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Fascist politics and literary criticism

Ortwin de Graef, Dirk De Geest and
Eveline Vanfraussen

Fascist aesthetics – more precisely, aesthetics informed by fascist conceptions of nation, society and human essence – is intricately and insidiously bound up with twentieth-century critical thought. This chapter discusses the origins and significance of fascist elements in twentieth-century criticism and aesthetics. It offers an analysis of theories of art expressive of, or simply receptive to, fascist ideology, taking the Belgian national context as a case study in the growth, diffusion and cultural resonance of fascist ideas.

The concept of fascism

The term 'fascism' derives its force from an incongruous yet potent mixture of novelty and imprecision. Arriving on the scene in 1919, Mussolini's *Fascismo* styled itself as a decisive tear in the mottled purple fabric with which liberal, conservative and socialist ideologies failed to cover the expanse of the political; it rapidly attained the status of a viable ideological alternative backed up by a distinct political force whose 'March on Rome' in October 1922 made it the first fascist movement 'autonomously to "seize" power'.[1] 'Fascism' has retained its significance as the name for a distinct, radically new political phenomenon, notwithstanding the semantic confusion wrought through its use as a generic term. Paradoxically, the generic term 'fascism' still has the performative power of a proper name, despite, on the one hand, its loose usage as a catch-all label for 'right-wing' or even just generally 'unpleasant' ideological beliefs, and, on the other hand, the numerous exercises in terminological hygiene seeking to distinguish between the dubious privilege of the proper name and the generic features constituting the 'fascist minimum'.[2]

The problematic status of the generic notion of fascism is typically thematised with reference to Germany and France. While it is commonly

[1] Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991), p. 21.
[2] Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite, ni gauche: l'idéologie fasciste en France*, rev. edn (Brussels: Complexe, 1987), p. 57. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations into English are ours.

assumed that the National-Socialist regime coming into power with Hitler's appointment as chancellor in 1933 is a prototypical example of fascism, a number of scholars have challenged this assumption, either by arguing for a distinction between movements approximating the Nazi model and movements closer to 'the Italian fascist pattern';[3] or by suggesting that this difference is so decisive as to become truly categorical.[4] Scholarly debate over fascism's historical origins prior to its emergence as a political regime remains no less unresolved. Here the most prominent bone of contention is arguably Zeev Sternhell's thesis that 'the true cradle of fascism' must be located in France.[5] 'The nature of a political ideology', Sternhell contends, 'is always clearer in its aspirations than in its application', and it is in France, in the 'great ideological laboratory of the Belle Epoque', that fascism's aspirations found their most sophisticated expression, which also helps to account for the remarkable proliferation of often highly articulate forms of fascism in France in the first half of the twentieth century.[6]

As it is not our intention here to flesh out these important questions of historical and conceptual clarification, we propose to take Roger Griffin's attempt to construct an 'ideal type' of fascism as our point of reference. Griffin's exercise in 'idealising abstraction', accompanied as it is by a lucid account of fascist scholarship, has the considerable advantage of being both flexible enough to accommodate most informal political uses of the term (including its application to National Socialism), and sufficiently sensitive to a broad cultural perspective to allow us to focus on the specific encounter between fascist politics and literary criticism.[7] The central point of Griffin's definition is the identification of fascism's 'mythic core' as 'a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism'[8] (*palingenesis* meaning 'rebirth'). In fascism's 'mobilizing vision' the '(perceived) crisis of the nation' is read as 'betokening the birth-pangs of a new order' in which the 'national community' will rise 'phoenix-like from the ashes of a morally bankrupt state system and the decadent culture associated with it'.[9] The fascist myth is populist in

[3] Stanley Payne, 'Fascism in Western Europe', in Walter Lacqueur (ed.), *Fascism: A Reader's Guide* (London: Wildwood House, 1976), p. 301.
[4] See e.g. Zeev Sternhell, 'Fascist Ideology', in Lacqueur (ed.), *Fascism*, p. 317.
[5] Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder and Maia Ashéri, *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 19.
[6] Sternhell, *Ni droite*, pp. 29, 59. For a survey of right-wing ideology in France, see Jean-François Sirinelli (gen. ed.), *Histoire des droites en France*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); Philippe Burrin's chapter 'Le fascisme' in vol. 1 of this study, pp. 610–617, contains a critical appraisal of Sternhell's analysis.
[7] See also Roger Griffin, 'Staging the Nation's Rebirth: The Politics and Aesthetics of Performance in the Context of Fascist Studies', in Günter Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945* (Providence: Berghahn, 1996).
[8] Griffin, *Nature of Fascism*, p. 26.
[9] Roger Griffin (ed.), *Fascism*, Oxford Readers Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 3.

