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## Poetry of the Resistance, Resistance of the Poet

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## Poetry of the Resistance, Resistance of the Poet

### Abstract

The expression "French Resistance poetry" tends to immediately suggest a poetry written for an audience belonging to a specific historical period, namely that stretching from 1940, the time of the French defeat and collaboration, to 8 May 1945, the date of the Allied Victory over Nazism...

### Keywords

French Resistance poetry, audience, 1940, French defeat, collaboration, 8 May 1945, Allied Victory over Nazism

## Poetry of the Resistance, Resistance of the Poet

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The expression “French Resistance poetry” tends to immediately suggest a poetry written for an audience belonging to a specific historical period, namely that stretching from 1940, the time of the French defeat and collaboration, to 8 May 1945, the date of the Allied Victory over Nazism. Taking this historical context as my starting point, I would like to propose a shift of perspective from the idea of poetry *during* the Resistance towards a view of poetry as itself constituting an act of resistance: what resists is poetry, each poem being an act of resistance delivered by an exemplary subject, the poet.

Let us first examine the historical moment. What exactly did poetry written *during* the Resistance resist? There were indeed men, and women, who wrote poems during this time in which the words I use now—defeat, occupation, collaboration, execution, deportation—were, far from being hollow, filled with the suffering of millions of people, every one of them like us, *mon semblable, mon frère*. A book by Pierre Seghers, *La Résistance et ses poètes* (*The Resistance and its Poets*) retraces the history behind the poems that were being read at that time. Poems of the “black years” were distributed illegally or published by journals whose existence hung in the balance from one day to the next. For example, Seghers and his *Poètes casqués* under the aegis of Apollinaire, *Poésie 40, 41, 42*, Jean Lescure and *Messages*, Vercors and the Editions de Minuit, Max-Pol Fouchet and *Fontaine*, René Tavernier, the founder of *Confluences*, and many others during this period, all gave poetry

“the opportunity to simply exist.”<sup>1</sup> Some did not even have such a chance. The poets whose names spring most readily to mind are Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, the poets of the *Le Crève-cœur*<sup>2</sup> and the *Diane Française*. They also include the poets of *Rendez-vous allemand*, as well as Pierre Emmanuel, Pierre Seghers, Pierre Jean Jouve, Loys Masson, Jean Cassou, and Robert Desnos. Finally, mention should be made of the twenty-two poets who published under pseudonyms in the anthology entitled *L'Honneur des poètes* (*The Honor of Poets*), a collection of poems I shall discuss below.

As Pierre Seghers saw it, under conditions of military occupation — *l'Occupation* — it was essential to testify to the continuing existence of a French poetry, “en français dans le texte,” as the title of a group of poems by Aragon insists (*En étrange pays* 39). Indeed, it is the word *français* that receives emphasis here. Writing, and in particular the writing of poetry, expresses a resistance of French thought, an uprising of the French language against the propaganda that was indeed written in the language of the occupying forces, the enemy German language, *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (LTI), to use the terms of Victor Klemperer.<sup>3</sup> “Death, death comes as a master from Germany,” runs the line from Paul Celan’s post-war poem, “Todesfugue” (87), while René Tavernier writes, during the war:

C'est d'Allemagne que vient le froid  
Et notre cœur bat au rythme fou des sables...  
C'est d'Allemagne que vient le temps  
Il mêle cependant les roses à la mort  
Les roses de Jéricho à la mort allemande.

It is from Germany that the cold comes  
And our heart beats in the crazy rhythm of the sands...  
It is from Germany that the time comes  
It mixes roses with death  
The roses of Jericho with German death. (23)<sup>4</sup>

The poetry of the Resistance would thus seem to bear out the idea of a poetry reviving the nation after defeat and occupation. This, it would seem, was a poetry conceived as national, even nationalistic, as belonging to a “National Front of French writers against

German barbarity,” defending French literature and all the values upholding the glory of French civilization (Seghers 211-12).<sup>5</sup>

Thus envisaged, French poetry became a song to, or of, nationhood: a *chant national*, to use the words of Pierre Seghers, which themselves echo the title of a poem by Aragon, “Pour un chant national” ‘For a National Anthem.’<sup>6</sup> In a retrospective reference to this poem, Aragon writes: “If my purpose is still not understood, read ‘Pour un chant national.’ . . . Perhaps it will be seen there that I searched among the dramatic conditions of poetry, and of the modern world, for ways of incarnating this wandering voice, ways of embodying French poetry in the vast martyrdom of French flesh” (*Les Yeux d’Elsa* vii-xxiv).

