**La littérature de la Résistance :**

**contre l'occupant allemand ou contre ses complices ?**

English Translation

To the writers left wondering whether publishing a book in the Free Zone (hence under the indirect auspices of the German occupier) had any meaning at all, the year 1942 brought a new opportunity. One that allowed them to be in total alignment with their opposition to both the German occupation and the Vichy regime: underground publishing. Literary resistance thus found a paradoxical forum, far from risk-free on the one hand, but remaining fundamentally discreet on the other, the author hiding his identity behind a pseudonym. It was, in that sense, a commitment toward history.

By publishing in an underground paper, writers were freeing themselves from external pressure. From then on, they were able to express their activism without fearing neither censorship nor the intended or unintended self-censorship that was *de facto* associated with legal publications. It was, in addition, no longer necessary for their work to have a purely activist content, publishing underground being in itself an act of resistance. Underground publishing left one totally free to work in a way that’s completely decorrelated from the war context, to work in the name of art’s supremacy over contingencies, the triumph of eternal values over temporal ones, the celebration of French quality *per se,* finally reinstated in its ability to affirm its own freedom of inspiration.

I’d like to make a first observation here. No author actually used this freedom to produce work that was detached from the historical circumstances. Out of the 33 issues of the Minuit publishing house, all of them were engaged, if not activist. None of them boldly situated themselves away from the war context. Despite a solemn appeal all works intended for publication dealt hands-on with France’s situation between 1940 and 1944. While Minuit’s house made a point of producing well-crafted publications, printed with great care, creating, as they were saying, “*de la belle ouvrage*” (i.e. high-standard work), as if the war wasn’t there (in reality *despite* war and the restrictions of occupation), the narratives themselves did pertain to occupation, none of them drifting away from it, despite the appeal, and the manifesto, inserted in each of the brochures.

It is hardly surprising, to tell the truth. The moment was not seen as being prone to context-free written artworks purely conceived with the intention to reaffirm art’s autonomy from historical contingencies. After all, it remained possible to publish such pieces legally. Why publish them underground? What would then be the difference between underground and legal publishing? For the sake of a clear distinction, it was crucial that the works published underground be, by definition, stories that would have been censored otherwise.

Who did write underground? What was written? What was published?

Two genres were favoured: poetry and short stories. Given that theatre plays are meant to be staged, which, in the context of the war, involved getting an official approval, there was no room for drama in underground literature. The absence of novels can be explained by, seemingly, purely material reasons. Paper was rare, writing a novel was impractical and the author was always at risk of not getting published. The first novel that actually got published was a translation of ***The Moon is Down* by** John Steinbeck.
Short in length and effective at conveying a message quickly, poetry was the most adapted genre, considering the need for of a fast diffusion and reception. *Liberté*, by Paul Eluard et *La rose et le réséda* by Louis Aragon were, in many ways, some the Resistance’s anthems, besides the *Chant des partisans* of Maurice Druon and Joseph Kessel.

If we are to have “Vichy revisited”, let us also revisit the literature of the Resistance. Quantitatively, writers’ participation was largely insignificant. The very few who did participate only wrote one piece, such as Francois Mauriac’s exemplary *Cahier noir -* which is a political work, hardly a fiction. Most of those who wrote for Minuit didn’t eventually leave their mark on French literature. Who, today, still knows the names and works of George Adam, Pierre Bost, Claude Morgan and Edith Thomas ? While specialists of French 20th century’s literature know Andre Chamson and Claude Aveline, their works haven’t been re-edited after their death. In fact, among the ‘big names’, one can count only Esa Triolet and Louis Aragon. The former published Les amants d’Avignon, the latter three fiction pieces -*Les bons voisins*, *Le Mouton* and *Penitent 43*, re-published after the war in 1945 in a collection entitled *Servitude et grandeur des Francais* (literally “servitude and greatness of the French”). None of these received much attention among Aragon’s contemporaries and current readers alike. Finally, there was Vercors, and his *Silence de la mer* – a masterstroke, especially for a debut: it is the only prose text to have generated such an infectious enthusiasm in real time and come down in literary history as a major text. All in all, great authors remained largely silent – and those who didn’t, either flirted with collaboration (Cocteau, Giono, Montherlant) either fully embraced it.

