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To cite this article: Cornelia Ruhe (31 May 2024): Between 'transmission' and usurpation: (far-)right remapping of European literature, Modern & Contemporary France, DOI: [10.1080/09639489.2024.2345914](https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2024.2345914)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2024.2345914>



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Published online: 31 May 2024.



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## Between 'transmission' and usurpation: (far-)right remapping of European literature

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### ABSTRACT

For the French Nouvelle Droite, literature plays an important role as a means to propagate questions of identity and the transmission of tradition. Literature is seen as a mirror not only of society but also, more specifically, of politics. If 'literary politics is [...] currently the central field of intervention of the New Right think tanks', then it is high time to gain an understanding of it. Through the analysis of an anthology published by right-wing editors, I elicit the idea of Europe and Europeans it seeks to propagate and reveal the strategies of subtle and deliberate confusion that it employs in order to include far-right authors in a universally accepted literary canon.

### RÉSUMÉ

Pour la Nouvelle Droite française, la littérature joue un rôle important en tant que moyen de propagation des questions d'identité et de transmission de la tradition. La littérature est considérée comme un miroir non seulement de la société mais aussi, plus spécifiquement, de la politique. Si 'la politique littéraire est [...] actuellement le champ d'intervention central des think tanks de la Nouvelle Droite', il est grand temps de s'en faire une idée plus approfondie. A travers l'analyse d'une anthologie publiée par des éditeurs de droite, je dévoile l'idée de l'Europe et des Européens que l'anthologie cherche à propager et révèle les stratégies de confusion subtile et délibérée qu'elle emploie afin d'inclure les auteurs d'extrême droite dans un canon littéraire universellement accepté.

When reading the headlines about book bans in the USA, about how books like Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* are not only banned from libraries but also removed from school curricula by right-wing circles (cf. Friedman and Farid Johnson 2022; Lock 2022; Sarappo 2022; 'School Board in Tennessee' 2022), one could get the impression that their relationship to literature is very distant and above all critical. A little further right, in what has been termed the *Nouvelle Droite* in France or the *Neue Rechte* in Germany, however, literature plays an often underestimated role. In France, the 'affaire Richard Millet' (cf. Achille 2018; Ballot 2013; Ernaux 2012; Sapiro 2018) was highly mediatised in 2012, the year in which the then member of Gallimard's prestigious 'comité de lecture'

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and so-called Kingmaker of two much talked about Prix Goncourt novels (Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* in 2006 and Alexis Jenni's *L'Art français de la guerre* in 2011) published an *Éloge littéraire d'Anders Breivik*, full of admiration for the Norwegian extremist and alleged murderer of 77 people. In a similar vein, in Germany the case of Monika Maron was much discussed, a bestselling author with whom her long-standing publisher, S. Fischer, terminated co-operation after she had published a volume of essays with a publishing house with far-right tendencies (cf. Hoffmann 2021, 220–227).<sup>1</sup> While these cases may have been prominent enough to lead to conspicuous discussions about far-right convictions in literary circles, the appropriation or even usurpation of literature for the political purposes of the far right often takes place in a more moderate tone and in subtler disguises—although they may reach a much larger audience that is, moreover, less well protected against ideological appropriation.

In a country that holds literature in such high esteem as France, it is hardly surprising that it becomes a central stake in questions of identity and the transmission of tradition (cf. Auclerc et al. 2019, 15–16; Sapiro 2018). More and more, literature moves to the centre of 'metapolitical' endeavours: in his analysis of the German New Right's literary policy, Torsten Hoffmann pointed out that, on the one hand, 'no other political current presently takes literature as seriously as the New Right' but that, on the other hand, their 'interventions in cultural politics had obviously taken place largely below the radar of the literary critics and of an academic audience' (2021, 226, my translation; cf. also Hoffman and Kempke 2022; Meurer 2023). His diagnosis for the German-speaking context also applies to the context of the French *Nouvelle Droite*, as has been noted by Étienne Achille in 2018: 'critical interest in the literary dimension of neo-reactionary discourse remains very superficial' (Achille 2018, 370, my translation). The hesitation in dealing with right-wing texts in literary studies is partly due to the fear of legitimising their politically problematic content through scholarly treatment. However, this risks overlooking the fact that the New Right is not merely seeking to propagate its content through literary texts, but rather usurping the mediation and interpretation of (canonical) literature in order to make a mindset acceptable that is often only recognisable as right-wing at second glance (cf. Wortmann 2023). The educational character of the *Nouvelle Droite's* literary programme now includes all ages: in recent years, the French *Nouvelle Droite* has published anthologies not only for adults (cf. de Benoist and Travers 2020, 2021), but also, with publications by Valérie d'Aubigny and Anne-Laure Blanc, for children (cf. D'Aubigny and Blanc 2018) and adolescents (cf. Blanc 2013). Through the analysis of one of these anthologies, this article aims to shed light on what seems to be a new field of action of the *Nouvelle Droite*: the mediation of literature aimed at children, adolescents and their educators through publications that establish the 'right' canon, using strategies of subtle and deliberate confusion in order to include far-right authors in a universally accepted literary canon and, thus, to mainstream and to normalise their ideas.

