

# FRENCH REACTION IN EXILE

By MEYER SCHAPIRO

I THINK it will interest American readers to acquaint themselves with the latest and most peculiar phase of French literary reaction, which appears also as a bold manifestation of avant-garde thought.

In *La Communion des Forts*, a book of essays published in Mexico City, Roger Caillois, the editor of *Lettres Françaises* and one of the outstanding younger French writers, proposes to intellectuals that instead of attacking society individually they band together as a communion of the strong to form a new society within the old and by force of their moral ideals impose an authority of the spirit on the chaotic, unspiritual masses. He conceives the action of this elite on the model of the Jesuit company and the glamorous *Treize* of Balzac, who rule France as a secret brotherhood of noble outlaw-adventurers, nowhere visible, but everywhere effective through their ramified connections. For this great task certain qualities are indispensable: strict honesty, the will to power, disdain and politeness, — aristocratic virtues which automatically unite their possessors into a cohesive group, instinctively and irreconcilably opposed to the rest of mankind, "miserable beings with whom they have nothing in common." Caillois despises the anarchy of modern artists, their faith in spontaneous creation, their whimsicality and irresponsible leftism, and opposes to these the 17th Century virtues of controlled behavior, dignified, noble thought and cool self-knowledge. At the same time he is

fascinated by the irrational and primitive in society. He has been concerned mainly with the power of myths in social life and often draws the substance of his writing from folklore and comparative religion. But unlike the romantic and surrealist taste for the primitive as a benign model of instinctiveness and spontaneity, he studies it as an example of social cohesiveness and of the control of the individual through rites and irrational beliefs.

His first chapter is a piquant analysis of the accounts published in the Paris press about the late executioner who died in 1939, accounts that are rich in amusing folklore and survivals of feudal thinking. Caillois observes the symmetry in the attributes of king and hangman, and concludes: "Thus the hangman and the sovereign form a pair. Together they assure the cohesion of society . . . . It is not surprising then that both are objects of horror or veneration, of which the sacred character is clearly apparent." In devoting so many articles to the executioner, the press "shows that there is no society so completely dominated by the powers of abstraction that myth and the realities which beget it lose all right and all power."

This combination of the rationalistic and the primitive, which seems so personal and gives a distinct imaginative quality to Caillois' essays, corresponds to a general need in modern reactionary doctrines. The more thoughtful, practical reactionaries — and this is clearest in Nazism — are rationalists for the ruling class, irrationalists for the people. The religion which they reject for themselves, they consider indispensable for the masses, if the social order is to be preserved. What Caillois has done is to generalize the irrational effectives in society by shifting from the particular model of the Catholic Middle Ages to a universal and timeless primitive which includes both the savage and the cultureless barbarian of modern society, who demonstrates in his everyday reactions and beliefs the power of the irrational in the higher social forms. By this broadening of the evidence, the laws of social behavior are made to appear independent of particular his-

torical societies; in all periods and places may be observed the eternal processes of social cohesion and decay; wars, crises, and revolutions are recurrent pathological effects in a social nature that is always the same. The problem today is therefore to resocialize the disintegrating community by restoring the organs of cohesion: the elite and a realm of the sacred.

In general, such appeals for order and a governing elite are the currency of monarchist and fascist groups. But Caillois rejects an aristocracy of blood or wealth and condemns fascism for its unscientific teachings of racial and national superiority; he condemns also democracy as the seed of fascism, but admits that an ideal order will arise sooner from democracy than from fascism. The latter is already a regime of authority and order, although hostile to the spirit, while the disintegrating democratic body provides a more favorable ground for the propaganda and contagion of the intellectual elite. His own goal is a re-sacralized, "super-socialized" society with a spiritual hierarchy based on intellectual virtues alone, and is close to the vision of Auguste Comte who outlined over a hundred years ago a future order governed by a "*pouvoir spirituel*" independent of the temporal power. The positivist Comte, an admirer of the dictatorship of Louis Napoleon and the autocracy of Czar Nicholas I, united in one scheme of a future society both the progress of science and the maintenance of the social order through a lay Church patterned on the Catholicism of the Middle Ages, with minutely prescribed rites and prayers, — collective exercises to shape the docility of the masses. Caillois, too, lays great weight on the cohesion of society through sacraments, and I am told that he has attempted, together with certain surrealists, to create modern rites and idols. But he is much less specific and serious than Comte (whom he ignores completely), and has nothing to say about the practical side of his new order. In this reform of society, the existing economic and social relations are left untouched, although his own order would "provide for everyone the conditions for the full development of

his personality"; he apparently considers spiritual authority in itself as a sufficient end from which other principles and tactics will logically flow. Since he is no political partisan and humbly disavows any competence in affairs, he stands above parties as a spokesman of the higher interests of society reflected in the intelligence and morality of the elite.

