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Christian Jouhaud, *Le Siècle de Marie Du Bois: Ecrire l'expérience au XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2022. 382 pp. Illustrations, facsimiles, and 15 photographs. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 9782021492026; €17.99 (epub). ISBN 9782021492033.

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In his choices of title and subtitle, Christian Jouhaud announces the double ambitions that shape *Le Siècle de Marie Du Bois*. As its title suggests, the book analyzes a single, largely forgotten seventeenth-century life, mainly on the basis of a single, remarkable document. For most of the year, Marie Du Bois lived as a small-time country gentleman in the Vendômois, on the fringes of the nobility but not solidly established within it. But he also held office as one of the king's *valets de chambre*, serving Louis XIII, Louis XIV, and finally the dauphin. Like many other venal offices at court, Du Bois's was exercised on a rotating basis, with a few months of service followed by several months at home with his family, and for many years he devoted his quiet hours in the country to writing out his experiences in both environments. The "ego-document" that resulted thus offers a stereoscopic view of upper-class life in the seventeenth century. Intimate scenes of life among the great alternate with small-town doings, and the cast of characters is correspondingly large; Louis XIII, Louis XIV, Mazarin, and several great nobles all make appearances, but so also do Du Bois's family, his rural neighbors, the poor, and even a rascally priest.

At this level, then, the book is a brilliant micro-history of the seventeenth century, an effort to illuminate the workings of a distant society. Jouhaud conducts this exploration with great skill, sorting out poorly known institutions, tracking down family and neighborhood relationships and examining the effects on these relationships of such mundane realities as travel conditions and ecclesiastical organization. But he also has another ambition, conveyed by his book's subtitle: he seeks to explicate the process of "writing experience," both one's own, as exemplified in Du Bois's ego-document, and that of earlier times, as in Jouhaud's own efforts as a historian to make sense of the seventeenth century. Alongside its social history, *Le Siècle de Marie Du Bois* thus offers an extended reflection on the nature of history writing itself, centering on the historian's encounter with an actor-writer from the past.

Those familiar with Jouhaud's abundant scholarship will recognize these as his longstanding preoccupations, already visible in his 1985 thesis on the pamphlet literature of the mid-seventeenth-century Fronde.^[1] That work explores the immediate political contexts in which apparently passionate ideological statements were composed and distributed, and it shows how directly contexts shaped contents; authors treated their works as political tools, designed to serve

the immediate interests of those who employed them, and their views evolved with their patrons' needs and alliances. Jouhaud's mode of analysis has helped inspire a burst of interdisciplinary scholarship, and since 1996 it has had an institutional home in the Groupe de recherches interdisciplinaires sur l'histoire du littéraire, loosely attached to the École des hautes études en sciences sociales.^[2] The GRIHL's name exemplifies one of Jouhaud's central interpretive commitments. In making the history of "the literary" rather than of "literature" its central concern, the group points to the dangers of reifying the concepts that historians apply to the past, "literature" chief among them. No clear line divides literary writing from other forms, and the historian needs always to ask how a given example of writing fits into the social world from which it emerged. Jouhaud and his colleagues have thus pursued a social history of writing, but a social history that avoids big generalizations about class and economic interests, and that questions as well many standard categories of historical analysis.

Jouhaud's three chapters on Du Bois's "politics of experience" offer a good example of these approaches. They open with a statement of method: Jouhaud has read Du Bois's text "de près, page à page et ligne à ligne, en y guettant la moindre trace d'une résonance politique" ("from up close, page by page and line by line, on the alert for the slightest trace of political resonance") (p. 223). Approaching the text at this microscopic level yields a series of important insights into what constituted politics for a seventeenth-century country gentleman. Jouhaud shows that those politics were never strictly located either at court or in the country, the two locales in which Du Bois spent most of his life. While serving at court, he was constantly alert to the ways in which his lofty contacts might help him advance his standing back home; conversely, his position in the wider world significantly shaped his local circumstances. Friends from court provided concrete help in moments of difficulty in the countryside, as when marauding soldiers appeared near his home during the Fronde, and he used the negotiating skills he picked up at court to deal with local challenges. More importantly, connection with the very powerful gave Du Bois a diffuse form of credit within his community, which he could draw on in his efforts to assert and defend his local standing.

