

Cristina MAZZONI

## Writing the Rite: Text and Sacrifice in Drieu La Rochelle

The thematization of sacrifice and the parallel sacralization of writing carried out in Pierre Drieu La Rochelle's last completed novel, *Les Chiens de paille* (written in 1943 but only published in 1964) displays a complex and ultimately self-reflexive movement. It traces back not only to Drieu La Rochelle's former writings—and, more specifically, to the first part of the collection of essays *Le Jeune Européen* (published in 1927), eloquently entitled “Le Sang et l'Encre”—but also to the larger framework of the history of the writing activity and of the written artifact.

The central position of sacrifice in this *roman à thèse* is evident from the very title: according to the Chinese religious text used as epigraph, the “straw dogs” evoked by the title of the novel are the quintessential objects of sacrifice which, as the epigraph explains, is just how heaven and earth malevolently and inhumanely treat all creatures. Towards the end of the novel the protagonist tells himself: “Le centre du destin humain, c'est le sacrifice. Tout se résume, se résout, s'exprime, se signifie par le sacrifice. Le sacrifice est le centre de la Bible et le centre des Védas.”<sup>1</sup> Sacrifice is defined as central to human destiny: it constitutes the very foundation of signification, of language and of text—above all, of course, of religious texts. In addition to the thematic recurrence of sacrifice in the narrative development of the novel, for Drieu La Rochelle the process of writing itself implies an element of “sacrifice.” In *Les Chiens de paille*, sacrifice is defined as that act of turning something profane into something sacred which involves irrationality, violence, and ultimately death.

Sacrifice is a form of radical experience which, in the texts by Drieu La Rochelle which I am about to consider, is inescapable once one embarks on the act of writing. The development of the connection between rite-ing and writing runs through much of *Les Chiens de paille*—turning its narrative into an instance of the title of Drieu La Rochelle’s other story, i.e., the unavoidable yet impure and sacred mixture of blood and ink. This aspect of sacrifice is materialized within the novel in more ways than one, and its thematization (for example, through the protagonist’s obsession with the relationship between Jesus and Judas as it is expressed in the Gospels) is accompanied by some vaguer allusions, chiefly consisting of what may be termed “sacrificial intertexts”: religious texts, literary texts, historical texts, and the all-pervasive sociopolitical background of the reality of the occupation of France.<sup>2</sup> These references permeate *Les Chiens de paille* like the highly symbolic liquids which so often appear in the course of the novel: sacred writing, in Drieu La Rochelle’s work, is composed precisely of a mixture of ink and blood.

### Sacred Books

The traditional religious belief in the sacred nature of writing, a major subtext in *Les Chiens de paille*, is often a shaping force even in the perception of its more secular forms: as the historian of writing I. J. Gelb points out, “everywhere, in the East as well as in the West, the origin of writing is ascribed to a divinity.”<sup>3</sup> And when Drieu La Rochelle writes that “L’amour des livres, c’est un reste de l’attachement de l’homme aux idoles,”<sup>4</sup> he is moving within the Judeo-Christian tradition of the cult of the book. It is with this tradition as a background that the protagonist of *Les Chiens de paille*, Constant Trubert, refers to the books he reads as “les livres de l’obstination spirituelle” (*Chiens* 30), and when he feels “la soif de la connaissance livresque” welling up within him he goes to Paris “pour entamer des études religieuses” (*Chiens* 171). Books, spirituality, and religion—even the religious institution itself as the official supplier of religious knowledge—are intimately connected. Books and writing are infused with an element of sacredness, a characteristic which allows them to signify on more than just a purely linguistic level. This alternative semiosis mimicks the alternative strategies that

can be observed, for example, in the Cabala (at the microscopic level of the graphic sign), or, within the Christian tradition, in the importance with which the more macroscopic iconic aspect of manuscripts has been invested (particularly in the Middle Ages). It is a semiotic phenomenon which, as the paleographer Armando Petrucci points out, has characterized the transmission of the sacred books of all the major religions in history: an elaborate formal structure succeeds in expressing ideological values not only in a verbal, or a discursive manner, but also in a figural way, through a more or less complex apparatus of iconic signs.<sup>5</sup>

The conception of the book as a sacred object worthy of adoration in and of itself was widespread in the ancient world—in Egyptian and Oriental cults as well as in the Roman and Jewish religions; Christianity continued and expanded on the religious traditions which preceded it in attributing holiness to the written word. The extra-linguistic semiotic power thus bestowed upon writing forms a cultural subtext which pervades and often dominates *Les Chiens de paille*, encompassing within the theme of the sacred various reflections about language, politics, and betrayal, and turning into a complex, dark meditation what is otherwise a novel with a rather simple albeit disjointed plot: in 1942, representatives of different French political factions (pro-English, pro-German, pro-Soviet) fight over a large cache of arms and ammunitions located in an unnamed coastal area of Northern France, while the jaded fifty-year-old protagonist Constant, an adventurer who works for a black marketeer named Susini, observes them with a somewhat distant eye as he guards the weapons. When the young and naïve nationalist Jacques Cormont (the only French patriot in the group) rashly takes possession of the warehouse, Constant (who feels a mixture of contempt and sympathy for Cormont) decides to blow up the warehouse with all of its occupants (including himself). Through this action, he reveals his peculiar religious commitment even in the absence of a political one (“Eh bien, moi, je suis tout à fait hors de la politique,” Constant explains towards the beginning of the novel, *Chiens* 27). But while he is grandiloquently explaining the significance of his sacrificial gesture to the others, an accidental bombing by a passing British airplane destroys the building and interrupts Constant’s act forever. Unlike Constant’s ultimately impotent sacrificial gesture, however, the meditation on the representation of sacrifice carried out throughout the novel—and not only in the final *coup de théâtre*—is not a failed one, and it is through

