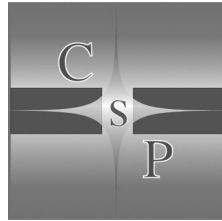


Culture Wars and Literature in the French Third Republic

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Edited by

Gilbert D. Chaitin



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INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICS OF CULTURE

GILBERT D. CHAITIN

Culture, Politics and National Identity

In his epoch-making *Betrayal of the Intellectuals* (first published in 1927), Julien Benda declared that humanity had entered a new and frightening stage of (im)moral development, one that combined culture wars with political strife: “The notion that political warfare involves a war of cultures is entirely an invention of modern times, and confers upon them a conspicuous place in the moral history of humanity” (Benda 1955, 16). Confronted with the virulent nationalisms of the World War I and post-war periods coupled with the rise of Fascism and Nazism, Benda correctly predicted that this addition of culture wars to political conflict would lead to “the greatest and most perfect war ever seen in the world . . . like the life and death wars which occur among rodents and among the carnivora” (Benda 1955, 145-6). (Some of the following material on Benda has appeared in Chaitin 2008a.)

What made this mixture so lethal, Benda argued, was the rise of modern, democratic nationalism. Now each nation claimed that the highest products of civilization fashioned by its members belonged not to humanity at large but to itself.

With a hitherto unknown consciousness (prodigiously fanned by authors) every nation now hugs itself and sets itself up against all other nations as superior in language, art, literature, philosophy, civilization, “culture.” (Benda 1955, 14)

Begun in Germany in 1813 according to Benda (presumably with Napoleon’s defeat in the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig), this “democratic patriotism [constitutes] . . . the determination of a nation to oppose others in the name of its most fundamental characteristics” (Benda 1955, 15).

Although he does not use the expression “national identity,” Benda clearly means that the masses henceforth tie their sense of self to belonging to a national culture. Writing in the aftermath of the great War and the Treaty of Versailles, Benda saw that ethnicity had become the principle of nations, and that “culture,” with both a small and a capital C, had become the source of nationalistic “pride or self-esteem (*égoïsme*)” (Benda 1955, 24)—his scare quotes no doubt a nationalistic dig at the Germans’ *Kultur*. In addition to justifying the desire for material advantages, this movement answers people’s desire to “become conscious of themselves as *individuals (particuliers)*, insofar as they are *distinct* in relation to other men” (Benda 1955, 24; emphases in text), and this is a far more powerful motivating force than mere self-interest. Together, these desires form the will to “situate [one]self *in real life*” (Benda 1955, 25; emphases in text).

This desire for difference does not remain within the sphere of individual psychology; on the contrary, it is transferred to the group, the state, nation, or social class, and it is precisely this transfer that makes the new form of patriotism especially malignant. Indeed, according to Benda, “the individual bestows a mystic personality on the association of which he feels himself a member, and gives it a religious adoration, which is simply the deification of his own passion” (Benda 1955, 3). “The State, Country, Class are now frankly God” (Benda 1955, 29).

The paradoxical result is that the desire to be distinct imposes a previously unheard-of homogeneity on the members of the group, who huddle together to bask in the warmth of group identity. It is this “political passion” which inspires the virulent hatred of other people that will lead to the all-out wars of the future, in which each nation will be intent on eradicating the other. Furthermore, nowadays each political passion must have its own system of doctrines that attempt to prove that its action has supreme value, that each such passion is the good, its enemy evil, not only in politics but on the moral, intellectual and esthetic levels as well. This “intellectual organization of political hatreds” characterizes the twentieth century (Benda 1955, 21).

The betrayal of the intellectuals consists of their abandonment of the universal values of the Enlightenment and the Revolution in their zeal to provide theoretical justifications for the particular political interests and individual pride of nations. Formerly, even when they were preoccupied with politics, the majority of intellectuals had “a sense of the general, an attachment to abstract views, a disdain for the immediate, all of which exclude what is properly called ‘passion’” (Benda 1955, 31). Those modern intellectuals who not only love the particular but raise it to the level of a divinity in a new practical religion assuage the consciences of

the politicians and the citizens who indulge in the worst forms of egotistical passion.

For Benda the crucial distinction is that between disinterestedness or metaphysics and what he terms realism or practicality, the love of the factual, which he condemns equally in positivism and Hegelianism. Only the universal, abstracted from the particularity of the real, can ensure the disinterested pursuit of truth and morality.

In his 1931 *Essai d'un discours cohérent*, Benda would therefore conclude that the only way to avoid total war is precisely to develop sensitivity to mankind in the abstract and to combat interest in concrete man by turning people away from the study of history and towards that of metaphysics (cited in Niess 1956, 198).

Because leaders are now obligated to “present [their] acts as bound up with a system of morality, a metaphysics, a mysticism” (Benda 1955, 88), the new democratic imperative leads, in a second paradox, to the resurgence of authoritarianism. This doctrinal justification makes traditional morality into the source of evil defined as practical weakness, while portraying the components of authoritarianism as the basis of morality—politics and practicality, self-love (*l'égoïsme*); and this is in principle, not just in action as in former times. Among the many intellectuals Benda criticizes—philosophers, churchmen, educators, historians—he singles out artists, especially writers, who have lately championed authoritarian systems intent on extolling the virtues of force and grandeur, for, under Bergson's aegis, since the 1890s artists have discovered that their productions have value only through their artistic sensibility, not in their sensitivity to reason. Such works are much more pleasing artistically than those based on establishing justice, “for the characteristic of artistic sensibility is the love of concrete realities and the repugnance for abstract conceptions and conceptions of pure reason, the model of which is the idea of justice” (Benda 1955, 137); not to mention the contemplation of an orderly, harmonious, hierarchical organization—the opposite of a democracy where all are equal.

Add to this that every doctrine which honours Man in the universal, in what is common to all men, is a personal injury to the artist, whose characteristic (at least since Romanticism) is precisely to set himself up as an exceptional being. (Benda 1955, 137-138)

For Benda, then, culture wars are not simply conflicts among divergent groups; they consist of putting culture in the service of politics, the lust for prestige, power and conquest. Culture here means both the habits, mores,

language and religious affiliations that define ethnicity and the intellectual productions customarily associated with a high degree of civilization—science, art, philosophy, morals, religion, literature. The result is a generalized xenophobia exacerbated a thousandfold by the theoretical underpinnings supplied by the intellectuals.

