

***Anorexia of Literature: Julien Gracq's Refusal of the 1951 prix Goncourt***  
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In a decade as vulgar as the twentieth, authors like Julien Gracq are a rarity. If Gracq is known for his almost mythical marginality and anachronistic writing style, for many, knowledge of his opus stops there. Behind this most secret of French writers lies a simple man by the name of Louis Poirier. Born in 1910 on the banks of the Loire in the quiet village of Saint-Florent-le-Vieil, Poirier had no intentions of flirting with the profession of writing until just one hour before putting pen to paper. Soon, he completed his first manuscript, *Au château d'Argol*. At that moment, in his twenty-eighth year, he switched focus to his *manus ultima*: a pen name and an editor. Poirier decided on the pseudonym Julien Gracq, composed of a two-part homage of sorts. 'Julien' reprises the stendahlien hero, Julien Sorel, in *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830). 'Gracq', a one-syllable last name chosen for its sonority, references the Gracchus<sup>2</sup>, a family historically representative of decadent Rome known for their agrarian reform in favor of the plebeians. Poirier's choice, in line with his background as a professor of both history and geography, highlights his fervid and long-standing interest in both land and revolutions. With this new identity, Gracq sent his manuscript to the *Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue française*. Within weeks, a letter of rejection from France's most distinguished editorial house was placed in his mailbox. As Pierre Assouline<sup>3</sup> informs us, editor Benjamin Crémieux thought Gracq's text was too close in style to the work of a certain Charles du Boisen, who, today, is a virtually unknown writer.

What to most might seem like a simple rejection was in fact for Gracq an important moment of passage into the Parisian literary world. This event served as the first in a chain of eye-opening revelations that, together, would form the position and character of a truly singular author. Gracq persisted and presented his manuscript to a small Parisian avant-garde publishing house with a "certain esprit" named after its only editor, José Corti. In his *Souvenirs désordonnés (...-1965)*, this editor, linked to the

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<sup>2</sup>The *Gracques* in French. I'll suggest that in simplifying the spelling of this name, Gracq wished to celebrate his connection to Brittany. Many last names from this region end in "cq": *Pecq*, *Houellebecq*, *Darrieusecq* to name a few.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Assouline, "Gracq : Enquête sur un écrivain secret." *Lire*, n. 163, avril (1989): pp. 35-47.

surrealist movement by sympathy and interest, tells of this moment. For Corti, time engendered much affinity and Gracq found a man whose point of view complemented his own in more than one way. Without hesitation, Corti wanted to publish the text. Lacking the funds, Corti wrote a humble letter to Gracq, asking him to share the cost of publication. This practice was, of course, common as late as the end of the nineteenth century, especially in houses such as the *Mercur de France*. Its disappearance is noted in the beginning of the twentieth century when publishers such as *Gallimard* aimed to attract the work of artists with greater talent. Gracq, by all means, accepted Corti's offer of publication. Albeit warmly received by the press, Gracq's first text sold few copies. Unexpected and flattering remarks came, however, in the form of a letter from André Breton. Dated 13 May 1939<sup>4</sup>, the leader and initiator of surrealism praised Gracq's work. Shortly after reading the novel, Breton spoke of Gracq to Edmond Jaloux, critic at *Nouvelles littératures*, who expeditiously wrote an article of resounding support in favor of Gracq's work. Corti affirms, however, that Breton's steadfast praise did not assure Gracq's success, but instead served as the provocation that brought about a general attention to his effect.

Without wanting to reduce the 1938 editorial decisions of the *Revue* that would later be baptized as the *librairie Gallimard* to two cases alone, I will nonetheless evoke a text that was accepted in place of Gracq's: Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*. Sartre in fact worked on and transformed this novel during a period of nearly ten years. As early as 1931<sup>5</sup>, he began work on what he referred to as a "factum sur la contingence", which was then entitled "Melancholia", and submitted in 1936 to *Gallimard*. Refused, it was later accepted and published in 1938, after the author agreed to withdraw nearly fifty pages, principally filled with erotica. Sartre's work contains, in a myriad of ways, not only autobiographical references, but the essence of his ideas on being, ideas that attest to the fact that Sartre refuses to separate the two domains of philosophy and literature. *La Nausée* was declared a literary event and marked, for many critics, a new direction in literature as a pillar of modernity. Written during a period of history of troubled and changing times, *La Nausée* can be read as a political work and a political *prise de*

<sup>4</sup> I am informed by Bernhild Boie's generous *Chronologie* in volume I of the *Pléiade* she edited on Gracq.

<sup>5</sup> I draw these details from the personal and professional introduction to Sartre by Contat and Rybalka, published in the *Pléiade*.

*conscience*. In 1941, just a few years after the publication of *La Nausée*, Sartre was tenured to the post of a Jewish professor dismissed during the application of anti-Semitic legislation by Vichy.<sup>6</sup> Sartre is accused of being on good terms with the Occupants and is described as an *arriviste* in the advancement of his theatrical career during the war. Ingrid Galster's recent study, *Sartre, Vichy et les intellectuels*, sifts through the *idées reçues* of the reception under the Occupation of Sartre's play, *Les Mouches* (1943). Sartre's name, it appears, was included under the column "deutschfreundlich" in archived dossiers of German propaganda. During these black years, and throughout their respective careers, the divide between Sartre et Gracq could not have been wider. If Sartre's writing was urban, Gracq's was rural; If one was politically engaged, the other withdrew. If this dichotomy was applicable to other zeitgeists, the mismatch would be of Rousseau and Voltarian dimensions.