this meditation that the historically-specific story of wartime France takes on a universal level of meaning.<sup>6</sup>

The meditation on sacrifice is usually stimulated by Constant's reading of sacred books: the relationship between himself and the idealistic Cormont reminds the protagonist of the complex one between Judas and Jesus (although, with an idiosyncratic interpretation, Constant perceives Judas and not Jesus to be the sacrificial scapegoat and therefore the generating nucleus of the Christian drama [*Chiens* 132]), and the already tenuous narrative line is interrupted time and again by the protagonist's paralyzing meditations on the Gospels. These texts are described alternately as an enigma, as detective novels, and as four little novels, the work of four novelists (*Chiens*, 115, 117, 133-34). But they are also usually set in the context of other sacred books which deal with parallel issues, since Constant abhors the opposition usually made between Christianity and paganism. It is as a direct consequence of the traditional iconic interpretation of sacred books that linguistic decipherment is not always what Constant seeks when he deals with the Oriental books he copies: "il avait éprouvé le besoin de s'appropriier par un geste, par le geste de l'écriture, les mots Sanskrits qu'il ne comprenait pas mais qu'il reproduisait avec une vénération plastique" (*Chiens* 88). If he cannot appropriate the linguistic meaning of the words, the protagonist of *Les Chiens de paille* can nevertheless on a different level take possession of the text—or let the text take possession of him—by other than verbal means. The religious text, like the sacrificial political action depicted in the novel, transcends its own limited verbal signified, thus acquiring a much vaster semiotic potential; it is because of this iconic signifying capacity that Constant refers to his own copying activity as "calligraphy," the results of which are described as "calligrammes" (*Chiens* 100).

Through the description of copying as calligraphy and calligrams, writing is associated with art, and especially with drawing and painting. It is indeed with the Russian painter Liassov, in front of the latter's startling fresco representing together Athys, Osiris, Mahomet, Buddha, Christ, Orpheus, and Dionysus, that Constant can share some of his own spiritual reflections (*Chiens* 51-55). The connection between writing and the visual arts also finds its ancestry in the origin of writing, namely in the function of ideograms and hieroglyphs: it is no coincidence that Constant calls his own writings at the margins of books "hiéroglyphes

qui marquaient les jalons de son apprentissage” (*Chiens* 72).<sup>7</sup> Thus his calligraphy, which gives him some of the pleasure of drawing (*Chiens* 83), is the point of junction between language and image, and in writing he succeeds in uniting thought and beauty: “il songeait à un texte thibétain. Il se baignait paisiblement à la contemplation de sa beauté” (*Chiens* 115).

But the descriptions of the beauty of writing experienced by Constant are not so peaceful and contemplative when they are connected to his agonistic relationship with women. After a sexual encounter with an unnamed woman, Constant attempts to write a sonnet combining a praise of her with a praise of the Sanskrit text he had copied just before their meeting—an unsuccessful undertaking (*Chiens* 83). And later, while thinking of his painstaking transcription of that same incomprehensible Sanskrit text, Constant notes that its “beaux caractères rouges se détachaient devant ses yeux avec la même beauté indestructible qu’il y avait dans les seins de Paulette. Les deux beautés étaient en lui” (*Chiens* 88). That an emphasis on the iconic aspect of writing leads to an insistence on its physicality becomes especially obvious in the comparison of Sanskrit script with a woman’s breasts, of one “body” with another. What unites language and image is the palpable (re-)production of graphic signs on paper—a materiality which implies the possibility of physical destruction. It is to say the least ironic, then, that Constant describes the common beauty of breast and text as “indestructible” when in fact it is their materiality, their common ability to be destroyed or expended—as the *embodiment* of beauty and of thinking, respectively—which heightens their esthetic effect. It is because of this bond between destructibility and esthetic pleasure that Constant regrets not being able to dedicate himself to painting, which he perceives as the most efficient way of enjoying profitless expenditure (in Bataille’s definition of “dépense”): “Par cet art [painting], en jouissant de la matière on la détruit mieux que par toute autre art” (*Chiens* 100). Since Constant cannot paint, it is through an eminently iconic (and therefore painting-like and body-like) form of writing that he can make the product of thinking tangible and hence destructible in profitless expenditure.

