

Modern Literature and Christianity: The Religious Issue in Lucien Rebatet's *Les Deux étendards*

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Even though great books are those that deal, to quote Robert Poulet, with “la signification de la vie et le destin de l'espèce humaine” ‘the meaning of life and the fate of mankind’¹ (96), only a few novelists have dared to directly tackle the subject of religion. One of them is Lucien Rebatet (1903-1972) in *Les Deux étendards* (*The Two Standards*), a 1300-page novel published in Paris in 1952. Despite being acclaimed at the time by critics and authors as influential as Bernard de Fallois, Etiemble, Roger Nimier, and Antoine Blondin, who all hailed it as a great novel, it received very little recognition. Later, Pierre de Boisdeffre called it “un des grands romans de l'époque” ‘one of the great novels of the time’ (579); George Steiner, “one of the secret masterpieces of modern literature” (45); Michel de Saint Pierre, “un livre capital” ‘a capital book’ (8); Germaine Brée, “a fine novel” by “a great talent” (340); and Maurice Bardèche, “a magnificent novel” by an author “more interesting than Céline” (qtd. in Kaplan 179); but a wall of silence continues to surround the book while Rebatet's name, in Steiner's words, “remains strictly taboo” (45). Indeed, *Les Deux étendards* is excluded from the French canon because of Rebatet's political writings and his pro-German activities during World War II. In fact, he was sentenced to death in November 1946 and wrote a good part of his novel on death row, with chains on his feet, and, after his sentence was commuted to forced labor, at the Clairvaux prison from which he was released soon after the publication of the book.

Yet *Les Deux étendards* does not deal with politics, but with religion, love, and art. Based on real events, the story, which takes place in the 1920s, begins like a typical nineteenth-century novel: Michel, its hero, who is largely modeled after the young Rebatet, leaves his *province* to conquer Paris. Educated at a Catholic school, he has rejected religion and now worships art. In Paris, he dedicates himself to literature, painting, music, and theater, as well as to women. The story, however, takes a completely different direction when Michel's friend, Régis, who lives in Lyon, tells him that he will become a Jesuit priest but loves a high school girl named Anne-Marie, who also intends to join a religious order. They received the revelation of their pure and mystical love after spending a night together on a hill called Brouilly. When Michel sees Anne-Marie, he immediately falls in love with her, but knows that she belongs to Régis and to God. Yet, fascinated by his friends' adventure and eager to join them on their mystical plane, he attempts to become a Christian again. Soon, because of his amorous obsession, he gives up a promising literary career in Paris and moves to Lyon, where his painful theological quest is brightened by the long hours he spends discussing literature, art, and religion with Régis and Anne-Marie. After he fails in his efforts at conversion, he tries to convince his friends not to sacrifice their love to God. When Régis's confessor makes the future Jesuit end his relationship with Anne-Marie, Michel rids her of her religion, but for a long time does not dare confess his love for her. After he finally finds the strength to tell her the truth, he manages to seduce her and escapes with her to the south of France, Italy, and Turkey. Her family, fearing dishonor, wants them to get married, but Anne-Marie refuses and leaves Michel: it appears that her relationship with Régis and her earlier religious aspirations have doomed her for life.

Les Deux étendards, an extremely rich and intricate work that, in Steiner's words, "has the impersonal authority, the sheer formal beauty of classic art" (45) is a remarkable work on several levels. It deals with three exceptional characters, fashioned after actual individuals, and offers a striking picture of the French society of the time. As for its treatment of love and art, it is in many ways reminiscent of Proust, who clearly had a strong influence

on Rebatet. The latter, however, regretted that Proust, as Anne-Marie and Michel put it, had “aucun sens du surnaturel” ‘no sense of the supernatural’ (611), and clearly intended, just like Michel, to apply the instruments of modern literature to a subject worthy of them, “l'éternel conflit du Mal et du Bien” ‘the eternal conflict of Good and Evil’:

Les modernes s'étaient forgés des instruments d'une perfection, d'une souplesse, d'une nouveauté admirables. Mais ils ne les employaient guère qu'à disséquer des rogatons, à décrire des snobismes, des démangeoisons du sexe, des nostalgies animales, des affaires d'argent, des anatomies de banquiers ou de perruches mondaines. Michel connaissait leurs scalpels, leurs microscopes, leurs introspections, leurs analyses, mais il s'évaderait des laboratoires. Le premier, il appliquerait cette science aux plus grandioses objets, à l'éternel conflit du Mal et du Bien, trop vaste pour ne point déborder les petits encéphales des physiologistes.

