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## Some Wheat and Some Chaff: Jean Paulhan and the Postwar Literary Purge in France

### Abstract

A somewhat overlooked figure of French literary history, Jean Paulhan has resurfaced in the polemic surrounding the wartime activities of many respected intellectuals, most prominently Blanchot, Heidegger and de Man. Commentators on Paulhan's role in the intellectual history of the period have tended to avoid reading his texts closely. Paulhan—one of the "heroes" of the literary Resistance in France during the Second World War—took the extremely unpopular and controversial stance after the Liberation of criticizing the National Committee of Writers' proposed purge of suspected collaborationist writers. This essay demonstrates the rigorous consistency of Paulhan's position in the context of his other works, and argues for the necessity of taking into account the internal logic and rhetoric, as well as the explicit argument, of his texts. A careful reading of *De la paille et du grain* (*On the Wheat and the Chaff*) reveals an unusually forceful and original insight into the relationship between language, literature and political commitment, which has many resonances for current debates on this question.

### Keywords

Jean Paulhan, Blanchot, Heidegger, French literary history, intellectuals, Resistance, French literary Resistance, Second World War, WWII, Liberation, National Committee of Writers, rhetoric, *De la paille et du grain*, *On the Wheat and the Chaff*, politics, language, literature

Some Wheat and Some Chaff:  
Jean Paulhan and the Post-War Literary Purge in France

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Towards the middle of his article responding to the recently discovered wartime writings of Paul de Man, Derrida makes a passing reference to a little known work by Jean Paulhan, *De la paille et du grain* (*On the Wheat and the Chaff, Oeuvres complètes* V). Paulhan's text is evoked in the course of Derrida's commentary on de Man's article, "Sur les possibilités de la critique" ("On the Possibilities of Criticism," *Wartime Journalism* 168-69), in which de Man discusses the notion of literature as a politically or morally independent domain, and implicitly condemns the ideological agenda that is often present behind the appropriation of this "neutrality." Derrida remarks:

The logic of this argument anticipates, up to a certain point, that of Jean Paulhan (whom de Man was rediscovering during the last years of his life, no doubt in reference to other themes, but it is still not insignificant). Writing after the Liberation in *De la paille et du grain*, this writer-resistant disputed the right of his "friends" on the National Committee of Writers to conduct, as writers, political trials of other writers known to have collaborated with the enemy. If there were grounds for such a trial, then it was the province of other tribunals competent to judge political acts: there ought to be no literary "épuración" [purge], no writers' tribunals to judge the politics or morals of other writers *as writers*.

The whole question of the political responsibility of writers has taken on renewed urgency in recent years with the revelation of the wartime activity of many respected intellectuals, most prominently Blanchot, Heidegger and de Man. As more and more information comes to light about this still murky period of French literary history, it is becoming clear how pivotal a figure Paulhan was in the whole debate. Derrida does not elaborate further on this allusion to Paulhan: "My own thinking as regards Paulhan's discourse cannot be summed up in a few

lines" (*Responses* 138). His reluctance to engage Paulhan's discourse is hardly surprising, since Derrida's name has itself been yoked together with Paulhan's and his own work implicated in charges currently being levelled at writers whose intellectual value is said to have been irreversibly compromised by the politics of collaboration.<sup>1</sup> In this reconstructed intellectual history, Paulhan is presented as a writer who prefigures many currents of contemporary literary theory, but whose work has for some reason, until lately, been a victim of a similar historical "amnesia" that is said to have afflicted proponents of deconstruction.<sup>2</sup>

Although Paulhan is chiefly remembered today for his skill as a literary talent scout and for his encouragement and promotion of new writers, at the time he had acquired a considerable reputation as the "gray eminence" of French Literature, and indeed, from the 1920s to his death in 1968, he had a powerful (albeit subterranean) influence on most of the literary production in France as the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. He preferred to keep his own writings away from the public gaze, never clamoring for the kind of celebrity many of his *protégés* achieved. When his texts have attracted critical attention, it has almost always been as a foil to the work of other, more "important," writers (de Man, Blanchot, Derrida). Despite a resurgent interest in Paulhan, studies of his texts to date have been marked by a reluctance to actually read them. There is a certain amount of unease or resistance in attempting to deal with Paulhan's texts, and this may point to problems that go well beyond their apparently minor or local interest. Of his works, the writings on the *épuration* are among the most consistently misrepresented, misread or simply not read at all, and yet these texts offer an unusually forceful and original reflection on the relationship between literature and political commitment. It might thus prejudice the question to Paulhan's disadvantage to begin by placing Paulhan's texts within a historical context, but since this is how most commentaries frame them, it is a necessary preliminary step towards their understanding.