that 'even if led by small elite cadres or self-appointed "vanguards" . . . [fascism] depend[s] on "people power" as the basis of [its] legitimacy'; it is ultra-nationalist in that it goes beyond, 'and hence reject[s], anything compatible with liberal institutions or with the tradition of Enlightenment humanism which underpins them'.[10]

In this 'matrix of fascist ideology', a number of further features receive varying degrees of emphasis in distinct instances of fascist politics: fascism is both anti-liberal and anti-conservative but does not essentially style itself as anti-socialist (rather, it claims to release 'true' socialism from its distortion in communism and recruits its supporters from all classes of society); it favours charismatic politics centred around the figure of the Leader; it is anti-rational; it is racist in its 'celebration of the alleged virtues and greatness of an organically conceived nation or culture' yet it does not preclude a form of internationalism conceived as a 'bond with fascists in other countries'; lacking a generally accepted canonical source comparable to the place Marx holds in socialism, fascism is extremely eclectic; and finally, but decisively, fascism is totalitarian.[11]

Indeed, as Sternhell has argued, fascism was 'the first political system to call itself totalitarian precisely because it encompassed the whole range of human activity', 'represented a way of life', and 'meant to create a new type of society and a new type of man'.[12] This involved, among other things, 'the creation of an elaborate machinery for manufacturing consensus through propaganda and indoctrination',[13] and it is in this respect that fascism's relation to art is of paramount importance. For if fascism styles itself as a total response to what it perceives as a historical crisis, it must also attempt to control the representations of that crisis and of the recovery it heralds: in order to achieve total hegemony in the representational field, it must engage with the actual representational mechanisms involved in the production and reproduction of, precisely, the 'aggressive' style which expresses its 'new ethical and aesthetic values'.[14] The fact that these values are often systematically incoherent lends a special urgency to this totalitarian representational programme and it has been suggested that 'fascism required an aesthetic *overproduction* . . . to compensate for, fill in, and cover up its forever unstable ideological core'.[15] To the extent that the practice of representation particularly pertains to the province of art, then, fascism must also submit art to critical judgement, and the study of fascism must trace the criteria it employs in this judgement.

[10] Griffin, *Nature of Fascism*, pp. 36–37.
[11] See Griffin, *Fascism*, pp. 4–8.
[12] Sternhell, 'Fascist Ideology', p. 337.
[13] Griffin, *Fascism*, p. 6.
[14] Sternhell, Sznajder and Ashéri, *Naissance*, p. 27.
[15] Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Epic Demonstrations: Fascist Modernity and the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution', in Richard J. Golsan (ed.), *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1992), p. 3.

Aesthetics, literature, literary criticism

The reference to Walter Benjamin's *1936* characterisation of fascism as an 'aestheticization of politics'[16] has become an almost ritual obligation for enquiries into the relation between fascism and art. Two major strands may be discerned in the interpretation of Benjamin's dictum. The first starts out from the text Benjamin uses to illustrate his argument, viz. the Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's glorification of war as an experience of aesthetic excellence. Taking Marinetti's judgements in this tract at face value results in an understanding of fascist aesthetics as a wilfully extremist indulgence in violence as modernity's decisive modulation of Beauty itself. Although it is not difficult to find suitably shocking instances of fascist aesthetic doctrine to support this interpretation, it does tend to reduce the impact of fascist aesthetics by diagnosing it as an easily identifiable aberration comfortably alien to the development of true aesthetics. The second strand in the interpretation of Benjamin's analysis takes its cue from his insistence that fascist aesthetics should be read dialectically, that is, with specific attention to the political and socio-economic processes that determine it. For Benjamin this involves the recognition that the aesthetic glorification of war, far from being an idiosyncratic if influential deviation from the norm, is the logical culmination of the twin processes of massification and proletarisation revealing the discrepancy between capitalism's compulsive augmentation of the means of production and its refusal to radically reorganise the distribution of wealth: 'Only war makes it possible to mobilize the entirety of technical means of the present whilst preserving the property relations.'[17]