## Writing and the Unspeakable

The process of profitless expenditure of writing is accompanied by a very strong awareness of the limits of language and of its sphere of action. Once writing undertakes to embody physically the sacred, there necessarily appears a dimension which escapes this materializing attempt altogether—for the sacred cannot be wholly reducible to a series of graphic signs on paper. Hence the central question of the Unspeakable, “l’Indicible,” a recurrent preoccupation of the text. The presence of the Unspeakable is evoked through spiritual and often oxymoronic definitions: “Dieu . . . n’est qu’une pénible abstraction . . . de l’Indicible” (*Chiens* 127); “le péché . . . c’est le tourment, délicieux, qu’engendre l’articulation du Verbe sur l’Indicible” (*Chiens* 99); “le Verbe . . . lui-même rentre dans l’Indicible” (*Chiens* 164). God, sin, and the Word itself are tied to the Unspeakable—i.e., to that which cannot be spoken in the dual sense of the writer’s inability to speak it and of an Other’s prohibition against such a speech (“Oui, nous entrons dans la voyance, dans l’ordre métaphysique. Cela n’est plus dicible. —Pas à dire, en tout cas,” *Chiens* 143). The reliance on the iconic aspect of writing displayed by Constant is therefore also a way of capturing an unspeakable signified through an apparatus of non-linguistic signifiers—that are in this way external to and not limited by the speakable/unspeakable duality.

Yet the unspeakability of the sacred is also a metonymy for a different and more generalized sort of unspeakability. Thus, after delivering a political speech to Cormont and his men, Constant realizes the unspeakability of political discourse: “Dans ce temps, plus que jamais, les paroles lui paraissaient atrocement vaines et sacrilèges. Pourtant, la forêt dispensait une solennité indéniable à celles qui pouvaient être dites ici” (*Chiens* 158). Discourse may signify in an extra-linguistic manner (through the solemnity given by the forest, for example), while the strictly verbal meaning remains “vain and sacrilegious”—an inadequacy that comes to the fore when the message is the sacred, the “unsignifiable” *par excellence*. Furthermore, politics cannot be truthfully spoken because the political situation of France abolishes that difference which is the very foundation of language. This happens, in Constant’s opinion, because the various political groups, be they pro-

German, pro-Soviet, or pro-English, are in the end the same in their enslavement, in their failures and in their weakness: “Plus ils étaient divisés et plus ils se ressemblaient . . . Tous, moins ils étaient Français et plus ils l’étaient, mais négativement, stérilement, tout en creux” (*Chiens* 39). Unspeakability is therefore preferable for Constant to the false discursive ease of political jargon, so that he states: “j’aime mieux m’occuper de l’Indicible que de ce qui est si facilement dit et si faussement dit dans le jargon politique” (*Chiens* 211). Only through a dedication to the Unspeakable, Constant seems to imply in this passage, will the individual be able to sacrifice the unspeakability of politics.

It is because of this dedication to what cannot or should not be said that the references to Constant’s books and to his activity as a copyist abruptly stop toward the middle of *Les Chiens de paille*—an interruption which, though sudden, was not wholly unpredictable. For throughout the references to writing which appear in the course of the novel there runs a resistance against its possibility of signifying verbally, i.e., in the conventional linguistic manner. The narrative stress on the iconic aspect of the written artifact is the clearest instance of such a suspicious attitude: writing may be as beautiful and as pleasurable as a woman’s breast, but writing can only convey “the unspeakable inexactitude” of its own utterance. Hence the slightly perverse relish for a subversion of the commonly accepted purpose of writing. Writing is from a certain (optimistic) perspective an act of communication (or, as Barthes suggests, “l’écriture est un acte de solidarité historique”),<sup>8</sup> and the presence of an addressee, of a reader, of a receptacle for the written message is always presupposed to some extent. Constant, however, self-consciously disbelieves and undermines this presupposition. After admitting indirectly that writing, like painting and politics, is indeed an act of communication—and, more specifically, of communication of one’s thoughts (“je suis le plus secret des hommes puisque je n’écris pas, je ne peins pas, je n’ai pas d’opinion politique” [*Chiens* 89])—he defines his own writing as a secret and a religion (“Mon secret est ma religion, ma religion mon secret” [*Chiens* 89]), and thus as an analogue of his beloved desert and the very opposite of epigraphy: “Les autres signent sur les murs des cabinets, des monuments publics: ‘Titine et Tintin ont visité le Mont Saint-Michel le 24 juillet 1893.’ Moi, j’écris sous l’ombre d’un pont une phrase anonyme que personne ne lira jamais. Mais cette phrase est dite à jamais” (*Chiens* 89).



