

Ellul on Technique and Literature

by Michel Hourcade

Michel Hourcade was a comptroller at the French Treasury until April 2012. He is a graduate of the Institut d'études politiques at the University of Bordeaux and an alumnus of the École Nationale d'Administration. Jacques Ellul was his professor from 1966 to 1968. Hourcade is co-editor (with Jean-Pierre Jézéquel and Gérard Paul) of Jacques Ellul's course lectures on Marxism (Paris : La Table Ronde, 2003 and 2007), *Ellul par lui-même: Entretiens avec Willem H. Vanderburg* (La Table Ronde, 2008), *Pour qui, pour quoi travaillons-nous ?* (La Table Ronde, 2013) and the revised edition of *Changer de révolution, l'inéluctable prolétariat* (La Table Ronde, 2015, first published in 1982).

* * * * *

Was Jacques Ellul familiar with Henry Miller's novels? Did these novels help him illustrate the importance and consequences of Technique in our society? And did he like Henry Miller at all? The answer to the first two questions is clearly positive when one considers that his name is mentioned no less than six times in Ellul's most notorious book on Technique. The answer to the third question requires some reflection.

After all the many years I spent reading Ellul, I had kept in mind that three authors were cited in his books: an American novelist, Henry Miller, and two French novelists, Georges Duhamel and Romain Gary. But besides those three authors and some subjective impressions, I had no recollection of the names of other authors appearing in any of Ellul's books. This encouraged me to resume my reading of *La Technique* with a special interest in literary references and quotations. I found they were numerous, unexpected, and sometimes enigmatic. On the whole, I think they help consider literature, including post-Ellulian literature, from a new angle. I also believe that, to some extent, they provide a better comprehension of Ellul himself and of his work.

***La Technique* and its hardly noticeable bibliography**

The bibliography at the end of *La Technique* (1954 edition) extends from page 393 to 399 and is headed by a sort of foreword in italics in which Ellul explains what he decided to include (or not include) in the bibliography. Literature is present in the foreword, with this brief statement:

*"3. I also excluded literary works dealing with Technique, like those by Duhamel, by Huxley, by Ernst Jünger, by Orwell, by Gheorgiu, etc."*¹

A few indications (factual or personal) will help explain what inspired these writers and what made Ellul take an interest in their work. Georges Duhamel (France, 1884–1966) was a physician, a novelist, and a poet. He won the Prix Goncourt in 1918 and became a Member of

the *Académie Française* and of the *Académie de Médecine*. He was active against the Vichy government during World War II. He defended the idea of a civilization built upon wisdom and brotherhood and not uniquely upon technical progress.

I discovered this author thanks to Ellul who mentions his novel “Salavin” (without any other details) in a text that I unfortunately cannot remember. But I was fortunate enough to find a copy of *La confession de minuit (Midnight Confession)* in a flea market in Paris and discovered that it was the first volume in a series of six under the general title of *Vie et aventures de Salavin (Life and Adventures of Salavin)* published between 1920 and 1932. This work portrays a weak character (Salavin) who works as a clerk, is dismissed and thereafter lives a mediocre life without giving up lucidity and morality. Having read several novels by Duhamel, I personally found that technique was not the main theme of his narrative.

Aldous Huxley (England, 1894–1963) is the author of *Brave New World* (1932). It was Huxley who discovered and promoted Ellul’s book *The Technological Society* (translated and published in 1964 in the United States). Ellul had read *Brave New World* shortly after its publication and had also read Huxley’s *End and Means*, published in 1937 and translated into French in 1939.² Ellul had also read *Contrepoint (Point Counter Point)*: “the urbane and intellectual chattering depicted in Huxley’s admirable *Counterpoint*.”³ Unmistakably, Huxley was an important novelist in Ellul’s opinion and an author who made technique an essential part of his writing.

Another author of interest to this discussion is Ernst Jünger (Germany, 1895–1998). I found in dictionaries and on the Internet that he was at the beginning of his career the author of essays and novels in praise of mechanization, which he later condemned because it threatened individual freedom, more particularly in his novel *The Glass Bees* (1960). His brother Friedrich Jünger (1898–1977) had a similar opinion about technique. Ellul refers to him in *Perspectives on Our Age*.⁴

George Orwell (England, 1903–1950) was a novelist and a journalist. He is best known for two novels, *The Island of Animals* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (published in 1949), that depict a world dominated by totalitarian regimes using oppressive techniques. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Huxley’s *Brave New World* are frightening dystopias. But as far as I am concerned, I think politics, not technique, is the main topic of George Orwell’s novels. C. Virgil Ghorghiu (Rumania, 1916–1992) was a novelist and also a priest in the Rumanian Orthodox Church. He is mostly famous for his novel *The Twenty-Fifth Hour* (published in 1949, like Orwell’s bestseller). In this text, he criticizes the dehumanization and cruelty of modern society in wartime.