The literary debates and differences of opinion of the pre-war period greatly informed the political cleavages of the war time.<sup>7</sup> To fairly present Gracq's political preferences, it is important to note that while he was seeking the completion of his first publication, he exercised regular political activity. As a high-school teacher in Quimper, he was secretary of the French trade union, the CGT (*Confédération générale du travail*), and took part in section meetings, the publication of their newspaper as well as an illegal strike. Boie informs us, though, that the contradiction between his militant activity and his burgeoning literary activity—having little or nothing to do with the aesthetics of social realism—began to trouble him in 1938. Nonetheless, his aforementioned choice of pseudonym carries the trace of an activist, reformist spirit. A few months after receiving Breton's letter of praise, Gracq solidified his refusal of communism. I will maintain that this moment is essential to understanding Gracq, his relationship with both Sartre, surrealism and his aesthetic.

Gracq met Breton in a hotel in Nantes, a few months after receiving the letter on his behalf. Gracq recalls this experience with sheer pleasure. As a shadow cast over the rest of his *œuvre*, this meeting brought about countless misunderstandings about Gracq in

<sup>6</sup> Ingrid Galster. *Sartre, Vichy et les intellectuels*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001: p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> To this effect, there is the noteworthy study of Gisèle Sapiro, *La guerre des écrivains 1940-1953*. Paris: Fayard, 1999. Surprisingly, in nearly 800 pages of research, including a chapter on the *Académie*

the public's eye. Gracq's name and the nature of his work would consistently be associated with Breton and the collective activity for which he manifested. Breton was not for Gracq a mentor or a cheerleader, but an admired friend. Together, they would talk about literature, poetry, art and their travels. It must be clear, however, that the manifests, political activities and exclusivity of the surrealists were most clearly for Gracq of a terrorist nature. Gracq never joined in on the group's daily meetings at the *place Blanche* and to this day refers to himself, in relation to surrealism, as a sympathizer alone. In late 1939, Gracq's sympathy began to take shape. Its solidification coincides with the signing of the germano-russian pact, in late August of that year. Gracq actively campaigned for communist ideals for a total of three years and set aside time to prepare the campaign of the *Front national*.<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that he progressed to an advanced level in his study of the Russian language, Gracq resigned from the Communist Party and tore up his membership card. The pact that had become the tragedy of the communist movement, a movement that had always promoted the "dogma of action", was also a moment of severance—if ever there was a bond to break—between Gracq and others of his generation. From then on, as before, Gracq not only supported surrealism from afar, he dismissed the intimidation of the surrealists and contracted a life-long allergy to their utopian political ideals.

If I have mentioned the public's misunderstanding of Gracq's engagements, I have failed to mention yet another element that helps to complete the mathematical equation: Breton's appraisal of Gracq as the heir to surrealism. Breton's speech on the state of the surrealist movement was pronounced before a group of French students at Yale University on 10 December 1942. At the time of the speech, Breton was in exile in the United States. Marked by a somber tone that one would expect during a time of war, Breton traces the fundamental publications of surrealism. He begins in 1919 with the arrival of the *revue Littérature* and adds to this some of the first chapters of the *Champs magnétiques*. With this as one symbolic book end on shelves filled with surrealist texts, Breton defines the culmination of the surrealist conquest as Gracq's *Au château d'Argol*. Surrealism, born in a war, was in the long process of disassembling itself. This process

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*Goncourt*, Sapiro does not mention or analyse Gracq's action and inaction in the form of his 1951 refusal of the *prix Goncourt*.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Murat. *Julien Gracq*. Paris: Belfond, 1991: p. 137.

continued until surrealism's official death in 1969. As a public relations campaign of sorts, Breton's speech aimed to prepare his return to Europe where he would re-launch surrealism. Knowing in advance that this would logistically be difficult with surrealists scattered around the globe, Breton used the occasion to profit from his friendship with Gracq, one of a few that stayed behind, to set the stage. The speech was published in *La Clé des champs* in 1945, in the same year of publication as Gracq's second novel, *Un Beau Ténébreux*. At its publication in France, Breton's speech was read as proof that the essentials of surrealism were alive and well.<sup>9</sup> During surrealism's arguable decline, Breton's continued support of surrealism was also met with accusations of pointlessness in 1947. These accusations come from the pen of Sartre, who, among others, declared that surrealism was doomed to failure and had nothing left to share. Gracq responded one year after his publication of a critical work in homage to Breton, titled *André Breton : Quelques aspects de l'écrivain*, a work for which Gracq refused the *prix des Critiques*. In his 1949 speech, "Le Surréalisme et la littérature contemporaine", Gracq responded to Sartre's "réquisitoire sans indulgence". As per Gracq, surrealism, whose authority was structured on the magnetic personality of Breton, was a victim of its own success.<sup>10</sup> Surrealism, he advocated, must be read in both its historical perspective and its historical reality. Gracq stated that the effluvium of Sartre's ideas are "un goût de cendre, un grand vide, le ressentiment et le malheur intime de n'avoir pu se maintenir à la hauteur de ce qu'il proposait." [a taste of ash, a great vacuum, the resentment and intimate misfortune of not having been able to measure up to what it was he proposed.]<sup>11</sup> Gracq's charge against Sartre was calm and collected. On the back burner, his criticism would, soon, come to a boil.

