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Patrick Deville's Novelty

Warren Motte

1 Speculating about the present state of things is always difficult, because the present is so hard to seize. It escapes from us just as we try to grasp it; it is mutable, elusive, and fundamentally ephemeral; its dynamic nature puts our own intellectual mobility to the test in crucial ways. Nevertheless, most of us feel the need to come to terms with the present, with the *new* and the *now*, and we devise different strategies in order to do so. Writers are no exception. Like the rest of us, they too try to account for the present in various ways, and traces of that process can be observed in literature. The contemporary French writer Patrick Deville is a case in point. Right *now*, he is producing some of the most intriguing writing one might hope to find. His is an agile and ever-changing body of work that insistently asks the question of what the novel is in our embattled cultural present, and what it may become in a future we can only dimly descry.

2 Deville's oeuvre[1] is all the more astonishing granted that he seems to have reinvented himself in mid-career. From the mid-1980s until the end of the century, he published a series of five novels at the Editions de Minuit: *Cordon-bleu* (1987), *Longue Vue* (1988), *Le Feu d'artifice* (1992), *La Femme parfaite* (1995), and *Ces deux-là* (2000). Based on that body of work, many critics described him surely and definitively as a minimalist, an impassive fictionalist, and a paragon of the Minuit School.[2] In the new century however, Deville migrated to the Editions du Seuil, and the five texts that he has published there to date—*Pura Vida: Vie & mort de William Walker* (2004), *La Tentation des armes à feu* (2006), *Equatoria* (2009), *Kampuchéa* (2011), and *Peste & choléra* (2012)—are very unlike his Minuit books, suggesting a writerly retooling of a very rare sort. Among those more recent works, I am most particularly interested in *Pura Vida*, *Equatoria*, and *Kampuchéa*, because they appear to constitute (for the moment at least, that is to say, *presently*) a trilogy of sorts, one that circles the globe at the equator, and whose heroes seem in each case to be places, rather than people. Or perhaps, in another perspective, one might argue that the protagonist of these texts is the novel itself, because each of them—and whatever else may be at issue—puts forward a vision of the novel searching for a *new* shape, right *now*. That process is a compelling one, because it testifies to the way that culture itself shifts, right before our eyes. In what follows, I would like to

focus closely upon *Kampuchéa*, because I believe that it builds upon the texts that precede it, and responds to them in key manners. Moreover it is in *Kampuchéa* that Deville puts his new writerly skill set to work most adroitly[3].

3 Like *Pura Vida* and *Equatoria*, *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[4] 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 (one thinks of the recent work of Jean Echenoz, Pierre Michon, Marie NDiaye, Jean Rolin, Lydie Salvayre, Olivier Rolin, Marie Cosnay, Iegor Gran, and Emmanuel Carrère, to name just a few). 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.

4 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. As I mentioned, it begins with Henri Mouhot, the French naturalist and explorer. His presence may be felt throughout *Kampuchéa*, for example when Deville mentions, "Nous sommes en 41 apr. HM" (118), that is, 41 years after Mouhot's "discovery" of Angkor Wat, or 1901. Mouhot is a *conqueror*, and Deville stages that notion very deliberately in his text, according it a place of privilege. Mouhot will be followed by other conquerors: Doudart de Lagrée and Garnier, for instance, and Mayrena, and Auguste Pavie, and André Malraux, and, in a sense, Charles de Gaulle. Thus, in one of its dimensions at least, what Deville gives us in *Kampuchéa* is the history of French colonialism in Indochina. Yet the end point of that narrative comes well

before the present, at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954: "C'est la fin du rêve délirant de l'Europe, celui des Français et des Anglais. Leurs empires s'écroulent comme des pans d'icebergs dans l'océan" (210).

5 Other dimensions of this project quickly become apparent: an account of how colonial subjects take their history in hand; a reflection upon political idealism and its fate; an evocation of the manner in which the collective beggars the individual and history obscures the story of any single life. In conversation with a longtime French expatriate in Phnom Penh, Deville remarks, "Je trace pour lui les grandes lignes de ma petite entreprise braudélienne. J'aimerais mettre en perspective le procès des Khmers rouges dans une durée moyenne, sur un siècle et demi, depuis que Mouhot, courant derrière un papillon, s'est cogné la tête, a levé les yeux, découvert les temples d'Angkor" (143). That "perspective" is mainly a question of context and causality, in Deville's view, but it is something that must be carefully constructed. Thus, he evokes a moment in the early 1940s when the future Khmer Rouge leaders were in high school together, and then how they went to study in Paris, and how that Parisian past rejoins the Cambodian present in unexpected ways: "Ils sont membres du PCF. Khieu Samphân y rencontre Jacques Vergès qui est aujourd'hui son avocat" (46). Deville examines Norodom Sihanouk as well, a figure fully as fabulous, as *romanesque* as any character in a novel : "Le prince est un magicien, un illusionniste sur la scène du grand music-hall de l'Histoire" (49).