The strength of this diagnosis is that it can think together both the extremely destructive edge in fascist aesthetics and its manifold alternative strategies for representing the masses of modernity in accordance with the projection of a fascist utopia, including its predilection for the monumental, its obsession with mass rituals, pageants, festivals and exhibitions, its aggressive anti-individualism; in short, its cult of the People as the organic raw matter with which to refashion the Body Politic after the disillusionment created by the political crisis. 'The masses have a right to a change in the property relations; fascism seeks an *expression* of the masses whilst conserving these relations.'[18] Benjamin thus credits fascism with a full-blown aesthetic ideology (as opposed to a ragbag of halfbaked aesthetic mannerisms), thereby inviting us to take fascist aesthetics extremely seriously and to recognise its aggressive populist resurrection of the aura of authenticity and the authority of genius that, according to Benjamin's historical-materialist analysis, had been traditionally associated with art in the past. A similar appeal to take

[16] Walter Benjamin, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', *Illuminationen: ausgewählte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 169.
[17] *Ibid*., p. 168. [18] *Ibid*., pp. 167–168.

fascist aesthetics seriously informs alternative inquiries that trace the fate of modern aesthetics itself from its critical articulation in the work of Immanuel Kant, through its reworking by Friedrich Schiller, to its systematic perversion in the work of Nazi ideologues such as Joseph Goebbels, who notoriously held that 'The statesman is an artist, too. The people are for him what stone is for the sculptor. . . Politics are the plastic arts of the state as painting is the plastic art of color. . . To transform a mass into a people and a people into a state – that has always been the deepest sense of a genuine political task.'[19]

The suggestion that fascism's investment in aesthetics is far from being a mere quirk in the course of (western) culture finds further support in the numerous studies of prominent authors (including Maurice Blanchot, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, T. S. Eliot, Ernst Jünger, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats)[20] whose work has been compromised in varying degrees by their embraces of, or brushes with, versions of fascism. While the existence (though not always the extent) of fascist connections in the work of most of these figures had been relatively well-documented for a number of decades, the 1987 revelation of the collaborationist cultural journalism published in the first years of the German occupation of Belgium by the distinguished deconstructive literary theorist Paul de Man (1919–83) came as a surprise that added fuel to the already acrimonious debate over the state of literary studies in the 1980s.[21] Earlier in the same year, Victor Farias' book on *Heidegger et le nazisme* had lent new intensity to the dispute over the German philosopher's involvement with National Socialism, and the fact that Heidegger is one of deconstruction's privileged points of reference raised the stakes in the controversy. Rather than pursue this particular controversy further, we propose to direct our attention to the specific genre to which de Man's wartime writings belong: the cultural and, especially, literary criticism published in channels supervised by the propaganda division of the particular brand of fascism that is National Socialism.

[19] Quoted in the editors' introduction to Friedrich W. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. cxlii.

[20] See Steven Ungar, *Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France Since 1930* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997); Philippe Alméras, *Les idées de Céline* (Paris: Berg International, 1992); Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Marcus Bullock, *Violent Eye: Ernst Jünger's Visions and Revisions of the European Right* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992); Thomas R. Nevin, *Ernst Jünger and Germany: Into the Abyss, 1914–1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Robert Casillo, *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988); Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland, and Fascism* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

[21] See Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943*, eds. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); also see Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz and Thomas Keenan (eds.), *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) and the special issues of *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (1989), *Diacritics* 20.3 (1990) and *South Central Review* 11.1 (1994).

The fact that this type of research is by no means the norm for investigations into fascist aesthetics is at once understandable and surprising. Understandable, because it involves the analysis of vast quantities of writings which, from the perspective of established aesthetics and literary scholarship, must appear utterly banal. Instead of the fascinating spectacle of highly articulate modulations of fascist aesthetics in the work of major figures, research into common or garden literary criticism pledging allegiance (often implicitly) to fascism seems to lead one into a dreary wasteland of trivial mediocrity. Yet it is precisely this apparently unsurprising textscape that the study of fascist aesthetics must also explore, for it is through the compulsive reproduction of the components of fascist belief *as* banalities that fascism summons the People whose palingenesis as a Nation it claims to represent – as is indeed implied in the historical meaning of the term 'banal', 'obligatory for all the tenants of a feudal jurisdiction'. The fact that the workings of this ideological reproductive apparatus are most prominent in 'minor' genres such as journalistic criticism does not of course prevent the emergence of fascist banalities in 'major' works: inasmuch as fascism is a totalitarian ideology intent on a homogeneous saturation of the representational field, the proper function of its ideological beliefs is banality, irrespective of the context in which they appear.[22]