The modern writers had invented instruments of great perfection, flexibility, and novelty. But they used them only to dissect trifles, to describe snobberies, sexual itches, animal yearnings, money matters, bankers' or society windbags' anatomies. Michel knew their scalpels, their microscopes, their introspections, their analyses, but he would escape their laboratories. He would be the first to apply that science to the grandest objects, to the eternal conflict of Good and Evil, too vast not to overflow the small encephala of the physiologists. (181-82)

This does not mean that *Les Deux étendards* should be considered a Catholic or a Christian novel and put in the class of Mauriac's and Bernanos's works. Indeed, Rebatet's book deals with religious issues with an intensity and a virulence much closer to that found in *Les Décombres* (*The Debris*), his hysterically anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic and pro-Nazi pamphlet published in 1942, than in the *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*). In addition, through the animated discussions of his protagonists, as he re-enacts the quarrel that has been raging for two thousand years between believers and nonbelievers, with Anne-Marie at stake, the author clearly writes from the point of the nonbelievers. In fact, as we will see, the novel contains some passages dealing with religion that seem to have been borrowed from the chapter in *Les Décombres* dealing with the Catholic Church.

However, Rebatet attempts to offer both conceptions of religion, one embodied by Régis and the other one by Michel, in a very fair and balanced way by giving the latter a worthy opponent. Régis, whose model would become a prominent Jesuit, is indeed, in spite of his rigidity and his blindness, an exceptional Christian who totally devotes himself to his vocation, fortifies his soul in sacrifice and even mortification, and, above all, while being aware of the past and present mistakes of the Church and of the weaknesses of its representatives, defends his cause with great intelligence and a deep knowledge of theology. Nevertheless, since God's partisans use their faith as their main weapon, it is essentially with his unshakable faith that Régis fights the numerous arguments which Michel discovers against religion. Although, as a good intellectual, he often answers his adversary's objections with demonstrations and reasonings just as learned as those he has to face, in the final analysis he always falls back on his faith in Jesus Christ. When Michel wears him out, he responds: "le dogme est net, il est sans fissure et il n'en admet pas" 'the dogma is clear, it doesn't have any crack and does not admit any,' before trying to end the discussion with the following words: "L'Eglise affirme que ce sont des vérités *certaines*" 'The Church affirms that these are *certain* truths' (825). Even if, in this specific discussion, he is exasperated by Michel whom he hits with his stick, most of the time he faces up to his opponent who, powerless in front of his faith, cannot really bend him.

Michel rejects his religious education because of his experiences and his analyses. When he and his school friend Guillaume discuss the subject, they attribute their hatred for the Church to the sad example of the priests who have educated them and who have disgusted them with their hypocrisy, their bad faith, their pettiness, their cruelty and even their perversity. In addition, and above all, they are convinced that their intelligence prevents them from "gober le catéchisme tout cru" 'swallowing the catechism whole' (22), especially the episode of the resurrection, which Guillaume sees in the following way:

Il paraît que si Jésus-Christ s'était manifesté partout en sortant du tombeau, sa résurrection aurait été trop évidente, nous

n'aurions plus été libres, ça serait devenu trop commode de croire. Est-ce que tu ne trouves pas dégoûtante cette notion d'un Dieu qui joue à cache-cache avec les humains, qui combine ses miracles pour qu'ils n'aient pas trop l'air de miracles, et qu'il puisse encore nous foutre à la chaudière?

It seems that if Jesus Christ had appeared everywhere after leaving his tomb, his resurrection would have been too obvious, we would have been no longer free, it would have become too easy to believe. Don't you find it disgusting this notion of a God who plays hide-and-seek with men, who devises his miracles in such a way that they don't look too much like miracles, and that he still can shove us into the boiler? (21-22)

Michel agrees and, after denouncing the ontological argument, expresses the principle which must henceforth guide his conduct: "Il nous est nécessaire de chercher la vérité, et nous la regarderons en face, quelque qu'elle soit" 'It is necessary for us to look for the truth, and we will look it straight in the face, whatever it may be' (22). Michel then looks for this truth in art and moves further and further away from religion and its representatives whom he ends up hating passionately and attacking with "une espèce d'allégresse sardonique" 'a kind of sardonic cheerfulness' (26).

