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ON THE MOST TORN DEPTHS OF HISTORY.  
PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE IN JEAN  
WAHL DURING WARTIME

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1. *Introduction. Jean Wahl, Voice of a «Dual Position»*<sup>1</sup>

With an eclectic intellectual production open to a variety of influences, Jean Wahl (1888-1974) is one of the most multifaceted cultural figures of his generation.<sup>2</sup> Metaphysician, poet, scholar of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and the philosophy of existence, Jean Wahl was also a proponent of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary dialogue and exchange between different academic disciplines: in particular, by underlining his «dual position as philosopher and poet» [Kalinowski 2001, 5], it is possible to provide a broader and more comprehensive

<sup>1</sup> Kalinowski 2001, 5.

<sup>2</sup> From his *Études Kierkegaardiennes* in 1938, to his readings of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, and his *A Short History of Existentialism* published in 1949 and *Philosophies of Existence* in 1959, Jean Wahl became one of the most influential intellectuals that helped the reception of many of the non-French existentialist authors. His reflections on human existence formed the basis for his consideration of the relationship between philosophy and literature, conceiving both of them as avenues to shed light on human existence and reality.

view of his philosophical thought, conceiving it as the perfect synthesis of a philosophical reflection and a literary reflection in their common aspiration to the Truth.

Specifically, through his reflections, Jean Wahl demonstrates a «[...] progressive use of materials external to the traditional philosophical *corpus*, [he] presents an original deviation from the then-predominant philosophical model in France, and in doing so, authorize[s] a new type of philosophical gesture» [Petteni 2019, 213] for his generation. Born and brought up within the French academic milieu of the first half of the last century, Jean Wahl's thought continually explores the extra-academic sphere, that of poets and writers who, in those years, hardly had access to the rigid university circles.

Both «marginal» in his poetic production and his proximity to literature and literary circles, and «academic» in his career (winner of the *concours général, normalien*, first in the *agrégation*, teacher at the *khâgne*, at the university, then professor at the Sorbonne, director of the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* and of the *Société Française de Philosophie* after the war), Jean Wahl [...] was undoubtedly the most authorized to transgress the prohibition that academic philosophy placed on literature because he occupied a strong institutional position [Kalinowski 2001, 18].

A multifaceted academic able to engage with various disciplines thanks to his forward-looking perspective on the intellectual atmosphere of that period, Jean Wahl represents the precise emblem of the «difficulty of reconciling a university position and his poetic interests before the reception of Heidegger resolved such a contradiction» [*ivi*, 1], a difficulty due in particular to the French academic milieu's distrust and «circumspection» [*ivi*, 9] towards literature and poetry:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Kalinowski correctly observes: «From the end of the 1930s, literature found itself entirely excluded from the range of publications of the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, and it was necessary to wait until 1956 to read a study devoted to Joyce and a review of Ferdinand Alquié's *Philosophie du surréalisme*, published the previous year. One might be surprised that Jean Wahl's arrival at the direction of the *revue*, in 1950, did not immediately influence the publication policy in a more favorable direction towards literature. It was only from the end of the decade that an evolution took shape. In 1957, Jean Wahl and Kostas Axelos each published an article on Rimbaud. In 1959 and 1960, the names of Amiel, Proust,

Why did most of the great German philosophers of this century, from Wilhelm Dilthey to Martin Heidegger, going from Ernst Cassirer, Karl Jaspers and many others, spontaneously choose Hölderlin as the subject of their philosophical work, while the genre of commentary on his poetry only appeared later on in France, as a clearly imported product, linked to the reception of Heidegger? More generally, why did «institutional» French philosophy show itself to be largely reluctant towards literature during the first half of the 20th century, while German philosophy has always included literature among its legitimate subjects, following a tradition dating back to the end of the 18th century [*ivi*, 1]?

Jean Wahl's academic and literary reflections seem to evade such observations and questions, maintaining a leading role in both fields. Considered an atypical academic figure, both for his poetic works and his contributions to literary journals such as the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and *Mesures*, his biography demonstrates his desire to transcend rigid disciplinary divisions and embrace a broad view of reality and human life. It is therefore no coincidence that he was soon to be regarded as «the most prominent philosopher in the literary field» [*ivi*, 20]. He was a student at the École Normale, a professor at the Sorbonne and the founder of the École libre des Hautes Études in New York, as well as the philosophical symposia at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts (the *Décades de Pontigny-en-Amérique*). He was also the founder of the Collège Philosophique and the director of the philosophical journal *Revue*

