

PAULHAN BEFORE BLANCHOT: FROM TERROR TO LETTERS BETWEEN THE WARS

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La terreur n'est autre chose que la
justice prompte, sévère, inflexible.

Maximilien de Robespierre

What can we learn by reading (or rereading) Blanchot today? Or, as the question might otherwise be put in order to stress its didactic force, what exactly is the lesson of Blanchot's writings for those who read them today? Until recently, approaches to Blanchot tended to split along the lines of his twin careers as novelist and literary critic, with discussion centered on whether to attribute priority to the criticism over the fiction or vice-versa. In 1973 Roger Laporte could still discern three distinct generations of Blanchot's readers.¹ In reverse order, the most recent came to his writings via the *Nouveau Roman* and the strategies of writing first set forth by Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*. For a second or middle generation, Blanchot was a major post-war critic whose essays appeared regularly in prestigious literary journals such as *Critique* and the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. A first generation of readers—that of the period between the wars—is more elusive, for while Blanchot was known to have been writing during the 1930s, no one knows with certainty who was reading his earliest texts when they first appeared.

The question of locating Blanchot within modernity is primarily a question of literary history: the three generations of his readers schematize the evolution of literary modernity in France over the past fifty years. Seen first in the wake of the Surrealists and subsequently as a fellow traveler of the Existentialists, Blanchot continues to elude

definitive classification to the point where even Laporte's hypothesis is outstripped by a supplement that points to the historicity of Blanchot's modernity. In large parts, the latest supplement subverts existing knowledge by inscribing the literary and critical writings within a new progression that begins with a substantive set of texts on history and political issues. Because, at this point, there is reason to believe that Blanchot's place in literary modernity has been assessed without adequate consideration of his earliest writings, the apparent untimeliness of current inquiry—reading the earliest texts some fifty years after the fact—is offset by what these early texts might tell us about the criticism and fiction that followed.

As part of a longer reassessment of French modernity, the pages that follow explore the prehistory of "Comment la littérature est-elle possible?" (1942), an essay that is commonly accepted as Blanchot's first major piece of critical writing. But where most commentators see this text as a response to Jean Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* (1941), I shall argue that what is seen as the apparent origin of Blanchot's conception of literature is, in fact, preceded by an earlier text that appeared in 1936, at precisely the same period as the first version of Paulhan's *Fleurs*. From 1942 back to 1936 and with Paulhan *before* Blanchot, I shall locate the convergence of two practices of literary modernity between the wars and point out whenever possible the attempts to reconcile literary and political questions in view of what may well serve as a case in point for ongoing attempts to understand the conditions and pre-conditions of post-modernity.² In order to recast the chronology and relocate this "new" origin of Blanchot's modernity in its convergence with that of Paulhan, it is necessary to set Paulhan actively *before* Blanchot, in the spring of 1925.

When Jean Paulhan took over as editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* after the death of Jacques Rivière, the journal had a solid reputation as an exponent of the genteel mix of modernity and classicism propounded by André Gide and other founders some fifteen years earlier. During his term as editor—from 1925 until the fall of France in June, 1940—Paulhan extended the journal's reputation by promoting the early writings of a new literary generation that included Henri Michaux, Francis Ponge, André Malraux, and Jean-Paul Sartre. To be sure, the *NRF*'s notion of modernity, with its stamp of Gidean *moeurs littéraires*, was far from universally shared, to a point where Paulhan's role as a *directeur de conscience* who wanted his journal to mediate between cultural practices and political issues

came increasingly under fire from more militant groups of various political persuasions. As early as 1925—one year after André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* and three years after the death of Marcel Proust—the *NRF* embodied an all-encompassing modernity that assimilated disparate practices within a unified doctrine that was soon attacked as complacent, conservative, and middle-class.

From the ranks of the political Right, the *NRF*'s openness to literary innovation made it the target of attacks that linked the Surrealist *enfants terribles* to the more doctrinaire programs of the French Communist Party. Once the Surrealist provocations became visible in the popular press, it was relatively easy for the conservative Action Française group to call for their suppression as a threat to social order. And when, in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), Breton invoked the use of every means possible to lay waste to the ideals of family, fatherland and religion, there was every reason to believe that the Surrealists wanted very much to be seen as a political (if not revolutionary) movement to be reckoned with. In the light of ongoing political instability in France and the threat of foreign revolution in Morocco, China and especially the Soviet Union, liberal or progressive views of any kind were difficult to maintain. After 1925, the *NRF*'s attempts under Paulhan to support progressive views in literature and politics made for a seemingly irresolvable bind. By the early 1930s, its middle-of-the-road modernity had been outflanked by the proliferation of groups, movements and journals whose activism was fast becoming strident and militant.