Le malheur m’a pris à la Flandre  
Et m’étreint jusqu’au Roussillon  
A travers le feu nous crions  
Notre chanson de salamandre  
*Mais qui saura ce cri reprendre.*

Donner voix aux morts aux vivants et plonger  
ses doigts dans la cendre y débaillonner les grillons.

*Misfortune took possession of me in Flanders*  
And consumed me until Roussillon  
Across the fire we cry out  
Our salamander song  
But who will know to take this cry up.

Give voice to the dead to the living and thrust  
fingers in the ashes to give voice to the crickets.  
(Aragon, *Les Yeux d’Elsa* 31-33; my italics and layout)

Poetry during the Resistance thus designates a specific period in which poets resisted by using their words to “perpetuate” their country, to restore it in and through poetry. France is “the nation that in the eyes of the world represents liberty and alone allows the pursuit of thought and reflection” (Seghers 126). There is no longer any question in this *chant national* of giving a purer meaning to the words of the tribe (Mallarmé’s “donner un sens plus *pur* aux mots de la tribu”). As the title of another of Aragon’s poems, “Contre la poésie pure” ‘Against Pure Poetry’ (34), indi-

cates, the point now was to reunite the French “Tribe,” or nation, giving it meaning through the expression of its language.

“Poets,” writes Pierre Seghers, “cut off from the world, in hiding, dispersed around the country or living clandestinely in Paris, poets but also readers, have suddenly become impassioned, and have discovered everything that ivory-tower poetry had made them forget. Villon, Rutebeuf, Charles d’Orléans, Bertrand de Born, d’Aubigné, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, and many others have begun to re-emerge. Their poems are still topical. And the French poetic tradition is all the more reinvigorated for it” (Seghers 269).

One thus finds in poetry *during* the Resistance, that is during the time of occupation and French collaboration with the Nazis, not only a refusal, but a sense of the *impossibility*, of Mallarméan or even Baudelairean poetics (the latter insofar as it is exemplified by Baudelaire’s comment that poetry has no other purpose than itself). Indeed, the work of poets espousing the *chant national* as their form of resistance has no time whatsoever for the Mallarméan values of the “jeu de la parole” ‘play of language,’ the “notion pure” ‘pure notion’ or the “quête sans espoir de résultat” ‘quest without hope of fulfillment’ (36).

What is demonstrated in such work — *Mais qui saura ce cri reprendre* — is the hope of a *chant général* in which a united people will join in unison with the poet’s solitary voice. Seghers expresses this hope when he writes that “in the thick of disaster, when the world is consumed and overflowing with massacres, burnings, barbed wire, ignominy heaped on humankind, one thing is sure: that there is a poet composing songs of glory, songs that the crowds will take up as their own” (135). “Your songs,” Paul Eluard also wrote in *Poésie et vérité* 1942, “are the tracery of people’s hopes and beliefs.”<sup>7</sup>

In *Critique et clinique*, Gilles Deleuze writes that it is the role of the fabulating function (*la fonction fabulatrice*) to “invent a missing people” (14),<sup>8</sup> and that “even though it always harks back to singular agents, literature is a collective arrangement of utterances” (15). He further writes that literature is “a measure of health when [the writer] invokes this oppressed bastard race that never stops growing restless under domination, never stops re-

sisting all that crushes and imprisons, and never stops outlining its own image in literature as ongoing process. The ultimate goal of literature is to deliriously release this creation of a kind of health, or this invention of a people, or, to put it another way, this potential for life” (15).

Did this minor, oppressed people, as the French were at that time, find itself expressed in the poems of Aragon or Eluard? Did such writers offer a “potential for life”? What is clear is the frequent emergence in such poems of the figure of a French people being called out to and exhorted:

Ne rien sentir et consentir:  
Jusqu'à quand, Français, jusqu'à quand?