Internal Xenophobia: Culture Wars during the Third Republic

What Benda did not mention is that, at least in France, external culture wars were preceded by internal ones. Moreover, during the Third Republic, it was the assertion of universality rather than its abandonment that led to the fiercest and most widespread of these conflicts; namely, that between the forces of (Catholic) theocracy and those of the secularizing proponents of Enlightenment principles. The fledgling republic organized these culture wars in order to create a large body of loyal republican citizens whose new patriotism would shield them from the dictates of the Church or the seductions of the monarchies and authoritarian dictatorships—“caesarism” in the catchword of the enemies of Bonapartism (see Albanese 1992, 3-6)—that had ruled France during most of the nineteenth century.

As several scholars have pointed out, it was only in modern republics, in democratic régimes, that governments had to worry about imposing a national identity that would take precedence over, if not replace, older forms of group identification; under the old régimes, the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian Empires for example, the government was concerned only with avoiding overt hostilities among ethnic groups. As long as each lived in its own enclave, the rulers left them alone, since the latter were independent of those different groups, at least in principle; whereas in a democracy, it is the will of the people as a whole that supposedly legitimizes government. (See for instance Calhoun 1994, Burke 1992.)

Once the supporters of republican government had won majorities in both houses of Parliament in the 1880s, Jules Ferry, Minister of Education and President of the Council (akin to Prime Minister), launched these battles with a series of educational reforms designed to establish a system of nationwide “obligatory, free and laic” primary schools and, with his associate Camille Sée, a similar system of public secondary schools for girls. National unity and a competent citizenry, he claimed, could be achieved only by inculcating in the children of France filial piety toward the Republic and the Positivist principles of freedom of thought and universal morality. Since morality is a “social fact” rather than a

transcendent commandment for Positivism, it becomes a matter of “culture” in the most general sense of the term (1876 Speech to the Freemasons, Legrand 1961, 245). Catholicism and its brand of morals, he maintained, adopting the arguments of Edgar Quinet during the Second Republic, was a “particularism,” just one of three religions present in France (Quinet 1895, 119). The teaching of morality in the public schools thus became a political issue, because it combined the endeavor to establish a new republican national unity with an attack on the Catholic Church’s hitherto unchallenged monopoly on morality and moral training. (See Chaitin 2008b, Chapter One, for a more ample discussion of the culture wars set in motion by the Ferry education reforms of 1880-1882.)

By making the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous, universal subject of reason and morality the basis of the new, democratic subject, the Opportunists aimed to establish the legitimacy of their government and of the schools it was creating. They supported their educational reforms with arguments drawn from the scientific positivism of Auguste Comte, Émile Littré and their followers. The case for the autonomous subject and independent morality—the secular system of morals based solely on the principles of reason and observation, as opposed to a specific doctrine, faith, or belief, and therefore universally valid—was buttressed with the neo-Kantian philosophy of the very influential philosopher, Charles Renouvier, and of the educators whom Ferry appointed to head the new school systems, such as Félix Pécaut, Ferdinand Buisson, Jules Steeg and Mme. Jules Favre.

While the two philosophies were incompatible in many ways, their combination was useful to the reformers because both asserted the limitations of rational knowledge against theological and metaphysical speculation, both championed disinterestedness as the key to scientific knowledge and morality, and both agreed on the basic tenet of the existence of an independent—that is, purely human – universal morality. These precepts allowed the republicans to respond to the crisis that had undermined the authority of all governments since the Revolution: the lack of any transcendent foundation of power, without God or the absolute monarch as sources of legitimacy. Republican universality and disinterestedness were designed to take the place of the lost transcendent ground and thus to justify the claim that the new regime’s pedagogy, ideology and government were legitimately based on a set of principles unaffected by partisan bias and hence conducive to a rational social order and to national unity. In Lacanian terms, the universal Republic became the Other necessary to guarantee the imaginary unity of the republican citizen.

By making national identity a State affair, and in undermining Catholic teachings, the Ferry laws stirred up an existential angst among the entire population that previously had been reserved for the intellectual minority, while at the same time making both education and identity political matters. Culminating in the Dreyfus Affair, which divided the country into two warring camps, roughly from 1897 to 1900, and in the official separation of Church and State in 1905, the internal strife lasted until the beginning of World War I, and the effects of these educational reforms are still felt today. In fact, although there are obvious differences, the conflict played out in France at the turn of the twentieth century serves as a small-scale model for our twenty-first-century wars, in the West and the East, between modern scientific and traditional religious ideologies.

Authoritative French historians such as M. Ozouf and J.-M. Mayeur have shown that, like Comte's Positivism, the Republic sought not merely to displace the Church but to replace it (Ozouf 1982, 114; J.-M. Mayeur 1984, 83-84). Quoting two passages on geography, the one from a journal of Catholic education, the other from a secular magazine, Ozouf shows that the role of beneficent Providence reserved for God in the first is copied almost verbatim in the bounteous character attributed to the *patrie* in the second. From this and other evidence she concludes, "Ainsi la patrie joue, dans l'école laïque, le rôle réservé à Dieu dans l'école congréganiste" (Ozouf 1982, 114). [Thus, in the secular schools the homeland plays the role reserved for God in the Congregationist schools (my translation)]. In this judgment, Ozouf was echoing the analysis of Célestin Bouglé, an early collaborator of Durkheim, for whom the sacred represents the community as a whole: "La 'religion de la patrie' était comme un succédané de la religion, auquel les fidèles des religions traditionnelles . . . consentaient eux-mêmes les concessions nécessaires" (Bouglé 1939, 11). [The "religion of the homeland" was, as it were, a substitute for religion, to which the faithful of traditional religions . . . themselves granted the necessary concessions (my translation)].

By the end of the century, the schoolteachers of the republic had become "lay monks," "lay missionaries of the truth," "apostles of progress," "priests of a religion of love" who would "sow the good word in the tender souls of the children" so that their "successors will see the harvest of the ideas of justice and fraternal solidarity germinate" (Laville 1991, 332-334, quoting clippings collected by Zola in preparation for his novel, *Vérité* [*Truth*] (1903); the last quotation is from Payot's manual for schoolteachers). In her study of *Truth*, Béatrice Laville points out that the drive for secular education was painted as a veritable religious crusade, in which Péguy's famous "hussards noirs de la république" [black Hussars of

the republic] were to lead the holy war to have, in Jean Jaurès's words, "la science organisée et pénétrée d'idéal . . . remplacer peu à peu dans la vie humaine et dans les profondeurs du peuple la foi morte ou mourante. Et l'Université peut devenir en ce sens l'Eglise de la pensée libre" (quoted in Laville 1991, 334) [organized science, permeated by the ideal . . . little by little replace, in human life and in the depths of the people, dead or dying faith].