As he is about to meet Anne-Marie, Michel has become totally allergic to Catholicism and is revolted by what Régis and Anne-Marie intend to do with their love, even if, at the same time, he tells Régis that he greatly admires their adventure and their faith, which he finds worthy of the Christians "du temps des cathédrales" 'of the time of the cathedrals' (101). However, his feelings after he meets Anne-Marie lead him to question his values and to write Régis a letter in which the future Jesuit will see "un préambule de crise religieuse" 'the preamble of a religious crisis' (162) and a call for help. If, when he concludes that letter, "entreprise" 'undertaken,' to quote Rebatet himself in his unpublished *Etude sur la composition des "Deux étendards,"* "dans un sentiment de duplicité" 'in a spirit of duplicity' (13), Michel is conscious of having "transposé" 'transposed' his feelings, his impressions (161). Blinded by his passion, he convinces himself quickly that "[son] amour [l'] emporte vers Dieu" '[his] love takes [him] to God' and that Régis and Anne-Marie will make him

“digne d’entendre et d’adorer sa voix” ‘worthy to hear and adore his voice,’ before concluding: “Dieu, mon amour, mon art, ma vie . . .” ‘God, my love, my art, my life . . .’ (169-71). It is only when he receives Régis’s response, a “massive décharge de catholicisme” ‘massive discharge of Catholicism’ (172) that he comes back to earth and rediscovers his hatred for religion. However, soon after, once again tormented by his love for Anne-Marie, he thinks that Régis’s letter may have been sent by Providence and wonders whether his destiny is “de sauver Régis et Anne-Marie de la loi du Christ ou [de se] livrer à elle” ‘to rescue Régis and Anne-Marie from the law of Christ or to surrender himself to it’ (177).

Michel, more in order to share his friends’ adventure and thus to see Anne-Marie again than to obey an inner necessity, chooses the second path and responds to Régis that by accepting his letter, he has made a big step toward faith. Encouraged by his friend who gives him a list of “fundamental” books on religion to read and convinced that he now possesses “l’appétit de Dieu et la soif de ses lumières” ‘the appetite for God and the craving for his light’ (265), he goes in search of faith. Then, during some five hundred pages, the novel, becoming a kind of conversion manual, recounts the sincere efforts and the ardent application of Michel, who thinks he can find God in the study of the dogmas of Christianity and the reading of the mystics and the exegetes. He surmounts his aversions and takes refuge in prayer, throws himself into the works of Theresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross, Jean de Ruysbroeck, and many others, studies in depth “the objections” as well as the most basic and obscure religious issues, passionately discusses his progress with Régis, gradually transforms his ways to the extent that he soon leads a monk’s life, and, in desperation, when nothing works and his soul remains “sèche et muette” ‘dry and mute’ (535), implores God to send him an illumination similar to Brouilly’s. However, if he experiences, in his quest, genuine moments of euphoria and exaltation and often leads his friends to understand that he finds himself at the threshold of conversion and even that he contemplates the possibility of becoming a priest himself, he cannot cross that threshold and regularly feels overcome by doubt. Only in the last resort, pushed by Régis and Anne-Marie, who repeatedly tell him that he

is closer to God than he thinks and that only his intellectual qualities, his reasonings, and his pride prevent him from giving in to faith, does he agree to go to confession and to church, sincerely hoping that confessing himself will allow him to join his two friends in their sublime universe.

His confession, though, does not have the desired effect. He is so disgusted by the experience that he loses the desire to become a Christian forever and recovers his hatred for Catholicism. He also decides to open Régis's and Anne-Marie's eyes and to show them that their religion is a fraud.

If Michel fails in his attempt at conversion, it is, first of all, because his eagerness to convert and thus his progress toward faith are clearly founded on a misunderstanding or an illusion that make him deceive himself as well as his friends. In fact, as I said earlier, the letter which he sends Régis and starts everything is a "transposition." Although it is true that his friends' adventure makes him question his values, he shows bad faith when he writes to Régis that he is experiencing a religious crisis: even if he does not want to admit it to himself, his letter is essentially a stratagem that, he believes, will give him the opportunity to see Anne-Marie without whom he can no longer live. Later, because of his passion, he stifles his guilty feelings by making a dubious connection between God and his love; which convinces him of his good faith, at least until Régis's letter breaks the charm. Nevertheless, his love is so strong that, eager to meet Anne-Marie again as soon as he possibly can, he persuades himself that he is on his way to faith, as he tells Régis in his second letter. Michel's undertaking, clearly more motivated by his love for a woman than by the desire of God's love, was thus ineluctably doomed to failure.

The way Michel puts himself in search of God and of faith also accounts for his failure. To want to find God by reading the mystics and the exegetes and by studying the main theological issues in depth, in short through intelligence and reasoning, is rather perilous. Indeed, Michel is quickly held up by "les difficultés historiques" 'the historic difficulties' (555) and by a number of arguments, such as those of evil and suffering in the world or the incoherencies of all kinds which he discovers in the Scriptures. Régis, who very quickly sees the danger of his friend's