Sartre, unlike Gracq, enjoyed a favorable reception of his theatrical works. Biographers note that as a boy, Sartre took pleasure in seducing little girls with his marionette plays in the *jardin du Luxembourg*. Gracq, on the other hand, came to theater through his readings of Wagner whom he encountered in his nineteenth year. Gracq's dream, above all, was to realize a literature that mirrored opera. His first and only play,

<sup>9</sup> As per Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Œuvres complètes* of Breton, volume III, p. 1355.

<sup>10</sup> Julien Gracq. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 1989, volume I: p. 1009.

<sup>11</sup> Julien Gracq. "Le Surréalisme et la Littérature contemporaine", p. 1025.

written in 1949, is *Le Roi pêcheur*, greatly influenced by Wagner and the search for the holy Grail. Gracq's *Roi pêcheur* was subsidized by the *Commission d'aide à la première pièce* [Commission of Subsidy for a First Play] in April and May of that year. Albert Camus was one of the jury members. Gracq had read some of Camus' works and felt a sense of appreciation towards them. Camus took great interest in Gracq's play as his friend, actress Maria Casarès, was cast the role of Kundry. Unanimously, to the great dismay of Gracq, critics rejected the play. Believed to be against the grain of theatrical endeavours of the time, Gracq's play was severely criticized left and right, and by pens that spilled highly-respected ink. His two most severe reviews came from Jean-Jacques Gautier and Robert Kemp. The first is noted for calling the play "*ruisselant d'ennui*"... "*nous ne sommes pas touchés une seconde par le texte*" [dripping with boredom... we are not one second touched by the text]. The second, worse, referred to it as "*une leçon ; c'est presque un châtiment*" [a lesson; it's almost a punishment].<sup>12</sup> Gracq was devastated. Shortly after these negative reviews, Camus asked Gracq to submit a text to a forthcoming issue of the review *Empédocle*, named after a Greek philosopher who committed suicide. What Gracq submitted was both an indirect response to his critics and a declaration of faith in the kind of literature he supports, that of *la littérature pure*.

Published in the January 1950 issue of *Empédocle*, Gracq's piece was entitled *La Littérature à l'estomac* which translates to "literature in the stomach". Such a provocative title merits consideration and analysis. In this pamphlet, the literature Gracq refers to is clearly that of his era. But what is the role of the stomach to which he alludes? We know that Gracq is a *voracious* reader, he *devours* books. In many languages, when a book is highly praised, such are the images used to describe the feast of words a reader partakes in. The stomach, organ that consumes and digests, in relation to the written word, might suggest that which gives us energy and sustenance. Perhaps instead, Gracq highlights that that what is digested of the literature of today goes *only* to the stomach and not the brain or the heart. He might also offer that literature is an object that is consumed and regurgitated upon the demands of society and the institution of

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in Boie's critical notes on the play in volume I of Gracq's *Œuvres complètes*, Gautier's review was published in *Le Figaro* of 29 April 1949 and Kemp's in *Le Monde* of 30 April 1949.

education. Turning the idea on its side, Gracq also remarks that media, critics, literary prizes and the like digest literature for us, preventing us from reading after our own tastes. I might also mention the French verb, *estomaquer*, based on the noun *estomac*, that translates to “to flabbergast and astound.” This of course, could be Gracq’s emotional conviction before the literary production of his contemporaries for which he has developed a version of literary anorexia, a true lack of desire to devour. Further, the French expression “avoir de l’estomac” [to have guts] is linked with brazenness, boldness and audacity, that which Gracq needed to write his virulent pamphlet and that which his contemporaries provoke in him. The beauty of Gracq’s title is that it suggests everything from a stomach ache to an empty stomach craving more satisfying food. Lastly, in relation to French literary prizes, on which Gracq remarks *in extensio*, decisions are rendered, debated and made public over an official meal. The *prix Goncourt* is a shining example.

In his *Littérature à l’estomac*, Gracq denounces without naming names. He makes clear in the “note”<sup>13</sup> that was published a month after the text that Camus was not a target of his attack. Gracq also tells me that he would have made his ideas public even if a text was not asked of him by Camus. In the era during which Gracq writes, that of engaged literature, writers take part in a circus wherein competition, stardom and promotion rule. This image is not far from that of Jean-Sol Partre in Boris Vian’s *L’écume des jours* (1947). In the novel, Partre, representing Sartre, notably arrives to one of his conferences on an elephant who tramples over and kills the “spectators” to the indifference of the sensationalized philosopher. In such a world, journalists enter into a media blitz and applaud or boo, as would an audience. In result, literature is commercialized by their pen, further publicity and literary prizes. The latter serve to create a literature that runs on elections. One only has to recall of the year 2000 presidential elections in the United States—decided first by “pregnant” and “hanging” *chads* and then the intervention of the Supreme Court—to fully appreciate Gracq’s point of view on the lack of democratic ideals in the bookstore. To be fair, what Gracq desires is not democracy in the bookstore, but total anarchy. Literature, as he prefers it, is a “lieu d’anarchie”. Instead of being adored by the masses, Gracq states he wants what

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<sup>13</sup> *Empédocle* of February, page 95-96.

