

1996-3

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Recommended Citation

Maher, E., (1996) War and Migration : the example of "An Ordinary Exodus" by Roger Bichelberger, The Month (March),pp.110-3.

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War and migration: the example of *An Ordinary Exodus* by Roger Bichelberger

'War and peace, migration and repatriation, joy and suffering, death and new life, each has its antidote in Bichelberger's scheme of things.'

EAMON MAHER



THE NAME Roger Bichelberger will not usually generate nods of recognition among literary people in France, and even less so outside his own country. Bichelberger cannot be classed as a major writer in the sense that this term is applied to Julien Green, François Mauriac, or Georges Bernanos. Rather, he is a minor Christian writer who lives in the little town of Forbach in his native Lorraine. Author of some eight novels, two poetry collections, a critical study of Mauriac as well as a doctoral thesis on Julien Green he continues to work as a *professeur de lycée* in spite of many attempts that have been made to lure him into university lecturing. He is active in humanitarian causes, especially in the movement that fights against the torture of prisoners and he is also a regular contributor to the regional newspaper, *Le Républicain lorrain*. His activities are thus many and varied.

So why have I chosen his novel, *An Ordinary Exodus*,¹ as the subject of an article for *The Month*? Many critics would find aspects of this novel mediocre

from a literary perspective — indeed, Bichelberger has written far more accomplished works — but it underlines none the less in an enlightening manner how war affected the inhabitants of a particular community in Lorraine. The fact that we have just celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II makes this testimony even more relevant.

Lorraine, situated on the borders of France and Germany, knows all about the reality of war. It changed hands four times between 1870 and 1945 and its inhabitants suffered great hardship, especially in the course of the Second World War. Its geographical location and rich natural resources made Lorraine the prize of many a tug-of-war between France and Prussia and later between France and the united Germany. A local German dialect was spoken by all Lorrains at the outbreak of the Second World War which caused some French people to associate them with the dreaded *Boches*. But there was still a strong feeling of kinship with France.

War has been the inspiration of many great literary and historical works, most of which have concentrated on dramatic evocations of courage and heroism, corruption and cruelty, murder and hatred. Sometimes what is overlooked, in the depiction of conflict, is the pain suffered by civilians as the result of generals drawing lines on maps. Bichelberger at least has the merit of writing about the situations and people



he knows best, about how war affected them and how their spirituality helped them to transcend the evil that entered their lives.

Incitement to kill

An Ordinary Exodus relates the migration of the villagers of Lasting-en-Lorraine, Bichelberger's birthplace, who are forced to flee before the threat of the German invasion. They move all the way across France to the town of Châtelailion-Plage, in Charente-Maritime, on the Atlantic coast.

There is a strong autobiographical dimension to this novel, as Bichelberger himself, at the tender age of one and a half, undertook the same journey, which is detailed in his autobiography, *Les années buissonnières*.² War and migration, hatred, uncertainty, death, uprooting, the future writer experienced them all first hand during his *petite enfance*:

It wasn't the evacuation that was the real calamity, it was the war itself, setting men against each other and inciting them to kill.³

These lines at the beginning of *An Ordinary Exodus* encapsulate the feelings of Roger Bichelberger with regard to war, and they take human form in Manuel, the major character of the novel, who is also the village simpleton. Manuel possesses a strong spiritual dimension, which is respected by the inhabitants of Lasting-en-Lorraine, but this will cause him problems when he has to cope with the rupture of migration and the exposure to people who don't understand him. He looks at his only living relative, his sister Angela, four months pregnant, and he wonders who the father of her baby can be. In the first town they visit, he will nastily be held responsible for her condition.

Brother and sister travel together in a neighbour's cart, each preoccupied with poignant thoughts, she worrying about her lover, Benoît, who is at the front, he concerned about the pet pigeons they neglected to release from their loft before they left. He spends their first night away returning back home to release the poor birds. He can't bear to think of them trapped in a prison.

The migrants stop off in two towns, Bemering and Lidrezing, before being boarded on a train that will transport them to their destination on the Atlantic. Manuel gets into trouble in Lidrezing when he eats all the sacred hosts from the tabernacle in the church. The local parishioners cry 'sacrilege' and wish to punish the desecrator. Manuel is confused and upset; he believes himself to be simply following Christ's words at the Last Supper: 'Take and eat'.