The older critics of democracy and socialism have written much about the creation and betrayal of popular movements by the elite which leads them and exploits them in its own interest. In Caillois' thought the cynical standpoint of these critics is converted into an ideal goal: it is indeed the business of the elite to impose its will on the ignorant, inferior masses; what he finds reprehensible is that the modern elite has tied itself to the interests of particular groups and in doing so has betrayed its own highest functions and rendered itself ineffective. On the corruption of intellectuals who serve the ruling class, he is certainly right; but he is unaware how much his own doctrines depend on his relations to that class, which has for years propagated similar notions of the need for an order, stabilized by a spiritual elite that acts for society as a whole. Nor does he consider how intellectuals who depend materially on the upper classes and the state can overcome the force which these inevitably oppose to any attempted reduction of their power. His few concrete remarks on fascism and democracy show his innocence of the nature of these group interests; he believes, for example, that fascism is the reaction of a defeated democracy to national humiliation (the history of Italian and Spanish fascism should have saved him this nonsense), and that democracy doesn't work because the policy of the government is subject to the whims of an ignorant electorate. These are banal confusions and errors, unworthy of a reader of a newspaper.

His own model of a pure and effective elite, the Jesuits, was not designed to change society in its basic structure, but to preserve the power of the Church — the social institutions of the time and place being accepted as necessary conditions for its ac-

tivity; although the Jesuits were to some extent reformers of the Church, their action is inconceivable without the latter's strength and its support by the upper classes in Catholic countries. They could function as a disciplined militant group because they were possessed by definite ends and were parts of an already existing institution, whereas Caillois' elite is without a clear doctrine or social attachment and achieves its unity by a process of instinctive moral coalescence, like a band of writers and artists who share a common personal tendency.

His other examples of a strong and militant elite, the Thirteen of Balzac and the Assassins of the Orient, show how much more devoted he is to the personal form and quality of social action, to its style, so to speak, than to the particular social results. It is the marginal, underground, conspiratorial, even criminal aspect of these groups that attracts him; and one guesses that his admiration for the Jesuits is aroused also by the element of the sinister and the unsocial that has been traditionally attached to their name. The goal is a secondary matter; with all his contempt for what he takes to be the dogmas and irrationality of Marxism, Caillois will even admit the communists as possible agents of the desired restoration of society, provided they are a secret minority distinct from the masses,— an admission that will undoubtedly be approved by certain reactionaries, if by communists is meant the agents of Stalin.

Lacking economic and political proposals, just as he lacks a concrete analysis of the causes of the present state of society, his ends are insistently formal and aesthetic: to bring about a well-marked cohesiveness, to stabilize society with the help of ceremonies and myths, and to restore the feeling of the sacred in institutions. His elite are the artist-priests of the social image. The formulas of the modern artistic schools, both the classicist-abstract, with their idea of a rigorously designed order as the condition of harmony, and the expressionist-surrealist, with their faith in the primitive and irrational as the grounds of creativeness, seem to

have been transported here to the social world. In his aestheticized concept of society, Caillois continues and modernizes the tendency of older ideologists of reaction who created an image of the Christian Middle Ages as a perfectly ordered system analogous to the cathedrals and the scholastic summas. With the growing incapacity or unwillingness of sociologists to deal with class conflict, the aesthetic image has become more widespread as a model in sociological thinking than is commonly recognized. Consider how the 19th Century views of society as another nature or as a regulated machine have been replaced by the description of particular cultures as organic works of art, with a unity of style, a pervading psychological expression, and a sub-rational source of creative energy. Caillois' social thinking is more deeply bound, however, to the self-consciousness of the modern French artist: the fundamental division within society for him is between the cultured and the uncultured, the elite and the barbarians, the same distinction that governs the arrangement of Courbet's great picture of his studio — a "real allegory," he called it — where the artist has brought together on the right the representatives of the world of thought and the arts, whom he calls the active and the living, and on the left, the rest of humanity, who embody for him death and social decay. This is also the view of Nietzsche, whose psychological and moral distinction between masters and slaves, and whose faith in an elite reappear often in this book. In France where culture, and especially the arts, are so important in social life, the elite is more likely to feel itself to be a distinct class and to sense its own influence and possibilities. Hence the general use in most countries of the French term "elite," with its connotation of the professional stratum of the bearers and creators of culture; just as the Russian word "intelligentsia" has become the international name for a more particularly critical and intellectual opposition, less concerned with the arts.