.....

Ce n'est plus le temps de se taire:  
Quand le ciel change ou va changer,  
Ne me parlez plus du danger!  
Voyez, voyez sur notre terre,  
Le pied pesant de l'étranger!  
Entendez, Francs-Tireurs de France,  
L'appel de nos fils enfermés . . .

Not to feel and not to consent:  
Until when, French citizens, until when?

.....

Now is not the time for silence:  
When the sky changes or will change,  
Do not speak to me any more of danger!  
See, see on our territory,  
The heavy foot of the foreigner!  
Hear, snipers of France,  
The call of our imprisoned sons . . .  
(Aragon, *Prélude à la Diane française* 16-17)

Similarly:

Ce cœur qui haïssait la guerre voilà qu'il bat pour le combat et la bataille!

.....

Comme le son d'une cloche appelant à l'émeute et au combat.  
Ecoutez, je l'entends qui me revient renvoyé par les échos.  
Mais non, c'est le bruit d'autres cœurs, de millions d'autres cœurs battant

Comme le mien à travers la France.

This heart which hated war now beats for combat and battle!

.....

As the sound of a bell calling for riot and for combat.

Listen, I hear something which is brought back to me by echoes.

But no, it is the sound of other hearts, of millions of other hearts  
beating

Like mine across France. (Desnos 28-29)

We see from these examples that the art of poetry *during* the Resistance is no longer that of an address to a secret interlocutor forever unknown to the poet,<sup>9</sup> but an art of address extended to the whole of France, as summarized in Aragon's *France écoute* (*France Listen*).<sup>10</sup>

France écoute

On dirait que ta voix n'est plus seule

Le ciel est moins obscur

France listen

It is said that your voice is no longer alone

The sky is less dark. (19)

In poetics such as this, the old distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* is abolished. "Action" is no longer "the sister of Dream," for the two have merged. The emphasis here is on con-fusing poetry and action, not on "transforming old enemies into loyal adversaries," as the "poet's effort" is described in René Char's *Les Feuilles d'Hypnos* (*Leaves of Hypnos*). Char chooses to uphold this distinction in favour of action, even if for him poetry had its part to play in the struggle against Nazism. Thus the very last fragment of his *Feuilles* still holds out that:

Dans nos ténèbres, il n'y a pas une place pour la Beauté. Toute la place est pour la Beauté.

In our darkness, there is not one place for Beauty. All of the space is for Beauty. (Char 232)

This national, patriotic poetry is a popular poetry, or at least aspires to be one. It values not "hothouse flowers" but "flowers of blood."<sup>11</sup> It turns not to Mallarmé's "l'absente de tout bouquet"



but to the rose and the *réséda*, which amid shared struggle and unto death have united “Celui qui croyait au ciel” and “celui qui n’y croyait pas,” Gabriel Péri and Estienne d’Orves, Guy Mocquet and Gilbert Dru:

Et leur sang rouge ruisselle  
Même couleur même éclat  
Celui qui croyait au ciel  
Celui qui n’y croyait pas.

And their red blood flows  
Same color same burst  
He who believed in the sky  
He who did not believe in it.  
(Aragon, *La Diane française* 26)

During this period of history everything hinged on going beyond what Michel Deguy calls the “asocial” nature of poetry. Like Hugo, Rimbaud, Whitman, and Mayakovsky, whose names are quoted in Eluard’s introductory text to *L’Honneur des poètes*, certain poets during the Resistance created a “committed art” that was ready to take the form of revolt, chronicle, or memorial.

Such poetry was committed to shouting in the face of lies, as Paul Eluard demonstrated in *Crier (To Cry Out)*:

Ici l’action se simplifie  
J’ai renversé le paysage inexplicable du  
mensonge  
J’ai renversé les gestes sans lumière et les  
jours impuissants  
J’ai par-dessus terre jeté les propos lus et  
entendus  
Je me mets à crier  
Chacun parlait trop bas parlait et écrivait  
Trop bas

J’ai reculé les limites du cri  
L’action se simplifie

Car j’enlève à la mort cette vue sur la vie  
Qui lui donnait sa place devant moi

D’un cri.

