

## To what extent the journey and travel narrative of *Chemin faisant* illustrates a cultural résistance?

After the communist-led liberation from Nazi German occupation, the post-war France has experienced some significant changes in their political regime, economy growth and the quality of life for the society. The end of war has brought about an unprecedented prosperity, mostly thanks to America and their Marshall Aid Plan, investing in the reconstruction of multiple national economies by offering huge loans to European countries destroyed by the war, such as France. With slogans like “*bas les vestes et haut les coeurs!*” and “*hop, on s’en sortira!*”, the French nation has eagerly jumped on the reconstruction and the modernisation of the country and its economy, bringing levels of production and consumption to highs never experienced before<sup>1</sup>, while being led by the communist and capitalist ideology. As France quickly became the most state-controlled capitalist country in the world, these developments have resulted in thirty-years long period of economic prosperity and constantly increasing standard of living called *Les Trente Glorieuses*. During 30 years of immense economic growth, and modernisation of society, one would expect, that such age would only bring benefits to the French society, unfortunately, that was not the case. France rapidly advanced throughout the process of leaving behind the rural, empire-oriented country, when society was equally scattered across all provinces of France, and became an industrialized, urbanised country with intense political and economical centralization. Much of the society has abandoned the calm and quiet village life and moved onto the fast-paced, production and consumption oriented life, centralised within exponentially growing cities. This has resulted in some significant negative outcomes: an enormous rural exodus, an abandonment of rural areas in provincial France, oblivion of the richness of various French dialects and various provincial languages, as well as dull focus on pushing the values of capitalism, mass production and consumption. Indeed, such transformation and centralisation of the country has provoked some response and critique against this regime, one of the most significant methods to do so being the *cultural résistance*, the use of literature or other arts to indirectly critique and challenge this political system. Jacques Lacarrière was one of the most significant authors representing the cultural resistance over this period, demonstrating an incredibly intelligent way of hiding the criticism of the “new France” in his travel chronic *Chemin Faisant*<sup>2</sup>, a travelogue of a thousand kilometres journey on foot across the France. This essay will discuss instances of cultural resistance hidden within this

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<sup>1</sup> McNeill, T. (1998). *Les trente glorieuses: 1945-1975*

<sup>2</sup> Lacarrière, J. (2017). *Chemin Faisant*

oeuvre, demonstrating the power literature and words can have, as Lacarrière said himself: “*la poésie, pendant la guerre, avec ses poètes assassinés ou fusillés, ses poètes résistants, était aussi une arme de vie et de mort*”.<sup>3</sup>

First demonstration of his denial of the imminent centralization of France is his choice of route across France. Going from Saverne on the north, aiming to arrive at the south of France, close to the Mediterranean Sea, it would be much easier for Lacarrière to use available asphalt roads connecting major cities, at the same time making use of easily available hospitality in these quickly developing *grand villes*. Nevertheless, as a demonstration of anti-centralising resistance, he uses a diagonal, provincial Gallic route from east to west, passing through more culturally unique, and symbolic stops such as Château Cathare, Peyrepertuse or La Couvertoirade. He avoids roads and cities intentionally, being strongly attracted to the unknown and unexpected of the provincial Gallic and Celtic France, and escaping the modernism and consumer society described by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*<sup>4</sup>, by avoiding the heart (cities) and veins (roads) of the republican France. This anti-centralising demonstration thus appears within the geographical space of provincial France, that consequently becomes symbolic of this criticism<sup>5</sup>.

Particular stops within this geographical space also offer more specific indications of this criticism. For example, his way towards the castle of Peyrepertuse in the Cathar land is very much a symbolical representation of a resistance to monarchical France and the violence experienced by dissident groups.<sup>6</sup> The castle of Peyrepertuse has acted as a stronghold of Guillaume de Peyrepertuse, who refused to submit to the Pope Innocent III during the Cathar Crusade in 13th century<sup>7</sup>. Interestingly, this is quite analogous of the police invasion of Sorbonne during the events of May 68<sup>8</sup>, and of the refusal of students to submit to the police force during riots that have changed the shape of the country<sup>8</sup>. Considering that Lacarrière himself was quite active at Sorbonne during big part of his life and he wrote this oeuvre in the

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<sup>3</sup> Lebrun, J. (2002). *Mémoire Vivante: Jacques Lacarrière Entretien*

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, R. (1973). *Mythologies*

<sup>5</sup> Salazar-Ferrer, O. (2018). *Cours sur Chemin Faisant I.*

<sup>6</sup> Salazar-Ferrer, O. (2018). *Cours sur Chemin Faisant I.*, page 4-5

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia (2020). *Albigensian Crusade*

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia (2020). *May 68*

post-68 period, this analogous reference to a period of revolt against state centralism in France is very clever and relevant aspect of cultural resistance within this work. There are also multiple references to the *Larzac Struggle*, both within the geographical space of south-west and by mentioning the keyword *Larzac* itself, which was another civil movement against a regime, which ended in a victory of peasants, forcing then-newly elected Président François Mitterrand to retreat and abandon his project<sup>9</sup>. An another thought-provoking analogy to Charles de Gaulle escaping France during the events of May 68’.

