this untormented unbeliever who, as a writer, has never ceased to be sensitive to the aura of the word of Christ, to appreciate Baudelaire's «liturgical sensuality», and to find the devil of the Inquisitors more convincing than the *Id* of the psychoanalysts.

Gracq nevertheless concludes his book with a lengthy reflection on the literary judgement that the writer expects from his peers, and which in the beginning constitutes a veritable acceptance into an order of the mind. This is what Balzac did for Stendhal, Barrès for Mauriac, and Breton himself for the author of Au Château d'Argol, in a letter preserved like a «certificate of qualification». That the trajectory of Gracq's published work perhaps finishes at this point is an invitation to us to pay a parting homage to the unceasing concern for his purpose, as much as to his fidelity to himself.

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His complete works have been published by Gallimard, in the «Bibliothèque de la Pléiade» collection, in two volumes (1989, 1995). The preparation of this edition, under the editorship of Bernhild Boie, was closely followed by the author himself.

Some of Julien Gracq's books have been translated into foreign languages.

albanais

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allemand

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La Presqu'île
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Vega, Lisbonne

roumain

Au château d'Argol

Enoch Est, Bucarest

Le Rivage des Syrtes

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Un balcon en forêt

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russe

Carnets du grand chemin

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