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Marc Hersant, *Saint-Simon*. Paris: Gallimard, 2016. 352 pp. Images, timeline, bibliography, and notes. €9.40 (pb). ISBN 978-2-07-046138-7.

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According to recent reports, Emmanuel Macron is reading the *Mémoires* of the duc de Saint-Simon to understand the court society of Louis XIV and thereby gain insight into the monarchic aspects of the Fifth Republic.[1] Should Macron be unable to complete all 7,000 pages of the *Mémoires* (in the most recent Pléiade edition), he should turn to this more compact biography of Saint-Simon—part of the Folio Biographies series—which provides a richly detailed and entertaining portrait of the author, his work, and his era, penned by one of the best Saint-Simon scholars of our time.

Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon (1675-1755) is known today as a writer—a title he would undoubtedly reject—because of his massive and highly partisan *Mémoires*. Written in secret, the text details the author's life at court from 1691 to 1723. Denied a military promotion in 1702, Saint-Simon, lacking any official duties, essentially became a professional observer of life at Versailles. His residence at court was justified only because of his wife's family and her appointment as lady-in-waiting to the duchesse de Berry. Saint-Simon played a minor role in the first years of the regency of Louis XV because of his longstanding friendship with Philippe d'Orléans, but he would ultimately be marginalized during the premiership of the abbé Guillaume Dubois. Saint-Simon was therefore something of a political failure, and it is only because he turned to writing in the last decades of his life that he continues to generate interest among contemporary scholars. For Saint-Simon's verbal talent—his ability to capture both grandeur and eccentricity, to depict the repressed passions and overt antagonisms that drive court life—is truly extraordinary, and it explains why the *Mémoires* have been admired by novelists such as Stendhal and Marcel Proust.

Rejecting the adulation of Louis XIV that characterizes official court histories, Saint-Simon views the Sun King as someone who is insidiously destroying the sacred order of the kingdom by promoting members of the third estate to positions of authority. Of particular concern to Saint-Simon is the status that Louis XIV accords to his own illegitimate children, born to his mistresses Louise de La Vallière and Madame de Montespan. Through a series of legal and extra-legal means, the king gives the *bâtards* an important place in the social hierarchy and even grants his illegitimate sons the power of inheriting the crown should the princes of the blood predecease them. Saint-Simon, attentive to maintaining his ducal privileges, depicts this and other infractions of tradition with apoplectic fury, and a good deal of the *Mémoires* is devoted to arcane

questions of protocol or labyrinthine genealogical studies. Anthologies of Saint-Simon's work usually omit these passages and, instead, showcase the writer's amusing anecdotes and vivid portraits of various courtiers. Critics have often dismissed Saint-Simon as a mediocre historian while praising his text's literary merit.

Marc Hersant, better than anyone, understands the complexity of reading Saint-Simon and the various attempts to categorize the *Mémoires* with a single label. In an earlier and quite polemical work, Hersant—a professor of eighteenth-century literature—disdained critics who read the *Mémoires* from a purely literary perspective.[2] Condemning what he termed “‘impérialisme’ littéraire,” Hersant proposed an absolute boundary between history and fiction, arguing that Saint-Simon can only be understood as a historian devoted to a particular idea of historical truth.[3] It is notable, then, that in his biography of Saint-Simon, Hersant evinces a less rigid approach to the writer and his work. In the introduction, Hersant acknowledges that Saint-Simon has become “un des plus grands écrivains français,” and he states that his objective is to understand why this is true, given that Saint-Simon is “ce qu’il y a de plus étranger à ce que nous appelons la ‘littérature’” (p. 14). In other words, Hersant's biography is focused on how the different aspects of Saint-Simon's life become transformed into a text that can legitimately be placed within a literary canon.