approach, tries to explain to him that he constantly confuses mental life and moral life and that he puts “les qualités intellectuelles en avant” ‘the intellectual qualities forward’ when “Sur la balance de la vie éternelle, les dons de l’intelligence ne pèsent rien, ou pèsent à contre-poids” ‘On the scales of eternal life, the gifts of intelligence weigh nothing, or weigh negatively’ (490). He attempts to make him understand that he is “à la recherche d’explications” ‘in search of explanations’ whereas one should not ask God “de savoir, ce qui est tout le contraire de ce qu’il réclame de nous, il faut lui demander de croire” ‘to know, which is the opposite of what he asks from us, one should ask him to believe’ (553). To that Michel answers that he is incapable of it without an illumination or without the help of the grace of God, which, after a time, leads Régis to try to persuade him that only religious practice and the sacraments “[lui] apporteront la vie religieuse” ‘will bring [him] religious life’ because “nous avons besoin de Dieu pour aller à Dieu” ‘we need God to go to God’ (569), and thus to push him to go to confession. Even if his efforts ultimately prove to be in vain and if his advice is not always judicious, Régis is certainly not wrong to believe that reason and faith do not go together and that Michel is on the wrong track. Michel “se trompe lui-même: car son mouvement vers la foi est volontaire, uniquement volontaire” ‘deceives himself: for his move toward faith is voluntary, only voluntary,’ to quote Georges Laffly, who adds that “Il veut croire—c’est comme si on voulait tomber amoureux” ‘He wants to believe—it is as if one wanted to fall in love’ (98).

However, the main reason of Michel’s failure in his attempt at conversion comes from his fundamentally anti-Christian personality, as he realizes himself soon after his unfortunate confession: “Entre le catholicisme et moi, la combinaison chimique est impossible. On a essayé l’expérience. Tout le laboratoire a sauté” ‘Between Catholicism and me, the chemical combination is impossible. I have tried the experiment. The whole laboratory blew up’ (662). More precisely, as Régis points out several times, his immense pride, of which, despite his efforts, he cannot rid himself, is incompatible with the humility which Catholicism calls for. In addition, Michel, who loves life and its pleasures, who

considers himself a disciple of Nietzsche, and who values his freedom of action and opinion and his responsibilities as a man, suspects that a conversion would deprive him of them and turn him into a robot. Essentially, Michel rejects religion because, in Pol Vandromme's terms, "les vertus chrétiennes (la charité, la pitié, l'acceptation de la souffrance) sont, pour lui, des insultes aux valeurs de vie, des entraves à son art" "Christian virtues (charity, compassion, the acceptance of suffering) are, for him, insults to the values of life, shackles to his art" (90).

As soon as Michel rejects the idea of conversion, the novel becomes, to quote Bernard de Fallois, "la plus formidable machine de guerre qu'on ait jamais dressée contre le christianisme" 'the most formidable war machine ever set up against Christianity' (2). Indeed, Michel declares war on the religion that he almost embraced:

Je hais la religion où le hasard m'a fait naître. Cette haine est mon épine dorsale, mon seul tonique. Dussé-je n'avoir plus d'autre raison d'être, je voudrais que celle-ci pût me suffire. Je hais cette religion pour ses mensonges, sa férocité, sa stupidité, ses victoires toujours frauduleuses et aussi pour tout le mal qu'elle m'a fait. . . . Le système s'est écroulé sous moi et me voilà par terre, les membres disloqués, infirme peut-être pour le reste de ma vie. Mais ma haine me sera une béquille.

Je suis cet estropié qui cherche sa vengeance et qui est parvenu à se refaire au moins une règle: travailler à cette vengeance, obstinément, envers et contre tout.

I hate the religion into which I was born by chance. This hatred is my backbone, my only tonic. Even if I had no other reason for being, I would want that reason to be sufficient. I hate that religion for its lies, its cruelty, its stupidity, its ever fraudulent victories and also for all the harm it has caused me. . . . The system has collapsed under me and I have fallen down, my limbs are dislocated, I may be disabled for the rest of my life. But my hatred will be like a crutch to me.

I am that cripple who is seeking revenge and who has been able to find at least one rule: to work toward that revenge, obstinately, in spite of everything. (738)

Since his work aims at convincing Régis and Anne-Marie that they are mistaken, Michel accumulates material against Chris-

tianity and turns the novel into "l'histoire d'une déconversion" 'the story of a deconversion' (*Etude sur la composition* 63). Tirelessly he carries on his study of the Church and the exegetes, but now only in order to discover the weaknesses and the problems. The novel then completely alters its course and in places turns into a catalogue of arguments against religion that Michel develops either in his diary or in long interior monologues or in the animated discussions he holds with his two friends. In these pages, as Bernard de Fallois notes, *Les Deux étendards* strongly reminds the reader of *Les Décombres*: "le génie est le même: même puissance lyrique, même déferlement de l'image et du verbe, même amertume" 'the genius is the same: same lyrical power, same outpouring of images and words, same bitterness' (2).