Exaggerations aside, in many ways, Vercors is not far from being the only real embodiment of literary resistance’s spirit. Following the title of this conference - Vichy Revisited - my point will be to revisit Vercors and pay him the tribute that he deserves, and that I fell he only partly received. Indeed, his underground work cannot be boiled down to the sole *Silence de la mer*. Between 1941 and 1944 he wrote no less than eight pieces, including one that is today considered as a masterpiece of equal (or higher) quality than the *Silence de la mer*: *La Marche a l’etoile.*

My goal is not only to pay him a tribute. I shall also identify, through six of his stories, the very matrix of literary resistance.

Leaving aside the questions of the style and aesthetics of his work, my presentation will focus on the story itself, and more particularly its characters. Who are they, what do they do? The low number of characters per story, gives each of them an even greater symbolic signification. Each of the characters is ‘in situation’, to use a famous post-war Sartre concept. Each of them is situating himself clearly in the array of possible positionings created by the armistice and its two major consequences: the German occupation and the formation of the Vichy collaborationist government.

A story taking place in this post-June 1940 period had to stage characters representing the occupiers and the occupied. The former are of course German soldiers, competing with each other in diligence and eagerness to perform their duties. I shall elaborate on their characteristics later. Facing them, on the other side, the French characters can be categorised into four types, mirroring the divisions of French society after June 1940:

the collaborationist; the resistant; the Jew; the bystander

1. The collaborationist is complicit with the occupier. He’s accepted the new state of things and sees the alliance between Vichy and Nazi Germany as an opportunity. He actively works for the Collaboration or supports it.
2. On the opposite side of the spectrum stands the resistant. Against the *status quo,* the resistant seeks the restauration of French independence, freed from German domination and the preservation of its dignity in the face of occupation.
3. There are also the Jewish characters, which, while part of French population, don’t share the same treatment in so far as their Jewishness makes of them the targets of specific marginalisation, exclusion and extermination policies.
4. Between collaborationists and resistant figures, the story also portrays characters that can mildly identify with one side or the other without actively supporting them. Their decisions are not definitive, they are largely dependent on events whose occurrence may completely overturn them. These are the bystanders, they represent French population.

Our task is thus to analyse how those figures are portrayed. Do they all benefit from the same degree of exposure in the text? Which ones dominate and which ones are absent from Vercors’s work (and from the literature of the resistance that Vercors, I contend, epitomises)?

**Given that** we’re talking about short stories, it is no surprise that the number of characters and narrative features will be limited. That genre doesn’t lend itself to grand historical stories featuring a multitude of characters and representing all five ideal-types we identified in a comprehensive and balanced way. Rather, they tend to focus the action on a tightened setting opposing *two* out of those five figures - the others being either absent either relegated to the background. Each short story revolves around a single duo, whose makeup varies.

Let’s now identify which combinations Vercors favours in the pieces he wrote between 1941 and 1945. Due to time constraints, I shall first present my hypotheses and results without delving into in-depth illustrations for each story. And, rather than outlining them one by one, I’ll expose my conclusions, starting with the least expected one.
It is a reasonable assumption to make that a war literature would put the emphasis on the figure of the Resistant, depicting his struggle with the ‘enemy from outside’ (the German occupier) and/or the enemy from within (the collaborationist), and neglect the two other types of character - the bystander and the Jew. Yet, reading Vercors, one realises that the dominating figures, the only two that appear invariably in all stories, are not the Resistant, the occupier and the collaborationist, but really the Jew and the bystander. These two key figures form the very core of Vercors’s stories. Bystanders are thus not only the designated audience of literary resistance - the one Vercors seeks to reach and convince - they actually play a part in most stories. The German occupier, which one would expect to find at the heart of the story, is side-lined - with the exception of the *Silence de la mer (*which, in many ways, has overshadowed the other pieces). The dramatic confrontation between a German and a Resistant, the power asymmetry (occupier/occupied, fighter/civilian, man/woman) that translates into the German officer’s never-ending flood of words powerfully subverted by the young lady’s enduring silence, all of it is unique in Vercors’s work. All the others, as I mentioned it, put the Jew and the bystander at the forefront.

