ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE

DENIS HOLLIER

TRANSLATED BY CATHERINE PORTER

FRENCH LITERATURE UNDER THE THREAT OF WAR

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CONTENTS

MUST LITERATURE BE POSSIBLE?

THIS IS A PIPE

This collection respects unity of place in its most minimal guise. The essays included here were all written at a respectable distance from Paris, in anglophone territories—first California, then New York.

At Berkeley, above the table where I worked, among the assorted pictures and notes tacked to the wall, there was a black-and-white postcard I had found in a general store in that computer-age paradise, the suburban Far West. It was a photograph of an object made by Native Americans. I've forgotten the name of the tribe. The card featured a ceremonial hatchet. The handle's grip was decorated with ribbons that hung down in a skein, like scalps. The association is not gratuitous. On the iron blade there was a crudely engraved scene: a vigorous redskin was brandishing his ax at arm's length, while with his other hand he was grasping the hair of a trapper on whom he was about to perform the horrific ritual. The scene provided instructions for using the object on which it was represented. America cultivates this sort of redundancy, in which mimicry functions as a strategy not so much for camouflage as for exhibition or even advertising. People here are fond of objects that display their own function. Hot dogs are sold in stands shaped like hot dogs.

On the back of the postcard, the caption turned the situation inside out.

I don't remember the exact words. But in its own way the text declared: this is not an ax. It was a pipe. The handle was hollow. As for the blade, which was also hollow, it became a bowl whose roundness was concealed by the viewing angle. Warring parties camouflage their military installations under peaceful exteriors. Here, to fool a friend, the peace pipe had been camouflaged as a tomahawk.

One can imagine the after-dinner stories, back when there were storytellers, to which pipes of this sort must have given rise time and again in Boston, Berlin, Oxford, Strasbourg, or St. Petersburg, as the pipe's owner, some anonymous Marlowe, would light up and answer the questions it provoked.

OF LITERATURE

The cluster of authors on which the following essays focus—Sartre, Bataille, Caillois, Leiris, Malraux—might lay claim to a rather supple form of temporal unity as well, that of a generation; their works are rooted in the 1930s and 1940s. But beyond the relative coincidence of dates, the fact that these authors belong to the same era is only the external aspect of what I shall call, so as not to abandon the criteria of classical dramaturgy, unity of subject or of action.

The hatchet-pipe orchestrates a happy ending. The object of peace manages to contain the scene of war for which it is the support structure; it is not overwhelmed by its subject. Like the dove announcing dry land, the pipe is a precursor of peace. The story hour is approaching; it is nearly time for the storytellers, those birds of Minerva whom Roquentin abhors ("you have to choose: live or tell")[1] and whom Sartre continues to mock in *What Is Literature?:* "We are first presented with the audience, a brilliant and worldly society which has assembled in a drawing-room after dinner. It is night-time, which dispels fatigue and passion. The oppressed are asleep, as are the rebellious; the world is enshrouded; the story unfolds . . . [The narrator] tells his story with detachment. If it has caused him suffering, he has made honey from this suffering."[2] Men with experience tell what they accomplished, once upon a time.

Walter Benjamin does not share Sartre's scorn for storytellers. In "The Storyteller," an essay written about the same time as *Nausea* (1936), Benjamin contrasts the narrative universe of tales with that of novels. The tale

is the narrative form belonging to what he calls transmissible experience, a world in which individuals and generations share what has happened to them, a world in which each object, each personal or professional situation, is paired with matching stories that function somewhat like a user's manual transmitting practical experience along artisanal lines. Unlike a tale, a novel conveys an experience that is too solitary, too individual to enter into the narrative or pragmatic patrimony of its public. A novel is the story of an individual who is not integrated into collective experience. But the world of tales is drawing to a close. Truth is losing its epic, communitarian character. Narration is threatened by information. And experience is less and less communicable. Benjamin's first example of this modern degradation of experience and its consequences is war. One of his statements in particular is often quoted: "Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?"[3] A great deal has been written about the aphasia of soldiers on leave. The war—Benjamin is referring to the war of 1914—did not transform its survivors into storytellers: war is one of the most powerful instances of the industrial degradation of experience that prevents it from being communicated or shared, from transforming itself into a story to be told.

