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# *La Trahison des clercs*—1927 and Later

David L. Schalk

“Once again, where are the traitors?”—Raymond Aron<sup>1</sup>

“Could we, the social scientists, have somehow betrayed ourselves during the past couple of decades by what is false within? Has there been anything resembling what Julien Benda called a *trahison des clercs*?”—Robert A. Nisbet<sup>2</sup>

Students of intellectual history are well aware of the pitfalls in trying to determine the influence of a scholar, artist, or other intellectual figure on future generations.<sup>3</sup> One can never be certain that a forgotten author is really dead and buried, neatly in place with a paragraph in the literary histories. Because external conditions become propitious, or perhaps even through the dedicated efforts of a scholarly defender, an author can quite suddenly be found relevant, cited and reprinted, translated and talked about.

Julien Benda (1867-1956) is known to specialists in French literature and social and intellectual history as a polemicist and critic, a second-rank figure who was overshadowed by several generations of brilliant contemporaries. He is remembered primarily for *La Trahison des clercs*, first published in 1927, and translated into English in 1928 as *The Treason of the Intellectuals*. Today Benda's controversial attack on the intellectuals is often dismissed as unscholarly polemic. In his introduction to *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963*, Christopher Lasch states: “. . . I have not wished to write a tract, another *Trahison des clercs*, and I state my own prejudices here only in order

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<sup>1</sup> *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (New York, 1962), p. 302. (Published in French in 1955; all further translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.)

<sup>2</sup> “Subjective Si! Objective No!,” *New York Times Book Review*, April 5, 1970, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring here explicitly to influence on other thinkers, and schools of thought, not to the far more difficult problem of determining the effect of a man's ideas on historical development per se.

to make it clear what they are, not because this book is intended to document them."<sup>4</sup>

Even when Benda's contribution has been viewed positively, it has been rather badly misperceived. In April 1965 a symposium on "The Intellectual in Politics" was held at the University of Texas, and the proceedings were published in 1966 with a preface by Professor H. Malcolm Macdonald. Macdonald felt that despite the divergencies of the views of the participants, a consensus did emerge, ". . . on the necessity of the intellectual, however defined, to remain true to his task of being what Julien Benda has called 'the conscience of humanity.'"<sup>5</sup> In a vague and general sense that every intellectual from Ayn Rand to Herbert Marcuse could probably accept Macdonald's assertion is correct. However, a close reading of the eight papers presented at the symposium reveals an almost total ignorance of the specifics of Benda's thought. Only one speaker, the Swedish political scientist and parliamentarian Gunnar Hecksher, refers specifically to *La Trahison des clercs*, but his brief remarks show little understanding of what Benda was advocating in that work.<sup>6</sup> One other participant, the German historian Klaus Mehnert, does take a position close to that adopted by Benda in *La Trahison des clercs*, but he never mentions Benda by name.<sup>7</sup> Senator Eugene McCarthy, the last speaker, makes an eloquent plea for greater political involvement on the part of intellectuals and without reference to Benda uses the phrase "treason of the clerks" in *exactly* the opposite sense originally intended by Benda.<sup>8</sup>

Senator McCarthy's "error" suggests that while the notion of the "treason of the intellectuals" is very much a part of our political climate, there is no widespread awareness of the authorship of the term. The meanings Benda attached to it have been long forgotten, and there has been heated debate, since the Second World War at least, as to precisely what segment of the intellectual class is treasonous. One's own political predispositions clearly play the major rôle in determining who betrayed.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York, 1965), p. xvi.

<sup>5</sup> H. Malcolm Macdonald, ed., *The Intellectual in Politics* (Austin, 1966), p. 9. The phrase is not a direct quote but rather was intended by Macdonald to synthesize the thrust of Benda's thesis. (Personal communication from Macdonald, Feb. 27, 1970.)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 96, 100. There is real irony here, given Benda's fanatical hatred of Germany and all things German.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> One has only to compare the views of Lewis Feuer or Sidney Hook with those of

One reason for Benda's relative obscurity is suggested by René Etiemble in a preface to a new edition of *La Trahison des clercs* (1958). For more than half a century Benda had obstinately refused every philosophical and political "mode." He produced polemics against Bergsonian intuition, Maurrassian sophism, and later intellectual "fads" such as surrealism and existentialism. When he died in extreme old age, he had never received much except "hatred and sarcasm," had never reached many people, and had gained several thousand enemies with one work. *La Trahison des clercs* infuriated the literary people, who are especially "rancorous and vain."<sup>10</sup> The media, Etiemble adds, who in a few weeks can make an "inoffensive imbecile" into a star, spent fifty years lowering Julien Benda into the image of a "fanatical, odious, and raging little man."<sup>11</sup>

Benda's literary style and methods of argumentation may also help to explain his lack of eminence. Those readers who are familiar with *La Trahison des clercs* may well conclude that the imprecise knowledge of what Benda stood for is deserved. Raymond Aron, author of another, very different, requisitory against the intellectuals, finds Benda's arguments often confused. Aron writes: ". . . if the betrayal consists in over-valuing the temporal and under-valuing the eternal, the intellectuals of our time are *all* traitors."<sup>12</sup>

While Aron's formulation is persuasive, I am not convinced that it is a completely correct definition of what Benda came to view the betrayal to be. Benda would be in complete accord with Aron's assertion that ". . . the tendency to criticise the established order is, so to speak, the occupational disease of the intellectuals."<sup>13</sup> Yet the matter is complicated because Benda would by no means claim that the criterion for discerning betrayal is criticism of the established order.

