

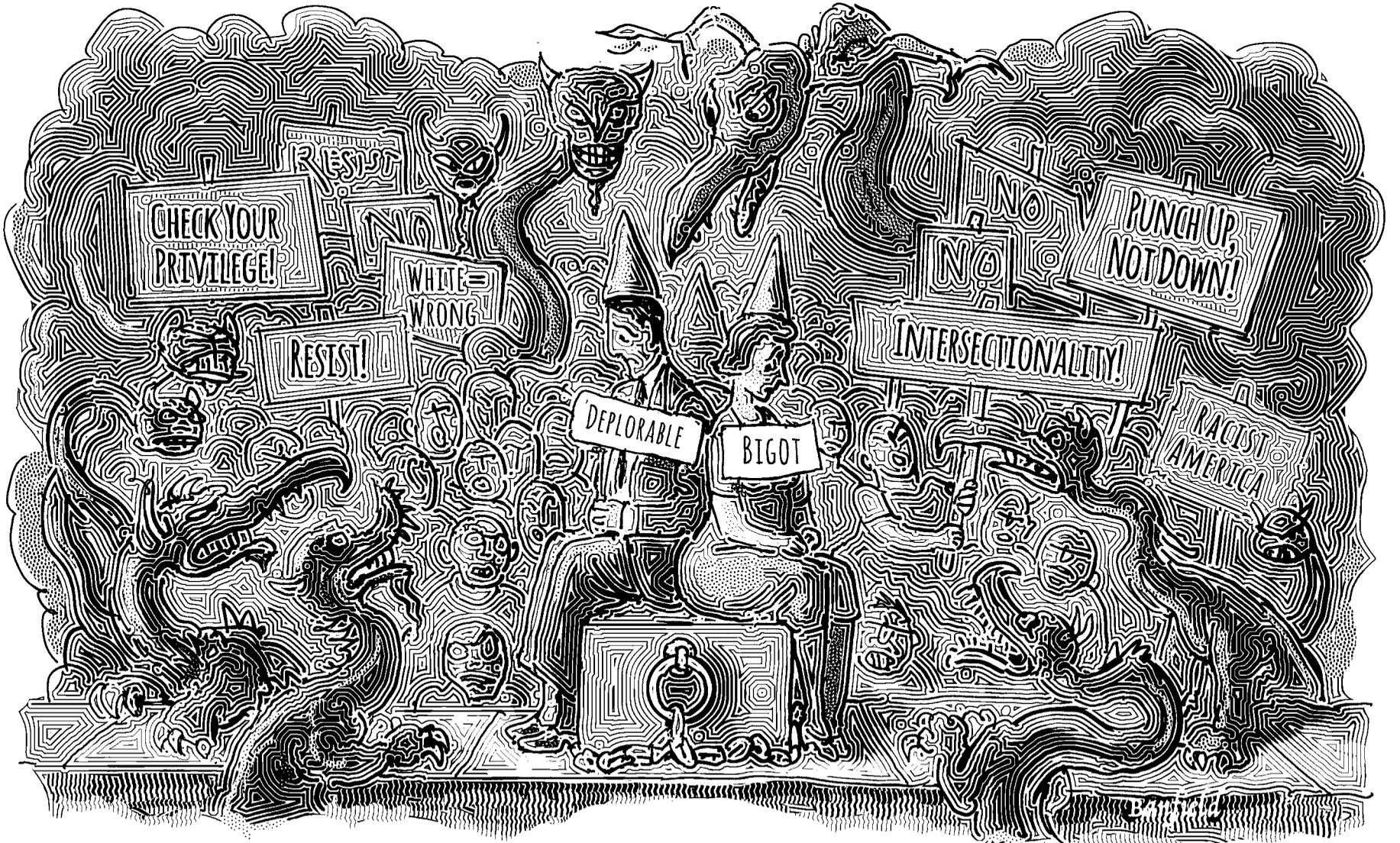
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Book Review by Angelo M. Codevilla