Caillois speaks, nevertheless, as a professional sociologist. He insists on the rigor and objectivity of science, and more than once

presents his conclusions as scientific results. To prepare the reader for his theories of order and authority, he begins with a richly documented investigation of the sociology of the hangman. This essay, which analyzes a historically trivial event in order to demonstrate the *survival* of feudal vestiges in the 20th Century, is significant of the sociological method of Caillois. For he approaches the problem of power and social cohesion indirectly and marginally and — it cannot be said too emphatically — in a completely unhistorical manner. His conclusion about the role of sovereign and hangman is a great leap beyond the facts on which it appears to be built, and gives, moreover, little if any insight into the concealed mechanisms of power and submission in our own society. He writes as if speaking of all societies, as if cohesion by its nature is essentially and permanently an affair of the sovereign and the hangman, and as if through the metaphors which link these two the present relations of authority and power are intelligible. But Caillois hasn't enough conviction to say so directly and to apply the conclusions to contemporary affairs; he is satisfied to prepare the reader's mind by holding up curious and diverting images of authority, which might render him more accessible to the analogies that follow.

In another essay, on the present war, there is a similarly indirect and metaphorical approach. He explains the acceptance of the war and the ease with which great masses of people and thinking minds slipped into it, in spite of the anticipated catastrophes, as a kind of social vertigo, the fascination of the deadly, and transposes to the social group the psychological process of the desperate gambler and the mad lover who pursues the woman who will lead him to destruction. There are admittedly economic and political causes, which, of course, it is not his business to consider or even to state precisely; but his sociological science, that he contrasts with the crude rationalism of the common material explanations, is unable to deal with these causes. It may be that some individuals are attracted to war as gamblers are drawn to the green table, but how

much does this say about war as a social phenomenon, how much does it enable us to predict a war or to foresee the behavior of social groups in war and peace, which Caillois believes is governed by an iron necessity, like natural phenomena?

Between these two essays, samples of sociological method, is sandwiched a shallow and ignorant critique of Marxism, confused for the most part with Stalinism. Caillois disavows any desire to demonstrate its contradictions or errors, which he considers self-evident and natural, since Marx wrote before the great advances in the social sciences during the last hundred years (it would be interesting to know what he has in mind here) — the fact that Marxists are constantly disputing about principles proves that these must be contradictory; Caillois' real aim is to show how and why Marxism became a dogma. Even for this limited historical purpose, we expect an examination of the history of Marxism or a study of different stages in the growth of its doctrines. But he offers a purely essayistic demonstration that hardly rises above the level of Jouffroy's naive essay on how dogmas are born and die. Because Marxism was the doctrine of a political movement, principles had to be accepted on faith; hence they ceased to be examined and were never revised or questioned in the light of new scientific discoveries. It appears then that Marxism is contradictory, because its followers are constantly disputing the principles, and a dogma because its principles are never discussed. This essay, like the rest of the book, shows no first-hand knowledge of the writings of Marx or of the leaders of the Bolshevik revolution, nor the smallest effort to come to grips with them, as one might expect from an intellectual who pretends to write on this subject.

There is a concluding essay on an episode of ancient history in which Caillois retells the predicament of Athens before the rising power of Philip of Macedon as an ante-type of the situation of France confronted by the threat of Hitler. Again, analogies and analogies. This one is vague and, as an account of the past, lacks any careful analysis of the causes of the ancient events.