Noam Chomsky. See, for example, Feuer's denunciation of the "Alienated Intellectual Elite," in the *New York Times Magazine*, March 26, 1967, pp. 22ff. Feuer clearly believes that men like Chomsky are betraying, whereas Chomsky has indicted men like Feuer in many of his writings, especially the famous article on "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," which first appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, and has been reprinted in *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York, 1969).

<sup>10</sup> René Etiemble, "Avant-Propos," to Julien Benda, *La Trahison des clercs* (Paris, 1958), pp. i-ii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ii.

<sup>12</sup> Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, p. 301. Italics mine. Despite the implications of the title, Aron is far more critical of fellow-travelers than he is of Communist intellectuals. (See Preface, p. ix.) Though Aron does not refer specifically to *La Trahison des clercs* until page 300 of a 324-page work, and then rather critically, one could argue that he has Benda in mind throughout. He chooses to bring up the earlier work on political involvement of intellectuals precisely when he is ready for his own conclusions on the justifications for that involvement. These are given on pp. 301-3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

As will be shown in the third part of this paper, the rather specific question of "Who betrayed?" was only a part of Benda's concern in *La Trahison des clercs*. He attempted to deal with many, if not all, facets of the intellectual's rôle in modern society. Such inquiries inevitably pose serious difficulties, since the individual commitment of the writer is so deeply enmeshed in the problem he is studying. Robert J. Niess, author of the definitive biography of Julien Benda, recognizes these difficulties and proposes an interesting, if somewhat discouraging solution: "To discover the true role of the *clerc*, to learn whether or not he has betrayed, and to date the betrayal successfully would be the task of the perfect historian, that is, the unfalteringly alert mind, not only universally learned but completely impartial both politically and intellectually and strengthened by the most rigorous kind of philosophical training."<sup>14</sup>

Niess emphasizes Benda's weakness as a historian.<sup>15</sup> Niess himself teaches French, though he demonstrates ample historical and philosophical skills. His analysis of the origins of *La Trahison des clercs* is a masterly piece of historical research. The idea of the *clerc* is traced by Niess back to *Dialogue à Byzance*, written thirty years before *La Trahison des clercs*. Already Benda conceived of a body of *clercs* serving as the conscience of society, but it took him a long time to develop his central idea of a mass treason of the intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> *La Trahison des clercs* is viewed as the essential document in Benda's life; at least with the hindsight we now possess he seems to have been progressing toward it all through his early and middle career, and after 1927 he constantly amplifies and defends it.

Niess's own judgment of *La Trahison des clercs* is quite ambivalent. There is a rather sharp dichotomy between high praise and sharp

<sup>14</sup> *Julien Benda* (Ann Arbor, 1956), p. 170. Niess' work was completed while Benda was still alive, and in press when he died in 1956. Its very excellence and thoroughness provide one explanation why so little has been published on Benda in recent years. Since Benda's death there has been only a scattering of articles in French and English, and a short (122 pages) biographical essay by Marcel Doisy, *Belphegor et le clerc* (Paris; 1960). His many enemies, from Bergson to Sorel, collect far more references in the indices of the *Publications of the Modern Languages Association*, the definitive American bibliographical source. A striking example of the lack of recognition granted Benda, who prided himself on his classicism, is that no volume has been dedicated to him in the *Classiques du XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle* series. By the spring of 1970 106 volumes in this series had appeared, and all of Benda's worst enemies are included, even Nietzsche (no. 59). Also Péguy (40), Maurras (whom he never tired of attacking, no. 5), Sartre (11), Barrès (43), Bergson (whom he especially hated, no. 83), Nizan (84), Brasillach (94), and many others.

<sup>15</sup> Niess, *Julien Benda*, p. 170.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145-46.

criticism, which suggests that he was uncertain in his own evaluation. Niess points up many of the vagaries and inconsistencies in Benda's argumentation, the biases and the faulty reasoning. Yet he is convinced that in the future *Trahison* will be seen as the one work which best combines Benda's passion and logic into a "brilliant system of social criticism."<sup>17</sup> Niess is persuaded that it will hold up as "one of the most considerable books of our time."<sup>18</sup> This dichotomy is again manifested in Niess's conclusions on Benda's entire career. He is quite severe; Benda made "a catastrophic intellectual error, the error of constant generalization without sufficient regard to facts. . . ." Yet Benda will some day be conceded "an honorable place in that brilliant line which he himself described, the line of St. Paul and Luther and Pascal, men who eternally prevent the world from slumbering in indolence and evil."<sup>19</sup>

It seems unlikely that Benda will retain this prominence simply because he made people angry and kept them alert. Perhaps Niess felt that intellectuals reading Benda would sense intuitively that his message was an important one, reminding them of truths about their calling. H. Stuart Hughes, in his pathbreaking *Consciousness and Society*, selects *La Trahison des clercs* as one of three works of "intellectual summation," a "directional signpost" for the middle and late 1920's.<sup>20</sup> On balance Hughes is even more critical than Niess, and he finds *Trahison* a deeply flawed book. Hughes does, however, value the work as a "moral remonstrance" and a call to an "examination of conscience."<sup>21</sup>

What is the nature of this "moral remonstrance" that both Niess and Hughes seem to find in *La Trahison des clercs*? For Hughes it must be an important factor, since without it Benda's simplification of the issues, his "profoundly parochial outlook," his "narrowness of intellectual range," would hardly make the book worthy of mention.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153. Cf. also p. 173: The book ". . . forces every intellectual to examine his conscience. . . . Its great merit is that it recalls and recalls mercilessly that the intellectual life is a true clericalism, a career in which there must be no compromise with the obligations of the order."