A CERTAIN IDEA OF FRANCE

De Gaulle, by Julian Jackson.
Harvard University Press, 928 pages, \$39.95



EVEN AS TIME PASSES AND FRANCE looms smaller among nations, Charles de Gaulle's heroic efforts to rebuild the nation he loved continue to fascinate. Julian Jackson's massive one-volume biography keeps a tight focus on its subject, only incidentally addressing the wider corruption and collapse that de Gaulle had to confront—something Jackson, a history professor at London's Queen Mary University, has touched on in previous books on 20th-century France. By the same token, the book delves into midcentury international affairs only insofar as they reveal more about de Gaulle. Jackson is not concerned, as de Gaulle was, with what sort of grandeur France may have been capable of, and what it might have taken to achieve it. Sometimes he treats events and thoughts of vastly different significance with roughly equal emphasis, in a kind of monotone. None-

theless, even for one familiar with de Gaulle's published works, this new biography is well worth reading.

CHARLES DE GAULLE FAMOUSLY SAID of Henri Petain—the French Army's savior in the Great War who then betrayed his country to the Nazis in the Second World War, and whose death sentence for treason de Gaulle himself commuted to life imprisonment—that he had been a great man who had died circa 1925. Had de Gaulle died in 1945, his biography would have been one of unalloyed success: his every quirk and misjudgment buried by the near-infallible prescience, intellectual brilliance, tactical skill, massive integrity, and grit by which a relatively junior army officer placed himself at the head of a defeated country that ended the war ranked among the world's victorious powers.

But during the years between his 1946 resignation as chief of France's provisional government and his second resignation in 1969 after a decade as president of the Fifth Republic, he compiled a far more checkered personal and professional record. De Gaulle's ideas and objectives for his country remained what they had been. And as before, his immanent task was to assemble popular consensus and marshal officials' and politicians' cooperation to serve those objectives. Absent the war and Nazi occupation's compelling focus, however, that task was inherently more difficult and the proper path ahead was less clear. There wasn't the same pressure on those involved to compromise—much less to sacrifice. Under these circumstances de Gaulle courted support by telling, or leading people to believe, what they wanted about his intentions—the oldest and

most short-legged of political tactics. He also sought to dispense with persuasion by seeking and exercising discretionary power. That sufficed substantially for dealing with the technocratic aspects of government. But since the problem that brought de Gaulle back to power in 1958—the Arabs' war against France's 130-year presence in Algeria—raised the most inherently divisive political passions, handling it as he did injured France severely. It also produced a de Gaulle very different from the man who had liberated Paris a quarter-century earlier.

CHARLES DE GAULLE WAS A SIMPLE, unpretentious man. Charles de Gaulle was complex, haughty, and Machiavellian. Much of Jackson's book revolves around this apparent contradiction. But it neglects how the general himself had clarified it in his memoirs, by agreeing with Franklin Roosevelt's judgment of himself as "stuck up," but faulting FDR for not asking whether de Gaulle was "stuck up" for himself or for France.

Jackson's illustrations of de Gaulle's simplicity are often moving. A colleague in the provisional government in Algiers who followed him home to retrieve a briefcase found him cuddling and singing love songs to his severely disabled daughter—something which occupied much of his free time. Those who dined with the de Gaulles in those years reported drinking out of sawn-off bottles and eating the most frugal of foods surrounded by the most basic of furniture. Even as president of France, living in the Élysée Palace, his tastes and habits outside of official functions remained spartan.

De Gaulle had tried unsuccessfully in 1940 to persuade persons more prominent than himself to head the Free French movement. When he took the job, he humbly felt "like a man on the beach proposing to swim across the ocean," as he put it. Between 1940 and 1944, dramatically subordinating his personal interest to his professional interest and to the national interest was essential to the moral authority—he had no other—by which he asked people to hazard their lives for the common cause. Later, even as he wielded the near-monarchical powers of the Fifth Republic's presidency, his personal behavior embodied the proposition that greatness consists only of identification with a great cause. Once that identification ceased, once he was freed from service to that cause, he retired to a humble country house, worked, and watched TV with his wife. He acted as an ordinary neighbor to his neighbors and refused to see anyone connected with government or politics. So consistently monastic was

he personally that no hint of financial or sexual scandal about de Gaulle would ever have been taken seriously.