Read in the light of the unprecedented upheaval and change that the literary world in France underwent after the Second World War, Paulhan was one of the writers who was least transformed by circumstances, since he steadfastly maintained his position on certain questions and demonstrated a remarkable consistency throughout his works. His refusal to compromise himself and to give in to the opportunism of the moment makes him stand out among the writers

who were closely involved in the literary resistance movements. Such intransigence has often been interpreted as indifference to the historical and political realities of the time and as a wilful retreat into the “republic of letters.”<sup>3</sup> Paulhan himself by no means discouraged this view of his relationship to politics in general. He was reputedly a Maurrassian, although it is important to stress the eclecticism of his associations, which cut across political divisions. He was at once close to some of the most outspoken of collaborators, such as Marcel Jouhandeau, while also counting among his friends most of the writers who figured on the list of “unpublishable” authors drawn up by the German ambassador, Otto Abetz. His policy as editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* very much reflected his own heterogeneity of taste, and he refused to allow the review to succumb to political or ideological pressures. His position on this is most clearly expressed in an editorial written on the eve of the war, entitled appropriately enough “Il ne faut pas compter sur nous” ‘You Shouldn’t Count on Us,’ *Oeuvres complètes* V, 271). In this text Paulhan stresses the need, in a democratic society, to protect the right of authors to disagree with the political and moral precepts of the state. His conception of democracy was an odd, seemingly naive mixture of Maurrassian royalism and utopian socialism. As he describes it in “La démocratie fait appel au premier venu” ‘Democracy and the Man in the Street,’ the truly democratic society is the one that makes a prince of the man in the street, the lowest common political denominator, whose importance is theoretically guaranteed within a democracy (*Oeuvres complètes* V, 277-81).

During the Occupation, Paulhan fought unsuccessfully to retain the independence of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and, once he relinquished control to Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, to prevent it from continuing under the same name. It is still unclear how much influence Paulhan in fact wielded while Drieu la Rochelle directed the *Nouvelle Revue Française* from 1940 to 1943, but it is certain that he shared none of Drieu’s convictions.<sup>4</sup> Even while officially out of work, Paulhan commanded great respect, both from Drieu and from the German officer responsible for overseeing the censorship of literature in Paris, Gerhard Heller.<sup>5</sup> At the same time that he was apparently continuing to work with Nazi occupying forces and with outright collaborators, he was also, in 1941, founding the first resistance journal with Daniel Decourdemanche (known by his pseudonym of Jacques Decour), *Les Lettres Françaises*, and was allowing Vildé and

Levitsky, the editors of the underground journal, *Résistance*, to mimeograph their paper in his apartment. He was a pivotal contact for the editors of the then clandestine *Editions de Minuit*, Pierre Lescure and Jean Bruller (who went under the pseudonym of Vercors), and for Jean Lescure, who published *Messages*, a literary review banned by the Nazis. He was also one of the founding members of the underground Comité National des Ecrivains (CNE), the principal organization of resistance writers during the Occupation, which included writers such as Mauriac, Sartre, Aragon, de Beauvoir and Triolet, and which was immediately recognized as the authoritative voice on literary matters once the question of the *épuration* came to the fore in 1945.

The CNE was intent on conducting an intellectual purge of French literature that would equal, or at least resemble, the general purge of collaborators in France after the war. They drew up their own blacklist of about 150 French writers.<sup>6</sup> In their charter, they announced their unwillingness to be published alongside any of the writers on this list. It was the manner in which the CNE pursued these writers that led Paulhan to resign from the organization and finally to criticize in no uncertain terms their procedures and their goals. De Gaulle responded to the CNE's appeals for retribution, and the most prominent writers on the blacklist—Charles Maurras, Marcel Jouhandeau, Lucien Rebatet and Robert Brassilach, the latter two both colleagues at *Je suis partout*—were tried early in 1945, with Brasillach being sentenced to death and executed in February 1946.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Paulhan's attitude should have angered so many writers, particularly those with whom he had been closely associated during the Resistance. At the time, it must have been difficult for these writers not to feel that his criticism of the CNE's call for a purging of French Literature was something of a betrayal of everything they had risked their lives for. Even commentators favorably inclined to his point of view—leaving aside the question of its opportunistic appropriation by what Peter Novick has called “*revanchiste* anti-Resistance circles and Vichy apologists”—indulgently accepted his argument while regarding it still with some suspicion (Novick 202). This is particularly true of historians attempting to understand Paulhan's position. Pierre Assouline, who devotes long sections of his book *L'Épuration des intellectuels (The Purge of Intellectuals)* to the importance of Paulhan's rôle in the whole debate, reduces the latter's argument to a plea for tolerance and for the writer's “right to error” and implicitly condemns Paulhan for refusing

to acknowledge his political responsibility:

What motivates Paulhan in his attitude, which is from the outset singularly decisive, is above all, it seems, a certain understanding of literature. The rest (a writer's duty, political commitment, . . .) is just an epiphenomenon. If he maintains a critical mind with respect to people, and especially their works, he is quite prepared to grant extenuating circumstances to those who are guilty.  
(Assouline 90)

But if Paulhan left himself open to the accusation of political naiveté, then it is no less true that the readings of his texts that encourage this view of him have often failed to take into consideration the texts themselves. Whether one condemns Paulhan by focusing on his refusal to take his political responsibilities seriously, or whether one praises him for the ethical strength of his non-partisan stance, in both cases Paulhan texts have been reduced to a single argument, a "prise de position" that is taken on good faith rather than actually read.

For anyone familiar with Paulhan's texts, the coexistence of two Paulhans—the courageous Resistance writer and the outspoken defender of collaborators—will not be at all surprising. The internal logic of most of Paulhan's texts is informed by tropes of doubleness, of chiasmic crossings, and of continual reversals, the most well-known being the interplay between Terror and Rhetoric in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* (*The Flowers of Tarbes*; 1925-41). In *Clef de la poésie* (*Poetry's Key*; 1944) this reversibility is formulated as the fundamental "law" of poetic expression. His short stories are structured according to a number of chiasmic passages, and the metaleptic reversal of cause and effect is the poetic principle governing the *Causes Célèbres* (1950). While it is certainly not the case for Paulhan that everything outside of literature is merely an "epiphenomenon," it is true to say that his analyses of political, ethnological, artistic and aesthetic questions are always mediated to some extent by linguistic considerations. Rather than revealing a duplicitous inconsistency between the commitment during the Resistance and the equally tenacious support of the "enemies" of the Resistance, the affirmation of this doubleness is in fact a deep-seated and rigorously consistent position. It is only by taking into account the theoretical rigor of this "duplicity" that it is possible to understand how Paulhan articulates the conjunction between literary and historical (or political) concerns in his texts, and

this understanding can only be achieved by engaging in the very reading that these texts seem so consistently and so effectively to discourage. Our first responsibility in reading *De la paille et du grain* and *Lettre aux directeurs de la Résistance* is at least to present accurately the explicit arguments of the texts.

It is precisely this responsibility to the truth that necessitates, according to Paulhan, placing the question of patriotism in a larger perspective. Thus Paulhan takes the examples both of Rimbaud's relationship to France during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71, and that of Romain Rolland in 1914 on the eve of the First World War, and points out that both would have been considered traitors in the context of the Second World War. In *De la paille et du grain*, Paulhan "reminds" Louis Aragon—who condemned Paulhan's choice of Rimbaud as a French writer who was no less "anti-French" than certain collaborators—that he had written about Rimbaud's anti-patriotic, defeatist attitude in 1934.

The charges brought against the collaborators by the CNE center on their betrayal of France, which is generalized by the CNE under the global heading of a kind of literary treason. As Paulhan puts it:

The only thing you hold against the writers on your blacklist is neither error nor greed, neither meanness nor a penchant for degradation, it is "the irreparable crime, the irreversible wrong, perpetrated against the nation." (*Paille* 344)

The crucial question, asked explicitly by Paulhan, is: "What is patriotism?"<sup>7</sup> For Paulhan it is essential to distinguish between being a partisan and being a patriot. True patriotism would transcend partisan differences and, according to this definition, the CNE would certainly not qualify as patriots. Paulhan felt that the retribution they called for was less an appeal for justice than a cry for vengeance, and that similar calls for vengeance had already given rise to a large number of summary executions immediately following the Liberation.

What, then, is Paulhan's definition of patriotism? A *patrie* according to Paulhan, is made up of two inseparable components: "la France charnelle" 'the land itself' and "la France spirituelle" (which he also calls "la cause de la France" [*Paille* 349]). Paulhan continues: "Now patriotism consists in no more separating this material France from this spiritual France than one would separate a man's face from his profile" (*Paille* 349). What saved France, according to Paulhan,