In the December 1932 issue of the *NRF*, Paulhan published a thirty-page series of statements ("Cahier de revendications") by young intellectuals that amounted to an extended (and disjointed) cry of discontent. Recruited for Paulhan by Denis de Rougement, the contributors included young right-wing writers such as Thierry Maulnier, Georges Izard and Emmanuel Mounier as well as the French Communist Party members Henri Lefebvre and Paul Nizan. Far from promoting solidarity, the statements express an overwhelming sense of disaffection, of the kind that preaches violence and revolution as the only possible responses to an alienation that is both social and spiritual. In 1936, the Popular Front under Léon Blum represented a first move beyond alienation. For many, including Blanchot, it did not however prove to be the right move. To return to the Blanchot/Paulhan convergence, we need to reconstruct the appropriate chronology in order to show that what is at stake in the

debate surrounding terror is, in fact, linked first to the social instability of the mid-1930s before its resurgence during the early part of the Nazi occupation of France.

I

Prends l'éloquence et tords-lui son cou!
Paul Verlaine, "Art Poétique"

First published in the *NRF* between June and October 1936, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la terreur dans les lettres* (*The Flowers of Tarbes or Terror in Letters*) reappeared five years later expanded to book length. While the ostensible subject of Paulhan's essay is the interplay between literature and rhetoric, his use of the term "terror" carries strong and direct associations with the 1793-94 period of the French Revolution. In view of the historical circumstances that intervene in the period between the two versions of *Les Fleurs*, the historical referent set into play by the term "terror" produces a secondary (connotative) discourse that remains forceful by its very displacement. When, for example, Paulhan writes about censorship, the direct reference to literary institutions is supplemented by connotation to allow for association via parallel to the Revolutionary period as well as that of the German occupation.

The expanded form of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* is divided into three sections. In an opening portrait, Paulhan describes terror as a condition of gravity and crisis arising from uncertainty concerning the "health" of literature. By invoking the metaphor of disease, Paulhan touches on the mixture of aesthetics and morals that express the conservative side of the *NRF*'s version of modernity. Whereas more militant groups such as Action Française and Doriot's Parti Populaire Français were calling for a violent overthrow to end the "established disorder" in France, Paulhan remains closer to the discourse of spiritual renewal of non-conformists such as the *Esprit* group around Mounier.³

The condition of crisis is, in turn, the result of a traditional mistrust of eloquence and rhetoric which, according to those who uphold the terrorist attitude, are seen as threats to authentic

expression and communication. Ultimately, the object of the terrorists' mistrust is identified by Paulhan as language whenever it assumes a mediating role: that is, whenever it is seen as deforming the purity and innocence of an original thought or emotion: "Of language, and thus of literature. Because one does not go without the other. It is not only in books, but in conversation as well that perfection upsets us. 'Too eloquent to be sincere,' we used to think. 'Too well said to be true.'" ⁴ The flowers alluded to in the title are those of rhetoric, and part of an anecdote used by Paulhan to dramatize his argument. A woman walking through the city park of Tarbes in Southwestern France with a bouquet of flowers in her hand is informed by a groundskeeper that it is forbidden to pick the flowers that grow there. She answers that she had, in fact, brought the flowers into the park with her. Some time later, a new sign at the entrance to the park stated that henceforth it would be forbidden to enter the park carrying flowers.

What, then, can be done to and with literature once the "flowers" of rhetoric have been banished? A first step is to account for the rise of the terrorist attitude in the hopes of eventually overcoming it. To this end, Paulhan provides an abridged history of modern rhetoric as the object of a terrorist gaze that he locates in a break near the end of the eighteenth century. Whereas the manuals of rhetoric of the Classical period served also as inventories of figures and other conventions of eloquence, the terrorist attitude—visible to Paulhan in the writings of Hugo, Sainte-Beuve, Verlaine and Rimbaud—turns eloquence into a suspect virtue that threatens the purity of thought or emotion associated with the Romantic notion of genius. At the source of this suspicion is the wider mistrust or fear—Paulhan coins the term *misologie*—that, in turn, is based on a myth of the power of language. As Paulhan goes on to state in the second part of his argument, this myth holds together only by means of the misbegotten belief that the idea is distinct from and superior to the word.