TOTAL SEPARATION OF PERSONAL AND official sentiments, however, is impossible. Better than anyone, de Gaulle knew how remarkable he was, how essential he had been to France's restoration. He acknowledged to a friend,

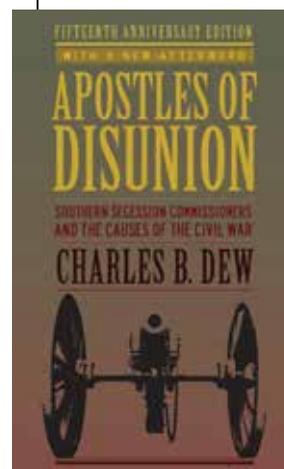
the incredible mixture of patience, of slow development, of obstinate creativity, of trick questions, the dizzying succession of calculation, negotiations, conflicts, trips that we had to carry out to accomplish our enterprise. Just take the example of [General Jacques] Leclerc: they seem to think it quite natural that he disembarked in Normandy, liberated Strasbourg and Paris. No one seems to ask: "where did he find the men and materiel? How is it that he was just at the right moment at the gates of Paris and then could fall on Alsace?"

Nor did de Gaulle ever have any doubt about his own talents. His memoirs (but not Jackson) relate an intimate evening during which Winston Churchill mused that he and de Gaulle were a lot alike, doing much the same thing. But, de Gaulle told him, while Churchill was acting as the recognized head of a mighty empire, he was doing similar things though bereft of means and "having come from nothing." Also, he believed that he was the better *writer*: Churchill dictated his books; De Gaulle *composed* them.

De Gaulle's lifelong Christian piety, which he did not advertise in deference to the French Republic's official secularism, helps explain his ability to maintain personal humility alongside overweening professional pride. Just how overweening—and, Jackson argues, dysfunctional—was that professional pride, how it bled increasingly into his person, is perhaps the biography's most recurrent theme. Jackson never misses a chance to relate de Gaulle's tendency to treat people from a presumption of superiority on the edge of insult. Anyone who stood in the way of his cause, he cast aside. As often as not de Gaulle would have to back down and accept the inevitable. Jackson well nigh ridicules his attitude as vainglorious and self-delusional, while often admitting that the harshness paid dividends.

Jackson shows, at first, a personally kind man for whom hard-heartedness was limited to the combat soldier's duty—one who, until 1946, looked for reasons to commute courts'

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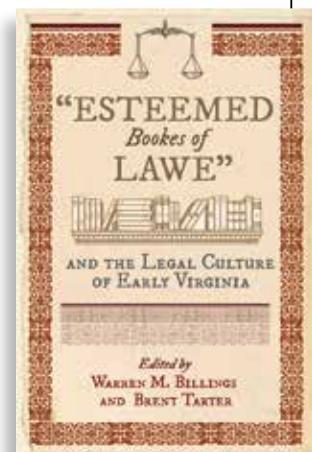
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24	25	26	27	28	29	30



death sentences passed under his rule. But long-term involvement in politics fired up de Gaulle's pride and animus to the point that only political calculation prevented him from indulging increasingly sanguinary passions. He became indifferent to the pain his policies imposed. As he roughly and haphazardly amputated Algeria from France's body politic, he responded to a plea on behalf of the Arabs who had fought for France and who he was abandoning to certain death with "Okay, they will suffer."

DE GAULLE WILL BE STUDIED FOR centuries because of what he did during World War II, and how he did it. France's entire socio-political establishment—its government, bureaucracy, armed forces' leadership: in short, the state—had abdicated the historical entity they were supposed to represent. The Vichy regime ruled on behalf of the Germans who had conquered them. France no longer existed as something capable of inspiring the people within its borders, or of engaging with other nations. There was no one to whom the French people could look. On June 18, 1940, via the BBC, the unknown voice of the unknown Charles de Gaulle gave them someone. He could make himself a transcendent symbol because no one else even tried. He understood, as no one else did, that power in France would flow to whomever the people identified with the idea of a France unbowed, honored, and ultimately victorious.