If Michel rejects religion above all because it is "against life," he needs to find more tangible and substantial arguments in order to win over Régis and Anne-Marie. Since Christianity is mainly grounded in the Scriptures, he bases most of his argumentation on the ambiguities and the contradictions that had held him up on his road to faith and that fill the holy books. Now that he takes up the opposite position, he welcomes all these problems and even enjoys heretical readings. When he has accumulated enough material, he does not miss any opportunity to present his objections to Anne-Marie and Régis. If he quickly convinces the former, he is not as successful with the latter who does his best to answer his arguments and clings to his faith, which is commendable because Michel's artillery is truly impressive. When, in one episode, Michel presents Régis with a running fire of objections, the future Jesuit thwarts each attack of his opponent with difficulty before hurling himself at him, powerless. Michel successively poses the question of man's freedom and responsibility in relation to that of God's grace and will, discusses the problem of the Logos which he claims is borrowed from the Greeks, tackles the ambiguities of the Fourth Gospel and the announcement of the imminent end of the world by Christ, sets Régis's convictions against the baffling mystery of the Cross, "cet abaissement de Dieu" 'this abasement of God,' and the "calculs" 'calculations' (832) of this God. To Anne-Marie, he demonstrates that "les chancis des interpolations, des erreurs de transmission,

des lapsus, des non-sens, des falsifications volontaires couvr[ent] maints et maints passages vénérés, illustres, fondamentaux” ‘the fungi of the interpolations, transmission errors, slips, misconceptions, intentional falsifications cover many a revered, illustrious, fundamental passage’ (885). He also shows Anne-Marie the serious differences between the Synoptic Gospels and John, “Bref, que le livre saint jargonne, bafouille, se contredit et se dément sans cesse, que c’est l’œuvre de savetiers juifs ignares, confondant tout, certains sachant à peine la langue dans laquelle ils écrivent” ‘In short that the Holy Book talks jargon, stammers, contradicts itself, that it is the work of ignorant Jewish botchers, confusing everything, some of them barely knowing the language in which they write’ (885). He also points out to her the adjustments of the Catholic commentators in order to reconcile all the differences, contradictions, and incoherencies, and draws her attention to the articles of the dogma which existed long before Christ, to Paul’s manipulations, to the heresies, to the mystery of God-made man, to the dubious history of the doctrine of the Trinity. And when he has finally convinced the young girl, he can denounce God without fear:

Ce Dieu qui vient nous sauver tout en nous laissant tous les moyens de nous perdre. Ce Dieu qui calcule sordidement ses miracles. . . . Ce Dieu qui se choisit le nom le plus incompréhensible, le fameux Fils de l’Homme. . . .

This God who comes to save us while leaving us all the means of perdition. This God who sordidly calculates his miracles. . . . This God who chooses for himself the most incomprehensible name, the famous Son of Man. . . . (1054)

However, it is in a three-page long pastiche of the Bible—“le livre le plus répugnant de l’espèce humaine” ‘the most repugnant book of mankind’ according to Rebatet (*Etude sur la composition* 221)—that Michel appears the most corrosive: in it he quotes God and, in the style of some passages of the Old Testament, presents him as a monster whom anger and pride drive to extreme cruelty and sadism (1213-215).

Although Michel grounds his anti-Christian demonstrations on the numerous incoherencies and falsifications that seem to

abound in the holy books, he reinforces it with other arguments that help him present the Church in a poor light. For instance, he takes pleasure in mentioning the many disturbing episodes, the various abuses, the dubious accommodations, and the horrors of all kinds that characterize the history of Catholicism. He is also interested in the saints and the mystics, but only in order to conclude that most were either mental patients suffering from various neuroses, such as Saint Theresa of Avila, or else, such as John of the Cross or Ruysbroeck, great minds who reached a state of ecstasy not by the grace of God, but by dint of asceticism, mental gymnastics and religious readings.

Michel also bases a good part of his argumentation on the hypocrisy, mediocrity, and pusillanimity of a number of church people, notably those whom Régis introduces to him, on the connections and the sordid arrangements between the clergy and the bourgeoisie, and on the unhealthy and petty atmosphere that prevails in Catholic schools, as he knows too well, and in convents. About the last point, he delights in opening Anne-Marie's eyes to the reality of the cloistered life that she had chosen and on which, because of her, he has collected material:

Fuir la société, bravo! Mais pour se constituer prisonnier d'une communauté, la société sous sa plus horrible forme, la société en concentré. . . . Et les enfilades interminables de rosaires et de psaumes . . . Les vieilles qui jalourent la jeunesse et l'ardeur des novices, les brimades sur la nourriture, les intrigues les plus fielleuses pour une nomination au chapitre! . . . Ces mots d'épreuves, de sacrifices, de volonté de Dieu, à propos d'une cruche neuve remplacée par une cruche ébréchée dans une cellule, d'une clé qu'on vous accuse à tort d'avoir perdue, de la maîtresse des novices qui vous envoie à la lessive bien que ce ne soit pas votre tour: quel rétrécissement grotesque de la vie morale!