It was not through the schools alone that the Republic strove to make patriotism into a second religion for the masses. J.-M. Mayeur, summarizing the conclusions of several important scholarly works, reminds us of the concerted efforts of the regime to orchestrate a series of representations of the Republic through the construction of sculptural monuments, the elevation of various figures to the status of national heroes, and above all the establishment of public festivals, celebrations and events of the 1880s, which he calls "les rites d'une véritable liturgie républicaine" (J.-M. Mayeur 1984, 83) [the rites of a veritable republican liturgy (my translation)]. In 1880, the year July 14th was made into the French national holiday, the Municipal Council of Paris declared that schoolchildren should participate in the official ceremonies in order to rid them of the "practices of superstition." Like the First Republic, the Third wanted to combat the "old dogmas" by creating a civic religion, and while the Goddess of Reason was not revived, the figure of Marianne gave the Republic a face and a body to worship in place of the Virgin (J.-M. Mayeur 1984, 84; see Agulhon 1989). In those early years, the July 14th celebrations aroused special fervor in the popular sections of Paris and the other big cities, where they took on the flavor of "political liturgies" (J.-M. Mayeur 1984, 84).

Novelists against the Opportunist Republic

A crucial difference between the external culture wars that Benda analyzes and the internal battles of the Third Republic is that, in the latter, cultural productions, especially fiction, became weapons intellectuals used not to support but to attack those in power. In the plots of their novels, right-wing writers such as Octave Feuillet in *La morte* [*Aliette*] (1886) bought into the propaganda of the Catholic party asserting that republican education basing morals on positivism or Kantianism leads to criminality and vice (see Caro 1883). The more sophisticated novelists, Bourget and Barrès, saw beyond these simple clichés. For Bourget's disciple, the danger of the school without God is the destabilization of identity. Science, personified by the inadequate father, Sixte, cannot protect

Greslou from his 'bestial nature' nor offer him consolation and forgiveness when he succumbs to its power. Still worse than the inadequate father, is the scientist who takes on the role of father in the real world: Greslou, the experimenter whose teaching seduces and causes the death of the innocent Charlotte, is the representation of the Republic with its experiment in national education (Bourget 1994). Barrès goes his colleague one better by showing that the Republic, personified in the philosophy teacher Bouteiller, uses neo-Kantian universalism as a façade for gaining control over its citizens so that its leaders can indulge their own greed and corruption. He echoes Bourget, Taine and the conservative tradition since Burke in accusing republican ideology of destroying the identity of its citizens by ignoring the particular realities that give their lives meaning. In order to reestablish a firm basis for individual and national identity, and thereby to save the motherland, both he and Bourget are quick to propose replacements for the inadequate or deceptive father, Spencer's Unknowable for the latter, the ancestors for the former (Barrès 1994).

Writers of the left did not challenge the potential adequacy of the republican fathers; rather they accused them of massive betrayals. For Vallès, as for his right-wing admirers, the leaders of the Republic had betrayed the trust of the citizens, undermining traditional identity and subjecting the latter to scarcely resistible coercion through the universalizing education purveyed in the schools (see Chapter One). Anarchist writers such as Léon Frapié and Brenn (pseudonym for Émile Masson), agreed that republican education crushes the spontaneity and autonomy of its pupils under the weight of the universal principles that are supposed to liberate them (Frapié 1908; Brenn 1905).

In his four-novel sequence, *Histoire contemporaine* [*Contemporary History*] (1897-1901), Anatole France bitterly reproached the Opportunist and Radical leaders for undermining the republican principles they claimed to stand for by collaborating with the enemy. Subservient to the interests of international finance and banking, the republican politicians collaborated with the Church in the lobotomy of the French people that kept the latter ignorant, gullible and docile to the authorities. Deprived of the inner life a good education would stimulate and the civic passion of their revolutionary forebears, they lacked the ability to form an identity other than a hollow, conformist social self (France 1987, 1991). In Zola's *Truth*, the republican fathers have not only violated the trust of the nation by colluding with the Church, they have committed a kind of rape and murder parallel to the physical crimes perpetrated by the churchman on young Zéphirin and the emotional traumas inflicted on the protagonist's wife, Geneviève, by confession and first communion. The theme of

women's liberation permeates *Truth*, first because Zola was convinced that education was both the root of the problem of women's dependency and its solution, and second because he believed that independent and enlightened women were the key to a free, healthy and unified republic. Like republican ideologists from Condorcet to Clemenceau, and in keeping with his own long-held positivist convictions, Zola attributed the legal, mental and emotional servitude of women to the deleterious effects of the Catholic education they received. Both Zola and France therefore assert that the education of the masses is the true hope for the future (Zola 1995).

Women writers of the period, such as G. Réval (pen name of Gabrielle Logerot) and Louise-Marie Compain, also looked upon republican education as an opportunity, but one that brought with it challenges not borne by their male counterparts. As is well known, under the Third Republic women were once again deprived of the right to vote and were therefore subject to significant restrictions on their participation in the benefits the regime advertised as the principal incentives it offered to its male citizens in return for their allegiance—universal rights and moral sovereignty. Women's allegedly natural differences from men served as the rationale for their unequal treatment. Sée and Ferry supported the institution of secondary schools for girls with the arguments that Michelet and Comte had long since put forth, and which had been taken up by the republican press since the 1870s (see Legrand 1961, 40). In order to preserve the institution of marriage and secure the "unity of souls" of husband and wife, we must have enlightened women who will second their husbands' progressive beliefs rather than cause dissension in the family as is now the case, due to the nefarious influence of the clergy on ignorant women. Moreover, it is women who have the greatest educative influence on future citizens, in their role as mothers.

Perhaps Zola put the republican position best in *Truth*:

Toute la désunion, toute la douloureuse querelle de la société contemporaine ne venait-elle pas de là, de ce divorce entre l'homme à demi libéré et la femme restée serve, esclave adulée, hallucinée du catholicisme agonisant? . . . Et, brusquement, Marc vit éclater la vérité, la solution unique: instruire la femme, lui donner près de nous sa vraie place d'égale et de compagne, car, seule, la femme libérée peut libérer l'homme. (Zola 1995, 338-339).