This brief bibliographic review leads to the following conclusions—Ellul was visibly interested in literature, and his interest was not limited to French texts, as demonstrated by the presence of four foreign authors in his selection of five. His judgment was sound and confirmed by posterity. At the time the bibliography appeared in *La Technique* (1954), the novels mentioned had been recently translated into French and their authors had not yet

acquired notoriety and recognition. Today, these texts are classics, and some have been transcribed into film scripts.

One must bear in mind that when Ellul mentioned Huxley in the bibliography of *La Technique*, he was far from anticipating that Huxley would promote *The Technological Society* ten years later.⁵ The common point in this bibliography is naturally technique. It makes us realize that some prominent novelists were conscious, as early as the first half of the twentieth century, of the invasive role of technique in our civilization. However, because Ellul did not go into any details in his bibliography, it is not always easy to find out which titles he had specifically in mind when he mentioned these authors. Indeed, as suggested above, technique may not have been the sole theme in their works.

Conversely, Ellul did not make reference to other writers who addressed the topic of technique. I am particularly thinking about Georges Bernanos (France, 1888–1948), the author of *La France contre les robots* (*France against Robots*), an explicit title published in 1947 with a no less explicit sentence, “regimes once opposed by ideology are now closely united by technique.”⁶ Ellul did not ignore this important writer noted for his devout Roman Catholicism and distrust of technique and money and does mention him in *Métamorphose du bourgeois*, published in 1967.⁷ As far as I remember, Bernanos himself once attended a lecture by Ellul (who was around 35 years old at the time) and reported he was impressed by his personality and his speech.

It may be pure coincidence, but the five authors mentioned in the bibliography also share more common traits. One is a sort of dual sphere of interest and activity. Just as Ellul participated in the sociological and religious fields, it appears that Gheorghiu, Orwell, and Huxley had a strong penchant for religion, spirituality, and/or mysticism. In Duhamel’s case, this dual set of interests was evidenced in the practice of both medicine and literature. His attitude in the Resistance against German occupation during World War II also bears resemblance to Ellul’s.

Thus it is a minimalist, almost unnoticeable bibliography Ellul inserts in page 393 of *La Technique*. But it is highly instructive about his curiosity for literature and the omnipresence of literary references in his sociological reflection on the technological civilization.

Literature, page after page

References to authors are numerous in the pages of *La Technique*: by my count, ten authors (novelists or poets), irrespective of the five names examined above, are to be found among the 392 pages of the book, and some of them occur several times with a total of sixteen mentions. But it is not because these authors addressed technique in a direct or indirect fashion. If Ellul makes reference to them, it is to better illustrate his narrative: hence a necessary contextualization.

It is in chapter three of *La Technique (Technique and economy—Economic man)* that Ellul mentions three French poets: Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891), Edmond Rostand (1868–1918), and Charles Péguy (1873–1914). At this period of time, says Ellul, man is but *homo economicus*, considered by bourgeois and proletarians alike to be a producing and consuming machine. Under the pressure of economic facts, the rest of life (art, culture, ethics, etc.) is not taken seriously. However, Ellul notes that in the working class, some sort of spiritual life develops around the year 1900. And this is where he mentions *that* literature in Rimbaud (or painting in Van Gogh) is a call against that pressure.⁸

The bourgeoisie thus proves to be unable to eradicate all spirituality in man. Paradoxically, it was Marx that continued this effort of the bourgeoisie by enhancing the primacy of the economic order. In this context, though, Ellul surprises us by asserting that poetry can provide an escape from reality and that Rostand gave economic man the illusion of spirituality. Likewise, Ellul admits that Péguy teaches us that man can still exist in his integrity, but in his life rather than in his writings.

