
*Poetry
in
Buchenwald*

“**H**ey, Lusseyran! Wait up! Listen!”

The hand of Saint-Jean, thin as a knife-blade,
so eager that the bones vibrated like nerves, grabbed
my arm. His voice became lower, graver, both angry
and tender. He recited,

I know all sorts of people
Who are not equal to their lives
Their hearts are poorly smothered fires
Their hearts
Open and close like their doors.

The hand on my arm relaxed, let go, and began gesturing in the air to an invisible witness.

"It's Apollinaire," said Saint-Jean. "Apollinaire! He knew! I tell you, he knew!"

Already my wonderful friend had taken a step away from me. He stood up, lifted his arms. He seemed to have grown taller and to have learned something so essential and so urgent that he had to let me know about it immediately. Yes! It was as though he came bearing news—good news which was going to brighten our wretched lives. I listened to him intently.

I know all sorts of people
 Who are not equal to their lives
 Their hearts are poorly smothered fires
 Their hearts
 Open and close like their doors.

He recited the verse again, but with a stronger, more confident voice. This time it wasn't necessary for him to convince me of anything. It had become obvious for me as well.

Now he leaned against my shoulder, as if to make me turn about inside myself and examine the horizon with the new eyes he had just given me.

"Apollinaire wasn't thinking about us," he said. "He was thinking about a prostitute, Marizibill. And yet, Lusseyran—!"

There was no need for him to say more. I let him know I had understood. Or rather—I *saw*. I saw around us the ring of sharp rocks that closed off the road and these men, this multitude of men who were almost faceless and whose eyes open and shut without ever *really* opening. I saw the lines of prisoners who trudged toward the central square to report for work. I saw the cold, the hunger, the fear, all these things that we were not equal to—that were greater than us, too great for us. I knew that the first man I would bump into would not speak my language and would have none of my thoughts. And that for him I, in turn, would be an utter stranger.

As for Saint-Jean, this man who ordinarily asked so many questions, who was so determined to see, to know, to arrive at a simple certainty, a final truth which could sustain him—he gave no further explanations, he sought no further.

I asked, "How did you find these verses?"

"They were there," he said. "I have known them a long time. But it was just then, when I saw the big Russian, a Tartar, and those fifty other Russians

who slowly made a circle around him and drew closer in silence and then, finally, threw themselves upon him with cries of hatred and scratched him, trampled him, killed him while nobody did anything or said anything and maybe didn't even see anything.... Then, Lusseyran, I understood."

I know all sorts of people
Who are not equal to their lives....

At this my friend made a great gesture with his arm as if to leave unspoken an unbearable thought. This thought had occurred to me in the same instant, and I, too, had found it unbearable. There was this powerlessness of men, our powerlessness, in the face of the events of men's lives, our lives! This was as frightening as the threat of perishing by fire. But Apollinaire had *spoken* this powerlessness. He had known how to say it in such a way that it no longer had the same face. It wasn't any softer, but it was clearer. It began to be reclaimed a little bit, just enough to leave a little room in which to live.

I had loved Saint-Jean for several weeks because he was courageous, ardent, agitated, and especially because he had an unbelievable passion

which I had never before encountered to such a degree in anyone—a passion for honesty. He didn't ask himself whether or not it was prudent to be honest in a concentration camp. An honest man is honest in all circumstances. One keeps one's word, one tries to understand, even if it's painful. Inner harmony, moral clarity, these are not things to be sold, even at the price of material security—especially not for that.

I had loved Saint-Jean for weeks, this thin, imperious, and driven man, because he *gave* his human voice, his human resonance, with constancy, from moment to moment, in spite of fatigue, the greatest fatigue. I had loved him from the moment I had entered a detention cell at Fresnes, the evening before the departure to Germany. Then I did not know this man who was speaking in the room of sealed windows. But I had been drawn towards him immediately, and without the slightest impulse to withdraw.

He was not a poet. He was a businessman. For many years he had managed a company in Marseilles very successfully. He had been a member of the Resistance from the very beginning in 1940, and a very effective one: he had set up a repatriation network for Allied aviators. He was not a confused daydreamer. And it was he who had suddenly recited Apollinaire, who had

suddenly transformed poetry into action.

Some weeks later—this was in the middle of August—during the time that, unbeknownst to us, the Allied armies were liberating France—I found myself in the same spot. I sat on the little stone wall which faced this long and narrow structure: the basins. A door, several high windows, and, in the interior darkness, a line of big red basins, over which hung a sort of metal mushroom from which icy water hissed. Each morning, the moment the night floodlights went out from the tops of the watchtowers, we were herded here and had to clean ourselves in the dense and sweaty atmosphere packed with bodies.