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301. The only other aspect of Niess's study which I find open to question is the rather strong emphasis, in my view exaggerated, which he places on Benda's Jewishness as a determinant in his intellectual development.

<sup>20</sup> (New York, 1958), p. 418. The other two works chosen by Hughes are Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 411, 415-18.

The reader, no matter how favorably predisposed, cannot fail to lose patience with Benda, to be annoyed by his stubborn refusal to consider opposing views, his digressions, his merciless hammering at the same points. However, it is possible with some effort to disentangle the central line of his argument. A careful reformulation of this argument should serve three purposes. First, in viewing the strengths and weaknesses of *La Trahison des clercs* in clearer focus, the reader will be able to evaluate its importance for himself. Second, Benda's intellectual evolution after 1927 will be easier to comprehend, in particular the quite fascinating and apparently contradictory changes in his views on the political involvement of intellectuals. The common misconception of Benda as purely an "ivory tower" theorist will be laid to rest definitively. I hope also to show that even in 1927 the question of political action of the *clerc* posed the crucial paradox for Benda. Benda may have resolved it to his own satisfaction, though I doubt even that, and find his ambivalence showing through in the very vehemence of his denials. The other ambivalence—that of the commentators—has, I believe, its roots in the same paradox. Benda touches painful nerves and reflects, in his own way, the doubts and hesitations felt by many practicing intellectuals today.

Benda opens *La Trahison des clercs* by formulating the *essential* qualities he finds in modern society at large. Both the intellectuals and humanity in general have been placing greater and greater emphasis on temporal concerns. This is an age of politics; political passions and those of race and class are now reaching almost everybody, even spreading to the Far East.<sup>23</sup> (Benda may have been thinking of the Chinese Revolution of 1927, though as is almost always the case he makes no specific historical reference. He prefers to remain on a general, theoretical plane.) We know, Benda adds, precisely who our political enemies are, and thus we can hate them more bitterly. A "condensation" of political hatreds has developed, along with a greater uniformity of thought.<sup>24</sup>

Again and again Benda stresses the growth of nationalist passion, the overweening concern with national glory and pride. He is horrified by new doctrines which advocate crushing enemy cultures totally, rather than incorporating the vanquished within the conquering society. Benda's distress at the rise of mystical nationalism cannot be

<sup>23</sup> Benda, *Trahison*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

overemphasized, and he frequently returns to the subject throughout his work. He devotes almost as much attention to the related issue of the rise of ideology in general. The passions of the past were precisely passions—that is, “naive explosions of instinct,”<sup>25</sup> with no theoretical grounding. From Marx to Maurras there has been a theory behind political passions, a whole network of doctrines which are set up to support them, and which *do* actually increase their strength.<sup>26</sup> But-tressed by this careful intellectual organization, each of the modern ideological systems argues that it is the “agent of good” in the world, and that its enemy is the “genie of evil.” Each system tries to be totalitarian, in the sense of covering all aspects of life, believing itself destined to succeed, and claiming that its ideology is founded on science.<sup>27</sup>

Benda believes that these new, systematized passions arise from two fundamental desires: (1) temporal good, and (2) the wish to be separate and unique from other human groups. The former relates to class passion, the latter to racial passion, and nationalism unites the two.<sup>28</sup> These passions are realist in that they relate to the world and are nonidealist, though they are so strong that one might term them “divinized realism.”<sup>29</sup> Men want to be in the real and practical world and not in the disinterested, metaphysical realm; no one would die now for “principles,” for abstract universal values like justice. Older idealist passions, such as those motivating a “pure” Crusader, have been absorbed by nationalism. The pragmatic behavior of a single localized state has become divinized—the state has become God and Mussolini’s Italy admits it.<sup>30</sup> Later in *La Trahison des clercs* Benda comments with disgust on the Italian intellectuals’ eulogy of warfare and scorn for civilian life, their praise of the morality of violence. He finds their apologies for the warlike instinct a “stupefaction of history.”<sup>31</sup> Benda appears to be contradicting himself here, for he descends from the ivory tower with a vengeance, even before he has elaborated his doctrine of the rôle of the *clerc*. He also breaks his general methodological rule of remaining on a highly abstract, theoretical level. Over the years his

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> It is clear that Benda, despite his own predilections, believes that intellectual work can have significant political effect.

<sup>27</sup> Benda, *Trahison*, p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131-32.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, See n.37.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225-26.



attacks on Italian fascism grew more vehement, especially after the invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps Benda realized that his remarks on Italy could lead him into a logical dilemma, for he makes the qualification that the *clerc* may become involved in external politics when an abstract injustice has been committed. (Of course, he can provide us with no universally applicable key to determine when an event may be classified a true injustice, though he names Voltaire's rôle in the Calas affair, and Zola's advocacy of Dreyfus' innocence as examples of justified involvement.<sup>33</sup>) I should like to emphasize here that when Benda mentions specifics, it is easy to detect a leftist, or at least liberal, political stance. I shall return to this point later. Presumably Benda felt himself on surer ground in adding two *general* criteria for involvement: First, the true *clerc* never espouses causes for any personal gain. Also, if the *clerc* is really fulfilling his function he will be scorned and insulted by the layman.<sup>34</sup> Here, then, is the first mention of the problem of when and why the intellectual should enter the political arena. Benda's embarrassment is, I believe, evident to the reader. Probably because it is always easier to look to the past with the benefit of present knowledge, Benda devotes much less attention in *La Trahison des clercs* to prescribing contemporary behavior than to the question of how the intellectuals *should have* responded to recent and dramatic changes in that part of humanity which he terms "lay," as opposed to clerical.