Sartre pursues the same idea in "Departure and Return," his essay on Brice Parain's philosophy of language. Brice Parain offers another example of the silence of the soldier on home leave: for him war is above all an uprooting from collective experience, from the narrative community; thus the experience of war is not transmissible.[4] But Benjamin and Sartre valorize opposite ends of the spectrum. Benjamin misses the storytellers; Sartre cannot abide them. Sartre chooses the world of noncommunicable experience, from which no lesson, no rule, no good can come because this sort of experience allows no escape, it can never be left behind; it never recedes to the distance that would be necessary if some lesson, some wisdom were to be derived from it. For Sartre, too, the key date is that of a war (the war of 1940). But whereas for Benjamin the First World War was responsible for the impoverishment of contemporary fiction, Sartre celebrates the opportunities afforded the modern novel in the Second World War. This is the war that ends the reign of "narrators" once and for all. It destroys narrative distance, brings the narrator out of hiding. At the hour of the night fliers, the sky is crowded, too dangerous for Minerva's

birds. Raymond Aron (in *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*) and André Malraux (in *Man's Hope*) diagnose the narrative implications of the crisis of the 1930s and 1940s in much the same way. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, writers respond to the appeal for stories without knowing where these stories will take them. Until recently, the scene of war was framed tightly enough to prevent the Indian pipe from becoming a battle-ax. Now words, as Sartre puts it, are turning into loaded guns.

Wartime memories? War leaves no time for memories. Rather than having stories to tell, we are left with the impossibility of telling stories. Like a moth attracted to a flame, literature turns toward war not because it sees war as its source, the condition of its own possibility, but on the contrary because it sees war as what threatens—or promises—to take away its conditions of possibility. War forces literature to take the risk—or gives it the hope—of being stricken at last with impossibility, of having nothing at all to fall back on. The *Odyssey* folds back into the *Iliad*, and the island of the Sirens becomes Troy in flames. Through its suffering, its chaos, its urgency, war defies description; like a reality that would refute the words used to name it, it sets a sort of objective limit to realism. But that is not all. Not satisfied with being an unnamable referent, war institutes a regime of total mobilization that takes away time for writing. Freedoms are suspended. War essentially holds suspect anyone who finds time to write. *The War* opens with the pages of a diary Marguerite Duras kept during the liberation of Paris. In one entry, she is seated at a table in the Orsay train station, taking notes, interviewing refugees. An officer appears. "You're allowed to work standing up, but I don't want to see this table any more."[5] The scene can be read as an allegory. War removes the support structures, the foundations, on which writing relies. Writers have nothing to fall back on. Nothing stable on which to write. Literature is no longer based on anything. This same note is struck forty years later in Duras's perplexity when she comes across the diary again. She recalls the scene, the events, but she cannot see herself writing in the midst of it all; she does not succeed in seeing the table on which the officer did not want to see her writing. It is a scene in which there is no place for her. "I can see the place, the Gare d'Orsay, and the various comings and goings. But I can't see myself writing the diary."[6] It is just as if the writing—stricken with what Lacan would have called *nullibiety*[7]—has not taken place, has not managed to find a place, to inscribe itself in space. Kassner, Malraux's

protagonist in *Days of Wrath*, is in a similar situation. His Nazi jailers have put him in a situation the most salient feature of which, for him, is the impossibility of writing. He reiterates the motif again and again: "How could he write, here in the cell? . . . Oh, to be able to write, to write!"[8] The generation of writers considered in these essays was highly sensitive to narratives that begin once the world in which the means for writing exist has been left behind, once the threshold of possibility of writing has been crossed. How would literature be possible in a place where writing is impossible? The question has to be turned around: How would literature be possible if there were a way to write?