Mallarmé had, a “société secrète” [secret society], in which fifty or so individuals were ready to be killed for their favorite author. Literary prizes, instead, turn writing into a contest with hierarchies that represent the taste of a handful of “culturally elite”, are imposed by publicity, literary events, signings and like. As a never-ending *mise en abyme*, literary prizes serve as a continuation of the French school system, with its ever-present *concours*. All of this, in Gracq’s opinion, covers up the poor creative activity of his contemporaries. Especially true in the after-war period, the mercantile-side of literature goes hand in hand with French literary critics that distance themselves further and further from pure literature; critics that, with time, become jury members of literary prizes. Gracq declines the introduction of the non-literary in literature, symbolized by Sartre and his opus. Since the 1930s, a majority of writers, he argues, opt for a socio-political attitude that makes literature submissive to ideology.

The *prix Goncourt* was not immune to this phenomenon. It was conceived at its origin in 1903 as an alternative to the conservative, state-controlled *Académie française*. Edmond and Jules de Goncourt designed their academy as a young, privatized version of the latter, and in their testament, clearly stated that if an author began service in the *Académie française*, the doors of the *Académie Goncourt* would, for him or her, always be closed. The Goncourt brothers aimed to celebrate and financially support a young author of an imaginative prose. Before the court, when seeking the legal rights to the Academy, they were no less accused by the opposing council as wanting to raise up against the *Académie française* “autel contre autel, ‘petite paroisse’ contre grande paroisse” [altar against altar, a small parish against a large parish].<sup>14</sup> Edmond de Goncourt nonetheless spent his last few months determining which ten individuals would serve in his Academy and chose many of his friends from Zola’s *Soirées de Médan*. Today, many suggest that Edmond de Goncourt did not anticipate his Academy’s future need for term limits in order to maintain youth and integrity. As jury members for life, *les Dix*, as they are referred to in French, are today mostly over sixty, male, Caucasian, and are sometimes past winners of the award. In the years after the creation of the *Goncourt*, which, interestingly enough coincides roughly with the launching of the Nobel

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<sup>14</sup> Léon Deffoux. “L’Académie Goncourt” in *Vingt-cinq Ans de Littérature Française : Tableau de la vie littéraire de 1895 à 1920*. Publié sous la direction de M. Eugène Montfort, tome II. Paris: Librairie de France, 1921.

Prize, a number of anti-Goncourt literary prizes have arose to “correct” their errors: *le prix Fémina* in 1905 of a jury composed of women but not necessarily awarding a work written by a woman; *le Grand prix du roman de l’Académie française* in 1918; *l’Interallié* for a journalistic work, created in 1930, and *le prix Médicis* in 1958. The most interesting creation might be *le prix Renaudot* which came into play in 1926 and selects a winner over a meal in the same restaurant as that of the *Goncourt* jury, *Drouant*. The exception being that this is done in another *salon* but nonetheless on the same day. Once the *Goncourt* jurors have made their selection, typically within five minutes, the *Renaudot* jurors can pick the writer the *Académie Goncourt* neglected. Still, today, cries are heard<sup>15</sup> from the editorial world<sup>16</sup> for the establishment of rotating jury members each year on the major literary juries, much like what is done at the yearly *Festival de Cannes*. What is true for French literary juries, known for their love of immortal power, is indeed rare in foreign countries. Britain’s young *Man Booker*, although modeled on the *Goncourt*, has a different jury every year and includes a literary agent, a critic and a bookseller among others; Italy’s *premio Strega* brings together four hundred cultural personalities to annually pick a stellar work; the United States’ *Pulitzer* has over one hundred jurors, and Spain’s *le Planeta* is sponsored by a publishing house that in return does not receive a grant for their choice. To many, French literary prizes and the choices they crown have, much like the *francs* of yesteryear, lost their value in the today’s commerce.

During times of war, every element of French society was indeed touched ideologically, and for the country noted as having the most literary prizes in the world— at last count, 5,000<sup>17</sup>—here is no exception. Only a few years before Gracq’s pamphlet, the *Académie Goncourt* made a series of choices under the influence of the Vichy government. Going back even further, to the first world war, works with themes

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<sup>15</sup> Notably in the following articles: *Agence France-Press* of 22 February 2003, “Prix littéraires : appel d’éditeurs en faveur des jurys tournants”; the *Agence France-Press* of 27 July 2003, “Centenaire du Goncourt à l’automne”; *Le Figaro littéraire* of 18 November 1999, “Prix littéraires : faut-il les réformer”, dossier by Philippe Cusin et al, and *Le Parisien* of 2 January 2003, “Des règles claires pour les prix littéraires” by Pierre Vavasseur.

