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Auger, Peter. Du Bartas' Legacy in England and Scotland

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Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Auger, Peter.

Du Bartas' Legacy in England and Scotland.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xi, 268. ISBN 978-0-19-882781-8 (hardcover) US\$80.

The poetry of Guillaume de Saluste Du Bartas (1544–90) was the most-read text in early modern England and Scotland after the Bible, as Peter Auger states at the beginning of this elegant, accessible, and well-researched book full of suggestive analyses. Yet Du Bartas's verses fall short of the rhetorical ornamentation and intellectual ingenuity of Renaissance writing. There was hardly a poet more significant than Du Bartas in the European Renaissance, but to a modern critic his "descriptive couplets [resist] close reading" (1) and his "works demand minimal interpretative labour in order to apprehend their divine meaning" (9), as is the case with his most influential *Semaines* (Weeks), a work to the English translation of which Auger devotes the most critical attention in his absorbing book. While Du Bartas was widely imitated by writers and copiously commented upon by readers and early critics, modern criticism—though not ignoring him entirely—has addressed his work primarily as an object of imitation throughout the early modern period, and as the subject of literary history rather than as the focus of criticism that might illuminate the internal quality and achievement of his writing. If Du Bartas's poetry "is worthwhile only in helping us understand how better poets wrote" (7), as Auger writes, then Auger's book is a study of an extraordinary instance of a poet of limited aesthetic achievement with an astonishingly big influence: a writer who shaped the wider literary culture in which both male and female writers in Scotland and England found their poetic voices, and who engaged with France indirectly but profoundly. Auger interprets nuances of this connection between Du Bartas and the burgeoning culture of England and Scotland with a keen critical ear for subtleties in both the original and the translation. This book is both about literary reception and about the theory and practice of literary translation in the early modern period.

A poet and a doctor of law, Du Bartas was more famous in Scotland and England than in France, despite being a Huguenot born in Gascony in 1544; his

poetry was “read in fragments and alongside other sources” (16), and his “works invited poets to add to them” (16). Auger’s book inspires further criticism and more analysis of Du Bartas’s wide-ranging influence; he invites further research into the nature, form, and structure of this transformative literary legacy. When one reads Du Bartas’s simple yet sensitive, spiritual, and touching verses, full of affective directness, one can see why the early moderns found him appealing and saw in his work a model to build upon. This is also why post-Renaissance readers should read Du Bartas, and why Auger is able to make a strong case for the dazzling power of Du Bartas’s poetry in his literary account. This translation, Auger reminds readers throughout his book, was both imitation and creation. It was also a vehicle to “forgotten and misunderstood poets” (8) of the period. The book discusses the influence of Du Bartas both on poetry and on the theory of poetry, showing how poetic creation and poetics, especially scriptural, went hand in hand. Du Bartas became a poet whom men and women took up equally as a model to re-imagine their own writing, both in poetry and in imaginative and religious prose of a great thematic variety. Spenser, Sidney, and Milton, as well as Du Bartas’s translator, Joshua Sylvester, found him an inspiration. Auger explores these connections in significant detail, shedding new light on the flourishing period of English literature, the 1590s. Du Bartas also shaped the writing of Ann Southwell and Lucy Hutchinson, and of many other women of letters, whose creative re-imaginings of the French poet are given due place in Auger’s book. Auger persuasively demonstrates that Du Bartas’s verses permeated almost all genres of writing, and assesses a large body of archival documents in compact analyses on carefully selected examples.

The book consists of two substantial parts, each containing four chapters, along with an introduction and an appendix, “Synopsis of the *Semaines*.” The first part, “A Jacobean Poet,” starts with an examination of King James VI’s friendship with Du Bartas. Traces of this lasting bond are found in their correspondence rather than in the poet’s printed works published in his lifetime. This chapter maps out the French poet’s presence in all of the king’s major writing during this period. The next chapter moves from a treatment of Du Bartas as a literary role-model for the Scottish king to a discussion of translations done by Scottish writers from James’s circle, and examines the role of English translators in integrating Du Bartas into the growing body of English literary writing in the last few years of the sixteenth century and throughout