Modernity does not hold the exclusive title to this kind of short-circuit. Stendhal, for example, had a gift for putting himself in situations in which his hand did not follow his thought, in which a sort of paralysis prevented him from carrying out the gestures of writing. He let himself be overcome by some event that left him wordless. *The Life of Henry Brulard* ends in a flurry of happiness that immobilizes his pen: "My hand can no longer write, I shall put it off to tomorrow"; "the subject surpasses the teller."[9] Some thirty years before, he had already had the experience of being overwhelmed by the events he was recounting. On February 11, 1805, for example, he noted in his diary: "For the past quarter of an hour, I've been making an effort to write, my feelings are so strong that writing (the physical action) is hard work for me."[10] The process of writing remains forbidden. Unhorsed, glued to the spot by a sudden happiness, writing does not go on. There is a touch of modernity in that broken column, marking the passage of what Leiris would have called the bull's horn. Stendhal is brought up short by happiness. Our own bulls' horns are darker, more tragic. There is another difference, too: while the unrepresentable may leave us wordless, it does not deprive us of speech. This observation is even the point of departure for modern criticism. The unhappiness of some writers produces felicitous turns of phrase. Blanchot explores this motif at the outset of *Faux pas* (False Steps), his first collection of essays, when he describes the condition of the modern writer: "What accounts for the destruction of language in him also accounts for his need to use language. He is like a hemiplegic whose affliction simultaneously obliges him to walk and prohibits him from walking . . . The one who writes is driven to write by the silence and absence of language that reach him."[11] What interrupts the writer's voice is also what gives the interrup-

tion voice in him. The more words are lacking, in him, the more their lack speaks. Obligation and prohibition are two sides of the same coin. Impossibility is not an obstacle, it is a springboard. Artaud, who speaks with rare power of his "absence of voice for crying out," is an exemplary figure of this contradictory fate. And Kafka, the exact opposite of Stendhal, is astonished that there is no misfortune so profound that it would keep him from writing. "I could never understand," he notes in his journal, "that it was possible for almost anyone who could write to objectivise pain in pain. For example, in my misery, with my head still burning with misery, I can sit down and write to somebody: I am miserable. I can go still further and, in various flourishes, according to my capacities, which seem to have nothing in common with my misery, I can improvise on this theme, simply, or antithetically, or even with entire orchestras of associations."[12] Elsewhere he writes: "There is undeniably a certain happiness in being able calmly to write down: *suffocation is inconceivably horrible.*"[13] When she opens up the manuscript of *The War*, Marguerite Duras is similarly astonished by the assurance, the impassiveness of her own writing; she is amazed to see that her own hand wrote out those appalling words without flinching, that she could describe what she saw with an untrembling hand: "I found myself looking at pages regularly filled with small, calm, extraordinarily even handwriting."[14]

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF CROWS

The essays brought together in this volume deal with a paradoxical form of *littérature engagée*, a paradoxical form of the literature of commitment: literature committed to its own exclusion. The aesthetic imperative this literature obeys is the ethical imperative turned upside down. Kant's "You must, therefore you can" is inverted, replaced by the conjunction of impossibility and necessity, the affirmation of impossibility as necessity: "You cannot, therefore you must." These pages deal with writers who, carried away by the excesses of that paradoxical heroism, saw war as the context that assured them of absolute decontextualization: in war, literature will never be in its place.

Debates over the literature of commitment reached a peak around the time of the Liberation, when Sartre's *What Is Literature?* appeared. Sartre does not ask writers to commit themselves, as we know; he shows that they

have already done so. He does not ask them to choose between a literature that is committed and one that is not. He shows that, whether they like it or not, whether they know it or not, commitment is a constitutive dimension of literature. Thus commitment in literature is not a matter of altruism on the part of aesthetes who consent to forget themselves in order to connect with humanity: the more committed it is, the better literature fulfills its own definition, its vocation, the less it forgets itself. To want literature to exist is first of all to want a world in which literature is possible, a world that acknowledges its right to exist. The writer must work toward the existence of a world that can give him the means to write and to be read. Committed literature is thus simply literature taking responsibility for its own conditions of possibility. But this analysis implies that literature insists on being possible.