6 History itself is often examined in close focus. Deville is especially intrigued by the way that people experience what we commonly call "history." During a visit to Hanoi, he notes, "Dans la rue je croise le regard des Vietnamiens qui ont mon âge, ont connu les bombardements américains sur Haiphong et le delta du fleuve Rouge. Le regard des vieillards comme le buraliste qui ont vu l'arrivée des troupes victorieuses par le pont Paul-Doumer et le départ des Français. Ceux-là ont vu les yeux de leurs grands-parents qui ont vu la folie guerrière de Garnier" (215). History is mostly about wars and conquest and inhumanity, and it has a great deal of narrative punch when compared to any given human life. Yet by the same token, we necessarily measure history with the tools that are closest to hand: "Une vie de durée moyenne est un bon instrument de mesure de l'Histoire" (239), for in a sense, we have no other way to gauge it, other than to project a life—*our* life—upon it. When we do so, however, we are likely to find that history belittles our story, and that a panoramic view tends to trivialize the details of which it is composed. What meaning can one claim for a life, or even a million lives, when they are set in "historical" context? "On pourrait les oublier, les Khmers rouges," argues Deville in the final chapter of *Kampuchéa*. "Qu'ils crèvent dans leurs cellules climatisées. Un ou deux millions de morts en quatre ans. Pas même le record du siècle. Six millions dans les camps nazis. Vingt au goulag. Cinquante peut-être dans la Chine de Mao" (252). What is it about history that wreaks such havoc on "lives," that is to say, stories of lives? How can one attenuate that effect when putting history into play in a novel? Is a humanistic history possible? Those are some of the questions that Deville seeks to address in *Kampuchéa*.

7 One of his avenues of inquiry involves the disparity between ideal and practice, more particularly, a meditation on the way that revolutionary ideals go awry. To Deville's way of thinking, Cambodia offers an excellent test case in that regard, because among all of the revolutions one might name, the one that transformed Cambodia was the most ideologically pure. It was at the outset, Deville suggests, "Une révolution aussi

parfaite qu'une expérience de laboratoire" (32). Nevertheless, in something less than four years, Cambodia became "un immense camp de concentration" (36). What went wrong, so quickly and so dramatically, allowing utopia to become dystopia? What is there about the revolutionary ideal that becomes perverted in the world? Is there something about that ideal that breaks down in practice, or when it is called upon to assume human dimensions? Does the fault lie in political philosophy or in the very nature of people? Like many humanists before him, Deville tends toward the former explanation of things: "La Terreur est le bras armé de la Vertu," he argues. "L'utopie politique, comme la religieuse, déteste l'homme dans sa monstrueuse incomplétude" (41).

8 Yet that consideration does not resolve the most pernicious questions that Deville asks about revolution. He wonders, for example, whether culture—and especially literary culture—can have any effect upon revolution, either for the better or for the worse. How can Duch, the former head of the Khmer Rouge internal security apparatus and commandant of the Tuol Sleng prison camp, a man accused of having tortured and murdered thousands upon thousands of people, how can Duch recite Vigny at his trial? It is not the first time that the question of culture and terror has been asked, of course. There are many other instances where that question arises, most notably in examinations of the European Holocaust. Yet Deville's interrogation is no less important because it is not absolutely original: it, too, takes its place in history, after all. If Deville focuses so closely upon literature, it is because, as a writer, he is quite naturally concerned about the uses and abuses of literature. I shall have more to say about that in a moment; for now, let us note Deville's recognition that Romantic poetry is not in itself a sufficient prophylactic against mass murder.

9 In other instances where Deville sees degraded revolutionary ideals, more obvious forces are at work. Human greed, for instance, and the allure of new capitalism can account for some of those examples. Strolling through Saigon, he notes, "il est curieux de voir ce soir stationner la météorite rouge sang d'une Ferrari Testa Rossa, devant la boutique Louis Vuitton, sise rue de l'Insurrection-Générale" (93). That scene is an ironist's dream, but it is clear that Deville himself takes things far more seriously, and that the corruption of revolutionary ideal offends him deeply.[5] Sharing a meal with a survivor of the killing fields, he admits, "au milieu des années soixante-dix, j'ai rêvé des tables rases. On arrête tout, on recommence. Le slogan courait de l'Europe à l'Amérique latine" (38). In a sense, then, Deville's inquiry is very personal indeed, and very deeply bound up, by his own account, with his personal history.