Let us start with the first and most famous piece: *Le Silence de la mer*, by Vercors. Surprisingly, instead of the expected Manichean confrontation between the most driven resistant and the worst occupier, the story portrays an unwilling occupier. To paraphrase Albert Memmi’s colonialist typology, one can identify here a well-meaning occupier facing a young lady that doesn’t see resistance as an armed or punitive struggle. The story shows the encounter between this educated and sensitive German officer and that young lady that invents what can be seen as the lowest degree of resistance: silence. No complacency, no compromise, but no explicit rebellion either, no attempt to eliminate him or stop him from entering the premises.

That German officer couldn’t be farther away from the figure of the persecutor. His first word to the niece is: “I am sorry”. On a physical note, the narrator says that “he had a handsome face”. Beyond that positive connotation, the description triggers compassion in the reader: “The officer followed her. I saw one of his leg was straight”. His first speech is rather puzzling: “I have great esteem for people who love their country.”

To put it differently, von Ebrennac is no common occupier. He is in line with the image crafted by German propaganda and validated by a number of French civilians: with him, the legendary German brutality gives way to courteousness, sensitivity and even a certain idealism regarding the future of the French-German couple - beyond the clichés on blond hair and taste for music. But the rest of the story shows that the officer’s admiration for France and French culture along with his wish to open a new chapter in France-German relations are in minority among German soldiers. In fact, he is a near-exception. Later in the story, Von Ebrennac becomes disenchanted with Germany. Not that the young lady convinced him. He comes to it by himself, as he is enjoying a permission in Paris with fellow soldiers. Far from von Ebrennac’s benevolence, his comrades are set on making France’s humiliation last. Torn between loyalty to his fellow fighters and his unrealistic ideals, he finally decides to go East, where – as the reader can perceive it – he will likely die. A choice for which the young lady gives him a short but heartfelt farewell. Nonetheless, even though the plot portrays the tensed encounter between a young French lady and an officer, even though speeches are overwritten by a persisting silence, even though there is strictly speaking no bystander character in the story, the bystander does remain the piece’s principal ‘recipient’. Vercors, here, is not trying to sing the praise of non-violent resistance and its superiority over armed fighting. Neither is he attempting to hierarchise among those who resist actively and those who stick to passive resistance. He’s rather stressing the need for an elementary degree of resistance, be it a mere code of conduct, that one should adopt and enact at an individual level for the sake of preserving collective dignity. Two characters are absent from the story, the Jew and the collaborationist - even if, I as stressed it, the temptation to identify with the latter is precisely what the text is taking aim at.

The lesson is crystal clear: every French citizen, regardless of their location and situation, can and must show his opposition to the present military and political situation, through any form of resistance that suits their means, age and social status.

What applies to *Le silence de la mer* doesn’t quite apply the other stories, however.
In those, the occupier is either totally absent, either marginal, taking the diffuse form of cruel and brutal enemy figure, never getting to be fleshed out as character in its own right. ***La marche a l’etoile***tells the story of Thomas Muritz who leaves his xenophobic and anti-Semitic country to settle in France, reputed the motherland of Human Rights. After a successful social integration - that he owes to his hard work and his marital life - he finally obtains French citizenship before the war. As a Jew, he is a first degree resistant, a concept defined by Vercors in *Le silence de la mer*. Unable, due to his old age, to “blow trains up or carry weapons across the countryside, he resigns himself to stay among those of his own kind and carry their cross with them”- that is, the yellow star. Blinded by an unwavering faith and an unsinkable love for France, refusing to blame Petain for his political choices, he finds comfort in denial. The Marechal knows nothing and the French police won’t do anything immoral, he believes. When, after being arrested and sent to Drancy, he seeks support from a French policeman, the latter reacts violently and threatens him with a gun. Muritz realises, albeit too late, that his love for France stopped him from seeing the dark reality of French collaboration. French people, more, French policemen meant to be keeping the peace, are complicit with German crimes. Muritz is left screaming and in tears. Tears - quote and quote - “of distress, despair, honour, tears of agony for a murdered love”. The narrator draws the lessons of the event: he foresees that while military misfortunes – such as the defeat and the Exodus – will likely end up being forgotten, other war facts will forever remain “degrading… and irreparable… Like… like what you’re wearing here” (referring to the yellow star). “Irreparable”, this word can’t but remind us of the word Jacques Chirac will be using fifty years later in his pivotal 1995 speech “in memory of the victims of the collaboration between the French Vichy state and the German occupier”.