Here the action simplifies itself  
I inverted the inexplicable landscape of  
lies  
I inverted the gestures without light and the  
powerless days  
I threw to the ground the gossip read and  
heard  
I start to cry  
Each spoke too low spoke and wrote  
Too low

I extended the limits of the cry  
The action simplifies itself

Because I release to death this view of life  
Which placed it in front of me

With a cry. (44)

Such poets were committed to bearing witness to their times—  
like Goya who, in earlier times, wrote under his war drawings: *Yo lo vi* (*I was there, I saw it*); like Zoran Music in Dachau; like Camille Meunel, an unknown poet deported to Drancy in December 1942, when she wrote:

Des bottes, des fusils, kilos de barbelés,  
Tonnes de béton noir, valises éventrées,  
Des billets en pagaille et déchirés, de l'or!  
Petits mecs, allez-y! vous êtes la force  
Armée!

Ah! Vos souliers pointus et vos vestons mal  
faits,  
Bourreaux d'enfants perdus et de vieilles sans  
dents!  
Roulez en Hispano, il faut en profiter,  
Profitez à crever! Tout le monde crève:  
Vous en avez tant vu des innocents crever.

Boots, guns, kilos of barbed wire,  
Tons of black concrete, gutted suitcases,  
Bills in shreds and strewn around, gold!  
Little guys, let's go! you are the armed  
Forces!

Ah! Your pointed shoes and your badly-made jackets,  
 Killers of lost children and of the toothless aged!  
 Drive your *Hispano*, profit now,  
 Profit until you die! Everyone dies:  
 You have seen enough innocents die. (24-25)

Once this poem has been read, the question of its aesthetic quality remains, for one cannot say, as Char would, that all of its space, or all of it as a place, is reserved for Beauty. What does remain, however, remote as it may be from aesthetic considerations, is an imperative need of the time, one still present in *our* time: the need to show our concern for the martyrs, the dead, the victims. Perhaps poetry—the daughter of Memory—is bound up with a deep-seated need to *resist* Léthè, to *not* forget, to bear witness on behalf of the dead and gone by rescuing them from an anonymous fate.

Without such poems as these, would the memory of certain names and certain actions have been retained in song, whether it be *La Légende de Gabriel Péri* (*The Legend of Gabriel Péri*) or *La Ballade de celui qui chanta dans les supplices* (*The Ballad of He Who Sang in Supplication*)?

Et s'il était à refaire,  
 Je referais ce chemin  
 Une voix monte des fers  
 Et parle des lendemains.

And if it was to be done again  
 I would take the same path  
 A voice rises from the chains  
 And speaks of tomorrows. (Aragon, *La Diane française* 43)

I have quoted extensively from poems featured in *L'Honneur des poètes*, the first anthology of poets of the Resistance,<sup>12</sup> published in Paris by the Editions de Minuit, “a work published at the expense/of a few book-lovers/patriots/under the Nazi occupation/ 14 July 1943/a day/of oppressed liberty.” From his refuge in Mexico, Benjamin Péret went on to refer to this work as the “dishonor of poets.”<sup>13</sup> In what sense, then, do these poems—written

and published during the Resistance, inventing this “missing people,” made up of martyrs and heroes, poems calling for heroism or at least courage, “dishonor” poetry?

First of all, Benjamin Péret denounced the fact that “the enemies of poetry have always been obsessed with subjecting poetry to their own, immediate purposes” (73-74). He saw the poets of *L'Honneur des poètes* as putting poetry in “the service of political activism” (76), as producing propagandist poetry. Péret even placed such poems in the same category and under the same heading as “fascist or antifascist poetry, or religious exaltation.” He characterized “patriots” as “Stalinists” (80). “Not one of these ‘poems,’” he added, “is anything more than a jingle for a pharmaceutical advertisement and it is not by chance that the vast majority of their authors believed in a return to rhyme and the classical alexandrine.”<sup>14</sup> “Unequivocally,” he concluded, “the honor of these ‘poets’ consists in ceasing to be poets and becoming advertising agents” (83).

