

## **SACRIFICE, NIHILISM, AND TOTALITARIANISM: THE QUESTION OF NOTHINGNESS IN PAUL NIZAN, GEORGES BATAILLE, AND PIERRE DRIEU LA ROCHELLE<sup>1</sup>**

The political ideology of some French writers in the 1930s and 1940s goes beyond their historical context and already announces the end of history, of all beliefs, and of occidental civilization. In our post-historic period, nothingness has become the horizon of European culture.<sup>2</sup> During the course of our century, all attempts to escape nothingness have resulted in the convergence of warfare and totalitarianism. Faced with genocide and carnage, many people have abandoned all illusion and sunk into nihilism. Consequently, a number of writers have interrogated the meaning of existence, as well as the origin and evolution of civilization (Descombes 134). World War I, which traumatized Europe, exacerbated these interrogations. Such discourses had been foretold by Nietzsche. Millions of victims and mass destruction had and still have discredited the notion of progress. Since then, many followed the philosophy of the Romanian thinker, Cioran, for whom “belief in progress as the most faulty and most naive of all superstitions”<sup>3</sup> (Cioran, *L’Inconvénient* 153), adding that the idea of progress “puts the intellect to shame”<sup>4</sup> (Cioran, *L’Inconvénient* 157). Similarly, Georges Duhamel claims that “the enthusiastic respect given the word ‘future’ and everything it contains must be ranked among the most naive ideology of the twentieth century”<sup>5</sup> (18). Faith in the future no longer exists, and even belief in human reason has been invalidated.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was translated from French with the assistance of Ana Kothe.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the concept of post-history, see Vincent Descombes’s *Le même et l’autre*, particularly Chapters 4 and 6.

<sup>3</sup> “la croyance au progrès comme la plus fausse et la plus miase des superstitions.” All translations mine.

<sup>4</sup> “déhonore l’intellect.”

<sup>5</sup> “le respect enthousiaste du mot avenir et de tout ce qu’il cache est à ranger parmi les plus naïves idéologies du XXe siècle.”

Consequently, writers such as Drieu la Rochelle and Bataille moved toward irrationalism and so embraced emptiness and nihilism. Both then experienced the temptation of fascism, while others, such as Nizan, were attracted to communism. There is little difference, however, between these two approaches, since both represent totalitarian systems. Their seductiveness goes hand-in-hand with the obsession with death, which has always haunted these authors. Their relation with totalitarianism lies in their search for a new principle of life and values, an answer to their questions and worries. In that sense, totalitarianism should not be understood as only a solution to the political crisis of the 30s; it was also the crisis of an occidental civilization that could no longer find meaning in its existence and whose future had come to an impasse. This crisis remains unsettled. Thus, such books as *Le Cheval de Troie* [The Trojan Horse], by Paul Nizan, *Le Bleu du ciel* [Blue of the Sky], by Georges Bataille, and *Les Chiens de paille* [Straw Dogs] by Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, are still sold in bookstores today. These novels describe not only the illusions of totalitarianism, but above all its disillusion, with death constantly lurking in the background. These three writers were obsessed with death and responded to it with a new mode of mysticism.<sup>6</sup>

With the decline of rationalism, the question of death manifests itself in all its absurdity. Nizan, who seeks to establish a communist world, tries at the same time to make sense of death. According to Allan Stoekl, *Le Cheval de troie* is an attempt to justify death by giving it a leading role of social cohesion and “useful” sacrifice for the welfare of future generations (54). In that sense, the idea of death becomes more acceptable, and even rationalized, because it has been theorized. Nizan describes in his work two types of death, which are perceived in a diametrically opposed way: on the one hand there is a useless and absurd death, such as Catherine’s, and on the other hand there is Paul’s, whose death is useful and therefore justified—even necessary—since it has been considered as a sacrifice that reinforces the solidarity of the group.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, “the idea of death is in the air, it is like an essential gas in the air that everyone breathes”<sup>8</sup> (134-35). Death is everywhere and

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<sup>6</sup> My use of “mysticism” will be more fully explained later, but here I wish to invest it with multiple attributes: a form of religion, a mystery or mystique, and political mystification.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine died after an abortion: Paul during a riot.

