

IN A POSTHUMOUS  
PUBLICATION:

## Henry de Montherlant expounds on “The Olympics”

In contrast to Greek antiquity, very few contemporary literary works take their inspiration from Olympism and sport. The exceptions contradict this statement, and one of them is Henry de Montherlant's work. Last year literature and the theatre lost one of their most personal servants of the century. Sport misses this man who sought a mystical theology in athletic effort and who showed with such talent his humanist capacity.

Now, in a posthumous publication<sup>1</sup> of a collection of memories, finished shortly before his death, the master recalls the figures, sportsmen and sportswomen, whom he used as models in “*Le Songe*” (1922) and “*Les Olympiques*” (1924).

Through the pages Henry de Montherlant reveals himself and avows his attachment to sport. We reproduce herebelow some of his quotations.

<sup>1</sup> Henry de Montherlant: *Mais aimons-nous ceux que nous aimons.*, (Do we really love those who we love?) Ed. Gallimard.



*"An athletic youth contains sufficient richness, varied richness, to nourish each moment of our internal development and each stage of our destiny with something."* Montherlant quotes again this sentence from *"Les Olympiques"* and affirms that he has never repudiated it." (p. 198)

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*"If we still worshipped the Hours, I should adore the Hour when for the first time we set foot on our stadium; the stadium with its boys with little heads, short nails, flat stomachs, with its basketball goals, with its cross-beam for gymnastics, with its jumping pits and heaps of clothes at the foot of those pits, with its goal-posts the netting of which is torn, and heaps of clothes at the foot of the goal-posts, with its oriflammes, with its exquisite lawn, glowing with freshness, 'covered in a vast wave of friendship and familiarity', covered too, if you listened closely, with the long quiver of a javelin in the air, the dull sound of a discus falling on the grass, the "smack" of a ball being kicked, the raucous monosyllables of players shouting to each other while dribbling; the strange silence that is this background noise (who would immortally describe it, in a word or a phrase, as the great silence of sport?). A whole, noble, young and charming, which none of us would have imagined so perishable, nor that we would see it perish in our lifetime. As the little children moved, so constantly did the magnanimous skies above them. The stadium was itself one day to move. I immediately fell in love with the cinders. That is, the clinker track<sup>1</sup>." (p. 35)*

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*The belief that physical culture is equal to moral culture is not as foolish as that of the ancient Greeks, for whom beauty is equal to morality. It is nevertheless foolish. Pierre de Coubertin wisely made it quite clear. "...a confusion between character and virtue. Qualities of character do not come from morals; they are not part of the realm of conscience. These qualities are courage, energy, will-power, perseverance, endurance. Great criminals and even downright scoundrels have possessed them. This is why the doctrine of direct moralisation through sport is false and worrying. (...) Sport is only an indirect adjuvant to morals." (p. 67)*

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<sup>1</sup> The track at our stadium was grass, but I describe it here as cinder because I like cinders.

*"I am more in favour than Coubertin of a certain relationship between physical culture and moral culture. It is accepted that the 'morals of sport' are often only a matter of will to obtain certain results in sport. A boy is chaste to preserve his athletic form; a boy is frank (or at least acts as though he were frank) because without frankness, "you can no longer play"; this chastity, this frankness are give and take, no more. But fair play, the fact of suffering an injustice on the part of the judges or the public (especially for professionals) the sense of measure (which I shall call sports litotes), discipline, solidarity with comrades, fraternisation with the opponent, are virtues going beyond sport and which belong well and truly to morals, and to the highest at that."* (p. 67)

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*"By the wisdom and behaviour of its leaders, the club came to imposing this paradox: putting a certain amount of measure in what is based on emulation."* (p. 34)

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*"What would a race look like at the finish where any runner who thought he had lost his chance of a placing gave up?"* (p. 89)

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*"No sport, except perhaps swimming, necessarily implies a beautiful body."* (p. 200)

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*"On 'Battling Malone'<sup>1</sup> I published a few pages which were enthusiastic to excess and from which this thought was not absent: 'To satiety you write that I introduced sports literature in France. Well, this was written more than ten years before Les Olympiques. Well done!'"* (p. 201)

<sup>1</sup> Written by Leo Hamon in 1911, and published in 1925.