It is nonetheless noteworthy in this respect that the 'major' authors now most frequently studied as representatives of fascist aesthetics often occupied less than prominent positions in the field of fascist culture at the height of fascism's political trajectory. The history of fascist politics shows a recurrent pattern in which fascism's rise to actual power, especially in nations where it is imposed by a foreign aggressor, is accompanied by a series of strategic political concessions intended to win over alternative important political factions. In its bid for cultural power fascism employed similar strategies of qualified compromise but it would appear that its mechanisms of representational control were relatively unsuccessful in fully accommodating potentially 'major' fellow travellers. This does not diminish the extent to which some of these 'major' figures were implicated in fascist ideology; rather, it may suggest a certain resistance to totalitarian homogenising strategies in practices characterised by a particularly acute fascination with the complexities of representation. The fact that this resistance is frequently also a matter of arrogant elitism on the part of self-appointed candidates for cultural canonisation should not be allowed to rule out the possibility that resistance to totalitarian banalisation is a critical, though by no means decisively democratic or enlightened, feature of representation itself. To the extent that this is indeed the case, even the discourse reproducing fascist aesthetics in its apparently

[22] On fascism and banality, see Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*, foreword by Russel Berman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

most coercively banal form is bound to show signs of representational strain. A brief sketch of Flemish 'fascist literary criticism' may serve to illustrate this hypothesis.

The discourse of fascist literary criticism

The pre-critical assumption that fascist literary criticism can be described in terms of a principled commitment to a stable corpus of texts and authors or to a fixed matrix of specific literary features does not survive a systematic encounter with instances of such criticism. In what follows we present some of the findings such a systematic encounter actually yields, basing ourselves on the extensive study of cultural discourse in occupied Belgium (specifically the Flemish part of the country) carried out by the Literature in the Second World War Research Centre at Leuven University.

This historical and geographical demarcation has at least three important implications. First, as is the case for fascisms everywhere, the 'fascism' represented in this discourse is shot through with features borrowed from the specific cultural tradition in which it takes shape. For Flanders this is predominantly the Catholic tradition, and it is often unclear whether recurrent features of fascist literary criticism are not just minimally transcoded elements of activist Catholicism.[23] Alongside this conservative Catholic-activist input, fascism in Belgium, as elsewhere, also incorporates 'left-wing' elements, the most prominent case in this respect being the influence of Hendrik de Man, 'theoretician of "left-wing fascism"'.[24]

Second, there is the specific location of Belgium on the border dividing Germanic culture and Latin culture, which makes it a particularly complicated example of the friction between the imperialist pan-Germanic strain in National Socialist fascism and the more neutralist or universalist tendencies of alternative fascisms.[25] Given the fact that Belgium consists of two linguistic communities of comparable size (the Flemish Dutch-speaking North and the Walloon francophone South), plus a small German-speaking community in the East, the politics of language play a decisive role in the formation of fascist tendencies in this country. Attempts to forge a Belgian People as an organic reality by fascist criteria never quite took hold, for fairly obvious cultural-historical reasons. Restricting ourselves to the Flemish situation, the most instructive conflict is arguably that between VNV (*Vlaams Nationaal Verbond*, Flemish National Union) and DeVlag (*Duits-Vlaamse Arbeidsgemeenschap/Deutsch-Vlämische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, German-Flemish Labour Association). As its name suggests, the latter struggled for the Great-German ideal according to

[23] See Martin Conway, *Catholic Politics in Europe, 1918–1945* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 53.
[24] Hendrik de Man, *Après coup (Mémoires)* (Bruxelles: Toison d'Or, 1941), p. 298.
[25] See Griffin, *Nature of Fascism*, pp. 48–49.

which Flanders is destined to figure as an integral part of the German Third Reich. The VNV, sharing the separatist agenda as far as the abolition of the Belgian nation was concerned (as witness their irritation with Hendrik de Man's 1940 'Manifesto to the Members of the Belgian Labour Party' which called for a 'national resurrection' of 'the Belgian people' in a politics of collaboration with the German occupant),[26] opposed DeVlag's Great-German aspirations and instead favoured a full integration with the Netherlands.

