Performing Pasts: A Dialogue with Paul Zumthor

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Over the last generation, the concept of “theatricality” has offered an outstanding model for interpreting modern and premodern culture. What precisely does this term evoke? Like all supposed neologisms, it is highly volatile. It gives rise to as many ambiguities as it does clearcut properties. Child of the sixties, it was defined first by what it was not: “theater minus the text,” as Roland Barthes put it.1 Splitting performance off from drama as literature was an act of defiance. It freed Barthes and other Parisian intellectuals to perceive what they read and did more keenly—to imagine a new way of acting in the world at large, of acting against its many oppressions.2 Theatricality quit the stage; and being theatrical became a daily affair of understanding and engaging those around us.

In England, too, at much the same time, reflection on dramatic action and its social consequences was no longer confined to the institution or genres of theater. Raymond Williams rejected a purely aesthetic monopoly. In Modern Tragedy he made compelling links between the actual forms of our histories and the tragic or other theatrical modes in which they are consistently perceived, articulated, and reshaped.3 When Victor Turner turned to explore “social drama,” his work packed much the same mobilizing energy.4 American anthropology in the sixties was committed to investigating many versions of theatrical action, ones that took them to distant places in Brazil and Indonesia, but also to distant times—twelfth-century pilgrimages, Thomas à Becket’s assassination in Canterbury Cathedral. When the New Historians began experimenting with a notion of theatricality in their analyses of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English culture, they entered into a long-standing and widespread project focusing on the theatrical dimension of public behavior.5 It was also a project increasingly associated with the premodern.

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One of the most commanding spokesmen of medieval theatricality was the Swiss-Canadian writer Paul Zumthor. He claimed it as his own neologism. He coined it together with his better-known linguistic jargon of "mouvance." In Toward a Medieval Poetics, an essay written in the wake of 1968, Zumthor introduced a notion that crackles with improvisational verve. It evokes "a spontaneous happening," "a sensation of space," "sounds, gestures, mime, and dance." Years later, Zumthor hit upon a working definition with a heavier, abstract tone: "by 'theatricality,' I refer to a structural and semantic element common to medieval performance and modern theater. It resides in a simultaneous physical presence articulated through the human body by the voice. It involves all those sensory, affective, and intellectual elements that make up a total action." What began as a strike against the aesthetic pretensions of theater mutated into a critical preoccupation with the body. Theatricality was endowed with every possible sensual allure. Divorcing it from perception and physical movement appeared counterintuitive. Once the theatrical was conceived as such a bodily effect, it became a profoundly oral occasion as well. Zumthor released it from the grip of written texts; in a premodern context, it broke free from the category of literature a second time.

Tracking the history of ideas of theatricality uncovers a puzzling combination of features. On the one hand, it is traced with the textures of deeply felt, personal experience. It conjures up the sensations that galvanize us—touching hands, tasting the salt of fear, relishing the tang of pleasure. And it describes the way those sensations draw us together with others, those present as well as those long gone in the past. It describes an inner, imaginary rapport with them. On the other hand, the theatrical suggests large-scale displays, the crush and surge of people gathering. It points to a connection forged through public, collective action. The theatrical makes for a political coming-together that happens outside.

Are these features at odds? My hunch was that much was to be learned by considering their very friction. I was interested in investigating how the two aspects of this strange phenomenon, theatricality, did or did not cohere. And I wondered whether this search would bring out yet another chapter in the notion of theatricality, a chapter that would tell us as much about the ways we critics make connections with premodern culture as about what distinguishes it from the modern.

I wrote to Paul Zumthor inquiring about such a history of theatricality. I had never met him, but I hoped that he would respond in that cordial manner I had seen in other European intellectuals of his generation—
urbane, full of learned references, if somewhat aloof. Zumthor answered by return mail. I was struck by his quick response, and what he said was even more surprising: "You have come very close to touching what is most personal about the past for me. How can I explain this in a letter? ... Evoking all this is only possible if I speak to you about it directly, out loud." How could the formal letter of a complete stranger have touched off such an intense reaction? I was very curious. Apparently, my questions tapped a powerful reservoir of memory. They brought Zumthor back to his university days when he signed up with a student acting troupe, called the Théophiliens, under the direction of the Sorbonne professor of French medieval literature, Gustave Cohen. Zumthor had already shown his penchant for reminiscing about this period. In his evocative sketch Speaking of the Middle Ages, he touches upon Cohen. And Zumthor enjoyed doing interviews. With the Québécois journalist André Beauder, he circled back to his decisive encounter with the Théophiliens. For some reason, he was intent on recollecting that youthful phase again after all those years.

I went to see him in Montreal, six years ago. We agreed to meet at his house. As the roving critic, I imagined visiting an eminence grise in his book-lined study. My earlier meetings with other Théophiliens in Paris had happened under similar circumstances. No sooner was I in the door than he started in straightaway. The same rapidity, the same eagerness to talk that I had sensed in his letter. He checked my wheezy tape deck often to make sure that our conversation was being recorded. Here was a charismatic person. All the reports of a passionately engaged intellectual came home to me. I was taken by his charm, and unnerved by it. Because he had written so vividly on theatricality, I was on the lookout for his own dramatic ways, any exaggeration or mannerism. Sitting in that bright, white room, I was still wary that Zumthor would put on an act for me. But Zumthor was also the insistent teacher. He set a brisk rhythm. He was constantly, intrepidly probing. His voice boomeranged through the house.

We paced our talk with trips to the corner grocery store. In the evening, when Marie-Louise Ollier returned home from teaching, we all broke for dinner and a whiskey on the deck out back. The next morning, we continued on for several hours more. I was looking forward to summing up; Zumthor was ready to push on still further. When our conversation trailed off, we turned to look at illuminations of that thirteenth-century and Théophiliens hit, the Jeu de Robin et Marion, that I had brought for him. He laughed at the sight of them because, oddly enough, he couldn’t remember ever having seen them before. "I never was much of a manuscript type," he
confessed. It was time then for him to get back to his study (Marie-Louise Ollier was already at work in hers). I had to catch my train to Toronto.

What follows represents a synthesis of conversations stretching over those two days, that Indian summer weekend in Montreal. I have reproduced the major sequence of our exchanges, cutting only redundant passages. Four ellipsis points indicate such cuts; three ellipsis points, by contrast, mark significant speech pauses that sometimes shift the discussion. This dialogue took place in French. The translation is my own.

Parisian memories

8 September 1991

_Helen Solterer_: You began your literary studies with the medievalist Gustave Cohen in Paris in the early thirties. How did you understand his involvement in the theater then?

_Paul Zumthor_: To my mind, there were three reasons inciting Cohen to take a special interest in the theater. And that’s what he did best. For starters, there was his temperament. His build, his voice, his character, too; there was something of the actor in him. His classes were real performances that attracted crowds. There were hundreds of people who rushed to get into his main class at the Sorbonne.

_HS_: From the beginning of his teaching?

_PZ_: Let’s say from the beginning of my studies, for I didn’t know him before.

_HS_: But you had already heard of this professor — this _grand maître_?

_PZ_: Oh yes! When I arrived at the Sorbonne in the autumn of 1933, he already had a considerable reputation, and his reputation was well established given that he was not French. He was Belgian. He was decorated for his military service during World War I, and on account of these recognized merits, I think, he was integrated later on into the French university system. He had widespread connections in the Parisian scene among writers, artists. . . . You know, Cohen was no academic confined to a university world. At one point, he was in contact with Paul Valéry. He wrote a commentary on the _Cimetière marin_. He was involved with so many people. That was certainly a second factor playing a role or confirming his interest in the theater. He was very tied to Jean Copeau [Jacques Copeau]. I don’t know what the nature of their relationship was, but Cohen often talked about him. One of
our buddies in the Théophilien group was also an actor with Copeau, with whom he studied theater. He was an extremely talented guy, shot by the Germans during the war. And then the third element, I think, that inspired not only Cohen's interest in the theater, but also his Théophilien experiences, was the discovery he made at the beginning of his career: the Mons director's manual.\textsuperscript{14} It was the record of a theater director, transcribed in 1501, so it's quite early in date. This was a real find for Cohen, and throughout his entire career, he exploited his discovery. He used it, and prudently, I might add, when he decided to produce the *Miracle de Théophile*. I'm sure of it. And that was the first play he put on; that's how he came to call his troupe the Théophilien. Straightway he had imagined a dramatic production according to the model of *mansions*. [Actors had individual *mansions* on stage, sites marked by props or some architectural detail, where they returned once they were no longer directly involved in the action.]\textsuperscript{15} In any event, the manuscript of the *Miracle de Théophile* encouraged us to think that every actor has his place on stage. Even so, I think it was a notion coming from what was known about late medieval theater that led Cohen to extrapolate somewhat. He felt that it was a tradition going way back. As for me, I don't think he was wrong. One way or another, as a theatrical model, it was very effective.

*HS*: It seems to me that Cohen often worked from cases taken from the fifteenth century and adapted them for the high Middle Ages. Did he base this theory of *mansions*, or the theory for simultaneous stagecraft (*décor simultané*) upon later accounts of performance or illumination alone?

*PZ*: Let's say that indications in the manuscript didn't prove him wrong. In my opinion, he was not a great scholar, but he certainly knew a lot. And he wouldn't have invented such a theory if the manuscript evidence hadn't allowed for it at all. I remember well that at a certain point he put on the *Jeu d'Adam*. He did it free-form, on the public square, in front of the southern portal of Chartres Cathedral. There was no scenery. It was very beautiful. It was just the singers, divided up, and placed at different spots along the facade [see figure 1]. But, in any event, for this theatrical experiment, and for the creation of the *Miracle de Théophile*—creation in a theatrical sense—Cohen was a real pioneer. Today many people talk of this. Some remarkable work has been done on the subject; for instance, Rey-Fland's book on theater in the round, and Konigson's research on theatrical space. Today we talk with assurance about things which have been established because a lot of documents have been dug up, and studied carefully in the intervening time. But Cohen was really the first. Earlier on, scholars had asked questions; they had always
considered them through dialogue with the actor. But it seems to me that the real dramaturgical problem had never been raised among medievalists before Cohen. Obviously, there was Chambers’s book, *The Medieval Stage*.