Whether he was at court or back home in his village, local standing remained Du Bois's principal concern, and it shaped even his dealings with ostensibly non-political issues, such as the project of installing a new chapel within his parish church. On the one hand, the project merely reflected Du Bois's conformity to the assertive spiritual mood of the later seventeenth century, but it was also an act of self-promotion, designed to affirm his position within local society. Hence he regularly referred to the completed chapel as belonging to him, and in his testaments he treated it as part of the property he was leaving to his son. In Jouhaud's words, the years devoted to realizing his plans for the chapel can be read as "les actions constitutives d'une identité ou, mieux, d'une personnalité sociale" ("actions constituting an identity or, rather, a social personality") (p. 335; also p. 10).

Jouhaud argues vigorously against attributing to Du Bois any form of genuine political "engagement," least of all an "engagement au nom d'une conviction politique, ce qui serait un point de vue anachronique sur ce passé" ("engagement in the name of a political conviction, which would be an anachronistic view of this past"), in this respect reasserting the core argument of his book on the Mazarinades (p. 257). Du Bois seems not even to have attached himself to one of the contending aristocratic factions during the Fronde; then as throughout his life, he sought mainly to sustain good relations with all players in the local community, so as to preserve both its unity and his own place within it. But he did hold a dominant political idea, a belief in an ordered social

system and a belief in the monarch as both embodiment and guarantor of order. Hence Jouhaud is especially interested in moments when that political faith wavered, revealing traces of political critique. In 1664, Du Bois found himself unjustly accused of a major theft at court; the king seemed to believe his declarations of innocence, but also showed himself helpless to settle the matter, displaying the monarchy's unreliability as the preserver of real justice. Other shocks came a few years later, as Du Bois's court career neared its end. Too old to accompany the king on his many travels, Du Bois now served the king's young son. In this role he again had to confront injustice, disorder, and the monarchy's failure to correct them: the dauphin's aristocratic tutor regularly beat him, to the point of endangering the boy's health, yet Du Bois's protests seemed only to encourage greater ferocity. Already shaken by this violation of his ethical norms, he finally turned to the king himself, and encountered only indifference. Du Bois had again to confront the possibility that the king could not in fact create a just social order, and the still-worse possibility that he lacked even an interest in doing so.

Le Siècle de Marie Du Bois thus offers a model for reading historical documents and drawing inferences from them. It is a literary model, in the sense that it features close readings and attention to the artistry with which texts are constructed. However remote from the formal institutions of seventeenth-century "literature," Jouhaud shows, Du Bois was in fact an artist who shaped his text so as to give narrative coherence and emotional resonance to the episodes he recounted. Of course reading of this kind relies heavily on historians' own subjective responses to what they find in their texts, and Jouhaud acknowledges that reality in the book's numerous first-person interventions. Such explicit authorial presence is rare in French historical writing, and indeed in Jouhaud's own previous work, but it serves an important purpose here. By inserting himself into the text, Jouhaud both explores and interrogates his own role in creating the version of historical reality that he presents. Thus, having recounted an episode in which Louis XIV treats the now-elderly Du Bois with a coldness bordering on cruelty, Jouhaud asks whether the king seems cruel only "à mes yeux de lecteur à distance du temps de l'action" ("to my eyes as a reader distant from the time") (p. 302). More broadly, he describes his "inquiétude...à propos de l'impact de ma propre écriture" ("anxiety...about the effect of my own writing") in deforming "le précipité de l'expérience" ("the residue of experience") that Du Bois's text presents (p. 304). Such interventions reflect Jouhaud's sense of the difficulty of historical reading, and the book concludes by evoking the distance of the past from those of us who seek to understand it. Paradoxically, "le sentiment quelquefois éprouvé d'une trop grande transparence" ("the feeling of excessive transparency") in a text from the past, "d'un excès de proximité du passé" ("of an excess of closeness to the past"), stands in the way of real historical knowledge (p. 350).