In the past the *clercs* had stood apart from the masses, were devoted to the metaphysical and the speculative, and scorned practical ends. This elite boasted a lineage of 2,000 years and had always been in ". . . formal opposition to the realism of the multitudes." Thanks to the efforts of these intellectual sentinels, humanity had at least ". . . done evil while honoring the good."<sup>35</sup> This contradiction was the honor of humanity and kept civilization on its proper course until around 1890. At that time a sharp transition took place, and those who had been a "brake" on the realism of the masses began to stimulate that

<sup>32</sup> The French *clercs* who did not protest Mussolini's brutal actions, arguing instead that too much annoyance of their southern neighbor would risk war, infuriated Benda. They should have vigorously denounced Mussolini's imperial adventures in the name of universal principles and let the diplomats worry about the practical consequences. "The treason of the *clercs* is that today they are turning themselves into ministers of foreign affairs." (Julien Benda, *Précision* [Paris, 1937], p. 28.) See also Benda's introduction to the 1947 edition of *Trahison* (Paris, 1958), pp. 26-29.

<sup>33</sup> Benda, *Trahison*, p. 146.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

realism.<sup>36</sup> To show that there is a qualitative difference in the contemporary period he names individuals—Mommsen, Treitschke, Brunetière, Barrès, Péguy, Maurras, d'Annunzio, and Kipling. Sorel and Nietzsche are equally evil; they are all men of true political passion. (It must be noted that all of these intellectuals, with the possible exception of Péguy and Sorel, about whom there is heated scholarly debate, are on the Right politically.) Benda denounces them because they desire action and immediate results and have descended eagerly into the political forum. No disinterested group is left; the modern *clerc* is strongly xenophobic.<sup>37</sup>

Benda does admit that external historical circumstances have played some rôle in this change in clerical attitudes, though he still wishes that the *clerics* had not acquiesced so joyfully. The historians, guilty as the novelists and poets, are glorifying nationalism, producing pragmatic rather than disinterested work, and using history to strengthen political causes. The literary critics are unobjective and partisan; even the metaphysicians, supposedly the most abstract of all, are becoming political. The latter change is, Benda claims, totally without historical precedent.<sup>38</sup>

Benda's own xenophobia is evident on almost every page, and he indicts the German philosophers, such as Fichte and Hegel, as the first to betray.<sup>39</sup> Instead of honoring the abstract quality of what is uniquely human, they began the trend of looking concretely at men so that differences are clearly visible. Even Christianity, and Benda is a sincere admirer of the early Christians, has been subverted by the nationalists. Christ has been made a "professor of national egotism."<sup>40</sup> Marxism in its guise as internationalist philosophy is not a valid substitute, Benda believes, since it has concrete aims and speaks in the name of one group instead of all men.

The legacy of Hellenism has at last been defeated, laments Benda. The modern *clerc* has the infantile wish to think of everything as "in

<sup>36</sup> There is much to challenge in Benda's arguments including his assertion that political passions were foreign to great *clerics* of the past, even Voltaire and Montesquieu, that such nineteenth-century figures as de Maistre, Chateaubriand, and Michelet exercised their politics ". . . with a generality of sentiment, an attachment to abstract views, a disdain of the immediate, which properly excludes the name of passion." *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>37</sup> Benda makes no effort to rid himself of the xenophobia he finds in others and seems almost totally blind to any German achievements: "The nationalist *clerc* is essentially a German invention." *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* See n.37.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

time," never as outside or beyond time, and is concerned only with the contemporaneous, the immediate, present circumstances.<sup>41</sup> (One can see how appalled Benda would have been at the emphasis on "relevance," which has become central to American university curricula in the late 1960's and 1970's.) Benda finds that the new doctrines reverse Platonism by claiming that real values are seen and concrete instead of "clouds" (*nuées*) of justice and temperance.<sup>42</sup> For the first time in history *clerics* approve the judges of Socrates. Again and again Benda attacks the moral flavor the new *clerics* have given to realism, while stressing repeatedly that we are at a turning point in history. "The divinisation of the political" is the greatest and most evil work of the modern *clerics*.<sup>43</sup> Even Machiavelli said that politics and morality were disassociated, and Maurras now claims that "politics determine morality."<sup>44</sup>

The new emphasis on man's natural violence especially distresses Benda, along with the preference for authoritarian régimes. When confronted with barbaric behavior, the *clerics* now invoke human nature and claim that nothing can be done. They have forgotten that the moralist is essentially a "utopian" and get a romantic pleasure from pessimism. The *clerics* even praise war for itself not as a "sad necessity."<sup>45</sup> Modern man is returning to Sparta for inspiration. The *clerics* have created a new honor—the honor of practical courage leading men to the conquest of things. In Benda's view civilization is simply not possible unless functions are divided, and they are no longer divided when the *clerics* are laicized. Thus the general anti-intellectualism, the exalting of the man at arms over the man of study, the praise of action over thought, the unconscious over intellect, are to be expected.