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Valéry, Mallarmé appeared in the summaries. In 1961, Jean Wahl inaugurated a new section, *Voix des poètes*, at the end of the volume; but the rapid disappearance of the section undoubtedly testifies the criticisms it must have aroused, and explains *a posteriori* the reasons for Jean Wahl's circumspection at the beginning of the 1950s. Publishing poems in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* was going too far: any risk of confusion with the model of literary journals had to be avoided. From this quick inventory, it emerges that before the end of the 1950s, none of the great figures of the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, including Jean Wahl himself, published an article on literature there; the few examples that have been listed show that if literature was not completely excluded, the task of evoking it was preferably entrusted to a Germanist, a critic, a writer, or a foreign philosopher. The fact that Jean Wahl, author of numerous studies on poetry, only published them very late in the *Revue*, and that he preferably delivered this type of production to other media, clearly indicates that literature hardly had its place within the framework of the main university journal» [Kalinowski 2001, 9-10].

*de Métaphysique et de Morale*. His undeniable role within academic life did not, however, prevent Jean Wahl from participating in the literary life of his country, thanks to his numerous poetic compositions, essays on literature, novel, and poetry, and his interest in the Homeric poem, the *Iliad*.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyse his «dual position» [ivi, 5] as both a philosopher and a literary intellectual, considering it as *dual belonging* to two realms of human knowledge whose boundaries, in his view, are not clear-cut or defined, but are in constant and reciprocal dialogue and exchange, starting from the investigation of human existence. In a 1945 article, Hamilton Basso included Jean Wahl among the leading existentialist philosophers of his time, stating:

Philosophers, like roulette players, fall into two classifications – those who have systems and those who haven't. Wahl is one of those who haven't. It is agreed among philosophers that he is a «philosopher of existence». There are many definitions of this kind of philosopher, but what is meant, in general, is that he is a philosopher who makes use of personal experience much as a poet does [Basso 1945, 27].

This paper, then, aims to analyse Jean Wahl's thoughts on the relationship between philosophy and literature during World War II and his American exile, by examining two main texts from that period (*Métaphysique et Poésie* and *Sur la poésie*), and his reflections about literature and epic during the *Décades de Pontigny-en-Amérique*. During those years, he reflects on his «personal experience» [ibidem] and the historical situation, proposing the idea of intellectual Resistance as a dialogue between peoples and disciplines and as a continuous cultural exchange. Jean Wahl particularly sees a possibility for social, cultural, and human reconciliation in the constant dialogue between literature and philosophy (and ultimately between his literary and philosophical works). Consequently, this paper takes the following approach: it seeks to understand the relationship between philosophy and literature within the Resistance paradigm as a means of counteracting social disintegration and offering a possibility for redemption from war.

## 2. «*At the Very Edge of the Catastrophe*»:<sup>4</sup> Poetry and Philosophy of Existence during Wartime

Before analysing Jean Wahl's *dual belonging* to the domains of philosophy and literature, it is necessary to focus briefly on some salient points of his biography that influenced his thinking and became central to his philosophy. During the German invasion of France and the outbreak of World War II, several French intellectuals of Jewish origin were forced to resign from their teaching and academic positions and were compelled to go into exile in other countries, in particular the United States. This marked the beginning of the so-called «great migration» [see Enzensberger 1992], a movement of people fleeing anti-Semitic Europe, which also saw the birth of an intellectual Resistance movement characterised by the condition of exile. It was in this context that, in 1942, Jean Wahl obtained a professorship at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. In collaboration with other French intellectuals,<sup>5</sup> he founded the *Mount Holyoke College Symposia*, continuing the Burgundian collective called *Décades de Pontigny*.<sup>6</sup> These symposia consisted of intellectual meetings characterised by cultural exchange between exiled intellectuals from diverse academic and disciplinary fields. The seminars were characterized by a preponderance of philosophers and writers who came together in a «trust in the vitality of human conversation» [Benfey *et al.* 2006, xiii], as well as the necessity to safeguard the French cultural heritage from the social and intellectual disintegration caused by the war.

And yet, the creative and dialogical capacity evidenced by Jean Wahl's conception of symposia, his perpetual cultural creations, and his prolific production during those years did not derive from a privileged and effortless life. On the contrary, Jean Wahl's biography perfectly exemplifies the material and existential difficulties of the last century.

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<sup>4</sup> Bepaloff 2003, 129.

<sup>5</sup> Gustave Cohen, Henri Focillon, and Jacques Maritain.

<sup>6</sup> The *Décades de Pontigny en Amérique* (or *Entretiens de Pontigny* or *Pontigny Symposia*) at Mount Holyoke College took place during the summers of 1942, 1943, and 1944, with the support of Mount Holyoke College faculty and Professor Helen Patch. For more details on the exile of European intellectuals and the *Décades of Pontigny en Amérique*, consult: Benfey *et al.*, 2006 and Zamboni Russia 2023.