Next element of cultural resistance is expressed by his mode of transportation. In post-war period, Renault as one of the most historically famous car manufacturers and suddenly overseen and nationalised by the state, has led a historical explosion of car production and car use<sup>10</sup>. In the capitalist state, speed was a priority whether in terms of production, consumption or transportation. Lacarrière, however, chooses to travel on foot, demonstrating his refusal of the ideology of speed and the hectic tempo of production-focused life in cities, advocating *un voyage à petite vitesse*. As De Certeau points out: “*mechanization of travel leads not so much to a disembodiment of the traveler*”<sup>11</sup>, and indeed, for Lacarrière moving on foot is a mode of knowledge, offering him the time to take in all perceptions of the walking body, such as contact of the foot with the landscape, appreciation of endless space and feelings appearing during random meetings. He explains: “*Ce que j’ai redécouvert en marchant, ce ne sont pas seulement ces rencontres chaque jour différentes, ces visages inconnus qui deviennent si vite familiers, ces réponses de plus en plus sensibles à mon attente, ce sont les heures du jour, vécues tout autrement qu’à Paris.*”<sup>12</sup> The choice of travelling slowly to allow enough time to enjoy the surroundings is very reminiscent of Nicolas Bouviers’ *L’usage du Monde* and his use of extremely slow and inefficient Topolino, as an important aspect of *l’exercice de disparition*<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, for Lacarrière walking offers an exercise of psychological liberation, or deconditioning, creating the necessary creative emptiness and liberation from capitalist ideology and social classification, in order to appreciate the ephemeral nature of things he encounters in the “forgotten” provincial France.

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<sup>9</sup> Salazar-Ferrer, O. (2018). *Cours sur Chemin Faisant I.*, page 5

<sup>10</sup> McNeill, T. (1998). *Les trente glorieuses: 1945-1975*

<sup>11</sup> Forsdick, C. (2015) *Travel and the Body*

<sup>12</sup> Lacarrière, J., *Paroles pour un été – la marche*

<sup>13</sup> Bouvier, N. (1963). *L’usage du monde*

Another issue criticised by this literary work is the absolute desolation and abandonment of rural, provincial France that he is passing through, versus the unstoppable colonisation of urban areas France was experiencing. He manages to marry demonstrating this very issue with cleverly hidden criticism of capitalism and state centralism within a single example - his visit to La Couvertoirade. On his arrival to the medieval village, he stops by at a cafeteria, where he is given a symbolic piece of cheese and a glass of wine, while being told by the woman working in there: *"c'est tout ce que j'ai à vous donner, vous savez à cette saison personne ne vient par ici"*<sup>14</sup>. These are first indications of the emptiness and even lack of food in this remote place, as all production is focused in cities, emphasised by ironic identification of the cafeteria as *"l'unique café de l'endroit"* and the woman working there as *"la cafetière de La Couvertoirade"*. However, the impression of the desolate state of the village grows much stronger, as he realises there is a funeral being held for a 92 year old man on that day. Cafetière tells him: *"Il va y avoir beaucoup de monde. Cet homme avait le coeur sur la main. Vous lui demandiez du pain, il vous le donnait aussitôt, sans rien vous demander. Aujourd'hui, ça n'existe plus des gens qui vous donnent du pain et ne demandent rien."*<sup>15</sup> One can notice an obvious criticism of capitalism, as she says that nowadays there are no people that give you bread and do not ask for anything in return. The man to be buried is clearly a symbol of good character, moral values and anti-capitalism, yet, no family nor any friends come to his funeral in this forgotten village, only funeral directors are present, waiting bored at different spots, one of them ironically expecting guests at the door of the village: *"..en arrivant juste au pied des remparts je vis, immobile, droit comme un if, un homme tout de noir vêtu, croque-mort montant la garde aux portes du village. A l'intérieur, dès la première ruelle, je vois un deuxième homme, lui aussi tout de noir vêtu. Deux croque-morts. Au détour de la ruelle, sur la petite place attenante au café, immobile, regardant le ciel, un troisième croque-mort."*<sup>16</sup> There is not even a pastor to read eulogy for the dead man, so the *cafetière* reads it. Lacarrière hides even more criticism within the description of this sad, forgotten village, describing masons replacing a roof of tiles with roofing stone taken from abandoned sheepfolds. The irony in this is overwhelming, while big cities are experiencing expanding construction, nobody cares about restoring villages and they need to use materials from *des bergeries abandonnées*. Interestingly, he claims