**HS:** That was in 1911, before World War I?

**PZ:** Yes, but that was a book of a scholar, whereas Cohen’s work was that of a man of the theater. Cohen was on stage at the very time he was working on his research. He was really a director who reacted like a theater person.

**HS:** Did he himself act?

**PZ:** Not that I know of. When I was his student, he couldn’t have acted. He had a serious injury from World War I. He limped terribly, and in the end, this war injury aggravated all sorts of illnesses, from which he never recovered. That’s how he died. He died late, however. He died after the Second World War. During the war, he took refuge in America, where he taught at the Free University of New York.\(^\text{16}\)

**HS:** You mean at Hunter College, where Lévi-Strauss was, Cocteau, a group of refugees from Paris?

**PZ:** Yes, all those people. During the war, physically, morally, as a Jew, he couldn’t take what was happening. He returned to France in 1945 [figure 2]. I saw him by chance, by extraordinary chance.
HS: In Paris?

PZ: No, I was a professor in Amsterdam. By complete chance, I was his successor at the University of Amsterdam. For as a young professor of Belgian nationality, Cohen was responsible for setting up the French program in Amsterdam. “Created,” he would say. But, in fact, something was already in place. However, he really did develop it into something important. He made it into a chair of French, and so I was his distant successor. It was in Amsterdam that I saw him again.

HS: Was that in the fifties?

PZ: That’s right, it must have been sometime in the middle fifties. It was just before his death. It was awful because he could no longer stand up straight without help. In order to get around, he had a male nurse, a robust, strong fellow who had to carry him around in his arms like a child. That was a horrible end. Anyway, during the years when I was his student, from ’33-’36, he was really a theater man.

HS: Once you were a Cohen student, did that mean becoming an actor—a Théophilien? What exactly was the connection between the two?

PZ: I can only give you a rough idea. In the lecture course that Cohen gave at the Sorbonne, there were generally three hundred students in the
amphitheater. It was packed. And among the Théophiliens, there were probably ten or twelve. Those were the proportions. Actually he chose us. In my case, it happened like this: during my first year at the university, he gave a course on the Miracle de Théophile, and he suggested several paper topics, just as we do in seminars here: work to be handed in before a certain date. I remember that was my first university paper. It was the only time in my student life that I worked straight through the night.

HS: An all-nighter?

PZ: From six in the evening to nine the next morning! I'm not sure what the topic was, but I do remember that I made a comparison between the Miracle and Faust. That wasn't so stupid. It was a young fellow's hunch, but you know, there is a real link between the various stories. Faust is one of the modern forms that the Théophile story took. In any event, when Cohen handed back the papers, he had trouble deciphering my name. He said, "I would like this student to come to see me after class." So I showed up, we spoke briefly, and he asked me to drop by his apartment. He liked inviting students to his place. At the time, that was uncommon. A professor never entertained students at home. And so I told him about myself. He showed real interest in my case, and for a lot of reasons. But I think the fact that I was a Swiss student in France without French citizenship, that resembled his own circumstance. Way back, he had been a young Belgian student in Paris. Since he didn't have French citizenship, he was at a disadvantage as far as the entrance exams went [les concours], in fact, in terms of the entire organization of the French educational system. It is quite chauvinistic, you know. It was a situation similar to my own. A little time later, my father died suddenly, as a result of an accident, and my family was in a very difficult position. I went to Cohen, and he was extremely friendly toward me. He even helped my mother. He advised her, and he told me, "You ought to surround yourself with young people. Come join the Théophiliens." He addressed his students in the familiar "tu" form. That was also revolutionary at the time. He tutored the guys, and hugged the girls!

HS: I have heard that he considered himself a father of sorts. Did he play the "Daddy" role with the group of students gathered around him?

PZ: That's it. It was really seductive at first and then, well, after a little while, that bothered me. He was very paternal. Today, we would say paternalistic. And today, students would never put up with it. But at the time, it was so different. Our professors were on the whole cold, distant, rarely sympathetic.
For example, you know, Cohen was hardly well off. He had his professorial income, he had his apartment in Paris where he lived. He had his books, thousands and thousands of books, I don't know how many. His apartment was a library in fact. And then, over the years, he bought three small houses, barely houses. They were more like shacks, three meters by five. He had one close to Paris, in a place frequented by the Impressionists, Auvers [sur-Oise]; he had another, somewhere in the Alps, in the southern range; and Les Mimosas, on the Mediterranean coast near Bormes [La Croix-Valmer]. He would take his students there, at least the Théophiliens. For example, I stayed at Les Mimosas. We were all there, the entire troupe. There were ten or fifteen of us. And we camped. He stayed in the house with his wife. He had a small room, and a tiny kitchen. ... You know he did that with such kindness. But at the same time he remained lord of his manor. He liked it when we called him "Maitre." For instance, we didn't call him "Sir," but instead "Maitre." Even among ourselves, we would say "le Maitre."

HS: But wasn't that common at the time? I mean, weren't all professors at the Sorbonne addressed as "Maitre?"

PZ: Yes, yes. I remember his wife, a really nice woman. She died before the war; luckily for her, she didn't have to live to... because when the Germans made it to Paris, Cohen had to flee. The Germans destroyed his entire library and all his notes. Destroyed it, ransacked it, stole it, whatever. In any event, when he came back after the war, the apartment was empty. Anyway, his wife died before all that. She was a great person, a little on the quiet side. So when he was talking to his students, he wouldn't call her "my wife." He would say "la maman Théophilienne!"

HS: So there was always this sense of a big, happy family, with brothers and sisters, moms and dads, even grandmothers.

PZ: That's exactly how it was, that's right. And I remember one time there was a young girl who was part of the troupe, a really nice girl whose name I don't remember. She acted in the Théophile, she played the part of the Virgin Mary, and one day she told us that she was going to enter the convent. She was barely twenty-two. One evening, she explained to us that she was going to enter the day after the last performance. That time she was playing in the Jeu de Marie Madeleine. Cohen had based this production on the Mystère of André Greban. She and I both acted in it. I'm not sure what role she was to take on, but in any event, after the performance, behind stage, when she was still all made up, Cohen showed up in his smoking jacket. He gath-
ered us all around him, and started to speak: “tonight we say good-bye to our sister.” And then he took her in his arms, and he began to cry. And I can remember it so well, I can hear it still, the sound of big tears rolling down his beard, falling on the lapels of his jacket. And that made a sound: *floc, floc, flœc*...

*HS*: What a scene.

*PZ*: Right. As I was telling you, he was a real actor. He was a man of the theater through and through. He would certainly have had a lot of success on stage. Except for his infirmities—that handicapped him a great deal.

*HS*: And you, what roles did you play?

*PZ*: In the *Miracle de Théophile*, I played God. When I started acting, the group was already in existence. Oh yes, I have to mention something else first. The group was founded, I think, about the time that I first arrived at the university, or just before that. It must have been set up during ’33. And in ’34, it was followed by the founding of Mazon’s group. That was the troupe of classics students who imitated the medievalists. It was the beginning of a movement—a real movement.

*HS*: Was this the troupe that Roland Barthes joined?

*PZ*: That’s the one, the Mazon troupe. But you know I met Barthes, sitting next to him in class. Barthes was two years older than me, I think. But because of his illness, and the fixed sequence of courses, we ended up together in the same class. I can’t put an exact date on it, but we took a Latin course together from Pierre de Labriolle in ’34 or ’35. . . . All of that to say that by creating the Théophilien troupe, Cohen really changed the way we looked at medieval theater. He was at the beginning—at least in France—of a movement that tried to move the study of theater away from the mere study of texts. At the time, as young students, we were simply taken by the fact that it was something completely new. He gave us the feeling of a window opening up—a huge window on the world. Over time, I am sure of it, Cohen made a big mark. In the long run, it was satisfying, successful.

*HS*: So the idea of dramatizing medieval texts wasn’t initially strange or even off-putting for you. Was it an invitation of sorts? A challenge?

*PZ*: Listen, that makes me think of someone else whose courses I took and whom I admired a great deal. I’m thinking of Edmond Faral who was the
very opposite of Cohen. Today, we would say that Faral came up with theories and principles that helped everyone who tried to understand medieval jongleurs later on. But by temperament, personality, even his own bias, Faral was completely uninterested in anything that did not involve the text—we could even say the printed text. In some respects, he was a man of real talent. But in others, his work remains sterile, at least for me, because he could never go beyond the text. Cohen moved beyond it. He went further. Some said—including Faral—“He’s a showman.” Maybe they weren’t wrong. However, there are some texts for which one must be a bit of a showman.

HS: Did Faral ever go to see the Théophiliens perform?

PZ: Not that I know of, that would surprise me. I think that most of Cohen’s colleagues thought that Cohen did theater just as others did stamp-collecting. It was his hobby. In other words, it wasn’t serious. It wasn’t research or university work, really.

HS: What was a Théophilien production then? Let’s take the example of the Miracle.

