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The contemporary French novel is striking in its diversity, its complexity, and its resistance to easy classification. This is not an utterly new phenomenon (one recalls both Gide and Queneau, in the 1920s and 1930s respectively, describing the novel as a fundamentally lawless genre), but it is legitimate to say that the novel's horizon of possibility has broadened during our time, allowing for new kinds of expression. Those latter may be based in formalist experimentation (I'm thinking of writers like Jacques Roubaud, or Paul Fournel, or Stéphane Vanderhaeghe), or personal confession (Édouard Louis, Camille Laurens, Philippe Forest, for instance), or an insistence upon narrativity (Jean Rouaud, Christian Gailly, Christian Oster), or autofiction (Christine Angot, Annie Ernaux, Chloé Delaume), or social and political concerns (Gérard Gavarry, François Bon, Laurent Mauvignier), or hyperfiction (Manuela Draeger, Lutz Bassmann, Elli Kronauer), or indeed in a conscious hybridization of any of the foregoing directions.

Among all of those various possibilities, I am interested in the way that certain French novelists in recent years have turned toward the "real," toward history and biography. I am thinking of books like Jean Echenoz's *Ravel* (2006), *Courir* (2008), and *Des éclairs* (2010), for example; or Lydie Salvayre's *Hymne* (2011), Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* (2008), Jean Rolin's *Crac* (2019), Olivier Rolin's *Le Météorologue* (2014), and Marie Cosnay's *Villa Chagrin* (2006), to name just a few.

Most especially perhaps, Patrick Deville comes to mind. His example is a very remarkable one, insofar as he chose to retool his writerly skills exhaustively in mid-career. After five relatively conventional, brief, "fabulist" novels published from 1987 to 2000 at the Éditions de Minuit, he brought out his "equatorial trilogy": *Pura Vida: Vie et mort de William Walker* (2004), *Équatoria* (2009), and *Kampuchéa* (2011), collected in an omnibus edition entitled *Sic transit* (2014). Focusing upon Central America, the Congo, and Cambodia, respectively, these texts may be best imagined as biographies of *place*. Deville relies upon history, testimony, and personal observation in order to tell the stories of those places, animating them in a mode which is indisputably novelistic—if by "novelistic" one means a narrative form in prose that can reconcile and accommodate a multiplicity of expressive purposes.

I would like to say a few words about the third volume in that trilogy, *Kampuchéa*—though my remarks might equally apply to the volumes that precede it, or indeed to the books that Deville has written since, like *Peste & Choléra* (2012), *Viva* (2014), and most recently *Amazonia* (2019). *Kampuchéa* presents itself as a novel, complete with the term *roman* emblazoned on its cover. Yet there is very little fiction here—if indeed there is any at all. Focusing upon Cambodia, roughly from Henri Mouhot's "discovery" of the temples of Angkor Wat in 1860 to the present time, *Kampuchéa* (the title is the Khmer word for "Cambodia") puts

on offer a meditation on history, on geography, on politics, on culture, and on the way those categories necessarily overlap in a place that has always found itself precariously situated "entre l'enclume et le marteau" (187). The event that draws Deville there is the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, and especially the trial of Kang Kek Iew, or "Duch," the first of the five former Khmer Rouge leaders to be indicted, and who would be convicted of crimes against humanity and sentenced to thirty-five years in prison in July 2010. That trial provides the text with its principal narrative thread, around which Deville weaves an impressive variety of other stories. That of the French Mekong Expedition in 1866-1868, lead by Ernest Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier, for instance; or that of Marie-Charles David de Mayrena, who declared himself King of Sedang in 1888; or that of Vann Nath, who survived the Khmer Rouge camps by painting portraits of Pol Pot; or that of Pol Pot himself, a man who returned to Phnom Penh after his studies in Paris in order to teach Vigny, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, and whose clandestine activity eventually resulted in his being named Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea. The regime that he presided was a short-lived one, lasting only three years, eight months, and twenty days, yet it left a very bloody legacy.

In Patrick Deville's view, the task of sketching a panorama of such dimensions demands a new kind of narrative form. If he calls this book a novel, he does so at a time when the horizon of possibility of that genre is constantly in question. That questioning is intended to restructure and reinvigorate our manners of writing and reading, to be sure; but what is also at stake, clearly, is the way we understand our world. One of the most common ways of coming to terms with the world is through history, and Deville gives us plenty of that. But it is a special kind of history, one that is carefully honed and teleological. "Le procès des Khmers rouges est l'aboutissement d'une histoire vieille d'un siècle et demi," remarks Deville (128), and it is legitimate to see in that

remark one of the theses of *Kampuchéa*. History always seems to point toward the present of course, or toward *us*, in other terms; and it seems inevitable, for we organize it in a narrative fashion, and narrative is necessarily teleological. Yet Deville provides another kind of logic to the particular chunk of history that interests him here, focusing on how colonial subjects take their history in hand; reflecting upon political idealism and its fate; sketching the manner in which the collective beggars the individual and history obscures the story of any single life.

Deville's interrogation is no less important because it is not absolutely original: it, too, takes its place in history, after all. And if he focuses so closely upon literature, it is because, as a writer, he is quite naturally concerned about the uses and abuses of literature. What interests me most about his work is the way he wagers upon the protean character of the novel, upon the way it changes shape while still remaining a novel. I am also intrigued by his faith that some point of connection will be made between his desire to write new kinds of novels and our desire to read them. Clearly, his writerly project is fueled by the conviction that the novel is the major genre of our time. Think what one may of that notion, it would be difficult to find a writer in France (or anywhere else for that matter) who has defended it more vigorously and more boldly than Deville, in what we think of as our very own literary and cultural present.