## The *Nouvelle Droite*

The *Nouvelle Droite*, a movement born 'in January 1968, although it was not then known by that name' (François 2021, 7, my translation), has been working since then at the normalisation of its chosen themes within the social and political sphere, in which literature traditionally plays a central role in France. Based on a solid French tradition of

far-right thinking going back more than a century, the movement's 'objective is to find new intellectual paradigms to legitimise the anti-egalitarian theses of the far right' (Lecœur 2007, 77, my translation).<sup>2</sup>

Its founding nucleus is the GRECE (Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne, since 1968), a right-wing think tank with the help of which one of its initiators, Alain de Benoist, has sought to establish a right counterbalance for an intellectual field that he saw as dominated by leftist ideas. Instead of direct political action, de Benoist and GRECE focused on 'ideological hegemony [...] as] a precondition for political victory' (Camus 2019, 74). In recent years, with the creation of the Institut Iliade pour la longue mémoire européenne, the Groupement has institutionalised its range of activities, thereby also lending them a new visibility. The Institut Iliade was founded in 2014 and is dedicated to the memory of the ex-OAS Dominique Venner, himself a founding member of GRECE.<sup>3</sup> The *Nouvelle Droite's* sharp criticism of French educational institutions that are, in the words of the right-wing author Bruno de Cessole, 'responsible for the impoverishment of the language [...] through the decommissioning of the classical humanities' (Giroux and de Cessole 2016, my translation),<sup>4</sup> led the institute to open its own 'training paths'. A branch is dedicated to the 'Formation jeune' (for those between 18 and 23),<sup>5</sup> but at its very heart is 'L'école des cadres du Réveil européen' ('the leadership school of European awakening'). It is organised in 'promotions', following the model of the prestigious French Grandes Écoles, and providing the 'trainees [...] from all provinces and other European countries'<sup>6</sup> who have enrolled in these cohorts with a genuine ideological formation promoted with the slogan 'Standing tall in a world in ruins'.<sup>7</sup> Its model seems to be the German neo-right Institut für Staatspolitik, 'an intellectual breeding ground for cadres' (Hoffmann 2021, 229, my translation), dedicated to 'new-right educational work in the form of bi-annual academies, workshops and publications' (Hoffmann 2021, 228, my translation). In France, the activities of GRECE and the Institut Iliade are supported and promoted to a larger public through publications such as *Nouvelle École* (since 1968), *Éléments* (since 1973) and *Krisis* (since 1988).

Just as the 'promotions' of the Grandes Écoles, that were, for example in the case of the former École Nationale d'Administration (ENA), traditionally named after authors, personalities, or values,<sup>8</sup> the Institut Iliade chooses namesakes for its new cohorts three times a year. In doing so, it practises what Ellen Salvi calls 'confusionism' (2016, 124), a deliberate confusion that consists in mixing ideologically unimpeachable authors and personalities such as Marcus Aurelius (2018), Dante (2022), Homer (2022) or Leonardo da Vinci (2022) with (far) right figures such as Dominique Venner (2016), Ernst Jünger (2017) or Jean Raspail (2021). To the untrained eye, it is not necessarily clear which political side the name-givers belong to<sup>9</sup>; the emulation of the practice of elite universities furthermore suggests the legitimacy of the Institute's 'promotions'.

Moreover, the names given to the different cohorts show yet again the prominent role assigned to literature within the *Nouvelle Droite*. Literature is seen as a mirror not only of society but also, more specifically, of politics, as the right-wing author Bruno de Cessole points out: 'France's political decline is inseparable from its literary decline' (Giroux and Cessole 2016). If this is the case, then a renewed interest in and mastery of literature—the right kind of literature, pun intended—logically leads to a potential takeover of political power. If Hoffmann is right in suggesting that 'literary politics is [...] currently the New

Right think tanks' central field of intervention' (Hoffmann 2021, 226, my translation), then it is high time to gain an understanding of it.

## An Indo-European literary canon

In 2020 and 2021, the Éditions du Rocher published two volumes aimed at the 'jeune européen', the 'young European': *La Bibliothèque du jeune Européen. 200 essais pour apprendre à penser* (de Benoist and Travers 2020) and *La Bibliothèque littéraire du jeune européen. 400 œuvres de fiction essentielles* (de Benoist and Travers 2021). The volumes were edited by Alain de Benoist, 'leader of the *Nouvelle Droite*' (Blin 2019, my translation), and Guillaume Travers. The 'young Europeans' in the titles are explicit references to Pierre Drieu la Rochelle's essay *Le jeune européen* (1927), which the editors do not fail to mention in the introduction of the first volume (cf. de Benoist and Travers 2020, 7). While both editors are part of the French New Right's cultural, or to use the more adequate term, 'metapolitical' project, Alain de Benoist is a more prominent figure in this context. He

is considered the main thinker of the so-called French New Right. [...] He is the editor of the annual publication *Nouvelle école* [...] and the editorial writer for the monthly magazine *Éléments*, the two flagship publications of the French New Right. He is also the director of a quarterly publication, *Krisis*. (Camus 2019, 74)

Beginning in the 1980, de Benoist 'is looking for respectability' (Keucheyan 2017, 135), which he has done by trying to 'normalize' not only his positions—in tone more than in content—but most importantly by 'persuading contributors from the other side of the spectrum to contribute articles to *Krisis*' (Camus 2019, 85). With his activities, he is actively contributing to the 'destruction of the dams that separate the far-right from the right', thus aiming at a 'political confusion' (Keucheyan 2017, 129) that will ultimately allow these ideas to seep into the more mainstream and centre-right public discourse that had condemned them earlier. Thus, for those previously acquainted with the French far-right, de Benoist's name might be a sufficient indicator of the volume's content, but even in France there may be readers for whom his name does not immediately produce (meta)political associations.