PZ: Cohen followed the manuscript notations. Now this sort of guideline was never very complete, all the more so given that the text of this play began abruptly in the manuscript. In my opinion, and Cohen’s as well, a folio page must have been lost. The prologue was missing. And such a prologue would have served to set the scene. None of the action of the scenario was affected. Nothing was really missing. But it is strange that a religious play like this has no prologue, especially since the series of miracles, the Dutch version, the German and Italian plays, they all have one. In any event, to come back to the manuscript, the missing commentary did bother us. There were a few clear indications that survived, however, such as: “Théophile goes to the bishop’s residence,” “Théophile goes to the sorcerer.” This gave the impression of multiple settings. Cohen was inspired by these sorts of directions. He imagined that between scenes, the actors could remain standing on stage, at their appointed places, there in front of their mansions. There is a certain visual evidence for this approach. I remember that Cohen took us—not only the Théophiliens, but a group of young people who were taking his course—to the north portal of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. There we could see an entire tympanum that represented the story of Théophile. To be sure, this was a legend that was widely known. So we cannot be certain that the sculptor was representing a performance. That is overstating the case a bit. But that
was Cohen's idea. He went so far as to say that since the tympanum was sculpted in the middle of the thirteenth century, we should situate the performance of the *Miracle de Théophile* at that time. Given the content, this particular *miracle* must have been performed in the vicinity of the church. Since [the poet and jongleur] Rutebeuf was working principally in Paris, Cohen also drew the conclusion that, in all likelihood, the *Miracle* had to have been performed outside one of the facades, or maybe within the church of Notre Dame at the very moment when the sculptors were in the process of sculpting this capital, I mean, the tympanum. I'm not entirely convinced. But in any event, there is a resemblance. You can follow the sequence and division of scenes in the sculpture and they correspond well [to the play]. . . .

*HS:* Did the Théophiliens perform the *Miracle* in front of Notre Dame?

*PZ:* No, we never did. To my knowledge the only thing staged in front of a church was the *Jeu d'Adam*, in front of the portal, on the southern facade of Notre Dame at Chartres. It was very beautiful. But above all, it was a fine musical event. From the beginning of this experiment, Cohen had dramatic advice from Copeau. Another element adding enormously to the success of these performances was the music, arranged by Jacques Chaillé. He was a student of my generation. Chaillé was one of our gang; he took Cohen's courses because he was very interested in the Middle Ages. But he was really a music student. He majored in medieval musicology. He put together a choral group, called the Psallette de Notre-Dame, I think [see figure 3]. I don't recall what exactly they sang in the *Miracle de Théophile*, but Cohen had the idea of creating a kind of musical illustration, prologue, epilogue, as it stands at the end of the manuscript. He asked them to sing the *Te Deum*. In that way the performance was articulated musically. It gave greater depth to the *Jeu d'Adam*, especially since we were able to turn to the Cathedral Choir. It all worked very well because the *Jeu d'Adam* includes a number of liturgical responses. Ordinarily, they are dropped from the editions. It was really very beautiful because in the end, the dialogue seemed like a commentary on what was being sung. Usually we are liable to say the opposite. But we need to consider this example. As the sung verses are taken from the Lenten liturgy or some other, the spoken dialogue is interpreted both in a narrative and historical sense.

*HS:* Is there a kind of echoing?

*PZ:* That's right. These are musical echoes. All this should be considered as one symbolic ensemble: the song is the divine word, and the spoken dialogue, the human. Even with the differences between singing and speaking,
the human word only weakly transposes the divine. It translates what is ahistorical in a historical register.

HS: And how is the diabolical word represented?

PZ: Moïse Abbadi played the role of the sorcerer, and he was extraordinary. At the time Cohen convinced us, and he taught us all about being silent. Abbadi played a devil who did not speak; he was dumb.

HS: What an ominous silence.

PZ: As for the sorcerer, according to Cohen, he spoke what was a distorted form of Hebrew. But I think these are just arbitrary sounds, stripped of all sense.

HS: A jumble of words? Pure nonsense?

PZ: That’s right. So when Abbadi played this, it was poignant. We were all stunned. Much later, when I thought about this all again, it seemed to me
that nothing remained of language except its rhythm. To speak with the devil, one had to go deeper, to descend below the level of spoken language to reach simply the rhythms of the voice. So the devil does not speak.

HS: Is this the degree zero of language?

PZ: Evidently. When we read medieval texts, often they appear to us impoverished. But that's precisely it. [When they are spoken or sung,] all these elements give them their depth, their force, making them really powerful. It is obvious that these things can make a huge impression on spectators.

HS: What were the reactions of audiences in Paris and elsewhere?

PZ: For starters, we played in a hall still there at the Sorbonne [salle Louis Liard; see figure 4]. It was not well suited for this, obviously. It was much too small, but we always had an enthusiastic response. Then we went on several tours, in the provinces, abroad. But for various reasons, I didn't participate in all of them. I do remember performing in the South, in Menton in particular, and in Marseille, I believe. I don't have a memory of the audience.
We performed in a square, outdoors, a very handsome setting. And we also performed in the Comic Opera House. And now I recall lots of applause. . . . That must have been in '34-'35, no later than '35. To tell the truth, I remember that what has stayed with me most from all this Théophilien experiment, what I still cherish most, was the team spirit it fostered. And one of friendship, of a kind of lively exchange. That's what this collaboration gave me. And that was completely different from the customary arid quality of university life. For me, those were difficult years because, [as I said,] at the beginning of my studies, my father died. There were all sorts of enormous changes in our family life, and obviously, without even realizing it at the time, I had enormous need of a friendly milieu—something that my studies couldn't bring me. That's what I first found with them. Then, little by little, when I reflected on the work we were doing, I began to see it in terms of my participation in the theater. And, if you like, it was through the desire to do theater that I was brought into the group. Through Cohen's invitation, I found a milieu that was incredibly warm. After two years, I became a little disenchanted. It started to feel stifling to me, maybe precisely that aspect of close camaraderie. . . . As far as my theatrical experience went, it was only afterward, much later, when I thought about what Cohen had wanted us to do, that I began to think along the lines and draw all the conclusions that we have been talking about. So that's how I came to perform. I had had two roles. The first time, shortly after I had joined the Théophiliens, we were rehearsing Le Jeu de Mary Madeleine, which Cohen had taken from Gréban's Mystère de la passion. When the roles were distributed, I got to do a prophet. At a certain point in the play, I had a tirade to deliver, and I remember that during the performance I wore a remarkable robe, a long robe like a toga, and I remember it as yellow. Yes, it was Cohen's idea, that was a Jewish color. It was a minor role, but I think that I did quite well. I have one strong memory: learning the part off by heart wasn't a problem for me, but performing it naturally was. I had real problems. I rehearsed a lot. Then, with the principal play, the Miracle de Théophile, there my memory betrays me. I have the impression that I came to it late so that they only used me when there were no-shows. . . . In '35, however, Cohen did ask me to take the role of God. Then his idea was, as I was telling you, these various little mansions for each character. In the manuscript of the Miracle, it is mentioned somewhere that the Virgin was sitting next to God, but, let's say, that God was nowhere to be found. So Cohen decided to put God on stage. He arranged the stage set from left to right, running from heaven on one side, to hell on the other. And there were all the little mansions of the different actors, lined up in
between, according to their degree of virtue or vice. Thus the closest to hell was the Jewish sorcerer. The closest to heaven, that was the bishop.

HS: Oh, that hierarchy.

PZ: A hierarchy, right. In heaven, there was God. It was not a speaking part, and he stayed immobile. I was seated on a throne with a crown. It was made of wood and it made my head ache. And then I was holding a scepter. My only gesture was to be, at the moment that Mary pronounced a long prayer, to give my blessing, by making the gesture of lowering my scepter. That was Cohen's idea, like a ceremony of investiture. There was the young girl I was talking about; she was kneeling in front of me, dressed all in white, and had to recite this magnificent prayer. Light was blazing from the edge of the stage. Without my glasses, I was blinded and dazzled. I could barely make out the face of my friend. She had such presence. At a certain moment, when I had completely forgotten to lower my scepter, she said between her teeth, "in the name of God, lower your scepter!!"

HS: And so you obeyed her?

PZ: Yes, that's my memory ... But you know, when you are not accustomed to the stage; the proscenium is all lit up. Performing without my glasses, and being near-sighted, I couldn't make out the stage lights, and I was so tense that I could hardly follow along. But I still had the impression that it all went extremely well. It was a hit, and in any event, that lasted until the war. After the war, they continued performing, but I don't think Cohen was involved. They put on the major part of the Mystère de la passion of Arnoul Gréban on the esplanade in front of Notre Dame in Paris.

HS: As you say, that was later, in the late forties and fifties. But before the war, what precisely was the seductive quality of these performances? How did they touch people so deeply?

PZ: Yes, for people with a literary background, that was a big surprise. The "cultivated French person"—as the expression goes—considered these old texts, as he had always done, as something minor. One was interested in them much as one was curious about fairy tales. And all of a sudden they took on another power. Yes, I remember, the young woman whom I mentioned, who became a nun. At the end of the Miracle de Théophile, playing Mary, she recited a long prayer. When this is done by an actress with real talent, it is amazing. No audience can resist its enthralling character. For people with a literary background, like [the critic Benjamin] Crémieux, I'm
not sure. With [the critic Robert] Brasillach, I know that he was very
taken by it. Maybe it was that he perceived that, much more than with
modern dramatic works, these are plays that exist through the presence of
the actor. You know, there is another text of Rutebeuf, a monologue, the
Dit de l’herberie. I saw it performed in the Comic Opera House. It was at
the beginning of a performance, done by Moïse Abbadi. It was absolutely
extraordinary. The audience were on the edge of their seats. He made it
happen. He used comic techniques to create something tragic, I’m not sure
how. Maybe it is my memory, maybe my memory is playing tricks on me.
At any rate, that was how it stuck with me. You know all that happened in
’37 or ’38. We sensed very well what was going to happen. Moïse found a
way to relay something of that collective anguish in his performance. He
was a great actor.

HS: So you are saying that his playing responded to the feelings of uncer-
tainty and anguish of the time?

PZ: There certainly was something there. That’s talent, I suppose. The real
talent of an actor who knows how to perform. Cohen had an instinct too.
And then behind him, I think, was Copeau, who must have given him good
advice [figure 5]. Cohen had a flair for choosing people with talent. He
picked out at least several young actors with considerable gifts who can get
something across. Next to them, if the minor roles were taken by more
mediocre actors, it really didn’t matter. I have a memory of that young
woman, the one who played Mary Magdalen. . . . She was perfect, a real
talent. In her case since she entered the convent, you can guess that there was
a profound personal connection with the religious aspect of the text. In any
event, that’s how I imagine it. She likely identified with the role by way of,
or because of, a particular piety for Mary.

