Pot, Olivier (ed.). Simon Goulart, Un pasteur aux intérêts vastes comme le monde

George Hoffmann

Volume 37, numéro 2, printemps 2014

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090734ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i2.21830

Pot, Olivier (ed.).

*Simon Goulart, Un pasteur aux intérêts vastes comme le monde.*

If one could ever get inside the head of Simon Goulart, few mysteries would remain regarding the French Reformation. Historian, poet, satirist, scholar, playwright, lyricist, translator, and indefatigable editor, Goulart entered a horse
in just about every race that reformers joined. He did not always place, but
the range of his multifarious activities spans the entire breadth of a movement
whose variety and scope still remain too poorly understood. Leonard Chester
Jones’s 1917 biography reads more as a narrative bibliography: one learns when
and what Goulart published, but little about the combination of motivating
spirit and external circumstances that led him on from one project to the next.
Recently, Cécile Huchard and Amy Graves have produced two excellent mono-
graphs on distinct facets of Goulart’s career that demonstrate all that is to be
gained from further study of the man and his work. The present collection of
21 essays, four appendices, an updated bibliography, index, and a substantial
introduction is a welcome arrival, setting in place the building blocks for any
future study that will attempt to fit together the disparate activities of this fas-
cinating figure.

In a painstaking introduction, Olivier Pot enumerates the long record of
neglect that Goulart has suffered at the hands of scholars. But he does not ex-
plain the causes of this oversight. In a movement still perceived mainly through
theological categories, Goulart did not make a single doctrinal contribution;
were it not for the wealth of source materials he published, his name might have
been forgotten altogether.

But for anyone who still thinks that the French Reformation can be
summed up in the person of Calvin, Goulart stands as a salutary antidote. It
is precisely his lack of involvement in theology, one almost wants to say, that
makes his case so instructive. He believed in divine providence, but his volu-
minous histories charted the vagaries and human contingencies of the religious
wars. He consented to live in Calvin’s austere Geneva, but he threw himself
into the task of promoting a lush poetic aesthetic that would allow reformers
to pursue what proved to be the literary afterlife of the late Valois court. More
surprising, he subscribed to the doctrine of inscrutable predestination, yet he
indulged a lifelong fondness for crystal gazing and astrology.

Goulart held no sympathy for the Roman Church’s excesses. But he
teaches us what many histories do not: despite the sharp dividing lines staked
out in one polemical work after another, reformers lived in a fluid social world
that invited, even demanded, accommodation. He experienced no difficulty in
turning from vehement diatribes against the Roman Church to meals shared
with Catholic or Catholic-leaning friends. Nor did he flinch at purchasing a work of cabbalism. Unlike Calvin and Beza, Goulart did not renounce
his youthful humanist interests. His lifelong efforts to disseminate Amyot’s Plutarch and direct France’s reception of this towering monument of humanist translation helped make it a staple of every serious writer’s library well into the nineteenth century.

Another lesson to emerge from this volume comes in how decisive Goulart’s encounter with Montaigne’s Essays proved for the trajectory of his career. Although he brings both more doctrinal commitment and more studiousness to his editorial labours than does Montaigne, he repeatedly found inspiration not only in the diverse materials of the Essays but also in Montaigne’s novel manner of self-presentation. Goulart’s scientific interests receive attention as well, but still more here remains to be explored. In particular, it would be fruitful to place Goulart’s Paracelsian interests into dialogue with the prevalence of a similar strain of Paracelsianism among artisanal reformers in western France that Neil Kamil unearthed in his 2005 Fortress of the Soul.

The impression of Goulart to emerge from this volume is a refracted one in which the divergent tendencies can seem nearly impossible to reconcile. Some heretofore unsuspected proclivities reveal astonishing complexity: Olivier Pot’s 70-page analysis of Goulart’s poetic sensibility reads as a monograph in its own right. The range and variety of issues covered in this volume do not make the task of pulling together Goulart’s many faces into a coherent portrait any easier for the future scholar, but they will make the result far richer and more interesting.

GEORGE HOFFMANN
University of Michigan