

Montherlant, A Memoir

By HENRI KOPS

His greatness conquered me slowly and in a roundabout way. I first heard Montherlant mentioned when I was eleven by a boy of my age whom I met in Belgium. He was of Spanish Sephardic descent, and I can still see his large, dark eyes sparkle in his copper-tinted round face as he praised *Le songe* as a fantastic book that I should not miss. But it was just one of a number of things suggested during my youth that I did not do then.

Another eleven years elapsed before I read Montherlant. In 1934 I was trying to write for motion pictures and, during a number of months that I vainly assaulted the fortress Hollywood, I took out of the well-stocked Hollywood public library *Les olympiques* and *La petite infante de Castille*. Later I read the remarkable *Les célibataires*.

While serving in 1945 as French interpreter with the Headquarters Command of the U.S. Army in Reims, its public library gave me a more complete revelation of Montherlant through his famous tetralogy *Les jeunes filles*. I bought a precious numbered copy of his collected political and moral essays from a Reims bookseller with a then priceless carton of Lucky Strikes! *La relève du matin*, *Service inutile*, *L'équinoxe de Septembre*, and *Le solstice de Juin* made me a confirmed Montherlant aficionado.

When in Paris that same year, I asked novelist Jean Vignaud, who was also the publisher of publications for which I was Hollywood correspondent, where I could find Montherlant. Although Montherlant's apartment had been searched by the nazis during the occupation, a few unofficial accusations of collaboration had also been made against him. In the confused post-liberation days even Vignaud had to use many contacts to track down the place Montherlant was then residing. As my Paris furlough was running out, I just took a chance and rang the bell of his apartment. There was no answer. But by the time I received my discharge from the U.S. Army, I had shipped an almost complete collection of his works to my California home.

By 1950 I had studied just about everything Montherlant had written and my admiration led me to devote an article to him that would be a substantial introduction of the man and his work to American readers. It was then that my correspondence with Montherlant began. With varying degrees of frequency and significance, it was to last twenty-two years, and excerpts from it follow.

In one of my first letters to him I mentioned how Jean Vignaud had obtained this same address for me after much difficulty, while I was on a brief military leave in Paris, but that I rang the bell in vain. Montherlant's response of November 1950: "Si vous m'aviez demandé un rendez-vous en janvier 46 au lieu de sonner chez moi à l'improviste, je vous aurais reçu bien volontiers." In answer to questions in preparation for my article, he replied: "J'écris toujours à la main . . . Je participe toujours aux répétitions de mes pièces, du moins de celles qui sont en répétition à Paris; mais je ne

m'occupe jamais ni des répétitions ni des représentations de mes pièces données à l'étranger."

After I sent him the article in the 1957 summer issue of *Books Abroad*, he wrote me in August: "J'ai lu avec beaucoup d'intérêt votre étude. Vous avez raison de dire que ce que j'écris défie la traduction. Je m'en aperçois sans cesse, et mes traductions—dont j'ai d'ailleurs cessé de m'occuper—sont pour moi un véritable calvaire quand je peux les comparer à l'original. Dans son ensemble ce résumé de ma vie et de mes oeuvres pourrait être utilisé même en France (traduit) pour donner une première idée de moi."

Later in 1957 when I asked him about recordings of his works, he informed me that Pathé had recorded *Port-Royal* and *La reine morte*, and commented: "ce sont les seules pièces d'un auteur vivant à figurer dans la collection du répertoire de la Comédie Française."

My Spring 1959 *Books Abroad* review of *Don Juan* contains a prophetic sentence: "We are treated to what many of us hope is but a very premature practice in dying gracefully." Having read the review, Montherlant wrote to me: "Ce *Don Juan* a été massacré, d'abord par les interprètes, et ensuite par mes confrères, qui ont pour moi une haine toute française. On va le jouer en Allemagne et il va passer à la B.B.C. de Londres. Je vous ai fait envoyer un petit volume de textes écrits sur moi par des jeunes gens, dont le ton est tout à fait différent de celui qu'ont à mon égard les professionnels de la critique." I reviewed this unprecedented volume in the summer 1960 issue of *Books Abroad*.

In a letter of December 1959 he wrote, "Je crois que la question de la postérité, du moins aujourd'hui et en France, est surtout une question d'organisation."

When I asked his permission to nominate him for the Aspen Award on the basis of distinguished achievement in strengthening man's sense of his nature, purpose and destiny, he replied in December 1963: "Quant au Prix Aspen, faites comme vous voulez, mais je n'ai nulle chance d'avoir aucun prix, et d'ailleurs nulle envie d'en avoir un. Merci cependant pour votre pensée."