It is in the final chapter of *La Technique (The techniques of man, sub-chapter IV titled total integration)* that Ellul resumes his literary references. Total integration becomes necessary, Ellul explains, because humans live an uncomfortable life where what remains of individual freedom is in conflict with the power of technique. But the attempt to rebuild human unity makes use of (apparently soft) technical means. In the same vein, brutal police intervention can be replaced by an efficient gathering of data. To illustrate violent police methods, Ellul makes reference to “*terreur sur la ville*” (*Terror over the City*, 1938), the title of a novel by Corrado Alvaro (1895–1956), an Italian journalist and novelist. This novel describes life in a police state and reflects the author’s stand in defense of the individual against totalitarianism. This novel was published in French in 1941 under the title *Terreur sur la ville* and in English in 1948 (*Man Is Strong*).

Henry Miller (America, 1891–1980) appears no less than seven times in the last chapter of *La Technique*, between pages 377 to 388. As is often the case, Ellul does not provide any precise reference to Miller’s writings: readers of *La Technique* are supposed to be familiar with this American author who actually spent several years of his life in France, where his books were published and he gained his notoriety. Miller developed a new literary genre, mixing eroticism, surrealism and autobiography. What Ellul saw in Miller is the use of eroticism against the aggressions of the modern world, against the integration of instincts and spirituality by the technical civilization. But Miller’s provocative literature cannot cope with the power of technical integration, quite the contrary: far from enticing individuals to revolt, it soothes them. Ellul makes it clear that Miller is not conscious of the sociological function he fulfills. The reproach he formulates is Miller’s lack of lucidity. On the whole, Ellul probably did not hold Miller in high esteem as a novelist, criticizing his logorrhea and meaningless speech.⁹

Another name to be found among the same pages is André Breton (France, 1896–1966), whose association with surrealism is mentioned three times on pages 378, 379, and 388.

Breton wrote *The Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924, in which he defined the principles of a cultural movement embracing poetry and visual artworks. Breton asserted that surrealism was a revolutionary movement. Here again, Ellul is very clear: surrealism is ineffective in its attempt to escape from a technological civilization or to incite revolt against it.

French philosopher, playwright, and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1964 but refused to accept it. He is mentioned four times (pp. 385–386) without any bibliographic reference but rather as an illustration of some publishing techniques. I remember that in his lectures, Ellul was very critical of Sartre, arguing that a man who had been politically mistaken throughout his entire life could not deserve much confidence as a philosopher.

Boris Vian (French novelist and musician, 1920–1959) is mentioned on page 378 in the same sentence as Miller with a brief reference to thrillers. There is an anecdote about Vian which is worth mentioning: In 1946, he was invited by his publisher to write novels in the American style. He therefore imitated American thrillers using the pseudonym of Vernon Sullivan, causing a scandal due to the immoral topics about which he wrote. Ellul probably referred to those parodies, which certainly did not reflect Vian's true literary and artistic talents.

The name of Paul Bourget (French novelist, 1852–1935) appears on page 380 and is used to illustrate how a literary text is accepted or refused by publishers according to their bourgeois or revolutionary opinions. Bourget was a conservative Catholic writer with keen psychological insight. A highly notorious novelist at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, his books have now gone out of fashion.

Another name (*Tulipe*) appears on page 380 but in an enigmatic form: indeed, *Tulipe* is not an author's name, but, as I discovered, the title of a play by Romain Gary. Romain Gary (France, 1914–1980) is a prominent novelist who twice won the prestigious Prix Goncourt, using a pseudonym (Emile Ajar) the second time, since this prize can be awarded only once to the same author. Ellul's use of literary references reaches here a completely elliptical mode: no author's name, and the mere title of a relatively unknown play published in 1946. Here again, Ellul's purpose is to demonstrate the influence of publishers in accepting or refusing an author's text. *Tulipe* is the example he chose for a text being refused by a bourgeois publisher (likewise Paul Bourget was an example of a conservative author versus a revolutionary publisher). Ellul argues that a book questioning the universal order of technique will not find its way under the current publishing and broadcasting techniques. And this inevitably reminds us of the difficulties he encountered in having some of his books published, including *La Technique*. Because Ellul did not bother to mention Romain Gary as the author of *Tulipe*, one might infer that he did not care much for him. Conversely, not mentioning his name may be interpreted as a perfect knowledge of this author, including his minor texts. The response to this alternative calls for a wider approach of literary quotes in Ellul's books.