In a strict application of the working definition we have chosen, both these forms of Flemish secessionism fail to qualify as fascism – as Griffin indeed states, while admitting their kinship with fascism[27] – since they are not intent on the palingenesis of the nation 'properly speaking', i.e. as a territorially established political entity. This, however, would seem to underestimate the distinction between the nation as a historical political entity and the symbolic functioning of the nation as a culturally and linguistically homogeneous and ultimately 'natural' given coinciding with the People imagined by fascism itself. In fact, it can be argued that it is precisely in cases such as this, where convenient (albeit spurious) recourse to the existing nation as a ready-made mould for the People is impossible, that the formative resolve of fascism is tested to the full.

This confusing state of affairs is further compounded by a third aspect, involving the specific nature of National Socialist rule in occupied Belgium. Unlike the Netherlands, for instance, where a *Zivilverwaltung* of German civilian officials actively governed the country at all levels, Belgium was provisionally administered by a *Militärverwaltung*, consisting of a relatively small cadre of military executives who delegated the actual administration of the country, including its cultural life, to Belgian civilians, thus creating a wider margin for more or less significant deviations from Nazi orthodoxy.

Notwithstanding this heterogeneity and instability, it is possible to articulate dominant patterns in what we can still call (Flemish) 'fascist literary criticism' as a discourse of normative and institutionally determined statements assigning specific functions to literature and its reading in the service of the establishment and maintenance of the People as an organic reality. In what follows we propose a composite picture of a central strand of this discourse refracted through the prism of the body. The wide semantic spectrum generated by this notion (involving the body proper as well as the various figures of incorporation depending on it)[28] covers an important section of fascist representational practice and should allow us to assess the function of literature and criticism in mainstream Flemish fascist discourse.

[26] Peter Dodge (ed.), *A Documentary Study of Hendrik de Man, Socialist Critic of Marxism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 328.

[27] Griffin, *Nature of Fascism*, p. 169.

[28] See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Paris: Métailié, 1992); and Ortwin de Graef, 'Sweet Dreams, Monstered Nothings: Catachresis in Kant and *Coriolanus*', in Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods (eds.), *The Ethics in Literature* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999).

The fascist body in criticism

The institutional determination of fascist literary critical discourse is perhaps its most readily visible feature, involving as it does the legitimation of this discourse through a complicated apparatus of cultural councils, party commissions and state organisations. The relations between these various organisations are often troubled even in a firmly established fascist regime such as Nazi Germany, so it is not surprising that cultural institutionalisation in countries occupied or controlled by Nazi Germany should be characterised by overt conflict, backstabbing and duplicity. Yet while the relation between the Councils for Culture founded on German directives in occupied Belgium and the many cultural organisations subordinated to them was indeed far from harmonious, it is the very fact of these institutionalising strategies that is important in that it reveals fascism's express intent to get a firm grip on the cultural system.

In the field of literary criticism, the effects of this intent become clear even at a cursory glance: the discourse on literature is compelled to style itself as an institutional performance. Literature is represented at official functions, in public speeches set up as photo opportunities for critics in uniform against a backdrop of banners and insignia, in publications in journals proudly sporting their official affiliations. This emphatic awareness of institutional space also informs the more strictly textual framing of this discourse: bylines often include references to the author's military rank or station and editorial comments rivet the text to the contemporary political situation. Even in its external trappings, then, the discourse of fascist literary criticism is obsessed with the sense of its own historical situation and compulsively confesses its participation in the People's struggle from crisis to rebirth.

This participation in the People's palingenesis takes on specifically activist overtones in the cultural elite's determined assumption of its salvific task. The notion of the 'People' in effect functions as a normative rather than a descriptive category. The People may figure in the essential core of fascist thought, but the people is in a state of crisis and will only become totally itself under the instruction of an elite that has fully recovered its essence and recognised its destiny. The implication of this normative transcription is that the sense of historical crisis and renewal powering fascist ideology is ultimately integrated in the transhistorical teleology of apocalyptic myth: the emphatic commitment to the present historical condition involves a reading of this condition as the last chance to end history properly in the final fulfilment of the People.