The rite of writing, as also the sacrificial act, must be carried through and its performance signifies regardless of the absence of the deciphering Other; therefore, Constant's private sacrifice in Susini's cellar, heard by no one, witnessed by no one, is nevertheless representationally significant. In so doing, Constant imitates the cosmic order that brought the writing of the world into being, for the outside reality (the reality outside of books and writing, the reality of the *marais* surrounding the cache of arms and ammunitions) is for him an undeniably written one: "Ces dunes, c'était un peu le désert—ces terrains nus, parlant un langage sobre et net à travers les longues lignes enlacées d'une écriture indéniable" (*Chiens* 23). The desert is "written"; but if the desert (an image that recurs in Constant's discourse) is a figure for the absence of the Other, then the communicative end of writing is effaced, and the description just quoted becomes a sort of *mise en abîme* of the author's reflections on writing expressed in the course of the novel. Even the real, tangible books are placed in the context of the desert: "Ces livres répétaient tous la même chose, et ils étaient touchants et précieux pour leur monotonie de plantes ascétiques dans le désert" (*Chiens* 25).

Once more, the intertext of the tradition which saw the world as a book shapes the development of this theme, evoking images of ascetic Saint Anthonys fighting numberless temptations of the desert. But in the medieval tradition the world was figurally regarded as a book because of their common signifying capacity; in this case, on the contrary, semiosis or the ability to convey a message through signs is not an ability but rather a delusion. Writing is sheer unproductive expenditure, it is "dépense" (again, in Bataille's sense), writing is loss, for anything worth writing turns out to be, in fact, unspeakable: "Cette heure s'amène avec l'envie d'écrire mais aussi avec une lumière étrange qui me fait voir qu'écrire c'est autant de perdu" ("Le Sang," 33). Writing is equivalent to "charbonner sur un mur sans réponse" ("Le Sang," 39). To write then becomes a rite, a profitless expenditure parallel to the act of reading: "Tous les livres qu'il lisait, il les avait déjà lus, aux quatre coins du monde" (*Chiens* 25). What matters is the performance of the rite and not the practical result of the linguistic decipherment. Significantly enough, it is through a similar non-verbal reading that Constant's very initiation to philosophy takes place: at 14, he is introduced to Nietzsche, "feuilletant un livre dont il ne comprenait qu'une ligne par-ci par-là" (*Chiens* 170). Constant's reading career characteristically begins with a lack of verbal



understanding, in which the non-verbal semiosis of the written sign takes over its conventionally-established subordination to language.

### The *Sacer*

The duality of writing in *Les Chiens de paille* is intrinsic to its linguistic/non-linguistic, speakable/unspeakable nature. This is also a version of the duality inherent in the concept of the sacred and in the antithetical meaning of the Latin word *sacer*—an ambiguity exemplified by the fact that the “secret of religions” in the book is contradictorily defined as the engendering of the feeling of the divine on the part of a perfect atheism (*Chiens* 52). The dual or sacred nature of writing has been discussed at length by Jacques Derrida in his well-known essay entitled “La Pharmacie de Platon,” in which he analyzes Plato’s *Phaedrus* and writes: “Socrate compare à une drogue (*pharmakon*) les textes écrits que Phèdre a apportés avec lui.”<sup>9</sup> The written (as opposed to the oral) text is the oxymoronic *pharmakon*, both a remedy and a poison: a remedy for oblivion and a poison producing the forgetfulness which it is meant to cure. Analogously ambiguous images of writing appear in Drieu La Rochelle’s writings. In *Les Chiens de paille* Constant uses a written text as an effective sedative: “Pour détendre ses nerfs qui, en dépit de son grand flegme et de sa grande indifférence, s’étaient un peu exaspérés, il songeait à un texte tibétain. Il se baignait paisiblement dans la contemplation de sa beauté” (*Chiens* 115). But in “Le Sang et l’Encre” the author describes writing in opposite terms: “Le venin qui était resté dans mes veines, ressortit sous la forme d’une autre maladie. Après la lecture, ce fut l’écriture” (“Le Sang,” 43). In addition to their therapeutic effects, reading and writing are described as disease-bearing venoms—since, as Derrida suggests, “le *pharmakon* ne peut jamais être simplement bénéfique” (112). Writing appears thus as an instance of the forbidden “mélange,” the mixture of pure and impure, of sacred and profane, of good and evil, which lies at the very heart of the sacrificial gesture; as Drieu writes, “je prenais peur, je me sentais la proie d’un vice. Et d’autant plus que dans les livres mêmes, circulait la rumeur que les livres sont mauvais” (“Le Sang,” 52). If through its presence the text affirms its own positive value as a written artifact—as a beneficial *pharmakon*, a sedative as well as producer and product of human

creativity—this value is nevertheless constantly jeopardized by a circulation, within the text, of thematized writing as venomous *pharmakon*. Such duality is the result of the irreversible “mélange” mentioned above, of the mutual contamination of sacred and profane which characterizes every form of writing—materialized, thematized, and so on—in Drieu La Rochelle’s texts. Like the *pharmakon*, writing is essentially dual and the mixture it embodies cannot possibly be escaped by the writer.