HS: Was this the case with most of the student-actors?

PZ: No, but it was certainly Abbadi’s case when he performed the role of the
sorcerer. He only had to say a few words before; but Abbadi had a tragic
actor’s temperament, or more precisely he was a comic actor with a tragic
temperament, that is the strongest combination.

HS: Apparently Cohen converted to Christianity while working with the
Théophiliens. What do you make of this?

PZ: Yes. I’m not sure when exactly Cohen converted, but when I knew him
during the thirties, I had the impression that he was very attracted by Chris-
Figure 5.
Jacques Copeau presenting the Miracle du pain doré, performed in the fifteenth-century Hôtel-Dieu, Beaune, Burgundy, 1943.

tianity. But maybe he had already converted and I simply didn’t know. For me, at age twenty, those things didn’t pose a problem. I didn’t even ask myself the question. I learnt that he converted after the war. I presume that in the years around ’33, ’35, he hadn’t yet officially converted, but it was clear that he was so inclined, and he had a good knowledge of Christian mythology. But I guess that he may have been pushed in that direction from way back. That’s how people change, at least in certain cases, very slowly.

HS: Jacques Copeau also rediscovered a certain religious sensibility. It has been suggested that he converted while in full swing of his theatrical work. I’m not asking a theological question. I’m interested instead in the problem of identification. If one is trained to perform religious plays passionately and with real fervor, is one likely to begin identifying with the play personally?

PZ: Yes, yes, that is a crucial question. Can identification go beyond the character to touch even the content of speeches? That is important. But it gives me pause. In Cohen’s case, one can say that a certain identification occurred since the man was Jewish and never hid that fact. In fact, he presented himself as a Sephardic Jew by origin. Yet he devoted his entire career to researching and teaching medieval works that were stamped with a heavy mark of Christianity. But we could also cite the cases of other medievalists, even important medievalists, who were Jews, for whom there was no such identification. We are in the domain of the individual here, and for that reason, I hesitate. In the case of the young woman whom I mentioned a while back, someone brought up in a Christian family, with an obvious talent and taste for the theater, there the two elements seem to have come together leading her to join this group, and not another, to ask for such and such a role, and not another. Nevertheless, I hesitate to claim that once an actor is strong, he or she identifies with the [theatrical] character. That’s for sure. As for identification with what the character says, the role, there, I would say, perhaps we have a factor in certain cases. In fact, that is much of what the censors said about tragedy during the classical period. In effect, there can be a kind of identification that takes place without it becoming a matter of course.

HS: During these years, Bertolt Brecht was developing his acting theory of the “Alienation Effect.” I have often wondered whether there could be any connection between such a theory and the common theatrical experiences of the time?

PZ: Let’s say that I didn’t feel it that way. As far as I know there was no theory opposing Brecht’s explicitly at the time, unless one is going to cite some
position of Artaud. Anyhow, it is true that I was very young at the time and was far from knowing all that was going on. For us in the Théophilien group, Artaud was little more than a name. I had heard of him; I read some of his texts for the first time during the war, in the forties. As far as I remember, however, it was not an issue for the Théophilien among ourselves. Nor were theoretical questions about the theater ever on Cohen's lips. In a sense, the question of theatricality was implicit insofar as it was part of his research, his discovery of the Mons manuscript. It came from a very definite idea as to how a medieval text should be performed. On that point, his teaching was very clear. And as for the practice on stage, as I told you, there he was really a director.... And so since he frequented Jacques Copeau's circle and adored the theater, it would surprise me if he didn't have some ideas on theatricality [figures 6 and 7]. But for those very same practical reasons, I would guess, he must have thought that it wasn't necessary with his group. A director isn't going to do theory when he has fifteen actors to work with on stage.

HS: From our point of view today, it is interesting to place the Théophilien effort in a wider context. Your talking about Copeau and Artaud clarifies this context.

PZ: Yes, yes. For me, what is clear is that the memories going back to that period [of the Théophilien] have certainly played a role in leading me to the idea that all medieval texts should be understood through performance: not only the so-called dramatic works, but in a general way, all poetic texts of the Middle Ages. When I began to orient myself in that direction some fifteen years ago, I can't say that I thought especially of that, but, yes, I am convinced that it has played a role.

A poetic perception of things

HS: And what of your own teaching?

PZ: It has happened that I performed a text in front of students.

HS: Which one?

PZ: I remember, for example, something that I used to do here in Montreal when I was talking about chansons de geste, so as to give them an idea of what that could have been. I began to sing the scanned part of the song that we know. Or there was a kind of popular epic in local dialect, composed in the
Figure 6.
Copeau's group, les Copiaus, performing in Beaune.

Figure 7.
seventeenth century, that was only really known by the working class through broadsheets. It tells the story of how the people of Geneva were victorious over the Duke of Savoy who wanted to restore Catholicism. We always sang that song in Geneva—a kind of national anthem. In any event, on many occasions, I sang it for my students in dialect. I also tried another experiment with them. I recited a romance, out loud and with a minimum of gestures, a romance of five thousand verses. The Roman d’Eraclée of Gaultier d’Arras has allowed me to try all sorts of things. I did it several times, it finally took hold of me. All in all, I must have recited for eight hours.

HS: And how did the students take to it?

PZ: Oh, in general, they were enthusiastic. Just as we were with Cohen in 1930. It’s because that completely changes a class. And that’s what one must do—change it, I’m sure of it, so that the students began to realize, in whatever confused way, that these are not texts like any others. They bear a special mark. Not only do these texts need to be performed. They are also texts with which we must play. The author constructs a material for playing. Specialists do the rest, or amateurs who take it from there.

HS: That’s quite an image of Professor Zumthor, the actor and director in an amphitheater at the University of Montreal. Are teachers in some manner performers?

PZ: I have always been convinced of that, since the beginning of my career, from the time when, as a young professor, I began to get control of the various difficulties in teaching, and finally began to engage my audience. I realized that it is important to engage them much as an actor engages his public. So when I came here to Montreal I was able to test it out. That was fairly late, at the end of my career. I came here in 1972. They brought me because they needed someone who was experienced. They gave me a challenging assignment, one that I accepted enthusiastically, and that was to give an introductory course on the Middle Ages that would spark student interest. It was a required course, and it met on Friday afternoon. I had between 250 and 300 students in a huge amphitheater. In other words, the worst conditions. . . . Somehow I had to hold their attention. I had to fashion the course in such a way that they came away with something positive each time; that they realized something that they didn’t have at the beginning of class. Something simple and important. And to pull that off, I had to master my voice, my gestures. I moved around the room a lot. And my first gesture was
always to unplug the microphone. I told them that I didn't need it. I have a strong enough voice; if I used the microphone, I would deafen them. It was "my one man show." That was ten years ago. People still stop me in the street, men and women who greet me and say, "Don't you remember? I was in your class." One of my students, now a radio journalist, told me last year that of all the courses he took, that was the only one where he saw students get up spontaneously to give a round of applause.

HS: Now that's theatrical.

PZ: That's for sure. You could even say that they were responding in my language. And that is absolutely necessary. Theater is part of teaching. . . . And what you are saying takes up these terms and applies them to all medieval texts; many of our texts are made for such play.

HS: Giving a theatrical atmosphere to your classroom, making something theatrical out of medieval texts, or should I say medieval things: were those the unexpected fruits of Cohen's teaching?

PZ: Yes, yes, without a doubt. In any event, that is certain with the passage of time. I have to acknowledge that Cohen was a mediocre scholar. However everyone who was his student was passionately taken by the Middle Ages. In other words, he was not among the first-rate critics, but he communicated something profound to his students. He gave them a close connection to the material. And that is very important [figure 8]. Later on, one can always train young people, equip them for research. But to begin with, one must empassion them. The material must seduce them, and the material comes to them by way of the teacher's action: he must enthral them.

HS: In his essays, Cohen gives his own reminiscences of studying with Joseph Bédier. He calls him a magician or enchanter. Is this the sense you mean when you talk of a teacher being enthralling?

PZ: It's possible. I didn't know Bédier. But what does strike me in Cohen's thinking is that he is absolutely right. Bédier the enchanting writer. That's very rare among academics. I'm thinking of Bédier's Légendes épiques, admirably well written. His Tristan et Iseut. That's magnificent. In any event, I don't know what went on in his classes, but the fact that Bédier wrote so well means that he was an enchanter.

HS: Do you think a person such as Bédier risks getting caught up in his own many talents?
PZ: I don’t know. But what is clear to me is that since I was very young, I have always felt a certain fertility—creativity—that comes with a poetic understanding of things. When I say “poetic,” I am talking about something very specific. For me, there is a type of intelligence that I call poetic, that works principally by analogy, whereas an intelligence called scientific acts through reduction. I am simplifying a lot here, but poetic intelligence makes itself apparent through language, through forms of speaking and acting. Even the simple fact of combining literary qualities with research, that is already a manifestation, however minor, of poetic intelligence. And I think that poetic intelligence understood in this manner has the power to persuade. If certain people object to that, I would say, too bad for them!

HS: And such a poetic intelligence? Do you think Bédier had it? Cohen? yourself?

PZ: Ah, Bédier, for sure. And Cohen, too, without a doubt. Actually in the case of Cohen, it is obvious in his theatrical activities. That is absolutely clear. For his writings, it is less clear. I have to say that there is no one great Cohen text. His work as a whole is very uneven. As for myself, it is basic, absolutely
fundamental. I have developed it. Of that much, I am very aware:... I have written poems. I attach the greatest importance to that. And I think that means naturally that when we turn to examine an object, it is a form of poetic intelligence that leads us to compare this object with others. Of course, analogies must be disciplined. With poetry, it is the opposite. All such control must be abolished. Yet when you use this type of intelligence in research or in writing an essay, it has to be disciplined. That is a question of knowledge.

HS: How do you discipline it? How do you take account of differences in the two analogous objects while at the same time benefiting fully from the analogy?