At no point does Jouhaud go further in exploring the historian's subjectivity, by exploring the ways their specific experiences or situations might shape readings and interpretations. In that sense his historian remains a detached, dispassionate scientist, constrained only by the inherent difficulty of accessing vanished realities. The richness of his results amply justifies Jouhaud's allegiance to this enduring professional self-image, but in one respect even the enthusiastic reader feels entitled to ask for more extensive self-reflection: namely, concerning the overlap between *Le Siècle de Marie Du Bois* and some of Jouhaud's previous work. In his preface, Jouhaud explains that Du Bois came to his attention in the early 2000s and that the encounter constituted "le début d'un long compagnonage" ("the start of a long friendship") (p. 8); in the following chapter, he describes learning of the text and immediately wanting "de travailler sur le texte de Du Bois, ce que j'ai commencé à faire dans les années qui ont suivi" ("to work on it, which I began to do in the years that followed"); an end-note mentions three works in which this early research appeared

(p. 39; p. 355 n. 27). But these brief references risk giving a misleading impression, for Du Bois already plays the primary role in Jouhaud's 2007 book *Sauver le Grand-Siècle? Présence et transmission du passé*. Its seven chapters, he explains, "prennent pour guide Marie Du Bois, le valet de chambre de deux rois, et tentent de ne pas le perdre de vue dans ses propres cheminements. Son texte est la porte" ("take as a guide Marie Du Bois, the *valet de chambre* of two kings, and try not to lose sight of him in his life course. His text is the gateway") to the problems the book addresses.[3]

Sauver le Grand Siècle? differs in fundamental ways from *Le Siècle de Marie Du Bois*. It is less directly concerned with Du Bois's life and social experiences and more directly examines what his text can tell us about historical writing. To that end, it interweaves his version of the seventeenth century with that presented in a series of canonical historical works, notably those works that established our understanding of the seventeenth century as France's *grand siècle*; the juxtaposition, Jouhaud shows, can "disrupt" (*brouiller*) our understanding of what constitutes a historical work.[4] But despite their differences, the two books analyze several of the same episodes from Du Bois's narrative, and the later work even includes a few recycled sentences.[5]

Hence the reader's questions. At the most basic level, have Jouhaud's interpretations changed in the eventful fifteen years that separate the two works? More broadly, can historians in the twenty-first century altogether avoid situating ourselves within history, as Christian Jouhaud himself has so persuasively done for our predecessors? Are we also not in some degree engaged in "writing experience?" Over his career, Jouhaud has developed a set of powerful and sensitive tools for contextualizing writing, and his monographic studies have brilliantly illustrated their effectiveness in making sense of the past; but can historical practitioners in the present exempt themselves from the questions he has raised about the past?

NOTES

[1] Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades: La Fronde des mots* (Paris: Aubier, 1985; repr. Aubier, 2009); for a thoughtful review of Jouhaud's earlier work, see Robert Schneider, "Political Power and the Emergence of Literature: Christian Jouhaud's Age of Richelieu," *French Historical Studies* 25/2 (Spring 2002): 357-380.

[2] See "Groupe de recherches interdisciplinaires sur l'histoire du littéraire – GRIHL," EHESS, accessed August 21, 2023, <https://www.ehess.fr/en/node/4530>.

[3] Christian Jouhaud, *Sauver le Grand-Siècle? Présence et transmission du passé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), p. 28.

[4] Jouhaud, *Sauver le Grand-Siècle?*, pp. 23, 24.

[5] Compare Jouhaud, *Sauver le Grand Siècle?*, pp. 183-184 with Jouhaud, *Le Siècle de Marie Du Bois*, p. 301.

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