To run away from society, good idea! But to give oneself up to a community, society in its most horrible form, a concentrate of society. . . . And the endless strings of rosaries and Psalms. . . . The old nuns who are jealous of the young ones and of the ardor of the novices, the vexations about the food, the most rancorous intrigues for an appointment to the chapter! . . . The words of trials, sacrifices, God's will, about a new jug replaced by a chipped one in a cell, a key that you are wrongly accused having lost, the mistress of the novices who makes you do the laundry even though

it is not your turn: what a grotesque shrinking of moral life!
(895)

Finally, Michel tries to convince his friends of the validity of his position by using as a weapon his political and racist prejudices in tirades that are reminiscent of the author's worst political writings. Indeed, Michel initially blames Catholicism for, among other things, its affinities with democracy and its need "d'aller au peuple" 'to go to the people' (159). It is thus hardly surprising to see him, as he tries to "convert" Anne-Marie, denounce Christ "qui apprend aux hommes l'effroyable mythe de l'égalité" 'who teaches men the dreadful myth of equality' (1047). Likewise, if he doubts the truth of the New Testament, it is also because, as he keeps pointing out, it is the work of Jews. He considers the evangelists as "savetiers juifs ignares" 'ignorant Jewish botchers,' and describes Saint Paul as a "Juif génial et terrible, rabbinique et hellénisé" 'clever and terrible Jew, rabbinical and Hellenized.' As for Saint John, he is "le vieux Juif" 'the old Jew' "qui s'empare du Logos . . . comme un métèque subcarpathique qui se mettrait à philosopher sur *le cogito, ergo sum*" 'who lays hands on the Logos . . . like a subcarpathic Dago who would start philosophizing on the *cogito, ergo sum*.' In addition, he denounces the New Testament because it was spread by "les convertis juifs, la diaspora internationale, ce judéo-christianisme adhérent encore à la synagogue" 'the Jewish converts, the international diaspora, that early Christianity still adhering to the synagogue' (887). At last and above all, Michel emphasizes the fact that Catholicism was founded on the teachings of a Jew, the one whom he is fond of calling "le Juif" 'the Jew' (1176) or the "rabbi Jesus" (737; 953), and thus that it is in his eyes a "drogue juive" 'Jewish drug' (815). Such passages seem to have been taken directly from the chapter in *Les Décombres* in which Rebatet launches virulent attacks against the Church because it is, in his words, contaminated by the "microbe juif" 'Jewish microbe' (555).

It thus appears that *Les Deux étendards* can be viewed as a deeply anti-religious work, which is the opinion of Paul Sérant, who states that "la passion anticléricale le domin[e] exclusivement" 'anti-clerical passion dominates it exclusively'

(107); of de Fallois, who describes it as “l'épopée de l'athéisme” ‘the epic of atheism’ (2); and of Rebatet himself, who defines it as “un livre totalement antichrétien” ‘a totally anti-Christian book’ (Chancel 245). In a way it constitutes a long development of the virulent chapter of *Les Décombres* on “The Christian Religion.” In fact, without trying to contradict the author, it seems that these opinions must be, if not rejected, at least tempered somewhat. Indeed, several critics have noted that Michel’s quest for God, which largely contributes to give the story its sublime dimension, occupies a good half of the novel and that the last word goes to Régis, “the standard of Christ,” so that the conclusion calls everything back into question and that “Brusquement, le livre bascule, et comme s’inverse” ‘Suddenly, the book tips over, and kind of reverses itself,’ to quote Vandromme. The latter adds that Régis, unlike Michel, shows “maîtrise de soi” ‘self-control,’ which, according to him, “prouve que le roman reste ouvert” ‘proves that the novel remains open’ (95). It is very possible that, as he declares in the last sentence of the novel, Régis, rather than Michel, leaves Anne-Marie “un souvenir lumineux” ‘a magnificent memory,’ especially since she writes in her last letter to Michel that “[elle] n’a pas remplacé son bon Dieu” ‘[she] has not replaced her God’ and that, although she has “perdu toute raison et toute volonté de croire” ‘lost all reason and all desire to believe,’ “[elle] toujours le besoin de la foi” ‘[she] still is in need of faith’ (1288). In short, it seems possible to demonstrate that, despite the fact that in the end Michel and Régis remain firmly entrenched in their positions, religion triumphs through Anne-Marie, even if her external behavior suggests that she has chosen the standard of Satan. In reality, precisely because neither boy really wins the “prize” that the young girl represents, and because Michel cannot bring over Régis to his cause nor vice versa, it seems more accurate to state that the struggle between “the two standards” ends in a draw.