10 Clearly, he hopes that the trial of the Khmers Rouges will provide answers to some of the questions he is asking. A trial is a forensic dynamic, first and foremost, one that is intended to discover the truth. As Duch's trial begins in 2009 (he was the first of the five former leaders to be tried), Deville still hopes that it will afford some resolution to a history that remains scandalously unresolved. Though he had imagined a process that would be absolutely riveting, he quickly finds that it does not interest him as much as he might wish: "C'est assez vite emmerdant, ces exposés qui n'en finissent pas, ces procédures, les auditions qui se répètent, les témoignages qui se recoupent. C'est admirable aussi. Cette dilation du temps. Un ou deux millions de disparus au Cambodge en moins de quatre ans. Toutes ces années pour juger cinq personnes" (105). In other words, the trial is lacking in *narrative* interest, and that is an important concern for Deville. Moreover, far from being a high-minded process of discovery, the trial seems to

him to be a kind of grossly commercial theater: "Le tribunal est une monstrueuse industrie corrompue qui gère des sommes considérables" (144). By the time Duch is convicted and sentenced, a year and a half after his trial began, Deville is thoroughly disillusioned. Like the revolution, the trial has gone badly awry. It has been put to uses for which it was never intended, and it tells a story that is very different from the one that a forensic fundamentalist might have anticipated.

11 When he himself is not in Phnom Penh, Deville follows the trial in newspaper accounts. Newspapers are yet another way of coming to terms with the world, but unlike history they focus upon the immediate, upon very recent (and indeed ongoing) events. In the first pages of *Kampuchéa*, Deville makes it clear that newspapers are very much a part of the narrative fabric that he intends to weave. Reading an issue of the *Bangkok Post*, he remarks : "Je survole l'actualité aux commandes de mon bimoteur, une cigarette aux lèvres et les pieds nus sur les palonniers, la bouteille entre les cuisses" (12). That kind of *overview* allows him quickly to invoke, one after the other, the Khmer Rouge trials in Phnom Penh, the arrest of the head of a drug cartel in Mexico, the trial of ex-President Alberto Fujimori in Peru, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Tanzania, and the trail of former Croatian generals in The Hague. This moment is an important one in terms of the way he chooses to stage things in *Kampuchéa*. First, it allows a brief contextualization of the Khmer Rouge trials in terms of contemporary events. Second, it serves to remind us that crimes against humanity are not lacking in the world, and that what happened in Cambodia was not absolutely exceptional. Third, it suggests the narrative perspective that Deville will adopt in *Kampuchéa*, that is, an overview of a century and a half of Cambodian history. It might be argued, moreover, that this kind of approach has characterized all of Deville's work since he left the Editions de Minuit; and he himself has pointed out the fundamental role that newspapers played in the conception and execution of his first book for the Editions du Seuil, *Pura Vida*.[6]

12 Even more so than history, when Deville puts newspapers into the mix of this new kind of novel that he is attempting to write, the question of the relations of reality and fiction necessarily arise. His Minuit novels clearly privileged the latter over the former. The world that they sketch is not a particularly referential one, and little regard is given either to history or to the phenomenal present. As Pierre Hyppolite puts it in his discussion of *La Femme parfaite*, "En saisissant ces moments d'hésitation où l'image et la réalité se superposent, où le personnage passe d'un mode à l'autre, le texte ne met pas seulement en cause le partage entre le réel et la fiction, il en inverse les rapports dans un retournement hyperréaliste" (69). In *Kampuchéa* however, Deville very deliberately and strategically promotes the real as a central element of the novel. Thus, when he invokes the visit of Charles de Gaulle to Cambodia in 1966, and the famous speech he delivered praising that country—"une histoire chargée de gloire et de douleurs, une culture et un art exemplaires, une terre féconde aux frontières vulnérables entourée d'ambitions étrangères et au-dessus de laquelle le péril est sans cesse suspendu" (49)—the Charles de Gaulle that he gives us is not so much the fictionalization of a real person, but instead a figure who is supposed to come to us with his political, historical, and ideological heft very much intact. Yet the passage has still more to say about the dynamic of reality and fiction, I think, because de Gaulle's speech was written by André Malraux, his Minister of Cultural Affairs, and Malraux is in turn the author of one of the novels that informs *Kampuchéa* most deeply, *La Voie royale* (1930). In this affiliation,

what we see is the suggestion of a process in which fiction and reality cannot be usefully—that is to say, *productively*—disintricated.