<sup>16</sup> Among the smaller publishing houses: Belfond, Le Serpent à Plumes, Robert Laffont, Anne Carrière, José Corti, Editions de l’aube, Lattès, Liana Levi, Losfeld, Métailié, Michalon, Actes Sud, Plon and Phébus.

<sup>17</sup> I take this number from *Man Booker Prize* scholar Richard Todd. Alastair Niven, in opposition, claims that the UK has more literary awards, at 7,000.

concerning the war, soldiers and nationhood were crowned as the jurors liked, through their choices, to reflect the shape of their nation. The 1941 prize, however, is the most infamous example of the pressure of Pétain and his ideology on the Academy. The year prior, *les Dix* decided to adjourn. They reserved the following year's award for a writer fighting for France, later awarded in 1946. Since no one knew when the war would be over, the Academy eventually met in 1941 and crowned Henri Pourrat's *Vent de mars*. With Vichy's theme of rural politics central to its platform, Pourrat's novel that celebrates fighters and prisoners was a choice that fit the requirements at hand. Gracq, fervently anti-Vichy, references these selections when he discusses literary prizes. Perhaps later the 1960 *Goncourt* prize was rescinded in order to whiten the Academy's black, tar-like image. It was awarded to Vintila Horia for his *Dieu est né en exil*. Four days later, *L'Humanité* and *les Lettres françaises* revealed that the winner was a member, in the years leading up to the second world war, of pro-nazi dictator Antonescu's party.<sup>18</sup> The Academy announced two days after that they would not receive the winner. At around the same moment, Horia sent a telegraph from Romania saying that he would not accept the prize. Crowning no literary work that year, at least the Academy would not be accused, yet again, of recognizing with their unyielding influence, the wrong side of the political spectrum. Nonetheless, the all too recently darkened history of the Academy demonstrated in 1951 the mixture of literature and ideology, to Gracq, a dangerous mix.

During these years after the setback of his theatrical début, Gracq made the switch back to the novel. His *Rivage des Syrtes* was published in 1951 and is today known as his best work. Gracq was not worried when he heard that the *Goncourt* jurors were impressed with his novel. Certainly, he stated his case against literary prizes in his recent pamphlet. Nonetheless, as chatter continued, Gracq sent a letter to the editor in chief of *Le Figaro littéraire*. In his letter, published 28 November, Gracq declared himself "non candidat"[non-candidate], after which the *Académie* responded that that was logically impossible as an author cannot make him or herself a candidate in the first place. Seeking clarity, and still a favorite for 1951's *prix Goncourt*, Gracq published an interview the next day in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* and said that if granted the prize, he would refuse. Five days later, when the Academy met over their meal at the restaurant

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<sup>18</sup> Olivier Boura. *Un siècle de Goncourt*. Paris: Arléa, 2003: pp. 221.

*Drouant*, Gracq received six out of ten votes, including one rather adamant one on the part of Colette, who, immobilized by arthritis, sent her vote to the Academy's secretary. One of the jury members, author Raymond Queneau, went before a crowd of journalists to publicize the results. Constantly playing with words and the ideas behind them, Queneau announced that the *prix Goncourt* had been awarded to Monsieur Julien Green for his novel *Les ravages de Sartre*.<sup>19</sup> In April of the same year, Green, who indeed shares the same first name as Gracq, was awarded the *Grand prix littéraire de Monaco*. If Queneau changed the title of Gracq's work, even while maintaining its homophony, it was to mock Gracq's relationship with one of his illustrious contemporaries. Still, Gracq had been awarded. In Paris's Latin Quarter on his way to teach at the *Lycée Claude Bernard*, Gracq was surrounded by a sensational crowd of journalists. Unable to outrun them, he turned into the *café Voltaire* at the *place de l'Odéon*. As is told, there was so much excitement out of the scandalous story unfolding, that the journalists and spectators on the street resorted to the use of ladders to peer over the mock stage of the thorny crowning moment. From the first day of Gracq's entry into Paris's literary world, and throughout his successive battles, all had built up to this moment, to this refusal. Gracq, a man who, by reputation, says what he believes and does what he said, humbly refused a second time by reading a written statement to the press and then going on his way. He declined the award check, worth 5,000 francs<sup>20</sup>, and the attention-grabbing red band that annually wraps the awarded book. As Robert Poulet so vividly notes: "[j]amais lauréat ne porta moins haut son laurier." [never had a winner carried his laurels so low].<sup>21</sup> Countless journalists and *Académie Goncourt* juror Armand Salacrou—who put his vote towards Louise de Vilmorin's *Madame de*—accused Gracq of staging a refusal that would bring him greater publicity and thus, more financial gain. Even decades later, a

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Bernhild Boie's notes to *Le Roi pêcheur*, page 1257 of volume I.