Paulhan sums up the nature and evolution of the terrorist attitude in a definition that ties it to a recurrent historical phenomenon in which the preservation of order rejects the more common virtues of method, knowledge and technique in favor of what it takes to be purity of soul and a freshness of common innocence:

Whence it occurs that citizens see themselves called to account rather than their works: the chair is forgotten for the

cabinetmaker, the remedy for the doctor. Meanwhile, skill, intelligence and knowhow become suspect, as if they were hiding some lack of commitment. (*FT*, p. 47)

Comparisons between the 1936 and 1941 versions of Paulhan's text show that this definition was added to the latter in what I see as representative of the historical discourse embedded within the discussion of literary practices. Noting an even more substantial principle behind the "common sense" claims of the terrorist, Paulhan finds the remains of a deformed Cartesian method appropriated in the cause of literary chauvinism:

Thus dividing the difficulty into as many particles as are needed to resolve it, requiring evidence from each particle, and taking nothing for granted that has not been verified; accepting ultimately that there is nothing in such materials that our attention, once applied, cannot seize and understand. Such is the foundation on which Terror builds its war machine [*engin de guerre*]. (*FT*, p. 65)

The third section of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* begins with an abrupt change of direction. After exposing the inherent flaws in the terrorist attitude, Paulhan states that it derives from the reader's projection of meaning rather than from authorial intention. Consequently, Paulhan admits that his own approach to the terrorist attitude is . . . that of a terrorist: "We are ourselves what we were pursuing. We are personally involved" (*FT*, p. 105). What motivates this apparent about-face is Paulhan's desire to convert the potential terrorist within all readers into a future supporter of the new rhetoric that founds Paulhan's practice of common communication. In order to achieve this conversion, Paulhan must first allow the critical suspicion of the terrorist attitude to assert itself. Then, by confessing his own involvement as a former terrorist who has overcome terror, he can hope to make his conversion exemplary.⁵ Once disabused of his or her own mistrust of language, Paulhan's reader would presumably assimilate the terrorist attitude as a negative phase or moment of critical doubt to be subsumed in a dialectic leading to the thesis of a new rhetoric. Freed from the myth of the power of words and the sickness of language, the reader could use the very elements of

eloquence and invention that Paulhan sees as central to expression and communication. In place of prohibition and expulsion, one might then hope to find a new sign stating that henceforth it would be forbidden *not* to carry flowers into the garden.

In his response to Paulhan, Blanchot writes that the force and movement of Paulhan's essay—from the initial portrait of terror to its refutation and reappropriation in the cause of a new rhetoric—are intelligible only in their effect on the reader: "It is by the feelings of discomfort and anxiousness that one is authorized to relate to the large problems that he studies and whose absence alone he is willing to show."⁶ Rethinking the singular force of language as a basic measure of literary invention is central to Paulhan's projected rhetoric. But, as Blanchot argues, the subtlety of Paulhan's argument works against his intentions. While he exposes the false distinction between thought and language essential to the terrorist attitude, Paulhan does not, according to Blanchot, address the full implications of his position: "The book that has just been approached, is it really the right one to read?" (*FP*, p. 97).

To what other book might *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* serve as preface or introduction? What exactly is it in Paulhan's text that requires a supplement? To restate the point a third and final way, one might ask whether Paulhan actually overcomes the terrorist attitude and thus whether the proposed rhetoric of communication is anything more than an idealized synthesis projected from within an earlier and less fully developed phase. For Blanchot, Paulhan merely redirects the terrorist attitude toward a new object, without considering the opposition that undermines it. Here is how Blanchot sketches this move in Paulhan's *Fleurs*: "If the writer makes proper use of images, units of rhyme—in other words, of the renewed means of rhetoric—he can rediscover the impersonal and innocent language that he seeks, the only one allowing him to be what he is and to have contact with the pure newness [*nouveauté vierge*] of things" (*FP*, p. 99). The flaw in Paulhan's argument is that his proposed rhetoric asserts a privileged origin. Can one truly rediscover a *nouveauté vierge*?