However, it is more interesting to try to find out the dominant point of view of the book and show that this book, even if it is literally anti-Christian, favors neither atheism nor materialism, contrary to what de Fallois believes, and is not directed against God. In fact, Michel claims he is not an atheist (1086), and *Les*

Deux étendards never denounces or attacks God himself, but what men have made of God, or rather the God that men have created. When he sums up his philosophy with the four words that initially formed the title of the novel, “Ni Dieu ni Diable” ‘Neither God nor Devil’ (990; 1080), he clearly rejects a certain God, the one “[qui] est bien mort” ‘[who] is truly dead’ (1055), the one who has the Devil as a counterpart, in short, in Pol Vandromme’s terms, “la tradition catholique et la tradition luciférienne” ‘the Catholic tradition and the Luciferian tradition.’ “[Il] n’accepte qu’un seul fanion,—le sien, celui d’une indépendance obtenue par l’exercice systématique et quasi vertigineux de la lucidité” ‘[he] only accepts one pennant,—his, that of an independence achieved through the systematic and quasi vertiginous exercise of lucidity’ (78). But his independence does not drive him to reject the existence of God, far from it. Does not Anne-Marie tell him that he has “une notion de Dieu beaucoup plus haute que celle des chrétiens” ‘a notion of God much higher than that of the Christians’ (900)? In fact, Michel, like Rebatet himself (Chancel 248), is an agnostic, as he plainly tells his girlfriend: “La véritable humilité, elle est chez nous, chez les agnostiques. Agnostique: celui qui avoue qu’il ne sait pas” ‘The genuine humility, it is among us, among the agnostics. Agnostic: the one who admits that he does not know’ (902). Later, he even adds that “L’agnostique, lui aussi, aboutit au mystère” ‘The agnostic also attains the mystery’ (1087).

This last remark is capital because it helps understand Michel’s position throughout the story as well as the philosophy of the novel. Indeed, Michel uses the word “mystère” ‘mystery’ much earlier in the novel, when he describes the Brouilly episode to Guillaume (96). A close reading of this episode shows that this is not the God of the Bible who initially fascinates Michel, but, as the title of the chapter that recounts it indicates, “le Dieu des clairs de lune” ‘the God of the moonlights.’ As Christophe Chesnot observes, “Michel pressent confusément que ce sentiment de communication cosmique, ce dieu des clairs de lune, ne sont pas chrétiens mais païens” ‘Michel confusedly feels that this sentiment of cosmic communication, this god of the moonshines,

are not Christian but pagan' (19). That explains his ambiguous attitude when he relates Brouilly to Guillaume: while he admits he is moved and fascinated by Régis and Anne-Marie's adventure, he laments and condemns its destiny. "[Il] s'insurge contre la finalité chrétienne du sacrifice de cet amour" '[he] rebels against the Christian finality of the sacrifice of that love,' but is attracted by what he calls the mystery or what Chesnot calls "le sacré" 'the sacred,' which he defines as follows:

Rebatet fait ressortir que le sacré, cette onde de poésie lumineuse qui baigne le couple, n'est pas une pure création de Dieu ou des hommes, mais une co-présence: présence des hommes au monde, présence divine dans le monde. Une communication totale au sein du monde avec le Dieu qui l'habite.

Rebatet emphasizes that the sacred, the wave of luminous poetry that bathes the couple, is not a pure creation of God or of men, but a co-presence: presence of men to the world, divine presence in the world. A total communication in the heart of the world with the God who lives in it. (19)

Chesnot then shows how Michel's eagerness for conversion, his initial relationship with Anne-Marie, "l'ambassadrice du sacré" 'the messenger of the sacred,' (20), his fascination for her adventure with Régis and even his interest in music can be explained by his desire to safeguard the sacred and to have his life imbued with it. However, very soon, the sacred stands in opposition to the religious which ends up prevailing. Vandromme agrees with Chesnot when he explains that Régis undergoes an important change as the story goes along: at first, he is "un mystique" 'a mystic,' and, in the end, "un dévot—non pas un dévot banal et insignifiant, mais, si l'on veut, un dévot théologien" 'a bigot—not a common and insignificant bigot, but, rather, a theologian bigot' (91). However, it is the young man of Brouilly, Anne-Marie's mystical lover, whom Michel wishes to model himself after, not the future Jesuit. Michel's tragedy, and another reason for the failure of his undertaking, lies in the fact that his attempt to join his two friends on their mystical plane is accompanied by a transformation of Régis that takes him further and further away from him. If he is still animated by the same faith, the mystic of Brouilly

who excited Michel's admiration becomes gradually what the latter calls contemptuously "le prêtre, non seulement l'ennemi des hommes, mais le pire ennemi de Dieu, si Dieu existe" 'the priest, not only men's enemy, but God's worst enemy, if God exists' (1311). The priest is God's enemy because, as Michel explains earlier in a passage that contains his main grievance against religion, "[la] religion brouille et vicie tout" 'religion confuses and vitiates everything,' including and especially God (1086). Thus Michel's march toward faith is based on another misunderstanding: he aspires to meet the God of Brouilly while Régis puts him on the path that leads to the God of the Bible, who is the other God's enemy.