PZ: Let me give you an example. Let’s take the fabliaux. Ten years ago, an idea came to me, an analogy that functions well, I think. I took a trip to Japan where I have a number of medievalist colleagues from way back. The Japanese Middle Ages is very interesting. They took me to see a kind of drama, for which there are at least a dozen theaters in Tokyo. It’s what they call the rakugo. So we went, and when I came out, I said to myself, “That’s it, a solution for all my problems with the fabliaux.” I had found a story of about the same length as a fabliau, constructed completely out of dialogue, and their subjects were much the same. So there were the elements of analogy. But of course, the rakugo is a genre known and cultivated in Japan in the sixteenth century, maybe even further back. There is a body of some six hundred stories. They are meant to be performed according to very strict rules. One of the rules in particular stipulates that the storyteller must use several registers of his voice for the different characters in the story, something which allows one actor to play all the parts in a dialogue. That explained many things to me about fabliaux. But of course it offers no proof. Such analogies allow you to say, “And if...,” “Maybe one day, someone will find something more convincing.” Of course, what I really mean by poetic intelligence, by a poetic perception of things, is that nothing is completely dead. Everything lives. You simply have to find the rhythm.

Translating body languages

HS: Everything seen or understood poetically is thus “alive.” Your talk of this “living” quality makes me think of Cohen’s vocabulary of incarnation.

PZ: That was Cohen’s poetic side. No question about it. And Cohen was manifestly a sensual person. Such sensuality is not an indispensable condi-
tion, but it is often closely linked to a poetic perception of things, at least in sensitive people. One felt that he was a man who, despite his infirmities, despite the times, was someone who loved life. And for that reason he became very attached to young people. Since I had a career that resembled his own a bit, I have taken my distance. I've been critical. But I know that there are some former Théophilien buddies, people whose lives have taken them in different directions, who still maintain a clear memory of Cohen, intact, completely enthusiastic. As far as his language of incarnation goes, you know, I have taken a lead from this vocabulary, and not just the vocabulary. I have oriented my own thinking according to this perspective. I would say, and not without some hesitation, that there are some implications to it that I did not want to consider. But at least for us humans, nothing is alive except by means of the body. This body, it is the means, the medium, and the sign of life. That which is bodyless can still exist in some way for us. That is only natural. But I would say that such an existence comes out of fiction. I don't want to trespass on the domain of religious belief, but it is not felt as life. I'll say it again: the body is at once the origin, source, medium, and sign. Sure, this is a truism in the sense that any doctor or psychologist will tell you that what is called the mind or spirit cannot function independently of the body. I would put it another way. In my opinion, there is no knowledge that can be fully abstracted from the experience of the senses. In saying as much, I am coming back to what we were saying about poetic intelligence a little while ago. Abstract knowledge, purely abstract knowledge, is instrumental rather than existential. It is of a completely different order. What I know of existence, I know that it exists because I perceive it. From this perspective, the Middle Ages, like so many human cultures, is quite heterogeneous. On the one hand, there was a brand of theological thought that was coherent, stronger, and more closed in on itself than during other periods. It was imposed on a reality that often escaped it completely. But what the poets were saying provides a witness to such a reality, and one that escapes the grasp of theology. Medieval poets are profound bodily voices. And that is for a number of reasons. The principal one is that the voice represents the medium of human communication; it makes for social contact; it creates links. And the voice is intrinsically an emanation of body.

HS: Taking up your own terms again, if we proceed by analogy, it seems to me that there are correspondences between a language of body in the vast majority of medieval works and a language of body that appears in critical writing on medieval culture.
PZ: Yes, doubtless. There is a kind of critical language too. And when you happen upon a critic or a historian who has this language, you sense it right away. There was Barthes, above all, there was Roland Barthes . . . but I wanted to add something else, something about medievalists who would be comparable to Barthes. I think that this language comes from such a bodily, poetic voice. When it talks to us of today’s world, then it talks in a way that touches us immediately. But when it talks of the Middle Ages, it is obliged to take on all sorts of historical “noise.” That makes it heavy, weighs it down. And so it requires a stronger talent to pull it off. The effort is much riskier.

HS: But doesn’t this critical “body language” have a considerable theological dimension?

PZ: Of course. When Cohen, for example, was seeking a way to approach the medieval work, to be close to it, he came across the idea of embodiment, of body, of incarnation. Given the theological charge that Christianity attributes to such notions, that must have touched off a profound search in him. Or it may even have resulted in a conviction of sorts. And so he played with just this ambivalence.

HS: So for you, it remains ambiguous. In other words, Cohen manipulated . . .

PZ: Maybe I am being unfair or a bad judge, but from my memories of Cohen the person, I feel that there was ambivalence. That is to say that he used the term [incarnation] full well knowing that among some of his Christian audiences, that would awaken these sorts of echoes.

HS: But that for others, it was not necessarily a theological notion.

PZ: No, not necessarily. Only we do have to consider the fact that in Western Europe during the thirties, the Christian tradition was still extremely strong. If a large number of intellectuals had abandoned it, they had certainly not forgotten its terminology. At the time, anyone with a biblical background—today that may no longer be the case . . . If I put it this way now, it is because it is confused in my memory. I remember well that there was a moment for me, not at the time that I was studying with Cohen, but a little bit later, when just such ambivalence gave me pleasure. To talk about existence, daily experience, and in the process to use terms that had a theological resonance elsewhere, that pleased me. And I wasn’t the only one like that. As far as I can remember, it was a state of mind that was very common among young intellectuals, twenty-year-olds, who came from a Christian background, during the thirties and up until the beginning of the forties. A
little bit later, I had that impression; for example, when I married a young woman about my own age, who came from much the same circle. For her, it was the same thing. I remember that when we were twenty or twenty-five, we looked constantly for such ambivalences which seemed to us a way of renewing our conception of different worlds, and of Christianity itself. Afterward, it quickly became intolerable. Then we abandoned it, as with many other things. But for Cohen, when he talked of incarnation, he was applying a discourse heavy with religious connotation to a certain conception that he had of his object, to texts that he loved.

**HS:** A little while ago, you mentioned Artaud. But he, too, played with this quasi-theological vocabulary from time to time. At one point he talked of a “theatrical trans-substantiation.”

**PZ:** You know what was happening? That’s the kind of ambivalence in the thirties and forties that we’re talking about. And the term was being used in two completely different senses. By people like Artaud, with the aim of desacralizing an object, and by others, Christians for the most part who represented the avant-garde of the Church, with the aim of re-sacralizing something.

**HS:** And then there was Barthes’s term: *ultracarnation.* Is that a good example of what you mean by this desacralizing aim?

**PZ:** Yes, exactly. And with Barthes, the substitution of another prefix—that little point of snobism, that coquettishness on his part—it signals something else. Because there, we sense irony about the original term.

**HS:** Repeating the term, but making it somehow different at the same time.

**PZ:** Yes, that’s it. Or else one is looking for the opposite effect, one is confounding or effacing the difference between the two. Put another way, the same word *incarnation* could be used to designate a poetic phenomenon and elsewhere a theological one. And it can also be done to create a confusion that will end up by eliminating the sacred. Because it can just as easily be desacralizing as sacralizing.

**HS:** One doesn’t prevent the other. When did you begin to use the concept of theatricality?

**PZ:** The term *theatricality,* I think I used it for the first time in the *Essai de poétique médiévale.* Except it didn’t yet carry all the senses that I would give it later. I took it up again, but independently from the Middle Ages, in
L’Introduction à la poésie orale. I deepened it considerably in the more recent work, La Lettre et la voix. I came back to it relatively late. The real reason why? It took me years to go through a mass of material, to acquire gradually all the frameworks of knowledge that I have now. Let me think . . . this idea of theatricality. The Essai came out in ’72. Yes, it’s at the very beginning of the book. I started to talk about the theatrical aspects of play and about performance in my courses. Later, I spoke about the voice, and the voice led me to the body, to play. I started all that around 1965–66.

HS: Those were festive years in the sixties. Things were hopping.

PZ: That’s for sure. There was a kind of high; that was very clear. That resulted in a rethinking of several models, with me and a certain number of other people from the current generation. It ended up by us questioning the content of our teaching—of teaching as a whole. I remember in 1968 when I was directing the Institute for Romance Languages in Amsterdam. That was a big operation; there were four hundred students and a near revolution. No, it was quite serious in Amsterdam. A woman student was killed by the police. A group formed, a type of student committee, with whom I collaborated straightaway. And together we attempted a kind of teaching reform based entirely on oral forms. That is to say, we banished the mediation of the written text. We didn’t exactly abolish books, but we tried to come up with a type of teaching that counted more and more on ordinary conversation. We tried, and I managed to hold on for a year and a half. We had a hard time, in the end, because you can’t easily improvise such things. . . . That’s what happened. So it seemed to me. So I left.

HS: From the lessons and experiences of the thirties to the sixties, that’s quite a jump. As far as your thinking about theatricality goes, how do you see this interval?

PZ: In my particular case, I was going to say that from the time when I was Cohen’s student, to the sixties, to ’65, nearly thirty years went by. But those years were, first of all, war years, during which we had other things to do. Then, for me, they were real years of training. The forties were a kind of apprenticeship, during which time I learned a lot, I read many works, I produced the book, Histoire littéraire de la France médiévale. That took me ten years and taught me a great deal. Essentially, my university studies gave me ideas; I got to meet people like Cohen. It was a really enriching experience. But it taught me very little. The university taught me little indeed. So I had to learn by myself afterward. It took me almost twenty years. Then, taking
into account that there was the war, and my book that didn't appear until 1954, those were my . . .

HS: Apprentice years?

PZ: *Meine Lehrer Jahre*, as in *Wilhelm Meister*.

HS: *Stimm*.