What Is Literature? provoked a host of defensive reactions. On the side of the uncommitted, literature was said to have better things to do than shoulder the weight of the world; it should be making its readers forget that burden. A second critical thrust (coming especially from Bataille and Blanchot) countered Sartre's notion of commitment with the opposite stance. It was not a question of sheltering literature from politics, restoring the autonomy of art, carving out safe places where art would be protected from propaganda. Nor was it a question of protecting art against the world. Quite the contrary: it was a question of exposing art to a world in which it would no longer have any protectors.

The historical references invoked by Blanchot and Bataille are very different from Sartre's. Sartre has democratic socialism in mind ("[Literature's] chance today, its only chance, is the chance of Europe, of socialism"),[15] while Blanchot and Bataille refer back to the Terror, and for the opposite reasons: there, the fortunes of literature are reduced to zero. Bataille begins his chapter on Sade in *Literature and Evil* by asking: "Why should a period of revolution lend a lustre to the arts and the world of letters? Armed violence is ill matched with the enrichment of a domain which can only be enjoyed in peacetime."[16] And in "Literature and the Right to Death," the anti-Sartrean manifesto published in *Critique*, Blanchot refers to the Terror as a wholesale mobilization, the institution of a society without secrets, an exceptional situation with no holds barred: "No one has a right to a private life any longer, everything is public, and the most guilty person is the suspect—the person who has a secret, who keeps

a thought, an intimacy, to himself. And in the end no one has a right to his life any longer, to his actually separate and physically distinct existence. That is the meaning of the Reign of Terror. Every citizen has a right to death, so to speak; death is not a sentence passed on him, it is his most essential right; he is not suppressed as a guilty person." And Blanchot continues: "The writer sees himself in the Revolution."[17] In other words, the writer sees himself in the Reign of Terror as in the most unliterary space there is, a totalitarian space in which, by imposing the law of the whole, action allows literature to go beyond the work of negation, beyond the negation of negation, in order to carry out its task of global negation; it allows literature to deny everything, to deny the whole, in order (as Blanchot says) to be merely—at a vast remove from particular cases, from determined things and defined work—master of everything. "Unreality begins with the whole,"[18] but the whole begins with Terror. Thus the writer recognizes himself in the dry spells of literary history, periods in which historical urgency reduces literature to nothing (Sade in prison). This view puts us at the opposite pole from Sartre. Sartre showed writers that they had an interest in constructing a world in which the existence of a right to literature would be recognized. For Blanchot, literature, which has an interest in transforming the world, places its bets on the appearance of a totalitarian world—a world of terror, a world at war—that would deprive literature of all rights but one: the right to death.

This anti-aesthetics of Terror serves as a matrix for the literary Communism that Bataille and Blanchot developed at the start of the Cold War. Victor Kravchenko had left the Soviet Union and published *I Chose Freedom.* The title alone sufficed to show that Kravchenko was not a writer: literature needs Communism, for Communism, by prohibiting literature, allows literature to be faithful to its own definition of itself. Literature does not expect to be made possible by a transformation of the world; rather, in a transformed world literature will be able to realize its own essence by ceasing to be possible. Impossibility is literature's essential attribute, its condition of possibility. One of the most compelling illustrations of this paradoxical movement appears in the chapter on Kafka in *Literature and Evil.* Bataille's line of reasoning here is powerful and perverse. Everything Kafka wrote, he says, can be viewed as a demand addressed to a father who could not bear the fact of his son's writing; everything Kafka wrote stemmed from his desire to be acknowledged as a writer by the one person