In order to accomplish its part of this mission, the discourse of fascist literary criticism needs norms with which to judge the works it must represent and perhaps its most typical routine in this respect is the projection of its own mission onto the author of the literary work. The fact that the biography of the author is a standard component of fascist literary criticism is hardly a

distinctive characteristic in itself. What is striking is the sheer insistence with which these biographical data are hammered into exemplary shape. An appropriate model for this practice in English culture is the portrait of the Hero as Man of Letters in Thomas Carlyle's 1840 lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. For Carlyle, characterised by Harold Bloom as 'the true forerunner of twentieth-century Fascism',[29] the Hero as Man of Letters is 'the soul of all. What he teaches, the whole world will do and make. . . His life . . . is a piece of the everlasting heart of Nature herself: all men's life is, – but the weak many know not the fact, and are untrue to it, in most times; the strong few are strong, heroic, perennial, because it cannot be hidden from them.'[30]

If we change 'Nature' into 'People', Carlyle here captures the core of fascist literary criticism in its obsessive representation of the true Author as the exemplary incarnation of the People's purest essence. This representation typically follows the narrative patterns of epic and tragedy. Thanks to his extraordinary qualities, the Author is able to transcend all limitations, be they internal or external. He is man enough to recognise and redress errors in his personal past – the standard topos here being his conversion to literature of and for the People after a brief spell of unhealthy fascination with various vaguely-defined modernisms. He courageously deals with diverse instances of personal opposition which are readily identified as symptomatic of the decadence threatening the People in its time of crisis. The critical conditions diagnosed over and again in this connection are capitalist and individualist modernity; the ruins of parliamentary democracy and misguided technologisation; rampant urbanisation demonised in the vision of the city as a noxious melting pot of cultures whose effluvia threaten to asphyxiate the People; crass commercialisation and mercantilism typically portrayed in vicious vignettes of prostitutes and Jews; and in particular the internationalist literary movements whose villainous representatives flourish in this wasteland.

The argument undergirding this narrative dynamic is perfectly circular: the Author truly in touch with his People can only produce literature proper for the People; authors with foreign allegiances can never successfully represent the People they are strangers to or estranged from: at best they can strike an unconvincing pose, at worst they indulge in subtly perverse attempts to deceive that must be firmly condemned on grounds that are typically though not exclusively racist. This of course raises the question of the special status of foreign literature in a relatively small linguistic community: even assuming that this literature is a proper representation of and for the People to which its Author belongs, its function in the context of another culture remains problematic. A typical strategy in this respect is the reference to congenial literary-

[29] Harold Bloom (ed.), *Thomas Carlyle* (New Haven: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 14.
[30] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: On Heroes and Hero Worship* (London: Dent, 1908), p. 384.

critical representations of such Authors in their own culture; another subterfuge consists in exercises in special pleading intended to strike a balance between the recognition of the merits of foreign literature and the programmatic preference for literature produced by representatives of the People at home. The following 1942 statement by the Flemish critic Paul Hardy gives a good impression of the unstable commixture of self-deprecation and self-assertion this yields: 'Generally speaking our literature, the literature of a small people, can evidently not be a match for that of the great European countries; yet nobody would think of preferring the mother of his rich neighbour over his own just because his own happens to be less endowed with the gifts of the spirit.'[31] The programmatic transformation of critical judgement into filial commitment encapsulates the coercive dynamics of fascist literary criticism in its structurally unstable intent to honour both the universal superiority of *genius* and the particular superiority of the *locus*.

A similar ideological-critical balancing act is required in the attendant debate over the issue of popular editions. Here, the conflict is between commercial, ideological and aesthetic values: the People must be furnished with their representation in the Body Popular, yet the popular market produces representations insufficiently infused with the representational project of fascism or even wholly indifferent to it, while the writers among the people ready to embrace this project are not always particularly 'endowed with the gifts of the spirit' and consequently disseminate 'aesthetically inferior' and ideologically unbalanced 'tendentious literature'. Faced with the popular appeal of this literature, fascist literary criticism takes it upon itself to adjudicate between the people's mere need for representations, its 'hunger' for literature and its genuine but fatefully obscured desire for the representation of its sacred essence.

The amount of special pleading in articles concerning this problem indicates yet again the instability in the representational project of fascist discourse – an instability institutionally performed in the encounter between the Flemish critic R. F. Lissens, writing in the francophone journal *Cassandre* about Flemish literature, and Lothar von Balluseck, representative of the 'Reichsverband deutscher Zeitungsverleger' and director of the Belgian collaborating distribution house *Agence Dechenne*, represented here by Belgian critic Paul de Man. Lissens had commented unfavourably on popular Flemish editions distributed by *Dechenne*, and von Balluseck invited him, via his editor Paul Colin, to an interview on this topic with his subordinate Paul de Man.[32] The vertiginous perspectival shifts in this encounter are symptomatic of the intractability of the literary field in the period: a dismissive 'French'

[31] Quoted in Dirk De Geest, Eveline Vanfraussen, Marnix Beyen and Ilse Mestdagh, *Collaboratie of cultuur?: een Vlaams tijdschrift in bezettingstijd (1941–1944)* (Antwerp/Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Kritak/Soma, 1997), p. 248.