This mixture is emphasized especially in the case of overtly sacred texts: “[dans] les Évangiles . . . il trouvait le même secret répugnant et fascinant, le même secret sordide de roman policier aux dessous miroitants, la même légende indéchiffrable et révélatrice” (*Chiens* 103-04). Through a series of oxymorons, the duality of the written text comes to mirror the duality of the sacred, so that Drieu La Rochelle’s adjectives “répugnant” and “fascinant” correspond quite neatly to what Roger Caillois describes as the “tremendum” and the “fascinans” elements of the sacred, its frightening awfulness and its captivating charm.<sup>10</sup> The pure and the impure essences have their correlatives in the realm of semiosis, but these correlatives are highly ambiguous: in addition to being “repugnant” yet “fascinating,” sacred writing is an “undecipherable” and a “revealing” legend, signifying and non-signifying at once. This latter duality goes back to the issue of the Unspeakable, materializing it under the form of the *sacer*. For if, as Caillois claims, there is no religious system in which the categories of the pure and the impure do not play a fundamental role, conversely the dominating presence of a pure/impure polarity points to the existence of a religious, or at least of a ritualistic subtext (Caillois 37).

In *Les Chiens de paille* there is definitely something untouchable—i.e., too pure or too impure to be touched—about writing, to the point that a rite of purification is necessary before undertaking such an activity: Constant “rentra chez lui et, après s’être lavé, compara un passage du Zohar avec un passage de la Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad. Sur du beau papier, il transcrivit face à face les deux textes” (*Chiens* 83). Washing is necessary to prevent the forbidden mixture of the *sacer*: as Caillois writes, the sacred is “celui ou ce qui ne peut être touché sans être souillé ou sans souiller” (40), and “tout mélange est une opération dangereuse qui tend à apporter de la confusion et du désordre” (26). René Girard also maintains that “tant que le pur et l’impur demeurent

distincts, en effet, on peut laver même les plus grandes souillures. Une fois qu'ils sont confondus, on ne peut plus rien purifier."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, when dealing with writing, rites must be continuously carried out so as to avoid the mixture: even during his shady and often violent black-market dealings with all sorts of foreigners, Constant regularly goes back to his room, "où il retrouvait ses livres et copiait des textes" (*Chiens* 92).

Pierre Drieu La Rochelle had a firsthand experience of writing as a manual and hence a physical activity: his biographer Frédéric Grover describes how he used to copy by hand the three or four drafts of each of his books, with the patience of a craftsman.<sup>12</sup> And also within the development of Drieu La Rochelle's life we can see a shift from writing to life and vice versa, as in an attempt to keep the two realms distinct although mutually influential: in Grover's words, "Chaque fois qu'il revient au papier et à l'encre, c'est après un nouveau contact avec l'action, pour digérer une nouvelle expérience" (75). Like Constant, Drieu La Rochelle moves back and forth from writing to living and vice versa—two complementary realms which nevertheless remain, for him, quite separate: as he states in "Le Sang et l'Encre," "tantôt je voulais écrire, tantôt je voulais vivre. Je voyais ces mots-là comme des bornes opposées contre lesquelles je me butais tour à tour" ("Le Sang," 45). Writing and life are often seen as downright opposite to one another, and the confusion between the two leads to a quasi-pathological delusion-formation: for example, "Il n'y a qu'au cinéma et dans les livres qu'une vie se déplace auprès d'une autre vie sans se déceler" (*Chiens* 34).

This resistance against the incorporation of writing and books within the normal course of life is at least in part motivated by a fear of the looming figure of the written artifact as something with a boundless power over life—a fear that has its roots in the religious tradition of the sacred book which I outlined above. In this context, to allow the presence of the *pharmakon* is to give free rein to its omnipotence: "les journaux sont imprimés à l'avance. Tout se passe comme il est écrit" ("Le Sang," 38). Writing literally precedes life and constantly threatens to displace it and replace it, and in spite of all the rites performed in order to avoid the "mélange," writing does graft itself onto life—thereby affirming that very power which caused it to be an object of fear, a *pharmakon*, in the first place. The intention to avoid the mixture between writing and life is therefore defeated by its very premises.

Writing is described as the artisan's attempt "d'incruster l'éternel dans le quotidien" (*Chiens* 100), and this encrustation blends together, in addition to the eternal and the everyday, also the written and the lived. Performing the ritual of purification before copying the sacred texts does not prevent writing from mixing with Constant's life under another form, that of the book (one of Thoth's many theophanies): "Il n'y avait pas beaucoup de livres, mais il n'y en avait aucun qui ne lui tînt à la chair, au plus profond de la chair. . . . Il pensait à ses livres qu'il allait retrouver et déjà il était dans l'un d'entre eux. . . . Il était déjà dedans. . . ." (*Chiens* 72).