who was absolutely certain never to acknowledge him. Bataille goes on to say that Communism is the equivalent for literature of the paternal sphere for Kafka. If a writer militates in favor of Communism, it is not because he expects it to give him the freedom to write, or because he expects to be a prophet in his own country, because he expects his talent to be recognized and rewarded with the medal of the Legion of Honor, a nice flat, a salary, a comfortable pension and a dacha. On the contrary, writers militate in favor of Communism because under Communist regimes no one writes innocently. Only Communist regimes actually place high value on literary impropriety: under Communism, literature can finally, in Blanchot's words, "plead guilty." Kafka's work calls the world communistic, but that is because such work "has no place in Communist society."[19] Even if he could flee, Kafka would not choose freedom. In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot quotes one of Kafka's apologues: "Crows claim that a single crow could destroy the sky. This is no doubt so, but it proves nothing about the sky for the sky signifies precisely: the impossibility of crows."[20]

Sartre defended commitment because "the art of prose is bound up with the only regime in which prose has meaning, democracy."[21] Bataille—who had acted on behalf of an anti-Communist front to withdraw an article from *Les temps modernes*—"defended" Communism for the opposite reason: it is the only regime under which literature will escape the work of meaning, where it will not allow itself to be appropriated, pardoned, redeemed. It is the only regime where the negativity of literature is not needed, the only one where a writer will not run the risk of being offered a job, where he will be consigned, as Francis Ponge put it, to the bottom of the heap where he belongs.

How to write after Auschwitz? After Auschwitz, literature should no longer be possible. Auschwitz ought to have done away with the world's right to literature. Not only is literature "illegitimate," according to Blanchot; perhaps it "has no right to consider itself illegitimate."[22] It does not even have the right not to have any rights; it can invoke no higher legitimacy to justify its improprieties. But as there is no such thing as an innocent sovereign, this is how literature achieves a sovereign gratuitousness. Moreover, if it were permitted, it would not be literature. Philippe Sollers recently said the same thing with reference to Hemingway: a writer is first of all someone whom everybody forbids to write, someone who

writes in spite of everything and everyone. The modern Sirens say: Poet, leave your harp alone. Literature, for this generation, has been an art of despiteness.

A way out may seem to beckon. It is possible, for example, to see the sign of a generational shift when a writer like Pascal Quignard couples his views of the contemporary world with a discouraged sigh: "For the first time, the existence of a society is opposed to the existence of a literature."[23] Would it not be rather the first time in a long time that a literature has dreamed of being accepted? that it has consented to exist? And, if things go on as they are, we may be reduced, like Stendhal's Signora, to regretting that such a thing is allowed, that it is no longer a sin.

POWERS OF THE NOVEL

What is called existentialism started out, on the aesthetic level, as a radical antinaturalism. Existentialism opposes efforts like Hippolyte Taine's to deduce works of art, to ensconce them in a given landscape, a valley, a genealogy. The works to which the essays in this book refer are all engaged in the consolidation of a context from which it would be impossible to deduce them, one in which they would be either impossible or forbidden—a context that, at best, would make them improbable. This is true of Leiris's conjugal space, of Malraux's revolutionary apocalypse, of Blanchot's Terror, of Bataille's Stalinism.

The same schema underlies *Puissances du roman* (Powers of the Novel). In this essay written in 1940, Caillois accuses the novel of complicity with liberalism: in order to triumph, the genre needs a society that permits individuals to have reservations about that society. The schema is a classic one, similar to the one Benjamin adopts in "The Storyteller." But whereas Benjamin contrasts the storyteller's world with that of the novelist, Caillois contrasts societies that favor novels with societies that favor architecture. With their massive construction projects, architecture-societies function according to principles of total mobilization that leave no place (no void, no vacancy, no availability) for the slightest distance. Caillois's position becomes original, however, when he moves beyond this sociological condemnation of the novel. In the crop of novels produced in the 1930s, Caillois in fact diagnoses a promising but also suicidal evolution owing to which the opposition between novels and architecture has become blurred.