<sup>8</sup> “L’idée de la mort était dans l’air du temps... elle était comme un gaz essentiel dans l’air que tout le monde respirait.”

in everyone. The cause of Catherine's death was that her life seeped out of her, leaving only ever-present death to fill her body. Rather than residing outside the body like a foreigner, death is a force that emanates from the depth of one's being. Catherine's death is an absurd death, one that nothing can justify, an injustice. However, it has been provoked by an external cause, an abortion made illegal by a fundamentally hostile society. For a communist such as Nizan, Catherine died for nothing because the dominant and exploitative capitalist society provided no prevention of these gratuitous and absurd deaths. Furthermore, capitalism is not in a position to bring a satisfactory justification to the problematic of death, and leaves everyone on her own when she dies.

Inversely, Paul represents the unique justifiable death, the only positive death in Nizan's world. It is then interesting to note that Paul, a minor character during his novelistic life, gains importance due to his death. In a sense, it is not Paul who is essential to the group; instead what matters is his sacrifice and thus his death. Life is therefore of secondary importance, which is reinforced by the fact that Nizan seems to ignore personal and family life throughout the work. Home, the setting of personal life, has now become the setting of death since it is the place where Catherine and her fetus die.

Nizan, like his characters, cannot accept death. They must deny it or at least justify it by making it useful since "every man lives only to deny death"<sup>9</sup> (299). The announcement of Paul's violent death to the communist members at first causes an outrage provoked by its injustice. Bloyé, the intellectual of the group, theorizes death and its position in a sacrificial context. Paul dies for those who share his ideas, and therefore his death encourages them to pursue the revolution. It celebrates a primordial finality and opens the eyes of his companions by offering them a better understanding of their situation and cause. In this way, Paul's death is not in vain. It becomes a symbol addressed to the men of action, giving them a reason to keep on fighting and risking their lives for their beliefs. It is a sacrificial death for the community. Individual death is erased, along with its absurdity.

Undoubtedly, Bloyé represents the side of Nizan that faithfully believes in sacrificial death as a way to enable communism, but Nizan also creates the character, Lange, who certainly represents his own alter-ego, the one obsessed by the image of death in an attitude of passive nihilism. Lange proposes that the only way to

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<sup>9</sup> "tout homme ne vit que pour nier la mort."

tolerate living obsessively with death is by living alone. Myths that could have helped him overcome his obsession cannot protect him. History has ended for Lange, who is a history professor, and he has renounced all hope that death can be meaningful. Having lost all illusion and belief, he refuses to participate in the community. He is so obsessed with his own individual dilemma that collectivity holds no interest for him. Politics does not count, and he is solely preoccupied by metaphysics. According to him, no system, either political or ideological, can resolve the question of death. Nevertheless, violence can offer an answer to his problem of loneliness. To an extent his belief in a strong, violent system was characteristic of the period between the two World Wars. In this sense Lange's belief, ironically, is not an isolated one. A strong and powerful system similar to that of the Germans was on the brink of dominating Europe. A reader might wonder if Nizan weren't asking for a totalitarian state like the Soviet one he admired so much during his visit. In a way, the Stalinist Bloyé and the potentially fascist Lange converge in their desire for totalitarianism. In Nizan's thought, however, there is a major difference between fascism and communism. Fascism is an image of death and only brings destruction. Conversely, communism is the image of construction. But for Lange, a strong state is merely a temptation. He is ultimately aware that no political or social system will provide a solution: man is condemned to die alone. His final departure cannot be achieved collectively.

The whole problematic of *Le cheval de Troie* and its characters lies in the realization of a pure ideal located in a distant future and that has as its ultimate goal to overcome, once and for all, the fear of dying. This rather mystical idea lends a quasi-religious nature to the militants' actions in the novel. It is a religion based on individual sacrifice that greatly affects the community, but it lacks the most essential characteristic, which is to give a meaning to life beyond justifying death. This is the issue that Stoekl raises in his analysis: what is the meaning and role death will be given once the revolution has taken place at the end of history? What then will be the cement that strengthens the solidarity in the community? As Stoekl writes, "Bloyé conceives a community in the present. But the community of the future, in which sacrificial death no longer serves as the unifying element is for him unimaginable" (67). This idea is repressed by Bloyé and confirms the impossibility of giving death meaning. The question of death and nothingness changes into a political one which ultimately does not solve the metaphysical angst of death.