From the outbreak of war and his active role in the French intellectual Resistance to the Nazi persecution of Jews, which led to his confinement in the Drancy concentration camp, his subsequent escape from the camp and American exile, his life was characterized by significant and complex events: his existence was also marked by deprivation and difficulty.

It is a source of wonder, both to his old friends and to those who have met him since he came to this country [the United States of America] in 1942, that so frail and helpless-looking person, equipped with little more than a talent for abstract thinking and poetry, could survive the experiences that befell him after the collapse of France – a stay in prison, a term in a concentration camp, and an escape from Paris, where the Germans had orders to shoot him on sight, to what was then the Unoccupied France. Wahl rarely talks about these adventures. He would rather discuss philosophy and poetry. It was philosophy and poetry, more than anything else, that sustained him while he was in prison and concentration camp, and they have been almost as helpful in sustaining him since he has been in exile in the United States [Basso 1945, 27].

During his time in the Free Zone of France and his participation in the Resistance, Jean Wahl encountered many literary *revues* that represented the exact realisation of his utopia: a union and reciprocity between disciplines that are traditionally kept separate, but which he believed to be intimately linked – the poetic-literary sphere and the philosophical sphere. This utopia originated with the outbreak of World War II and the birth of the Resistance movements, and was further enriched by an «exceptional situation» [Kalinowski 2001, 20]: the war. In his view, the journals encountered in the Free Zone could bring together:

[...] philosophers and poets, thanks to an exceptional situation, in the same way that they gathered Surrealists, Catholic and Communist writers under the banner of a shared hostility to Nazism, these journals temporarily relegated the traditional antagonism between academics and creators to the background. After the war, Jean Wahl perpetuated the spirit of fraternal eclecticism that had characterized the editorial practices of the poetic Resistance in the six issues of the journal *Deucalion*, between 1946 and 1957: he brought together texts by Beckett, Benveniste, Hamann, as well as children's poems, evoked Rilke while Levinas commented on Proust. The same principle was behind the Collège de Philosophie,

founded by Jean Wahl in 1946, where philosophers and writers succeeded one another as speakers for about twenty years [*ibidem*].

Despite the brevity of these biographical notes, it is possible to observe the complexity and the multiple facets that characterized such an intellectual personality:

Jean Wahl represents the exceptional case of an individual who, for about fifty years, spanned the entire spectrum of the philosophical field, and was present both at the summit of the institution and at the heart of avant-garde. He possessed the project of transcending the cleavages that structured the field. In actual fact, it can be observed that the deliberate or non-deliberate strategies to which he resorted [...] tended less to subvert the established boundaries than to reinforce them [*ivi*, 21].

Aware of the «established boundaries» [*ibidem*] Jean Wahl conceives the two disciplines as intimately united, always analysing them in terms of reciprocity. This reciprocity is determined by their possibility to reach the Truth. However, beyond biographical reasons, these reflections on the relationship between philosophy, poetry and literature are framed by an in-depth consideration of various themes. Thanks to, among many others, his well-known studies on Kierkegaardian thought, his reading of Heidegger and his analysis of Hegel's *Unhappy Consciousness*, Jean Wahl placed human existence at the heart of his reflections over the years [see Wahl 2016]. In particular, Jean Wahl was interested in human experience in its concrete form: it is no coincidence that his study *Vers le concret* [see Wahl 2004] aimed to bring philosophy closer to the concrete experience of reality, while simultaneously distancing it from abstraction and expanding its usual boundaries. It was through this expansion that Jean Wahl opened philosophy to the necessary contact with literature and poetry, which he conceived as concrete modalities of contact with reality, free from unnecessary mediation and capable of looking at the very heart of reality. From this perspective, philosophical and literary reflection can only be examined in their mutual relationship: a relationship that feeds and lives on the concreteness of reality.

According to his friend, philosopher Rachel Bepaloff, Jean Wahl situated his own thought and poetics at «the very edge of the catastro-

phe» [Bespaloff 2003, 129]. He never turned away from history, existence, war and the global situation, always facing the concrete facts of life without illusions or attempts to escape from it. Referring to his poems, Rachel Bespaloff stated:

They traverse the very edge of the catastrophe; at the heart of its unleashing. They follow the migration of a wounded civilisation, from one shore to the other of an ocean ploughed by war [...] He plays at mixing sensation and thought, delivering them to each other at the border of the carnal and the spiritual [...] The philosopher abandons himself to the poet, who sets sail for the All without ever leaving himself. Only poetry will wrest from him this approval of the All that philosophy cannot justify without banishing dissonance and division [*ibidem*].