In the second part of the novel, it appears clearly that if Michel has violently rejected the God of the Bible, he remains loyal to Brouilly and open to the mystery and the sacred, which explains why he is ready to sacrifice his love in order to save his two friends' relationship, why he keeps on admiring the "true mystics," such as Ruysbroeck and Saint John of the Cross (908), and why, up to the final scene, he tells Régis that he loved "le garçon de Brouilly" 'the boy of Brouilly,' meaning the mystic, and blames him harshly for killing him and "[l']avoir] enterré sous [sa] défroque de prêtre" 'burying him under [his] cloth' (1311). Nevertheless, it is obviously Anne-Marie who yearns the most for the sacred since she can no longer love and is doomed to fall after Brouilly and since, in her last letter to Michel, she essentially "signifie que la religion de son temps a oublié sa véritable vocation de *lien* entre les hommes et les dieux par l'intermédiaire du sacré" 'means that the religion of her time has forgotten its true vocation of *link* between men and gods through the medium of the sacred' (Chesnot 21). As Chesnot writes, this is where Rebatet's message lies:

Le roman s'achève sur ce constat: les hommes ont détruit le sacré, ce pont qui rapproche les dieux des hommes au sein du monde. Il aboutit à cette tragique alternative: abolir le monde pour être en Dieu, ce que fait Régis; ou abolir Dieu pour être au monde, ce que fait Michel. En ce siècle, nous dit Rebatet, ces deux attitudes sont les seules possibles.

The novel ends on this observation: men have destroyed the sacred, the bridge which brings gods closer to men in the heart of the world. It ends with this tragic alternative: to abolish the world in order to be in God, which Régis does; or to abolish God in order to be in the world, which Michel does. In this century, Rebatet tells us, these two attitudes are the only ones possible. (21)

Rebatet himself confirms Chesnot's views when, in his *Etude sur la composition des "Deux étendards,"* he sums up the novel this way:

Trois mystiques vagabonds se sont heurtés au catholicisme. Le prêtre s'est soumis, "obéissant très vulgairement à sa fonction éternelle, et s'asseyant sereinement dans les duperies de son rôle." Anne-Marie "est retournée naturellement aux orgies des rites primitifs." Michel "a vu que s'il n'y a aucun chemin entre Dieu et les hommes, c'est peut-être et d'abord parce que les religions les bouchent tous. Il est un de ceux qui se tiennent toujours debout, clairvoyants mais dévastés, aux époques où les religions trépassent."

Three wandering mystics have clashed with Catholicism. The priest has given in, "very vulgarly obeying his eternal function, and serenely sitting in the duperies of his role." Anne-Marie "has naturally returned to the orgies of the primitive rites." Michel "has seen that if there is no path between God and men, it is maybe and first because religions obstruct them all. He is one of those who always stands up, clear-sighted but devastated in the times when religions die." (292-93)

In short, *Les Deux étendards* and Rebatet condemn religion, the theological, in order to better affirm what can be called the sacred with Chesnot or the mystery with Michel or the spiritual. Rather than reduce the novel to "la plus formidable machine de guerre qu'on ait jamais dressée contre le christianisme" 'the most formidable war machine ever set up against Christianity,' one should insist on its spiritual dimension, as Chesnot does when he notes that "Le thème essentiel . . . c'est l'exigence, impossible à satisfaire dans le monde moderne, de donner une dimension sacrée à la vie" 'the essential theme . . . is the necessity, impossible to satisfy in the modern world, of giving life a sacred dimension' (19). Indeed, Michel's and Anne-Marie's quests for God are genu-

ine, even if the former's is mainly motivated by his love for the latter, but it gets lost in the formidable lie that, in their eyes, Christianity represents. Whatever one may think about the views on the spiritual and religion that Rebatet offers through his hero, one must be grateful to him for daring to tackle the problem, maybe the only one that really matters, and for dealing with it with a "honnêteté" 'honesty' and a "passion" rightly praised by Antoine" Blondin (103). Indeed, this passionate approach to religion, its place at the heart of the novel, and its intimate connection with the other essential themes, love and art, give *Les Deux étendards* its unique dimension.

Note

1. All translations are mine.

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