In both volumes, literature in its broadest sense—incorporating essays and even some graphic novels—is not only considered 'essential', but also understood as a means to 'learn to think', as the subtitle specifies. The *Nouvelle Droite* in general and the two editors in particular see themselves as the self-appointed guardians of 'a literary temple' (Salvi 2016, 116), a temple that they believe is in danger of collapsing.<sup>10</sup>

In their introduction to *La Bibliothèque littéraire du jeune Européen*, on which my comments will centre, the editors state that their aim is to 'contribute to the transmission of the European cultural heritage and to the development of a specifically European aesthetic sensitivity' (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 9, all citations from this volume my translation). What seems ideologically innocuous at first glance appears in a different light when de Benoist and Travers affirm that (European) culture was at risk since a 'banishment of culture' was spreading under the term of 'cancel culture' (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 9). Moreover, they lament 'a much deeper and more insidious process of cultural erasure' preceding even the so-called 'cancel culture', due to 'propaganda through media and commerce' (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 9). A 'slow forgetting of the past' and of classical languages such as Latin and Greek was, in their opinion, complemented by

a colonisation of the ‘mental imaginary of Europeans’ by ‘productions from other regions of the world’ (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 9). According to their arguments, ‘a cultural revival’ through the ‘reappropriation of their literary and artistic heritage’ is direly needed (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 9). The volume is aimed at nothing less than ‘the transmission of a culture common to all Europeans and the fight against the course of a world that we do not want’, as the reviewer Sixtine Chatelus, member of the Institut Iliade, states (Chatelus n.d.). All of these assumptions suggest that there is such a nearly forgotten ‘culture common to all Europeans’ and that the anthology is taking on the task of saving it from oblivion and finally placing it in the right light. However, what Benoist’ and Travers’ project rather does is to invent this very specific version of a ‘common culture’, whose expressly right-wing character is not made explicit but has to be located between the lines. In presenting it, they cleverly rely on a cultural pessimism that has established itself even in educated circles not suspected of right-wing sympathies and use it to make their version of a ‘European culture’ easier to absorb (cf. Wortmann 2023, 88).

The choice of texts is therefore worth considering closely: the editors explain in their introduction that only authors already dead and buried were included, which fits their assumption that a) contemporary literature is not worthy of the name ‘literature’, b) confirms the status of (real) literature as endangered by the above-cited ‘forgetting of the past’—it needs to be saved through publications such as these. Moreover, c) being dead, these authors can no longer protest against their ideological appropriation for the anthology. Furthermore, the authors and texts included must be accessible in French. It also turns out that the ‘young Europeans’ at whom the manuals are aimed are to be nourished intellectually only with texts from fellow Europeans or from ‘Europeans who have crossed the Atlantic’—a somewhat less straightforward attribution that I will circle back to (Travers n.d.). While Benoist and Travers point out that these decisions excluded authors otherwise dear to them such as Yukio Mishima, it is made very clear that intrusions from regions of the world without any ‘importance for the cultural history of Europe’ are unwanted (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 10). As these exclusions are not made explicit, it is between the lines that one must look for the systematics conditioning them.

The promised 400 literary texts turn out to be 418 exactly, which is oddly consistent with the fact that only eighteen women authors were included—or perhaps added at a later stage, given that the introduction also speaks of only ‘four hundred texts’ (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 10). One could conclude from this very disproportionate ratio—a mere four per cent—that female authors were either not deemed suitable to contribute to the education of the ‘young European’ or that, with these few exceptions, their literature was not considered worthy of inclusion in this canon. One might deduce that this is no more a coincidence than the exclusive masculine form ‘jeune Européen’ in the title and throughout the introduction—the ‘young European’ the volume is destined at is male and to be educated through the reading of literature by (mostly) fellow men.

The choice of authors and texts mostly opts for canonical authors, although not always for their most well-known text, a strategy that will be commented upon later. In a similar way to Günter Scholdt’s parallel project for the German *Neue Rechte*, his *Literarische Musterung. Warum wir Kohlhaas, Don Quijote und andere Klassiker neu lesen müssen* (2017), Benoist and Travers ‘follow a canon that could be labelled “educated middle-class”, as Wortmann termed it (2023, 88). With 210 authors writing in French there is, as the editors Alain de Benoist and Guillaume

Travers state in the introduction, 'a relative over-representation of Francophone authors' (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 10). The choice of words is interesting in light of the fact that the interpretation of the term 'Francophonie' seems to be rather narrow in the volume: while it does include authors from the Swiss Romandie or Belgium, authors from former colonies or even the Overseas regions and departments of France are conspicuous by their absence, however famous they may be. The Francophonie is thus limited to a 'Francophonie du Nord'. No author of colour is incorporated in the anthology, with one significant exception that confirms the rule: the inclusion of Alexandre Dumas père, who is also the only author of colour to be included in the prestigious Collection de la Pléiade of the Éditions Gallimard. Moreover, in recent years, he has been subjected to a rather peculiar form of whitewashing that makes it safe to include him even in this anthology: in Safy Nebbou's film *L'autre Dumas* (2010), he is played by the (white) actor Gérard Depardieu. The vast majority of the literature with which the 'young European' is to be intellectually nourished is thus written by dead white men who are, moreover, European at least in spirit.