### 3. *Metaphysics and Poetry: «An Unending Dialectic»*<sup>7</sup>

In a 1939 essay published in the journal *Messages*, Jean Wahl provided a thorough analysis of the relationship between philosophy and poetry. The title of the essay, *Métaphysique et Poésie*, reveals a fundamental aspect of Jean Wahl's philosophical poetics, a feature that also characterises his entire reflection on the relationship between poetry and metaphysics:

Inseparable, poetry permeates the entirety of his philosophical work, notably *Poésie, pensée, perception* (1948) where the central Parmenides, his beloved Hölderlin, Keats, and Whitman, among others, and elsewhere also Dante – to the point of naming one of his daughters Béatrice –, Coleridge, Novalis, Hebbel, Rilke, Traherne, Claudel, nourish his evolving reflection. More fundamentally, Wahl's poetry and poetics are intrinsically metaphysical [Wahl, E. 2019].

Jean Wahl's reflections emphasise a paradigmatic aspect of the relationship between philosophy and poetry throughout history, outlining the purpose of his research: to explore how poetry and metaphysics are simultaneously distinct and interconnected, forming an eternal parallel-

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<sup>7</sup> Moore 2016, 221.

ism, like two lights illuminating the same reality. At the beginning of his 1939 essay, Jean Wahl stated:

Until our time, one could say that poetry and metaphysics treat the same subjects, but with different techniques. Yet both poetry and metaphysics aim to be rid of all technique [...]. At one point in time they were very deeply united. The Greek Sophists gladly relied on Homer and discovered in him the idea of a perpetual transformation of things. Before them the first philosophers were very often poets [...]. Parmenides formulated his metaphysics in very austere verse. The way of opinion leads to nothing: those who rely on sense rely on that which is not. It is necessary to rely only on those things that are known by way of science. Thus this metaphysician poet warns us against the poetic realms and allows us to open our eyes only before the brilliance of the eternal sphere of being. Whereas the prosaist Heraclitus highlighted the reasonless elements of the universe, all the while insisting on the logos, on a reason that unites them in a mysterious way. Plato is heir of these two philosophers. He harshly criticizes the poets Homer and Hesiod. However, it is Platonism that permitted, during the course of the centuries, the majority of poets' escapes toward metaphysics. I would like to see what poetry can retain of metaphysical motifs, how poetry can give access to the metaphysical world, and how the poet departs from these metaphysical motifs in order to constitute a poetic system [Wahl *et al.* 2016, 217-218].

According to Jean Wahl, although poetry and philosophy appear distinct, they should be studied as closely related disciplines, with poetry being seen as the «big sister» [ivi, 227] of philosophy. The best way to study them is to examine their mutual parallelism throughout human intellectual history. The two disciplines appear simultaneously and essentially autonomous from each other, that is, never completely overlapping:

And yet, as becomes evident over the course of the essay, poetry can only be understood through its relationship to metaphysics, while metaphysics can in turn only be understood through its relationship to poetry. Each may shed light on the other, but neither ultimately stands autonomous. What we have is a sort of unending dialectic in which «they always remain linked, living from their reciprocal deaths, each emerging at the moment when the other is destroyed but living also from their reciprocal lives» [Moore 2016, 221].<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Alexander Moore presents a brief illustration of the intimate relationship between philosophy and poetry, claiming: «Wahl shows, for example, how Whitehead expresses

As suggested by Wahl, poetry seems to be located «both at the foundation of metaphysics and at the summit toward which metaphysics strives» [*ibidem*]:

Through a «union of contradictories», of contrary images that selfdestruct and advance us toward what is imageless and indeterminable; through a coincidence of opposites – for example, passivity and activity, and consciousness and unconsciousness – poetry helps us to go beyond what is given «here below», but, in a move that resembles what Wahl elsewhere calls «transcendence», also allows us to return to the world below in which we find ourselves, to «join immanence to transcendence» [*ibidem*].

Thanks to the union of contradictories, poetry enables humankind to transcend physical reality and access the realm of metaphysics and eternity – that «ocean» [Wahl 1939, 9] to which humanity can only gain access through the infinity within itself and in relation to which poetry seems to possess a privileged avenue of expression:

The poet does not appeal to the same region within us as the prose writer. He stirs an inner lake that mysteriously communicates with the ocean, which the Greeks considered the origin of all things. This is none other than what Schelling attempted to define: the union of the subjective and the objective. He touches the extreme of subjectivity and through that joins us to the cosmos [*ibidem*].