<sup>20</sup> A small fee, but nothing in comparison to the sales authors can expect after winning the *Goncourt*, at an average of 100,000 copies. (Pierre Assouline, to this effect, notes that in 1951, Corti indeed sold 100,000 copies; 110,000 in one month according to Robichon. In 1952, the total was 175. Gracq saw this as the ephemeral nature of literary prizes. Today, Gracq generally sells 6,000 copies of *Le Rivage* per year, as noted by Assouline.) Also priceless is the force at which the awarded text becomes translated into numerous foreign languages. This is an important, hugely under-noted effect of literary prizes. Gracq claims to write in a way that is impossible to translate, a challenge translators have sadly, with the exception of *Le Rivage*, not taken up. It goes without saying that the Academy's 1951 choice put Gracq on the proverbial map for those from afar interested in France's literary landscape.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Poulet. *Aveux spontanés*. Paris: Plon, 1963: p. 116.

call into question comes from the pen of Oliver Boura, author of a 2003 book tracing the one hundred year history of the *Goncourt*.<sup>22</sup> Boura connects Gracq's refusal to Bourdieu's disqualifying theory of rejection<sup>23</sup> referred to as the "le point de vue de Thersite et la fausse rupture." This simple soldier in the *Iliad*, known for his aggressiveness, took pleasure in denouncing the vices of the great. His point of view, on the margins, that of an ordinary citizen, inscribed itself by denouncing systems of power, as a way of expressing resentment, exclusion and a desire to dominate. This anti-intellectual opinion surges forth in pamphlets. For those who know Gracq, any suggestion that he exemplifies this point of view is far-fetched. Even Bourdieu notes the error this individual makes: they forget that they should first apply to themselves the instruments of analysis of their objective category. History shows that Gracq practices what he preaches.

Many in France took Gracq's refusal as a major literary event and as one of the most essential of last century's history for a comprehension of our times. Baptiste-Marrey wonders whether he is witnessing the birth of a movement of *refuznik*. Gracq's act would later be mimicked by Sartre in his refusal of the Nobel Prize in Literature. This took place during the Cold War, in 1964, when iconoclastic Sartre designated by letter, before certain of having being selected, that he wished to avoid a misunderstanding by taking himself off the list of current and future candidates. His "raisons personnelles" centered on his refusal of official distinctions and his "raisons objectives" were based on the idea that an acceptance of an award is also an acceptance of the institution that grants it. This refusal did not modify the final outcome for Sartre either. According to the official announcement of the Swedish Academy, Sartre "a exercé une vaste influence sur notre époque" [did exert a vast influence on our era].<sup>24</sup> Their use of the past tense in the moment of attributing the award is not exactly flattering. The comparison of both Sartre and Gracq's refusal of the literary prize, both set in political contexts, provides little contrast. It should be mentioned that in Gracq's case, although first to refuse the prize, unlike Sartre he was not first to criticize the *Académie Goncourt*. In fact, the first anti-

<sup>22</sup> Oliver Boura. *Un siècle de Goncourt*. Paris: Arléa, 2003: p. 204.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Bourdieu. *Les règles de l'art : Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Seuil, 1992: p. 315.

*Goncourt* attack comes from Charles-Louis Philippe and Eugène Montfort in 1906. Philippe, it should be noted, did not win the 1903 prize for his *Père Perdix*, nor the 1906 prize for his *Croqignolle*, despite the fact that he was the public's favorite for both. Two days after the attribution of the third *prix Goncourt*, Philippe and Montfort published an article in the *revue Gil Blas*. In their article, they question a possible coincidence of sorts: how is it, they ask, that the night before awarding Jérôme and Jean Tharaud's *Dingley, l'illustre écrivain*, the novel appeared in bookstores with a picture of the Goncourt brothers and the announcement "*prix Goncourt 1906 !*" ? Philippe and Montfort also note that the Tharaud brothers' editor had the same photograph copied fifteen days prior. Was the prize secretly awarded in advance? Although I've tried, I cannot find an official response to these accusations on behalf of the *Académie Goncourt*. They served as first in a line of scandals that would be associated with the distribution of the prize. To this first point of contention, I'll add that after the first world war, there was *l'affaire Proust*. In 1919, Proust's second novel, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, was in furious competition with Roland Dorgelès' *Les Croix de Bois*. Against Proust was the fact that he was older than Dorgelès, which, as per the Goncourt testament, was a trap to be avoided if at all possible, in the distribution of the prize. To this, Jacques Rivière of the *NRF* claimed that the *Académie Goncourt*, in awarding Proust, crowned "le plus rajeunissant" [the more rejuvenating]<sup>25</sup> of the two. Proust had also never fought in the war. It is probable that that might have helped Proust out in the end, as Dorgelès' novel would have been the sixth awarded to a soldier. Besides, Dorgelès' work was later crowned the winner of that year's *prix Fémina*. After Proust's manuscript was refused from three different publishing houses, including Gide's later regretted refusal at the *NRF*, Proust's editor, Bernard Grasset, handed Proust's work over to Gaston Gallimard. Founded in 1914, this was *la maison Gallimard's* first of many *Goncourt* attributions that, with great splendor, also had the effect of introducing Proust to the world's stage. Statistically, since this date, most *Goncourt* prizes have been awarded to the authors of what is charmingly referred to as "galligrasseuil"—that is *Gallimard, Grasset and Seuil*.

