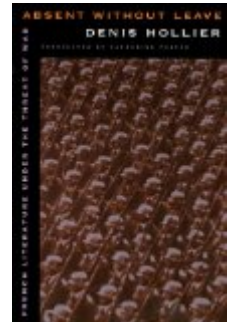


**Denis Hollier.** *Absent Without Leave: French Literature under the Threat of War.*  
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**Reviewed by** David L. Schalk

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Denis Hollier is a prolific and talented scholar of contemporary French literature who has very recently moved from Yale to New York University. Several of his works, which focus on, though are by no means limited to, the period between the two World Wars, have already appeared in English translation.[1] Hollier is enormously learned, conversant with the most advanced literary theory, and never coddles his readers--indeed, as will be noted later, he may assume too much background knowledge from his anglophone readership. He is sophisticated, often paradoxical,[2] sometimes skirts the edge of understanding, but is never deliberately obscure for the purpose of demonstrating verbal pyrotechnic ability. He frequently takes a historical approach to the subjects he studies, and many of his analyses, often highly original and provocative, will be of interest to historians of modern France, particularly those who have specialised in the 1914-1945 period. All of his principal characters, the intellectuals whom he examines, are in complex and convoluted, often conflictual ways, reacting to the rise of fascism and more generally totalitarianism in the 1930s.

Most of the thirteen chapters of *Absent Without Leave*, so smoothly translated by Catherine Porter that the reader often forgets their French provenance, were published elsewhere. This is a marvelous title, in this reviewer's judgement, more evocative of the work's contents and principal themes than *Les Depossedes*. Since north American scholars often rely upon translations in their teaching, I might add that it is a tribute to Ms. Porter's skill that she is often able to capture in English Hollier's wit and elegance of argument.

When Denis Hollier collected the essays for this volume he edited them somewhat, and generally they cohere. While he may jump ahead to the Resistance and then backtrack to the late 1920s, in ways that to this reader are not fully persuasive, [3] there is a temporal unity in that the principal works studied date from 1927, with the publication of Julien Benda's *La Trahison de clercs* to the late 1940s. The most intense focus is on three tumultuous and painful years, 1937-1939, just before the outbreak of a new war, punctuated in the middle by the Munich Crisis of September 1938, a moment of partial mobilization, after which, in



the words of Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiographical hero Mathieu Delarue in *Le Sursis*, "*il ne resterait plus qu'une petite cicatrice invisible dans la continuité de sa vie, une petite cassure: le souvenir d'une nuit où il avait cru partir à la guerre*" (Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 510, a work which Hollier does not cite but which reflects many of the themes of *Absent Without Leave*).

These were years of extraordinary intellectual productivity, in so many areas of cultural endeavor--ranging from all varieties of literature through anthropology to sociology, via philosophy and political science--one thinks of the early works of Raymond Aron, astutely discussed by Hollier. They were years of an anguished sense of national (and in some cases personal and physical) impotence, even despair, of betrayal, of "Sympathy for the Devil" across the Rhine, of engagement, disengagement, the true "prehistory of postmodernism", to quote the blurb supplied by Harvard University Press. The years just before World War II are indeed probably more significant for understanding postmodernism than the years of the dominance of existentialism, which lasted from 1945 to 1956, and perhaps as late as 1960, with the publication of Sartre's last formal work of philosophy, *Critique de la raison dialectique*.

Hollier is thus studying a period of extreme tension, of foreboding, of an awareness of impending catastrophe, fearing war yet attracted to it: "Like a moth attracted to a flame, literature turns toward war not because it sees war as its source, but on the contrary because it sees war as what threatens-- or promises--to take away its conditions of possibility ... Not satisfied with being an unnamable referent, war institutes a regime of total mobilization that takes away time from writing" (p. 4). The essays collected in this volume "deal with a paradoxical form of the literature of commitment: literature committed to its own exclusion" (p. 6).