After even closer scrutiny, the idea of a European literary canon behind the volume becomes apparent: second to the French literature is the British with 48 texts, closely followed by 38 German texts and US-American literature with 28 mentions (given the anti-Americanism of the *Nouvelle Droite*, this is remarkable), supported by significant additions from Italian (22) and Russian literature (17). Greek and Roman classics have their part to play (ten mentions), the contributions of Belgian (six) Spanish (five), Irish or Romanian authors (four each) range far behind, as do those from Denmark, Norway, Austria and Switzerland (three each). Poland, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Sweden, Finland and Iceland are minimally represented, with one or two mentions each. Only five texts from non-European literatures appear in the selection: the *Ficciones* by Jorge Luis Borges and *Martín Fierro* by José Hernández from Argentina, *2666* by the Chilean Roberto Bolaño, *Light on a Dark Horse* by the South-African writer Roy Campbell and the *Mahabharata* from India. Together with the US-American authors, these seem to belong to the group of 'Europeans who have crossed the Atlantic' mentioned by Travers. With regard to the concrete selection of texts, the designation seems odd, as, for one thing, neither South Africa nor India are across the Atlantic and, for another, quite a few of the US-American authors would probably take offence at being designated as somehow displaced 'Europeans'. The grouping thus seems to follow other criteria, criteria that at the same time exclude authors such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi or Assia Djebar, but also Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez or Octavio Paz—neither black nor métis authors or those coming from countries with strong indigenous populations are considered 'European' enough to be included, however influential their work may have been.

The inclusion of an Ancient Indian text, of a White South African author (who is said to have been flirting with fascism), of two authors from Argentina, which indeed tends to perceive itself as 'a nation of transplanted white Europeans' (a notion that has been contested in recent years) (Goñi 2021),<sup>11</sup> of a White Chilean author who spent most of his life in Spain and whose monumental novel revolves around a (fictional) German author and, moreover, the repeated appearance of the term 'indo-européen' (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 12, 14, 78, 160, 294, 611) and, just once, 'indo-aryens' (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 14)—all of this implies that the anthology locates its borders at a concept dear to



the New Right Movements: Indo-Europe and the Indo-Europeans. Stéphane François explains:

The Indo-European question has fascinated the Western extreme right since the post-war period. The different branches of the extreme right did not intend to abandon this question despite the discredit and suspicion that these studies suffered following the advent of Nazi Germany and their racial studies. (François 2021, 165)

The designation 'jeune Européen' thus aims in two directions: those who are to be educated by reading the volume are, specifically, young (Indo-)Europeans. While it doesn't matter whether they really are young—the reader must be young in spirit rather than in age' (de Benoist and Travers 2020, 9, my translation), their belonging to Europe is not questioned. They are not supposed to read World Literature, which would be an obvious choice for an anthology with a broad focus. Their literary formation is to be very focussed, relying on a choice of authors that covers the territory of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) that goes beyond the concept of any one nation, but still gives a very clear idea of the supranational community it seeks to implant in readers' minds: covering the whole of Europe with an emphasis on the Northern European countries and stretching as far as India, the anthology seems to cover literarily the territory the *Nouvelle Droite* claims for what they term the 'Indo-Europeans' (cf. François 2021, 165ff). Stéphane François explains that this term, which is at the centre of the New Right's 'racial anthropology' (2011, 137, my translation), is a 'reactivation of the "Aryan myth"' (François 2011, 143, cf. 2014, 21ff). It appears, as Tamir Bar-On states, that, with the *Nouvelle Droite*, certain terms function as "'code words", such as "Indo-European" (instead of Aryan), "European culture" (instead of white) and "Judeo-Christian tradition" (instead of Jews)' (Bar-On 2016, 120).

### Strategies of deliberate confusion

At first glance, it can be maintained that the volume mostly follows a traditional and rather narrow idea of what is often called the 'Western canon', thus leading to an anthology that would please the conservative mind, while others might find the canon it advances incomplete (and, in other places, a little too complete). While amply speaking for an outdated conception of 'the canon', the choice of (most) texts is, however, not in itself indicative of far-right thought. The interspersing of undoubtedly far-right authors among those belonging to a more classical canon is subtle enough not to be immediately obvious and aims to include them into the mainstream most of the other authors belong to. It is, however, de Benoist's and Travers's treatment of the included authors and texts that gives away their intention.

Comparing the volume to Alain de Benoist's Goncourt-winning anthology *Vu de droite* from 1978 (re-issued in 2001), whose title already amply characterises the content or to the more recent *Le Défilé des réfractaires. Portraits de quelques irréguliers de la littérature française* by Bruno de Cessole from 2011 ('The parade of the unruly'), one cannot fail to notice that the tone of *La Bibliothèque littéraire du jeune Européen* is much more restrained. De Cessole's volume also aims at the propagation of literature, but its very subtitle declares that the choice will be anything but objective—it will be about 'some irregulars of French literature'. Early in the introduction, he proposes that 'maybe good



literature is always right-wing' (de Cessole 2011, 19, all citations from this volume my translation) and thereby clearly positions not only himself but also the authors he is including, sometimes probably against their own self-perception. His characterisation goes on to distinguish them from what he calls the 'progressive and humanitarian vulgate':

It's true: a good many of the refractory people reviewed in the following pages have not distinguished themselves in the defence of human rights, the fight against discrimination, the ostracization of alcoholics and smokers, the purging of myths and legends, the fight for parity, and other valiant health crusades. (de Cessole 2011, 18)

There is no attempt to hide whose brainchild he is, and this assessment is strengthened by his lengthy rant against women authors—of the 55 included in the volume, only two are women, because the others were either not 'refractory' enough or, like Christine Angot and Virginie Despentes, 'they have less to do with literature than with the "people" or "applied sexology" sections in women's magazines' (de Cessole 2011, 115–116).