[Didn't all the dissension, the whole painful quarrel in contemporary society come from the divorce between half-liberated men and the vision of women remained servile, slaves conjured up in the admiring hallucinations of a dying Catholicism? . . . And suddenly Marc saw the

truth burst forth, the only solution: educate women, give them their true place next to us as equals and companions, for only liberated women can liberate men. (My translation)]

In short, it was as wives and mothers, not as citizens in their own right, that educated women were needed to protect the Republic, chiefly, as with the primary schools, by weakening the hold of the Church over them (Ferry 1961, 235-237; Ferry defense of Sée bill in Senate, December 10 1880, in Robiquet 1896, 10-15; see also discussion in F. Mayeur 1977, 58-60). As a result, the idea of a liberal education for women, parallel to that of the boys' secondary schools, was rejected (F. Mayeur 1977, 33). The double standard inherent in the curriculum adopted was especially evident in the main emphasis laid, as in the case of the primary schools for both sexes, not so much on the theory of independent morality as on moral training, with its goal of inculcating obedience and reconstituting national unity (F. Mayeur 1977, 109). In this same spirit, the SEQES (Société pour l'étude des questions d'enseignement secondaire [Society for the Study of Secondary Education Questions]) report on girls' secondary schools chose not to include Clarisse Coignet's claims about the eventual equality of the rights of women under the Republic nor her call for professional training in their description of the curriculum in moral education for girls (Coignet 1880).

Excluded from official discourse, the case for women's liberation was therefore made in alternative venues, public meetings, journalism and fiction. Through the theoretical principles of universal human dignity and autonomy taught in the normal schools and by the practical possibility of financial independence, the teaching profession offered women the chance to attain a degree of independence and sense of professional achievement virtually unknown under previous conditions. But in practice the autonomy they gained occasioned the sacrifice of their sexual and maternal desires, all the more so because the same Kantianism that promised them liberty did so at the price of a Puritanism, at least where women, especially women teachers were concerned, that threatened to enslave them in a different way. Réval's primary objection to the republican ideology of the woman schoolteacher is that its Kantian morality enforces the cant of concealment or the even more damaging mutilation of the woman's intellect and "natural" desire, both of which obstruct the "full development of life" (Réval 1907, 261). Torn between two identities, women schoolteachers had to suffer in addition from the duplicity of the Republic, which undercut the theoretical autonomy it preached with the derisory salaries, political pressure and deference to

local bigwigs that made women teachers of the 1880s and '90s live in isolation and subjection to outside forces.

Marguerite, the main character of Réval's *Les Sèvriennes* (1900), is forced to choose between the teaching career she envisioned as a student at the newly-founded women's teacher training college at Sèvres, and her love for a man she cannot marry. She takes the momentous decision to live with him anyway,

en dehors de la vie commune; mais la tête haute, consciente de l'œuvre féconde que sera l'œuvre d'amour, je pars, ayant au coeur une gratitude infinie pour cette École, dont la main libératrice rouvre la porte au Bonheur. (Réval 1907, 351)

[outside of conjugal life. But head held high, aware of the fertile work that this work of love will be, I am leaving (the Sèvres Normal School) with infinite gratitude in my heart for this School whose liberating hand has once again opened the door to Happiness. (My translation)]

Thanks to the headmistress, whose main principle is “la culture absolue de l'esprit de justice” [the absolute cultivation of the spirit of justice] even when it requires going against strict obedience to actual laws (Réval 1907, 262), or of pitting individual conscience against paternal will (265), Marguerite has learned that freedom consists in following one's conscience, so that the law becomes my law, my destiny. And her destiny is to assert openly a woman's right to desire, beyond the laws of the judicial system and of social respectability.

Compain's *L'un vers l'autre* (1903) deals with the question of equality between the sexes in marriage. Laure Deborda leaves her family out of a sense of duty to herself, seeking an existence that will liberate her from the slavery of wifedom in a traditional bourgeois marriage, even though she is still very much in love with her husband Henri (Compain 1903, 161). By using her intellectual skills to become a teacher in an upper primary school, she thinks that she can gain her independence and also occupy her mind. Compain presents Laure's situation in her first job in dichotomous terms, which indicate that teaching is the realm of freedom, while love is the domain of subjection. Teaching confers financial independence while forcing a woman to cope with the sort of personal and professional problems reserved for men alone in the customary nineteenth-century bourgeois scheme of things.

In this novel, love is portrayed as a force for both liberation and subjection. When thought of as individual fulfillment, love is opposed to impairment of the self through duty to society; when considered as need for the other, it is opposed to the autonomy of the self. The most difficult

lesson for Laure to learn is that the love that robs her of her autonomy by making her dependent on the man she loves is nevertheless at the same time an essential part of herself. Neither a wife nor a mother while she is employed as a teacher, she feels that she has “mutilé [s]on être en quittant [s]on mari” (Compain 1903, 244) [mutilated her self in leaving her husband]. Laure’s dilemma is therefore more complex and more difficult than Marguerite’s fairly straightforward choice between constraining Kantianism or liberating love: either she will remain in an autonomous but unsatisfying existence, or accept a certain dependency in order to live life to the fullest.

Despite their limitations, the new women’s lycées aroused enormous antagonism among the general public, due to the threat they seemed to pose to the core of human identity, especially in a patriarchal order—the definition of gender roles. No one was more aware of this source of animosity than G. Réval, who described the promise of the new secondary schools in the preface to her second novel, *Un lycée de jeunes filles* (1901):

Qu’on ne s’y trompe point, les Lycées de jeunes filles, où les Sèviennes répandent l’esprit nouveau, sont moins créés pour arracher la femme au “joug religieux,” que pour l’aider à s’affranchir, et du même coup affranchir le vieux monde. . . . ce qu’il leur faut conquérir pour devenir enfin les égales des hommes. . . . Le Féminisme n’est plus aujourd’hui la tentative de quelques révoltées, c’est l’organisation raisonnable, disciplinée, de ces femmes instruites et courageuses. (Réval 1901, viii-ix)
 [Let no one be deceived, the Lycées for girls, in which the graduates of the Sèvres teacher training college are spreading the new spirit, have been created less to tear women from the “yoke of religion” than to help them free themselves, thus helping to free the old world at the same time. . . . what they need in order finally to become men’s equals. . . . Feminism is no longer the endeavor of a few rebels; it is the disciplined and reasonable organization of these courageous educated women.]

