

The Prose of Jean de la Ville de Mirmont: A Presentation

John Taylor

Jean de la Ville de Mirmont has remained obscurely present in French letters since his death in 1914 at the age of 28, one of the first French soldiers to die in the First World War. Selections from his small oeuvre have periodically been reprinted in limited editions; now and then mention is made of him in academic work (invariably in reference to his friend François Mauriac); and music lovers know of Gabriel Fauré's *L'Horizon chimérique* (opus 118, 1921), a cycle of four moving songs based on his poems. Yet inevitably the question remains, as Mauriac himself once put it in *Le Figaro littéraire* (22 December 1967): "Aurait-il eu un destin littéraire?" Had he not been killed, would he have continued writing? What shape would his work have taken? The enthusiasms of Jean de la Ville's advocates typically derive not only from the poems and stories themselves, but also from the *potential* qualities the youthful works are thought to presage.

One cannot justify an author's reputation, of course, on what he might have written, had he lived longer. The facts, however tragic, are that Jean de la Ville left a collection of forty-five poems, entitled *L'Horizon chimérique*, posthumously published in 1920 (Paris: Société Littéraire de France); seventeen other poems some of which were published in reviews during the author's lifetime, then first collected in Michel Suffran's essay and anthology *Jean de la Ville de Mirmont* (Paris: Seghers, 1968); the novella *Les Dimanches de Jean Désert*, self-published in 1914; his *Lettres de guerre*, posthumously published in 1917 (Bordeaux: Gounouilhou); and his eight short stories, first collected in 1923 under the title *Contes* (Paris: Le Divan). Except for his mother's biography, *Vie de Jean de la Ville de Mirmont* (Paris: La Cause, 1935), and remarks by Mauriac in various works,¹ firsthand information on the author's life is virtually nonexistent.

Jean de la Ville's oeuvre is divisible into two categories, which roughly correspond to two periods; first, the earlier works (especially but not exclusively the poems), which are marked by images of sailors, ships, and the sea, by nostalgia, by reverie, and by a yearning for the "great departures unappeased within me"; second, the later works (especially but not exclusively the stories), which deal with Parisian life in a much less romantic, less symbolic, more realistic, and sometimes satirical fashion, which explore "our age of *cafés-concerts*, airplanes, and incredulity." As Suffran notes, works from the second period are marked by an "abrupt rupture, doubtless that of a *forced maturation*, of a very conscient and very painful 'adieu to adolescence'" (98). "Who then will deliver me," asks the poet in "Examen" (1912), which perhaps marks the turning point, "from this too chimerical heart, / steeped in vague rhetoric, / in romanticism, et cetera?"

So little is known about Jean de la Ville that one may only speculate on the causes of the turning point. Mauriac recalls that the poetry of Baudelaire and Laforgue had influenced that of his friend, and a sudden interest in contemporary, big-city life is evident in stories such as "Mon ami le prophète," "Entretien avec le Diable" and of course *Les Dimanches de Jean Désert*. Perhaps Maupassant was also an influence. In 1911 Jean de la

¹ See, for example, *D'autres et moi* (Paris: Grasset, 1966) 50-57, 306-07; *Mémoires intérieurs/Nouveaux Mémoires intérieurs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985) 227, 487; *Le Nouveau Bloc-Notes 1958-1960* (Paris: Flammarion, 1961) 183; *Écrits intimes*, (Geneva/Paris: La Palatine, 1953) 59, 74-75; *Lettres d'une vie (1904-1969)* (Paris: Grasset, 1981) 28-29, 37-38, 384-86. Jean Lacouture's biography *François Mauriac* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) mentions Jean de la Ville in several places. A few other sources of information are mentioned in Suffran's essay. All translations are mine.

Ville passed an examination for a lowly bureaucratic position in the Préfecture de la Seine. From 1912 to 1914 he acted as secretary for a roving commission of inspectors appointed by the Bureau de l'Assistance aux Vieillards to investigate welfare claims. Summarizing his experiences out in the Parisian suburbs, he writes: "I have never seen so many old people in my dog of a life: some are lame, some have only one eye; there are consumptives among them, alcoholics, idiots . . ." (quoted by Suffran, 78). It is clear that Jean de la Ville, who had been raised in a provincial, grand-bourgeois family--his father was a professor of Latin at the University of Bordeaux and a member of the Municipal Council--had while working at the Préfecture de la Seine his first exposure to urban misery. Though no apparent rift occurred in their friendship during this period, Jean de la Ville stopped frequenting Mauriac and perhaps his other literary friends as well.

The *Contes*--not all of which are technically "tales"--straddle the aforementioned categories, and it is frustrating that in the latest edition of them (Le Forum [Bayonne]: Harriet, 1987) no attempt is made to establish a definitive chronology (if indeed it is possible to do so). Symbolic tales such as "City of Benares" and "Les Pétrels" belong to the first category; in comparison to the poetry, however, maturity and perhaps the exigencies of prose as a medium have sharpened the author's expression of his fundamental despair and pessimism: the language has sobered; images and symbols are more precisely delineated. In the former tale a three-masted ship, "by dint of sailing around the world" (27), comes to realize that the earth is round and decides to let itself go under. In the latter, the darkest tale in the collection, Jean de la Ville describes how on their long voyage over the sea some petrels--a bird which, he recalls, is shortsighted--suddenly break off from the group and fall "like rifle shots, headfirst, their wings folded back" (33). Recurrent in several of the tales and stories (as in the poetry) is the theme of fatality: the fatality of failure or of an early death. Biographical details suggest how personally allusive such tales might be: Jean de la Ville once tried to commit suicide by drinking ink and his shortsightedness caused several military doctors to turn him down when he first tried to enlist in the war. "Only rarely have I felt within me the force to resist people, things or circumstances" (101) remarks the narrator of "Mon ami le prophète," a story in which autobiographical allusions are evident.