was that it was fortunate enough to have had Pétain to preserve the sentimental or material half of France and de Gaulle to preserve the rational or spiritual half. Moreover, if de Gaulle represented the spiritual “essence” of France, it was an essence that had migrated abroad. This critical empirical moment in French history (the history of “France”) was for Paulhan no less indicative of a linguistic crisis. If language is inseparably composed of a physical and a spiritual half, what happens when the spirit, the essence of language, wanders off and becomes estranged from its physical half? What if, Paulhan wonders, the essence is always already to some extent contaminated by the accidental (Pétain causing France to deviate from its “true” course)?<sup>8</sup> Paulhan’s texts on the *épuration* can thus be read as an attempt to articulate linguistic and political considerations. As Thomas Fernecki puts it: “Jean Paulhan’s attitude with respect to language commands both his theoretical reflexion on political discourse, and his political appreciation of events” (“Discours” 225).<sup>9</sup> Only when we consider that, for Paulhan, the enigmatic doubleness of language is matched by an identical doubleness informing patriotism, can we truly begin to read these texts. The statement that “there is a mystery in the *patrie*, just as there is one in languages, and Literature” (*Paille* 353) is reformulated elsewhere in the text as an expression of a kind of radical indifference:<sup>10</sup>

Here I come to my point: as long as they have not decreed that there are opinions that are guilty, and worthy of death, the pacifists of 1914 have no right to display such aggression toward the pacifists of 1940. Nor those who were shot to death in 1915 (if I may say so) to look down upon those who were shot in 1945. From the simple point of view of the *patrie*, they are equivalent: it’s six of one and half a dozen of the other (“c’est blanc bonnet et bonnet blanc”). (*Paille* 350)

This section of the text condenses a range of important considerations that will deepen our understanding of the two texts of Paulhan we have been looking at rather paraphrastically, in particular *De la paille et du grain*.

In fact it could be said to constitute the major turning point of a reading of this latter text a pivotal moment which will either lead us further into the text, or back out of it to “history.” As a rather neat summary of Paulhan’s various sets of parallels, the phrase “c’est blanc

bonnet et bonnet blanc” is also precisely the kind of reversal that is so typical of Paulhan’s texts. Its exemplary status is all the more striking in that it is formulated as a proverb. For the Paulhan of *L’Expérience du proverbe* (1913, 1927), there is far more to proverbs than first meets the eye. In this early essay, he describes the tension inherent in proverbs as a doubleness or a radical division between their semantics, or *sens*, and their syntax, or their *force* (*Oeuvres complètes* II, 97-124). Indeed, it is a similar vacillation that informs the way in which this particular proverb in *De la paille et du grain* can be read. The semantic or referential reading of the proverb—from the point of view of patriotism it’s all the same, it doesn’t matter whether one is a Fascist or a Communist—leads directly to the extratextual, empirical context, and to a politically overdetermined condemnation (or praise) of Paulhan; a purely syntactical reading—the inversion of the noun and the adjective makes no difference to the meaning—advocates the priority of language over experience, or the indifference of literature to politics. It is only by reading them as being equally valid that one can begin to discover the resonances within the text. In other words, the semantic reading is only valid if one reads it simultaneously with the syntactical reading, just as the syntactical reading is only valid if read in conjunction with the semantic one. Paulhan’s text only really begins to come into focus if the explicit political discussion is read as a version of the fundamental indifference informing the linguistic analysis, both in this text and everywhere else in Paulhan. The inverse is equally the case. The argument of political indifference only makes sense when read in terms of linguistic indifference, just as the syntax of the proverb (read as the trope of hyperbaton, or the inversion of the normal order of words) only makes sense if it is given referential determination. Once one gives this structural ambivalence its full theoretical weight, the apparently disparate components of *De la paille et du grain* begin to suggest a more deep-seated coherence.

For example, the theme of “whiteness” pervades the text. The *épuración* is literally a cleansing of past crimes, and the French verbs “blanchir” and “laver” both have these connotations. For the CNE the *épuración* was as much an ethical as a political necessity; certain writers had sullied the nation, and it was thus in need of a moral whitewash, a wiping clean of the slate. The members of the CNE themselves were very certain of their position on the moral spectrum, and indeed their ability to discriminate depended upon the establishment of just such a spectrum. For Paulhan, however, the

ethical “colors” are by no means allotted once and for all. One might speculate, in this light, what it would mean to speak of someone’s “true colors.” As a way of illustrating his argument, Paulhan invents a short allegory of the history of France beginning in the early 30s and going through to the post-war period. There are two parties, the Reds and the Whites, who are clearly intended to represent the Communists (or, by connotation, the Revolutionaries of 1789 with their “bonnet rouge”) and, if not Fascists, then at least Capitalists (“these people who stuffed our heads full of their *patrie*! A *patrie* made up of their small stocks, their portfolios, and their trust funds,” *Paille* 348). The allegory lends force to the argument of reversibility of colors by being presented in such a simplified form. It ends as the Reds return to power after the war and set about legitimizing their program for political and moral rejuvenation: “These Whites betrayed the *Patrie*!—You were ready to betray it yourselves, if need be. Just admit the truth. You are executing them because they are white” (*Paille* 348).