Continuation of literary references in *Le Système technicien*

Ellul's second major book about Technique, *Le Système technicien* (published in English as *The Technological System*) was published in France in 1977. It does contain literary references, but these are more limited in number than those found in *La Technique*. Morris West (Australia, 1918–1999) is mentioned with his novel *Arlequin (Harlequin)*, which Ellul used to describe a universe in which humanity is convinced that computerized data represents reality.¹⁰ Huxley, briefly mentioned in *La Technique* bibliography, appears again in *The Technological System*. “Huxley's *Brave New World* is in sight,” wrote Ellul. “We have the means to make it real. What we lack is ideological impulse.”¹¹

Another English writer that appears in a number of Ellul's books is G.K. Chesterton (England, 1874–1936). He was a journalist, novelist, and essayist and also a convinced Christian who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1922 and became a Catholic apologist. Chesterton's name will ring a bell with quite a few Frenchman, but I think mostly in relation to his celebrated sense of humor. Studying the problem of the acceleration of technical progress and the possibility of an indefinite growth in *The Technological System* (part III, chapter I, sub-chapter IV), Ellul indicated that “we should pay attention to Chesterton's warning” and quotes ten lines from G.K. Chesterton, *Le Napoléon de Notting Hill*, a novel set in the future, albeit a future in which there are no advances in technology.¹² It is worth noting that this particular novel by G.K. Chesterton was utilized in an issue of *The Ellul Forum (The Survival of Culture)* by Monica Papazu, *The Ellul Forum*, spring 2009). *Forum* readers will find in this article the essence of Chesterton's artistic vision of a technical civilization and its relevance to Ellul's analysis.

Chesterton and Gary again

We have not finished with Chesterton yet. Ellul strongly recommended reading another of his books.¹³ In an intriguing and hilarious short story, the central character Professor Chadd has worked out a theory about language and even a system of language of his own that includes . . . dancing! The reference to G.K. Chesterton and this funny story is to be found in a passage of Ellul's book (which book?) in which he replies in a polemical form to the theory of some intellectuals who consider that language is normative and therefore deprives us of the freedom to create our own language *ex nihilo*. I cannot imagine any other French scholar choosing Chesterton in this manner.

Romain Gary occupies a distinct place in Ellul's writings and, in my opinion, was one of his favorite authors. He is mentioned in *La Foi au prix du doute (The Humiliation of the Word)* in a manner similar to the one we found in *La Technique*: the reference is *Tulipe* again, but this time it includes a quote and Gary is explicitly mentioned. Ellul's admiration for Gary is evident when he speaks of “Gary in his immortal *Tulipe*.”¹⁴ But to the average reader, the link between Gary and the topic Ellul addresses in this page (new expressions of Christianity) is far from evident.

Apparently, Ellul takes it for granted that all readers are familiar with Gary's writings. In *La Raison d'être, méditation sur l'ecclésiaste (Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes)*

in a sub-chapter titled “Is there no true wisdom?” we find another elliptical, enigmatic sentence.¹⁵ What made Gary such an interesting author to Ellul? I am afraid no answer to that question is to be found in Ellul’s writing. One can imagine that Gary’s active participation in the Resistance movement in France during World War II led to Ellul’s interest. We know that Ellul was also active during that period, although in a non-violent manner. An uncompromising stance in political matters, based on the sense of honor, probably appealed to Ellul as well. A concern about the environment also united both authors. This concern is evident in *La Technique* (1954) and salient in *Les Racines du ciel* (Gary’s Prix Goncourt winner, 1956). This novel was published in English in 1958 under the title *The Roots of Heaven*, and a film directed by John Huston was released the same year. In fact, Gary was probably the first novelist in the world to use and explain the concept of ecology as early as 1956.

Updating the Bibliography?

Who knows what novels or writers would have garnered Ellul’s attention in the last ten or twenty years? I think Ellul’s deep interest in literature and the interplay he established between technique and literature make this question stimulating and legitimate. All the more so since the offer of novels and the demand from readers have remained on a high level over the last few decades. A book with explicit Orwellian overtones and which as such might have been listed by Ellul in his bibliography is the novel by the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, *1Q84*, an explicit continuation of Orwell’s *1984* supposed to actually take place in 1984. But here again, the topic of technique does not seem to me to represent the core of the story.