On the Olympic Games<sup>1</sup> — Paris, 1924:

*"... As ten out of the seventeen nations who competed in the Games had taken part in the war, I had suggested in an article that the Games should be solemnly devoted to the war dead. I probably borrowed this idea from a Greek tradition, as the idea of the "unknown soldier" was by a journalist<sup>2</sup>. This idea did not amount to anything, which was probably so much the better; a number of similar ideas, good in themselves, end up a farce (not of course the idea of the "unknown soldier"). I followed the Games with interest but without exaltation. Neither sports chauvinism nor the records interested me. There were some attractive and impressive scenes but they were spoiled for me by the blurb, the eye-wash, where officials and journalists swam like fish in water. The word "peace" was already the stop-gap word which it has remained until now; it is a word covered with sticky slime by the surfeit of mouths that has pronounced it. Peace through sport; international meetings contributing to the peace of the world. There were only two of us, a journalist and myself, to rise up in the press against this nonsense. If the Games favoured anything, it was not so much peace as national animosities, by virtue of that excellent saying (by whom? me?): "Groups do not unite; they divide". Moreover, neither the nations nor the men who competed for them were interested at the Games in the peace of the world. They were interested in making their colours win, which basically did not mean anything. Verdun, yes; having the ball, no. At a certain Olympic Games an important nation abstained; it nevertheless remained an important nation. At others, a nation won the... .. championship with dazzling mastery; it nevertheless remained if not a small nation, at least a nation which is not often talked about..." (p. 179)*

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"I was now writing 'Les Olympiques', and I enjoyed writing sport even more than living it.

*There was more to it, a lot more to it. I could not, in the most decisive moment of any sports competition, rid myself of the thought that the result was of no importance whatsoever. For Peyrony sport was something strict, precise, orderly and difficult. For me too it was all these things, but with a margin of detachment which imparted to it in intelligence what it detracted from it in authenticity. I am talking at least about football. In football I indulged. I gave myself up to racing. Why this difference? Because racing was individual? Probably." (p. 95)*

<sup>1</sup> An appendix to this publication entitled "*Jeux Olympiques à Colombes*" (1924) reproduces a text written by Montherlant probably shortly after the 1924 rugby final. In it he strongly criticises nationalism in sport, with this sentence in particular: "*In this way we make war in the midst of peace*".

<sup>2</sup> In ancient Greece, an empty sarcophagus, supposedly carrying the "unknown warrior", was carried on certain occasions. I cannot quote the book reference of this act, but I am sure I have seen it in a work by an expert on ancient Greek history.

"Thus sport (at least football) was summed up in my mind in a single word: Playing. Bulls in a word: Domination. War in a word: Generosity. Three words were enough to cover the three passions of my youth." (p. 95)

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*"Sport and Christianity correspond in the cases where the virtues demanded by sport correspond to those demanded by Christianity. This proposition seems stupid, however all the rest in this connection is an empty thought and verbosity."* (p. 40)

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*"Past the barriers of the stadium enclosure, we had entered a new world where sensual-ity did not have its place, either by instinct or design."* (p. 45)

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*"I had specialised in the 100 metres. It is an idiots' race, and that is why I was good at it. On the "get set" you fill your thoracic cage with air and hold it; on the "go" you push like made; that's all. A good command of the brain, but this I had. And a spot of craftiness for the start: you threw yourself forward by supporting yourself on the tip of your toes in holes you had dug yourself; you had to know how to dig your holes. (Today this method has been replaced by a mechanism; the Americans have mopped up the only drop of intelligence that there was in this race). The instantaneousness of the start of the 100 metres is the effect of a decision but not of an option..."* (p. 113)

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*"Nevertheless it was the war which led me to true sport in another way, and this is how. At the front, suddenly transported by the retreats behind the lines from the hard, terrifying life, to the populations going about their daily work, I had waited for, hoped for, blessed the truce; and yet, having returned to peace, far more than a satisfaction of the body I dreamed of finding with the stadium the generosity of student and war life, if only in the harmless combats of the leather ball. From the war I had developed a taste of team spirit completely unknown before us, the severe passion of the hours of brotherhood to gain ten metres of ground, which basically was not without comparison with so much earnest intent to score a goal."* (p. 26)