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<sup>14</sup> Lacarrière, J. (2005). *Chemins d'écriture*, page 188

<sup>15</sup> Lacarrière, J. (2005). *Chemins d'écriture*, page 188

<sup>16</sup> *Ibd.*, page 189

the image of masons leaves the strongest image in his memory from La Couvertoirade, however, this “interest” in their work may as well be only a smokescreen, a symbol to represent the criticism and the sadness of a situation, when man with good morals has no family present at his funeral, because he was forgotten and left behind in a same way as these “medieval” villages were. And, indeed, he indicates this might be true, saying: “ *Pourquoi par exemple ai-je toujours si vivant en ma mémoire cet après-midi à La Couvertoirade où, par un temps froid et gris, dans une ruelle balayée par le vent, je regarde des ouvriers en train de poser des lauzes sur un toit? Spectacle finalement aussi intéressant que d'éplucher hit siècles d'archives et d'articles pour retrouver l'histoire de cette Commanderie.*”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, this desertification and desolation of the provincial France is a reoccurring theme, expressed in many other examples throughout the journey: an abandoned train station that becomes “*salle de l'éternelle attente*”, rancid and depressing hotels “*avec leurs salles à manger Henri II*”<sup>18</sup>, or the lack of hospitality infrastructure in these regions: “*Aujourd'hui tous ces lieux ont disparu et, plus encore, l'idée que l'on pourrait en avoir besoin.*”<sup>19</sup>

The last element of cultural resistance, this essay will mention, is Lacarrières' praise of regional dialects and use of provincial-specific archaic words, promoting these against the generalisation and centralisation of French language. Over the course of his journey, he shows how his perception of landscape is influenced by discovery of various provincial dialects. Let us take as an example his exploration of variations on the word designating a small hill: “*puy*” becomes “*peuch*” as he goes south of the Auvergne, then “*puech*” in the Causses becomes “*pech*” in the Minervois, eventually changing to “*pié*” in Languedoc<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, he explores variations on word “*narce*”, becoming “*narse*” and “*nerse*”, contemplating: “*Changements minimes entre ces mots et qui peut sembler inutile puisque tous trois désignent la même chose mais qui sont justement le sol et le sel du langage.*”<sup>21</sup> Lacarrière aims to resurrect the language also through an increased use of archaic words, such as *jasserie*, *paillardise* or *esbaudissement*: “*..nos routes et nos auberges ont beaucoup perdu en paillardise et esbaudissement*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., page 193

<sup>18</sup> Lacarrière, J. (2017). *Chemin Faisant*, page 37

<sup>19</sup> Lacarrière, J. (2017). *Chemin Faisant*, page 258

<sup>20</sup> Salazar-Ferrer, O. (2018). *Cours sur Chemin Faisant I.*, page 9

<sup>21</sup> Salazar-Ferrer, O. (2018). *Cours sur Chemin Faisant I.*, page 10

depuis le Moyen-Âge.”<sup>22</sup> He promotes strong valorisation of these “des patois”, and emphasizes their value over a standardised French language: “Ainsi, tout au long des chemins, du Morvan aux Corbières, ma marche fut-elle accompagnée de sons nouveaux, d’inflexions inconnues pour moi comme si, souvent, je me trouvais non pas en pays étranger, mais sur des terres dont l’histoire ne s’était jamais confondue tout à fait avec celle de la France.”<sup>23</sup> Through this linguistic differentiation, he once again rejects the centralised, nationalised France created by the post-war communist Gaullist regime.

To conclude, this essay does not only demonstrate a powerful cultural resistance hidden within the pages of *Chemin Faisant*, whether that involves escaping the modernism of post-war republican France by walking the forgotten roads of provincial France, criticising the rural exodus caused by the capitalist transformation of the country, or reviving rich provincial dialects of French language. It also shows, how anyone can create and walk their own *chemin*, to empty oneself of everyday emergencies and worries: “ vidé de tout ce qui l’encombre dans la vie quotidienne et citadine.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Lacarrière has brilliantly shown how literature, sentences and words sometimes “devenaient comme des projectiles”<sup>25</sup>, and can act as an effective weapon of cultural resistance, an intelligent way of criticism and denial of the regime through the use of art.

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<sup>22</sup> Lacarrière, J. (2017). *Chemin Faisant*, page 239

<sup>23</sup> Salazar-Ferrer, O. (2018). *Cours sur Chemin Faisant I.*, page 9

<sup>24</sup> Lacarrière, J. (2017). *Chemin Faisant*, page 159

<sup>25</sup> Lebrun, J. (2002). *Mémoire Vivante: Jacques Lacarrière Entretien*

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