[32] Letter to Paul Colin, *Agence Dechenne*, 13 August 1942.

look at Flemish writing coming from a Flemish critic crosses a German glance at the necessities of the representational programme, represented by a Belgian critic-cum-secretary invariably championing 'properly aesthetic' and 'European' criteria. The interview never took place, but de Man did write an article on the uses and abuses of popular editions in the collaborationist newspaper *Het Vlaamsche Land* (20 October 1942), stating that 'The author should not descend to the people but the people should rise to the level of the artist'[33] – which may in itself be read as a classical 'properly aesthetic' statement all too ready for transcoding in the heroising discourse of fascist literary criticism.

On the field of actual reading and writing, then, the Author as Hero is crowded out by a plurality of alternative representations of the author as entertainer: teller of tales, stories, anecdotes, which may or may not harbour fascist aspirations of various hues. In the critical appreciation it must devote to these insufficiently integrated, and hence potentially dissenting, yet extremely familiar voices, fascist literary criticism is torn between its commitment to the integral representation of the People and its task of recognising the people's representations in popular culture. On the field where it represents itself to itself, however, this discourse exorcises its internal scission by repositing the Author as Hero in a monological incantation structured as sheer repetition – spectacularly expert in figures of amplification, such as the incremental repetition of synonyms and the successive development of increasingly emphatic features, and in figures of pathos, such as hyperbole and personification.[34] In its predilection for a performative stylistics, fascist literary criticism turns its back on the requirements of rational articulation and effectively imitates the prophetic and visionary mode it simultaneously identifies as the proper voice of the genuine Author.

The drastic homogenisation of the literary-critical corpus resulting from this representational strategy is entirely consistent with its express intent to frame the Author's individual body in the Body Popular to which he is born. This rhetorical conception of the People as a corporate organism finds its concrete, but no less rhetorical, counterpart in the remarkable attention devoted to the body of the Author, both in photographs and in prose impressions. The Author's body is typically staged in a vertical and monumental position: he (and the ideal-typical author is invariably male) dominates his surroundings and surveys them from above, his gaze qualified as steely, perceptive, penetrating. Whenever possible it is dressed up in military garb and, even more importantly, over-coded as pre-eminently virile. The figure of the self-enclosed virile body suggests a dynamic totality, self-sufficient in its difference from the symptoms of decadence and endowed with the capacity to

[33] De Man, *Wartime Journalism*, p. 333.
[34] See also Saul Friedländer, *Reflets du nazisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), pp. 49–51.

realise itself in the world of its People by reproducing its culture as in itself it really is: a 'living work of art'[35] which transforms the masses into the Body they have become alienated from.

The mythical frame of fascism

In its performance of this essentially racist 'national-aestheticist' phantasm,[36] fascist literary criticism must also engage with the fictional world created by the Author: it is the task of criticism to frame this fiction in the image of the People from which it derives its significance. To appreciate the nature of this enterprise, it is instructive to juxtapose the fascist framing of everyday life with the notion of *figura*, the key to 'the conception of reality in late antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages' in Erich Auerbach's 1946 classic *Mimesis*: 'In this conception, an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms . . . The connection between occurrences is not regarded as primarily a chronological or causal development but as a oneness within the divine plan.'[37] A simple translation exercise yields a helpful insight into fascism's framing of the quotidian: ordinary life receives its full significance in the context, not of a 'divine plan', but of the People's palingenesis. Ultimately, then, fascism's insistent awareness of the historical uniqueness of the contemporary condition of crisis is cancelled in its commitment to the transhistorical mythical reality of, to paraphrase Carlyle, 'the everlasting heart of the People itself'.