Stoekl adds that when violence is no longer turned "outward, toward an external enemy, the violence will be turned inward, into

and against the community itself" (68). Revolutionary violence, which is at once destructive and creative, is applied to destroy an old order and install a new one. However, once the new order is established, violence will still be present and will serve to keep the community unified in a totalitarian way since there would be an absence of unifying values. This reinforces the conceptions of Lange who only believes in death and violence. Therefore, in contrast to Bloyé, he can imagine a future. He knows that fascism along with its violence and collective rituals will be able to maintain a community established through force. Justifiable death is thus bound to fail. At the end of the novel Berthes asks Bloyé, "Then what? We are all going to die anyway and we will end in a hole"<sup>10</sup> (242). Bloyé replies evasively and remains silent. He does not have the last word. This is Lange's silence: Lange is also a part of Bloyé, a part the latter cannot accept. He denies thinking like Lange. So he remains silent before Berthes' objections. Bloyé refuses fully to believe and accept the absurdity of violence, death, and nothingness.

Just after Paul's death, Bloyé's words have in themselves hate and violence, which fuse into a secret and effective power to overthrow the present order. This power, which leads to Stalinist dictatorship, is insidious, terrible, merciless, and it is all the more dangerous when it remains in an unconscious state among the partisans. Bloyé speaks but when the mask hiding the illusions of meaningful death falls, the true face of destruction will speak instead, within an established totalitarian state. "The era of deaths is announced"<sup>11</sup> (239), but those deaths will certainly not carry Bloyé's meaning.

In his novel *Le Bleu du ciel*, Bataille also faces the question of death, totalitarianism and nothingness. Inversely to Nizan, however, Bataille does not want to justify or create anything. This, as Peter Collier points out, is "a vertigo of self-destruction ... the novel recreates, in a fictional mode, the psychological and political conditions that favor the growth of fascism"<sup>12</sup> (81). *Le Bleu du ciel* is an immersion into morbid eroticism and nihilism which join together in a search for death. Death is here defined as an aesthetic of alienation and nothingness.

Francis Marmande rightly considers this novel as one of the

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<sup>10</sup> "Et après? On mourra quand même et on finira dans un trou."

<sup>11</sup> "L'époque des morts s'annonçait."

<sup>12</sup> "un vertige de l'autodestruction ... le roman recrée sur un mode fictif les conditions psychologiques et politiques qui favorisent l'essor du fascisme."

“most atrocious and suffocating”<sup>13</sup> twentieth-century books. According to Marguerite Duras, it is a fight against the language; Bataille “invents how not to write while writing.”<sup>14</sup> Certainly, this novel represents a new world that only brings the horror of a massacre lived in indifference, black irony, and evasion, all of which are expressions of passive nihilism.

Bataille highlights the cohesive aspects of violence and affection against rationality in his essay “La Structure psychologique du fascisme” [Psychological Structure of Fascism]. For a community to exist, Bataille believes, it must be both religious and military. Religiosity in a community structure is of primary importance and, as he puts it in *Acéphale*, “if nothing can be found beyond political activities, human avidity would only reach a void. We are fiercely religious”<sup>15</sup> (quoted in Heimonet 16).

Facing powerless reason, Bataille offers in his novel the sacrifice of lucidity for irrationality that he had theorized in his essay on “La notion de dépense.” Bataille brings self-sacrifice toward a death that leads to nothing. This sacrifice is absolutely useless and unproductive. *Le Bleu du ciel* is a book of wasting, loss, non-sense, a celebration of nihilism.

As for Bataille, ideology is an appearance that simultaneously enables and cloaks one’s existence. This is in complete opposition to Nizan’s ideas. Being is an absence, and ideology is a cover protecting it from the fall in nothingness. “The impossible” is a basis of existence and leads to the divine. Consequently, “the impossible” is heterogeneous in a sense that it is an undefinable immensity, “the unorganized”. Exploring “the impossible” provokes a fall into darkness and infamy. One of the main characters, Henri, embraces “the impossible” and uses it to build all his beliefs. According to him, everything but death is a fiction. It is fiction, an appearance, which separates one’s existence from death. Life is only a process of decomposition, and in no way can this decay be measured and defined because it is partly a representation of heterogeneity. Blood, sperm, and vomit, which are heterogeneous substances, are negatively characterized in relation with organized elements. This explains why they defy all rational discourses of the tangible. Vomit, excrement, and

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<sup>13</sup> “plus atroces et plus suffocants.”

<sup>14</sup> “invente comment ne pas écrire tout en écrivant.”

<sup>15</sup> “si rien ne pouvait être trouvé au-delà de l’activité politique, l’avidité humaine ne rencontrait que le vide. Nous sommes farouchement religieux.”

decaying flesh do not lead toward a rational solidity or comprehensible structured shape, but rather toward an indivisibility of fluids, imprecision, mutability, and impossible cohesion.