The author's early death should not, of course, tempt one into ascribing to his work (especially to poems and stories expressing that very theme) an unwarranted originality, stylistic accomplishment, or emotional power. Some of the tales and stories, such as "La Mort de Sancho" and "Les Matelots de la Belle-Julie," however pleasant, are minor and should be judged as such. But "Le Piano droit," "Entretien avec le Diable" and especially "Mon ami le prophète" reveal the extent to which Jean de la Ville had begun to shed his juvenility, to assimilate the examples of his mentors, until their contributions to his art had blended more smoothly into what at last was emerging as his personal style. It was probably around the year 1912 that Jean de la Ville began to explore the banality of everyday experience, the "humdrum routines of human existence" (71), as the narrator of "Mon ami le prophète" puts it. Narrative voices are no longer those of introspective romantic poets from the provinces, but rather those of the luckless, the subordinate, the urban down-and-out, the bored. In "Entretien avec le Diable" all the narrator desires, in exchange for his soul, is "a sight capable of enthusing [him] for a mere ten minutes" (59).

Heroes and first-person narrators in stories by Jean de la Ville rarely encounter such sights, but in "Mon ami le prophète" and especially in *Les Dimanches de Jean Désert* (latest reprint: Plan de la Tour: Editions d'Aujourd'hui, 1977), the characters do endeavor to keep their boredom and despair at bay by seeking out distractions in the streets of Paris and thus by participating in life, vicariously. In "Mon ami le prophète" the narrator's life takes on meaning when he meets the colorful Baruch, a dishevelled hawk of Bibles, who later attempts to found a new religion and finishes up in an insane asylum. The narrator's resolute drabness anticipates that of Jean Désert, the sadly comic "absurd hero" about whom Jean de la Ville wrote to his mother on 11 October 1912, remarking that the character corresponded perfectly to his "tastes." Jean Désert's principal occupation, besides working as a bureaucrat in the Ministère de l'Encouragement au Bien, is collecting advertising flyers; the itinerary of his Sunday promenade is then arbitrarily mapped out by proceeding from

one address to another. Plot is thus depicted as an arbitrary construct; the logical, step-by-step progression of human action as an illusion. (One of the stops on Jean Dézert's promenade is the "lavatory *rationnel*" [33], a barber shop.) Surrealist and Dada writers employed similar techniques; one is also reminded of the "constraints" employed more recently by members of the Oulipo group to organize the narrative progression of their fictions.

It is indeed as early examples of certain trends in modern literature that Jean de la Ville's novella and some of his short stories should be remembered and--it is hoped--will be studied. The music teacher whose piano will not fit into her new lodgings ("Le Piano droit"), the narrator of "Mon ami le prophète" who cannot panhandle his novelties, and the dull civil servant Jean Dézert resemble those hapless figures and "men without qualities" who appear in works by German and especially Central European authors from the period just before and after the First World War. Incarnating all that is average, mediocre, Jean Dézert "opens his umbrella when it rains and rolls up the cuffs of his pants. He greets his concierge and inquires about his health. He mingles with crowds surrounding street pedlars or singers. He has served several times as a witness to car accidents" (8). Never far from the minds of these sad clowns--clowns *malgré eux*--are thoughts of death. Jean Dézert, in fact, nearly commits suicide, then decides that even dying would be "useless": "He knew himself to be interchangeable within the crowd and thus utterly incapable of dying completely" (95).

Handled in innovative ways is indeed the underlying theme of alienation and urban solitude. In *Les Dimanches de Jean Dézert* a quotation from *Robinson Crusoe* serves as the epigraph to one of the chapters, and both Jean Dézert and the narrator of "Mon ami le prophète" observe life so obliquely that they seem to be stranded, not only as provincials in Paris, but also as helpless, shipwrecked explorers on an undiscovered isle--indeed, in the short story, on the Ile Saint-Louis, when Jean de la Ville actually lived while working at the Préfecture de la Seine. "The mores of the natives [on the Ile Saint-Louis] have no particular distinguishing characteristics," explains the narrator. "No record exists of their having worshipped the sun or tortured Protestant missionaries. Still, like all islands, the Ile Saint-Louis forms a whole which is separated from the rest of the world" (74). Both characters enjoy the company of a "Friday," of a sidekick better equipped to deal with society: Baruch in the short story and the "well-balanced" Léon Duborjal in the novella. Both works deal with apprenticeship.

Though *Les Dimanches de Jean Dézert*--so difficult to procure at the present time--is the work upon which Jean de la Ville's reputation must ultimately rest, the recent edition of the *Contes* will perhaps suffice in drawing attention to this unjustly ignored writer. The same publishers are also announcing a new edition of *L'Horizon chimérique*, and it can only be hoped that a new edition of the novella will be brought out as well.