I was sitting on the wall in the sun, between a young Parisian actor—a frightened and too-beautiful young man with the hands of a woman—and a conscientious and somewhat skeptical teacher from Bourgogne. I said to them,

“Poetry, true poetry, is not ‘literature.’”

They both cried out, “Not literature!”

I had surprised, even shocked them. I saw that I would have to explain myself, although I didn’t want to. And I began to recite verses, at random, any that I could think of, any that resembled our life at

the moment. In a plain, undramatic voice I recited Baudelaire, Rimbaud.

Little by little, another voice was added to my own. I did not know where it came from—I hardly asked myself. Finally, though, I had to listen: the verses were being repeated in the darkness. Voices had timidly joined in behind me, and in front of me. I was surrounded. Without even intending to, I began to recite more slowly.

More men came. They formed a circle. They echoed the words. At the end of each stanza, in each pause, there rose a great hum of the last syllables.

“Keep going! Keep going!” whispered the actor with the hands of a woman. “What’s happening is truly extraordinary.”

I chanted. It seemed to me in that moment that I knew all the poems I had read, even those I thought I’d forgotten. The circle of men pressed in closer around me: it was a crowd of men. I heard men who weren’t French. The echo which they sent back to me was sometimes disfigured—like the sound of a violin with a loose string—sometimes harmonious. The breath of all these men came closer, I felt it now on my face. There were perhaps fifty of them.

I said to them, "Who are you?" The response came immediately, but in a frightening disorder: some spoke German, others Russian, others Hungarian. Others simply repeated the last words of the last verse in French. They leaned toward me, gesturing, swaying, beating their chests, lisping, muttering, crying out, seized by a sudden passion. I was dumbstruck, happy like a child. The noise had grown so loud in a few seconds that I could no longer distinguish a single word. Far from me, behind the oscillating mob, men hailed the passers-by in all the languages of Eastern Europe. No longer trying to understand what was happening, incapable of feeling anything but happiness, a happiness of the throat and breath, I began to recite again. All I had left in my memory was a poem of Baudelaire: "Death of the Lovers." I recited it. And scores of voices, gravelly, croaking, caressing voices repeated, "The dead flames...."

I had a hard time leaving this crowd, escaping from it. I had to throw my arms out and leave, step by step, still reciting. I know that this is hard to believe, but behind me I heard men weeping.

My teacher-friend told me that all these men wore on their shirts the letter "U": Ungar—they were Hungarians.

"But what happened?" I asked.

"We didn't see anything," my two friends said. "They came from all directions all at once, like flies," said the actor with the hands of a girl. But he who usually snickered at the end of each sentence was now serious and sincere.

In the following days I got to know some of these Hungarians. I learned that most of them were Jews who were waiting for what the SS called "transfer to the sky." They all knew they would soon die. I also knew that none of them spoke French, not even a little, but that listening to a man recite poetry, they had thrown themselves upon it as upon food. After a month one of them, Alexander, could repeat without fault the last stanza of "Death of the Lovers"; he could put together all these words which had no sense for him. I asked him what his work was: he was a journalist at Miskolcz, a little village northeast of Budapest.

No, poetry was not simply "literature." It did not belong to the world of books. It was not made just for those who read. The proof of this was growing.

One dark winter morning, in the ink of dawn, we were about thirty exhausted men, shivering, and we were bumping up against each other around one of the

red basins for a little icy water. This brutal water, intercepted by a hand, crazed by a face that pressed itself too close, snaked down our naked chests. There was silence, the obligatory silence of all communal activities. But all of a sudden a neighbor began to sing. His voice took off before him and extended out toward us in an immediately magical way. It was the voice of Boris, a man so extraordinary that I can't speak about him just yet. A voice as supple as a head of hair, as rich as the feathers of a bird, the cry of a bird, a natural song, a voice of promise. Without giving notice, Boris had suddenly left this place of cold, dreary dawn and the crowd of human bodies. He recited from Péguy's "The Tapestry of Notre Dame," I think.

Which of us knew what Boris was saying? Who cared? But the thirty of us stayed with our arms held out, leaning forward, a handful of water slipping through our fingers. At last, when the poem was over, a little man whom I had thought for many months was awkward and dull said to me,

"Touch my forehead. It's sweat! That's what warms us up, poetry!"

In fact, the iciness had disappeared. We no longer felt our exhaustion.