These ideas of death and rottenness are well expressed through *Le Bleu du ciel's* characters. This is particularly true with Lazare, a Communist woman who fervently wants to change the world. The world, however, becomes with her as grey as her flesh. In Bataille's mind the idea of salvation is non-sense and represents death as a promise of the coming war. Like Lazare, Henri, "feels a compulsive attraction toward violence and death"<sup>16</sup> (Collier 77). He observes the Catalan separatist insurrection with irony and detachment. He also penetrates death, and reaches his climax in a tomb with the female character, Dirty, who represents the image of death. Henri's sexual impotence and therefore his inability to reproduce life is cured in a tomb but it is only to give birth to death with a Nazi woman, who fascinates him. This nihilist passage is an ironic reversal of the title, since "*le bleu du ciel*," a French expression implying hope, only reaches fruition in a cemetery. The future is as gloomy as the darkness that covers the tombs. In fact, one of the last scenes is a parade of young Nazi children who will spread devastation and death and who therefore represent the future of a world heading toward annihilation.

The novel is constituted as a mixture of dreams and reality. This reality is a vision of the impossible, deprived of all meaning and future. Nothing is secure; one can only grasp things that immediately decompose. All discourses are turned into derision, interrupted by bodies, producers of filthiness. Everything falls into decrepitude. The structure of the novel, like religious and social superstructures, is both sacred and impure. All forms of heterogeneity—in other words, the sacred, waste, eroticism, and violence—are mingled without distinction and merge into perversity. There is a conciliation between the sacred and the blasphemous, which join together to experiment with death. *Le Bleu du ciel* becomes, therefore, the expression of violence, madness, excess and the inassimilable.

The novel ends with a laugh recalling the laugh in *La Chute* [The Fall] by Camus. This evil laugh must be understood as a surpassing of religion and beliefs that can unify communities. It is a post-religious element that sacrifices the community and leads to nothingness. This laugh comes indeed from the conscious of nothingness

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<sup>16</sup> "ressent une attraction compulsive vers la violence et la mort."

and claims it. It is a nihilist sense of relief that enables mockery of illusion of being and meaning. It is also the consciousness of failure and absurdity as the only reality. From the very beginning, the "I" enjoys itself "as an object of disgust"<sup>17</sup> (395). The "I" wallows in downfall and filth in order to reach the unhealthy joy of laughing at death. Everything was lost in advance: there is nothing to learn or to understand. As in *Le Cheval de Troie*, human speech becomes silent and announces a coming ineffability. Nazism is preparing a massacre, and reason cannot do anything to prevent it. It is clear then, that the necrophiliac nature of the book is based on a religion of death established by a fascist thanocracy that cannot be stopped.

With Drieu la Rochelle, the vision of the world does not improve; it is in fact even worse. We move from the tomb, where Henri was wallowing, to the marshland, which is the natural environment of *Les Chiens de paille*. We enter the decaying world of the swamp, in which France is mired. The nauseating liquids of the marshland are similar to the setting of Bataille's novel and evoke the putrefying state of France. This irreversible decline of France brings Drieu the greatest despair. At the time he writes his novel, Drieu has no longer the faintest hope and even ends with a complete indifference toward politics, turning instead to metaphysics and religion history. Having lost his last illusions, he declares in his journal, "Perhaps I am going to die for an apparent belief in the virtues of politics no longer mine"<sup>18</sup> (quoted in du Bois). He finally realizes that fascism is the wrong way to heal France.

*Les Chiens de paille*, which Frederic Grover considers as a classic of European agony, is dominated by the ideas of decadence, deterioration, and by its call to nothingness. The idea of a decadent France is directly linked to the idea of old age, which is a biological conception of civilization. It is interesting to note that this concept is similar to Cioran's, who thinks that all societies are condemned to die. Drieu is convinced "that the French body and the French soul are dead" (Kaplan 99). "For a cynical Drieu," Alice Kaplan writes, "a postwar France can no longer be a glorious whole, only a partial object, condemned to federate with foreigners or die" (104). While he is writing *Les Chiens de paille*, Stoekl adds, Drieu loses "faith not only in the idea of a third force but in any possibility of an independent powerful role for France in the world" (74). France, even more that

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<sup>17</sup> "d'être un objet de dégoût."

<sup>18</sup> "Je vais mourir peut-être pour une croyance apparente dans la vertu de la politique qui n'est plus la mienne."



the other European nations, is defeated and will never be able to hold a predominant role on the international scene, unless *Endgame* by Beckett is played. Drieu, like Tocqueville, Duhamel, and Morand before him, sees the upcoming domination of the world by the United States, but he also adds the Soviet Union as the second superpower to his vision.