The local curé, aware of the strange joy which illuminates Manuel's features, recognises that he is dealing with someone who is in close contact with the

Absolute. He shields the young man from the wrath of his parishioners of whom he says:

These Christians were hot on justice: they knew little of the difference between the love of God and the justice of men.⁴

When they finally disembark at Châtelailion-Plage, Manuel and his fellow-travellers are greeted warmly and placed in houses around the town. But in spite of the peaceful surroundings, the reality, or unreality, of war continues to haunt them. Stories of lack of discipline among the French troops soon begin to circulate. Their towns and villages are being ransacked by drunken soldiers who sometimes engage in bizarre rituals:

One of the soldiers had found a wedding dress and put it on, and they all paraded through the streets, pretending that they were marrying War, or Death. They had even compounded their sacrilege by going into the church.⁵

Such accounts do little to ease the anxiety of the migrants, the oldest of whom, Millache' Babe, seeing no signs of the war ending, decides that he can't wait any longer. He sits down on his chair and dies. The narrator offers this interpretation:

So old Millache' Babe couldn't wait to go home to his Léna (his wife), back in their own land, beneath the geraniums, he couldn't wait for this interminable war to end. So he died, there and then, simply turning his back on the war.⁶

Angela is overjoyed at the arrival of her lover Benoît, who is allowed to visit her over Christmas. The joy of their re-union is brief, as he will be killed in the Ardennes, a few months after the birth of their son. His father, Siébert, had always been a great defender of the French army, who, he insisted, would withstand the Nazi onslaught. The Maginot line, the Marne, and the Somme were evoked one after the other as though possessing some magical force capable of preventing the inexorable advance of the German army towards Paris. The faces of the French soldiers, arriving back after the collapse of their country's defences, paint a more accurate picture:

They had returned from the land of war, from the dark land of night where death was their constant companion. They found the bright summer of the Atlantic coast strange and surprising.⁷

They firmly rebuff 'ol' Grandad' Siébert's ramblings, telling him that there was going to be no repeat of the 1914-1918 glories. France had surrendered and was under German occupation.

To Manuel, the evacuation has offered his first

glimpse of the immensity of the sea, which he spends hours contemplating. He has also had the chance to listen to Fata Ioss, one of the elder citizens, reading from the copy of the New Testament which the curé of Lidrezing presented Manuel with as a parting gift. His youthful face takes on a warm glow as he listens to the various passages and allows them to sink into his consciousness. He believes that war should not happen. When they return to Lorraine, soon after the *drôle de guerre* has ended, Manuel quickly becomes the favourite of the German N.C.O., Müller, to whom he says:

This war must end. . . Love one another, Müller, remember, love one another.⁸

Innocence and love

Surely a German officer would not accept such advice from the village idiot. And yet Manuel appears to embody in his person so many Christian virtues that those who come in contact with him are touched by his inner flame. Innocence and love are the two guiding forces in his life. In the church he sometimes enters into strange mystical trances while contemplating the tabernacle. He burns to partake of Christ's body, but he does not repeat the performance that got him into such trouble in Lidrezing for fear of upsetting Angela. A Russian prisoner of war, Séraphim, who arrives in Lasting-en-Lorraine, immediately recognises that Manuel is a *fol de Dieu*.

(. . .) he would never have believed it possible that he could find, in France, a man like the *jurodiv*, the 'fools of God' of his native land. It was not long before he was treating Manuel as a sort of *staretz*.⁹

The childlike qualities of this twenty-something year old man, the *esprit d'enfance* so cherished by Bernanos, his charity and innocence, are in sharp contrast to the bombing, hatred and slaughter that are happening all around him. He is friendly with the German soldiers, while at the same time bringing supplies of food to two local members of the Resistance movement. He does not compartmentalise people as friend or foe but loves everyone equally. He cannot read and yet he is capable of reciting whole passages of the New Testament, especially the Beatitudes. 'Happy the poor in spirit for they shall inherit the kingdom of Heaven', he is often heard to say, as a prelude to going through each section in its turn.

Bichelberger has several characters that can be classified as 'fools of God' in his novels. He believes that humble people, or simpletons like Manuel, are in close contact with God and that their uncomplicated attitude to things spiritual can lead to a greater understanding of the Gospel message. Manuel does not

bring about an end to the war but he is none the less an agent for reconciliation between the warring factions. He readily forgives the Gestapo for their cruel and humiliating interrogation of him, and even for confiscating his precious New Testament — they did not appreciate the fact that it was in French! He regards the German soldiers, whom Fata Ioss and many of the other villagers perceive as the public enemy, as friends and does not want them to come to any harm at the end of the war. He hates the hostility aroused by conflict.



