



Francesco Manzini (ed.)

Lectures croisées

Essays by Alan Raitt

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Preface

Alan Raitt produced more than forty articles, as well as numerous books and critical editions, in the course of his very highly distinguished career. Between 1954 and his death in 2006, he published on Flaubert and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, the two authors with whom he is most associated, but also on Mérimée, of whom he was also the biographer, as well as on Balzac, Nerval, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Huysmans and Maeterlinck.¹ This volume represents a selection of these articles, chosen for their coherence with each other and for their exemplification of Alan Raitt's methods. The title of this collection, *Lectures croisées*, is taken from the last of these articles, which looks at Huysmans as a reader of Villiers and Villiers as a reader of Huysmans. It is a title that captures something of Alan Raitt's approach to nineteenth-century French literature – an approach he set out in one of his earliest books, as pointed out by Roger Pearson in his introduction to *The Process of Art*, the *Festschrift* produced to mark Alan Raitt's retirement as a teacher:

One's first impression on comparing the literary history of nineteenth-century France with that of other centuries is of a dramatic foreshortening of perspective. Classicism, Romanticism, *l'art pour l'art*, Parnassianism, Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism – all these schools, to say nothing of innumerable independent writers, follow one another so rapidly within the space of less than a hundred years that it would be as legitimate to speak of simultaneity as of succession.²

- 1 See Michael Freeman et al., eds, *The Process of Art: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art offered to Alan Raitt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. xx–xxvii for a bibliography of his published writings compiled by Janis Spurlock.
- 2 A. W. Raitt, *Life and Letters in France: The Nineteenth Century* (London: Nelson, 1966), p. xi.

It is nineteenth-century French literature as at once simultaneity and succession that occupied Alan Raitt both as a researcher and as a teacher.

After his untimely death, Alan Raitt's close colleague of many years and his former student, Toby Garfitt, wrote of him as a teacher as follows:

Tutorials with him could be somewhat daunting, not least because he often set titles of huge scope: when faced with the question 'What was the contribution of X to French literature?', one's feeble grasp of content, context, relevance and balance (all important to him) was all too easily exposed. On the other hand, the essay was invariably listened to with great concentration, its strengths and weaknesses were clearly demonstrated, and one was treated to a summary of the appropriate evidence which would eventually serve as excellent revision material.

Prose classes were equally daunting and equally valuable: if one could get over the embarrassment of having mistakes pointed out and discussed in public, there was always much to learn, particularly from the analysis of nuance that involved consultation of dictionaries of synonyms or Grevisse's *Le Bon Usage*.

As a postgraduate supervisor, Raitt displayed an ideal combination of immense erudition and benign neglect. Before letting his supervisees loose in France, he would instruct them in the idiosyncrasies of the Bibliothèque Nationale, provide them with introductions, and make sure that they knew where to have lunch. His editorial thoroughness was legendary, and his support to former students unstinting. In a viva, he could be counted on not only to have an intimate knowledge of relevant bibliographical details, but to put his finger on the central issue being addressed in the thesis, and to formulate it in terms that were genuinely enlightening to its author.

Alan Raitt loved words: fine distinctions, puns, cryptic crossword clues (and crime mysteries), bons mots of all kinds, and jokes that often assumed knowledge of more than one language.³

I should like to focus on these two quotations in order to explain my choice of *Lectures croisées* as a title before briefly going on to consider how each of the following collected articles illustrates one or more aspects of Alan Raitt's distinctive approach to the study of nineteenth-century French literature.

I was very briefly Alan Raitt's undergraduate student: he taught me final-year prose and marked one three-hour mock literature exam a month before the end of my degree. His advice to me for Finals revision was that I go off and read Huysmans' Catholic novels, for how else could I possibly

3 Toby Garfitt, 'Professor Alan Raitt', *The Independent*, 6 September 2006.

hope to produce a balanced answer on this author? I immediately realized that this was excellent advice and dispensed with other forms of revision. I am still writing about Huysmans, and *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* in particular, thanks to Alan Raitt; more generally, I decided to do a PhD in French literature thanks to the example he provided.

What still seems like a lifetime later, I submitted my doctoral thesis for publication in the series Alan Raitt was editing for Peter Lang. It was already a very long thesis: his advice – having read and corrected it for numerous errors of grammar and logic, as well as literary historical detail, all in the space of two days – was that it was not nearly long enough to treat its subject properly. I immediately realized that this was excellent advice and dispensed with other forms of research. Some time, not quite a lifetime, later, my revised version, almost half as long again, satisfied him as a sufficient treatment of its abstruse subject. I am still writing books thanks to the example he provided.