### Blood and/as Ink

As the above quotation makes clear, books are encrusted onto Constant's body, in spite of the incompatibility of writing and life in other respects. As Grover says about Drieu La Rochelle, "C'est parce qu'il a passé la plus grande partie de sa vie à écrire, à lire, à méditer, qu'il a ressenti si fortement combien l'homme complet est diminué dans l'écrivain, celui qui décrit, représente la vie au lieu de la vivre" (69). The necessarily vague term of "life," "la vie," includes and implicates both social and political action, and the dual nature of writing brings together the incompatibility of thought and action (of writing and life) and their need for one another: "Un peu plus tard, si je feignis de m'arracher aux livres, ce fut quelque chose pris dans les livres qui m'y incita" (Drieu, "Le Sang," 42). Writing leads to living and living leads to writing, as we have seen in Constant's ritual return to his room so as to read or copy his books. This circular motion, tied to the sacred "mélange," is represented metonymically by an uncanny circulation of liquids in Drieu La Rochelle's writing—especially, of course, of ink and blood. Under the shape of blood (blood as the quintessence of life and blood as a figure for death), life mirrors the *sacer* quality of writing, its pure/impure, life/death duality, and this (often oxymoronic) polysemy is pointed out by Constant himself when he states: "Le sang, si, j'y crois, parce que c'est un mythe. J'aime les mythes" (*Chiens* 114). In writing, then, the forbidden mixture is always already accomplished, and the rites performed are failed exorcisms rather than possible purifications. If in *Les*

*Chiens de paille* Constant's books are attached to his flesh (72), in the autobiographical "Le Sang et l'Encre" the same bond of sign and body is obtained through a sticky circulation of ink, as when the writer talks of "le temps où je lisais les livres et où je sentais avec horreur que peu à peu je m'engluais dans l'encre" ("Le Sang," 26).

Yet this ink is itself far from being pure. Constant's favorite ink color is red, the color of blood (*Chiens* 83). And in "Le Sang et l'Encre," when Drieu La Rochelle writes, "j'ai fini par noircir un livre. J'ai attendu, l'encre goutte à goutte est tombée sur le papier, il s'est formé des signes" (42), the description of his ink falling on the paper "drop by drop" suggests the motion of blood as it flows out of a wound. The use of blood as ink is also what the author suggests when he writes: "Je ne suis pas de ces hommes qui peuvent écrire seulement avec de l'encre" ("Le Sang," 47). Ink is also blood, and writing is done, at least in part, through the spilling of the author's own blood—as he himself unequivocally states when he fantasizes that "ce serait doux de réciter à un ami qu'on admire des pages écrites avec du vrai sang" ("Le Sang," 50). Again, we are in the presence of the duality of the *pharmakon*, of writing as life and death at once: "l'odeur de l'encre revenue détruisit ma vie" ("Le Sang," 47); "je pensais qu'on ne peut écrire qu'avec sa vie, avec son sang. Je voulais donner mon sang dans l'écriture comme j'avais fait jusqu'ici dans les guerres, les révolutions et les amours, en brutal, en primitif, directement" ("Le Sang," 51). Nonetheless, the mixing of writing with life, or of ink with blood, leads to the sacrificial destruction of the entire narrative system—and much more. In his final letter to his brother, written in 1944, Drieu La Rochelle clearly laments the apparent incompatibility of blood and ink:

J'ai toujours regretté que l'homme ne soit jamais complet et que l'artiste ne puisse être homme d'action. Par moments, j'ai un regret douloureux de n'être que la moitié d'un homme. J'estime donc un bonheur de pouvoir mêler mon sang à mon encre et de rendre sérieux à tous points de vue la fonction d'écrire. Certes, cela l'est sans la sanction de la mort, mais tout le sérieux qui y est par ailleurs ressort dans l'occurrence mortelle.<sup>13</sup>

The irreversible "mélange" has taken place and now, through the metonymy of the two liquids, there is no possible purification: eternity, like ink and blood, falls drop by drop (*Chiens* 89), sweat is spiritual (*Chiens* 200), a text is something Constant bathes in (*Chiens* 115), and communion (a purified, ritual form of *mélange*) is achieved through

sweat and saliva (*Chiens* 146). The circulation of liquids between the body and the outside is bidirectional, and if blood flows out, the Other dangerously flows in: about the ill-fated Cormont, we read that “Les mots du jargon politique devenaient dans son sang comme des virus tout neufs et y rencontraient la fièvre” (*Chiens* 119). The language of political jargon is figured as a virulent penetration of the Unspeakable into the human body, through blood as its metonymic liquid. This circulation of blood between political language and the otherwise passive human body entails a violent form of penetration which is both cause and effect of the sacred nature of writing (in this case, of writing as political jargon). If, as René Girard points out, violence is indeed inseparable from the sacred (“C’est la violence qui constitue le cœur véritable et l’âme secrète du sacré” [52]), still in Drieu La Rochelle’s text the sacred is also inseparable from life; life cannot be without religion and religion implies violence: “La vie n’allait pas pour lui sans la religion et la religion sans la vie, un extrême sans l’autre extrême; l’extrême abstrait n’était possible que dans l’extrême concret” (*Chiens* 5).