Because he remains blind to the internal flaw in his argument, Paulhan's attempts to reappropriate the terrorist attitude are neater than they ought to be. By inscribing terror within a movement toward his new rhetoric, Paulhan idealizes literature in ways that ultimately repeat the terrorist attitude without any apparent movement beyond

it. For Blanchot, literature is conceivable only when terror is allowed full impact that precludes the false security expressed in the recourse to an origin:

It is a fact, literature exists. It continues to be, despite the internal absurdity that inhabits it, divides it, and makes it nothing short of inconceivable. There is in the heart of every writer a demon who pushes him to murder literary forms and to become aware of his dignity as a writer to the degree that he breaks with language and literature: in a word, to question tacitly what he is and what he does. How, in these conditions, can literature exist? How can the writer who distinguishes himself from others by the very fact that he challenges the validity of language and whose effort ought to be to prevent the formation of a written work [*oeuvre*] finally create a literary product [*ouvrage*]? How is literature possible? (*FP*, pp. 102-03)

In place of Paulhan's projection of a future rhetoric of communication, Blanchot argues for a notion of literature whose instability is the result of two necessary illusions: the first, of those who struggle against convention by reinventing it, and the second, of those who claim to renounce literature in the name of something such as religion or metaphysics. For Blanchot, Paulhan exposes the first illusion, but he is a victim of the second. Unwilling to repeat Paulhan's gesture, Blanchot asserts the openness of a permanent dialectic in which the recourse to origin is seen as simulation and enacted as repetition: "The writer needs to see that he gives birth to art only by a futile and blind struggle against it, that the work he thinks he has torn away from common and vulgar language exists because of the vulgarization of pure language, by an overload of impurity and debasement" (*FP*, p. 104). The mixture of descriptive and judgmental terms used by Blanchot is instructive because it reveals the factor of value implicit in Paulhan's argument. But whereas Paulhan moves (all too neatly) beyond the negative moment of terror toward a future synthesis, Blanchot avoids both origin and projection by asserting only difference.

II

In order to understand the historical problematic inscribed within Blanchot's response to Paulhan (1942), I want to return to 1936 and an earlier text by Blanchot whose appearance coincides with that of the first version of Paulhan's *Fleurs* at the start of the Popular Front regime under the leadership of Léon Blum. Associated during the 1930s with a number of short-lived non-conformist movements of conservative orientation, Blanchot published a considerable number of political texts, some of which have recently become available. Mention of them is made here tentatively and in order to encourage their inclusion in future studies of what increasingly appears to be the prehistory of Blanchot's literary career. At the very least, these first writings need to be accounted for by anyone who might otherwise relegate Blanchot's complete works to the "Garden" of literature.

Reacting to what he sees as the absence of parliamentary opposition to the Popular Front government that was to last for little more than a year, Blanchot calls for the most militant of protests, prescribing terror in what his title characterizes as the cause of public safety (*le salut public*):

We are not among those who prefer to adopt the call for a peaceful, spiritual revolution, which is both senseless and cowardly. There must be a revolution, because a regime that holds everything and that has its roots everywhere cannot be modified. It must be ended, demolished. This revolution must be violent, because one cannot draw from a nation as deadened as our own the strength and passion suited to renewal by decent measures, but instead by bloody jolts, by a storm that will shake it up in order to awaken it. This is not at all peace of mind, but that is exactly what must be avoided.⁷

Such a radical vision calls for interpretation along at least two lines, for while ongoing study of Blanchot's critical and fictional writings continues, recent documentation has brought to light what had formerly been the object of conjecture and insinuation: namely, the 1930s period referred to by Mehlman as that of Blanchot's "inaugural

silence.” At first glance, the revelation of a political past appears to haunt Blanchot some fifty years after the fact, haunt him personally and cast suspicion on a political itinerary which, since 1945, has moved markedly toward the Left. The apparent scandal centers on the fact that this co-signer and reputed author of the 1960 “Declaration of the 121” opposing French intervention in Algeria is also the author of political texts openly supportive of conservative and reactionary movements that preached right-wing revolution during the 1930s.

But before too many allegations are made on the basis of tentative (and incomplete) evidence, a number of direct questions need to be asked about Blanchot’s activities during the 1930s. Is the political venture a master key on which the later fiction and criticism are somehow dependent? Do the early writings explain or account for inconsistencies and gaps? Or should they instead be added to the existing body of his writings without special consideration? To restate the question more pointedly, we might ask just how much of Blanchot’s notorious obscurity can be traced to this political origin. How much does the political supplement enrich our understanding of Blanchot’s place in literary modernity?