As de Gaulle put together a temporary replacement for the state, one imperfect human brick at a time, his uncontested, increasing grip on the French people's imagination (to which Churchill's Great Britain supplied the only significant material power) was and remained his main asset in dealing with colleagues, as well as foreign governments. The first two volumes of de Gaulle's memoirs and the first third of Jackson's biography are primarily about this rebuilding, carried out painfully and painstakingly. The *state* was the objective. Democratic legitimacy was the means.

He deployed democratic legitimacy against challengers foreign and domestic. After the first months, his trump card against Admiral Émile Muselier, for example, who wanted to supplant him as leader of the Free French movement, was that nobody in France knew anyone but de Gaulle. The same went for his control of the other groups that together made up the French Resistance. His delegates' directions were followed because, quite simply, his name had become synonymous with genuine resistance and hope. However violent his quarrels with his British

hosts, they knew perfectly well that his image as a non-puppet was a priceless asset of his own creation. Churchill strove mightily to make Franklin Roosevelt understand that. By 1943, much as the Americans preferred to have what was becoming France's government-in-exile in the hands of the pliable Henri Giraud, they could not stop Frenchmen from rallying to de Gaulle's flag. As U.S. forces prepared for D-Day, General Eisenhower quietly ignored Roosevelt's orders not to treat de Gaulle as France's leader. No one else had won France's heart.

BUT DE GAULLE WAS NOT A DEMOCRAT at heart. A Frenchman in the tradition of administrative government resting on the Napoleonic code and, beyond that, on the tradition of the royal *commis* (clerks) such as Colbert, Turgot, and Vauban, he was unsympathetic to spontaneity. France had been made, and was to be kept, by its governments, acting professionally through ministries: the army, finance, diplomacy, po-

De Gaulle will be studied for centuries because of what he did during World War II, and how he did it.

lice. Once Allied armies had displaced the Germans, bureaucrats excessively loyal to Vichy had been chased out, and persons loyal to de Gaulle had taken key posts, he turned power over to the regular bureaucracy. He treated Resistance people who had risked their lives as relics of the past. They had done their duty. Now their duty was to step aside and serve the state.

The state, however, needs the direction and coherence of an executive, wholly responsible, wholly in charge, because the people had chosen him. In the course of having increasingly exercised those powers during the war, de Gaulle had become that executive. In 1946, France's elected representatives quibbled about his powers, and he resigned.

The process by which he resumed executive power 12 years later differed radically from that by which he had won it during the war. This time democracy—the people's confidence in him—was in the far background and of little help as he wooed influential politicians. What's more, these machinations

were not what brought him back to power. During the crucial days of 1958, his appeal to the politicians had far less to do with popular sentiment than with the fact that only he could save them from the vengeance of the army in Algeria. Fear of that army and the hopes of those committed to keeping Algeria French enabled him to secure a premiership with "full powers," and then popular approval of a constitution that rendered parliamentary quibbling largely irrelevant.

Wielding the Fifth Republic's powers required coherent policies on his part, and his principal officers' consensus about them. Gathering that consensus regarding technical matters would prove easy enough—e.g., committing France to long-term reliance on nuclear power for electricity. But with regard to Algeria—the principal problem that he had been empowered to resolve—what he did was the negation of policy, as he had masterfully defined it: "that ensemble of continued objectives, of matured decisions, of measures brought to term." The lack of it had doomed the Third Republic. Now it would transform de Gaulle.

JACKSON IS AT HIS BEST WHEN SHOWING how, between 1958 and 1961, de Gaulle had no clear idea of what he wanted to achieve or of how to go about it. Not Machiavellianism, but the impossibility of rallying support for a course on which one hasn't decided, is the reason why de Gaulle gave different people different impressions of what he wanted to do. And it is the reason why, changing course so often, he lost the confidence and the loyalty of many of his collaborators. That same failure on his part to decide a course and stay with it is the reason he began by spurning negotiations even with moderate Arabs, then agreed to negotiations with the extremist National Liberation Front (FLN), but set terms that led to deals being refused that would have either partitioned the country or given special status to French people born in Algeria. As his supporters turned against him and he found himself at war with them, his negotiating position with the FLN collapsed. The result was less a defeat than a rout.