A similar reversible movement is at work in the *Lettre aux directeurs de la Résistance*. The possibility of a dual interpretation of Article 75 of the Penal Code is phrased as the difference between a literal and a figurative reading, that is, between following the law to the letter, and acting within the “spirit” of the law:

It is too true that the gap separating Law and Justice is almost the same as that separating the letter from the spirit: the letter, always ready to encroach upon the spirit, to restrict it and to diminish it—always ready to become a dead letter. But the living, free spirit, escaping the traps of automatism, born anew at every moment.

(436)

Thus one can pass from the linguistic model (the division of a word into letter and spirit) to its “real life” application (Law and Justice), and back again, just as the two components of each pair continually vacillate back and forth. What is it that separates them, moreover, if not a kind of blanc ‘whiteness, gap, blank,’ “the same gap,” just as the two models are barely separated by the gap suggested in the approximation of the “almost” (“*peu s’en faut*”). And it is impossible to tell whether the linguistic model and its judiciary version mutually support and sustain each other *because* the linguistic model happens to work this way or whether the opposite is the case. The only thing one

can say for sure is that neither can exist independently of the other, despite the CNE's fierce denegation of Paulhan's "grammarian" literalism in commenting on the Pétain government's legality. The necessity of accounting for the codified aspect of the law is in fact explicitly stated in terms of the grammar of a language: "There is a kind of grammar of ideas at work here, which is no less prompt or decisive than our grammar of words (this spontaneous grammar that rubs us up the wrong way, or that makes us burst out laughing when we see a badly constructed sentence, or a mispronounced word," (*Lettre*, 440-44).

The central metaphor of *De la paille et du grain* is of course the one that gives the text its title, the separating of the wheat from the chaff.<sup>11</sup> The CNE would claim that the *épuration* was intended as precisely this kind of an operation, as an expulsion of what was no longer wanted, of what had been responsible for the degeneration of France. This works on the level of language and literature, insofar as it implies that there is a part of language that is dispensable, and a part that is essential. Just as in Paulhan's descriptions from *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, it is initially Terror (or the priority of thoughts over words) that is aligned with authenticity and essence, and Rhetoric (or the priority of figures over thoughts) that is deemed inauthentic and inessential. The title *De la paille et du grain* could indicate that the text is concerned with precisely this question of separating out the essential from the dispensable. However, the "de" could also be read as a partitive, which in fact dovetails far better with Paulhan's argument; language is always necessarily made up of some wheat and some chaff, of some Rhetoric and some Terror. And just as a true patriot is incapable of separating out "le pays charnel" from "le pays spirituel," so the reader is incapable of deciding whether the literal or the figurative reading is what can be dispensed with. One might appeal to the determining instance of a context, but one can never tell whether the context is determined by, or whether it determines, the linguistic dilemma. It is impossible to tell the difference: it is "blanc bonnet" and "bonnet blanc." Yet one cannot overlook the fact that the indifference of "blanc bonnet/bonnet blanc," and all the other reversible pairs of terms that are in play in these two texts, are indeed different. How can one account for this difference within indifference? The answer may be found in the most consistently overlooked of all of the linguistic allegories of this text, the opening sections of *De la paille et du grain*.

neglect that has been their lot: “Un secret de polichinelle, ou La littérature comme fête publique” ‘An open secret, or Literature as a public celebration’ and “Des amateurs de bridge aux policiers bénévoles” ‘From lovers of bridge to benevolent policemen.’ The obviously playful tone and theme of these pages is in striking contrast to the main body of the text and to the seriousness of the subject under consideration. Yet, these sections are absolutely crucial to the argument of the rest of the text. The beginning is almost always overlooked as something marginal to the “central” argument (simply frivolous examples, or by-play), as *paille* to the *grain* of the main text. Thus the CNE refers to “the thoughtlessness of his words” (*Paille* 355), and Julien Benda asks: “Is it bad faith on Paulhan’s part? Or feeble-mindedness? Is he a *jongleur* entertaining himself? Does he have psychological problems?” (*Paille* 361). Read in the light of Paulhan’s other texts, this introduction is anything but a petulant display of impatience with the rather ponderous attitude of the CNE. In fact, the opposite may be more the case.

