

Online Reviews

Bloy, Léon. *Lettres à Paul Jury*. Ed. Michel Brix. Tusson, France: Du Lérot, 2010. Pp. 333. ISBN: 978-2355480379

Matthew Sandefer, Princeton University

“Je ne crois pas que personne ait une plus curieuse collection de mes lettres que Jury,” writes Léon Bloy in his *Journal inédit*. Both curious and eclectic, this compilation constitutes the first volume dedicated to their correspondence. Edited by Michel Brix, professor at the University of Namur, it presents sixty epistolary manuscripts currently held by the Moretus Plantin University Library.

Paul Jury first reached out to Léon Bloy at the age of fifteen. It was the discovery of *Le Désespéré* and *Sueur de Sang* that incited a fascination for their author, who wrote with such violence and authority. Finally, on July 29, 1894, he sheepishly slunk into Bloy’s Parisian apartment, launching a decade-long relationship. Although the letters span the period from this initial meeting to their falling-out (August 15, 1894 to June 18, 1905), the majority are concentrated over a period of two years, beginning in the spring of 1901.

Readers familiar with the tribulations of the *pèlerin de l’absolu* will encounter few surprises in this collection. Bloy’s precipitous exit from the *Gil Blas* ended his only steady source of income, setting the stage for prolonged misery. A predictable cycle of manic-depressive intense optimism and deep despair punctuates the glimpses offered into his daily life. Desperate for the boon that will allow him to compose the “nobles livres” ordained by God, he places his faith in elusive benefactors and in the ever-illusory success of his publications.

Through the letters, Bloy’s peculiar understanding of friendship also emerges. Early in their relationship, he makes clear that he views his young admirer as a means to achieving possible financial security. His frustration is clear when others seemingly fail to make the sacrifices he views as necessary to complete his work. While pecuniary themes dominate, in later letters Bloy delivers contentious polemics in the style that made him (in)famous. He lambasts modern Catholicism, takes comfort in the disastrous eruption of Mount Pelée, and decries the Republican government’s contempt for religion.

The familiarity of these excerpts is not coincidental. The ten-year period covered by the Jury missives corresponds to a time of intense autobiographical production. If there is an acute sense of déjà-vu, it is because approximately half of the letters figure in some form in one of Bloy’s edited diaries—in particular *Quatre ans de captivité à Cochons-sur-Marne (1900-1904)*—and the second volume of the recently published *Journal inédit*. The only significant new material is limited to scattered reflections on *L’Exégèse des lieux communs*.

Brix does an admirable job of avoiding this potential weakness by transforming the correspondence into a useful source of reference. His preface provides a valuable summary of Bloy’s relationship with his young correspondent, and an even more intriguing description of Jury’s adult career as a priest-cum-psychoanalyst. This collection does not intend to upend what is known about these difficult years in Bloy’s career, but rather to refine that knowledge. In cases where portions of a text were published elsewhere, footnotes list the variants found in the manuscript. Wherever possible he also includes excerpts from the *Journal inédit*, revealing the circumstances surrounding a particular exchange. The extensive notes contextualize the letters, allowing readers to verify the claims made by

both men regarding their relationship. Although significant posturing is indeed present in this correspondence, it presents a different image than the one Bloy painstakingly constructed in his private journal.

At one time, critics interested in an authentic view of Bloy's personal life had few options. Epistolary collections were often incomplete, and overzealous biographers censored letters and did little to hide their bias. In the past twenty years, the publication of Bloy's *Journal inédit* and new editions of his letters have changed that, offering new insights into the life of the controversial polemicist. The correspondence presented by Brix does not contain the kind of enthralling details found in the recent editions of letters to Johanne Molbech (2010) or Louis Montchal (2012). Despite its limitations, with the prospect of a complete edition of Bloy's correspondence still far from realization, the *Lettres à Paul Jury* represent another important resource for reconstituting the reality of Bloy's life and beliefs, which still remain shrouded by posturing and controversy.

Nineteenth-Century French Studies 42, Nos. 3 & 4 Spring-Summer 2014
http://ncfs.unl.edu/reviews_online.php

© 2014 University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Questions & Comments, write to: <ncfsreviews@gmail.com>