13 Such reflection raises still another question for Deville, that of literature and its uses. It is an especially burning question for him, regardless of the shape it assumes. What can literature achieve in the world? What are its possibilities and limitations? What is its proper role, and what is its responsibility? What can one expect of it? *Kampuchéa* asks questions like those on virtually every page. Again and again he returns to the early apprenticeship in literature—and notably French literature—of many of the Khmer Rouge leaders. That astonishes Deville, patently, and it scandalizes him, too. It is not only Duch reciting Vigny that shocks him, it is also the fact that Pol Pot himself studied literature as a young man, went to France to pursue those studies, and returned to Cambodia to become a teacher of literature. No less a figure than Soth Polin, the Khmer writer and newspaper editor who was forced into exile by the Khmer Rouge regime, can testify personally to the excellence of Pol Pot's pedagogy:

> Au collège Soth Polin avait eu comme professeur de littérature le futur Pol Pot, retour de Paris. "Je me souviens de son élocution : son français était doux et musical. Il était manifestement attiré par la littérature française, en particulier par la poésie : Rimbaud, Verlaine, Vigny... Il parlait sans notes, hésitant parfois un peu mais jamais pris de court, les yeux mi-clos, emporté par son propre lyrisme... Les élèves étaient subjugués par ce professeur affable, invariablement vêtu d'un pantalon bleu foncé et d'une chemisette blanche." (247)

14 It would be difficult to find two contemporary Cambodian destinies more different than those of Pol Pot and Soth Polin. Yet both were deeply informed by literature. Does literature then have absolutely no effect upon human beings and how they behave? Or is it more a matter of what one *does* with literature? Deville tends toward that latter conclusion. And if his efforts to renovate the French novel have a political dimension to them, those politics are in the first instance communitarian, that is, they embrace the idea of literature as a kind of community. Speaking at a colloquium on contemporary literature at the Centre Culturel International in Cerisy in the summer of 2003, Deville explains why he chose to attend that event : "Il y a pour moi au moins une espèce de complicité, ce que nous faisons à la fois quand on écrit, quand on est libraire, universitaire, lecteur, etc., tout cela fait partie d'une même activité, activité qui est extrêmement menacée. J'ai l'impression que nous appartenons à un tout petit réseau de résistants en voie d'extermination et que, donc, c'est la moindre des choses que de soutenir ce genre d'activités"[7]. The notion of *resistance* is a crucial one. It is a central term in his theory of literature, and it is a key figure of all of his recent writings. In Deville's view, literature must be promoted *as literature*, but also as a way of coming to terms with a world and a reality that can be very oppressive indeed. Literature is, and must be, both artifact and tactic.

15 In *Kampuchéa* a broad metaliterary discourse animates the text from first page to last, and it deserves close attention. Intertextual allusions abound, invoking figures from Herodotus to Jean Rolin, and mentioning along the way Pliny, Pascal, Descartes, Boileau, Montesquieu, Vigny, Hugo, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Michelet, Kipling, Conrad, Loti, Gide, Paulhan, Cendrars, Breton, Aragon, Farrère, Mauriac, Malraux, Greene, Simenon, Orwell, Lowry, Robbe-Grillet, and Soth Polin. A couple of things could be noted about that referential field. For one, it is very heavily skewed toward Western writers, and more particularly still toward French writers. For another, Deville wagers heavily upon

fairly recent literary history, mainly that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because that is the historical period he chooses to examine in *Kampuchéa*.

16 Among the many writers who stride through this novel, two are preeminent on Deville's horizon. The first is Joseph Conrad. He appears in *Kampuchéa* as a precursor figure, a traveler and a writer who found a way to turn the rich experience of his travels into novels. Two of his texts figure heavily in the intertextual weft of *Kampuchéa*. First, *Heart of Darkness*, both as a tale of the Congo and as a tale of Southeast Asia. Let me explain. On the one hand (and most obviously), Marlow's story of his travels on the Congo exercises a strong pull on Deville's imagination—all the more so granted that he himself has spent a lot of time traveling in the Congo, thinking about that region's vexed history, and writing about it, all of that activity resulting materially in *Equatoria*, the book that immediately precedes *Kampuchéa*. But another version of *Heart of Darkness* is just as important for Deville, Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation of the novel in *Apocalypse Now*. In that film, the Marlow-figure, Benjamin Willard, follows the fictional Nung River all the way into Cambodia to find his "Kurtz." That Deville is indeed thinking of the film, as well as the novel, is confirmed by explicit references to Coppola in the text.[8]

17 The second Conrad text is *Lord Jim*, and its role in the intertextual economy of *Kampuchéa* is still more important than that of *Heart of Darkness*. Jim is a very uncertain hero, of course, and it is perhaps the dubious nature of his heroism that appeals to Deville. Yet Jim is also patently associated with the idea of fiction itself, more so than Marlow, more so even than Kurtz, and when Deville puts him on stage he quite deliberately underscores that trait: "Et à chaque cigarette malaise, le fumeur revit la fin héroïque de Lord Jim, 'l'homme à la conscience romanesque', celui qui remonte sous la jungle la rivière de Patusan pour aller y expier sa faute" (52). It is precisely that "conscience romanesque" that seizes Deville's imagination. It is moreover the crux of the analysis of Jim's character that Stein offers to Marlow in Conrad's novel:

> "I understand very well. He is romantic."
> He had diagnosed the case for me, and at first I was quite startled to find how simple it was; and indeed our conference resembled so much a medical consultation —Stein, of learned aspect, sitting in an arm-chair before his desk; I, anxious, in another, facing him, but a little to one side—that it seemed natural to ask—
> "What's good for it?"
> "There is only one remedy! One thing alone can us from being ourselves cure!" The finger came down on the desk with a smart rap. The case which he had made to look so simple before became if possible still simpler—and altogether hopeless. There was a pause. "Yes," said I, "strictly speaking, the question is not how to get cured, but how to live."[9]

18 That question is a sobering, powerful, crucial one for any hero—or indeed for any writer. And much of what Patrick Deville puts on offer in *Kampuchéa* is intended to address it.