Like the male socialist writers, Réval looked on the anti-clerical campaign of the republicans as little more than a diversion, designed to distract them from their true goals of liberation and equality. Mimicking the language of Zola (“raisonnable, disciplinée, femmes instruites et courageuses” [reasonable, disciplined, educated and courageous women]), to whom she refers with approval several times in *Les Sèviennes*, the writer announces the arrival of a new era of sober, reformist feminism, like the down-to-earth socialism that was to supplant the idealism of the 1840s. “Qu’on l’avoue ou qu’on ne l’avoue point, les Lycées de jeunes filles

aboutissent à l'idée socialiste en aidant à la libération des femmes, par l'émancipation de leur cerveau" (Réval 1901, ix). [Whether or not people admit it, the Lycées for girls lead to the idea of socialism, promoting women's liberation by emancipating their brains].

For Réval and Compain, the ideal is a life that will encompass both professional and romantic fulfillment, and if their heroines must choose between the two, it is not out of personal inclination, but due to the constraints imposed upon them by the Republican system of women's education, which professes to value freedom and autonomy above all else, but does not allow those qualities to flourish in its own teaching corps.

Male writers also expose the contradiction between the official ideology of the Republic and the actualities of the schoolteachers' lives in the 1890s. Like other education novels, Zola's *Truth* contrasts the claims of republican ideology—equality under the law, the right and the means of personal and intellectual development, moral and financial independence, sovereignty over herself and participation in the governance of the nation—with the realities of women's condition under the Opportunist and Radical governments of the Third Republic.

For his *Institutrice de province* (1897), Frapié devised an exquisitely literary method of expressing the fundamental irony of the woman schoolteacher's situation. He modeled his tale of Louise Chardon's life as an *institutrice* on the traditional Catholic saint's life, thus making his novel into a literal enactment of the favorite metaphor of the period, that of the teacher as a "lay saint." Like a true saint, she is exposed to a series of persecutions and temptations presented as so many ordeals, tests of her innocence and her devotion to her cause, that of secular republican education. The irony is, however, that it is the very Republic for which her suffering bears witness that proves to be the ultimate cause of her martyrdom.

Other Battles

Internecine warfare during the latter part of the nineteenth century was not restricted to the battles of the secular state versus the Catholic Church, nor of women striving for emancipation; the Republic was also engaged in political and cultural conflicts with other forces that opposed the bourgeois interests and values it championed. Foremost among these adversaries were the advocates of the new urban masses, on both the left and the right, who coalesced in the phenomenon known as Boulangism, so named after its wildly popular leader, General Georges Boulanger, Minister of War from 1886 to 1887. Indeed, the first major crisis of the Republic of the

Republicans, as it was known starting in 1877, was its confrontation with Boulangism, which threatened to topple the republic in the years 1887-1888. The power of the movement resulted from the confluence of several factors: widespread dissatisfaction with the perceived instability and weakness of parliamentary government, the repercussions of the economic crisis of 1882, and the nationalist craving for “la revanche,” the desire to recapture the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine from the Germans, who had annexed them after their victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 (J.-M. Mayeur 1984, 119). Boulanger was supported at first by his high-placed friends on the left, especially Georges Clemenceau, leader of the Radicals, and the working-class followers of the socialist Paris Commune who were seeking their own *revanche* against the governing powers that had brutally suppressed them in June, 1848 and again, still more murderously, in June, 1871. The movement was then appropriated by the Nationalist, Bonapartist and monarchist right. As his growing popularity threw fear into the republican leaders, Boulanger was removed from office by the centrist parliament in December 1887. In 1888 and again in January, 1889, he and his followers won a series of elections. Unwilling to attempt a military coup against the Republic and threatened with prosecution as perpetrator of an “offence against the safety of the State,” Boulanger went into exile in April of 1889 and committed suicide two years later.

Starting in 1887, when Boulanger appeared to have success in resisting German political pressure in the Schnaebelé case,¹ his every move was reported and magnified by the popular press. A product of universal male suffrage, industrial urbanization and the mass media, the Boulangist phenomenon is especially appropriate for this volume, because, in a tradition harking back to the Revolution and beyond, this battle was fought not only on the political, judicial and financial fronts, but also with the weapon of popular songs. Following in the footsteps of Paul Déroulède’s revanchist military songs (*Chants du soldat*, 1872)—and he himself became an ardent supporter of Boulanger—the Boulangists used military songs, especially *En revenant de la revue* [Returning from the Parade], to whip their supporters up into a patriotic frenzy, while their opponents retaliated with satirical chansons in popular cabarets (*café-concerts*) like the famous *Chat Noir*.

In appealing to the masses through popular culture, the Boulangist leaders aimed to use the power of democracy against the Republic, arousing the political passions of the people much as in Benda’s analysis of the external culture wars of the 1920s and 30s the leaders of fascist regimes ratcheted up popular support for political and military conquest by

appealing to their citizens' narcissistic pride in their cultural productions. The voices of military patriotism reached a fever pitch with the media blitz during the Dreyfus Affair (ca. 1897-1900) led by mass-circulation newspapers such as *Le Petit Journal* and the various regional editions of *La Croix*. Of course, the republicans fought back using similar arms: satirical songs against Boulanger, Bernard Lazare's press campaign for Dreyfus's innocence in the newspapers (*L'Éclair* and *Le Matin*) and Zola's *J'Accuse* in Clemenceau's paper, *L'Aurore*. In fact, the Ferry education reforms were designed to counteract the preference shown by the vast majority of the peasant population for Louis-Napoleon's dictatorship in the plebiscites that ratified his coup d'état against the Second Republic and for the reactionary monarchist and Bonapartist forces that dominated the first elections of the nascent Third Republic.

In their novels about the Dreyfus Affair, *Truth* and *Monsieur Bergeret in Paris* (the last volume of *Contemporary History*), Zola and Anatole France depict what Benda might have termed the "betrayal of democracy," the fact that the vast majority of the people not only sided with the military against Dreyfus, ignoring all the evidence of his innocence, but indulged in rabid anti-Semitism and violence against Dreyfus's supporters. Like other intellectuals who supported the Republic, they were caught in the dilemma of populism, obliged by their principles to rely on decisions of the majority of the population yet fearful of what they considered to be the latter's lack of humane principles, knowledge and taste.