The social studies of Caillois have been mainly of the primitive levels of culture and an attempt to discover in the most civilized forms the primitive processes and characteristics. This whole effort requires an abstraction from history and from the experiences by which men become civilized, that is, more free as individuals, more capable in nature, more understanding and more productive. His sociology is the study of society as a static or self-balancing whole, always and everywhere the same in its basic movements from birth to decay. The admission of the historical does not change this, for it is only a Platonic admission, and Caillois insists on the analogy and the eternally primitive societies. An investigator with this viewpoint is incapable of dealing with change and with intricate historical processes; he approaches them indirectly, looking always for the psychological, the mythical, the vestigial, and metaphoric in these phenomena. Such an approach is bound to be sterile, even as literature; for it is too much attached to the piquant and little detail, the amusing analogy, to develop its resources of insight and construction. We feel the shallowness most strongly when such a writer, without knowledge of affairs, without even the impulse to acquaint himself thoroughly with the scientific literature, begins to moralize and to offer plans for a new society. We are treated then to aphorisms that deserve a place in Flaubert's unfinished Dictionary of Accepted Ideas: "To follow an impulse and to oppose it are contrary ways," or: "It is when they invoke liberty that individuals commit the most unreasonable acts which enslave them most firmly."

The ideas of Caillois have a moral interest as an attempt to recover the sentiments and ties of community of which the lack is felt most keenly by intellectuals and artists. Therein lies the pathos of Caillois' thought which is always imaginative enough to convey the hidden trauma of a personal estrangement, without revealing its exact nature and its cause. But the social in itself, as an ideal, is only a form to Caillois, and a form limited to a particular type of association, which is repressive, binding, authorita-

tive or secret and conspiratorial, rather than the condition of a possible freedom for all individuals. Since the lack of cohesion is what disturbs him in our own society, he tends to overrate communal rites and compulsions; he ignores the possibility of a looser organization in which men are freer than today and yet as cooperative and humane as in the most harmonious, simple tribal society. The social as such is hardly identical with the closed stabilizing and repressive relations that appeal so much to Caillois; these are only a particular historical case, and it may be said that the anarchy of present life is no less social than the "order" of feudal society and depends no less on conditions that restrict, subordinate and socialize individuals.

With all his pathetic appeal to the social and communal, Caillois's writing is noticeably lacking in humane social feeling. The virtues he requires in his elite are essentially private or repressive and hostile: sociability, love, cooperativeness, generosity, self-sacrifice, good-will, are absent from his catalogue. On the contrary, he is most eloquent and deliberately exalted in describing control, awe, authority, scorn, condescending politeness, obedience and secrecy. And when he has to speak of the atmosphere of his future world, he elaborates images of coldness and aridity; his thought turns to a dry, anti-organic environment, the setting for a disciplined mind, which ordinary sensual beings cannot withstand. His whole tendency is against warm feeling, spontaneity, love, in short, against life itself. Hence his curiosity about the hangman, the praying mantis that devours her male, vertigo, the buried or concealed object, the secret group, the fragment of treasured glass; examine his other writings, his likes and dislikes, and you will see how often he is attracted by the anti-vital, with what anxiety he writes of contacts with the human mass, the living creatures whom he fears and detests. We are therefore bound to mistrust him when he tells us that the society regulated by his elite will "provide for everyone the conditions for the full development of his personality." The question he does not ask himself is

whether a society that really provided these conditions would need a repressive elite, would even have an elite in his sense; whether an elite like his, suspicious of the people, regarding them as brutes, as "almost of a different race" — they seem "to belong to a different animal species," he says, — would ever put itself to any trouble to create these conditions, which might bring some surprising revelations of human capacities and of the effect of the present degraded state of the lower classes on the morality and life of the elite. His assumption of the inherent inferiority of the non-elite is a foolish prejudice, no better than Nazi racism. In such opinions, as in his essays on the hangman and vertigo, the sociology of Caillois betrays itself as a romantic and humorless social macabre, a learned extension of his emotional attitudes. That is indeed the source of his interest and limitation as a man of letters.

Some readers, inspired by a wholesome common sense, will perhaps wonder that attention is given to such ideas. Apart from the talent of Caillois as a writer — it is nuanced, ingenious and often brilliant, but weakened, I think, by the necessity of defending such a position — his essays are significant for several reasons. They show, in the first place, what has become of the great literary tradition of reaction in France in the present younger generation. Remember that this line included among others Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Renan, and Taine, and that even in the *Action Française* the standards of social inquiry were higher than Caillois'. As the crisis becomes more acute, as the ideal of a cultured life appears daily more problematic, the old concept of a society refined and stabilized by an elite, which gave some dignity to reaction, assumes in the writing of Caillois, who is unwilling to repeat the old formulas and must look for a fresh creed, a strangely morbid and fantastic tone. Unable to accept fascism or royalism or Catholicism, but attached to a hierarchical society, he has devised a poor compound of Nietzsche and Comte (let us forget the Assassins and the Jesuits), wholly unapt for his ends. He

wishes the intellectuals as an independent group to regenerate society, but he offers them a doctrine that betrays the incapacity of his elite to understand either themselves or the society they are to reform.