19 The second preeminent writer in the novel's intertextual economy is André Malraux. The epigraph that Deville chooses for his text is borrowed from *La Voie royale*, and indeed that novel serves as the principal intertext in *Kampuchéa*. The passage that Deville quotes comes from the early pages of Malraux's text, which present a discussion between Claude and Perken focusing on the idea of sexual perversion. Provocatively enough, Perken argues : "Il n'y a qu'une seule 'perversion sexuelle' comme disent les imbéciles : c'est le développement de l'imagination, l'inaptitude à l'assouvissement" (*La*

Voie royale 10). That is a curious note with which to introduce a novel, to say the least; yet it puts on stage two terms, imagination and dissatisfaction, that will be extremely important ones throughout *Kampuchéa*.

20 Just as in the case of Conrad, it is both the author and the character that interest Deville. Malraux is clearly a strong precursor figure for him. Like Conrad, he is a writer who has traveled broadly and who has brought that experience to bear in his art. Yet Perken appeals to Deville too, for he embodies the ideal of the adventurer. That idea is a powerful one for Deville, and he puts it into play explicitly on several occasions. Two of those instances deserve attention. In the first one, Deville speaks of Malraux in the 1920s and 1930s, and the circumstances of publication of *La Voie royale*: "En 1930 il publie son roman autobiographique et invente son double aventurier Perken. C'est la gloire littéraire et ça n'est pas assez. Il veut encore agir, peser sur l'Histoire, sortir de la bibliothèque" (71). The epithet "roman autobiographique" is intriguing, insofar as it suggests a very transparent reading of Malraux's novel. The vision of Perken as Malraux's "double" is likewise interesting, most especially because of what it suggests about Deville's own writerly strategies. Moreover, it is legitimate to see both of the terms that I mentioned a moment ago, *imagination* and *dissatisfaction*, at work in this passage. Were "invention" and "imagination" and "literature" not enough to satisfy Malraux? Will they not suffice to satisfy Deville, either? In the other instance, Deville quotes Malraux's own use of the word *aventurier* in *La Voie royale*, in a remark that has since attained the status of aphorism: "Tout aventurier est né d'un mythomane."[10] Thus does a boat captain describe Perken to Claude; but for Deville, the same might be said of Malraux. Adventure, after all, is a kind of heightened, sharpened experience, experience viewed through a narrative lens and organized according to principles of narrativity. A mythomaniac is someone who exaggerates the truth, who embellishes the truth, who imagines things because the truth alone is not satisfactory. In other terms, Malraux's remark points to the very essence of what a novelist does, and when Deville adduces that remark in *Kampuchéa* its specular function could not be more obvious.

21 Deville finds Malraux exemplary by virtue of his energy, his will to play a variety of different roles—traveler, novelist, publisher, journalist, soldier, politician, intellectual—and to leave his signature upon his time. More than anything else, it is a question of *reach*. Yet in Deville's view, Malraux's reach was not only horizontal, but vertical as well. That is, as much as he figured prominently in his own time, so too did he take his place in history. That is quite clear insofar as literary history is concerned. Deville mentions that Malraux had read Pierre Loti, and that Loti's influence in *La Voie royale* is fundamental. He remarks further that the young Loti had been inspired by Henri Mouhot. Thereby, Deville traces an affiliation in which he, too takes his place—all the while recognizing that Malraux is an exceptionally hard act to follow. Literary influence, both as burden and as opportunity, is very much on Deville's mind in *Kampuchéa*. When he remarks, "Souvent c'est la crainte de ne pas égaler les pères qui fait les aventuriers" (74), he is speaking about Marie-Charles David de Mayrena's relationship with his father, but he might just as well be speaking about his own relationship with the writers whom he puts forward as his precursors.