Contents

The articles assembled in this volume describe and analyze the ever-widening attempts in the early years of the Third Republic to mobilize literary phenomena for the purposes of political and social warfare. The topics covered fall into four categories: education, literary heroes, women's liberation, popular political culture.

In "The Thesis Novel as Weapon in the Education Wars of the Third Republic," I argue that during the Third Republic literature became the preferred site in which the human implications of the battle over national identification waged between proponents of secular and religious education were articulated, dramatized and appraised. The dominant literary form enlisted for this purpose was the so-called thesis novel (*roman à thèse*), a type of fiction criticized in those days and since as an authoritarian genre for putting the idea ahead of the story, privileging the general over the particular, and depriving the reader of her freedom by imposing the author's interpretations of the actions recounted.

My analysis of two exemplary texts shows that, in fact, there is no fixed relation between narrative structures and political valence. *Histoire d'un sous-maître* [*The Alsatian Schoolmaster*] by Erckmann-Chatrian has all the narrative characteristics of an authoritarian thesis novel, yet it argues forcefully for the emancipation of students from the coercive and often brutal pedagogy of the Church schools it criticizes. Jules Vallès's *L'enfant* [*The Child*], on the contrary, is a text whose features—multiplicity, discontinuity, fragmentation and negation—shocked the critics of Vallès's times but make it a model resistant text by the standards of our contemporaries. Yet the author openly proclaimed, in his correspondence and in the text itself, that he wrote the book in order to advocate a thesis—children's liberation—and it was received with approval precisely by the right-wing nationalists who opposed parliamentary democracy.

What the two stories have in common is the desire to promote the dignity, reason and rights of the individual student, and thus of the development of each student's identity, and the conviction that school education, both Catholic and Republican, threatened their loss. It was this desire and this fear that launched and sustained the culture wars of the Third Republic.

In "Literary Pedagogy and/as Religious Ritual in the French Third Republic," M. Martin Guiney notes the parallels between the "religious wars" in the United States today and those of the French Third Republic, but he concludes that the tensions between religious and secular factions in the two countries are dissimilar due to the differing role of literature in the two cultures and their schools. In France, where the legitimacy of government has been in question since the Revolution, and where great moral power has traditionally been attributed to literature, the Republic has strived to bolster its moral authority by presenting itself through its teaching of national literature in the public schools as the source and protector of national identity.

Underlying the secular-religious divide in France has been the idea of "art as religion," a categorial confusion based on the notion that the schools are the sole guardians of the "mystery" of literariness—the elusive quality that constitutes the value of literary works—just as the Catholic Church controls access to God's mysteries. This parallel allows Guiney to observe another: that between the Republic's maintenance of the principle of *laïcité*, the right to assimilate all inhabitants to a single standard of secularity in public institutions, as was promulgated under the Third Republic and came to the fore in the controversies over Moslem girls wearing headscarves to school since the 1990s; and the assertion that only

works that participate in “literariness” deserve to be taught in the schools. Guiney concludes that it is inappropriate to treat literature as a religion and therefore “irreducibly mysterious” or as a radical deviation from any norm and thus as “irreducibly strange.” And he implies that the same is true for national identity: the recognition of difference is not incompatible with the assertion of a certain sameness.

By turning the system of republican schools into an instrument of social integration, the government aimed to promote the ideal of national unity and, to this end, elaborated a consensual discourse capable of reconciling various elements of diversity such as regional particularisms and class differences which threatened to destroy the social fabric. With this goal in mind, Ralph Albanese argues, they transformed two literary lights of the monarchical past into heroes of the Republic. La Fontaine’s *Fables* were taught to the nation’s entire population in the primary schools, with the overriding message to French peasants and working-class people that wisdom resided in adopting a complacent mindset and an ultimate acceptance of the socio-political realities of the day. Corneille’s heroic tragedies, on the other hand, were studied exclusively at the secondary level and only by a very limited student population, roughly two percent at the turn of the century, reflecting middle and upper middle-class values, in short, the social elite who would later emerge as the future leaders of the nation. Their adoption of Cornelian virtues would allow them to transcend the status quo and achieve a heroic greatness worthy of France. Grounded in the opposition between heroic and anti-heroic values, the contradiction between these two canonical authors serves to shed light on the class conflicts of the period and to explain French political attitudes during the wars and crises of the twentieth century.

Anne McCall broaches the subject of the republican production of national literary heroes from the more practical but also ideologically loaded point of view of legal disputes over intellectual property rights. During the 1890s, especially 1896-1900, the subject of posthumous correspondence publications became a topic of great debate in the press, a debate in which writers, critics, and an occasional politician took part. Its terms would sound like simple posturing, were it not for the fact that changes in literary property laws had recently inverted typical publication models and strategies, making families the source of iconoclastic publications rather than protectors of their ancestors. This led the State in turn to wonder if it might have an interest in the protection of the nation’s leading cultural figures and literary heroes. Framed as a question of family values, the issue of posthumous publications also set literary critics against judges, who were increasingly becoming the first, authoritative readers of

correspondences. McCall argues that this para-literary, professional turf war was a primary yet unrecognized factor in the literary demotion of letters at the end of the nineteenth century.

Beth Gale and Erin Hyman look at different literary interventions in the nascent battle for women's liberation around the turn of the twentieth century. Gale reports on the growing battles over women's education triggered by the Sée law instituting secular secondary schools for girls, which were designed to aid in Ferry's goal of wresting women from the clutches of the Church. But the Church was not the only group opposed to broadening women's education and teaching them "to reason," as the Republicans proposed. People on the left and the right, especially men, claimed that such education went against "nature" and feared that the "New Woman" would abandon her traditional roles as housewife and mother. Those who proposed using education to prepare women for psychological, political, social and economic autonomy were in a small but vocal minority. These battles were often fought out in novels, several of which Gale describes.