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<sup>24</sup> Clarification on this refusal comes from Jean-Jacques Brochier's *Pour Sartre : Le jour où Sartre refusa le Nobel*. Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 1995: p. 40. Their use of the past tense is fair, as in 1964, the wave of Sartre's influence was largely on its way out to sea.

Even in 1932, Céline would not have found this tendency charming at all. Unknown at the time, Céline had published at age 38 his provocative *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Rejected at first by two editorial houses, as was the case for Proust, Céline's decadently bourgeois novel was accepted by the Belgian house *Denoël*. As Henri Godard explains in his notes to the Pléiade,<sup>26</sup> at the *Académie Goncourt's* 30 November preparatory meeting, Céline's novel was sized to win six votes, the number of votes required for a majority. This was somehow leaked, and eight days later, when the jury returned to select the winning text, Céline had lost three votes and Guy Mazeline's *Les Loups* was awarded. Descaves, Daudet and Ajalbert had maintained their choice but Dorgelès and the Rosny brothers had switched in the eleventh hour. Descaves, in sheer indignation, published in the *Lectures du soir* of 10 December 1932: "[...] jamais plus je ne remettrai les pieds dans cette Académie qui est un marché, une foire, et où, à quelques exceptions près, tout est à vendre." [never again will I set foot in this Academy that is a market, a fair, and where, with some exceptions, everything has a price tag].<sup>27</sup> It appears that, indeed, the defection was due to Rosny elder's publication of his last text in *L'Intransigeant*, a serial under the direction of Guy Mazeline. Soon, Dorgelès defended his anti-Céline stance. The next year, Galtier-Boissière pushed for the demission of Rosny and Sicard claimed that Dorgelès' vote was bought, causing Rosny and Dorgelès to lodge a complaint against both Galtier-Boissière and Sicard. With a year, the scandal ended up with two court trials and a huge polemic on the terms of Goncourt's testament which, above all, sought to award young writers who display originality and talent in new forms. At the heart of *l'affaire Céline* was, for *les Dix*, a debate on the French language and the informal, if not crass language used by Céline, a language that for some, proved menacing. As per Boura, this choice reflected contemporary France, "un pays gouverné par des vieillards ; un pays sans enfants qui avait laissé sa jeunesse à Verdun." [a country governed by old people; a childless country that had left its youth in Verdun].<sup>28</sup> Céline felt that as for the *Goncourt*, the quality of the text was not the criterion, instead, it was

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Rivière. "Le prix Goncourt." in *Études : L'œuvre critique de Jacques Rivière à la Nouvelle Revue Française (1909-1924)*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999: pp. 90-91.

<sup>26</sup> Céline. *Œuvres complètes*. "Romans", Paris: Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", volume I: 1981. Edited by Henri Godard. I owe Godard and Robichon for their clarity on this complex matter.

<sup>27</sup> Reprinted on page 1280 of volume I's Pléiade.

<sup>28</sup> Olivier Boura. *Un siècle de Goncourt*. Paris: Arléa, 2003: p. 129.

‘une affaire entre éditeurs’ [an affair among editors]. In the end, Céline won the *prix Renaudot* and is regarded, with the likes of Proust and Gracq, as one of the best French writers of his century.

Today, Gracq’s *Littérature à l’estomac* is referred to as prophetic and has influenced a call into question with a “fièvre de croissance” [growing fever]<sup>29</sup> of both the literary prize and current literary production on behalf of a number of later awardees and members of the literary community. In the shadow of Gracq but not necessarily in the same spotlight as Proust or Céline, Jean Carrière comes to mind. Carrière won the 1972 *Goncourt* for his *L’Épervier des Maheux*. He is also well regarded for his 1967 *Retour à Uzès* and known by specialists of Gracq for his 1986 *Julien Gracq* and his 2002 *Julien Gracq ou Les reflets du rivage*, works considered more in homage to Gracq than as academic studies. His 1987 autobiographical work—published in the same year as his text on Gracq—is entitled *Les Cendres de la gloire ou le Prix d’un Goncourt*. In it, Carrière blames the weight of the prize for his father’s death, his wife’s illness, their subsequent divorce and his profound depression of ten years, during which he suffered from writer’s block. Carrière’s case is extreme; he refers to the *Goncourt* as “l’archétype de l’arme à double tranchant.” [the archetype of a double-edged sword].<sup>30</sup> Mad at himself after accepting the prize, years after his literary idol, Julien Gracq, refused it, Carrière read and re-read Gracq’s pamphlet, sinking into a deeper slump. He notes that he, as de Beauvoir in 1954 for *Les Mandarins*, wanted to refuse but feared that the press would attack him for imitating Gracq’s infamous act. Another *Goncourt* recipient, Pascal Lainé, won in 1974 for his *La Dentellière*. Nearly three decades later, he wrote about culture and the literary prize in his year 2000 *Sacré Goncourt !*. Lainé suggests that the problem with the *Goncourt*, “c’est que ça ressemble plutôt à l’élection d’une Miss.” [is that it is too much like the election of a Miss].<sup>31</sup> Posing before journalists in a swimsuit is of course his least favorite part. Lainé mentions on several occasions Guy Debord, whose 1971 *La Société du spectacle* was possibly informed by Gracq’s prophetic pamphlet. As per Lainé, the *Goncourt* embraces Debord’s reflections, and, like all spectacles, is full of artifice. His book takes the form of an interview before a journalist