Benda is convinced that despite all the pressures to conform it is possible for individual *clerics* to resist and remain independent. He clearly believes in the responsibility of individuals; if one is a real thinker, he will be a universalist. Today humanity wants its scholars to be "not guides but servants," and for the most part, this is what humanity gets.<sup>46</sup> The general conclusion of *Trahison* is that the polit-

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 226-27.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261. The *clerics* are as bourgeois as their masters. They attack classical studies because the classics emphasize man's generality; they have a thirst for sensation, a need for certainty.

ical realism of the *clercs* is not a random fact but is instead “linked to the essence of the modern world.”<sup>47</sup> One could infer that the entire world is treasonous, and Benda might have agreed, if pressed on the matter. He argues that because of the *clercs*’ evasion of their duty, humanity now both perpetrates evil and honors it. Perhaps because of his acute pessimism, Benda was often an accurate prophet, and he predicts that civilization will move toward “the most total and perfect war that the world will have ever seen.”<sup>48</sup> It should be emphasized that these words were written in the relative calm of the mid-1920’s, several years before the sense of living in a period “between two wars” became prevalent.<sup>49</sup> Whether this new war is to be between nations or classes, Benda’s diagnosis is somber. He sees little hope for peace and finds that most pacifist doctrine weakens the true cause of peace.<sup>50</sup>

Benda pulls all his arguments together in a final summary, where he adopts the more inflexible position that the true *clerc* must be *totally* disengaged from society. When the *clerc* declares to mankind that his “kingdom is not of this world,” he may be crucified, “. . . but he is respected and his word haunts the memory of men.”<sup>51</sup> Yet in the real world the betrayers dominate—Nietzsche, Sorel, Barrès, and their ilk, and Benda emphasizes again that this is no temporary aberration but rather a permanent trend in world historical development.<sup>52</sup>

Benda wonders whether realism may not after all be the dominant force in human society. Coupled with the growing conquest of Nature, realism could easily produce a relapse into the worst forms of violence and cruelty—another striking prediction for 1933-1945. The best that one can hope for, Benda believes, is some form of union of nations and classes, though the “universal fraternity” which would emerge is not really desirable. It would merely be a higher form of nationalism, with the nation calling itself Man, and naming God as the enemy.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>49</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre’s discussion of this new awareness in *Situations II* (Paris, 1948), pp. 242 and *passim*.

<sup>50</sup> Benda rejects the mystical pacifism of a Romain Rolland because of his conviction that the Germans were responsible for the First World War. Benda claims that in Rolland’s case the “mystique of peace” has triumphed over “the sentiment of justice.” (*Trahisson*, p. 279.)

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 286-91. The word “civilization” was purposely not used here, since Benda is critical of the idea that one can predict any continuation of civilization. What we have been granted thus far may have been a “happy accident,” since humanity has enjoyed only eleven centuries of Hellenism, then suffered through twelve centuries of the Dark Ages, and there have been only four centuries since the Renaissance.

And henceforth, unified into an immense army, into an immense factory, no longer aware of anything save heroism, discipline, inventions, scorning all free and disinterested activity, no longer placing the Good above the real world, and having for God only itself and its wishes, humanity will attain great things—that is, a really grandiose control over the matter which surrounds it, a really joyous consciousness of its power and its grandeur. And history will smile to think that Socrates and Jesus died for this species.<sup>53</sup>

It may be that Benda's anger and pessimism were simply aroused by more flagrant examples of what was always done in the past. The Marxist argument, that philosophers and all other intellectuals have never ceased to defend specific social groups, has been powerfully stated by Paul Nizan in his polemic against *Les Chiens de garde*—the watchdogs—the academicians who so subtly support the status quo. *Les Chiens de garde* (1932, reprinted in 1965) is in part a direct rebuttal to *La Trahison des clercs*; Benda is definitely included among the watchdogs.<sup>54</sup> The older man must have been surprised when Nizan linked him with Henri Bergson, whom he had attacked fiercely for forty years, identifying the two as “fraternal enemies.”<sup>55</sup> Nizan himself (1905-1940) was a brilliant graduate of l'Ecole normale supérieure, and a deeply engaged Communist militant who nonetheless left the party in 1939 in protest over the Nazi-Soviet Pact. He was almost completely forgotten, in large part due to the efforts of the French Communist party, who portrayed him as the worst sort of traitor. However, his reputation has been rising dramatically since 1960, when the first of his books, *Aden Arabie*, was reprinted with a long preface by his close friend, Jean-Paul Sartre.

In the 1930's Benda was aware of Nizan's work and respected his brilliance, but the Marxist theory of the nature and function of the intellectual classes was too foreign to his own, and he never gave it

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>54</sup> Nizan begins his polemic by citing without commentary an extract from a debate between Benda and Parodi, an academic philosopher. Parodi makes a rather Byzantine effort to distinguish between the idea of the absolute and the idea of the eternal, and Benda retorts: “The eternal is static.” There follows an excerpt from the contemporary press listing the work of a recent criminal court session in Hanoi, then, of course, French colonial territory. Twelve were condemned to death, eleven to forced labor for life, and 131 others were given lesser, though severe, sentences. Thus Nizan points out the relationship between two species of watchdogs. (*Les Chiens de garde* [Paris, 1965], Introduction, p. 9.) Later, in criticizing Benda, Nizan refers to him as shrewder than the others; he claims to be interested in man but that it is “. . . in deserting them that he serves them best.” *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

serious consideration.<sup>56</sup> One should also emphasize that there is a distinction between accepting a theoretical explanation and agreeing to cooperate with a party for pragmatic reasons. In any case, Benda never wavered from the conviction, so frequently reiterated in *La Trahison des clercs*, that a betrayal, a descent from a purer state, had taken place.

