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978-0-521-47213-5 - Genealogies of the Text: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and
Politics in Modern France

Jeffrey Mehlman

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Each of the essays here gathered charts and expands an experience of intense readerly surprise. Beyond any methodological considerations, whatever readability they retain lies in the extent to which that surprise continues to permeate them. At a time when “literary theory” often seems bland in the predictability of its outrages, such interest may constitute sufficient justification for their collective publication, but I would not have assembled these papers were it not for the overriding surprise informing my sense of their global coherence – the macro-shock constituting, as it were, the medium within which they were written. These remarks have been compiled toward its delineation.

In the ten years preceding the decade during which these essays were written, in the course of three books,¹ I had been pursuing a dual project: on the one hand, to write an implicit history of the most fruitful phases of that ongoing meditation on textual interpretation in France which had received the journalistic tag(s) of “structuralism” and/or “post-structuralism;” on the other, to do so in the form of a series of readings of canonical texts of French literature. A first book, *A Structural Study of Autobiography*, was intent on bringing Lacan’s re-evaluation of Freud to English-speaking academia by showing that that re-evaluation, among other things, had precise and important consequences for any reading of so enshrined a masterwork as *A la recherche du temps perdu*. *Revolution and Repetition*, which followed in 1977, freed the structuralist model of the ballast constituted by its residual investment in the Freudian category of “castration,” charted the reversals in Laplanche and Derrida through which it was dismantled, and made the case that there could be no better medium for the

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optimal functioning (or comprehension) of the entire process than the intertextual field formed by the novels of Victor Hugo. Finally, *Cataract*, I now believe, offered a meditation on the decline of the entire problematic in the form of a reading of Diderot. At a time when “deconstruction” was becoming a byword of American academia, I was struck by how depressingly quickly repetition was winning out over difference in the general field of repetition-as-difference (or deconstruction), and found in the writings of Michel Serres the wherewithal both to propose a new coherence in Diderot’s *oeuvre* and to articulate a certain waning of what had previously, in the years prior to its academic respectability, seemed to augur the possibility of a style of reading that might be construed, without inflation, as radical. Serres as the decadence of deconstruction? The suggestion carries conviction both because his thought is a protracted meditation on the diverse valences of “entropy” (or decline) and because the arch perversity with which it posits a virtual equivalence between “literature” and “science” seems a kind of bravura rigidification of the manifold and more credible inter-implications of “literature” and “philosophy” found in Derrida.

Those three books, then, together tell something of a story – a classical narrative of rise and fall, emergence and dissipation – unavailable to a reading of only part of the series, and it is perhaps worth observing that the experience triggering the essays in this volume occurred when that narrative appeared to be drawing to a close.

In 1977, while at the Bibliothèque Nationale, I stumbled on what may be some of the most taboo texts of contemporary French letters: the series of violently anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, and pro-terrorist articles contributed in the 1930s by Maurice Blanchot to the fascist monthly *Combat*. Blanchot, of course, was one of the great tutelary presences of the entire interpretive effort that so fascinated me. My debt to him was amply recorded in my essay of 1974, “Orphée scripteur.”² Moreover, one of the more intriguing aspects of his writing was the constant strain toward Judaic metaphor in his delineation of a crucial realm of textual dispersion. Here, then, in the transition from the pre-War anti-

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Semitic journalism to the post-War philo-Semitic meditation on “literary space” lay an enigma I set myself to pondering. The result was “Of Literature and Terror: Blanchot at *Combat*,” which became the first chapter of my *Legacies: Of Anti-Semitism in France*.³ But it is in the prehistory of that publication that the overriding surprise referred to in the inception of these remarks is to be found.

The essay situated Blanchot’s former anti-Semitism against the strange backdrop of France’s pre-World War II tradition of anti-Jewish thought and its precipitous liquidation once Hitler in effect made of anti-Semitism an untenable option for the vast majority of French intellectuals. Perhaps the (Möbian) context against which the Blanchot enigma might best be encapsulated and situated is the lineage moving from Edouard Drumont to Georges Bernanos to Maurice Clavel. Drumont, in *La France juive* (1886), wrote a thousand pages intent on promoting left-wing anti-capitalist anti-Semitism as *the* political philosophy of modern times. It was one of the two best-selling works in France in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Catholic novelist and polemicist Bernanos, in his influential *La Grande Peur des bien-pensants* (1931), wrote a lengthy biography in praise of Drumont. By the end of the decade, Bernanos’ politics had taken a militantly anti-Fascist (i.e., anti-Francoist) turn, but he was careful to maintain that even then he had not broken with the values of his beloved “master,” Drumont. Finally, there came in the 1970s the Catholic *gauchiste* patron of the resolutely philo-Semitic “new philosophers,” Maurice Clavel. For Clavel was careful to maintain that *his* “master” remained Bernanos, and even the unassimilable Bernanos of *La Grande Peur*. From Drumont to Bernanos to Clavel, in brief, there was no break, but a paradoxical twist bringing a fundamentally anti-Semitic configuration into alignment with a later philo-Semitic one. Such, in summary, was the perverse progress against which I assayed the enigma I had located in Blanchot.