His reaction to that rout made it worse, including for himself. A million French people left Algeria, most of whom had been born there, spurred by massacres, confiscations, and violations of the negotiated terms of independence. De Gaulle gave them neither help nor sympathy. In April 1961, when generals Raoul Salan, Maurice Challe, and Edmond Jouhaud, whom de Gaulle had ordered to "win this war," turned against him, he stopped the putsch in its tracks by putting



on his general's uniform and calling on the army to obey him. Then he put the generals on trial for their lives. He intended for them to be condemned to death and then to commute their sentences. Challe was so condemned. But Salan's attorneys used the record of de Gaulle's contradictory orders, and of the great man's own 1940 refusal to accept defeat, in a public trial that resulted in no death sentence. De Gaulle's united entourage barely prevented him from going through with Challe's execution, and thereby pouring gasoline on a still simmering army revolt. All three generals went to prison. Power tends to corrupt even the best of men.

After Algeria, de Gaulle acted competently as head of the state by virtue of his powers far more than by any mystique of attraction. For a while, his technocratic rule satisfied France. But by 1968 very different people had seized the country's imagination. Barricades went up in Paris as a generation protested against lives that offered endless "boulot, metro, do-do"—work, go back-and-forth, sleep. To keep hold of power, de Gaulle called once again on his authority, born long ago of exemplary patriotism, but little of it was left. To reclaim some of his alienated comrades, he pardoned the 1961 putschists. Gaullist France put down

the revolt less out of love for the old man than for partisan reasons. De Gaulle, knowing that something was needed to catch the people's imagination, proposed a referendum to reform the structures of the state—essentially the transformation of the Senate into a chamber of corporations. It excited nobody. When it failed, he resigned the presidency. He was succeeded by Georges Pompidou: a technocrat, certifiably brilliant (the top student in France's top school) and decent, and as uninspiring as they come.

TWO YEARS LATER, IN 1970, DE GAULLE was dead. Despite his wishes for a private funeral, millions thronged his village to mourn. "France is widowed," said Pompidou, who gathered the world's great at Notre Dame cathedral to pay him homage. Today, no name is more honored in France than de Gaulle's. The country, however, is nothing like "the certain image" which had been his life's guiding star, as he explained in his *Memoirs*: "the princess of fairy tales or the madonna of frescoes...fated to an eminent and exceptional destiny...only vast enterprises...on pain of mortal danger, it must aim high and hold straight." Ardent love of that image had impelled de Gaulle to sacri-

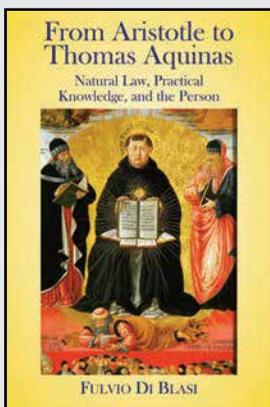
fice himself and others on its altar. The patriotic infection he sought to spread was filial: "mother, behold the sons who have fought for you so." Because culture and race are related incidentally rather than essentially, his prescient objection to a substantial Arab presence in France was about cultural and national identity rather than race. Though his patriotism acknowledged the Gauls and Romans as ancestors, as well as France's several historic political identities, it recognized Christianity as its soul. None of that is on modern France's mind.

Charles De Gaulle's patriotism made him who he was, and was responsible for the successes he had. History teaches that love of country is indeed naturally infectious, and that it covers a multitude of other faults. Pericles' ability to dissolve his personal interest into Athens's, and to invite others to do the same, was not the least of his assets. But patriotism will get you only so far. As Julian Jackson's biography shows, de Gaulle's life illustrates patriotism's limits as well as its power.

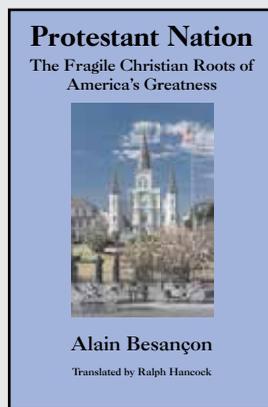
Angelo M. Codevilla is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute and professor emeritus of international relations at Boston University.