An increasing number of recent novels, he reports, present heroes who are hostile to novelistic reserve: "We have once again entered an era of architecture, of pyramid-building and cathedral-building." Novels of the 1930s (he cites Henry de Montherlant, Malraux, Ernst von Salomon), lacking critical distance, are catalysts for a society in which "there is no longer a place for novels."[24] The novelist, rejoining the freewheeling body of sorcerers' apprentices, sets about to saw off the branch on which his predecessors perched; he is working toward the accomplishment of his own conditions of impossibility. In 1974, introducing a new edition of *Puissances du roman*, Caillois acknowledges that he allowed himself to go a little too far: "I deduced that in the full society imagined by the College of Sociology, there would no longer be any place for novels. I did not suspect that that wholly imaginary city was itself nothing but a lure of the moment, a product of the eternal and always complementary solicitation operated by novels."[25]

To illustrate the novel's hold on the mind of its reader, Caillois mentions the letter that one reader, dragging herself reluctantly away from *The Life of Jesus*, was said to have written to thank Renan for sending her his book. "She had almost finished reading it," she wrote, and it was hard to pull herself away from her reading to send him a note "so eager was she to finish the book 'to see how it comes out.'"[26] More than twenty years later, *Pontius Pilate* reintroduces the same sort of novelistic suspense in its account of one of Christianity's most crucial moments: Caillois's historical fiction depicts a Pilate who refuses to condemn Jesus.

After a day of consultations during which everyone presses him to give in to Caiaphas and have the religious agitator executed, the procurator decides to do just the opposite. He frees Jesus. The decisive moment comes during Pilate's consultation with Mardouk. The Chaldean magus, a kind of Renan-as-futurologist, sketches in the events that are supposed to follow the sacrifice of the Messiah. He puts the future on display: two thousand years of Christian history. But to come into being, this future requires Pilate's signature. Mardouk works on him by appealing to his vanity as a state official: the execution, Mardouk says, will make you a *cause célèbre;* the doctors of the new religions will argue endlessly over your free will. He invokes the bibliography of works that will be devoted to him by casuists, theologians and historians. He even mentions "the French writer who, a little less than two thousand years later, would reconstruct his

discourse for publication by Gallimard and Macmillan—and no doubt he flattered himself that he had imagined that name."[27]

Nothing is easier for a modern writer than to invent a character who predicts the present from his vantage point in the past. But the present, here, is the book the reader has in his hands. And this is where things get more complicated. If you want history to remember your name, Mardouk tells Pilate, have Jesus crucified. It's up to you whether or not Caillois will write a book that will tell the story of your choice. But Pilate is not a Pascalian; he prefers to play to lose, and he makes the opposite choice. And the story ends with these lines: "Because of a man who despite every hindrance succeeded in being brave, there was no Christianity. Except for Pilate's exile and suicide, none of the events predicted by Mardouk came to pass and history, save on this one point, took another course."[28] The end. Mardouk had in fact predicted to the procurator of Judea the future that seems to have been in store for Pilate. The procurator's exile and suicide are not the only events prophesied by Mardouk that actually took place. The concluding remark "save on this one point" is undermined by the book in which it appears: despite Mardouk's blackmail, and even though the book in question does not relate—as Mardouk had predicted it would—the crucifixion of the Messiah, the *Nouvelle revue française* nevertheless did publish, in 1961, the *Pontius Pilate* that Mardouk had announced.

Caillois's fable is built around two competing visions of the future. A first series of events, inaugurated by the death of Christ, leads one thousand nine hundred sixty-one years after the birth of the future Crucified One to the publication of the narrative. We are not privy to any specific information about the second series. The story's conclusion nevertheless informs us that (with two exceptions) it includes none of the events of the first. The two series are mutually exclusive. Yet it is in the first series that we find the book in which we learn that Pilate has chosen the second. The book we are reading is, as it were, ruled out by the events it chronicles. Pilate's choice makes the narrative account of that choice impossible. In *Approches de l'imaginaire* (Approaches to the Imaginary), Caillois used the expression "novelistic temptation" for the dream of a world in which novels would be impossible. In *Pontius Pilate*, this temptation is embedded within a novel.

But that does not prevent it from existing.