The circulation of the written sign is therefore largely a circulation of blood as it embodies both life and violent death: as Derrida underlines, “le dieu de l’écriture est aussi, cela va de soi, le dieu de la mort” (104). For in the end, the violence engendered by the sacred entails a sacrificial killing. In certain cases, writing may be clearly about killing (“il croyait bien se rappeler avoir lu quelque part que contrairement à la légende ce suicide est douloureux et cela lui faisait peur” [*Chiens* 172]), but on a level other than the strictly thematic one, namely the level of figures of speech and of concealed implications, writing *is* violent death: “sur une table je voyais traîner une phrase inachevée comme une amoureuse abandonnée au bord d’un lit et qui demande qu’on la pousse jusqu’à la chute dans le sommeil et dans la mort” (“Le Sang,” 59). This is the sacrifice of the written artifact through a figural slaying of the sentence—in turn figured, once again, as a desirable and destructible female body—and the “act of historical solidarity,” as Barthes defines writing, is in this case not writing but rather its death. Through the killing of writing—and feminine anthropomorphization is an important example of the multiple materializations of writing—one kills its immobilizing unspeakability. Writing must be sacrificially destroyed in order for political action to be carried through, so that Constant will only

become actively *engagé* once he puts an end to his copying activity and, more generally, to his dealings with writing.

### Sacrificing the (Inter)Texts

The presence of deadly bloodshed is posited in *Les Chiens de paille* not only thematically but also through active intertexts. Above all the *roman policier* and the Gospels, seen at times as one entity, at times as four separate texts, constitute a term of comparison, a model of behavior which is the object of an “anxiety of influence” (to use Harold Bloom’s phrase) on the part of Constant—and ultimately of the novel itself. The Gospels are explicitly described as novels, so that the judgment on their sacredness will reflect upon Drieu La Rochelle’s novel, too: by means of such references, the novel writes its own genealogy and therefore establishes to some extent its own sacred nature, through an inevitable process of genetic transmission. Blood drips through the ink of the intertext, both vertically (through the diachronic development of the sacred text), and horizontally (through the synchronic definition of the novel).

The intertext of sacrifice is also the intertext of betrayal (“la trahison est un emploi de première utilité dans la comédie humaine” [*Chiens* 115]), and the figure of Judas is in this case the anthropomorphic embodiment of Constant’s, and the text’s, “anxiety of influence.”<sup>14</sup> At the level of writing, Judas is the “traître, traditeur, traducteur, transmetteur”: the traitor (“traître”), who gives sacred writing over to the sacrificer (“traditeur”) by translating the Unspeakable into words (“traducteur”) and thus transmitting the sacred violence of writing (“transmetteur”). He is the embodiment of the sacrifice which Constant attempts (and fails insofar as the British chance bombing takes over and interrupts him), and which the text instead carries out, through its sacrifice of writing as well as through its presence as a book. The inescapable existence of the Unspeakable renders writing a necessarily betraying activity, one that, among other things, betrays its own verbally signifying function.

Furthermore, this betrayal on the part of the written sign cannot be concealed and ignored because, like the betrayal of Judas, it is always already textualized in an implicating fashion: “S’il ne s’agissait que



d'une lettre anonyme, mais il faut se montrer" (*Chiens* 116). Anonymity is impossible, self-implication inevitable, and the subject of writing and thus of its betrayal will inevitably be sacrificed. The betrayal inherent in writing is underlined also by Drieu La Rochelle's contemporary Maurice Blanchot—a critic whose complex theories are particularly relevant to Drieu La Rochelle's writing because of the similar socio-political backdrop of their work. In his essay "La Littérature et le Droit à la mort," Blanchot writes: "Que la littérature soit illégitime, qu'il y ait en elle un fond d'imposture, oui, sans doute."<sup>15</sup> The illegitimacy, the deceitfulness of attempting to speak the Unspeakable, to encrust the eternal upon the everyday (to use Drieu La Rochelle's own diction), is the sinful articulation of the Word onto the Unspeakable—the fatal undertaking of the forbidden sacred "mélange." But this self-destruction (a suicidal writing?) is also the possibility of existence for writing: in addition to being "vraiment l'œuvre de la mort dans le monde" (340), literature, Blanchot explains, "sympathise avec l'obscurité, avec la passion sans but, la violence sans droit, avec tout ce qui, dans le monde, semble perpétuer le refus de venir au monde" (332-33).

In Blanchot's essays, then, as in Drieu La Rochelle's novel, one finds a certain incompatibility between life and writing. In "L'Œuvre et l'Espace de la mort," for example, he writes: "Pour écrire un seul vers, il faut avoir épuisé la vie . . . il faut avoir épuisé sa vie dans la recherche de l'art."<sup>16</sup> Drieu La Rochelle's protagonist can rewrite the Gospel only through sacrifice—the sacrifice of the unspeakability of politics: as Blanchot writes, "*Écrire pour pouvoir mourir—Mourir pour pouvoir écrire*" ("L'Œuvre," 92). It is this very movement between life, death, and writing, so pithily described by Blanchot, which takes place in *Les Chiens de paille*: Constant's writing is the preparatory rite for the ultimate sacrifice, where first of all writing is "killed"—and thus erased as a theme from the text—and then it is the human Other (through Cormont) who is killed, so that the rewriting of the Gospels is made possible as the authentic copying of the sacred text, accomplished with a self-implicating blood and not just with a neutral ink. At the level of narrative, then, this is an instance of Blanchot's statement that "[l']artiste] est lié à l'œuvre de la même étrange manière que l'est à la mort l'homme qui la prend pour fin" ("L'Œuvre," 106). For if self-annihilation through mystical experience is impossible, as it is for Constant, then suicide or voluntary death is the only way to abolish the individual self (*Chiens* 218).