the seventeenth. The attribute “divine,” which Auger reminds us was most often used to describe Du Bartas in the 1590s (77), connects the poet’s association with non-fictional poetry inspired by the scriptures to his influence on the shaping of the Protestant creative imagination; it also connects his role in the shaping of the valuable treatise on poetry, William Scott’s *Model of Poesy* (1599), with Philip Sidney’s own literary poetics and Edmund Spenser’s writing, especially the romance epic, *The Faerie Queene*. Joshua Sylvester’s widely read poem *Devine Weekes and Workes* was inspired by Du Bartas; Auger devotes an entire chapter to discussing Sylvester’s translations and the reader’s marginalia as a sign of an immediate engagement with the poet by selecting “memorable examples” (120). Du Bartas also offered seventeenth-century women writers the opportunity to create new “forms of expression” (123) by adapting and re-envisioning his poetic forms. His books were found in women’s libraries, where readers signed them and left traces of their reading.

In the second part of the book, “Little Histories: Patterns for Divine Poetry I,” Auger expands his argument on the devotional quality of *Devine Weekes*, as well as the achievement and forms of what he provocatively but accurately calls the “oppressive quality” (133) of this important seventeenth-century text. Much more, perhaps, could be said about Du Bartas’s style as a model for new writing in England and Scotland, and as a point of resistance among those who wrote their religious narrative poetry in imitation of Du Bartas’s “divine poetry” (135). Anne Southwell’s poetry of divine reflections and the divine verses of William Whishartt and Anne Bradstreet are the subject of an especially rich analytical chapter brimming with original insights rendered with critical crispness and the clarity of interpretative thought. Auger is a careful reader of “scriptural poetry” (177), reflective and precise, learned and convincing. The book ends with a retrospective reading of the poems from *Devine Weekes*: a glance back at “a collection of anecdotes, myths, and factual errors” (183) as poetic material to be accessed by scientific analysis.

This is a book about reception, translation, and adaptation—about a profound literary legacy, as the title indicates—and as such it is also an invitation to return to Du Bartas’s poetry in its own right, to see it as if for the first time and as worthy of consideration by the modern reader and critic. Auger’s critical gift is of the finest sort, allowing him to transform a plain but

enormously influential subject of literary history into the subject of an academic monograph that affords great reading pleasure.

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Barbier-Mueller, Jean Paul.

***Ma Bibliothèque poétique. Quatrième partie, Tome V. Contemporains et successeurs de Ronsard, de Pasquier (suite) à Sorbin*, éd. Jean Balsamo.**

Genève : Droz, 2019. Xvii, 580 p. ISBN 978-2-600-05955-8 (relié) 120 CHF.

Nous avons déjà consacré un compte rendu du tome II de la deuxième partie de *Ma Bibliothèque poétique* de Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller, qui a été publié dans *Renaissance & Réforme* (41.1, hiver 2018, p. 169–171). Cette fois, nous voulons présenter le tome V, qui sera le dernier de la série, car cette entreprise bibliographique a été interrompue par le décès de son auteur, le 22 décembre 2016. La relecture de ce catalogue a été confiée à Jean Balsamo, professeur émérite à l'Université de Reims, lequel a corrigé et parfois complété la description des soixante-quinze notices qui concernent vingt-sept poètes et traducteurs, parmi lesquels on relève la présence d'auteurs plus célèbres tels qu'Étienne Pasquier, Jean Passerat, Guy du Faur de Pibrac, Nicolas Rapin, Mathurin Régnier, Catherine et Madeleine Des Roches, et Scévole de Sainte-Marthe. D'autres sont moins connus, mais leurs ouvrages méritent de figurer dans cette collection aussi ample que riche en exemplaires remarquables. Parmi les trésors, ou perles introuvables, que le bibliophile genevois était parvenu à dénicher, citons la quatrième édition du *Monophile* de Pasquier (Paris, Abel L'Angelier, 1578 ; notice n° 2), la plaquette de *L'Adieu à Phœbus* (Paris, Benoist Prevost, 1559) qui constitue l'entrée en poésie de Jean Passerat. Cet humaniste précepteur de Jean-Jacques de Mesmes, Lecteur d'éloquence au Collège royal, éditeur, traducteur, poète français et néo-latin, figure en bonne place dans le présent catalogue. Quatorze de ses ouvrages sont décrits et collationnés avec précision et font l'objet de questionnements sur les circonstances de leur publication, comme la plaquette du *Chien courant* et d'autres pièces cynégétiques [Paris,