We recall that there are hints within the original *Trahison des clercs* that under some circumstances Benda would allow the intellectual to enter the political arena without betraying. In general, however, the correct way for the *clerc* to act in the modern world is to protest vocally, then submit and drink the hemlock when the State so orders. Any other action is treason. H. Stuart Hughes' criticism seems justified: "Had they followed to the letter the advice Benda offered, few European intellectuals would have survived the two decades subsequent to the publication of his book."<sup>57</sup>

*La Trahison des clercs* immediately stirred up a very heated controversy, doubtless to Benda's delight, and he collected some of the best of his polemical journalism and published it in a volume entitled *Précision (1930-1937)*.<sup>58</sup> Here we see a considerable evolution in Benda's thought on the subject of political involvement of the *clercs*, a movement not exactly toward compromise but toward some recognition that the realities of modernity had to be faced in new ways. He tried to maintain continuity with his earlier positions by including a prefatory note explaining that he chose articles which dealt primarily with critiques of *La Trahison des clercs*. These attacks had helped him to clarify his own position, and he asserts that the articles selected were not mere sallies. The immediate subject was to serve as a protest for more universal considerations.<sup>59</sup>

The promised emphasis on universal problems in *Précision* is very hard to detect. Benda ranges widely, from discussions of educational policy to nationalism to a strong attack on marriage as one of the greatest betrayals of the modern *clerc*, since the *clerc* should reduce his "temporal surface" to a minimum.<sup>60</sup> In some of the articles, how-

<sup>56</sup> After World War II Benda joined a distinguished group of intellectuals in a statement defending Nizan's memory against the attacks of Communist party propagandists. This incident will be discussed in the author's forthcoming study of Nizan's thought. See n.87.

<sup>57</sup> Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, p. 417.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Niess, *Julien Benda*, p. 29. "His passion is the source of his vitality and of his effect: his hatreds have given him his books." See also p. 168 and *passim* on Benda's love of polemic.

<sup>59</sup> Benda, *Précision*, p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9. Benda himself was a rather fanatical misogynist and did not marry

ever, the major themes of *La Trahison des clercs* are reexamined—first in a renewed attack on rightist *clercs* like Barrès, then in a more detailed treatment of the distinction between political speculation and immediate political action. Benda argues that there is a profound difference between the theoretical political analyses of the great *clercs* of the past and the conviction of many contemporary (1932) intellectuals that they are the “saviours” of society.<sup>61</sup> The true task of the intellectual remains “. . . to think correctly and to find truth, without concern for what will happen to the planet as a result.”<sup>62</sup>

Yet Benda himself did participate in the general movement toward *engagement*, which is such an important phenomenon in the intellectual history of the 1930's.<sup>63</sup> He began to sign leftist manifestoes. In *Précision* he tried to explain that he was not betraying by asserting that he would only join such appeals when they seemed to defend “eternal principles.”<sup>64</sup> The *clerc* must preach justice and truth without regard for the practical consequences of his position. Even in a totalitarian age Benda demands a strict idealism. It is natural to compromise, but the intellectual must “. . . *elevate himself above that which is natural.*”<sup>65</sup> He retains enough optimism to believe that continuous pressure on political leaders can have some political effect, can constrain them to be partially just. “History is made from shreds [*lambeaux*] of justice that the intellectual has torn from the politician.”<sup>66</sup>

Again and again in *Précision* Benda reiterates that he cannot collaborate with the Communists. In an article published in 1934 and entitled “For Whom Do You Write,” he professes a total inability to grasp the arguments of revolutionary writers like Paul Nizan, who claim that an intellectual who is reserved and withdrawn from society

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until he was over eighty. In *Précision* there are also criticisms of absolute pacifism, arguments for European unity, and paradoxically, an impassioned defense of his profound Francophilia and violent antipathy toward Germany. He argues also that a true intellectual cannot be a state functionary or a journalist under obligation to produce a regular column. The main thread of his argument is further obscured by a fascinating digression on the morality of science, which may be compared to the debate generated by the “Research Strike” of March 4, 1969, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other American universities. Cf. Richard Todd, “The ‘Ins’ and ‘Outs’ at M.I.T.,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 18, 1969, pp. 32ff.

<sup>61</sup> Benda, *Précision*, p. 19.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> For an excellent brief introduction to this subject see Louis Bodin, *Les Intellectuels* (Paris, 1964), pp. 19-20.

<sup>64</sup> Benda, *Précision*, p. 23. He therefore approves of Zola's “J'accuse,” but not of Anatole France's advising the Combes ministry.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28. Italics his.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

is really aiding capitalism. He cannot see how writers like Valéry and Giraudoux “. . . serve the *Comité des Forges* or the powerful banking interests. Even less that they serve them consciously.”<sup>67</sup> The communist intellectuals attack the man “who meditates between his four walls” for not acting, even when his literary production “labors in the sense which is dear to them.”<sup>68</sup> The communists should recognize that there is an element in a writer which is outside the social régime, that in France there exists a long tradition of literary independence, that French writers will not make good militants, whether communist or fascist. Benda follows his logic to the extreme of stating that he wrote his polemical works “. . . with the perfect conviction that they would not change my contemporaries, . . . and [in any case] I care very little about this changing.”<sup>69</sup> In two hundred years some bibliophile, and he hopes that the species will still exist, might open his work and remark with surprise that in this universally pragmatic age here was one man who did not cooperate. Benda decides that he had been writing for such a judge.<sup>70</sup>

Benda recognizes the power of Paul Nizan's arguments for a communist humanism. Nizan only made him see more clearly how different his conception of humanism is. It is, he proclaims, based on classical culture, and he holds strongly to the dichotomy between spiritual and material life. The reconciliation of intellectual and manual labor holds little attraction for him, since man is great only when he obeys his “divine part.” He has no sympathy with those who “drink life through all their pores.”<sup>71</sup> Benda rejects writers like Jean Guéhenno and Jean-Richard Bloch who call for humane rather than intellectual values, and he prefers emaciated figures who lived the pure life of the spirit. In this context he mentions Dante, Erasmus, Fénelon, and Leo XIII. For Benda the Marxist-inspired religion of “total” man is merely a revitalized romanticism, venerating passion and action. There is no such creature as a “total” philosopher; one only practices philosophy “with the spirit.”<sup>72</sup> Spiritual and economic activity are totally distinct, and therefore his humanism demands the autonomy of the spiritual life, freedom for the spirit to escape society,

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.