Le chaos et la nuit contains the only three lines in the 6500 pages of his complete works that I do not understand. Although not wounded physically, the main character is found dead with "... entre la nuque et le bas des omoplates, quatre blessures, quatre entrées minces et nettes comme d'un couteau ou d'une épée . . ." When I asked Montherlant about these unexplained wounds, he replied in a letter of December 1964: "C'est une mort symbolique puisque l'auteur l'a identifié avec le quatrième taureau de la course: il meurt des quatre coups d'épée qui ont été donnés à ce taureau." An unsatisfactory explanation from this realistic master who never used far-out symbols anywhere else!

In the *Books Abroad* autumn 1965 issue I reviewed his new play inspired by the Roman leader Pompey, and the author replied: "Je vous remercie pour votre note sur *La guerre civile* qui a un bon succès en France et doit être emportée en tournée dans tous les pays qui bordent la Méditerranée, qui vont être conquis, une nouvelle fois, par les Romains."

The very first time I laid eyes on Henry de Montherlant was in Paris, 15 May 1966. As he appeared in his *salon de réception* decorated with rare Greek and Roman

sculpture and shook my hand, my reaction was peculiar. Despite lengthy knowledge of his work, I had seen only a few photos of him, none full length, and one, taken when he was 34, had eclipsed the others in my mind. It gives the impression that he is tall, slim, Spanishly dark, a rather fatigued, inbred aristocrat. I suppose it was a case of self-delusion due in part to Count Henry de Montherlant having spent much time in Spain and written much about it.

Here stood a broad-featured septuagenarian who did not exceed five feet by much, massive bodied, with the medium complexion of a landowner of northern France and with a manner not unlike that of say, a retired French cavalry officer.

That morning and in subsequent meetings, I found him a very courteous and a very private person who, like many successful writers, spoke sparingly and listened attentively. He knew little about the U.S. and was interested in all I told him about its ways, the press, cultural and social trends. He hardly knew about the Spanish background of California, or that Los Angeles had a huge and eminent university where the library contained nearly all his works in French.

He asked whether I had found Paris visibly changed. I said no, but that I had only recently arrived for this, my first revisit in twenty years. He then remarked about the heavy Black and North African influx and noted that it was altering the face of Paris. I got the impression that he, voyager of the thirties who sympathized sincerely with the plight of colonial natives, did not consider their mass invasion of the French capital as a solution.

Montherlant was genuinely appreciative of my lasting interest in his work. Yet, when I mentioned I was due to meet a fellow *Académicien* that afternoon but had mislaid his address, he immediately phoned the secretary of the Académie to get me the information.

I made it a point not to overstay my welcome and to refrain from personal questions. As an American-style journalist I would have liked to see him at work, at dinner, at play. But from his published diaries I knew how intensely he believed that these activities are a private preserve, and I respected this scrupulously. That year of 1966, in discussing Montherlant with a variety of Europeans, I was pleased to find how unanimously and without reservation he was rated a very great author of extraordinary purity of thought and style. This did not quite hold true for giants like Gide, Sartre, or Camus, or even Colette! I also confirmed the consensus that the inaccessible Montherlant consented to see only whom he pleased, and these were so few that he was considered a recluse. Significantly, his fame got him elected to the *Académie* without his making a single, traditional visit to the voting members and brought him the unique privilege of giving his acceptance speech before a regular, private session of the members rather than in public, beneath the famous *Coupole*.

In October 1968, Montherlant wrote to me: "Une phrase de votre note sur *La ville dont le prince est un enfant* m'a tellement amusé que je la cite, en vous nommant, dans une réimpression de ma *Pléiade Théâtre* qu'on fait en ce moment, et aussi dans la préface de mon nouveau roman. J'ai un peu triché et l'ai citée comme si vous l'aviez écrite concernant ma pièce et non concernant moi." In his preface to *Les garçons* (1969), Montherlant quotes my remark that he fascinates women reviewers like the serpent is said to fascinate pullets.

When I visited him again in July of 1969, I found the same reserved, attentive listener. From a nick in his chin while shaving that morning, I surmised that his sight was beginning to fail following the loss of his left eye in March 1968. Because I treated my contacts with him as a delicate relationship, I decided against asking him how that had happened. My recent inquiries of his publisher and his executor have produced no answer. I am not excluding the possibility that the amphigenic master became blind in one eye from a street assault by young hoodlums resulting from a homosexual episode.

I did ask Montherlant about his health, and he answered casually that he felt well enough but took medication for a circulatory problem. As he had so plainly stated in his diaries, he was as ever a person to whom writing what he must say and occasional sexual diversion were what mattered, and very little else was permitted to interfere. He answered my questions about the meaning of certain words in his works with easy directness. I took time to show and tell him about the *Playboy* phenomenon and how much of America's best fiction was now published in between escapist, female nudes. He registered it all, but in a way that seemed remote, unconcerned.