The description of literature as a “fête publique” recalls the texts of Paulhan from the 1930s and 40s on the possibility of a literary “community.” This was in part the subject of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, with its apparent solution of a communally reinvented Rhetoric, but it is even more explicit in texts such as “La Rhétorique avait son mot de passe” ‘Rhetoric had its password,’ (*Oeuvres complètes*, III 165-89). In this essay Paulhan describes Rhetoric as being originally “A joyous science,” “A world of magic,” which had its own secret society, with its initiation ceremonies and rites. The dismissal of Rhetoric as a frivolous exercise, like aesthetics (to which it is compared in terms of its ornamental, inessential nature), is, according to the essay, cause for concern. Paulhan wishes to return Rhetoric to the public domain where he feels it rightly belongs. In the intellectual context of the late 1930s there was a great deal of theoretical interest in the question of society and community, revolving of course around the College of Sociology, which Paulhan was instrumental in promoting. One common concern among the members of the College was to analyse the sacred elements of primitive societies (this was a theme addressed in particular by Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois), and Paulhan’s contribution, a version of his reflexion on Malagasy proverbs, took up a number of related themes. Unlike the other participants, however, his focus was on the idea of a linguistic community, and his interest was in the way in which the weighty ethical and political questions were

concentrated in the proverb-debates that were an essential element of social interaction among the older inhabitants of Madagascar. Their sacred status had to do with their enigmatic, secret power. They could indeed be described as a “secret de polichinelle,” an open secret, since they are neither part of the profane, everyday social intercourse, nor are they at all hidden from the public eye, yet they are both of these at the same time. The confusion of public and private—of “littérature” and “fête publique”—is a fundamental paradox typical of Paulhan.

The innately joyous quality of literature and language is the apparent theme of the opening section of *De la paille et du grain*. It begins: “What a pleasure to read, in the closing pages of Eugène Marsin: ‘This horse has two *joquets*.’ *Joquet*, like *croquet*, and like *jacquet*, there’s a nice little French word” (*Paille* 315). Paulhan admires the capacity of language to thus absorb foreign words, and questions the acceptability of those that make little effort to integrate themselves into the language, such as *hapéfiou* (happy few; “when they could say *la fine fleur*, like everyone else” (*Paille* 315). Like the allegory of the Reds and the Whites which comes later on, the narrative that begins the text recounts a fundamental shift in attitudes from the pre-war period to the post-war period, an attitude which symptomatically involves precisely the loss of an aesthetic enjoyment of language. The “fête publique” of language is then described as a fancy-dress party (“un bal masqué”), of which the golden rule is that foreign words have to be disguised in order to be admitted along with native participants such as “flâneur” ‘stroller,’ “tourte” ‘meat pie,’ “spatule” ‘spatula,’ and “ornithorynque” ‘duck-billed platypus.’ Thus *Sauerkraut* is playfully transformed into *choucroute*, where *chou* means *Kraut*, and *croute* (roughly) means *Sauer*. In the context of the decline of aesthetic enjoyment that seems to be a sign of the times, the question, according to Paulhan, is “knowing whether the French language is still capable of defending itself, and of putting on, as it pleases (“d’habiller à sa guise”) the exotic words it welcomes” (*Paille* 316).

The beginning of the essay is in part an indictment of the use of foreign words within the French language that stand out as foreign words, or of words invented by scientists, for example, that are anathema to the popular sensibility (“When scientists, or semi-scientists, invent a word, it is an absurd and badly made word: it is *kilo* or *eczéma*. It is even *curozéma*, and *cosmogéopédomicrophysicozéma*” (*Paille* 316)). As might be expected, the essay is also in part a recognition

of how easily the layman copes with linguistic difficulties that “scientists” and “semi-scientists” deal with in a particularly belabored fashion. For the *premier venu*, the mystery of language and literature (and the mystery of the *patrie*) is something that is hardly worth a second thought.

This mystery, and not the somber gravity of modern philosophy or science is what, according to Paulhan ought to determine our relationship to language. It seems that Paulhan is simply advocating a kind of linguistic chauvinism or anti-intellectual patriotism that would be nationalistic in the worst possible sense, given the context in which it is written. If we look at his argument more closely, however, while it is unashamedly patriotic (and it now becomes clearer why the opening pages defiantly assert the necessity of a mystery of patriotism that is no less enigmatic than the mystery of language and literature), it is also a plea for the recognition of other nationalities or nationalisms, with their own linguistic structures and internal tensions which may or may not correspond to those of another language. The fact of differences between languages and the strange effect that is created when they are brought into conflict with one another is similar, Paulhan argues, to the difference within language itself. One need only translate a language other than one’s own for this to become clear:

And I know that there’s more than one man who, in his heart of hearts, believes that, through some mystery, words reveal the nature of things to us: the unfortunate thing is that it is an opinion which is likely to vanish fairly quickly—precisely when one learns a language other than one’s own. (*Paille* 318)

What then becomes difficult to determine is whether there are linguistic differences between nations *because* there is a mysterious difference within all languages, or whether the reverse is true. To put it another way, it is impossible to decide whether translation is the cause or the effect of differences between languages.