The Germans don’t feature in the story; the French government commits irreparable crimes; bystanders are powerless while another Jewish (actively) resistant character gets denounced and delivered into the hands of the Germans. He’s the one recounting the last moments of Thomas Muritz, after his disillusion. The Jews are at the heart of the story and the author senses clearly that something of the French ideal dies alongside these innocent victims.

In ***L’imprimerie de Verdun*,** written in 1945, the bystander and the Jew are, again, the focus of the plot. German occupation is, again, nearly absent. The main character is a rather reactionary WW1 veteran. He owns a printing shop in which he employs a Verdun survivor like himself. The employee is a Jewish, free-mason and antifascist Italian immigrant, while his employer keeps vehemently complaining about the power of free-masons, Jews and communists. The owner sides with Petain, whom he trusts entirely; the Jew fears for his life. When a printer union representative asks the shop owner to sign a petition to expel Jews, he refuses to sign and keeps his employee with him, illegally. Realising the danger in which his Jewish assistant is, he decides to prints false documentation for him. And yet, the story ends with a triple tragedy. The Jewish employee, his wife and their children are deported and gassed in Auschwitz; the shop owner is denounced and sent to Germany, where he dies. Only the collaborationist that denounced him escapes with his life. Jailed for three days after the Liberation, he is quickly reinstated in his rank and possessions, in total good conscience. As I mentioned, the German occupier is completely absent from the story. The Resistance *is* present and active but the character that represents it ends up dying, along with his family - that he tried to save. The character that brought misfortune upon the others triumphs. He collaborated, sent innocent people to death … and survives and thrives. In this piece, Vercors shows the exemplary case of a bystander that, unpredictably, chooses to act in the name of human solidarity. But Vercors didn’t give way to the temptation of an easy happy ending.

In ***L’oubli,*** the narrator finds himself on a train journey to Paris that he took one year before, in June 1943, when he was the witness of a dramatic scene. At the station, screaming and threatening German soldiers were forcing terrorised and freezing Jews off the train. The narrator recalls his own powerlessness, the powerlessness of his fellow passengers and, more importantly, the indecent laughs of some of them. Looking at the 1944 passengers, he wonders if some of them could actually be those laughers, carrying on with their lives as if nothing had happened. In that text, Resistance is absent, even first degree one. No one protests, no one demonstrates any sign of solidarity towards the men, women and children victims. The Germans may well be playing their blood-thirsty persecutors parts, the bystanders and the collaborationists are the ones on trial here. And they are all *de facto* vindicated by history, except the narrator who remains haunted by the scene.

***L'impuissance*** (powerlessness in English) is precisely the title of another story, written in 1944 that illustrate Adorno’s famous quote years before he wrote it: “no one can write poetry after Auschwitz”. The story consists of two characters, plus another one, deceased. We’re told the first character “threw himself wholeheartedly into Resistance”, with no further indications regarding the details of his actions in it. The reader only knows that, as he was younger, the man didn’t hesitate to voice his indignation when one of his classmates was treated unfairly. The second character, who’s also the narrator, can be classified as a bystander. He goes to the main character’s place and shares with him a piece of news: one of their former classmates, Bernard Meyer, died after he was transferred to Drancy, and deported. Immediately prior to this, the main character learned about the German-perpetrated Oradour-sur-Glane massacre. As a reaction to this double catastrophe (both personal and national), this well-cultured and learned man unexpectedly decides to set fire to all his books and paintings in his courtyard. He can no longer stand the contradiction between civilisation and barbary, the fact art keeps living on “while women and kids are burnt at the stake in a church … While people are piled up in chambers purposely built to asphyxiate them … While nearly everywhere dead people are hanging on trees, accompanied by the radio, perhaps even playing Mozart, who knows? … While people have their feet and hands burnt to force them to denounce their friends?”

The Germans and the French *Milice* are not forgotten here, but their horrific actions remain in the background of the story. Once again, what stands out is the powerlessness of the bystanders, whose actions are much weaker than the ongoing evil ones. Vercors’ dilemma is explicit: “I won’t read a single line until humanity changes” the main character says, which contrasts with the narrator’s belief that “art alone keeps him from despair” and that “man is a beast that can only be redeemed by art and disinterested thinking.”