Although Hollier is not fully explicit, he clearly intends to distinguish between a period of total

combat, such as the six weeks from the beginning of the *Blitzkrieg* on 10 May, 1940, to Philippe Pétain's request for an armistice on 17 June 1940, and what followed in France. As countless studies of life under the Nazi occupation document, 1940-1944 *did* allow time for literature, some of it ignoble, some of it inspired, some of it ambiguous. The first major work Hollier analyses is Sartre's *Les Mouches*, which passed the German censors and premiered in occupied Paris in 1943. The play is well known and often performed, and Hollier probes deeply into its linguistic and philosophical grounding. "The play's center of gravity is a desire for gravity. Orestes [who returned to Argos to murder his stepfather Aegisthus] commits himself in order to escape dispersion and weightlessness, in order to recenter himself" (p. 19). Readers or viewers of *Les Mouches* today can easily see the appeal to resistance cloaked in classical garb. Aegisthus is clearly Marshal Pétain, for example, and while these contextual matters, which would be of more interest to historians, are not Hollier's central concern, he does not ignore them. He admits that the play "denounces the passivity with which the French accepted the Vichy regime" (p. 21).

After his rich and compelling analysis of *Les Mouches*, which is along the way compared to the intensely political and equally famous *Les Mains sales* (first performed in 1948), Hollier moves back in time in Chapter Three, "Mimesis and Castration 1937". Here he examines the work of Roger Caillois and the short-lived but important College of Sociology (1937-1939). At this point most American readers would have benefited from some background information. Caillois (1913-1978) is simply not that well known in north America.

Readers who are fluent in French will appreciate much more fully Hollier's acute and sensitive dissection of Caillois's elitism, the ambiguous attraction he felt for strong men, his reactionary positions, his desire to make social life sacred, and



his desire to combat entropy. All of this has a whiff of fascism about it, especially if one reads in tandem the articles on Caillois and on the *College de sociologie* in the *Dictionnaire des intellectuels francais*, edited by Jacques Julliard and Michel Winock (Paris, 1996). I think that it important to know, for example, that Caillois spent the years 1939-1945 in Argentina, where he did adopt anti-Nazi positions. Upon his return to France he took over the editorship of *La France libre* from Raymond Aron for a year, before withdrawing from all formal political engagement and becoming a functionary at UNESCO in 1948.

Hollier next turns to Georges Bataille (1897-1962), a better known and more widely translated writer, who has acquired somewhat of a cult following in the United States, especially among the younger intelligentsia. Bataille led a tumultuous life, was in contact with the major literary figures of the day, and produced some extremely violent, highly erotic if not genuinely pornographic texts. For most of his adult life, Bataille earned his living as a librarian, at the *Bibliothèque nationale* until 1942, from 1949-1951 at Carpentras, and after 1951 at Orleans. Bataille, too, was tempted for a while by fascism, and one of his works which Hollier analyses is entitled *Guilty*, a running sequence of notes written on a daily basis though not really a diary. It is surely significant that the first notation is dated 5 September 1939.

Chapter Six returns to Roger Caillois' College of Sociology, to which Bataille contributed extensively, and to its ambiguity toward fascism. Hollier shows convincingly that the nonconformity of many of the intellectuals affiliated with the College was tainted with fascism. Even when they appeared to attack fascism, they equivocated by identifying with the Nazi aggressor. Such a resistance "shuffles the cards, making it impossible to distinguish a potential aggressor from his victim" (p. 79). Most of the lesser-known intellectuals associated in some fashion with the College--Thierry

Maulnier, Arnaud Dandieu, Bertrand de Jouvenel, for example--have their articles in the above-mentioned *Dictionnaire des intellectuels francais* and reading about them pulls their ambivalence toward fascism more sharply into focus.

Maurice Blanchot (born 1907), another better known intellectual, also displayed a guarded praise of fascism in his pre-World War II writings. Hollier documents a love-hate relationship toward fascism redolent of anti-Semitism and digs out the uneasy ambiguities in the writings and behaviors of these intellectuals. Bataille himself is not exempt from this charge, as Hollier shows convincingly. This of course does not mean that Bataille himself or any of the others actually became fascists. Some of them, such as Jean Paulhan who spoke at the College in May 1939, later distinguished themselves in the Resistance. In the years just prior to the outbreak of war these intellectuals moved in a zone of "particularly intense ideological ambivalence" (p. 88). The dimension of ambiguity was present everywhere, including in Raymond Aron's 1939 doctoral thesis, and it found its way into postwar existentialism.