The text addresses this question through two “allegories of translation.” The first uses the recent refinements of the bidding system in the game of contract bridge to look at the advantages and disadvantages of a language that strives to become a perfect system of communication. The discussion is at the same time a critique of the ambitions of so-called international languages such as Esperanto. While the tendency towards perfection of the bidding increases the

efficiency of the game of contract bridge, it is in danger of becoming so automatic that one might as well play with one's cards on the table. Its desire for absolute refinement is its surest guarantee of failure, since it is nonetheless a *language*, and is always open to absolute misunderstanding: "You talk of nuances, of intimate thoughts, of delicate feelings, and he hears vowels and consonants, sentences, words. It is at the precise moment that your language seems perfect to you, that it appears detestable" (*Paille* 327). The second allegory comes in the section appended to *De la paille et du grain*, which is in part a eulogy of Gary Davis, an American pacifist who renounced all national allegiance, and spent several weeks on the steps of the United Nations building claiming he was ready to fight in the war, provided it was for a world state. This idea must clearly have caught Paulhan's imagination. Davis' great merit, according to Paulhan, was to force the United Nations to follow through the consequences of its desire for an international state. Gary Davis' action revealed the inherent absurdity of the United Nation's claim. For to understand his appeal, its linguistic dimension had to be taken into consideration. The mistake of organizations such as the U.N.O., and of contract bridge specialists, according to Paulhan, is their desire for a language that is unfailingly and universally comprehensible. Without the constitutive failure within language, of which Paulhan's texts offer us numerous examples, there could be no difference between languages, or even worse, no language whatsoever.

Yet what do these allegories of translation between and within languages have to do with the *épuration*? The kind of purge of French literature proposed by members of the CNE is analogous to the desire for a perfectible language, which would presumably obviate the need for any translation. In fact the wish to cleanse the literary world of its "impurities," while practically amounting to a "fascist sentence" (*Paille* 329), is exactly the kind of program that Paulhan had already identified twenty years earlier in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* as Terror. On a purely empirical level, it would be hard to disagree with the CNE's proposed acts of retribution. No-one would argue about the immorality of the acts and deeds, for example, of Robert Brasillach, which had very real and tragic consequences. But if the manner in which this condemnation is carried out implies a wholesale rejection of "immoral" literature, then the political consequences may be even more damaging and far-reaching. As Paulhan argues, there have always been immoral writers in France ("We have always been proud, and not without



reason, of Frenchmen who gave France something of a rough time” [*Paille*, 330]), who have been guilty of far greater anti-patriotism than the writers on the CNE’s blacklist. The tolerance of anti-patriots is, according to Paulhan, a sign of a healthy democracy, and a healthy ‘*patrie*’ (“Anti-patriots are a *patrie*’s luxury” [*Paille* 329]). Just as there is no perfect language (in fact, it is constitutively imperfect), so there is no perfect *patrie*. The mystery of language (how can language continue to function in its essentially imperfect state?) is identical to the mystery of patriotism (how can a *patrie* be reinforced by the existence and tolerance of anti-patriots?). It requires keeping this mystery in play, since its expulsion endangers the very existence both of language and of the *patrie*. Paulhan is determined to safeguard the mystery of differences between languages (and nations) since this mystery is also a guarantee of the existence of the difference within languages (and nations).

The CNE’s proposed purge was seen by Paulhan as having very serious consequences, both for the *patrie*, and for literature itself. One can easily appreciate the scorn provoked by terms such as indifference, duplicity, betrayal and mystery. In reading Paulhan’s texts in terms not just of their statements, but also of their rhetoric, one realizes that this indifference, or duplicity, does not naively claim to exist independently of political, ideological or ethical considerations. Rather, it naively claims to be their very condition of possibility, the safeguard of their continued existence:

And provided one remains a little naïvé, one never stops setting this mystery in motion and being surprised by it, or throwing words into the air and seeing them transformed into ideas. And even quarter words, an accent, a simple letter. (*Paille* 32)

This is by no means an assertion of the primacy of literature (the place where language can freely exercise its right to disturb and to unsettle) over ideology, since for Paulhan literature is just as ridden with ideology as is politics. The reception of Paulhan’s texts has ironically been motivated by the very illusions about the nature of literature and ideology that his texts call into question. The most common assumption about these writings is their indifference to, or disregard for, the political and ethical questions of the moment. A careful reading of these texts, and a reading that above all places them in the context of Paulhan’s sustained and rigorous analysis of the articulation between

literature and ideology, makes such claims seem at the very least short-sighted. According to Paulhan, the CNE's call for a literary *épuration* was characteristic of such short-sightedness and represented the very great danger of falling back into the same political errors they claimed to be opposing.