The essay first appeared in 1980 in a special issue of *Modern Language Notes* dedicated to the 1930s in France.⁴ Meanwhile, Philippe Sollers, who had heard a version of the paper (in improvised French) at Columbia University, confirmed that he was eager to publish a French translation (which he would commission) in *Tel*

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quel. When that translation finally did appear, in 1982, it was riddled with misrenderings in French, but nonetheless provoked considerable interest *pro* and *con* in the French press. All without my knowledge. It was not until a number of months later that I saw the botched translation and the two principal articles devoted to my own. The first, in *Le Matin*, hailed a major and barely believable revelation and declared it particularly significant that France would have had to wait for an American to reveal matters of such import about French intellectual life.⁵ The second, in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, simply denied the premise of my piece, refused to credit the existence of any anti-Semitic writings in Blanchot's past, and more or less implied that only a foreigner would stoop to such slander against the great French monument.⁶ Given the opportunity for ridicule opened up by some of the more ludicrous errors in the translation of my essay, I confess that I was relieved to see the attack focusing on the article's premise, and dashed off a letter to Maurice Nadeau, the editor of the *Quinzaine*, in which I dissociated myself from the translation, nonetheless responded to the denial by quoting at some length two particularly hair-raising passages of anti-Jewish polemic by Blanchot in the 1930s, took the liberty of connecting the refusal to acknowledge the existence of such passages with the manifestly xenophobic tenor of the attack, and had the pleasure of ending my letter by paraphrasing a well-known Bernanos title: "Français, si vous saviez . . . l'anglais par exemple."

When a month passed without word from the *Quinzaine*, I called up Nadeau and was told to my surprise that he had received the letter, but could not publish the two passages I had quoted because they were just too violent, Blanchot was now too old – and a friend of the house to boot. I reminded him that I had been attacked in his journal for claiming that such passages existed, specified that their existence could (and should) be carefully circumscribed in the *Quinzaine* by documenting Blanchot's activities during the War in the Resistance, but insisted that he publish my letter as written. At which point he pleaded a faulty (overseas) connection and I hung up – in astonishment. When Sollers discovered the existence of my letter, he was all too happy to publish it in the first issue of *L'Infini* (as the newly relocated *Tel*

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quel has since been called).⁷ What measure of Parisian resentment dictated the relish with which Nadeau's refusal to publish the letter was announced in *L'Infini* is, of course, open to speculation.

Now at the time all this was transpiring, my teaching in Boston brought me to review comments I had made years earlier in a preface to Jean Laplanche's *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*.⁸ In that piece, I saw myself (ten years after the fact) brandishing the thousand presumably unreadable pages of Lacan's *Écrits* and telling my American readership that what was remarkable about the French reading of Freud was not simply that it was an alternative interpretation, different from the going American one, but that what it mediated was nothing so much as an elaborate theory of the inevitability of the error entailed by the American reading. Laplanche's book, I maintained, would offer superlative access to that insight. Of a sudden, it dawned on me that that very scenario was being perversely re-enacted ten years later in the controversy surrounding my essay on Blanchot. For I saw myself again brandishing a thousand presumably "unreadable" pages, Drumont's *La France juive*, only to find myself this time – or so the *Quinzaine* would have it – in the position of the "American" who could not but be wrong. The seal provided by the twin motifs of the "inevitability of American error" and the thousand-page "unreadable" Gallic masterpiece was unmistakable. As in Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" an identical structure was being mobilized, but with a change of sign.⁹ As though the discursive dilemma into which I had been written in the recent polemic had always already been scripted in the somewhat triumphant heralding of the accomplishments of French thought found in the earlier essays.