One of Péret’s most vicious attacks is his condemnation of patriotism. Here, it must be remembered that to be a patriot and a nationalist in France marked one out as a right-winger, and a very conservative, upper middle-class, Catholic, and reactionary right-winger at that, of the kind emblemized in figures such as Maurras and Barrès. A Surrealist like Benjamin Péret would inevitably hold such people, and all they represented, in strong contempt.

Furthermore, the left-wing group to which Péret subscribed, along with Breton, was one that had chosen Trotsky over Stalin. We should not forget that during the Kharkov Congress of 1930, Aragon had betrayed Surrealism *and* Trotskyism. Thus Péret was denouncing Aragon’s patriotism at the same time as his Stalinism.

Traces may indeed be found in the work being examined here of a subjection of poetry to communist ideology. The brother in *L'Honneur des poètes* becomes at times a comrade:

Parce que tu es bon et juste parce que tu es mon frère que mon  
chagrin et mon rire sont les tiens

.....

camarade mon frère tu ne dois pas oublier tu dois imposer ta loi

et répondre au malheur

Because you are good and just because you are my brother that  
my grief and laughter are yours

.....

camarade my brother you must not forget you must impose  
your law and respond to unhappiness. (Hugnet 37)

These same brothers are seen in the following:

Frères nous voyons deux grandes ailes battre sur l'espoir, et ce  
sont d'un même

oiseau

Ici on l'appelle France et là-bas Russie

Avec les enfants du Volga vous êtes au centre de la machinerie

Vous la faites voler vers la victoire très haut.

Brothers we see two big wings beat on hope, and they belong to  
the same

bird

Here we call it France and there Russia

With the children of Volga you are at the center of the machinery

You make it fly very high towards the victory. (Masson 48)

Péret's main objection, which I will focus on for the purposes of analyzing *Le Déshonneur des poètes* (*The Dishonor of Poets*), was that poetry cannot obey a "nationalist slogan, even if the nation in question—France—was savagely oppressed by the Nazis." Poetry can only be understood as "total liberation of the human spirit, because poetry has no country, being rather of all times and all places" (Péret 87).<sup>15</sup>

Against this idea that the essence of poetry is "of all times," Celan, in his "Méridien" address, retorts that poetry preserves the "memory of dates" (3). One might also set Péret's utopia of total liberation against the *real* liberation of a land and a people. The *patrie* is one's country, a bodily entity and an embodied one, made up of individuals, *persons*, subjected by the Nazi enemy to violence and murder. Nor should it be forgotten that the Resistance fighters and poets who resisted had to *face up* not only to Nazism, but also to the totalitarianism of the Vichy government. These were patriots who, in the name of the nation, denounced the imposture of the Pétainist national revolution. If their poems are so tied to the time, the era, *the circumstances*, it is because they did

not have the time to achieve the “total liberation” of which Péret speaks. They were, to use a phrase by Horkheimer, “on the side of all those in despair, who are sentenced at a stroke to agony, and not of those who have time” (340).

In the same way, although it is certainly right as a general rule that “poetry has no homeland, being of all times and all places,” it can happen that some poets who sing about their land have experienced such desolation (*dé-sol-ation*: uprooting from their soil) that the determination of their being by the very soil of that land seems to them no more inhuman than their having no country at all. I am thinking particularly of Jean Améry, who writes in *Par-delà le crime et le châtement* (*Beyond Crime and Punishment*) that one must have a “land of one’s own in order not to feel a need for it” (89).<sup>16</sup>

It is nonetheless clear that a great number of poems written during the Resistance not only played, in Michel Deguy’s words, “host to circumstance” (“Situation” 8), but were also held *hostage* by it. Here it might be worth touching briefly on Goethe’s reflection that all his poems were “poems of circumstance”: “They are inspired by reality, upon which they are founded and stand. I have no interest in poems that are unfounded.”<sup>17</sup>

Goethe added, however: “As soon as a poet wants to engage in politics, he must join a party, at which point he is lost as a poet. He must bid farewell to his freedom of spirit, to his impartiality of perspective, and pull up to his ears the hood of narrow-mindedness and blind hate” (Seghers 27). Thus viewed, certain poets—known as Resistance poets—have perhaps failed in their poetry, insofar as it narrated, testified, and exhorted but did not resist, notably with respect to political *discourse* as such. For is not the resistance of poetry precisely a resistance to discourse?