Constant personifies both the artist and the suicide, the writer and the sacrificer/sacrificed, and it is as a sacrificial form of writing that he equally treats both writing and killing. His actual final sacrifice, however, is disrupted by another encrustation of the Unspeakable onto the sacrificial word—that is, by a movement opposite to writing, which in this novel is the articulation of the word onto the Unspeakable. The intention to sacrifice and the actual death of the victims are both present, but something else intervenes in the process: Constant's dramatic speech-act which baptizes the sacrifice as such ("Je suis le Melchisédech, le Grand Père éternel. Je vais achever, de mes mains, la France . . . Mes agneaux, agneaux de l'Apocalypse, je vais balancer mes grenades là-dedans. Ça vaut bien le couteau d'obsidienne du prêtre mexicain" [*Chiens* 239]), and which combines the momentous betrayal and execution with the annihilation of the personal self, is interrupted by the intervention of outside reality/history, under the shape of a bomb—the secular and relatively meaningless explosion of which comes to replace the ritual and semiotically charged explosion which Constant was about to accomplish. Sacrifice is indeed inevitable in *Les Chiens de paille*, for "il n'y a que le sacrifice, la vie est un sacrifice" (*Chiens* 237); but there is nevertheless a specific and strict limitation imposed upon sacrifice: "le seul sacrifice, c'est le sacrifice humain" (*Chiens* 237).

The human sacrifice of the narrative operated through writing is also the human sacrifice of the anthropomorphized book (foreshadowed by the analogy of breast and text). The reflections on writing fall back upon the novel itself, as one can read in the preface to *Les Chiens de paille*. The book risks "being killed," it "comes to life," it "ages," it "wounds," it "palpitates," it "will make others scream" (*Chiens*, 10). Through a series of eloquent metaphors, the book comes to share the essential qualities of human beings, thus acquiring the possibility of becoming the ideal sacrificial victim. Drieu La Rochelle's novel is always already sacrificed. The author states that what is "au fond de sa poitrine" is the book (*Chiens* 11), which thus carries "l'horrible palpitation d'un moment" (*Chiens* 10), and becomes the appropriate object of sacrifice—the palpitating human heart: "fendre un homme par le milieu et lui arracher le cœur. Qu'un cœur d'homme palpite dans une main d'homme, voilà toute la vie" (*Chiens* 238). The questions that the book addresses are in fact "déchirantes comme des lames de couteau" (*Chiens* 10—and one must think here of the "couteau d'obsidienne" cited above, the instrument of sacrifice), and the palpitating book "fera

crier, il me fait crier" (*Chiens* 10). The incarnation of the character Constant, described by Drieu La Rochelle in his preface as not only a part of the author but also a concentrate of the author's conscience (*Chiens* 11), becomes then a parallel transubstantiation and a metonymic reflection of the sacred character of writing.

*University of Vermont*

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Les Chiens de paille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 221.

<sup>2</sup> For a perceptive study of the intersection of politics and literature in Drieu La Rochelle's work (and especially in *Les Chiens de paille*), see Allan Stoekl, "Nizan, Drieu, and the Question of Death," *Representations* 21 (Winter 1988) 117-45.

<sup>3</sup> I.J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1952) 231.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, "Le Sang et l'Encre," *Le Jeune Européen* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927) 41.

<sup>5</sup> Armando Petrucci, "La Concezione cristiana del libro tra sesto e settimo secolo," in *Libri e lettori nel medioevo*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo (Bari: Laterza, 1977) 3-26, esp. 5-8.

<sup>6</sup> These religious and philosophical meditations, however, have also been described as a major defect of the novel, for "the unacceptably large amount of space" given to them, and for the fact that they are "not well incorporated into the story." Robert Barry Leal, *Drieu La Rochelle* (Boston: Twayne, 1982) 132.

<sup>7</sup> The central position held by painting in Drieu La Rochelle's novels has recently been discussed by Rima Drell Reck in *Drieu La Rochelle and the Picture Gallery Novel: French Modernism in the Interwar Years* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953) 24.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, "La Pharmacie de Platon," *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 80.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Caillois, *L'Homme et le Sacré* (Paris: Leroux, 1939) 42-43. For a description of the sacred as "tremendum" as well as fascinating, see also Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1950).

<sup>11</sup> René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972) 62.

<sup>12</sup> Frédéric Grover, *Drieu La Rochelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962) 70.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, "La Cité et l'Esprit" (10 August 1944), *Sur les écrivains*, ed. Frédéric Grover (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 125.

<sup>14</sup> I will not delve into the political implications of this allegory (in which the Nazi occupation of France is set in a parallel with the Roman occupation of Palestine at the time of Jesus's activity), as they have already been analyzed in depth by Stoekl.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "La Littérature et le Droit à la mort," *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) 303-45, 306.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "L'Œuvre et l'Espace de la mort," *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955) 83-166, 87.