The essays in this book are attempts to dwell within that unsettling insight in the hope of seeing where it might lead. Some return to texts I had analyzed earlier to view them as though my previous readings had been *at best* virtuoso renditions of the treble part of works for which I could now supply a rather rich, though sinister, bass. The return to the Valéry of my 1970s speculation "On Tear-Work"¹⁰ in "Cranometry and criticism," the opening essay of this volume, is, in this regard, exemplary, but the resurfacing of the Proust of *A Structural Study of Autobiography* in "Litera-

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ture and Collaboration,” and of the Blanchot of “Orphée scribeur” in “Iphigenia 38” (which takes the enigma of Blanchot’s political journalism of the 1930s deep into the most revered – and misread – of his novels) may be viewed in the same perspective. As may the return of the Mallarmé of “Mallarmé/Maxwell,”¹¹ in the (anti-Dreyfusard) anticipation of the future of Mallarmé criticism in “Pierre Menard, author of *Don Quixote*’ again.” Even the Lacan of “Poe *pourri*”¹² emerges in uncomfortable, if illuminating, proximity to the wildly reactionary Léon Bloy in “The paranoid style in French prose.”

The Blanchot controversy of the early 1980s was, in fact, the first of several in which I was to be embroiled. Convinced as I was of the centrality of the 1930s journalism to any understanding of Blanchot, I could not but be disappointed to find Derrida publishing an entire volume on Blanchot without referring to the tell-tale articles.¹³ That disappointment is registered in “Writing and deference: the politics of literary adulation” (chapter 7), an essay in which what I took to be an evasion is interpreted as symptomatic of a general waning of the intellectual energy (or audacity) of deconstruction in the age of its academic respectability. My sense was that Derrida would eventually – I did not realize how soon – have to confront the whole vexed matter of the War, the Collaboration, the Resistance, etc. I compared him to Jean Paulhan, in his last years something of a mystic of language, a man of impeccable credentials in the Resistance, but who, as soon as the War was over, began arguing with some stridency that there were no ethical grounds for condemning any intellectual who had collaborated with the Nazis. Why? The great paradox of World War II, according to Paulhan, was that the national Resistance to foreign occupation was to a considerable extent the achievement of an ideological group that had long been denigrating all national values with a view toward future collaboration – with Moscow. In addition, the Collaborators with the Germans were a group that had long been training as Resistance fighters – against the Russians. I endeavored to show that that constitutive chiasmus (between Resistance and Collaboration) was also the configuration informing what Paulhan as meditator on the con-

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undra of language was to call a principle of “counteridentity.” The political upshot of his position was to call for a general amnesty. Yet he felt inadequate to the task. “Ah! je voudrais être juif, pour dire – avec plus d’autorité que je n’en puis avoir [and yet he was a leader of the Resistance] – que j’ai pardonné à la France, une fois pour toutes, son impuissance à me défendre.”¹⁴ Let the chiasmus survive, but let its painful political crux be voided.

It was at this point in my speculative scenario that I had Derrida enter the scene – his *différance* taking over for Paulhan’s principle of counteridentity, his “dissemination” for the more radical polysemy Paulhan envisaged. And above all, I suggested, in what I called a “speculative genealogy,” Derrida separating the later Paulhan’s problematic from the political chiasmus that seemed to underpin it.

When “Writing and deference” appeared in *Representations* in 1986, the reaction was unexpectedly intense (although, once again, as in the case of the Blanchot polemic in France, it was not until months later that I learned the details). J. Hillis Miller drew up a list of four or five left-wing enemies of literary theory to denounce in his 1986 Presidential address to the Modern Language Association. The list included myself as well as the editors of *Representations* for having published my piece. Derrida, I’m told, refused to lecture at Berkeley because of it, and Stephen Greenblatt has told me that it changed the history of the journal.

In retrospect, the commotion over “Writing and deference” strikes me as justified less by the extremeness of what was presented as a speculative argument – Derrida, it should be repeated, was compared to Paulhan, a hero of the Resistance – than by the essay’s premonition of what would soon submerge the literary-theoretical community under the name of the “de Man affair.” My own favorite comment on the controversy – which was born of the discovery that the eminent Yale critic, recently deceased, had written numerous articles in the Brussels collaborationist press – is that of Howard Bloch, an editor of *Representations*, whom I ran into one evening in San Francisco and who asked me straightaway: “who would have believed you were right?” The present volume contains two essays (chapters 8 and 9) on the de

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Man affair – which, because of an ill conceived defense, very soon became a “de Man-Derrida affair.” Ultimately less interested in the (undeniable and precise) repercussions of de Man’s past in his later work than in the structure of Derrida’s apology, I have, I confess, observed with some fascination Derrida, in his writings on de Man, all but acting out, as it were, the scenario scripted for him in “Writing and deference.”