I shall leave this question open<sup>18</sup> and quote instead from Aragon’s *Prélude à la Diane Française*, which deals not with political parties, but with people:

L’homme où est l’homme, l’homme, l’homme,  
 Floué, roué, troué, meurtri  
 Avec le mépris pour patrie  
 Marqué comme un bétail et comme  
 un porc sur une table bouchère.

Mankind where is mankind, mankind, mankind,  
 Blurred, exhausted, torn, and murdered  
 With disdain for its country  
 Branded like cattle and like  
 Cattle at the butcher. (Aragon, *La Diane française* 19)

If we were to reproach certain poets in *L'Honneur des poètes* for “narrow-mindedness and blind hate,” to go back to Goethe’s words, I think that the alternative would consist not of appealing to an “all” as opposed to the particularities of circumstance, nor of writing *sub specie aeternitatis*, as Benjamin Péret would have recommended, but rather of writing *sub specie mortalitatis*.

It seems to me that, in this respect, Henri Michaux was exemplary, as he took the side of people, of mortal humans, writing in “Passages”: “By virtue of a common danger, the quarrels between men disappear and in their place a thrilling sensation suddenly appears, surpassing patriotism or racism: *L'Hommmisme*. Something that charity has never achieved! Such a thing would give me quite a thrill myself!” (36).<sup>19</sup>

I would like to conclude by discussing the poems Michaux wrote between 1940 and 1944 and collected in a book entitled *Epreuves, exorcismes (Trails, Exorcisms)*. “Pinned down in this murderous twentieth century,”<sup>20</sup> on the edge of despair, he managed to free himself from the trials and tribulations of his time through the poem’s power of exorcism, through exaltation and a magnificent violence wedded to “the pounding out of words” (Michaux, *Epreuves* 773). He thus produced through writing a poetry of circumstance addressed not to patriots but to the universal immortality in each and every one of us.

Immense voix  
 qui boit  
 qui boit

Immenses voix qui boivent  
 qui boivent  
 qui boivent

.....

Immense voix qui boit nos voix  
 immense père reconstruit géant

par le soin, par l'incurie des événements

.....

Etions-nous nés pour la gangue?  
Etions-nous nés, doigts cassés, pour donner  
toute une vie à un mauvais problème

à je ne sais quoi pour je ne sais qui  
à un je ne sais qui pour un je ne sais quoi  
toujours vers plus de froid?

Suffit! Ici on ne chante pas  
Tu n'auras pas ma voix, grande voix  
Tu n'auras pas ma voix, grande voix

Tu t'en passeras grande voix  
Toi aussi tu passeras  
Tu passeras, grande voix.

Vast voice  
that drinks  
that drinks

Vast voices that drink  
that drink  
that drink

.....

Vast voice that drinks our voices  
vast father reconstructed giant  
through care, through carelessness of events

.....

Were we born for the gangue?  
Were we born, fingers broken, to give  
life to a bad problem

to I don't know what for I don't know who  
to I don't know who for I don't know what  
always towards more cold?

Enough! Here we do not sing  
You will not have my voice, great voice  
You will not have my voice, great voice

You will go without great voice  
You also will pass  
You will pass, great voice. (775-76)



The vast voice of war that engulfs other voices is challenged by the person who resists through speaking out, who extricates his voice (“tu n’auras pas ma voix”) and commits it to the relativity of history (“Tu passeras, grande voix”). Against the booming voice of propaganda, there rises up the singular voice, the profoundly solitary voice of the poet, and not that of a national front.

“I can only write when I am speaking out loud,” confessed Michaux to Brassai (198-199) in 1943.<sup>21</sup> In these words we hear the utterance, breath and rhythm of the embodied subject who is resisting against the “vast voice,” against “the war of nerves” and the “cursed year”:

Année  
 année maudite  
 année collée  
 année-nausée  
 année qui est en quatre  
 qui est en cinq  
 année qui sera bientôt toute notre vie.

