Drieu la Rochelle (1893-1945)



Pierre Drieu la Rochelle was a controversial French fascist writer, Nazi collaborator and one-time surrealist. His large body of work covers many genres, including criticism, poetry, plays, short stories, and novels. Overshadowed by his contentious political views, Drieu’s engagement with some of the major themes of modernism— including the disintegration of forms, pictorality in writing, and the role of the author—is often ignored.

Born in Paris in 1893, Pierre-Eugène Drieu la Rochelle had a largely bourgeois upbringing, which he describes in his short autobiographical novel, *Etat* *Civil* (1921)*.* A vehement critic of the bourgeois self-indulgence of his parents, which he recounts in *Rêveuse Bourgeoisie* (1937), decadence becomes a major theme in Drieu’s work. Materialism, hedonism, industrialism and feminism—which he ascribes to the figures of Jews, women and Americans— make up what Drieu defines as a “bad” or corrupt form of modernism.

*True* modernism, for Drieu, was virile, young and characterized by primitive, animalistic violence. However, based on his own experiences— which he describes in two collection of war poems, *Interrogation* (1917) and *Fond de cantine (1920)*, the novel *Gilles*,and the short story, “La comédie de Charleroi”— WWI failed to restore France’s virility and had only increased the decadence of France’s population.

Drieu blames this decadence on women and foreigners, particularly Jews. In “La comédie de Charleroi”, Drieu presents a self-reflexive examination of the construction of the epic war stories, which had shaped his youth. Fabricated by women—in this case a Jewish, bourgeois mother— these epics represent everything that is wrong with interwar France. Beyond a marked cynicism toward tropes of heroism and patriotism, “La comédie de Charleroi” also introduces a formal modernism, which questions the essential separation of forms by overlaying illustrations of epic battle scenes from his childhood books on top of narratives of modern warfare.

Initially drawn to their mocking of traditional literary forms, particularly those that embraced a patriotic view of France, in the early 1920’s Drieu joined the surrealists, LOUIS ARAGON and ANDRE BRETON. In 1924, he contributed to their posthumous critique of Anatole de France, “Un Cadavre”. However, by 1925 Drieu announced his break with the surrealists in a series of letters that criticize their attack on the Catholic author, Paul Claudel, and denounce their failure to address the subjects of spirituality and war, which he saw as intertwined.

Later, in *Gilles*, his most successful novel, Drieu represents the communist surrealists as ineffectual decadents. More significantly, however, *Gilles* delineates a progression in Drieu’s role as a modernist author. The plot becomes secondary to a series of disjointed painterly images. From the sad clown in Antoine Watteau’s painting, also named Gilles, to Drieu’s sweeping reference to Picasso’s Guernica, Drieu paints the spectacle of human existence. However, unlike some surrealists, he does not see public spectacles as a return to the primitive, only as a self-interested escape from reality.

In the late thirties, Drieu identifies the spirituality of the doctrines of Fascism as the only answer to the emptiness of the spectacle. He embraces the fusion of athleticism and mythology found in the “Hitlerian man”, and joins Jacques Doriot’s fascist group. Filled with the conviction that “France” was dead, which he describes in *Chiens de paille*, Drieu developed what he considered to be European standpoint, which led him to collaborate with the Germans. After the war Drieu commits suicide, naming the war hero and prize-winning author Malraux as his literary executor.

Selected Work by Drieu La Rochelle

*Interrogation.* (1917)

*Fond de cantine (1920)*

*Etat Civil*. (1921)

*Mesure de France* (1922)

*Une Femme à sa fenêtre* (1929)

*Le Feu follet (1931)*

*Beloukia* (1936).

*Rêveuse bourgeoisie* (1937)

*Gilles* (1939)

*Chronique politique 1934-1942* (1943)

*L’Homme à cheval* (1943)

*Les Chiens de paille*. (1944)

*Histoires déplaisantes* (1963)

*Mémoires de Dirk Raspe* (1966).

*Sur les écrivains.* Edited by Frédéric Grover. (1966)

Key Critical Works:

On Modernism

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Saint-Ygnan, Jean-Louis. *Drieu la Rochelle ou l’Obsession de la Décadence.* Paris: Nouvelles éditions latines, 1984.

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On Fascism

Carroll, David. “The Fascist Imagined Community: The Myths of Europe and Totalitarian Man in Drieu la Rochelle” and “Literary Fascism and the Problem of Gender: The Aesthetics of the Body in Drieu La Rochelle”. *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture*.

Kaplan, Alice Yaeger. “Bodies and Landscapes: Marinetti, Drieu La Rochelle, and Céline”. *Reproduction of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Soucy, Robert. “Le Fascisme de Drieu La Rochelle”. *Revue d’histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale,* 17e Année, No. 66, Sur le fascisme (Avril 1967), pp. 61-84.