Finally, note should be taken of the public reception of the penultimate essay in this volume: “*Pour Sainte-Beuve*: Maurice Blanchot, 10 March 1942.” It was originally presented to a symposium on Blanchot at the University of London in January 1993, and deals with the author’s front-page article (on Sainte-Beuve’s politics) in the collaborationist newspaper *Le Journal des débats*. My argument ultimately has Blanchot misreading his subject in order to avoid the trap set for him (in 1942) by his collaborationist editors. Its subject, that is, is the political honor of Maurice Blanchot. Now in the course of the London symposium, Roger Laporte, a friend of the author’s, announced to general surprise that Blanchot, queried about the date in my title, drew a blank, but that upon being confronted with his own text of 1942, he had written a letter, which he had agreed to have read (by Laporte) at the end of my lecture. That letter, a rather violent act of self-criticism, does not see much beyond the egregiousness of the author’s endorsement of an argument by the royalist leader Charles Maurras. And yet it is a remarkable document, in some ways the letter many would have wished de Man had written, in others a rehearsal of Derrida’s own apology for de Man. Upon receiving the text of the letter, after my presentation, from Laporte, it was unclear to me whether it constituted a perverse sort of diploma or the epistolary equivalent of a pound of flesh. I have included it in an appendix.

“Writing and deference,” the two de Man articles, and “*Pour Sainte-Beuve*,” whatever polemical prominence they may have achieved, remain – or record – after-shocks, speculations carried out in the wake of my surprise, mentioned above, at rediscovering the contours of the polemic over Blanchot in the earlier problematic of my preface to Laplanche. And it is to that enigma, which

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furnishes the very medium within which these essays were written, that I shall now return. For the surprise implied, of course, that an unwitting anti-Semitic counterpoint was perhaps a dimension not simply of the texts I was *championing* (or explicating) but of those I was writing as well. The point might be sustained by considering that whereas the “method” of textual superimposition, first elaborated by Charles Mauron, is implicitly at work throughout my essays, “Cranometry and criticism” situates that most fruitful technique of “literary psychoanalysis” genealogically as part of the arsenal of social Darwinism, and “‘Pierre Menard’ again” details the role it played in the theory used to pin the incriminating text in 1894 on Captain Dreyfus in the celebrated Affair bearing his name.¹⁵ The general dilemma of the “status of my discourse” (as critical jargon would put it) – the un-ease with which one cannot but attend to the apparent enrichment of texts through a delineation of their anti-Semitic underpinnings – is the subject of the conclusion to my *Legacies*. I situate my recent efforts there within the context of Gershom Scholem’s remarks on the afterlife of Sabbatian antinomianism and their contribution to an understanding of the criticism of his friend Walter Benjamin.¹⁶ Within the present volume, that link – between Kabbalism and contemporary French letters – will be found in the discussion of Klossowski’s edition of Hamann in “Literature and hospitality” as well – more obliquely – as in the remarks on Bernard Lazare, anti-Jewish “Symbolist of Nîmes” and future hero of the Dreyfus Affair, in “‘Pierre Menard’ again.” If Scholem is right in suggesting that Jewish secularist culture, the whole of the Jewish Enlightenment, has its deepest roots not in a flight from religious mysticism, but in its desperate exacerbation, then a Jew’s deepest achievements in secular culture will tend to join up, however tangentially, with that will to violence against the Law which was Sabbatian antinomianism’s most characteristic tendency. As though at a certain pitch of intensity the fascination with the secular were less a forgetting of classical Judaism than an oblique remembering or unwitting re-enactment of a major Jewish heresy.

That heresy, of course, might be read reductively in terms of “anti-Semitism,” even “Jewish anti-Semitism.” Indeed, to entertain that proposition is to be reminded (first) that Jewish self-

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hatred historically was a matter of Eastern European Jews trying to work their way into German by sounding more Western than the Germans, that is: by sounding French; and (second) that a detour via French to the core of alien German texts is in many ways a precise and economical description of what has been called “literary theory” in this country. A tempting superimposition indeed: the “theoretical” or aesthetic dream and the nightmare it may always already have been.¹⁷ Yet whatever the seductions of such literary sociology, I prefer to remain with Scholem, reviving that deep historical fracture – the legacy of Sabbatianism, the perilous, even *erroneous* business of pretending to defeat evil from within – whose persistence may well be the enabling condition of these pages. Enlightenment and catastrophe, then: for it is within their conjunction and its repercussions that these essays, not quite *flowers of evil* all, have been culled.