Hyman focuses her attention on a single novel, Rachilde's incendiary *Marquise de Sade*, exploring its relation to two prevailing and intertwined anxieties of the turn of the century in France: mounting militarism and declining population. The nationalist fervor of the period wished to counter the growing "German menace" by exhorting men to do their duty as soldiers and by making childbearing for women the equivalent of military service. At the same time, one of the foremost concerns of the anarchist movement in France was to combat these discourses of militarism and patriotic family-building by encouraging women to "desert" their patriotic duties of reproducing more children and join a "grève des ventres." In Rachilde's novel, the heroine's defiant rejection of maternity and revindication of her autonomy provide a counterpart to narratives of soldiers gone A.W.O.L., as she refuses the imperatives of sacrifice, suffering and utility to the nation. The text thus confers a political dimension onto the exorbitant focus on sexual deviance in Decadent literature.

Jay Lutz and James Lehning bring out the use of popular culture in the power struggles of the early Third Republic. Lutz describes the France of the Freycinet government in July 1886, when the Republic itself and its symbolic representations lacked stability and were at risk of becoming the prey of various political movements. Into this charged environment ripe for adventurism and plotting of all sorts, the young military leader Boulanger rode at the head of the military parade on July 14, 1886. That day he instituted the practice of reviewing the troops as part of the July

14th celebrations, and that day the popular singer Paulus sang to wild acclaim *En revenant de la revue*, the patriotic song that would contribute to the creation of the Boulangist movement and become its anthem. Not to be outdone on the field of musical battle, *chansonniers* who opposed Boulanger, such as Louis Marsolleau, Maurice Millot, and especially Jules Jouy, who could not forgive General Boulanger for his role in the massacre of the Communards in 1871, answered with a barrage of satirical anti-Boulangist songs. These popular political songs thus used Boulangism to create a social narrative and history.

Lehning's essay focuses on the role of political culture in the process of democratization, as European countries such as France moved from absolute monarchies to more democratic political systems. This study emphasizes the performative aspects of political culture, the ways in which, starting with the Revolution, French political culture used the theater as a part of the country's experience with the process of democratization and created a particularly French way in which this process occurred. Concentrating on the state and boulevard theater of the early Third Republic, Lehning examines the reviews written by Francisque Sarcey, the most influential drama critic of the period and an outspoken supporter of the Republic and its Opportunist leaders. In his writings about the strengths and shortcomings of the public in the theater, he provides a model of the larger tension of representative government, that between the republican desire for popular participation in politics and the fear of the consequences of that participation. Sarcey's criticism thus exemplified the fundamental characteristics of French political culture in the second half of the 19th century.

¹ The German government arrested Schnaebelé, police commissioner in a region of Alsace, on the charge of espionage on behalf of France, a *casus belli* in the eyes of the French Nationalists. War was avoided when Bismarck ordered his release, in response to a demand from the French minister of Foreign Affairs.

CHAPTER ONE

THE THESIS NOVEL AS WEAPON
IN THE EDUCATION WARS
OF THE THIRD REPUBLIC

GILBERT D. CHAITIN

The Novel of Education

“You would not exist without the republican homeland.” That, in fine, is the lesson the new universal educational system meant to implant in the future citizens of the Republic. “The secular Republic is destroying the basis of your faith, your salvation and your very life,” was the rejoinder of the Catholic schools. These messages were trumpeted more or less openly in the press and in political polemics. But from the 1880s until the First World War, it was in the schools that the determining battles were waged, both sides remaining convinced that education was the most effective means of influencing the minds of the people and thereby the shape of the nation (Ozouf 1982, 225). Because the republicans staked their claim to legitimacy on the alleged universality of secular morality and the democratic political system, the crux of the ideological disputes inevitably became the question of morals and the conflict between the universal and its opposites—the contingent, the concrete, the particular.

The impassioned reactions on all sides to the Ferry educational reforms demonstrated that, despite the logical implications of Kantian moral universalism, positivist determinism and the Catholic doctrine of original sin, at some level all parties to the dispute believed that human nature is infinitely malleable. By their actions, if not by their principles, they showed that the basic conviction governing the ideological battles in France was that education did not simply draw out the potential within the child, as the etymology of the word and the Germanic notion of *Bildung* imply, but that it was capable of shaping the thoughts, feelings, behavior

and even the fundamental sense of who one is; in short, that it did not just form but actually created subjectivity and identity.

The question of education had, therefore, the widest ramifications for almost every aspect of individual and collective life, from the fate and future of one's children to the most elemental sense of personal and national identity, from the possibilities for earning a living to the very survival of the homeland. With so much at stake, at least in the minds of the leaders and the public, it is not surprising that these controversies were capable of mobilizing people's deepest anxieties and hopes about themselves, their children and their country, nor that the desires and fears associated with education in its role in the destruction and construction of identity should find expression in the literature of the period. The novel form was especially well adapted to treat these issues by virtue of its capacity, noted by critics from Friedrich Schlegel to Mikhail Bakhtin, to combine various genres; in this case, they mingled the essayistic prose of ideological polemics with the dramatization of conflicts characteristic of fictional plots and the production of fantasies embedded in the imaginary characters and situations that represent the processes of identity-formation. One critic at the turn of the century gave this characterization of the peculiar ability of the novel to serve this function:

[Le roman] pénètre partout; on ne résiste pas à son attrait. Là où le traité de métaphysique, de théologie ou d'économie politique trouve la porte fermée, le roman s'insinue. Personne n'y fait attention: c'est un roman! On l'ouvre, on le ferme, on l'égare, on le retrouve, on s'y découvre meilleur et plus intelligent, on y rencontre ses haines et ses rêves, on se passionne, on est pris. Le roman désormais pense pour vous, agit pour vous, peine et se réjouit à votre place. Autant et plus que le journal, il est le maître des consciences qu'il flatte et qu'il séduit. Il force la conviction avec toute la violence du concret, il entraîne les âmes à leur insu, comme le fait la vie elle-même. (Johannet 1908, 514)

[(The novel) has gotten in everywhere; its attraction is irresistible. In places where treatises on metaphysics, theology, or political economy find the door closed, novels creep in. No one pays attention; it's [just] a novel! You open it, you close it, you misplace it, you find it again. In it you discover that you are better and more intelligent, you encounter your hatreds and your dreams, you grow passionate, you are caught. From then on novels think for you, act for you, suffer and rejoice in your place. As much and more than newspapers, they are the masters of the minds they flatter and seduce. They force conviction with all the violence of the concrete; they drag souls along without them realizing it, the way life itself does.]

Narrative thus became the field in which the human implications of the issues raised by the education wars were articulated, appraised and dramatized.