The two chapters which deal with Michel Leiris (1901-1990) and offer elegant, even brilliant textual analyses, but are inwardly focused, and do not offer the kinds of linkages with external historical events which inform the chapters on the appeal of fascism. Chapter Eleven, on the other hand, provocatively entitled "When Existentialism was not yet a humanism", pulls us back into history with a fascinating analysis of the early Sartre. Chapter Twelve, "A Farewell to Art", takes us further along that route. Hollier notes how many writers of the 1930s, from all across the political spectrum, from Andre Malraux to Andre Breton and from Pierre Drieu la Rochelle to Sartre, laboring under a sense of intense historical and cultural crisis and striving to abandon their art [because they were either so politically committed or terrified and ambivalent if they remained *degage*, as Sartre did until after 1940], "were haunted by



the quasi-alchemical dream of transforming [their] writing instruments into firearms" (p. 159). There were powerful anti-democratic, anti-liberal tendencies in so many of these intellectuals, including Malraux, as one can see in his great novel on the Spanish Civil War, *L'Espoir* (1937). Hollier terms this widespread phenomenon, which he documents powerfully, "a totalitarian desire", which in the Spanish case, and probably elsewhere in Europe at the time, constituted as serious a threat to democracy as the army the Loyalists were fighting against (p. 159). Hollier is at his most evocative when he argues that what we see in France in the late 1930s is a turning toward a new type of *engagement*, which reflects the ever-tightening stranglehold of totalitarianism on the continent. The vocabulary of commitment moves away from the social and political action advocated for example by such diverse intellectuals as Emmanuel Mounier and Paul Nizan as early as 1932(4), to the "crudest form" of *engagement*, that of "military discipline" (p. 173). Hollier does not quite go as far as to argue that the intellectuals in these crucial years actually suffered from a Freudian death wish, but they were certainly dreaming of a world in which there would be no place for literature.

Hence the concluding chapter, "Desperanto", punning on Esperanto, examines the problem of speechlessness, which Walter Benjamin discussed in 1937. Speechlessness was, as Benjamin well understood, and he was thinking in terms of the Spanish Civil War, linked up with a terrible confusion, a sense of not knowing what to say or what to think at a time when all avenues seemed blocked, when no course of action made any sense, when political visibility was zero. As Hollier puts it brilliantly, speechlessness for Benjamin was that of the "Marxist who is no longer managing to catch the meaning of history on his dial" (p. 178). As the world becomes militarized, what place is there for the intellectual? Finally, Hollier moves away from his tormented European intellectuals--all French except for Walter Benjamin,

and concludes with a powerful analysis of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* which, he reminds us, is a novel about a novel which will never be written, since "death blocks the hero's conversion into a novelist" (p. 184). In this sense Ernest Hemingway actualized the dream (or nightmare) of diminished narrative space which haunted Caillois, Bataille, and their peers.

Denis Hollier is a master critic who deserves to be read not just by an intimate coterie of literary specialists, but by his historian colleagues. We may occasionally lament the lack of historical grounding, but if we follow Ariadne's thread (to find the way out of the labyrinth), which Hollier offers us, we shall be richly rewarded. He gives us a fascinating portrait of the precursors of post-modernism, an intellectual generation which essentially implodes in 1940, leaving behind some brilliant, if often self-destructive writings, and an ambiguous record of sometimes self-destructive behaviour, even literally so, as in the tragic case of Walter Benjamin who committed suicide in 1940.

#### Notes:

[1]. Of special interest to intellectual and cultural historians are: *The Politics of Prose: Essays on Sartre*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Minneapolis, 1986); and the edited collection, *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1988) (texts by Georges Bataille and others). Denis Hollier has also edited *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); and co-edited with R. Howard Bloch, *A New History of French Literature*. (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

[2]. For example, when he compares Sartre's defense of commitment with Bataille's "defense" of communism for opposite reasons. For Bataille, only under a Stalinist regime would literature "escape the work of meaning", and not "allow itself to be appropriated, pardoned, redeemed" (p. 9.). Under such a regime literature, (as Bataille understood it, as a kind of complex, perhaps frivolous



negativity), would be pure, precisely literature and nothing else, because of its complete social isolation.

[3]. After dealing with Caillois in the late 1930s in Chapter Three, Hollier returns to Caillois's work in chapter seven, this time focusing on the posthumously published *The Necessity of Mind*, written in 1933 when Caillois was 20. Chapter Ten deals with the review *Documents*, which ran for 15 issues in 1929-1930, dealing with numismatics and other topics. Bataille was one of the major contributors to this journal, yet five chapters earlier Hollier has already written about Bataille during the Occupation.

[4]. See my *Spectrum of Political Engagement* (Princeton, 1979).

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