“. . . even to act against it, to discuss the established order.”<sup>73</sup> Benda realizes that he has the communists, the Hitlerians, and the Action française against him, and the reader may sense a certain nobility in his isolation, in his determination to retain his vision of classical humanism. It is clear that he devoted a great deal of attention to creating a formidable battery of arguments against active political involvement.

Yet as the decade of the 1930's progressed, a new question imposed itself upon Benda: How should the *clerc* respond in an extreme situation, when two equally brutal factions exist and are clashing with such violence that one must inevitably crush the other and dominate Europe if not the world? Benda phrased this question in a note first published in January 1937 in the *Nouvelle Revue française*. His response shows a substantial change since 1934 in his attitude toward Communism and toward political involvement, though there is a limited continuity even with *La Trahison des clercs*. (As has been shown, Benda admitted in the earlier work that the existence of absolute injustice validated involvement.)

By 1937 Benda has actually become *critical* of the intellectual who remains in monastic isolation, pursuing his disinterested labor of science, poetry, or philosophy. In a very striking statement, he adopts a position remarkably close to the existentialist doctrine of *engagement*, developed in the years immediately following the Second World War, for very different reasons, to be sure; Benda was to have nothing but scorn for existentialism when it gained notoriety after the war.<sup>74</sup>

I say that the *clerc* must now take sides. He must choose the side which, if it threatens liberty, at least threatens it in order to give bread to all men, and not for the benefit of wealthy exploiters. He will choose the side which, if it must kill, will kill the oppressors and not the oppressed.

The *clerc* must take sides with this group of violent men, since he has only the choice between their triumph or that of the others. He will give them [the Communists] his signature. Perhaps his life. But he will retain the right to judge them. He will keep his critical spirit.<sup>75</sup>

Despite suffering, imprisonment, and extreme old age, Benda managed to survive the war and keep his critical spirit. He maintained an impressive volume of publication, including a new collection of essays, *Les Cahiers d'un clerc* (1950). Neither the violent and terrible

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>74</sup> The more dangerous enemy for the existentialists was, of course, "Western Capitalist Imperialism."

<sup>75</sup> Benda, *Précision*, p. 164.

events of the two previous decades nor his own shifts of position in the 1930's affected his conviction that his initial thesis had lost none of its truth. "I could re-write my *Trahison des clercs* exactly as I wrote it twenty years ago."<sup>76</sup> In an introduction to the 1947 edition of *Trahison* he emphasized that the *clercs* were still betraying their true function to the profit of practical interests—the love of order, the monolithic state, the Communist party, or collaboration during the 1940-44 period. The *clerc* was treasonous if his realism led him to accept fascism as a "fact" at the moment of Hitler's greatest triumphs.<sup>77</sup> No alienation of individual liberty is to be tolerated; the clerical ideal remains "disinterested thought."<sup>78</sup> Thought must be "rigid" and adhere only to itself.<sup>79</sup> Thus his opposition to most forms of *engagement* is as firm as it was in 1927, though he does clarify his views on democracy. The *clerc* can adopt, even proselytize for, the democratic system and still remain loyal because democracy has never existed: ". . . with its sovereign values of individual liberty, justice, and truth, *it is not practical*."<sup>80</sup> The *clerc's* duty remains constant: "When injustice becomes master of the world, and the entire universe kneels before it, the *clerc* must remain standing and confront it with the human conscience."<sup>81</sup>

Though Benda himself will probably continue to be rapidly dismissed as a minor figure, or even completely forgotten, the idea of the special responsibilities and obligations of the intellectual classes seems very much alive. Benda's crucial rôle in the formulation and propagation of this idea should be recognized. In the preface of 1958 to *La Trahison des clercs* René Etiemble emphasizes Benda's belief that the true *clerc* will, when necessary, die for universal values, will never say "my country right or wrong." Etiemble suggests that in 1958 more French artists and intellectuals are ready to struggle for universal values than in 1926-27.<sup>82</sup> Etiemble mentions professors and journalists, priests,

<sup>76</sup> Benda, *Les Cahiers d'un clerc* (Paris, 1950), p. 120.