PZ: That's when I really started to look at things. I can say that the first truly original step that I took, where I tried to go beyond all that I had learned and all my earlier experiences, maybe there, some of these images from the old Sorbonne were revived. It was an idea that came to me in Poitiers where I had seen [Edmond] René Labande, the historian, who was in the process of putting together a collection of photographs of medieval art.²⁴ He had spread these photographs out on the floor, and I took a packet of them, flipping through them rapidly. Remember the game that kids used to play, where you gave them twenty versions of an image, each slightly different? When you flipped through them rapidly, it gave you the impression of a moving picture, a kind of movie. Anyway, that's what gave me the idea of “mouvance,” or variation. At much the same time, I had an Italian friend and colleague, Darco Avalle, whose first article was “Variatione su tema obligato,” and that was it exactly.²⁵ Only he was working with literary texts, and I with photographic ones. That gave me profoundly the notion that everything lives, much like a body, through its flow of blood. Look, at the time, I would not have been able to use that kind of metaphor. But you know, in the end, it is possible that there, some memories of Cohen may well have come back again—maybe not so much of his teaching as of his conversations about theater. Because Cohen practiced a kind of theatrical variation too.

HS: But those were the very years of high structuralism. Wasn't there a distinction, even a complete separation between a linguistic structure and gestures or the language of the body?

PZ: There you are perfectly right. I think that the impact of structuralism on me was to delay my coming out with all I had to say on the body and the voice. It greatly delayed things. I could well have said them earlier if there had not been this episode of structuralism. Granted, that enabled me to do a lot of other things. That was at the beginning of the sixties, when in the circle where I worked, it represented a moment of great importance. . . . It was at that point that I got to know Greimas; we stayed in close contact for a long time. These people brought a kind of scientific rigor that had always
been lacking in our study. Yet we had to go through all of that in order to realize: at the price of what? of what sorts of values? I think that this sort of auto-critique corresponds to the years when I wrote the *Essai de poétique médiévale*. You can make that out in the *Essai*. There are passages in it which remind me of pages from Todorov’s earliest writing. There are others where I begin for the first time to take up the idea of theatricality. These are at the beginning, the first few chapters, which were, in effect, the last ones to be written.

*HS:* Would you say that there was a similar development in Barthes’s writing over these years?

*PZ:* I have always had the impression that Barthes, on his side, and myself, in a more modest fashion, we came to a similar field of research. Not only did I read everything that Barthes wrote, but he was a person toward whom I felt real friendship. He was a person of enormous discretion. He rarely revealed himself, but I always had the feeling that he looked kindly toward me. That kind of evolution, his and mine, must have happened at the same moment, at the end of the sixties. And that is when, at least for me, he wrote some of his finest books—*Fragments of a Lover’s Discourse* . . . admirable. Now there’s the kind of book I would have loved to have written. In any event, this parallelism is even more significant because, Barthes and I, we are of the same generation, but we were two very different people.

**Those theatrical years**

9 September 1991

*HS:* What was the upshot of your own theatrical experience with the Théophiliens?

*PZ:* For me, as far as theatricality goes—all that we talked about yesterday—the fruit of those experiences was that I came to see what theater is. I came to it by reflecting on it subsequently. And sometime in the years that followed, the war years when I was in Switzerland, I started to become interested in the theater as theater, little by little. And then my memories came back to me, they crystallized, so to speak. But at the time, during the two years when I was involved with the troupe, what counted for me a lot, in fact, principally, was the atmosphere of friendship. There was something like a Bohemian closeness that spread between us, much as it does with actors [figure 9].
Figure 9.
The Théophiliens on the steps of the Sorbonne, 1935.
Collection Harlingue.
Permission Roger-Viollet.
HS: And what was the prevailing mood of students at the time? In Cohen’s group, at the Sorbonne?

PZ: Naturally when I go back to that period in my mind, my memory may be playing tricks on me. In other words, it’s not always reliable. In any event, in the group of friends that I had, I would say that I spontaneously frequented guys and girls who had little critical sense. I put it that way because I’m not sure in what way the group with whom I was associated was really representative. But one way or another, what is certain is that in the student milieu I frequented, the university had lost all prestige. We had the impression of a decrepit, dusty institution incapable of responding to the questions about life that we posed it. That was very clear. From time to time, there was a professor who seemed more lively, and that was Cohen’s case. I have to insist upon Cohen, because his is a contrasting case that explains a lot of things to me. Much later, I had to say to myself that his critical work was quite mediocre. But that did not prevent me, or indeed others around him, from recognizing that he was truly a man of influence. Above all, he was someone who gave us a taste of freedom. I was studying law, and at the Law Faculty I had a professor. I had never heard of him. I didn’t know who he was. From a legal point of view, he may well have been nobody, again, another mediocre scholar. I don’t know. He taught legal history. He also spoke well; he gave me a feeling of freedom in the way he talked about the material. Throughout his teaching, he helped me to understand that all social structures—everything surrounding us that seemed dead—could be an object of history. In other words, one can take a certain distance. And that’s what made me a medievalist. That one time, and I took the plunge. Shortly after that course in legal history, I decided to major in literature [Lettres] and registered for Cohen’s course. And then what was weighing on us heavily, from 1935 and right up until the outbreak of war, was the feeling that war was coming. Let’s say that we felt a catastrophe was on the way. And I remember very well, it was a little time after the Théophile episode, sometime around 1938–39, I got to the point where I wanted a catastrophe: our future looked that blocked. I was barely twenty years old and I thought: anything’s better than this. Young people at the time were incredibly, strongly politicized and, naturally, they were polarized to the extreme. As far as I can remember at the University of Paris, the polarization happened mainly around what were called the Leagues; that is to say, groups from the far Right, more than others. And then, of course, there were the Communists.

HS: Where did you stand?
PZ: I was really taken by a fascistic temptation. For two years, in 1935–36, after my father’s death, because I really needed to earn money for my studies, I took a job with a noble Italian family, looking after their children. And there, I remember, I was enthusiastic about the Fascists. Very keen. Why? I don’t know. Maybe an idea of order. I was really sensitive to the rhetoric. I remember one time I came back to France, and I was flirting with this pal of mine, a very nice girl, the daughter of a rather well-known architect. I was in Paris during my vacation, and I was talking enthusiastically to her about Mussolini. And I remember she replied to me with scorn, I mean, with real scorching scorn: “Him? That carnavalesque Caesar?” She was very smart and I appreciated her intelligence. That began to give me doubts.

HS: Her simple turn of phrase?

PZ: Yes, yes. And the doubts grew. It was the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Right at the beginning, I was saying that it was a good thing Franco was there, to create some order. I was talking with someone who later became my friend, Jean Rousset, from Geneva. I was back there, I told him something that could have been taken as praise of Franco. And Rousset, I remember, he just said, “Ah?” That simple “Ah?” and it was over. That was a break and from that day on, that made me very sensitive, extremely sensitive to all that kind of latent fascism that was hanging in the air in the years before the war. It was impossible in the thirties, even in the years when I was in the Théophiliens, to consider these things abstractly. One could not not be politicized. One could not remain apolitical. It was impossible.

HS: And the other Théophiliens? Did they go the same way?

PZ: That’s difficult for me to say, because I only saw a few of them afterward. As far as Cohen went, he did not allow any sort of political talk in the presence of his students. It is clear that Cohen felt Nazism coming, and as a Jew he reacted violently. He was persecuted. I told you yesterday what happened to him. I don’t have the impression that, in today’s terms, he was on the Left. He was a man coming out of a liberal tradition, as was the case with his generation. Then there was Jacques Chailley.

HS: The musicologist?

PZ: Politically speaking, it’s obvious. He rose rapidly because there were very few medieval musicologists in France. He became a mandarin very rapidly. He became the big man with everything that that implies, how can I put it?
... with a kind of drive for power. At least psychologically speaking, he was among people on the Right. In the case of Marcel Schneider, I can't say. As far as I remember, someone like Moïse Abbadi was undoubtedly on the Left, as we would say today. But even then I am not absolutely sure. With Yvette [Juliette Jeandet], whom I saw again in the years after the war, I have the notion that she was completely out of all this. She was more or less tending to the Left. She was vaguely socialist; that was generally the case in this milieu.

HS: In a little book of memoirs, *Lettres aux américains*, that Cohen published in Montreal during the war, he refers to the fact that Hitler apparently invited the Théophiliens to perform in Germany.27

PZ: Oh, really?

HS: One of the real advocates of the Théophiliens in these years was Robert Brasillach, who became enamored of the Nazi program. You mentioned a little earlier this problem of a kind of latent fascism in this milieu during these years.

PZ: Right, yes, yes.

HS: Can one situate the Théophiliens in such a context?

PZ: I wouldn't say that one should situate them like that. But there was always the possibility of recuperation, because it is true that all fascist movements, and thereafter, the Nazis, all of them exalted a national past. A national past, viewed from a Hegelian perspective. On that score, it is worthwhile reading Hegel's chapter on knighthood. It's a kind of junkshop trinket of a Middle Ages, but it is also a Middle Ages of faith, of warfare, of order, of the nation, of living by the sword. As far as that invitation goes, I wasn't aware of it, but if it is true, it is very significant.

HS: In what way do you think?

PZ: Significant because if this invitation came from officers in the German government, it's because they were informed by their embassy in Paris that aspects of French culture at the time were moving in that direction, and that they could be pushed in the direction of that *Neues Europa* [New Europe] of which Hitler was dreaming. Yes, let's say that just such an attempt at recuperation, that seems to me very likely. But if Cohen was opposed to it, it was because he sensed the danger.
HS: So, in your opinion, he was entirely conscious of these dangers?

PZ: Yes, I think so.

HS: And as for the Théophiliens? I realize that it is not possible to account for all of them, but given your own experiences, would you say that these students were sensitive to the possibility of such a recuperation?

PZ: I can't speak in the name of others. But let's suppose that something like this [invitation] happened when I was a member of the troupe. I would certainly not have understood the problem. Only, we would have to look at the date when that happened.

HS: Yes, we would have to verify it.