One measure of how Hersant's relationship with Saint-Simon has changed over the years is the way in which the biographer treats his subject with a certain affectionate irony. For example, in recounting Saint-Simon's audience with Louis XIV in 1703, Hersant wryly suggests that the king viewed Saint-Simon as a monomaniac taken straight from a Molière comedy, like Arnolphe in *L'École des femmes*. In another place, Hersant compares Saint-Simon's relationship with the regent to Don Quixote's relationship with Sancho Panza. It is an unlikely pairing, in which Saint-Simon's obstinacy is humorously balanced by the regent's irresolution. Such comparisons demonstrate not just Hersant's literary erudition, but also his amusement with Saint-Simon's spleen. One might say—using another literary comparison—that Saint-Simon in this biography plays the role of Alceste (the title character in Molière's *Le Misanthrope*), while Hersant plays the role of Philinte, the ever-attentive friend who patiently listens to Alceste's outrage but takes it with a grain of salt.

The biography is organized into seventeen succinct chapters that follow the chronology of Saint-Simon's life while exploring certain themes that stretch across the entirety of the *Mémoires*. For example, in chapter three, titled “Anges et démons,” Hersant uses the moment of Saint-Simon's marriage to explore the competing impulses that characterize the writer's verbal portraits. While Saint-Simon undoubtedly loved his wife, who came from a well-placed family and won the king's favor, his various descriptions of her are platitudinous, lacking the energy and arresting detail that the writer gives in portraits of upstarts and scoundrels. A perfect example of the latter is the portrait of the duc de Lauzun, Madame de Saint-Simon's brother-in-law. Hersant analyzes this portrait to show the writer's staccato brilliance that comes through in his rapid accumulation of adjectives and adverbial clauses, often contradictory, creating a dynamic rendering of the subject. Through the juxtaposition of Madame de Saint-Simon and Lauzun, Hersant delineates two passions that flow through the *Mémoires*: on the one hand, the writer's attachment to “un ordre vertueux et immobile, fait de conventions hiératiques,” and, on the other hand, Saint-Simon's fascination with “la vie dans l'écart, la difformité des corps, la perversité des esprits, l'incongruité des attitudes, le déferlement incontrôlé des pulsions, les manies, les tics, les dérapages, les moments de folie pure” (pp. 62–63).

The fourth chapter, “Une spiritualité tourmentée,” discusses Saint-Simon’s religious beliefs. Hersant cleverly uses the figures of François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon and Armand Jean le Bouthillier *de Rancé*, both of whom are portrayed in the *Mémoires*, to explore the writer’s relationship to the controversies surrounding Quietism and Jansenism. Rancé plays the role of spiritual guide for Saint-Simon, but Hersant surmises that Saint-Simon probably rejected Rancé’s authority when composing the *Mémoires*. According to Hersant, the trauma of this Oedipal rebellion becomes apparent in Saint-Simon’s consistent need to justify his most malicious passages as a form of Christian duty. In a line that testifies to the biographer’s psychological insight, Hersant writes that Saint-Simon’s work originates from “un défi posthume à celui pour lequel il affiche, sur le plan conscient, une fidélité absolue” (p. 80).

Scholars interested in Saint-Simon’s relationship to Louis XIV will zero in on the tenth chapter, “Un ‘assez grand roi?’”, where Hersant contrasts Saint-Simon’s treatment of the king to that of Voltaire in his *Siècle de Louis XIV*. For Voltaire, the Sun King’s reign represents sophistication, harmony, and the acme of French neoclassical tragedy. For Saint-Simon, it represents decadence, chaos, and triviality. But Hersant is quick to point out that Saint-Simon respects Louis XIV’s poise and manner—the Sun King embodies kingship in a uniquely forceful way. Thus, Hersant argues that Saint-Simon portrays Louis XIV in complex, sometimes paradoxical terms that surpass the political and social disagreements separating the writer and the monarch. For Saint-Simon, Louis XIV is not only a reckless narcissist but also a gracious host who appreciates a courtier’s good joke; he is a master of self-control, who utters not a single syllable more than necessary, but who is nonetheless dominated by his mistresses and his bourgeois ministers. Ultimately, the king portrayed in the *Mémoires* is “un élément du monde réel complètement insaisissable autour duquel le mémorialiste, fasciné, sans savoir par où le prendre, tourne inlassablement” (p. 194).