In the second place, the book of Caillois is important because at a time when there is so great a pressure from above to justify and to glorify capitalist democracy, he openly expresses the dissatisfaction with it that thoughtful intellectuals are bound to feel, but which few will bring into the foreground of discussion. He is therefore able to attract those who are disillusioned with democracy, or at least to create an atmosphere of thought favorable to that disillusionment. At the same time, by his faith in the elite as an independent reforming power, he joins hands with those simple-minded democrats who hope, through a renewed humanistic education and religion and moral teachings, to endow democracy with a common discipline and an absolute spiritual principle. But where they imagine that democracy can be preserved only by fixed norms in culture and morals, Caillois, we have seen, believes, like his great forerunners, that authority in culture and morals is possible only if democracy is weakened or overcome, since the latter is a solvent of such authority. In his notion of a "spiritual power," Caillois draws out more completely the implications of the beliefs of these innocently authoritarian educators. Their democratic avowals are indeed often suspect; a strong polemic against democracy or a social crisis will easily shake their beliefs; but the abandonment of democracy will not necessarily entail any serious revision in their moral or cultural doctrines, since these are finally designed to serve the conservative tendencies of the time, rather than to make society more democratic than it is.

Caillois' book has still another and more definitely political interest in connection with French society after the war. We have no doubt that the political outcome of the war in France will be of immense importance for the movement for a free society throughout the entire world. The victory or defeat of socialism

in France will be felt everywhere. The type of frankly reactionary thought represented by Caillois has been most common in France, where it has a long intellectual ancestry going back to the revolution of 1789. This tradition, carried by the most cultured elite in the world, is often decidedly positivistic and devoted to science, in contrast to the German and Russian reactionary doctrinaires; in its ideology of order, it is sympathetic to science as the model of an impersonal, disinterested, aristocratic action of the mind which establishes general laws and subdues the chaos of impressions and the arbitrariness of individual minds. It can hardly be accused of obscurantism, like the metaphysical and religious critics of science, but it has become increasingly misanthropic and cruel. Every social upheaval and military defeat in France has strengthened this intellectual-political tendency: 1789, 1815, 1830, 1848, 1871, and 1914 have given fresh impulses to the idea of a hierarchical order, ruled by an elite. It is not commonly realized what conclusions were drawn by a learned, affable man, like Renan, a liberal and an admirer of Christ, from the experience of 1870-1871. He came to regard war as a hygiene of the race, an indispensable means of progress; democracy was incompatible with national strength, as was demonstrated by the victories of Prussia in 1815 and 1870. He therefore proposed a state ruled by a privileged caste of the army, the Church and the aristocracy, and recommended further a program of colonial imperialism, the rule of the French master-race over the inferior races, as a political necessity in averting class conflicts in France. And after the Commune, he could console himself for the Prussian victory with the thought that France now knew where to turn for its Scythians to police the barbarians at home. It is to this same Renan that Caillois turned for lessons in his *Lettres Françaises*, after the defeat of 1940. During the last few years, such doctrines have been shelved, or concealed by the democratic avowals of the official movement of resistance, which has gathered around its leader a most disparate political support ranging from the Stalinists and

the Socialists to men who in the past have been bitter enemies of democracy. These doctrines will emerge again, in the inevitable clash after the war, when the various factions of the underground movement and the politicians and generals (including de Gaulle, who believes like Renan that, without war, civilization would stagnate) present their claims.<sup>1</sup> The regime of Pétain had already attempted to put into force certain of these teachings. But after the experience of fascism and the popular revulsion against it, the doctrinaires of order have to differentiate themselves from it and to adopt at least some of the accredited aims, whether political or moral, of the anti-fascist coalitions of the war. By detaching himself from concrete political aims and by giving to his reactionary ideas a purely moral and formal direction, Caillois contributes to the intellectual conditions for a reactionary political power. But his call for the creation of a secret, militant group, hating the masses, suggests to intellectuals a more practical and sinister rôle

---

1. The essay was written before the liberation of France. EDITORS.