PZ: For example, I was actually in Germany, independently of the Théophiliens; I was part of a French student group invited by a club of German students. How do you call it? A Gesellschaft, a fraternity. In 1934, in Cologne. We knew that the Nazis were in power. In the streets, we saw the guys in uniform. But, [sigh], for me, a nineteen-year-old student at the time, it was totally impossible to guess what the regime was, or what it was going to become. I suppose that if for one reason or another, as a kind of aberration, Cohen had accepted an invitation like that, the actors in the troupe... that surprises me... I don't have the impression that we would have seen much in it, we would have seen it as a chance for a trip, we would have interpreted it as a sign of our growing influence, and that's all, I think. But then, maybe now I've got it wrong, maybe in the troupe... ah... I don't know.

HS: And after the war, during the Purge, Cohen supported Brasillach [during his trial for treason]. Do you know anything about that?

PZ: Yes, yes.

HS: I wonder, as far as Cohen was concerned, was it an attempt to establish that literature should never be politicized? Or was it just the reverse?

PZ: Now there, I am almost certain that in that case, Cohen's profound motivation was one of friendship and a kind of gratitude, since, among writers, among people in the Parisian literary scene, he had taken an interest in what Cohen had done. He even demonstrated it on several occasions. And I remember, one time, when we were going down South, when we were going on tour to Menton, I'll tell you, by some chance or other, Brasil-
lach was on the same train, in the same first-class compartment as Cohen. And we were in second class. Walking through the train car, we saw Cohen and Brasillach together. Yes, certainly, Cohen supported him out of generosity. Since he was a generous man, he signed the petition [for clemency]. On the other score, I think that Cohen must have thought that literature was not to be mixed up with politics. That being said, Brasillach was not only imprudent. He was someone on the Right who had seriously compromised himself with the Nazis. But I think as far as his trial went, a trial that was fatal for him in the end, there must have been a lot of scores to settle. That’s what I think. Because he wasn’t any more tainted than the others. No less than Drieu la Rochelle, no less than Châteaubriant, above all Châteaubriant who wrote that magnificent novel, *La Brière*. Well, that guy, he totally compromised himself politically. He lent his name to all sorts of things. Brasillach, I have fewer memories of him, but I do have the impression that there were other elements involved, other scores to settle. So, for him, Cohen intervened. Obviously once Cohen spoke, the person who had emigrated, who had been persecuted, the Jew, the person who belonged to the same Parisian intellectual scene, who had an international reputation, he risked nothing. Maybe it is a bit naughty of me to say it, but he was in a position of strength. He was able to speak out in that way. He could say what he wanted, knowing that it would be taken as an act of generosity.

*HS:* Was it an act of friendship, then, of gratitude?

*PZ:* Yes, I think so. Cohen was a person for whom matters such as friendship, generosity toward others, a sense of justice in human relations, dominated. They counted enormously. In my memory, that was how he lived. Of all the personalities I have known, he wasn’t the most admirable. But he was certainly the most touching.

*HS:* And during those war years, were you in Switzerland?

*PZ:* As for me, then, I was in Switzerland. My father died during the course of my studies, and my mother decided to go back home, returning to Geneva in 1936. That’s the year I finished my studies. I mean, I did what was called the Diploma of Advanced Studies, the equivalent of the Masters today. And since I had remained a Swiss citizen, I couldn’t sit for the *Agrégation* exam. I had no chance of making a living in France. So I consulted Cohen, and he advised me to go back to Switzerland and do a doctoral thesis straightaway under his direction. I remember very well how his supervision amounted to
one word. I said to him, "Professor, find me a topic, and I’ll pull it off." He looked in his files, and said, "Okay, there you go, a great topic, you have to study exhaustively the legend of Merlin." "Right, what do I have to read?" And there's that one word. He said to me, "Everything." That's the only supervision I got, since shortly thereafter I left for Switzerland with light baggage. I started to work, and I worked for eight years. Without any guidance. It was a little complicated, but, finally, I went back to Switzerland, it was the end of 1936, then, '37, '38, '39. Then, suddenly, I had to earn a living. I started to teach in a school in Geneva, devoting most of my time to the thesis. The war came fast. And during the war, I was of an age to be called up. I was drafted into the Swiss militia, I spent two years as a soldier.

After-Lives

HS: I would like to come back briefly to questions of the rapport between literature and politics. The issue of recuperation—How did you understand it for the war period? How do you see it today? For the Middle Ages always played a tricky role as a point of origin.

PZ: I would answer in two ways. First of all, today, especially given the extreme sophistication of the media, and advertising methods, today everything is recuperable: whatever one does, whatever one says. That is to say, it can be interpreted as an object in ways that escape you and that serve the purposes of someone else. Was it always like that? I don’t think so. It seems to me that this type of generalizable recuperation is linked to advertisement and its developing techniques. It is also connected to the hegemony lasting from the beginning of the forties right up to the eighties. Ideology has reigned for a good half century. I think that every ideology is a trap that tries to . . . It is possible that that might change. But it also seems to me that with everything happening in the Communist world, with the disenchantment over government and the public sector apparent in much of what we call conventionally the democracies, under these conditions, ideologies are in the process of breaking down. And for that reason political recuperation is much more uncertain, pointless, maybe even impossible. It’s a kind of philosophical reverie. As far as the Middle Ages is concerned, the question arises, whether it is easier to recoup and make over ideologically than the Renaissance or Greek Antiquity. I don’t know. I think that the reason references to the Middle Ages have a certain practical application is that it is both the past, and a past that is relatively close to us. In particular, the Middle Ages is a historical
period in which the modern nation took shape. That is very important. And that brings us back to Nazism. For the Nazis recuperated the Middle Ages. Why? They had Wagner, an extremely complex musician and way above the heads of most people. But he was exploited massively by the Nazis. Take the example of all the editions of texts that were done by Nazis, all those medieval texts. That was the past, a past sufficiently distant to be noble, dignified, worthy of high esteem, even veneration. And at the same time it is our past, the past of our nations. Apart from the Greeks today, nobody can get excited about Demosthenes. But one can get excited about Perceval.

*HS*: A small example from today. When I returned to the States last January [1991], just when the Gulf War was gearing up, I saw an ad on the television for the American military. The soldiers appeared as medieval knights. With swords, on horseback, thousands of Percevals, those American soldiers. Anyone who heads off into battle against “pagans,” against the most foreign adversary, anyone who is defending nation, does he look like that?!

*PZ*: Yes, there is a certain mythic interpretation of the Middle Ages that is alive and well.

*HS*: Is this a mythology that still holds here in Québec?

*PZ*: Now that’s a good question. Judging from the reactions of the students I had in that introductory course I was telling you about, that doesn’t exist. No, the break is complete. Because I remember, one time, one of the very good students who followed my course attentively, he said to me, “You know, you do the exact reverse of Christopher Columbus, you make us discover a new continent in the Old World!” You know in Canada, Québécois, and other Francophone Canadians, they have a peasant background, a background of mercenary soldier, the people who settled here represent the illiterate population of the French provinces. . . . I have the impression that Americans are much more deeply marked by European culture than the creators of Canada.

*HS*: All our talk of the stereotypes and commonplaces about the Middle Ages that subsist today, that makes me think one last time about our central question: How to make a past appear living? To what end?

*PZ*: When we say “make live again” [*faire revivre*], it is a twofold term. It includes both the idea of reduplication and of beginning again. But above all, it involves living. I think that nothing lives except the present. The present is life, life is present. Life is presence. To revive something that is no
longer is, in effect, to give it back its presence, that is, to make it present. This is a paradoxical challenge, but it is the only possibility as far as I am concerned. With the help of all that we know, all the steps of accumulating a learned knowledge that has survived in its entirety, this challenge involves taking a stand. It demands that you or I take a stand. It is a living being who actually takes possession, assimilates, and integrates. I would say that a fragment of the past takes its place in my current interior world, despite all the differences resulting from chronology or the passage of time. That's why I was talking yesterday about poetic intelligence. With this attitude, analogies play a central role in reanimating the past. Take the example of a certain incident that history or archival research teaches me, an event that documents establish as having happened in the thirteenth century. If I approach it analogically, I live this ancient event in my own time, in a certain way. By the same token, I project something onto this event from the past. Look, I'm not naïve, I avoid projecting something emotional, sentimental, simplistic. What I project is a certain personal engagement. And by that I mean, I can integrate it [that event], for myself, with the world in which I live. What I am saying, of course, is opposed absolutely, violently, I would even say in a programmatic way, to the idea of objectivity. But that is an idea that doesn't interest me. One can critique it, undertake an analysis of it, but let's say, as far as I am concerned, it is purely and simply a matter of interest. I cannot see what I gain from it. For fifty years now, I have never been willing to devote time to something to which I am not already emotionally attached. I began to realize this at first in a confused way, but over the years, it has become clearer and clearer to me.

HS: Is this where the theatrical shows itself too?

PZ: Naturally. Ever since the time when I was doing my thesis, as far as I can remember, I have always had this desire to make my object of study count—that is, count for me, for something in my own ego. For example, when I was writing my master's thesis on the Lancelot-Grail cycle, I simultaneously published a collection of poems, and I entitled it Le Chevalier. In the principal poem, I made Perceval speak. Of course, there was no immediate connection, no outside link between these two things. But it wasn't sheer chance either that they happened at the same time. I remembered several verses from this collection—the poems in it were terzinas that I composed in the style of Dante. At the time, I was beginning to study Italian, and I began to learn it straightaway with Dante. Perceval said, "Car je suis nice et chier de fruit novel et suis de ceux qui partent sans savoir dès
que l'on aura nommé Jerusalem." In retrospect, I can see very clearly that I needed that: I needed my work on the Lancelot-Grail to be fully integrated. So, all those poetic themes came out a little bit naively, especially where I say "I." It's happening here as a kind of school exercise, work done by an adolescent. But later on, when I was doing my thesis on the legend of Merlin, I remember well what kind of problem it posed for me. And I tried to resolve it by way of my own experiences at the time. I was researching and writing my thesis at the beginning of the war; the book was published in '42, and I defended it in '43. In any event, I remember very well: the events of Europe at war must have inspired me; they gave me the idea of an analysis that I would undertake of the cycle of Robert de Boron. I transposed it; but I believe that this analysis is still valid. I didn't take external events and slap them onto the text. I experienced them, and in that way, I understood. In other words, I practiced a kind of hermeneutics of the text that illuminated them from the inside, not from the outside, but deeply from within, according to a certain drama of the time. And I made sense of all this subsequently. At the time, I was going out with the woman who became my wife shortly thereafter, in '41. She was much more politically minded than I was.