Roger Bichelberger

Before the liberation of Lorraine by the Allied troops, there is heavy bombardment. The inhabitants are taken by surprise:

They had the impression that the monster of war had suddenly and violently awoken from a long slumber, and the noisy machines that flew overhead were like the rumblings of its anger, an anger that would have unforeseeable consequences.¹⁰

Crouched in the cellar of Fata Ioss' house, Angela notices that her brother is crying. She assumes that he is frightened but he shakes his head and says: 'The war, Angela, war is evil.'¹¹ Few would disagree with this, least of all Roger Bichelberger himself, who in the course of his youth had plenty of cause to reflect on

the evil of war. His father, Ligori as he was affectionately known, was mobilised in 1939 but joined his family shortly afterwards in Châtelailon-Plage. As the youngest child, Roger would only have a few short years to get to know this man, who evicted him from his mother's bed when he returned from the war. He died shortly after the liberation of Lorraine, leaving his wife to bring up three young children on her own.

In spite of the trauma he endured, however, Bichelberger does not overlook some of the beneficial side-effects of war, like the increased religious fervour of many people and the strong bonds which grew up in some communities. Even out of such evil as war he seems to believe that good can emerge. He also realises that the human spirit is resilient and capable of enduring the most intense pain. In *Les années buissonnières*, we read:

S'il y avait la mort, il y avait aussi la vie, et ni la guerre ni rien au monde ne parvenait à nous empêcher d'y mordre à belles dents, à la vie: comment survivre autrement?¹²

(There may well have been death in their midst but life went on, and neither the war nor anything else could prevent us from savouring this wonderful gift of life: how were we to survive otherwise?)

It is not just survival for survival's sake that interests Bichelberger. In his opinion, the world is full of beauty and promise as well as ugliness and evil. Writing, for him as for so many others, is a quest which can exorcise the hardship and pain of this life by allowing one to share in the work of creation. *An Ordinary Exodus* brings the characters on a circular path, but when they came full circle back home, they are no longer the same.

War and peace, migration and repatriation, joy and suffering, death and new life, each has its antidote in Bichelberger's scheme of things. We may or may not agree with his view of the world, we may find certain elements of his spirituality *invraisemblables* or simplistic, but we cannot easily dismiss his evocation of a war he witnessed at first hand and about which he writes in a manner that is devoid of bitterness. You can almost see him as he would like to be in the image of Manuel

throwing himself between the American soldiers and his German friends whom they are about to execute. He is caught in a storm of bullets and dies in the arms of Wilhelm, but not before hearing one of the American soldiers commenting that the name Emmanuel means, God with us. The last line of the book gives Manuel's reaction to this:

And on his lips there came a strange smile. . .¹³

Strange indeed, if one is not prepared to go beyond the simple exterior and to reflect on the possible source of Manuel's joy. The novelist could be accused here of a facile presentation of Manuel's other-worldliness. But that is not what is at issue here. What is important is Roger Bichelberger's treatment of war and migration in *An Ordinary Exodus* and this is well-balanced. The culture and traditions of Lorraine, its dialect, its annexation by the Germans, all feature, but in a non-polemical manner. Bichelberger's theory is that a change of heart is necessary in the resolution of all conflict and an ability to love in child-like simplicity, as Manuel does. The very act of laying down his life for the perceived enemy, Wilhelm, is probably the finest testament to the power of love in the midst of evil.

Notes

1. *An Ordinary Exodus*, Lion Publishing, Oxford, 1991. This is Toby Garfitt's translation of *Un Exode ordinaire*, Albin Michel, 1983.
2. *Les années buissonnières*, Editions Albin Michel-Serpense, 1987.
3. *An Ordinary Exodus*, p.19.
4. *Ibid.*, p.59.
5. *Ibid.*, p.106.
6. *Ibid.*, p.136.
7. *Ibid.*, p.214.
8. *Ibid.*, p.253.
9. *Ibid.*, p.284.
10. *Ibid.*, p.268.
11. *Ibid.*, p.268.
12. *Les années buissonnières*, op.cit., p.94.
13. *An Ordinary Exodus*, op.cit., p.320.

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