22 Yet another dimension of Deville's intertextual strategy is played out in a series of allusions to his own writings. Those allusions engage *Pura Vida* and *Equatoria* almost exclusively; there is only one allusion to *La Tentation des armes à feu*,[11] and none at all

(none that I could identify, at least) to the five novels from Deville's Minuit period. A few examples of Deville's tactics will suffice. When he mentions William Walker (61, 239) anyone even passingly familiar with his work will inevitably think of *Pura Vida*, whose subtitle is *Vie & mort de William Walker*. Likewise, when he invokes Nicaragua or the Sandinistas (22, 65, 85) one thinks of *Pura Vida*. When Deville remarks that he had traveled up the Ogooué River "sur les traces de Brazza" (83) however, he is clearly alluding to *Equatoria*. More interesting still are passages where both of those prior texts come into play. In one of those, Deville mentions Pierre Brazza and then quickly thereafter William Wilson (167), sketching in the lightest of strokes two of the central figures in the broad historical panoramas that he paints in *Equatoria* and *Pura Vida*. And when he remarks, "En cette année 79, les révolutionnaires sandinistes prennent le pouvoir au Nicaragua et la CIA organise les *Contras* au Honduras. Les Soviétiques envahissent l'Afghanistan, soutiennent les Cubains et le MPLA en Angola" (229), the effect is similar, except that this time what is at issue is the very recent history that he describes in *Pura Vida* and *Equatoria*. Those moments in *Kampuchéa* serve to affiliate that text with *Pura Vida* and *Equatoria*. In other words, the autoallusive tactics in *Kampuchéa* appear to be driven by the desire to suggest the mutual intrication of *Pura Vida*, *Equatoria*, and *Kampuchéa*, and to postulate their coherence as an oeuvre.

23 One consideration that is beyond dispute is that those three texts are very, very different from the five Minuit novels that precede them. That difference is everywhere apparent: in the conception of the texts, in their execution, in the concerns they display, in the way that they attempt to engage the world, in the inflections of their narrative voice, in the stance they adopt toward the reader, and so forth. Together, they testify to an extraordinarily bold decision on Deville's part to cast off his former writerly habits and to innovate, to experiment with new and untested models of prose narrative. Deville has not said a great deal about that process, but the few things he has said leave little doubt that he went about it in a conscious and programmatic way. In the conversation at Cerisy in the summer of 2003 that I mentioned earlier, he speaks in veiled and hesitant terms about his work-in-progress, *Pura Vida* (which would appear a few months later):

> Et mon prochain travail... je n'aime pas en parler mais... est vraiment quelque chose sur l'encyclopédie, c'est-à-dire épuiser... enfin épuiser c'est impossible mais... une tentative d'épuiser complètement un sujet, de le maîtriser absolument, de tout lire, de traduire... puisque la plupart des informations n'étaient pas disponibles... et d'écrire à partir d'un grand volume de connaissances, et de construire avec ça un roman.[12]

24 What is intriguing about Deville's remarks is that while he seems to be uncertain about the process, he is very sure indeed about the product: there is no doubt in his mind that the result of his experiment will be a *novel*.

25 A year after those remarks (and thus after the publication of *Pura Vida*), in an interview that appeared in *Le Matricule des Anges*, when Thierry Guichard remarks to Deville that *Pura Vida* displays a radical departure from his usual style, Deville responds with more assurance. "C'est parce que j'ai voulu faire quelque chose que je ne savais pas faire," he says. "Et réinventer des manières d'écrire. J'ai longtemps été devant un mur, j'ai fait des tentatives. C'est exactement comme si en musique, j'essayais de changer d'instrument"[13]. The notion of reinvention is a compelling one, and it is absolutely fundamental to Deville's project. As he imagines it, the problem is to get from something that he does know how to do as a writer to something that he doesn't yet

know how to do. In both cases however, that "something" is a novel, and clearly the task that Deville sets for himself is in the first instance a formal quest. In that perspective at any rate, he remains faithful to the principles that have always animated his writing. Speaking of his first novel, *Cordon-bleu*, he remarks : "Je suis toujours un peu formaliste. Il me fallait trouver une forme"[14]. And a bit further on in that same interview, he makes it clear that for him the search for form is essential to the aesthetic gesture, whatever guise that gesture may eventually assume : "Ecrire un roman, une symphonie ou peindre un tableau c'est aussi toujours créer des formes ; simples au départ elles deviennent de plus en plus complexes" (20).

26 The dynamic of formal creation, of innovation, of *invention* is thus both crucial and indispensable for Deville. He suggests that a great part of the satisfaction he derives from his craft is bound up in that process. "D'ailleurs, ce qui me plaît le plus, je crois, c'est l'invention des formes," he says. "C'est un grand plaisir d'inventer ou d'utiliser des formes"[15]. The will to make things new is of course central in art; and in the twentieth century it became the signature imperative of the avant-garde. Indeed, it became such a tyrannical diktat that one might argue it was the key factor leading to the avant-garde's exhaustion. The way the principle of innovation plays out in Deville's work is a bit different, however. More than anything else, it is a question of the search for new possibilities of expression in a literary genre that is—and indeed has always been—a significantly protean one.[16]