Through a *coincidentia oppositorum* (the coincidence of opposites: passivity and activity, subjectivity and objectivity, consciousness and

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philosophically what Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry «makes us feel» about nature «in its incessant mobility». But Shelley's poetry itself rests on certain «philosophical intuitions», which themselves derive in part from the philosopher-poet Plato. Wahl reveals similar connections with respect to the themes of memory in Alfred de Musset, immobile nature in William Wordsworth, time in Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, space in William Blake, causality in Paul Claudel, and even non-knowledge in the early poetry of G. W. F. Hegel. He also notes equivalents between two hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides* and the work of Arthur Rimbaud, and between the great kinds of being in Plato's *Sophist* and poets such as Paul Valéry, Walt Whitman, Novalis, and Gérard de Nerval. And he explains how even the simplest, least metaphysical poem by someone like Friedrich Hölderlin may lead us to philosophical insight» [*ivi*, 221-222].

unconsciousness)<sup>9</sup> poetry enables humankind to transcend givenness, material reality and open itself to the realm of metaphysics. It is no coincidence that Jean Wahl identifies poetry «from Parmenides to Mallarmé and Valéry» [Wahl *et al.* 2016, 222] as the «poetry of being» [*ibidem*], which is essentially metaphysical poetry. Although they cannot be properly defined in themselves, poetry and metaphysics appear to be eternally linked, mirroring each other reciprocally. In Jean Wahl's essay, metaphysical poetry and poetic metaphysics emerge as two perspectives that illuminate the same reality, which humankind can only grasp by traversing both.

I will quote a very short poem to summarize these connections between poetry and metaphysics. It is metaphysics that speaks and here is what it says: «Poetry, big sister, / That your song takes its flight, / I listen to you, and it is I who speaks». We do not know what metaphysics is nor what poetry is, but the core of poetry will always be metaphysics, and it is quite possible that the core of metaphysics is, equally, always poetry [*ivi*, 227].

In an essay dated 1944 and titled *Sur la poésie*, Jean Wahl precisely outlined the soul of the kinship between the two disciplines:

The kinship of poetry and philosophy is revealed when both reveal our kinship with the world. It remains true that until our day, it is rather poetry more than philosophy that has made present to us the first word of philosophy, that of Thales: «All things are full of gods» [Wahl 1944, 26].

If poetry offers the poet a privileged avenue to become «conscious of his own unconscious» [*ivi*, 20] (once again, a *coincidentia oppositorum*), then it enables the poet to depict the most universal experiences (pleasure, life, suffering, love, and death)<sup>10</sup> by drawing from what is most individual: his inner self.

At the same time as he can become conscious of himself as a knowing subject, the poet is conscious of himself as an existing subject. Because for humankind,

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<sup>9</sup> In the essays *Sur la poésie* Jean Wahl claimed: «The essence of being a poet lies in the consciousness of one's own unconscious» [Wahl 1944, 51].

<sup>10</sup> These examples are taken from Jean Wahl's text, *Sur la poésie* [*ivi*, 21].

knowledge is existence, and existence is knowledge. And existence implies transcendence; man exists insofar as he senses things and beings beyond himself [...] The poet indicates what is beyond [...] Poetry has its source in what is beyond and its destination in what is beyond [*ivi*, 26].

By swiftly transitioning from the individual's inner world to the metaphysical domain, Jean Wahl highlights the pivotal role of poetry in unveiling what lies beyond reality, almost defining a form of mystical and metaphysical knowledge. The core connection between poetry and metaphysics lies at this precise point: two parallel (and so, never coinciding, never opposed) avenues for approaching what lies beyond the realm of reality.

Refusing to take sides, Wahl's own work embodies the inconclusive dialectic between metaphysics and poetry. Their fusion is uncertain, but Wahl, whether in his prose or verse, never stopped striving «for the metaphysical-poetic Truth to appear» [Moore 2016, 222].<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. *From Poetry to Epic: «A Dominant Concern with Deeper Things»*<sup>12</sup>

As briefly mentioned earlier, Jean Wahl represented a prominent figure in the organization of the *Mount Holyoke College Symposia* during his exile in the United States. Together with Jacques Maritain, Helen Patch, Henri Focillon and Gustave Cohen, he initiated a discussion and dialogue group that aimed «to recover a vanished moment of prewar international cultural exchange» [Benfey 2006, 5]. In that context:

Jean Wahl was uniquely positioned, by temperament and training, for his role of cultural intermediary. He was master of the «in-between», a writer and thinker who instinctively worked the seams between cultures, nations, and languages

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<sup>11</sup> Along with Jean Wahl's academic and philosophical contributions, his parallel poetic work deserves attention. As Jacques Darras stated: «Jean Wahl even achieves this miracle of including the philosophical aspect of knowledge within his poem as a poetic thing. At no point, in fact, does philosophy overflow the poem, so much is it contained in harmonious accord by the poetic constraint [...]; at no point does philosophical language contest or endanger the words that welcome it» [Darras 1992, 82].

<sup>12</sup> Goodwin 1944.