It is the authors who are at the centre of attention of de Cessole's volume, turning Maurice Barrès into 'the nightingale of nationalism' or Jean Raspail into a 'Don Quijote of lost causes'. The eponymous chapters then go on to describe them and their trajectory in the style of the cult of genius, a genius that encompasses their literary as well as political or ideological positions. However, under its supposedly unambiguous title, this volume also appropriates authors who are not suspected of being politically right-wing or even particularly conservative, such as Patrick Modiano, Raymond Queneau or Jean-Paul Sartre, but whom de Cessole deems 'irregular' or 'unruly' enough to be included. The conclusion that the reader is supposed to draw after his reading of the volume is very similar to the one to be reached after the completion of Günter Scholdt's *Literarische Musterung*: it suggests that the real or imagined position of 'irregular', of outsider, in which even some literary classics—such as Louis Aragon, Paul Claudel, Milan Kundera, Arthur Rimbaud or Stendhal, in the case of de Cessole's volume—were placed, 'ennobles [...] the outsider-position of the New Right in the present' (Wortmann 2023, 90)—and of their favourite authors such as Robert Brasillach, Léon Daudet, Charles Maurras or Jean Raspail.

The strategies employed by Benoist and Travers are subtle in comparison: the title 'Bibliothèque' already emphasises that it is the texts that are to be at the centre of the volume. Each entry covers about two pages and is divided into three sections—'L'Auteur', 'Résumé', 'Analyse', accompanied by a brief bibliography—it follows textbook standards. While the articles focusing on authors or texts whose canonical status is undisputed are less conspicuous, they are still worth a closer look: in *Le Cid*, for example, Pierre Corneille 'succeeds in updating, transmitting, and preserving a philosophical tradition that provides a timeless line of conduct [...]. His protagonists of varying ages bear witness to the constancy that the value of honour must have, across time and social classes' (de Benoist and Travers 2021, 176–177)—an assessment that perhaps not all readers or scholars will share. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is best characterised, according to the article's author Grégoire Gambier, with a citation by fellow GRECE-member Jean Mabire:

Jean Mabire puts it very well: 'All the conflicts Faulkner describes are directly related to heredity. Alliances, bastardy, incest, rape and lynching all take place in a world insidiously

dominated by relations between whites and blacks. For both, the eventual interbreeding [*métissage*] is the main problem. [. . .]. (Gambier, in de Benoist and Travers 2021, 240)

Within this framework of readings that can at least be called idiosyncratic, the article thus elicits statements from the text which most Faulkner scholars would probably deem problematic. Compared to Scholdt's counterpart for the German context, there seems to be less 'blurring of boundaries between object and meta level' (Wortmann 2023, 92): the French authors at least of these articles cleverly pretend to be talking about the texts' content, while in fact concentrating on those sometimes more than marginal aspects that can be ideologically appropriated. While Torsten Hoffmann argues for the German context that 'the plea combines aesthetic and ideological arguments in a symptomatic way' (Hoffmann 2021, 230, my translation), in the French example, most of the time, ideology retains the upper hand.

Another tactic consists in interspersing commentaries in otherwise rather inconspicuous articles. Thus, in an article on *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant* by Jules Verne, one reads:

Jules Verne's novels pay tribute to those Europeans who set out to explore Africa, the southern islands or the Arctic lands for the glory of their own country and remind us how many paid with their lives for their daring explorations. While it is no longer fashionable to recall the martyrdom of the many officers, sailors and doctors who perished in the heart of a forest or desert, Verne's time was still marked by the discovery of ritual cannibalism. (Blanc, in de Benoist and Travers 2021, 684–685)

This open apology for colonialism is further exacerbated by the remark that statements like these were 'no longer fashionable', thus reducing the criticism of colonial practice to a mere 'fashion'. If 'Africa, the southern islands or the Arctic lands' had to be 'explored', this suggests that before the advent of 'those Europeans', they were unpopulated and empty, an assumption Verne's novel does not sustain. In articles like this one, the author leaves the 'object level' of text criticism to allow for undisguised expressions not only of far-right convictions but also, by mentioning 'ritual cannibalism', of a popular justification for European cultural supremacy.

The deliberate confusion of these articles consists in interspersing arguments of unbridled ideological content with rather harmless comments on the texts, thus making it difficult to distinguish one from the other, especially for untrained readers.

An analogous strategy is employed to dissimulate less canonical but more overtly right-wing authors amidst the mass of their uncontested colleagues. Consequently, Guillaume Apollinaire, Jane Austen, Honoré de Balzac, Albert Camus and Miguel de Cervantes find themselves in the company of Robert Brasillach, Léon Daudet and Jean Raspail. The alphabetical order puts them all on the same level and the undisputed literary reputation enjoyed by the former authors suggests that the latter must be granted the same legitimacy.

Two further strategies are used to blur the ideological positions: The first strategy can best be illustrated through the article on Robert Brasillach and his novel *Les sept couleurs*: Brasillach, a member of the extreme right *Action Française*, was sentenced to death for collaborating with the Germans during the Nazi Occupation of France. De Gaulle refused to pardon him, although many authors, among them Albert Camus, Jean Cocteau, and Paul Valéry, interceded on his behalf; he was executed in February 1945. In the section

'L'auteur' of the article authored by Yoann Chaumeil, Brasillach's collaborationist activities are mentioned, but somehow drowned out in a sentence full of commendation. After a brief survey of his childhood and youth, Chaumeil states: 'He was still passionate about high politics, as opposed to party politics; this led our brilliant Hellenist to a career as a journalist committed [*journaliste engagé*] to collaboration' (Chaumeil, in de Benoist and Travers 2021, 107–108). 'Passionate', 'brilliant' (in the supposedly neglected classical humanities), 'committed'—after all this high praise, the collaboration, especially as it is linked with commitment, risks going unnoticed—or, rather, the intention of the sentence might be to place collaboration on the same level as the other, clearly positive, qualities and achievements in this ranking.

