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Julien Gracq 4: références et présences littéraires
(review)

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French Studies: A Quarterly Review, Volume 60, Number 3, July 2006, pp.
416-417 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press



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porte-à-faux avec son époque. Murat n'hésite jamais à nous faire connaître ses goûts, par exemple qu'il considère *Un balcon en forêt* comme le sommet de l'œuvre de fiction ou qu'il trouve *En lisant en écrivant* moins 'respirable' que les autres livres de critique ou de fragments, mais il adopte aussi la même discrétion à l'égard de l'homme Gracq que celle de l'édition Pléiade: nulle mention de *Prose pour l'étrangère*, texte publié hors commerce mais accessible néanmoins au public depuis la publication du premier volume de la Pléiade.

Cet essai se démarque, par sa formule, des travaux critiques parfois fort érudits mais plus difficiles d'accès et plus spécialisés qui se sont poursuivis récemment, mais il garde toute la force et la justesse qu'il avait en 1992 et sa réédition est des mieux venues. Son regard aussi pénétrant que lucide sur ce qui fait la particularité et la cohérence de l'œuvre de Gracq, ainsi que la nature exacte des plaisirs qu'elle dispense, fait qu'il restera comme l'un des meilleurs commentaires sur elle.

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doi:10.1093/fs/ksn068

Julien Gracq 4: références et présences littéraires. Textes réunis par PATRICK MAROT.
Paris — Caen, Lettres modernes Minard, 2004. 280 pp. Pb €23.00.

This collection of ten essays provides focused studies on key corpuses that shape Gracq's intensely literary and referential works (for example, by Rimbaud, Breton, Hegel, Goethe, Poe, Wagner), and attends to referential play within a given work by Gracq (such as *Au château d'Argol* (1938), *Un beau ténébreux* (1945), *Le Rivage des Syrtes* (1951)). The striking feature throughout is the very sparing use of the word 'intertextuality'. If two essays recall this catch-all concept for the many procedures at work in Gracq's writing, both connect it overtly to qualifying aesthetics. Jérôme Cabot's '*Au château d'Argol* et le bricolage intertextuel: Hegel, la Bible, Faust et le Graal' and 'Énigme et intertextualité dans *Un beau ténébreux*' by Aurélien Hupé endorse an anthropological and metaphysical referential practice in Gracq's work that runs counter to the rhetoric of absence underlying the more deconstructive 'intertextuality'. It is Gracq's play with presence — whether of others' language and writing, other genres, or other contemporary interlocutors such as Breton or Monnerot — to forge his own, which is the central concern of all of these essays. In this, specialists will see extensions of existing approaches to Gracq, recharged by attention to adjacent counter-theories. For example, in the monumental opening essay, Patrick Marot surveys Gracq studies in the light of deconstruction, in order to reframe the revelatory textual visitations that constitute Gracq's referential practice within a wider neo-Romantic heritage including Surrealism. More specifically, Béatrice Damamme-Gilbert's 'Plaisir, circulation et appropriation: de Gracq lecteur au lecteur de Gracq' applies reader-response approaches and Barthesian pleasures of the text to Gracq as himself a literary reader with textual preferences that resurface in his writing. For Gracq studies, then, this collection is clearly summative and rejuvenating for those fully engaged with this corpus. For the uninitiated but specialist reader of the period, the uncritical attention in these essays to some clearly ideological preferences in Gracq's work may be problematic. However, it is perhaps the non-specialist reader, interested primarily in

the use of allusion, the recycling of literary form, or the importance of political or aesthetic influence who will find stimulation and frustration in equal measure with this collection. Where too much theory can often be restrictive in the elucidation of literary texts, too little grounding in theoretical method returns study of a corpus to extensive naming of the same tropes (or intertexts) with undue interpretation or qualification. For such a highly intertextual and referential writer as Gracq, whose works span so many important schools and movements in French literature, this collection of essays does and does not do justice to the span of his aesthetic practices.

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doi:10.1093/fs/knl070

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Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed. By B. C. HUTCHENS. New York — London, Continuum, 2004. viii + 191 pp. Pb £12.99.

Aiming to achieve ‘a balanced clarity of insight and intuition that is much needed in the study of Levinas’s thought today’ (p. vii), this advanced introduction describes Levinas as ‘undoubtedly one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century’ (p. 12). In a series of short, often dense chapters, it then runs through some of the principal issues with which Levinas deals: freedom, violence, language, scepticism, time, good and evil, suffering, justice, religion, technology, art, eroticism and gender. The stakes of Levinas’s work are high, and Hutchens displays an assured philosophical touch across an impressive range of topics. Throughout, he endeavours to give clear, judicious definitions of problematic terms, emphasizing the ambitious nature of Levinas’s thought but never simply accepting him on his own terms. In fact, this study turns out to be more polemical than one might have expected of an introduction, as Levinas’s shortcomings are scrupulously exposed. Hutchens argues from an early stage that, ‘treacherous as it may sound in an introduction to a fine visionary thinker, it is respectable to entertain that Levinas’s masterly vision is not relevant to contemporary ethical theory’ (p. 35); Levinas’s notion of ethical responsibility may be no more than an empty caricature (p. 54); and his influence on the philosophy of religion is ‘even less substantial than his influence on ethical theories’ (p. 112). Readers might begin to wonder why they should bother with Levinas at all. Hutchens finds a few intriguing, even fascinating ideas, but has little sympathy for the grander claims sometimes made by Levinas’s admirers. The final chapter outlines some of the ‘massive difficulties in interpreting [Levinas’s] thought as relevant and contributive’ (p. 155); there are problems of scale, relevance and detail, his notions are ‘hazy’ (p. 156) and his concepts are ‘nebulous’ (p. 157). The chapter ends by outlining Alain Badiou’s devastating criticisms of Levinas, and a brief Conclusion summarizes a few ideas that might be worth taking further, but which Levinas himself did not or could not develop. This is a very challenging approach to Levinas, perhaps too challenging to fulfil the role of an introduction. Rather than assisting uninitiated readers to tackle the extraordinary difficulties of Levinas’s prose, it might persuade them that the effort is barely worthwhile. Its demand for intellectual clarity might also miss the fundamental point that Levinas’s obscurities, ambiguities and hesitations contribute to the philosophical importance of his