[...] He was both a philosopher and a poet, with deep interests in visual arts, and saw no contradiction among these vocations [...] Jean Wahl seems to have made it his business to know everyone and everything, especially in his chosen fields of philosophy, poetry, and the visual arts. He was a friend of Walter Benjamin, with whom he participated in the Pontigny *Décade* of 1938, and of Simone Weil. Wahl was precisely the kind of «cosmopolitan Jew» the Nazis reviled [...] During his final months in France [...] Wahl, amazingly, managed to complete a volume of translations from American literature titled *Ecrivains et poètes des Etats-Unis d'Amérique*, first published a year later in Algeria, in two issues of the journal *Fontaine*. This publication proves that Wahl's idea of a French-American cultural alliance preceded his arrival in the United States. The translations of American poetry and prose were meant to constitute, in Wahl's prefatory words, «le signe de l'immense continuité intercontinentale» [ivi, 5-7].

From Jean Wahl's perspective, the only possibility for effective intellectual Resistance against Nazism, antisemitism, and World War II lay in the continuous intellectual exchange between his country of origin and the United States, that place where the so-called «France éternelle» could survive while awaiting better times. It was precisely through a perpetual dialogue between philosophy and literature that the Resistance movement could demonstrate its effectiveness, becoming «the cultural counterpart of de Gaulle's Free French in London» [Benfey 2006, 7-8], with the possibility of «sealing culturally an alliance crucial to the eventual liberation of France» [ivi, 8]. Specifically, the analysis of the relationship between creativity and political, global and social crises<sup>13</sup> determined by the war proves the crucial role of philosophy, literature and poetry (as well as the visual arts): reaffirming the primacy and importance of artistic creativity in the face of violence, forced exile and continuous bombing in Europe. As Jean Wahl himself said, these disciplines represent a form of «resistance to the degradation of human nature» [Wahl 1948, 27] in opposition to the Force that dominated the world in those years.

From this point of view, paradigmatic is the preface that Jean Wahl wrote for the 1943 text of his friend and philosopher Rachel Bespaloff, *De l'Illiade*, a study of the Homeric poem (also considered a response

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<sup>13</sup> The 1944 *Symposium*, organized from July 23rd to August 19th at Mount Holyoke College, focused on the concept of crisis (in literature, in culture, in society, in philosophy).

to Simone Weil's famous essay, *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*).<sup>14</sup> In this essay, Besseloff analyses the omnipresence of Force in the world (and in her own world, too) as the fundamental ontological principle of reality. In his introduction to the text, alongside Besseloff, Wahl emphasises a peculiar characteristic of the Homeric world, namely the fact that it is «the world of Force» [Wahl 1943, 271]. A generating and dissolving principle, Force possesses a dual nature, an original conflict enclosed within its very ontological unity, recalling Heraclitus' theory: Force and war govern things; contradiction and antinomies appear to be constitutive of the being of the world.<sup>15</sup> According to Wahl, Homer, the singer of both triumph and misfortune [see *ivi*, 273] encompasses the antinomic forces (that are eternal in their principle and that rule the world) in his epic poem.

According to Nietzsche, the Greek lives in a dark world. But from this darkness, flowers of light bloom. Youth is a flower. Pleasure is a flower. Thought is light. After Homer, it was Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle who recognized this fertile ground of becoming and the blossoming of forms. Plato, in particular, increasingly lived this experience; he came to see forms more and more as «*essences devenues*»—as products of a generative process tending toward being [*ivi*, 273-274].

From Jean Wahl's perspective, Homer emerges as the singer of the eternal antinomic struggle that constitutes reality and, from this precise point of view, stands as a precursor to the Greek philosophers – and not only –, presenting a thought capable of uniting contradiction. In his introduction to Rachel Besseloff's text, Jean Wahl stated:

Kierkegaard contrasts the aesthetic to the ethical; Nietzsche, in aesthetics – which for him is the only true ethics – contrasts the Dionysian to the Apollonian; Šestov contrasts something else to the Hellenic – Dionysian or Apollonian as

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<sup>14</sup> Simone Weil's and Rachel Besseloff's essays, who were both close friends and confidants of Jean Wahl, have an unusual history. Although the two authors never met in person, their essays have repeatedly been described as parallel due to their similarity in intent, argumentation, and treatment (see Benfey 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Jean Wahl claims: «Strife is the father of all things. But in its duality, Strife itself is the child of the unified *dynamis*, of the eternal *physis*. These opposing forces, these antagonistic energies, are the product of one and the same force» [*ivi*, 271].

it may be – which he calls Jerusalem. But the deepest Zion Rachel Bepaloff sees in agreement with the Greek spirit, just as she sees in Homer the agreement between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, and between the aesthetic and the ethical [*ivi*, 274].