The choice of *Les sept couleurs* as a text by Brasillach is also interesting: Chaumeil opted to include not his best-known novel in the anthology—that would have been *Comme le temps passe ...* (1937)—but the novel which 'marks a turning point in his work, as it introduces the world of fascism' (Ouellet 2000, 33). The 'Résumé' states that the protagonist Patrick, 'fascist at heart', 'feels enthusiastic about fascist Italy which he visits and Nazi Germany where he chooses to work' (Chaumeil, in de Benoist and Travers 2021, 107), all of which conforms to the plot of the novel. No critical standpoint is taken; the emphasis is on the protagonist's youth and his quest for adventure on every level. The 'Analyse' then goes on to give details about the plot, i.e. about 'the galvanising, almost liturgical force' emanating from the 'ceremonies of the Third Reich [*Troisième Reich*]' (Chaumeil, in de Benoist and Travers 2021, 108).<sup>12</sup> Yet again, this positive description of the Nazi ceremonies nearly covers the fact that they are taking place in Nazi Germany, just as in 'fascist Italy, everybody seemed to laugh and have fun' (Chaumeil, in de Benoist and Travers 2021, 108). The shift from Brasillach's best-known text to one that is less well-known, but thematically closer to subjects dear to the New Right, is unusually open for an anthology that otherwise tries to avoid too easily graspable associations with fascism.

The second strategy can be seen as illustrating just that: where authors are included whose interest for the *Nouvelle Droite* seems all too obvious, the editors choose to sidestep in their choice of a work: Arthur de Gobineau is included, but not with the expected *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, but with his novel *Les Pléiades*, ostensibly to value his literary qualities over those of the trailblazer of racial ideology. However, his famous *Essai* is mentioned in the very first sentence on the author and is thus maybe more present than the amorous adventures of the novel's protagonists.

The same tactic applies for Jean Raspail, whose *Camp des Saints* is not included: a reference work for the New Right, because it invents an 'invasion' of Europe by immigrants from the 'Third World' (cf. Stan 2024). Instead, he is represented with *Qui se souvient des hommes ...* But, yet again, his best-known novel *Camp des Saints* is called a 'dystopian, but no less prophetic novel' and mentioned in the very first paragraph of the article, and, for those who have still not noticed it, again in the last part of the 'Analyse' of his later novel: 'This writer [...] who has been wrongly reduced to his resounding *Camp des saints* and a few definitive, cookie-cutter formulas about his indefatigable royalism, will forever be remembered as the memoirist of the last misunderstood members of Progress and modernity' (Leucate, in de Benoist and Travers 2021, 558–559).

The title of the anthology suggests that it is aimed at a readership that has been spoiled by 'propaganda through the media and commerce' and that is to be brought to literature through this volume. For a previously uninformed readership, putting uncontestedly

canonical authors such as Cervantes, Corneille, Proust, Rilke or Goethe on the same level as Gobineau, Drieu de La Rochelle, Maurice Barrès or Robert Brasillach will suggest the same legitimacy for both groups. The interspersion of ideological remarks and valuations, their clever, albeit not always very subtle, rhetorical dissimulation threatens to insinuate not only the authors themselves but also the far right positions their texts convey, into the minds of a large, young, and potentially unsuspecting public.

A remark as to the reception of the anthology—published in 2020 for the *Bibliothèque* and in 2021 for the *Bibliothèque littéraire*, both volumes seem to have been ignored by the press; apart from a very positive article on the site of the Institut Iliade by Sixtine Chatelus, neither of the volumes seems to have been reviewed. However, this does not seem to have prevented them from selling well: according to Edistat, the French ‘statistiques de l’édition’ gathering the sales figures, 1,961 copies of the first have been sold and 829 of the second (by 7 January 2024, respectively; source: Edistat). Compared to Dominique Viart’s *Anthologie de la littérature française contemporaine française* (2013), very well received by the French press and rightly praised, but which has sold only 459 copies in nearly ten years (by 7 January 2024, source: Edistat), one would be tempted to call Benoist’s and Travers’ anthologies bestsellers. They are available, respectively, in nine and three university libraries throughout France (cf. [www.ccf.fr/bnf.fr](http://www.ccf.fr/bnf.fr), consulted 16 January 2024). Under the radar of scholarly or journalistic attention, both volumes seem to have achieved their goal of reaching a wider public.

### **Cosmopolitans, nationalists, and Nordomania**

Although the geographical space covered by what the *Nouvelle Droite* see as the common ancestors of white Europeans is large, from India and Persia to the Scandinavian countries, a term frequently appearing in the *Bibliothèque*’s articles is ‘Nord’ (cf. de Benoist and Travers 2021, *passim*) or ‘nordique’ (cf. de Benoist and Travers 2021, 13, 15, 17, 294, 384 twice, 437, 608, 631, 676). As has been shown, this is consistent with the predominance of texts from Northern or at least Central European countries. However, for a group so keen on the correct ‘transmission’ of traditions, of passing on cultural information, the matter-of-fact way in which the New Right’s self-designation as ‘Nordic’ is left unquestioned seems to be historically flawed, as I will show in the following (cf. Ruhe 2012, 96ff, 2022).

The New Right’s use of the term ‘Nordic’ as valorising and belonging to the core of what they believe to be ‘Europe’—a Europe now defined by common linguistic roots that supposedly laid the foundation for a shared cultural background—echoes a lively discussion that was conducted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in French journals, albeit from the opposite standpoint: today, the affirmation of a common ‘Nordic’ heritage mostly appears as a stronghold for the extreme Right against their perception of the ‘Great Replacement’ through migrants from the Global South. More than a century earlier, however, French nationalists—amongst them some of the *Nouvelle Droite*’s most cherished authors and role models—felt threatened by influences from countries that were then called Northern. At the time, the distinction between ‘nationalism’, ‘conservatism’ and far-right thought was not yet so developed—however, positions like those Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès defended certainly stood out at the time.

Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, geographical orientation seemed to be more individual than fixed: according to the debates of the time, the ‘peoples’, ‘races’ or ‘literatures of the North’ were not only from England and the Scandinavian countries, but also from Germany and Russia—although Paris and Munich are on the same latitude and the then Russian Kiev is south of Calais. These ‘Northern’ countries were believed to be barbarian, and while Madame de Staël, who had travelled widely in Germany, Russia, and the Scandinavian countries, advocated for them and their rich culture, the general opinion remained rather hostile. It was only at the dawn of the *désastre* of the Franco-German War of 1870-71, when a France that felt isolated was looking for new potential allies, that a renewed interest in the ‘North’ emerged. The defeat can be seen as the culmination of a debate on national decadence, similar to that which Italy would have after the defeat of Adua in 1896 and Spain after the loss of its last overseas colony in 1898. For the three Latin countries, the fear of a decadence of all ‘Latin countries’, of a real ‘pathology of the Latin spirit’ (Curtius 1920, 156, my translation), as Ernst Robert Curtius called it in 1920, was at the origin of a process of reflection and self-affirmation that began in France.

This development is accompanied by a production or rather a reproduction of the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and thus by a questioning of the boundaries of French culture. The ‘diagnosis’ in the French journals of the time registers a generalised decadence affecting in particular the field of literature, so central to French identity and its appeal abroad. However, opinions about a remedy for the supposedly sick or at least decadent Latin peoples and literatures are roughly divided into two parties: while the proponents of a liberal ideology, the so-called ‘cosmopolitans’, believe that foreign influences would be an opportunity to breathe new life into a literature and culture that had become anaemic, the ‘nationalists’ fear that it would rob them of the last remnants of a distinctly French identity (cf. Barrès 1892; Brunetière 1907; Delsemme 1967).

For both parties, there is a hierarchy of foreign influences that follows a dichotomous logic of (cultural) proximity and (geographical) distance: even ‘nationalists’ consider influences from southern cultures, i.e. from other Latin countries, to be beneficial, because they assume a cultural kinship with these countries, so that they can be considered part of an ‘us’. The permeability of the literary border with the countries of southern Europe is thus approved, and it is from here that a so-called Latin renaissance is said to hail (cf. de Vogüé 1895).

The same ‘nationalists’ deem influences from further afield—be it Britain, Scandinavia, Germany, or the Slavic countries—as highly problematic. They are considered to be incompatible with the so-called Latin cultures, and thus the influence they may exert can only be dangerous (cf. Lelièvre 1959). These arguments are all too often fleshed out with nationalistic ideas; they demand that the border with these ‘northern countries’ be a rigid and impermeable one. In contrast to them, the liberal side, the so-called ‘cosmopolitans’, were in favour of open borders and influences not only from the Latin countries, but also from the ‘northern’ ones. The fact that the dispute revolved around literary influences, and that the border was entirely virtual anyway, makes the question of the implementation of such a closure or opening all the more interesting. In a culinary semantic field, very common in this context, Maurice Barrès, for his part, sees the influences of the North more as ‘sauces’ or ‘hors d’oeuvres’ that would accompany very

French main courses, because what he fears more than anything else is to 'replace the French soul [. . .] with the European soul' (Barrès 1892, 1, my translation).

The heated debate therefore pits the supporters of a return to the 'Latin family' with its values against those who advocate what is called either 'Nordomania' or 'Septentriomania' (Lemaître 1894, my translation), or the influence of the 'Hyperboreans' (Maurras 1891, 229), which would lead, in a word, to the decline of the Occident.

## Conclusion

While 'the North', however unstable that might have been as a geographical localisation, was seen as a threat by conservative forces at the turn of the century before last, France now deems itself to be a part of it. The dichotomy of Northern versus Latin countries exacerbated and defended by the likes of Barrès and Maurras has collapsed into a new unity, which, interestingly enough, now bears the name of what were once hostile territories at least in literary debates. The term 'Latin', then at the core of French identity as the conservatives would have it, seems to have been dropped—one might be tempted to say that the much feared takeover by the Northern countries, the decline of the Latin Occident, is now a fact. 'Northern' is now a coveted attribute on the same level as 'Indo-European' and can thus be seen as another 'code word'—in the sense of Tamir Bar-On—for 'Aryan'. It is certainly no coincidence that the *Nouvelle Droite* discovered its predilection for the 'Northern' countries in the wake of Nazi ideology and its racist anthropology. Stéphane François ascertains that 'Nordicism remains an important and constant reference in circles ranging from neo right-wing neo-Nazis and the identitarian movement' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (François 2011, 136).<sup>13</sup> In the belief system of the *Nouvelle Droite*, the new union of 'Northern' '(Indo-)European' countries serves to establish a bulwark against an 'invasion' that is no longer only literary and is believed to come not from the North, but from the Global South. What does not seem to have diminished, however, is the fear of a 'contamination' of the European spirit Benoist and Travers evoke, which yet again becomes apparent in the strictly limited selection of texts in the anthologies.