One September night, as it was impossible to sleep in the hot and stinking barracks, Sylvain and I stole out and went to the one refuge: the basins. There, there was a little air. Sylvain was a young boy so pale and tormented that he seemed to cry out with each step he took. He had lost all hope, no doubt because being so young, he had not had time before coming to build up enough of a reserve of strength. He watched himself dying, very slowly, gently. He was as patient as he was sad. The hand which he gave me, so stiff it could only open halfway, I could not touch without the greatest caution.

Sylvain was a little Belgian musician. He had been an excellent viola player, and he had been expected to become a virtuoso. But he didn't speak. Of Flemish origin, French by education, he had never really spoken either language. This night I held his arm very firmly, because he was on the verge of collapse. I wanted to tell him about life, this great subject about which he knew so little. As he didn't understand French well, I recited some verses to him. Little by little, as the hours went by, I felt him grow stronger, his closed hands opened. I heard him begin to breathe. Sylvain was no longer afraid.

Poetry is more than simply "literature."

There was one thing that terror could achieve: that hundreds of men seething in the barracks were silent. Only terror and...poetry. If someone recited a poem, all hushed one by one, as coals go out. One hand drew these men together. One cloak of humaneness covered them.

I learned that poetry is an act, an incantation, a kiss of peace, a medicine. I learned that poetry is one of the rare, very rare things in the world which can prevail over cold and hatred. No one had taught me this.

A medicine, neither more nor less. An element which, communicated to the human organism, modified the vital circulation, making it slower, or more rapid. It was, in short, something whose effects were as concrete as those of a chemical substance, I was convinced of this.

A student of books, I had loved poetry as I would have loved a phantom: for its unreality! I had thought that it was simply an "art," a great game, a luxury, and always a privilege. What a revelation!

However, not all the poets were found worthy. Some were not allowed in; they were not welcomed by us in our misery. These were invariably the plaintive and lamenting poets.

Lamartine was not taken seriously; he wept too easily, he pitied himself—something we could not take. Vigny took pleasure in complicating life and was too solemn. Musset—he reached us, in spite of his terrifying egoism, because at least he had the art of song. He was an accomplished actor, a magnificent ham.

Hugo triumphed. The least of his verses gave us a charge, a surge of blood. This devil of a man, the irresistible liver of life entered our lives and mingled with us the moment a word of his was spoken.

He could speak of Charles V, the attributes of divinity, an arm around a pretty waist—he always worked on us. There was no need to understand him, even to listen precisely, to listen to the words: it was enough just to let it happen. Life, in his verses, made the chest swell, caught fire, raced forward. It was also a draught of cool wine in our throats—for drunkenness, the benevolent drunkenness which fills up the empty spots, gives one a new life in a place of poverty and pain. We loved Victor Hugo; it was a grand encounter.

Baudelaire also worked on us. But his was a mysterious and cunning power: he had the gift, so rare after all, of finding at the bottom of the darkest holes a little glimmer of light and making it burst before our eyes. He gave meaning to the difficulties of our col-

lapsing bodies. He tied earth back to heaven, linked the real and the impossible—with a flourish that gave us courage. It was permitted, then! Then we, too, were going to do it. In the stolen cigarette, in the crummy pipeful of dried grass, we were going to breathe all the lost paradises. He did it so well.

But the real winners, the tonics, those who worked upon us like a wine, were the poets who sang. I found some in the Middle Ages. Then there were Villon, Ronsard, Verlaine, Apollinaire, Aragón. They surmounted all obstacles. They spoke from another realm. Or rather, it was their step, the rhythm of their gait, which had nothing in common with our cowering. They flew past and carried us on their wings.

Can I remember that this is not just a manner of speaking, that for us these were sensations, that poetry was completely lived by us, and not simply evaluated? We didn't say, "It's beautiful," an expression which only has meaning for those who are happy, the sated. We said, "You see how much good it does!"

I hear skeptics growling, "He's not going to tell us that they were *fed* by poetry." Of course not. We were nourished by a watery soup and a bitter bread. And by hope. Let skeptics not forget this! It was precisely in this matter of hope that poetry acted upon us.

And it was in the thick of these most completely physical, material circumstances which I endured even to the point of suffocation, that I understood how utterly tangible are these things without weight which we call hope, poetry, life.

The little worker from Lens whom I consoled, whom I nourished with the only thing that remained to me on that day, a poem of Eluard, never pushed away this morsel which I held out to him. He never called it "play money." For him it had the most real existence: it was a chance to run, a rope to grab onto. It had a weight in the throat which reached, with one great thrust, towards the future.

To nourish the desire to live, to make it burn: only this counted. Because it was this that deportation threatened with death. It was essential to keep reminding oneself that it is always the soul which dies first—even if its departure goes unnoticed—and it always carries the body along with it. It was the soul which first had to be nourished.