The chapters on the regency period allow Hersant to describe Saint-Simon’s interactions with John Law and examine Saint-Simon’s ambassadorship to Spain, when the writer was tasked with negotiating the marriage between the young Louis XV and the Spanish infanta (the project was later annulled). This is also a period when Saint-Simon enjoys a brief moment of vengeance against his longtime enemies: the *bâtards* and the Parlement de Paris. With the famous *lit de justice* of 1718, certain privileges that had accrued to the *bâtards* and the *parlementaires* under Louis XIV were officially, and publicly, abolished. Hersant describes this moment as the climax of Saint-Simon’s emotional life and among the most powerful pages of the *Mémoires*, where the writer achieves “la plus haute et la plus étrange poésie” by using a vocabulary of intense, bodily pleasure to describe an event that is neither amorous, nor erotic, nor religious (p. 224). Here we see Hersant’s fullest embrace of Saint-Simon as a literary figure, for the biographer posits that this moment in the *Mémoires* expands the boundaries of literature and of autobiographical writing. Saint-Simon’s violent emotions during the *lit de justice* come not from his individual identity or character, as the conventional idea of the self would lead one to expect, but from his purely social identity as a duke and peer; his desire finds its satisfaction not in a private encounter but in a public assembly. According to Hersant, Saint-Simon experiences something akin to a “violent orgasme” from what is, after all, a legal proceeding—strange poetry, indeed (p. 223).

Later chapters deal with Saint-Simon’s retirement from court after the death of the regent and with his decision to occupy himself with writing. It is during this period that Saint-Simon acquires a copy of the marquis de Dangeau’s *Journal*, a day-to-day chronicle of Louis XIV’s reign,

and begins annotating Dangeau's text with his own interpretation of the events depicted there. Scholars usually describe Saint-Simon's additions to Dangeau as a first draft of the *Mémoires*, but Hersant argues that Saint-Simon's voice is different in the two texts and that the *Additions* have their own merit apart from being a precursor to the *Mémoires*. Finally, Hersant explains the organizational principles of the *Mémoires*, the different styles of writing that inhabit the text, and the variety of Saint-Simon's comic anecdotes. He also discusses the reception of the *Mémoires* during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, closing on a personal note to describe his own relationship to Saint-Simon.

Overall, Hersant relies mainly on the *Mémoires* themselves for his information about Saint-Simon, but he also draws on Saint-Simon's correspondence and lesser-known works that reveal biographical data. Indeed, one of the most outstanding features of this biography is that it demonstrates the importance of Saint-Simon's other texts that are usually overshadowed by the *Mémoires*. In particular, Hersant turns the reader's attention to the *Collections sur feu Monseigneur le Dauphin*, an homage to Louis XIV's grandson that Saint-Simon wrote after the prince's unexpected death in 1712. Hersant calls the *Collections* one of the writer's greatest works and one of the most overlooked texts of the eighteenth century.

Scholars embarking on a study of Saint-Simon and those who know the *Mémoires* only in brief selections will be especially rewarded by this biography, since it offers a comprehensive but concise overview of the subject, provides commentary on key passages of the *Mémoires*, and is written in an engaging style. Acting as a textual tour guide, Hersant indicates the specific years in the *Mémoires* that are particularly enjoyable or momentous. Departing from the position he espoused in his earlier scholarship, Hersant seems to accept the fact that very few people will read Saint-Simon's text in its entirety. Consequently, his biography helps readers focus on the parts of the *Mémoires* that best exemplify Saint-Simon's unique voice. That is a sensible position, and it serves as good advice for Emmanuel Macron.

NOTES

[1] "Saint-Simon, Levinas, Daoud... dans la bibliothèque d'Emmanuel Macron," *Franceactu.net*, September 1, 2017. <https://www.franceactu.net/non-classe/saint-simon-levinas-daoud-dans-la-bibliotheque-demmanuel-macron/>

[2] Marc Hersant, *Le discours de vérité dans les Mémoires du duc de Saint-Simon* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2009).

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 87, n. 167.

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