27 For the *new* is the lifeblood of the *novel*. Indeed the very name of the form—at least in English usage—suggests just that. We have been hearing reports of the model's demise for a good half-century now. In fact, many people of my generation cut their readerly teeth on novels that had somehow escaped from that very death sentence. And thankfully, writers continue to produce novels, despite proclamations that the novel as a cultural form is doomed. In point of fact however, the history of the novel suggests that the novel has *always* been in crisis, such crisis being more or less dire in any given period. What does seem to be true is that certain traditional models of narrative are no longer as viable and performative as they once were, and Jean-François Lyotard was undoubtedly correct when he argued, in *La Condition postmoderne*, that we are far more skeptical with regard to grand narratives than we used to be[17]. What is also demonstrably true is that contemporary novelists, since the New Novel in the 1950s, have steadily elaborated new models for the genre, and have proposed them to the reading public, with varying degrees of success. Patrick Deville takes his place in that experimental tradition consciously and deliberately. Moreover, he inscribes that gesture in the books he writes, putting his quest for a new kind of novel broadly on display, in the very middle of that quest.

28 Looking closely, one can see in Deville's career an evolution that plays out the recent history of the novel itself. His five Minuit books are relatively conventional with regard to the norms prevailing at that time (roughly, the last decade of the twentieth century) and that place (France, more specifically Paris, more specifically still the Editions de Minuit). They are traditional, even *classic* novels, as Deville himself is quick to point out: "Pour moi, les cinq premiers livres sont indubitablement des romans. On ne peut pas plus roman... C'est Mme de Lafayette quoi !"[18]. Then, to all appearances, Deville decides that that kind of novel is no longer valid, and he undertakes a dramatic renovation of his own writerly practice, looking for new and more invigorating possibilities for prose narrative. Those early texts are nevertheless marked by a strong

specular dimension, one that insistently asks the question of what a novel *is* and *can be*.[19] And when Deville turns away from those models, he is clearly still grappling with that very question. "Le but a toujours été de faire un roman," he remarks about *Pura Vida*. "J'ai utilisé nombre de genres pour ce livre : épistolaire, romanesque, poétique, journalistique, diariste et historique"[20].

29 That hybridity may seem extreme when viewed in the strict focus of any given text; but in a broader perspective one recognizes that the novel has always borrowed from other genres. Indeed, the generic specificity of the novel is notoriously difficult to define, undoubtedly in part because the novel has always spoken in a variety of accents. Patrick Deville's novelty wagers precisely upon that aspect of the genre, upon the way it changes shape while still remaining a novel. He wagers also that some point of connection will be made between his desire to write new kinds of novels and our desire to read them. Throughout, he is guided by an idea that he articulates in each of his texts. Sometimes he expresses that idea subtly, sometimes more overtly, but whatever form it may take it is clearly for him a confession of faith: "Je persiste à croire que le roman est le genre littéraire majeur[21]. 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*.

NOTES

1. Novels of Patrick Deville :
Cordon-bleu, Paris, Minuit, 1987.
Longue Vue, Paris, Minuit, 1988.
Le Feu d'artifice, Paris, Minuit, 1992.
La Femme parfaite, Paris, Minuit, 1995.
Ces deux-là, Paris, Minuit, 2000.
Pura Vida : Vie & mort de William Walker, Paris, Le Seuil, 2004.
La Tentation des armes à feu, Paris, Le Seuil, 2006.
Equatoria, Paris, Le Seuil, 2009.
Vie & mort de sainte Tina l'Exilée, Tours, Publie.net, 2011.
Kampuchéa, Paris, Le Seuil, 2011.
Peste & choléra, Paris, Le Seuil, 2012.

2. See for instance : Fieke Schoots, *"Passer en douce à la douane" : l'écriture minimaliste de Minuit*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, Rodopi, 1997 ; Pierre Hyppolite, "Hyperréalisme et représentation minimaliste dans *La Femme parfaite* de Patrick Deville", in Marc Dambre and Bruno Blanckeman eds., *Romanciers minimalistes 1979-2003*, Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2012, p. 55-69 ; Sophie Bertho, "L'Attente postmoderne : A propos de la littérature contemporaine en France", *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* 91,4-5 (1991), p. 735-743 ; and William Cloonan, "Homage to Jérôme Lindon : The Novel in 2001", *French Review* 76.1 (2002), p. 45-59.

3. For another discussion of *Kampuchéa*, see Pierre Schoentjes, "Les '*beaux* hasards' de Patrick Deville : *Kampuchéa* et la terreur", forthcoming in *Carnets de Chaminadour*.

4. Strictly speaking, it is the narrator who addresses us in *Kampuchéa*, but in light of Deville's efforts to erase the distinction between author and narrator, and for simplicity's sake, I shall say "Deville" from here onward.