Until unrestricted access to the “new” materials is complete, it seems premature to project a political vision of any breadth whatsoever. At present, it is all too easy to dismiss the call to violence as an offshoot of the radical non-conformism studied by Loubet del Bayle, Eugen Weber and others.⁸ For to dismiss the early political writings is somehow to neglect a number of problems that beset readers of French modernity in its various forms. In the case of Blanchot, a displaced political dimension can be discerned in narratives such as “L’Idylle” and “Le Dernier Mot,” both written in the mid-1930s and reprinted in 1951 under the title of *Le Ressassement éternel*.⁹ Similarly, references in Blanchot’s 1948 *L’Arrêt de mort* to the ill-fated Munich agreement of ten years earlier situate the personal scope of the first-person account within a historical context that most commentators overlook. Beyond Blanchot, a striking number of similar references call for rereadings of *Le Bleu du ciel* by Georges Bataille and *L’Age d’homme* by Michel Leiris.

Until such factors can be fully integrated into a wider study of Blanchot’s personal and literary politics, the title of his 1936 article—“Le Terrorisme, méthode de salut public”—is a reminder that when Blanchot exposes the terrorist attitude at work in Paulhan’s attempts to overcome terror in the cause of a future rhetoric, he also

acknowledges that attitude in his own conceptions of literature and history, conceptions that are necessarily those of literature within history.

NOTES

1. Roger Laporte and Bernard Noël, *Deux Lectures de Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973).
2. Jeffrey Mehlman states the point succinctly when he refers to "the disturbing repercussions of a lost pre-World War II sensibility in our postwar sense of cultural achievement" (*Legacies: Of Anti-Semitism in France* [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983], p. 9).
3. For an overview of the non-conformist phenomenon, see Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, "Une Tentative de renouvellement de la pensée politique française," *MLN*, 95 (1980), 787-808. The article is an updated and highly condensed version of his indispensable study, *Les Non-conformistes des années 30* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).
4. Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la terreur dans les lettres* (Paris: Gallimard "Idées," 1973), p. 23. The new edition edited by Jean-Claude Zylberstein amends the 1941 text with a number of appendices. Future references will cite the updated edition as *FT*. As an ongoing phenomenon that resurfaces in the current debates surrounding deconstruction in its American contexts, the terrorist attitude is visible as the critical object in Paul de Man's "The Resistance to Theory," *Yale French Studies*, 63 (1982), 3-20.
5. For a fuller analysis of Paulhan's notions of rhetoric and communication, see the contributions of Silvio Yeschua, Michel Beaujour and Frédéric Grover to the Cerisy-la-Salle colloquium whose proceedings were published under the direction of Jacques Bersani as *Jean Paulhan le souterrain* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1976).
6. Maurice Blanchot, "Comment la littérature est-elle possible?" in *Fauxpas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 97. Future references will cite this text as *FP*. Blanchot's essay first appeared in 1942, in the form of a pamphlet published by José Corti. His other writings on Paulhan include "Le Mystère dans les lettres," in *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) and "La Facilité de mourir," in *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). See also Sartre's references to Paulhan and the implicit counterresponses to Blanchot in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard "Idées," 1965), pp. 188-89.
7. "Le Terrorisme, méthode de salut public." The text is one of several reprinted in *Gamma*, No. 5 (1976). The passage quoted in translation is from p. 61 in the reprinted

version. The Committee of Public Safety was a central governing body during the Revolutionary period of 1793-94 known as the Reign of Terror. On this topic, see R.R. Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973). Like Paulhan in *Les Fleurs*, Blanchot invokes the historical allusion in what is likely an ironic mode of reference to the Popular Front and its pretensions to revolutionary reform.

8. With recent debate centering on the French translation of Mehlman's article "Blanchot at *Combat*" in the summer 1982 issue of *Tel Quel*, it is worth recalling that very little is known of Blanchot's activities during the 1930s. Before Loubet del Bayle's book, the only references that I have found are supplied by Eugen Weber in *Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1962).

9. In 1983, *Le Ressassement eternel* reappeared with a striking supplement—"Après Coup"—that only underscores the urgent necessity to (re)read his fiction and non-fiction along the lines that I have used to approach the Paulhan/Blanchot convergence. An English translation by Paul Auster of *Le Ressassement eternel* has been published under the title *Vicious Circles* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1984).