France has grown old and only produces out-of-date things. Even the young people, symbolized in the novel by the character Cormont, have outdated ideas. Cormont, who represents the new French generation, corresponds well to the young people born with a three-thousand-year history. In this sense, Cormont's dream, which is to reestablish a powerful and totally independent France, is outdated. He belongs to a bygone time. French people in the novel are without passion and have thus lost the violence which accompanies it, since passion is always violent. French people are products of a civilization running out of steam, as Cioran puts it. France has lost its vitality and can only count on others, like the British, Germans, or the Russians to "beg for extra years"<sup>19</sup> (Cioran, *Syllogismes* 63). Drieu is well aware that the era of nationalism, especially in Western Europe, is over.

For the Drieu of the 30s, European decline could be slowed down by fascism. This deadly madness was the last burst of pride by an agonizing Europe. His adhesion to fascism was favored by a sort of syncretism, which could be defined as a willingness to go beyond the left/right binary since fascism ignores the class struggle and does not call for revolution. This adhesion is not linked to a preference for this system, but rather to an image of the Nietzschean strong man who can only act and create in a totalitarian surrounding. In this way, Drieu also expresses his disgust for the laxness of democracy. On this point, he joins Cioran, who thinks that only the strong and violent states make the storyline of history. For Drieu, totalitarianism allows regeneration, and according to Cioran, "every exhausted civilization is waiting for its barbarian"<sup>20</sup> (Cioran, *L'Inconvénient* 51). There is, however, an essential difference between the two writers. Drieu, until the end of his life, maintains his preference for totalitarianism: "I wish for the triumph of the totalitarian man over the world"<sup>21</sup> (quoted in du Bois 314). On the other hand, Cioran claims that he hates tyrants and, therefore, totalitarianism.

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<sup>19</sup> "mendier un supplément d'avenir."

<sup>20</sup> "toute civilisation exténuée attend son barbare."

<sup>21</sup> "Je souhaite le triomphe de l'homme totalitaire sur le monde."

Like many French people after the end of World War I, Drieu believes that history has no meaning and that progress is a lie. Today, many French intellectuals still think like Descombes, who writes in his criticism of history that “history is the occidental myth”<sup>22</sup> (131). Consequently, for Drieu, only action and passion bring a sense to life, which is reminiscent of Malraux’s ideas. It is interesting to note, moreover, that these two authors remained friends even if one was fascist and the other tempted by Stalinist communism. This tends to show that what was important was their common taste for totalitarianism; the side they were on did not matter. In fact, at the end of the war, Drieu advises his friend Combine to join the communist party and writes in his journal “In the collapse of fascism, I give my last thoughts to communism ... I wish for its triumph”<sup>23</sup> (quoted in du Bois 334). Totalitarianism, whether fascist or communist, is better than decadence. Another similarity that Drieu shares with Malraux is his taste for art, which is for Trubert, the main character in *Les Chiens de paille*, “the best way to accept the ephemeral and to consecrate the ephemeral”<sup>24</sup> (100). Nevertheless, Drieu is less convinced by the virtues of art than Malraux. This leads him to the disillusion, indifference, and nihilism that appear in *Les Chiens de paille*.

The end of the war also marks the end of Drieu’s illusions. Having abandoned the false seduction of fascism, Drieu, like his character Trubert, turns to religion and the cult of nothingness through Buddhism. For Renan, Buddhism is a doctrine that assigns to life nothingness as the supreme goal; it is the church of nihilism (Droit 174). With a surprising sharpness, Nietzsche, so often quoted by Drieu, predicted the coming of a second Buddhism in Europe. He was not thinking of an eastern Buddhism but instead a new European Buddhism born from ruined energies and the *taedium vitae* suffered by the Romans. As a result, Buddhism becomes a philosophy which goes beyond illusions, an instrument of nihilism, a rejection of life and a preference for nothingness; as such, it is a mixing of weariness, indifference, and despair. In *Le Culte du néant* [The Cult of Nothingness], Roger-Pol Droit also writes about a modification of Buddhism by occidentals who interpret this philosophy as a negation of life, as self-destruction. He concludes his studies affirming in the last instance that it is the West that imagines a religion of annihilation

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<sup>22</sup> “l’histoire est le mythe occidental.”