Despite the brevity of the text and the fact that it is a commentary on Bepaloff's reading of the *Iliad*, a crucial reflection by Jean Wahl still appears: the substantial continuity and interpenetration between the domains of philosophy and the Letters – the Homeric epic in this case. Both disciplines concern the same sphere – human reality – and shed light on the inevitable presence and dominion of Force in the world, a world that in that 1943 could only represent the perfect exemplification of what Homer wrote in his *Iliad*. From this point of view, the intellectual and methodological approaches of both Bepaloff and Wahl were paradigmatic. They re-read their contemporary world through the Homeric poem and saw it as part of a line of thought shared by the great philosophers, remarking on a substantial unity between the two fields regarding their fundamental theme: reflection on the human condition.

From this point of view, the *Mount Holyoke Symposia* (also known as *Pontigny-en-Amérique*, to emphasise continuity with the original French collective) conceived by Jean Wahl aimed to be placed in direct continuity, at least thematically and methodologically, with this area of interest.

There was, however, a dominant concern with deeper things, with manifestations of great human crises in the culture of nations, with the social and moral crisis of the day. Unquestionably, the spirit of Pontigny was one of anxious hope that the cultural individuality of nations would be preserved while the national selfishness to wars and the destruction of culture would be somehow put down... [Goodwin 1944].

Once again, philosophy and literature converged on the theme of Resistance, particularly from a thematic perspective: both shed light on reality and human existence, even when the latter is exhausted by war.

5. *The American Novel: Under the Sign of an «Intercontinental Continuity»*<sup>16</sup>

Between the Jean Wahl of the 1920s – the one of patchworks of German and Anglo-American philosophical landscapes – and that of the 1945-1950s, a shift in the use of materials and types of textual sources nourishing his thought is noticeable. The philosopher moves from the publication of large philosophical monographs to a growing interest in American literature. In 1945, he would thus be responsible for the publication of an essay in the journal *Fontaine* entitled *Ecrivains et poètes des Etats-Unis* [Petteni 2019, 219].

The project of a collection of writers and poets from the United States, dated 1942, fully aligned with the climate of intercontinental dialogue that also characterized the *Symposia* at Mount Holyoke College: despite the World War, Jean Wahl's initiative was an alliance between two countries – France and the United States, or, more broadly, Europe and the United States – in an effort to understand the continuity and closeness between the literary production of the two countries.

It is therefore with the desire for a «culture to culture» conversation, under the sign of the «immense intercontinental continuity», that Jean Wahl introduces the texts of Henry Miller, T.S. Eliot, and even Faulkner into France, whose collection presents the translation of an unpublished short story, *Afternoon of a Cow* [*ibidem*].

Once again, an unprecedented methodological approach can be observed: a progressive rapprochement of philosophy towards literature from the perspective of thematic continuity. The narrative techniques introduced by American novels opened up new avenues of expression for philosophy, enabling Jean Wahl to identify the corpus to «operate a movement towards the concrete» [*ivi*, 224] in American literature.

[...] art and literature then constitute a privileged space for formal experiments of a continent that is no longer ordered from a single focal point around which perspective is organized, but rather composed of multiverses in which subjectivities orient themselves [...]. [Here] The subject is no longer an eye looking over a map, but a subjectivity that orients itself in a landscape, that is to say, in an affective

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<sup>16</sup> Wahl 1945, 3.

space. [...] It is therefore the inventiveness of the American novel in adapting the forms of the European novel to the pluralistic reality of the continent but also to types of haunted, stratified, and *différentes* subjectivities that constituted its attractiveness for postmodern philosophy, in search of a reconfiguration of the role and modes of expression of philosophy in the face of a tradition torn into discursive shreds [ivi, 234].

Alongside this, it is necessary to highlight «the act with a political dimension» [Jeanpierre 2010, 407] undertaken by Jean Wahl: that means proving «by an act that French thought was alongside those who, defenders of freedom, defended thought itself» [Fouchet 1945, 3]. For Jean Wahl, literary transnationalism simultaneously indicates a transnationalism of thought and philosophy and, consequently, a necessary strategy for intellectual Resistance. Once again, even from the perspective of «intercontinental continuity» [Wahl 1945, 3], a constant dialogue between philosophical and literary creation emerges: this dialogue concerns the search for Truth, that is understood as *lived Truth*. Individuals can access this kind of Truth only starting from the (metaphysical-poetic) «inner lake» [Wahl 1939, 9] of their inner world, through a constant exchange with others:

Wahl contends that art, beyond propositional truth, allows access to reality via what he calls *la vérité sentie* or «felt truth». Such truth is not primordial, as *Aletheia* was for Heidegger but, rather, a necessary «enlargement of the [...] idea of truth». «There are as many visions of the world as there are great artists. And each vision [...] is irreducible. But», Wahl continues, «within the soul of the spectator that we are, there are communications between these visions». Wahl spent much of his life engaging in, expressing, and facilitating such communications. [Moore *et al.* 2016, 20].