HS: In what way?

PZ: I mean, as far as the drama of that period in Europe went, the coming of fascism, all the consequences that that could have for us. Anyhow, over time, I have realized that various conversations with her could have played a role in the kind of analysis I was doing. But once again, not from the outside. All to say that they created an internal framework, a context for my thinking, my feelings and reactions, a context that was established by the world in which I was living. This was inevitable and part of my life in this world. My object of study was integrated into it to a certain degree.

HS: We were talking earlier about the effective use of analogies. What exactly was the analogy that you developed between the Grail text of Robert de Boron and the period of the war that you were living through at the time?

PZ: Now such an analogy is difficult to define. It is less of an analogy, technically speaking, than it is an analogy involving the forms of hope. You have to put yourself in the position and adopt the point of view of those who were in Europe in 1940 and '41. And such a situation was all the more serious for the likes of me since I spent a year in Germany during the war. I was in Germany ... hold on a moment ... that was throughout the entire year.
of 1941, and the beginning of 1942. I was appointed there; I was offered a job as lecturer of French in a German university.

**HS**: Which university?

**PZ**: At Halle, near Leipzig. I accepted the position because it gave me the chance to make some progress on my thesis. But on the spot in Germany, you really knew what that was. When I returned to Switzerland in 1942, I had very few doubts left. I didn't want to stay. It had become impossible for me.

**HS**: What was it like for you living that year in Germany in 1941?

**PZ**: Let’s say that it was extremely hard in every respect. But as far as I was concerned, I didn’t risk anything. It was every German citizen who ran risks. But above all, we learned what that regime was all about. And in the meanwhile, Lord knows, I completely lost all my former adolescent sympathies for fascism. I arrived in Germany with very strong prejudices, telling myself that I absolutely had to see as much as I could, that I had to experience the greatest possible number of things in that regime. But after fifteen months, it became intolerable. I returned to Switzerland. It was no longer possible. So when I came back, I really knew what it was. For, you know, at the beginning of 1942, not only could we not foresee the end, but we had the impression that Hitler was going to succeed, he was going to pull it off. In the spring of ’42, no, wait, the attack on Russia or against the Soviet Union, that was in ‘41, I believe, in any event, I still remember, on the morning that they attacked, the Germans themselves were extremely anxious, and were wondering what was going to happen. But in ‘42, it was done. Everything was fine. They had swallowed Russia whole. So we had the idea that the *Tausend Jähriges Reich*, the Thousand-Year-Old-Kingdom, was coming true. It was in that situation, with that conviction, that I attempted to find what could have been the plan for that trilogy in which Robert de Boron narrated a history that begins with a kind of evangelization, that tells of the coming of chivalry, the discovery of the Grail, as well as the end, the virtual end of the world. In other words, it is a complete vision of history. I don’t remember all the details of my thinking at the time, but what is certain is that everything was inextricably linked in my mind. And if someone would have said to me, “You shouldn’t be so preoccupied with your own experiences,” I would have been very irritated. I wouldn’t have gotten mad, because I don’t have an angry temperament. But I would have considered the person making such an objection a fool.
HS: It seems as if you profited from your experiences in Germany in a near theatrical way.

PZ: Yes, in effect, I entered into the events; I played with them. There you go. Extending this line of thinking to its very limit, I could say this: the attitude of the historian toward his object resembles that of an actor toward the role he plays. There is a similarity. Yet it proves difficult to establish concretely what the connection is. But I do believe one can say this with certainty. The role is conceived by the dramatist; the actor is not responsible for creating the part. But he is responsible for making it come alive. With history, it goes much the same way. The historian possesses a learned knowledge of an event, and that constitutes the event in a formal sense. He is challenged to make it live again.

Notes

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5 Stephen Orgel, Stephen Greenblatt, and Jonathan Goldberg have each, in turn, taken up the concept. Greenblatt, for instance, investigates the dual process of “theatrical demystification and remystification” in “Loudun and London,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 344. Lee Patterson is hardly exaggerating when he asserts that “the New Historicism conception of Renaissance culture (and, indeed, all culture) is essentially

6 “Quatre termes seulement... sont des néologismes de ma part... légende... mouvance... rencontre... théâtralité” *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 505, 507–9. Nearly twenty years later, at the occasion of the American translation of the *Essai*, Zumthor goes back over the development of his own term: “The argument in *La Lettre et la voix* hinges on philosophical and ethnohistorical conceptions which, at the end of a long intellectual journey, give unexpected meaning and weight to several notions put forward in the *Essai* to account for the mode of existence of old texts (mutability on the one hand, theatricality on the other), notions that, together with that of writing, provide a tension that gives these studies a dramatic dimension.” *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Philip Bennett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), xiv. Bennett asserts that “théâtralité is one term whose technical use is closest to its nontechnical use and needs no further gloss” (407).

7 Zumthor, *Medieval Poetics*, 18–22; or see the original *Essai*, 37–39.


9 Correspondence from Paul Zumthor, 30 March 1991.


13 Jacques Copeau (1879–1949): Theater director, dramatic theorist, and founder of the Parisian experimental company Le Théâtre du Vieux Colombier in 1913. Copeau dominated the stage in the period from World War I to World War II, producing classics such as those of Molière and Racine, as well as the contemporary works of Paul Claudel and Henri Ghéon. He placed enormous emphasis on the collective force of dramatic action. Copeau broke with his company in the 1920s and retired to the Burgundian countryside to work with a small circle of his disciples, named les Copiains. During the Occupation, he took to the road with this group, performing plays impromptu throughout France.


16 Zumthor is clearly referring here to the Ecole Libre des Hautes Études, a temporary think tank set up during the war in New York by refugee Parisian intellectuals such as Cohen, Henri Focillon, and Jacques Maritain, among others, which was affiliated with the New School of Social Research. On this episode, see Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, “The French in New York: Resistance and Structure,” *Social...*

17 Edmond Faral (1882–1958): Medievalist at the Sorbonne in the period between the wars, elected to the Collège de France, as well as to the Institut de France. Among his most influential critical works were *Recherches sur les sources latines des contes et des romans courtois au moyen âge* (1913), *Arts poétiques des XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (1923), and *La Vie quotidienne au temps de Saint Louis* (1942).

18 Jacques Chaillé (1910—): Composer and musicologist at the National Conservatory of Music. As a student, he worked with Gustave Cohen, transposing medieval scores for several Théophile productions such as *Le Jeu de Robin et Marion* (1934).

19 Benjamin Crémieux (1878–1944): Man of letters from the south of France, theater critic for the leftist journal *Nouvelle revue française* and for *Candide*, literary editor at Gallimard, and advocate and translator of Italian literature. He introduced French audiences to Pirandello. Notable writings include the novel *Le Premier de la classe* (1921), *Panorama de la littérature italienne* (1928), and *Iniquité et reconstruction: essay sur la littérature après-guerre* (1931). Crémieux was active in the Resistance, and as a Jew, he was deported, tortured, and killed in Buchenwald.

20 Robert Brasillach (1909–1945): Parisian man of letters. Brasillach began his career as writer and critic for the journal of the Right, *Action Française*. He edited the fascist weekly *Je Suis Partout* before and during the Occupation. Most notable works include *Présence de Vérité* (1931), *Précis de Jeanne d’Arc* (1932), *Histoire du cinéma* (1935), *Animateurs de théâtre* (1936), the novel *Comme le temps passe* (1937), and *Notre avant-guerre* (1941). He was the most prominent French writer executed for treason in the Purge directly following World War II.

21 Working with this *Verfremdungseffekt*, actors were to avoid such identification at all cost. They must distance themselves critically, “alienate” themselves from the role. See “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” in *Brecht on the Theater* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 179–208, and 23, 157.

22 Joseph Bédier (1864–1938): Medievalist, elected to the Collège de France, as well as to the Académie Française. Best-known works include *Tristan et Iseut* (1900), *Les Légendes épiques* (1908–13), and *La Chanson de Roland* (1922).


24 Edmond René Labande (1906—): Historian, who helped to establish the Centre d’études médiévales at Poitiers, where he directed the journal *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* during the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Among his principal works is *Histoire de l’Europe occidentale* (London: Variorum, 1973).

25 Dario Silvio Avalle (1920—): Medievalist, professor at the Universities of Turin and Florence. He is a representative of the postwar Italian school of critics who meld philology with semiotic analysis in their research on premodern literatures. Notable works include *Sponsus* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1965); *Il Teatro Medievale e Il Ludus Daniol* (Turin: Giappichelli, 1984); and *L’Ontologia del segno in Sansone* (Turin: Giappichelli, 1986).


Pierre Drieu la Rochelle (1893–1945): Writer, whose notable works include *Le Feu follet* (1931), *Giller* (1939), *Le Français d’Europe* (1941), and *Notes pour comprendre le siècle* (1941). He joined the Fascist party of Doriot, the *Parti populaire français*, collaborated with the Vichy journal *Révolution nationale* during the Occupation, and committed suicide.

Alphonse de Châteaubriant (1877–1951): Writer, whose notable works include *La Brière* (1923), winner of the Grand Prix de l’Académie Française, and *La Gerbe des forces* (1936). He founded the weekly review *La Gerbe*, advocating Franco-German collaboration, published under Vichy. He took refuge in Austria in 1944, where he continued to publish in French.

Study of National Socialism’s university work is under way; see Helmut Heiber, *Universität unterm Hakenkreuz* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1991); and *Wissenschaft im Dritten Reich*, ed. Peter Lundgreen (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985). Nazi editing of medieval texts is an intellectual history waiting to be fully narrated.