Because the Opportunist leaders of the Third Republic and their Catholic and monarchist enemies were united in the belief that whoever controlled the moral education of French youth would have the power to determine national identity and thereby the political future of the country, the many novels of education published during the Third Republic took on a heightened social and political significance lacking in those of previous years. The latter were generally predicated on the assumption that schoolroom teaching is largely irrelevant to the important aspects of life. Real education, they asserted, takes place outside the classroom: in the human relations, and even more often the inhuman relations, between parents or teachers and children, and among peers; in the struggle to find work or to make a successful career; in the need for love; in the striving to understand the greater questions of the meaning and purpose of life.

While some of these novels may have been written from a specific political point of view, they rarely were aimed to attack an entire governmental regime or to support a particular program of public education.¹ Once Gambetta made the reorganization of the educational system a condition for social and economic reform, in his Bordeaux speech of 26 June, 1871, education, and especially the primary schools, suddenly became relevant both to everyday life and to the fate of the nation in ways that lent themselves well to fictionalization. Novels and stories written during the Third Republic continued the oppositional tradition of their counterparts from the earlier years of the century, representing education from the standpoint of the victims and opponents of the status quo. The best among them take the form of the “novel of education” in the more comprehensive sense of the term, in which a young hero is brought to maturity through a series of lived experiences as well as through exposure to school instruction. But now the failings and abuses they discerned were explicitly portrayed as symptoms or causes of larger political and social evils, the educational methods they advocated were linked to public policy and goals.²

A Matter of Life and Death: Secular Education versus the Church Schools

During the Third Republic many of the most hard-fought battles in the culture wars between the republicans and their enemies were waged in the field of literature, especially in the genre of the so-called “thesis novel”

(*roman à thèse*). Then as now, writers and critics have maintained that such novels, with their heavy ideological burden, form an authoritarian genre, due to the intrusion of universalizing ideological discourse into the particularity of narrative, due to the distortion of plot and character in order to prove the thesis, and, above all, due to the dominance of the narrative voice which, by attaching a specific meaning to every event in the story, robs the reader of the freedom to interpret the latter for herself. Recent theory asserts, conversely, that resistant fictional texts are those that undermine standard narrative techniques and avoid authorial explanatory commentary. The one serious study of the genre in recent years, Susan Suleiman's excellent *Authoritarian Fictions*, explicitly attributes the authoritarian quality of the thesis novels she studies to the dominance of the universality of the meaning asserted by the narrative voice over the particularity of the story recounted: "The interpretation is "superior" to the story, as the general is to the particular, the universal to the singular, or truth to its manifestation" (Suleiman 1983, 30). The politically loaded conflict Suleiman sees between the universal and the particular in literature thus parallels the clash Ferry and Benda put forward as the foundation of the culture wars between democracy and its adversaries; but for her, as for so many scholars of the late twentieth century (see Chaitin 1999), the angels are on the side of the particular rather than the universal.

One might expect, therefore, that in texts favoring the republic, the universality of the idea would dominate the particularity of the story, whereas those opposed would favor narrative over ideology. In fact, however, as my examination in this essay of two exemplary novels of education suggests, no such neat dichotomy is to be found. Culture wars are just as messy as other massive armed conflicts. Whereas Suleiman's assessment tries to establish a fixed relationship between general and particular, idea and story, narrative form and political valence, the history of the genre shows that each of these relations is independent of the others. Each of the two texts I study—*Histoire d'un sous-maître* (1871) [*The Alsatian Schoolmaster*] by Émile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian (commonly referred to as Erckmann-Chatrion, due to their lengthy collaboration), and *L'enfant* (1878) [*The Child*] by Jules Vallès—attacks authoritarianism, but by deploying vastly different narrative techniques.

Histoire d'un sous-maître was published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1871, during the height of the polemical campaigns over education conducted in the press while the future of the Republic was still in doubt. *Sous-maître* is among the first works of fiction (after Julien's preceptors in *Le rouge et le noir* (1830) and Eugène Sue's *Martin l'enfant*

trouvé (1846) with its sympathetic portrait of the poacher Claude Gérard in his previous career as a village *instituteur*) to paint the schoolteacher in serious terms, making him or her a positive character rather than a cruel tyrant (Alexandre Dumas's *Ange Pitou*, 1851), an inept failure (Champfleury's *Les souffrances du professeur Delteil*, 1857), or a calculating egotist (Mme Héloüin in Octave Feuillet's *Roman d'un jeune homme pauvre*, 1859). The co-authors were staunch republicans who, as long-time enemies of the Empire, were eager to support Gambetta and Ferry in their efforts to establish the Republic of the Republicans against the Bonapartists and monarchists vying for power at the time.³

The tale uses the same narrative strategy that had already made Erckmann-Chatrian two of the most successful writers of the Second Empire and would soon make them even more widely read in the Third Republic: the story is told in simple, everyday language that mimics oral narration, by a first-person narrator who belongs to the people, speaks in an intimate, conversational tone and uses the familiar “*tu*” to his imagined addressee, a member of the same popular social classes as the potential readers to whom the narrative is addressed—peasants, artisans, employees and small shop-owners (Roux 1989, 109). Like the narrator-heroes of the earlier *Romans nationaux et populaires*, Jean-Baptiste Renaud, the schoolmaster of the title, looks back on his youthful experiences as a novice schoolteacher during the Restoration from the superior vantage point of his old age with its accumulated experience and practical wisdom. The adoption of this narrator allows the authors to explain in plain, univocal language the wider significance of the character's experiences for the people and for the nation as a whole, while linking the events of previous regimes—the time narrated—to current debates and concerns—the time of the narration. Indeed, he is eager to play the role of teacher to his would-be listeners and does not hesitate to present his tale as an illustration of a larger lesson.

Through the process of his own education, which includes his experiences as an apprentice teacher and his indoctrination into the ideas of Rousseau at the hands of the local pharmacist, Regoine, Jean-Baptiste has learned the function and consequent importance of schoolteachers for the nation. His theory allows him to pinpoint the dangers that arise from a faulty educational system, to discern the forces that support such a system, and to detect the profit they gain from it.

La grande masse suit ses habitudes comme un troupeau, et c'est pour cela que l'éducation fait non seulement les individus, mais les nations tout entières; c'est pour cela que le choix des instituteurs et des enseignants est si grave; c'est pour cela que ceux qui veulent dominer les peuples et vivre