Morality was powerless. All moralities. As if they had been created by artificial conditions of existence: provisional peace, provisional social equilibrium. Ideas, knowledge, could do nothing either: they left despair intact.

Only religion nourished. And next to it, the sensation of human warmth, the physical presence of other human beings. And poetry.

Poetry chased men out of their ordinary refuges, which are places full of dangers. These bad refuges were memories of the time of freedom, personal histories. Poetry made a new place, a clearing.

I met a modest and gentle man. His name was Maurice. I rested near him, because there was no violence in him, not even hidden. Each day he had the same serene expression; he spoke in short, abbreviated sentences. He looked at life from far away, always from very far away. It was as though there was a window between it and himself. Maurice was very sentimental. He was afraid of imposing himself on others. So normally he didn't speak, or else he simply repeated in a solemn way the last words of each sentence of whoever was talking to him.

Maurice had been an accountant in a firm at Saint-Etienne. He had very few memories, but those he had pained him terribly. They all centered around a woman, his wife. I listened to him intensely because it was the first time in months that a man had spoken to me of his legitimate loves and been overcome by emotion.

Maurice had a wife who was not particularly pretty, as he was always repeating, but who was his, who had always consoled him, supported him, and whom, certainly, he would never forget. His voice tightened when he made this promise, as though his return to this woman was forever impossible.

He spoke of Simone's hands, her hair, her heart, her dreams. He spoke of her personality and of her body without the slightest distinction. For him, all of Simone had the same tender and bitter taste.

He spoke to me about her one time, two times, ten times. At last one day I saw that this man was devouring himself. These memories were killing him. "I shouldn't think of her like this," he said. "It's too real. I know. But what can I do?" And one day I thought of poetry. I drew my accountant into a corner and recited to him a poem from Eluard which Saint-Jean had taught me:

She is there on my eyelids
 And her hair is in mine,
 She has the form of my hands,
 And the color of my eyes,
 She is engulfed by my shadow
 Like a stone under the sky
 Her eyes are always open

And do not let me sleep
 Her dreams in broad daylight
 Evaporate the suns
 And make me laugh, cry, and laugh
 And speak without having anything to say.

Maurice listened, said nothing, left. But the next day at wake-up time, he stopped me at the barracks' entrance.

"You know, my friend," he said; "since you told me that poem I haven't been thinking of her in the same way. I see her, but it doesn't hurt anymore. She seems to be everywhere, rather than being at Saint-Etienne. Your Eluard has cured me."

It was true. He spoke so much more loudly, firmly. He was for awhile at least, cured of himself.

I threw myself into a poetry campaign.

In the middle of the block, at midday, I stood upon a bench. I stood there and recited poems. I was the neighborhood singer and passers-by stopped. They pressed in around me. Soon other voices answered mine. I felt them all so close to my body that I could hear the in-and-out of their breath, the relaxation of their muscles. For several minutes there was harmony, there was almost happiness.

Unhappiness, I saw then, comes to each of us because we think ourselves at the center of the world, because we have the miserable conviction that we alone suffer to this point of unbearable intensity. Unhappiness is always to feel oneself imprisoned in one's own skin, in one's own brain. For a few moments there was none of this: the poets, the great poets, spoke the universal, spoke of a world in which all beings exchange strength and weakness, youth and decrepitude.

Simone, Maurice's Simone, was forever no longer at Saint-Etienne. These men and myself were no longer at Buchenwald, and there only, forever. How this helped us to live!

Books were rare, as one can imagine. Some came to us rolled up in food wrappers, crushed in the middle by a hunk of wood. Mutilated books circulated.

And it was thus that one morning the Greek text of the first section of *The Iliad* and a German translation came enveloped by thick spongy rolls of synthetic sausage.

I decreed a mobilization of our memories. I made each man recite whatever verses he knew. Bit by

bit I put together poems. I discovered that in men's minds there are great springs of poetry and music which nobody in ordinary life thinks of tapping.

Boris—the one who sang Péguy at the basins—said to me one day, “My child, my child” (as he called everyone he loved). “My dear friend! I beg you to count up everything that is not yours. Your hand is yours, your body is yours, your ideas are yours. What poverty! But poetry, it's not yours. Nor mine nor anyone else's. And that's why it gives us life. Let's not speak of anything else, O.K.? Only poetry, and love.”

It is in part because of this experience that I will say without ceasing, “Man is nourished by the invisible. Man is nourished by that which is beyond the personal. He dies from preferring their opposites.”

—Translated by Noelle Oxenhandler