<sup>23</sup> “Dans l’écroulement du fascisme je rattache mes dernières pensées au communisme ... Je souhaite son triomphe.”

<sup>24</sup> “la meilleure façon d’accepter l’éphémère et de sacrer l’éphémère.”

while at the same time discovering the collapse of its values, traditional hierarchy, and spirituality. Nietzsche was right, and Drieu is the victim.

Trubert is also fascinated by the sacrificial act. Sacrifice in Drieu's novel, however, only leads to a cynical celebration of betrayal and nihilism. This is in total opposition to Nizan who perceives in sacrifice a form of salvation for humanity. In this respect, Drieu is closer to Bataille since, for both authors, sacrifice does not result in more meaning than anything else. The self-sacrifice wished by Trubert does not happen. Instead, the author destroys the narration and sacrifices his work.<sup>25</sup> The end of the book corresponds to Drieu's apocalyptic vision of the world as seen in his journal: "People's lives are tragic. It is so because life is always hemmed in by destruction and annihilation"<sup>26</sup> (quoted in du Bois 304).

Trubert's main interests are in the fields of metaphysics and religion. He is as fascinated with death as Lange, and his mind, like Drieu's, is "beyond history"<sup>27</sup> (109). Drieu's commitment to fascism is then, in part, a spiritual search, an answer to the crisis caused by the death of God that created a spiritual emptiness in Europe. Christianity, which had built European civilization, lost its authority. Europe then began looking for new values and beliefs. Drieu, like some others, needed to re-create idols, a myth of the Nietzschean strong man endowed with a will of power in the form of a mighty leader of obedient masses. The heterogeneity of the leader's figure explained by Bataille, is present in Drieu's thirst for religion. In this aspect, God is certainly dead, but as Vuillemin analyzes these consequences of God's Death in *Le Dictateur ou le dieu caché* [The Dictator or the Riggged God], dictators represent the power of deception; they are profane gods who incarnate in many ways a hidden god.

Consumed with nihilism the three authors are thirsty for metaphysics that would resolve their crises of meaning. As Lange declares, "there is only metaphysics. It is all about human destiny behind your politics"<sup>28</sup> (114). Nizan is a man obsessively preoccupied with death, which seems to be for him the fundamental problematic of the human condition. He stands up against the concept of senseless death. In *Le Cheval de Troie*, he develops the idea that death can

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<sup>25</sup> A British bomber kills off all the characters, thus finishing the novel abruptly.

<sup>26</sup> "La vie des peuples est tragique. Elle l'est parce que la vie tout court est sans cesse assiégée par la destruction et l'anéantissement."

<sup>27</sup> "au delà de l'histoire."

<sup>28</sup> "il n'y a que la métaphysique. Il s'agit du sort de l'homme derrière vos politiques."

bring meaning to collective existence. It is this kind of unifying death that permits a Communist social progress. Paul's death therefore gives a sense to his own existence. In this way, Nizan uses militant actions to establish a new mystique able to sublimate death. This sublimation of death by the means of actions and sacrifice is, however, only a partial solution. It is a valid solution for a few moments in the class struggle, but it does not resolve the fundamental question of death at all. Nonetheless, Nizan does believe in the form of secular religion that is communism with all his might. Bataille and Drieu also want to believe in a higher force and are tempted by fascism. For them, this system appears as a human attempt to exorcise the demon of nihilism who took the place of an absent god. This is a secular satisfaction for their spiritual needs. In this sense, totalitarianism seems to occupy the place left vacant by the decline of traditional religions, which are as sectarian in their creeds as they were violent during their foundation. For the three writers, totalitarianism is above all the last attempt for cohesiveness and ideological unification. Bataille, however, cannot fully believe in it. In *Le Bleu du ciel*, his doubts win in the end and silently make way for World War II. In *Les Chiens de paille*, Drieu does not believe in fascism anymore. He retreats into nihilism with a desperate pride that leads him to commit suicide. *Les Chiens de Paille* is an expression of the spiritual and cultural crises that are still hitting Western Europe. Drieu announces the coming of the Barbarian who will relieve Europe of its crisis. As Cioran describes it, France as perceived by a desperate Drieu has only one conviction left, "the conviction of living as a victim, as a martyr ... France believes herself lost, she wants to be so and indeed she is so"<sup>29</sup> (Cioran, *La Tentation* 41). But here again, the French people do not even try to make sense out of this sacrifice.

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<sup>29</sup> "celle d'avoir un avenir de victime, de sacrifiée ... Elle se croit perdue, elle veut l'être et elle l'est."

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