

Obituary

LEON TAUMAN



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When Léon Tauman died on 14 October 1981, Australia lost a literary doyen, a philosopher and a most distinguished scholar. His warm radiance shone on many of us during his lifetime; his search for the infinite in our beings was never-ending. He represented the very best the time-honoured, mature cultures of Europe could give an impetuous and culturally immature Australia after the Second World War.

Léon was born in Czarist Warsaw in 1904. His youth and adolescence were spent in the shadows of tyranny, violence and poverty. By the age of seventeen he had witnessed a German invasion of his country, the advent of Communism and the Soviets on the borders, a 'Polonia Restituta', and the constitution of a Republic. Post-war Poland was unable to satisfy his natural spirit of restlessness and his yearning for wider intellectual contacts: in the footsteps of countless numbers of fellow citizens over the centuries, he moved to France, the cultural nirvana of post-war Europe.

His initial university studies were undertaken at Grenoble; they were completed, however, at the University of Aix-en-Provence, where he came under the influence of three eminent mentors, V. L. Bourrilly in History, J. Segond in Philosophy, and Ernest Zyromski in French Literature. After becoming a *Licencié ès Lettres* in 1930, Léon went on to present the following year, a doctoral thesis on an author who had died only eight years earlier, but who had already earned fame in France, Marcel Proust. It was entitled *La Sublimation des tendances chez Marcel Proust* and it earned him the coveted grade of 'mention très honorable'. Who could then have foreseen that the seeds of this exaltation would grow and flower far from the soil that nurtured them.

The next few years were spent in Paris where, as a literary journalist for the *Echo de Varsovie*, he was able to keep creative writers in France abreast with the publications and literary fortunes of their opposite numbers in Poland. Yet, Warsaw and Paris were no longer havens of peace, each was being subject to political and social unrest. The carefree experimentation and intercourse between French art, music, literature and cinema were threatened and even trammelled by new and blacker war clouds. Any scholar who finds himself obliged to abandon Paris for any reason, be it penury, political oppression or merely self-imposed exile, will comprehend the trauma and perturbation Léon experienced in 1936 when he took the decision to emigrate once again.

He reached Australia late that same year, his baggage containing the notes and chapter outlines of a projected major exegesis on Proust. The leisurely pursuit of this goal in his new home even was thwarted by more pressing concerns, such as teacher certification and finding employment at a time when permanent teaching positions in French at Australian Universities were all

filled. Part-time teaching was a possibility. He finally became tutor to students in some of Melbourne University's halls of residence, namely, Ormond, St Mary's, Queen's, Trinity and Janet Clarke Hall. Furthermore, it was about this time that his intellectual brilliance and achievements came to the notice of Australia's foremost Professor of French Literature, Alan Rowland Chisholm. With his strong support, Léon was appointed in 1941, after brief service as French Master at the Grammar School in Launceston, to a Lectureship in French and the Headship of the French Section in the University of Western Australia. He was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1947.

Léon employed well his early days at Nedlands, developing French studies and completing the research that had long preoccupied him. The comparative calm of his new environment enabled him, in spite of alienation by distance from Europe, to rise to the standing of Australia's leading authority on Proust and to attain the renown of being one of the few specialists in the field outside France who was respected and admired by the French themselves.

His laurels were won on 19 November 1949 by the acclaim of five of France's most distinguished scholars: Maurice Levallant for French Literature, Charles Dédéyan for Comparative Literature, Jean André Wahl and Etienne Souriau for Philosophy, and Pierre Moreau of the Sorbonne's Chair of 'Eloquence française'. His thesis was 'couronnée', in the best tradition of Academies in France, such were the mastery of dialectic he had achieved and the summit of erudition and scholarship he had reached.

The principal volume of the two that were examined on that occasion bore the unassuming title, *Marcel Proust: une vie et une synthèse*. It could be described as an attempt to lay bare the very soul of the great writer. Léon sought to demonstrate that Proust's world was not reality, that it was not even life, and that his literary fictions were not a series of interconnected novels, nor were they even conventional literature. On the contrary, his writings were a mirror of his sensibilities, subjected to endless meditation and contemplation. Proust's creative art was the skill with which he depicted through the medium of thought and words, the myriad reflections illuminating his soul. A rereading of Léon's work enables one to appreciate once again the timeless quality of his commendation and proclamation of Proust's search for the true life of the senses, the only one that matters, the only one that transcends Time: 'Impressions vraiment plaines qui sont en dehors du Temps,' wrote Léon.

His singular status among Modern French academics in Australia made him an obvious choice for the Headship of the newly created Department of French in 1951 at Nedlands. A Readership followed four years later. It is not surprising either that, when a group of twenty-six scholars of the highest distinction launched the Australian Humanities Research Council in Canberra in 1956, Léon was one of their number. The only other French specialist then on the Council was his former Melbourne colleague and friend, A. R. Chisholm.

If the forties found Léon preoccupied with Proust, the next decade belonged

in his mind to that other literary giant of the twentieth century, Paul Valéry. He published interim perspectives of his meditations on Valéry's poetry in *AUMLA* and in *Essays in French Literature*, a journal launched in his Department in 1964, and one whose high level of scholarship he promoted from a place on the Editorial Board and, later, on the Advisory Board.

1969 could be described as a year of mixed blessings for Léon. His teaching career came to a formal end, when he reached sixty-five and retirement. He had served for twenty-nine years in the University of Western Australia, and had spent just on half of his life to date in Australia, impressing his students and colleagues with awesome perspectives of the culture and literary traditions of the great French nation.

That same year he became a Foundation Fellow of our Academy. His enthusiasm and support for its activities remained undiminished throughout his remaining years. He loved attending our Annual General Meetings, he once told me, because of the intellectual strength he drew from renewed contacts with Fellows from so many closely related disciplines.

He further rejoiced that year in seeing another important work published in Paris, under the unequivocal title of *Paul Valéry ou le mal de l'art*. Léon perceived the poet as the victim of the very act of creation, and transformed Valéry from a philosophical poet into the role of a poet philosopher. In doing so, he revealed much of himself. His control of rhetoric and his display of eloquence reached new heights. Aphorisms abound and engage the reader's attention at every turn. Among the most notable are: 'Epuiser le charme du possible, aller jusqu'au possible du charme'; 'Dans l'investigation infinie du poète, il ne s'agit jamais de trouver, mais de chercher toujours'; 'Le poète en creusant le vers, creuse son inconnu'; 'Tout est égal pour l'esprit qui se veut esprit "pur", où tout se substitue également, ivre de la pure ivresse des métamorphoses.'

Posterity will, I am persuaded, recognize in Léon a distinguished son of his native Poland and an eminent French scholar, who, like so many other immigrants in the past two hundred years, contributed richly to the enlightenment and literary awareness of the citizens of their adopted nation. A tribute to his international standing was paid by the University of Western Australia in 1971 when it conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.

Over the years, both Proust and Valéry were responsible for Léon's transfiguration into a 'pur artiste du clavier verbal.' Their words were the instruments that enable us to celebrate his apotheosis; their thoughts provided the spectrum by which his sublimation was perfected. His cheerful spirit, his searching mind, his impassioned soul have now been laid to rest. The bell tolls for us whom he has left behind.

K. V. Sinclair