Year  
 cursed year  
 silenced year  
 nauseated year  
 year which is in four  
 which is in five  
 year which will soon be all of our life.  
 (778-79)

This voice of exorcism, “a strong reaction, like a battering ram”<sup>22</sup> (773) is not to be sung, in the manner of Aragon or Eluard, but shouted:

je crie  
 je crie  
 je crie stupide vers toi  
 si quelque chose tu as appris  
 à ton tour, maintenant  
 à ton tour, Lazare!

I cry out  
 I cry out

I cry out stupid towards you  
 if something you learned  
 your turn, now  
 your turn, Lazarus! (Michaux, *Epreuves, exorcismes* 777-78)

*Cris* was the title given to this poem, later renamed *Lazare, tu dors?* (*Lazarus, are you sleeping?*), when it was first published in 1943. The figure of Lazarus was foregrounded in a number of poems from the Resistance period, though not so much to “obey the famous slogan ‘the clergy is with us,’”<sup>23</sup> as Péret wrote, as to *raise* humanity back to its feet.

Guerre de nerfs  
 de Terre  
 de rang  
 de race  
 de ruines  
 de fer  
 de laquais  
 de cocardes  
 de vent  
 de vent  
 .....  
 Pendant millions et millions d’hommes  
 s’en vont entrant en mort  
 sans même un cri à eux

War of nerves  
 of Earth  
 of rank  
 of race  
 of ruins  
 of iron  
 of lackeys  
 of flags  
 of wind  
 of wind  
 .....  
 Meanwhile millions and millions of people  
 Leave entering into death  
 Without so much as a cry. (Michaux, *Epreuves, exorcismes* 777)

“Sans même un cri à eux”: in “La lettre dit encore . . .” (“The Letter also Says . . .”), Michaux wrote, “You must also know this.”

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We no longer have our own words. They have retreated into us. The truth is that THE FACE WITH THE LOST MOUTH lives and roams amongst us” (Michaux, *Epreuves, exorcismes* 795; the capital letters are the author’s).<sup>24</sup>

Would the last freedom that poetry has to offer not be to resist by *facing up*, winning back our voices, screaming our own screams, articulating meaning through what Mandelstam so magnificently calls our “*thinking-mouths*”?<sup>25</sup>

The poems of *Epreuves, exorcismes* were most certainly poems of circumstance, but they go further than that. Not because they erase the referent, for we can find in these poems the marks of a period that was “harder than people’s hard condition”; but because they let us hear the deeply singular voice of a subject, at a level of depth whereby it meets up with our own voices when we ourselves are confronted with injustice. Today we too can say: “I have not seen people dispensing around themselves their happy consciousness of life. But I have seen humans like a perfect combat twin-engines spreading around terror and atrocious evil” (Michaux, *Epreuves, exorcismes* 791).

We too can still hear the vast voice of *our* days of sorrow saying to us:

I will reduce these men, I will reduce them and already they are reduced, even though they know nothing of it yet. . . . Small, their movements are small. And it’s just as well. Like a statue in a park that, whatever happens, is left with only one gesture, so shall I turn them to stone; making them smaller, smaller. (Michaux, *Voix* 786)<sup>26</sup>

And yet Michaux’s poetry helps us stand taller, however “small” we might be. It bears witness not to the events that took place *during* the Resistance, but insofar as it is in itself a resistance, that of a subject who would be something other than a “being-for-death,” *something other than a mortal*: an immortal. We can say of Michaux’s poetry what du Bouchet said of Char’s poetry: “Qu’elle redresse au lieu d’anéantir” ‘that it is uplifting rather than annihilating’ (“Notes” 748).