It is ironic that a very similar scenario is currently being played out in the controversy surrounding the de Man/Blanchot/Heidegger affairs, with the same kind of moral outrage being expressed at the degeneration of literary studies. At times one might almost think that "deconstruction" were synonymous with "collaboration." We could do well to heed the warnings of *De la paille et du grain*, which alert us at the very least to the necessity of careful reading. It should also be clear that if Paulhan initiates a historical sequence that goes all the way through to Derrida, it is based on a remembering, and not a forgetting, of history. Apart from the banal observations about not learning the lessons of history, Paulhan's texts subtly articulate the mechanisms by which such historical errors are constantly repeated. They also demonstrate a highly original understanding of the movement of history itself, which is not so much a dialectical resolution of conflict or ambivalence, as a radicalizing of this ambivalence (indifference), which Paulhan makes into the very condition of possibility of difference.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Jeffrey Mehlman, "Writing and Deference," and "Perspectives."
2. In "Writing and Deference" Mehlman links Paulhan to Derrida by way of three rather ambitious comparisons. First of all, Paulhan's call for a political "amnesty" is said to predate Derrida's amnesic "forgetting" of history in, for example, his reading of Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort* (*Death Sentence*). Secondly, Mehlman takes Paulhan's analysis, in *Alain ou la preuve par l'étymologie* of the impossibility of telling whether an etymology may simply be a pun, as an anticipation of Derrida's own use of the term "undecidability." Thirdly, the admiration of Paulhan by Gerhard Heller, the German literary attaché in Paris during the war, is taken as an early paradigm of a generalized pattern of deference to charismatic French intellectuals by outsiders, with the American

"1941") that a more rigorous reading of the relationship between Paulhan and Blanchot is essential to an understanding of the place of Paulhan in French intellectual history, and I sketch out how such a reading also complicates the notion of a simple historical sequence of influences.

3. See, for example, Martin Chauffier's vitriolic attack on Paulhan after the publication of his *Lettre aux Directeurs de la Résistance* (*Lettre* 52).

4. The relationship between Drieu and Paulhan is discussed in greater detail in Herbert Lottman, "Capturing the N.R.F." Lottman refers to Paulhan's office at rue Sebastian-Bottin as a "resistance cell" (147).

5. See Gerhard Heller's memoirs of the Occupation, *Un Allemand à Paris*, especially the chapter entitled "Mon maître Paulhan," 97-113.

6. The list, which was circulated privately among the members of the CNE, is reproduced in Pierre Assouline's *L'épuration des intellectuels*, 161-62.

7. "Le goût des valeurs morales, la foi dans la justice ou la liberté, l'amour des peuples sont des sentiments louables; mais ils ne sont pas le sentiment qu'on appelle patriotisme. Non, pas plus que l'exotisme ou les plaisirs de l'anthropophagie. Et qu'est-ce donc que le patriotisme?" (*Paille* 349).

8. The *épuration* could be seen at this empirical level as the necessity of the reduction of the duplicity or doubleness of France to a single essence. At the linguistic level this would function in a similar manner, insofar as most contemporary readings of Paulhan's texts are motivated by a tendency to efface the radical undecidability which is their very theoretical foundation. This act of effacement, whereby the contingent is expelled in order to consolidate the assumed priority of the essential, is itself not accidental, but is, as Derrida has argued in "La Pharmacie de Platon," part of a long and well-established philosophical tradition. Paulhan's "ambiguity"—which is quite different from a simple semantic conflict—is from a theoretical perspective of a similar order to the ambiguity of a term like *pharmakon*.

9. Ferenczi is one of the few commentators to acknowledge the consistent and active interdependence between the linguistic and the ideological in Paulhan. Cf. also on this question his "Politique des littérateurs."

10. By "mystery" Paulhan means the enigmatic state of language, which exists simultaneously as language *and* thought, sounds *and* meanings, Rhetoric and Terror. For a remarkable critical commentary on "poetic mystery," an idea Paulhan elaborates most fully in his *Clef de la Poésie*, see Maurice Blanchot, "Le mystère dans les lettres."

11. The more common French term for separating the wheat from the chaff is "séparer le bon grain de l'ivraie." I have chosen to use the appropriate English proverb to retain the proverbial flavor of the French, which is undoubtedly there in the original.