Fascist framing so conceived can be read as an alternative response to one of Auerbach's guiding questions, viz. the question as to the precise difference between medieval and modern realism. For Auerbach, modern realism is exemplified in the work of Woolf, Joyce and Proust, whose relative neglect for 'the great exterior turning points and blows of fate' and concomitant commitment to 'minor, unimpressive, random events' provides him with a tentative modern alternative for 'the divine plan' of medieval figural realism.[38] In its 'representation of the random moment in the lives of different people', a moment 'comparatively independent of the controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair', modern realism brings to light 'the elementary things which our lives have in common' and thereby bears witness to the fact that 'the differences between men's ways of life and forms of thought have already lessened' in 'an economic and cultural levelling process' which is taking place 'below', and 'through', the 'surface conflicts': 'It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goals begin to be visible'

[35] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La fiction du politique* (Paris: Bourgeois, 1987), p. 111.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 112.
[37] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), p. 490.
[38] *Ibid*., pp. 484, 483.

and 'the complicated process of dissolution' initially mirrored in modern realism thus 'seems to be tending toward a very simple solution'.[39]

Considering the actual ramifications of what Auerbach refers to as 'the surface conflicts', including the fact of his writing *Mimesis* as a Jewish refugee in exile in Istanbul during the Second World War, this hopeful humanist projection of 'a common life of mankind on earth' as a resolutely secular alternative to the divine plan in pre-modern figural framing acquires a bitter taste. For the 'simple solution' advanced by fascist literary-critical discourse in the face of 'the complicated process of dissolution' is precisely intent on keeping the random at bay by representing it as ultimately incompatible with the homogeneous Body Popular whose constitutive components in the quotidian are radically dependent on the total struggle of the People to conclusively exorcise its others. Fascist literary criticism programmatically identifies the ordinary lives in the realism it favours as fascist *figurae* in a mimetico-mythical design whose commitment to simplicity and unity must appear irredeemably incommensurable with Auerbach's conception of a simple solution. As Auerbach indeed suggests: 'Perhaps [the very simple solution of a common life for mankind on earth] will be too simple to please those who, despite all its dangers and catastrophes, admire and love our epoch for the sake of its abundance of life and the incomparable historical vantage point which it affords. But they are few in number, and probably they will not live to see much more than the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification.'[40] To the extent that they did see such forewarnings, the representatives of fascist literary criticism devoted themselves to combating this solution by way of a very different unification and simplification – it is that difference that must be addressed.

Solutions for a world in decline

In the pages immediately preceding the prospective framing of modern realism in 'the common life of mankind on earth', Auerbach clearly demonstrates that he is by no means blind to the dark side of the temptation of unity and simplicity that informs fascism. After a rapid rehearsal of the 'tremendous acceleration' in the 'widening of man's horizon', reflected in the fact that 'synthetic and objective attempts at interpretation are produced and demolished every instant', he specifically identifies fascism as a response to the 'violent clash of the most heterogeneous ways of life' attending this disintegration: 'The temptation to entrust oneself to a sect which solved all problems with a single formula, whose power of suggestion imposed solidarity, and which ostracized everything which would not fit in and submit – this tempta-

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 488. [40] *Ibid.*

tion was so great that, with many people, fascism hardly had to employ force when the time came for it to spread through the countries of old European culture.'[41] In the literature of those countries, Auerbach continues, the 'increasing predilection for ruthlessly subjectivist perspectives is another symptom' of the 'confusion and helplessness' generated by 'the decline of our world': in much of modern realism, there is often 'something hostile to the reality which they represent', a 'hatred of culture and civilization, brought out by means of the subtlest stylistic devices which culture and civilization have developed, and often a radical and fanatical urge to destroy'.[42] Yet it is in this same modern realism that Auerbach notices 'something entirely different tak[ing] place too' – the prefiguration, through this literature's representation of the random, of, precisely, 'the common life of mankind on earth', the 'very simple solution' responding to 'the complicated process of dissolution' which also prepared the ground in which fascism struck its roots.

The lucidly implicit irony with which Auerbach thus establishes the connection between the 'sinister unification'[43] proposed in the 'single formula' of fascism and the 'approaching unification' of 'mankind on earth' he reads in modern realism's representations of the random, suggests that in order to oppose the forces of totalitarianism, the mere *positing* of the difference between the coercive frame of fascism and the frames fashioned to dissolve this coercion, may be too simple a solution. Rather, this difference has to be critically reconstituted, and for literary criticism this task can take shape as the careful insistence on the barely representable resistance to total incorporation which constitutes common life.

[41] *Ibid*., p. 485–486. [42] *Ibid*., p. 487.
[43] Such was Kenneth Burke's diagnosis of *Mein Kampf*, quoted in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fateful Question of Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 123.