In April 1972 Montherlant sent me, as he had done with many of his works, an advance copy of *La marée du soir*, his journals of 1968 through 1971. For the first time, it contained a card: "Henry de Montherlant regrette de ne pouvoir dédicacer ce volume." Saving the sight in his remaining right eye for what he felt he must write still?

Montherlant welcomed me again in his way of subdued affection on 27 May 1972. He sat in his salon, his back to the light and the Seine beneath, eyes shielded by tinted glasses. The keenness of his mind was undiminished as he remarked on the sorry state of current French literature. Just see, for example, what is playing on the Parisian stages today, he said.

In his latest journal, he had listed several subjects he would like to have time left to treat. In this connection, I asked why he, author of the magnificent playlet *Pasiphaé*, would not also attempt the challenge of a tale on the love between a man and an animal, perhaps a Bedouin and his mare I suggested. I told him how much freedom of expression was progressing in the U.S., and that women liberationists and homosexuals paraded through the main streets of San Francisco for their cause. This brought fourth rare laughter, the massive Montherlant jaws revealing the strong, spaced teeth. He doubted that parades could emancipate those people who needed it. He explained he would not write such a work as I suggested because he was past such a topic, and also he didn't believe it could be done now any more than long ago when he had discussed the possibility with both Gide and Colette. Both had agreed that writers of their magnitude could not handle the subject of bestiality. Montherlant did tell me that during his residence in North Africa in the early thirties he had gathered some documentation on the subject from natives and French colonial officers, but that if any place, it belonged in a medical journal.

He asked about my wife and daughter at some length, and then I took leave of him. The squat, granitic figure walked away stiffly, ahead of me. The seven shell fragments that lodged in his loins during World War I had left their mark.

The last letter from Montherlant, dated 1 September 1972, thanked me for my review of *Les garçons* which *Studies in Short Fiction* had published in their Fall

1971 issue. He added: "Il est intéressant pour moi que vous disiez que ce livre peut toucher des lecteurs nord-américains. Il a été très lu en France." I could tell from his signature, which I knew so well, that his sight was failing more.

I never saw him again. At four in the afternoon of 21 September 1972, seated in his favorite chair at his work table, Montherlant shot a bullet through his mouth.

It saddened me profoundly of course, but I wasn't surprised by the man who had written among numerous comments on self-destruction: "Car plutôt ne pas être, que ne pas être ce qu'on est fait pour être." Also: "On se suicide par respect pour la raison quand l'âge et la maladie enténébrent la vôtre. On se suicide par respect pour la vie quand votre vie a cessé de pouvoir être digne de vous." His end was as clean and clear and grand as the man and all his work.

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Butor Colloquium: A New Novelist Revisited

By ANNA OTTEN

The international forum that met at the cultural center of Cerisy-La-Salle in Normandy from 24 June to 1 July 1973 had congregated for a Butor colloquium in the presence of the writer himself. Some of the participants had been present at the colloquium on the new novel two years ago, from which Butor had been, according to Robbe-Grillet, "left behind" during the new novelists' move toward the "new new novel." Indeed, it had soon become very clear that the concept of "scription,"* dear to the new new novelists, was neither shared nor cherished by Butor. His absence during debates was acutely felt and prompted the director of the cultural center, Madame Anne Heurgon-Desjardins, to organize a Butor colloquium under the direction of Georges Raillard. It was easy to anticipate that scription would play a secondary role at that meeting, a prognosis that was subsequently confirmed.

Two years ago, at the colloquium on the new novel, where scription was the major concern, Jean Ricardou began the meeting by questioning whether the new novel was dead or alive. Judging from numerous publications, heated debates, articles in the press and interest among French intellectuals, the answer now is that it is alive but no longer what it originally was. Perhaps it would even be appropriate to ask whether the new novel ever existed. At the beginning, the term "new novel" was only a convenient label invented by journalists. When it appeared in the review *Esprit* in 1958, it referred to a few prominent novelists, primarily Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet, who adhered to different literary techniques and shared only the common desire to break with the traditional novel and experiment with new modes.

* Scription is, according to Jean Ricardou (who refers to De Saussure, Benveniste, Lacan, Derrida, Roussel, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss et al) language defined as a structure of signs whose interplay forms the text. The author (*scripteur*) is a craftsman who works with words (*générateurs*) and produces the text. His materials are his own memories, former fiction, works of others, associations, metaphors, anagrams et al. (For theoretical explanations see Jean Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman*, BA 46:2, p. 259; for a good example of scription, see Claude Ollier, *La vie sur Epsilon*, BA 47:3, p. 517.)