## 6. Conclusions

Portraying an intellectual personality such as Jean Wahl requires navigating both his reflections and his biography. It involves intrinsically connecting his work and personal experience, his philosophical and literary production and daily life, and situating all of these within a particular historical, social and intellectual context – World War II, exile and

persecution against Jews. From this perspective, Jean Wahl's message is clear: constant and mutual dialogue is the antidote to division and disintegration, whether between disciplines, intellectuals, or individuals.

In this sense, Jean Wahl's reflection fits perfectly into the so-called *Resistance paradigm*: through his work, we encounter an intellectual and cultural resistance to historical and social injustices. This is a way of creating culture – and therefore philosophy and literature – that can immerse itself in the reality of the world and *act* to renew it morally, spiritually and civically. For Jean Wahl, Resistance means producing a reflection that can confront the historical evils of World War II, exile and persecution.

The idea of transnational intellectual and cultural exchange, and the political dimension of Jean Wahl's thinking, also belong to the Resistance paradigm. It involves opposing dialogue to social disintegration and intellectual exchange to violence and *Force*. A concrete example of such a vision can be found in the *Décade* from the 1943 summer session of the American symposia, dedicated to philosophy and poetry. In this context, Jean Wahl conceived of poetry, and of philosophy, as «means of situating ourselves in the present» [Jeanpierre 2006, 28]: they are a privileged way of interpreting the world through a combination of rational and non-rational knowledge, the only possible form of «resistance to the degradation of human nature» [Wahl 1948, 27] and to «the most torn depths of history» [Bespaloff 2003].

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## Keywords

Jean Wahl; poetry; metaphysics; Pontigny-en-Amérique; intellectual resistance

## Abstract

Although Jean Wahl is widely regarded as one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, his literary career as a writer and metaphysical poet has remained relatively unknown. He is an emblematic figure in the history of philosophy. By dwelling on the boundary between philosophical and poetic-literary reflection, Wahl demonstrates through his biography and intellectual work the inseparable nature of these disciplines. In a perpetual state of mutual struggle yet complementarity, both directed towards the search for Truth, philosophy and literature only find their authentic nature when mirroring each other. Through the establishment of the *Décades de Pontigny en Amérique* and the Collège philosophique, Wahl laid the foundations for an ongoing dialogue between the dominant trends in philosophy and literature, in a spirit of continuous exchange and interdisciplinarity. Having survived deportation and forced exile «at the very edge of the catastrophe» of World War II, Wahl was able to establish the conditions for ongoing intellectual conversation, situating his philosophical reflections and poetics within these biographical events. Recovering original texts from his American exile and wartime will enable us to reconstruct the limits of such a dialogical *polemos*, and to reach, with Wahl, a philosophical poetics and a philosophy characterised by literary reflection.

Se Jean Wahl viene considerato come uno dei principali filosofi del Novecento, tuttavia la sua parallela carriera letteraria è piuttosto sconosciuta: poeta, scrittore, metafisico, Wahl rappresenta una figura emblematica per la storia della filosofia. Capace di soffermarsi sul confine di due discipline – riflessione filosofica e riflessione poetico-letteraria – Wahl dimostra con la sua stessa vicenda biografica e con la sua produzione intellettuale il carattere di *indissociabilità* delle due discipline: in un perenne stato di lotta reciproca, eppure complementari, rivolte entrambe alla ricerca della verità, ai suoi occhi, le due trovano il proprio carattere di autenticità solo nel rispecchiarsi una nell'altra. È con l'ideazione delle *Décades de Pontigny en Amérique* e nel suo ruolo all'interno dei movimenti intellettuali di Resistenza nel corso della guerra mondiale che Wahl pone le basi per un dialogo costante tra le principali tendenze in campo filosofico e in campo letterario, in uno spirito di scambio e interdisciplinarietà continui. Sopravvissuto alla deportazione e a un esilio forzato, *nelle profondità più lacerate della storia*, Wahl ha saputo creare le condizioni concrete per una costante conversazione tra discipline e pensieri, situando all'interno di tali vicende biografiche sia la sua riflessione filosofica che la sua poetica. Recuperando manoscritti originali provenienti dal suo esilio statunitense e dal periodo di guerra, sarà possibile ricostruire e situare i limiti di una tale lotta dialogica e *polemica* giungendo, con Wahl, a una poetica filosofica e a una filosofia impregnata di riflessione letteraria.

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