5. See Jean-François Hamel's discussion of the politics of Deville's *Pura Vida* and *La Tentation des armes à feu*, in "Le Pistolet *passé* sous la ceinture", *Critique* 719 (2007), p. 263-278

6. See his remarks in "La Fabrique du héros" 22 : "J'ai trouvé la forme du livre dès la première version en 1999, qui consistait à prendre deux journaux à une semaine d'intervalle dans deux capitales frontalières et d'écrire à partir de ce jeu entre les deux journaux *Diaro* et *Tiempo* et de ces deux vendredis consécutifs que le narrateur passe à Managua (Nicaragua) puis à Tegucigalpa (Honduras)." See also "Plus formaliste peut-être que minimaliste..." 326-27 : "Je vais quand même dire un mot de ce travail extrêmement long que j'ai évoqué... Il repose sur la lecture de deux quotidiens deux vendredis consécutifs. Ces quotidiens, je les ai pris de la première a la dernière page, y compris les petites annonces, les entrefilets, etc. Et pour chaque article, encart publicitaire ou quoi que ce soit, j'ai absolument remonté la pelote le plus loin possible."

7. Patrick Deville, "Plus formaliste peut-être que minimaliste...", in Marc Dambre and Bruno Blanckeman eds., *Romanciers minimalistes 1979-2003*, Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 201, p. 311.

8. See for example 52 : "On peut regretter que le bourreau Ta Mok n'ait pas eu le talent de Coppola, et sans doute n'ait pas vu *Apocalypse Now*, ni lu Conrad" ; and 77 : "Mais c'est Coppola qui les rassemble tous en un bouquet vénéneux dans son colonel Walter Kurtz, rassemble le héros de Conrad et Marie I^{er} et Pol Pot dans l'image de l'horreur et de la folie."

9. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, New York, Bantam, 1965, p. 136-137.

10. André Malraux, *La Voie royale*, Paris, Grasset, 1930, p. 16 ; *Kampuchéa*, p. 118.

11. On page 158 of *Kampuchéa* Deville remarks, "Je lui dis avoir écrit le récit d'un voyage en train de Bakou à Tbilissi," an account that figures prominently in *La Tentation des armes à feu*.

12. "Plus formaliste", p. 326.

13. Patrick Deville and Thierry Guichard, "La Fabrique du héros", *Le Matricule des Anges* 49 (2004), p. 21-22.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

15. "Plus formaliste", p. 319.

16. Deville clearly recognizes that trait. See for example "Plus formaliste" 323-24 : "Tout peut s'appeler *roman*, même si rien absolument n'y est inventé. Le fait même d'inventer un narrateur fait déjà du texte un roman. L'exercice littéraire majeur, sauf à écrire de la poésie, s'appelle toujours – et c'est assez logique – *roman*. Il n'en existe pas de définition. *Roman* signifie qu'il s'agit d'un texte littéraire."

17. Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne : Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, Minuit, 1979, p. 7.

18. "Plus formaliste", p. 324.

19. See Fieke Schoots (*op. cit.*, p. 92) : "*Le Feu d'artifice* est un roman sur l'écriture d'un roman, sur sa construction et sur sa représentation. C'est un roman qui raconte, dans la diégèse aussi bien qu'au niveau thématique et stylistique, la recherche et en même temps la déstabilisation de tout ordre."

20. "La Fabrique du héros", p. 22.

21. "Plus formaliste", p. 323.

ABSTRACTS

L'écrivain français contemporain Patrick Deville produit actuellement un œuvre des plus intrigants que l'on puisse espérer trouver. C'est un ensemble varié et en continuelle évolution qui pose avec insistance la question de ce qu'est le roman au milieu des conflits de notre présent culturel, et de ce qu'il peut devenir dans un avenir que nous ne pouvons que vaguement deviner. Parmi ses œuvres les plus récentes m'intéressent plus particulièrement Pura Vida, Equatoria et Kampuchéa, parce qu'elles semblent constituer (du moins jusqu'ici) une trilogie qui fait le tour du monde sur l'équateur, et dont les héros semblent à chaque fois être des lieux, plutôt que des personnes. D'un autre point de vue, on pourrait soutenir que le protagoniste de ces textes est le roman lui-même, parce que chacun d'entre eux – quel que soit son sujet – montre le roman de maintenant à la recherche d'une forme nouvelle. Cette façon de faire est convaincante, car elle témoigne de la manière dont la culture est en train de se métamorphoser, là, sous nos yeux. Dans cet article je voudrais me concentrer sur Kampuchéa, parce que je crois qu'il s'appuie sur les textes qui le précèdent, et y apporte une réponse essentielle. En outre, c'est dans Kampuchéa que Deville confirme sa nouvelle compétence d'écrivain, en esquissant un nouvel horizon de possibilité pour le roman comme forme littéraire vivante et dynamique.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Deville, roman, Cambodge, histoire, forme

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