Still, the *Nouvelle Droite's* insistence on the importance of tradition and their self-fashioning as the custodians of said tradition is clearly relativised through this shift from a national(istic) perspective to a so-called European one. The critical positions on 'Nordicism' found in important role models such as Barrès and Maurras, who, according to Baladier's article in the anthology, fought 'so that art and literature can protect the roots of our homeland and the loyalty to its history' (Baladier, in de Benoist and Travers 2021, 464–465), are passed over—which makes the claim about the reappropriation of cultural heritage somewhat more doubtful. On the contrary, it shows how the New Right instrumentalises (literary) history for their very own interests, condemning a 'slow forgetting of the past' on the one hand and then themselves forgetting what no longer suits their changed ideological positions. The shift of perspectives within the *Nouvelle Droite* over the course of a century concerning their idea of a French identity takes place in a significant historical context: as Stéphane François showed, the contact with a 'völkisch anthropology' by Hans F. K. Günther and his followers led the movement to embrace a racist ideology and to shift the image they forge of 'their' country in the context of a Europe that is based on the Aryan idea (François 2021, 165ff).

What the anthology aims at is nothing less than the propagation of the *Nouvelle Droite's* world view through subtle and insidious rhetorical operations that become visible only at second glance. Compared to the discussion more than a hundred years earlier, in which nobody shied away from clear and sometimes openly racist statements, the concession to an otherwise vehemently rejected 'Zeitgeist' now consists in no longer openly naming the basis of one's own identity, but rather in letting it emerge from a complex interplay of omissions and emphases. It is therefore of central importance that literary scholarship does not shy away from dealing with these publications, but rather addresses them in order to identify their strategies, to reveal the patterns they use, and thus to show the less experienced readers to whom the anthology is addressed the direction in which they are being led.

## Notes

1. One might add the involvement of GRECE writers in the editorial team of the *Le Figaro Magazine* in the years between 1979 and 1982 or the much more recent nomination of Geoffroy Lejeune, former editor of the extreme right weekly magazine *Valeurs actuelles*, as editor in chief of the *Journal du Dimanche*, which led to a strike by the whole team. Both events concern less the field of literature than the press and the fact that they were immediately taken up for discussion suggests that the control mechanisms in this area are more effective than in the—less transparent—area of literature.
2. As Damir Skenderovic convincingly argues, the Swiss *Nouvelle Droite*, especially in the Romandie, have copied 'the strategy of metapolitics developed by the French *Nouvelle droite*' (Skenderovic 2009, 254), while choosing 'an elitist approach and avoid[ing] attracting large audiences' (Skenderovic 2009, 273). Skenderovic points out that, other than in France and beginning in the 1990s, a 'considerable part of the francophone New Right [...] looked instead for opportunities for direct political intervention' (Skenderovic 2009, 273).
3. In Germany, it is the New Right publishing house Jungeuropa Verlag, that also publishes authors like Alain de Benoist, Pierre Drieu de la Rochelle or Robert Brasillach, which 'is dedicated to the cultivation of [Venner's] heritage in the German-speaking world' (<https://www.jungeuropa.de/autoren/dominique-venner/>).
4. It is certainly not a coincidence that both the acronym chosen for the Groupement and the name of the Institut evoke the classical humanities supposedly in steady decline.
5. Cf. <https://institut-iliade.com/formation-cycle-jeunes/>.
6. Cf. <https://institut-iliade.com/formation/>.
7. Cf. <https://institut-iliade.com/formation/>.
8. Such as Nelson Mandela in 2001, Léopold Sédar Senghor in 2004, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 2012, 'Liberté-Égalité-Fraternité' in 1989 or 'République' in 2007.
9. Whether or not one recognises those three figures as belonging to the far right is also a question of perspective: while Dominique Venner might be well-known in France, his name hardly resonates beyond the national borders. In Germany, Ernst Jünger was a highly controversial figure, but in France, his war journals have been published in the prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, one of the greatest honours that can be bestowed on an author. The protest by authors such as Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt remained more or less unheard. As for Jean Raspail, the new German translation of *Camp des Saints*, a bedside book for the global New Right, published by the New Right Antaios-Verlag in 2015, was very well received in the German Press, even called 'prophetic' in the context of the arrival of a significant number of refugees that same year, some going so far as to call for a Nobel Prize for Raspail (Klonovsky 2015).
10. Although it certainly is a mere coincidence, I would like to believe that the year of publication is particularly well chosen: in 2021, four of the most important literary



prizes—the Nobel Prize for Literature, the International Booker Prize, the Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels, and the Prix Goncourt—went to four excellent authors: Abdulrazak Gurnah, David Diop, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Mohamed Mbougar Sarr. For every non right-wing adept of literature, this was simply very good news and would not be worthy of further mention, had the press not, in reporting the individual decisions, but also all of them together, persistently stressed the fact that all four authors, or at least their families, come from Sub-Saharan Africa: they were thus marked not simply as authors, but as African authors, however far removed they may have been from actually living on the African continent. The media coverage thus kept reminding them and their readership that their position was other than that of the White writer, whom Oana Panaïte and Etienne Achille define as ‘a neutral, invisible, and free-flowing agent of the literary field whose body, name and subsequent production are not “marked”, as opposed to those associated with racialized groups of writers’ (Achille and Panaïte 2024, forthcoming). However, the sheer momentum of the prize juries’ decisions might have suggested to those already fearful for the privileged positions of not only White *writers* that the end was nigh.

11. The inclusion of *Martín Fierro* can also be read in light of the fact that it is considered to be the country’s national epic and thus a cultural heritage claimed by both left and right (cf. Iriarte 2020).
12. While the term ‘Dritte Reich’ [Third Reich] is contested in Germany and its use without reflective quotation marks embraces the propagandistic nature of the term, the awareness of the problematic character of the impression seems to be less acute in France.
13. François, an eminent expert in the field of the *Nouvelle Droite*, seems to have overlooked the historical instability of the relation to the ‘North’, which is nowhere to be found in his otherwise very thorough volume *Au-delà des vents du Nord. L’extrême droite, le pôle nord et les Indo-Européens* (2014).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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