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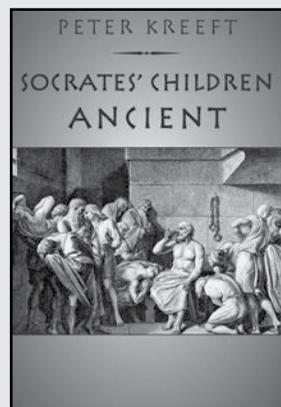
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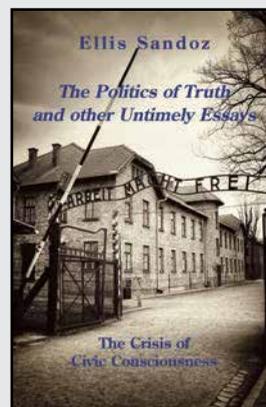
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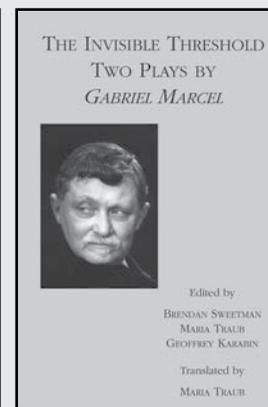
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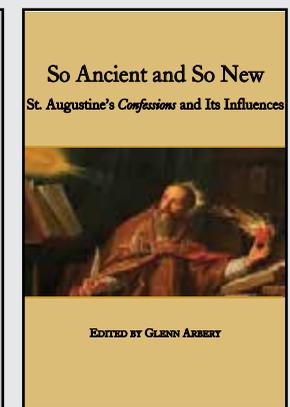
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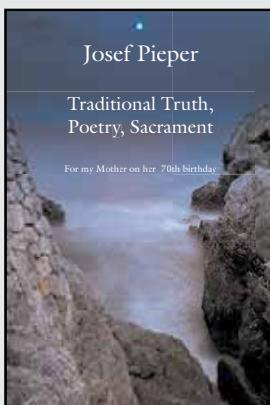
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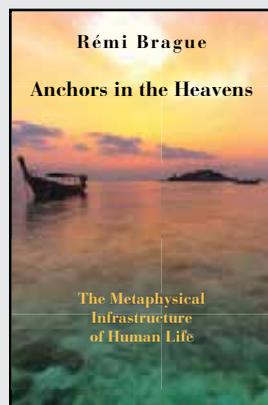
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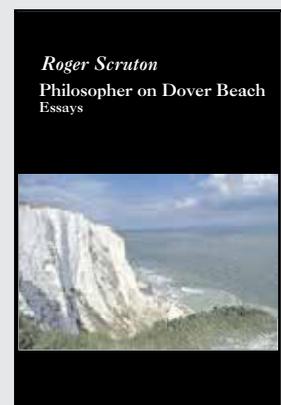
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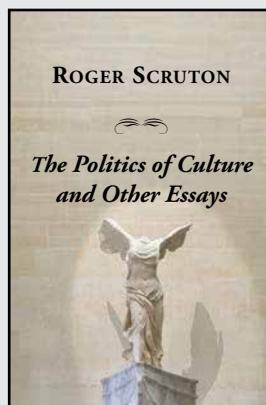
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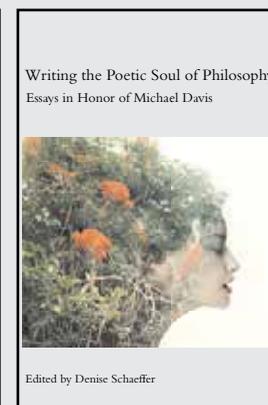
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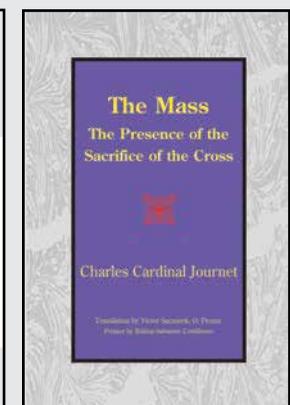
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