Alan Raitt was an extraordinary man for many reasons. He was the most erudite French scholar I have ever come across; he had one of the two most powerfully logical academic minds I have ever come across; as a consequence, he was one of the two most effortlessly grammatical writers I have ever come across. His prose, whether in English or in French, is always a pleasure to read on account of its lucidity. In this regard, it is quite unlike most academic writing, including my own.

The articles collected in this book all reflect Alan Raitt's lifelong commitment to logic, as applied to the literary text, to its grammar in senses both broad and narrow, and to its context, whether provided by other works of the same author or period, by the author's correspondence and biography, or by his unique perspective, as shaped by his peculiarities and his enthusiasms. I refer to the author as a man here because all the writers principally discussed in this book are male. Alan Raitt followed the conventions of his era by referring to the neutral reader also as a man; as a teacher and as an academic reader and editor, however, he made no distinctions of gender at a time when such an attitude appears to have been even more unusual than it is today, developing the highest regard for Claudine Gothot-Mersch, Marta Giné Janer, Anne Green, Adrienne Tooke and Barbara Wright – to cite only a few examples – as peers and friends, and publishing the work

of Barbara Giraud, Natasha Grigorian, Mary Orr, Juliet Simpson, Heather Williams and Barbara Wright in his Peter Lang series.

Before turning in more detail to these articles, I should like to stress another gift of his that might not be as immediately apparent as his powers of logic: Alan Raitt possessed a gift for friendship. He was an enormously kind man, faultlessly generous with his time and his intelligence, who engaged emotionally as well as logically, not just with texts and authors, but also with his many students, particularly at a postgraduate level. He was held in extraordinary affection by those he taught in part because of his exemplary qualities as an academic, but in part also because of this kindness. As Toby Garfitt ends by suggesting, he was also a deceptively funny man, his powers of logic leading him to produce an endless supply of serious and not-so-serious jokes.

Context, relevance and balance were all important to Alan Raitt because they helped him make the best possible sense of the succession and simultaneity that is nineteenth-century French literature. This collection of articles starts with an article dealing with a succession: Flaubert's positioning of himself in relation to Balzac. This article displays a profound grasp of the works and attitudes of both Balzac and Flaubert; it aims not to show off this erudition, but to use it in order to arrive at a balanced conclusion. Alan Raitt was peculiarly interested in critical judgement: he never said anything simply because it could fashionably be said, but always because he considered it the best he could say given the available evidence. There follow two articles on Nerval's *Sylvie*: the first looks at this text on its own terms, comparing it to itself in order to uncover its distinctive (il)logic; the second presents a brief cross-reading of *Sylvie* and *L'Éducation sentimentale*.

All paths led Alan Raitt to and from Flaubert. The next three articles show him first consider Flaubert's use of the present tense (as opposed to his more famous use of the imperfect), then develop this analysis to analyse, in as balanced a way as possible, the manifold repercussions of the famous *incipit* to *Madame Bovary*, 'Nous étions à l'étude...'; in terms of our reception of this novel; finally he turns his attention to the implications of accurately dating manuscripts by looking further at the possible significance of the projected epilogue to *Madame Bovary*.

The next two articles turn to *L'Éducation sentimentale*, already considered from the point of view of Nerval's *Sylvie* and of its use of the present tense. Alan Raitt wrote about the pyramidal structure of *Madame Bovary* (this article has not been reproduced here as it forms the basis of a chapter in Alan Raitt's masterful *The Originality of 'Madame Bovary'* [Peter Lang: Oxford, 2002]); in this article, he considers how *L'Éducation sentimentale* might represent a departure from this structure, in the wake also of *Sylvie*, before analysing the (lack of) characterization in this novel. Again, a careful process of cross-reading leads to a balanced, contextualized analysis of a literary text: these two articles together provide an assessment of the originality of *L'Éducation sentimentale*.

Alan Raitt's interest in dating and ordering is next revealed in his article on Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris*, which presents a careful sifting of the available evidence in order to question our received opinion of this text as having *ni queue ni tête* (Alan Raitt was always very alive to the ironies encoded within the programmatic and other statements of his authors). Baudelaire, Flaubert and Villiers occupy three points of a triangle; it is the relationship between the latter two that forms the subject of the next article, the first in a sequence dealing substantially with Villiers and the impression he made both on his contemporaries and on himself. On the surface, these articles are biographical, but in fact they point to the rival conceptions of literature simultaneously jostling for position in the second half of the century. Villiers's self-dramatization as an artist (the artist) is treated on its own terms before we turn to a balanced, contextualized account of Mallarmé's *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam* and finally an examination of Villiers's relations with Huysmans. The latter was, along with Mallarmé, the executor of Villiers's will. More generally, we might say that Alan Raitt, along with his great friend Pierre-Georges Castex, finally served as Villiers's literary executor: certainly the two of them did as much as Mallarmé and Huysmans to provide Villiers once more with a stage. I for one am grateful to Alan Raitt for this, and for much more besides.