Michel Houellebecq (France, 1958) is a successful novelist whose writings have been widely acknowledged in France and translated into many languages. In 2010, he won the Prix Goncourt with his novel *La Carte et le territoire* (*The Map and the Territory*). With an educational background in engineering, he has written novels akin to science fiction and particularly to cloning technique. The atmosphere in most of his books is pessimistic and cynical, indulging in obscenity and provocation. I think his books exemplify Ellul’s analysis of the technological society and concur with his vision of art and literature. According to Ellul, living in a technical milieu influences every aspect of our lives, including artistic creation, which becomes an imitation of the technical reality, as he wrote, “art has become the expression of the technological society.”¹⁶ For example, in Houellebecq’s books (and this is also the case of many contemporary novelists), nouns are often replaced by brand names, and technical artifacts (cars, cameras, etc.) are mere catalog excerpts. Furthermore, says Ellul, the inhuman, abstract milieu created by technique calls for necessary compensations, and sexual liberation is one of these compensations: the role of sexuality appears all too clearly in many of Houellebecq’s novels and becomes the main theme in *Plateforme* (2001), a novel that depicts an expanding sexual tourism.

Les Particules élémentaires (*The Elementary Particles*) published in 1998 refers primarily to science but also metaphorically to individuals living in the technological society. One of the

main characters is a scientist specializing in the technique of cloning, thereby opening the possibility of replacing sexual reproduction. Sexuality itself appears as an insufficient compensation for the hardship of an accelerating technical change. This novel is particularly relevant to Ellul's literary references in *La Technique* as it repeatedly refers to Aldous Huxley, discussing the accuracy of his forecasts in *Brave New World*, the role of science and technology and the evolution of sexuality.

In 2005, Houellebecq published *La Possibilité d'une île* (*The Possibility of an Island*) and resumed the technical theme of cloning while adding the religious quest of immortality, eternal life, and "new age" cults, a novel to be paralleled with Ellul's writings on technique and on religion. *La Carte et le territoire* (2010) introduces another Ellulian subject, which is art and its relation to technique. The author depicts the economic and sociological surroundings of the art market in a derisive tone. His main character is an artist who gains unexpected fame by photographing industrial objects and painting road maps. Houellebecq's latest opus, *Soumission* (Flammarion 2015; *Submission* in the English edition) narrates the victory of a Muslim party in France and the temptation among intellectuals to *submit* (hence the title *Submission*) to the Muslim religion and culture. Reading Ellul's posthumous *Islam et judéo-christianisme* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), published ten years after his death, confirms how attractive for Christians the uncompromising religion of Islam can be.

At this point, one could be tempted to compare Houellebecq to Miller, both authors being provocative in their criticism of modern society and controversial. But whereas Ellul considered that Miller (or Breton) fulfilled unconsciously a sort of sociological function, there seems to be less ingenuousness with Houellebecq and more clear-sightedness and cynicism. But I doubt Ellul would have appreciated him either . . .

¹ Jacques Ellul, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1954), 393. (Hourcade translation).

² Patrick Chastenet, *Entretiens avec Jacques Ellul*. (Paris : La Table Ronde, 1994), 105.

³ Jacques Ellul, *La parole humiliée*. (Paris: Seuil, 1981), 173. (Hourcade translation).

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*. Edited by Willem H. Vanderburg (New York: House of Anansi, 2004), 40.

⁵ Patrick Chastenet, *Entretiens avec Jacques Ellul*, 36.

⁶ Georges Bernanos, *La France contre les robots*. (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1947), 25. (Hourcade translation).

⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Métamorphose du bourgeois*. (Paris : Calmann Lévy, 1967), 160.

⁸ Ellul, *La technique*, 204.

⁹ Ellul, *La parole humiliée*, 173.

¹⁰ Jacques Ellul, *Le système technicien*. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1977), 117.

¹¹ Ellul, *Le système technicien*, 285. (Hourcade translation).

¹² *Ibid.*, 319.

¹³ Ellul, *La parole humiliée*, chapter 4, sub-chapter 3, 193, footnote 1. "Il est toujours bon ici de relire l'admirable nouvelle de G.-K. Chesterton, *La folie du professeur Chadd*, in *Le Club des métiers bizarres*, Paris, Gallimard, 1938." (It is always good to read again G.-K. Chesterton's admirable short story, "The Noticeable Conduct of Professor Chadd," in *The Club of Queer Trades*.) (Hourcade translation).

¹⁴ Jacques Ellul, *La foi au prix du doute*. (Paris: Hachette, 1980), 42. “Encore une patrouille de foutue” disait Gary dans son immortel *Tulipe*. (“Another lost patrol,” said Gary in his immortal *Tulipe*.) (Hourcade translation).

¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, *La raison d’être, méditation sur l’ecclésiaste*. (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 154. “Ca n’empêche pas le rossignol de chanter comme disait Gary.” (That does not prevent the nightingale from singing, as Gary used to say.)

¹⁶ Ellul, *Le système technicien*, 53.