<sup>77</sup> Benda, in the introduction to the 1947 edition, p. 76. Benda is bitterly critical of François Mauriac and others who asked for amnesty for convicted collaborationist authors (Béraud, Maurras, Brasillach). These intellectuals were not protected by the "right of error." They had engaged in political action and now must pay the price. Benda is scornful of appeals for clemency in the name of love—love is a commandment of the heart and not of reason and thus is "the contrary of a clerical value." (p. 69) One is an "impostor" if he poses as a *clerc* and prefers love to justice. (p. 70)

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61. Italics his.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>82</sup> P. xvi.

the Archbishop of Algiers, even a general. The opposition press took substantial risks to tell the truth about the Algerian War, and the Catholic daily *La Croix* rather belatedly published some articles which conferred upon it the "honor" of being seized in Algeria.<sup>83</sup> There may be truth in the notion that in his native country Benda retains what is best termed an "underground influence." The French intellectuals who became involved in the movement to end the war and grant Algeria independence were guided more by an outraged sense of justice than a desire for power and prestige.<sup>84</sup>

As far as contemporary America is concerned the ideas Benda championed are still influential in three distinct areas of our intellectual life, though his rôle in their formulation and advocacy is not recognized. First, there is the notion of professionalism, which is held by a considerable majority of the American academic community and is quite close to the "pure" position advocated by Benda in *La Trahison des clercs*. The sense of working within a discipline, of striving for the admittedly impossible goal of perfection within that discipline, the conviction that this unremitting labor is *the* important task of the scholar and intellectual, would not be foreign to Benda. Nor would the belief that outside involvement is painful, unnecessary, and to be avoided whenever possible, and that the university is a sacred place where the quest for pure, nonutilitarian knowledge should be pursued—though Benda himself was never part of the French university system.

Second, the attack by America's dissident academicians on the "Establishment Intellectuals,"—holders of government contracts, cabinet advisers, consultants of all varieties, those who perform military research—reminds one of Benda's denunciation of the new generation of realist *clercs*.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, the political behavior of America's "Alienated Intellectual Elite," primarily in opposition to the Vietnam war, shows in its rationale a resemblance to the more activist strain in Benda's thought which has been discussed in this paper.<sup>86</sup> An attempt has been made to

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xx-xxi.

<sup>84</sup> There is substantial documentation on the response of the French intellectuals to the Algerian crisis. See especially Michel-Antoine Burnier, *Les Existentialistes et la politique* (Paris, 1966), pp. 131-46, "Le F. L. N. et la Paix," Henri Alleg, *La Question* (Paris, 1958), and David L. Schalk, *Roger Martin du Gard: The Novelist and History* (Ithaca, 1967), pp. 4-5, 211-13.

<sup>85</sup> The term is Lewis Feuer's. Cf. *supra*, n.9.

<sup>86</sup> This relationship is closer than that between the "Alienated Intellectual Elite"—another useful descriptive term coined by Lewis Feuer—and the more uncritically engaged Communist intellectuals, whose history in France has been so well documented in

show that Benda could not really resolve the contradiction between his commitment and his scholarly detachment. This dilemma is shared by many, if not all, intellectuals today. It would be safe to predict that when scholars in America and abroad reexamine Benda's contribution in detail, they will remain ambivalent; one of the aims of this paper has been to probe more deeply into the roots of this ambivalence.<sup>87</sup>

There is a very small possibility that Benda will some day speak to a larger audience, perhaps to a new generation of students. He was, after all, very suspicious of ideologies, and believed in a rather anarchical, utopian, idyllic democracy. Our age has been characterized as one which is both postideological and in which the young make absolutist demands.<sup>88</sup> It is perhaps significant that *The Treason of the Intellectuals* has been back in print since January 1969 in a paperback edition.<sup>89</sup>

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David Caute's *Communism and the French Intellectuals* (New York, 1964). A comparative analysis of the political participation of intellectuals during the Dreyfus Affair and during the Algerian and Vietnam wars will, I believe, disclose some fascinating and significant parallels.

<sup>87</sup> It will be recalled that H. Stuart Hughes, surely the most distinguished American scholar to write on Benda in recent years, presents a very mixed evaluation of *La Trahison des clercs*. Hughes himself has in the past been rather deeply engaged politically—as national co-chairman of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and as candidate for the United States Senate in 1962, running against George Lodge and Edward M. Kennedy. At least some of these activities would have been reproved by Benda. To be sure, Hughes has always tried to maintain a sharp distinction between professional activity and one's involvement as a concerned citizen. At the dramatic and controversial meetings of the American Historical Association held in Washington on December 28-29, 1969, Professor Hughes spoke against a resolution committing the association to a public stance against the Vietnam war while reiterating his personal opposition to that conflict. I do not believe that Benda would have accepted this distinction, and it is clear that Paul Nizan would not. New light should be cast on this problem in the author's study, "Professors as Watchdogs: Paul Nizan's Theory of the Intellectual in Politics," to be published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1973. Also see *supra*, nn.54, 56.

<sup>88</sup> The metaphor of the bulldozer or steamroller has been frequently used to describe the condition of twentieth-century man caught up in the vast impersonality of institutional society. Tom Wicker concludes an article on alienation of intellectuals in America by comparing twentieth-century man to an old woman defending her homestead against the approaching superhighway, knowing full well that ". . . in the end the bulldozer will go through." ("The Malaise Beyond Dissent," *New York Times*, March 12, 1967, p. E-13.) Of course, it makes no real difference whether one kneels down or stands erect when confronted with a bulldozer or steamroller, but the world may be a somewhat better place because men like Julien Benda have chosen to remain upright—even when, as Benda wrote, injustice becomes master of the world. And at our present level of technological achievement there will probably still be a man running the machine. One is certainly more visible standing up, and there is always a possibility, however slight, that the human conscience which Benda so highly valued will have an effect, however temporary, and that the operator will stop the machine.

<sup>89</sup> Published by W. W. Norton. An earlier (1955) paperback edition, brought out by Beacon Press under the title of *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*, is now out of print. In French *La Trahison des clercs* was reissued in an inexpensive (3 francs) paperback edition in 1965 by J. J. Pauvert (Collection Libertés).