<sup>29</sup> Olivier Boura. *Un siècle de Goncourt*. Paris: Alréa, 2003: p. 199.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Carrière. *Le Prix d’un Goncourt*. Paris: Laffont, 1987: p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> Pascal Lainé. *Sacré Goncourt !* Paris: Fayard, 2000: p. 23.

named “lui” and an author previously awarded the *Goncourt* named “moi”. The author denounces with humour the blind conformity and herd instinct that is in his opinion a hallmark of his country’s recent literary past. With a clear case of media fatigue, Lainé echoes Gracq, down to his vocabulary, suggesting that France’s media circus suffocates the literary works of his day. Pierre Jourde mirrors these sentiments. He is not a recipient of the *prix Goncourt*, but has published on Gracq in his 1991 *Géographies imaginaires, de quelques inventeurs de mondes au XXème siècle : Gracq, Borgès, Michaux, Tolkien*. The authors in this title should be considered as those in his much-appreciated pile of bedside books. In his 2002 *La littérature sans estomac*, pamphlet-like in nature, he reacts, as did Gracq with a similar title, to the literary perversions of his day. For Jourde, and by extension, for Gracq, “[p]olémiquer, c’est aussi esquisser, en creux, une conception de la littérature.” [to enter into debate is also to engrave a conception of literature].<sup>32</sup> Jourde attacks the tradition of the *Académie Goncourt* which promotes the choice of a novel that will be considered as ‘true literature’, bought, but never read. In this fog, Jourde also consecrates chapters to the “mediocre” authors of today—Annie Ernaux, Houellebecq, Angot, Catherine Millet—all of whom produce literature that he prefers to file under the category “document humain”. Of late, Iégor Gran reprises the baton on Jourde’s point of mediocrity. His 2003 *Le Truoc-nog* is published during the one-hundred year anniversary of the Academy. If the title is “Goncourt” written *à l’envers* and thus in *verlan*, a conventional slang that consists of inverting syllables of certain words, it is because Gran seeks to invert the albeit less-common acquired idea that the *prix Goncourt* is awarded to the best book of the year. Gran’s novel sheds light on the life and times of a French writer from late August to early December. This protagonist, nicknamed *Goncourable*, discovers while reading *Le Monde* one day in the bus that he is short-listed for the prize. Humiliated, because he didn’t know he was bad “à ce point” [to that extent], *Goncourable* tries to accept his sorry lot. In the process, like an invalid avatar of Mercury, he contaminates, little by little, everything he touches with his mediocrity. Although Carrière, Lainé, Jourde and Gran experiment with different forms and do so much later to attack the *Goncourt* institution, they share Gracq’s refusal as their foundation.

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<sup>32</sup> Pierre Jourde. *La littérature sans estomac*. Paris: L’esprit des péninsules, 2002: p. 28.

It might be of interest to note that Gracq did submit his novel to the *Académie Goncourt*. His editor, José Corti, who gave a copy of *Le Rivage des Syrtes* to André Billy, one the *Goncourt*'s ten jurors. By word of mouth and money out of their own pockets, the other nine read the novel. Ironically enough, in the first few years of Corti's work as publisher, namely in 1936, he and his friends called into question the innocence of literary juries. In the spirit of putting together a farce, they decided to create a war machine against literary prizes and the *Goncourt* in particular. They put together a one-time *prix Rabelais*, whose name was hand-chosen to mimic the spirit of their farce.<sup>33</sup> Designating who would win from the beginning, that is, two of Corti's friends, they put together a jury of sorts composing of a doctor, a film director, a painter, an aristocrat, a composer, an insurance salesman and a cyclist, among others. They would announce the winner over a meal at the *Closerie des Lilas* in the summer month of July and would claim that this award was "for the public, by the public". It had a real value of twenty thousand francs. Once the fake award was discerned, they would write a front-page article on the true farce of literary prizes, tentatively entitled "*Comment décerner un prix littéraire*" [How to Award a Literary Prize]. All went to plan, but the article never actually saw publication. After giving out the award, the committee received a warm letter of thanks from a candidate whose book they had named in a Parisian daily as under deliberation for the phony prize. Apparently, in citing this to editorial houses, this once-published writer was able to publish with ease. Sobered, the judges of the one-time *prix Rabelais* realized—as Gracq did later in 1951—that the literary prize, and the prize culture it engenders, was a beast permanently anchored in their society. To that effect, I'll add that in 1974, yet another *prix Rabelais* was created,<sup>34</sup> but this time by an honest group of six Renaissance men. Their prize, unlike Corti's, is destined to award a work of any genre inspired by Rabelais. The annual recipient receives an unusual reward: one hundred bottles of *beaujolais*.

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<sup>33</sup> I learn of this anecdote in Corti's *Souvenirs désordonnés (...-1965)*.

<sup>34</sup> Bertrand Labès. *Guide Cartier 2000 des prix et concours littéraires*. Paris: le Cherche midi, 1999: p. 198.

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