People in Michaux's poetry are comparable to Giacometti's figurines, so small and fragile on their high pedestals. This human is walking, forging ahead, resisting:

But mankind, here driven crazy, there most cool-headed, had reflexes and made calculations should he suffer a hard blow, and he was ready, though he might generally have appeared rather hollow and hunted. He whom a mere pebble can cause to stumble had already been walking for two hundred thousand years when I heard the ominous voices of hatred attempting to frighten him. (Michaux, *Epreuves, exorcismes* 787)<sup>27</sup>

The human being endures. *Steht* was the word used by Paul Celan,<sup>28</sup> who appreciated Michaux and translated his work, notably the magnificent "Ecce Homo" from *Epreuves, exorcismes*. Michaux's poetry is neither engaged nor unengaged but *disengaged* in that it frees the self as you (*le toi*), a self not so much epic as embodied, incarnated and individualized by terror, with "broken fingers, broken back." "Take art with you," wrote Celan in "Le Méridien," "and free yourself"<sup>29</sup> (18): free your self.

This would be no less true of the political agenda of poets. Take politics with you, in your very depths, and free yourself.

Such, no doubt, is the point I set out to reach: the point located in this resistance of poetry, which is the resistance of a *subject* to or against History. A resistance in which the poet is exemplary because he dares to cry out and to speak in his own name.

Poetry of the Resistance. Or fighting with weapons held high, as Char did, while also writing *Les Feuilletts d'Hypnos*. Or attempting, albeit with great difficulty, to avert the effects of ideology in poetic language while committing oneself politically.

Or even better, being there, *être là*, like Michaux, but at a distance, stepping back from circumstance so that the poem might retain its charge of futurity and elevation: the resistance of the poet.

## Notes

1. In his preface to his translation of poems by Ossip Mandelstam, Paul Celan, wrote: "The first opportunity that has to be given is that  
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which remains the most important for all poetry: the opportunity to simply exist" ("Die Dichtung, 30).

2. *Le Crève-cœur* appeared in Paris on 25 April 1941, in the collection *Métamorphoses* by Jean Paulhan. This made Louis Aragon the most widely read and publicly recognized poet of his time.

3. It would also be starting from the German language, *against* the German language, yet close to it, given that German was his native tongue, that after the war a Jewish Romanian poet, Paul Celan, would attempt to find a direction in his life through poetry.

4. Translations of excerpted poetry were provided by Sarah A. Hutchison, unless otherwise noted.

5. Translations of quoted critical material are mine, unless otherwise noted.

6. The title of a poem published in January 1942, in *Poésie* 42 (1941-42). The poem was published and distributed openly, signed by its author and published in *Les Yeux d'Elsa* (*Elsa's Eyes*) (31-33).

7. My translation.

8. My attention was first drawn to this text by Jean-Claude Pinson (22).

9. A "distant interlocutor," always unknown, was defined by Ossip Mandelstam in his essay of 1913, "De l'Interlocuteur."

10. Completed in 1944 and published in Algiers, this text brought together poems by Aragon that had been published in the journal *Fontaine*.

11. Seghers wrote in *Le Figaro* of 26 July 1941: "As France goes through an unparalleled crisis in its history, it appears impossible to endorse those who, disdainful of our suffering, persist in cultivating hothouse flowers while ignoring all the flowers of blood" (re-published in Seghers 131).

12. Vercors made contact with Eluard with a view to entrusting him with the preparation of an anthology of poetry to be published clandestinely. Eluard, assisted by Aragon in the Vichy-administered southern zone of France, asked Loys Masson, Pierre Emmanuel, Seghers, and many others to take part in *L'Honneur des poètes*. In Mexico City, Péret knew only of one small volume published in Rio de Janeiro in 1944, *Choix de poèmes de la Résistance française*, with an introduction

by Michel Simon (Atlantica Editora had printed about 200 copies for non-commercial use by 14 July 1944). Maurice Blanchot gave the title *L'Honneur des poètes* to a text published in 1946, which had in part to do with Michaux's *Epreuves, exorcismes*.

13. *Le Déshonneur des poètes* is said to have been published by "Poésie et Révolution" in February 1945 in Mexico City. The reference is fictitious. It is in fact the first of a series of publications by the publisher K (Paris, 1945).

14. Aragon indeed defended the use of rhyme in "La Rime": "At this time, unreasonable rhyme becomes the only reason. Reason reconciled with meaning. And full of meaning like a fruit ripe with its wine" (*Le Crève-cœur* 46; my translation).

15. My translation.

16. My translation.

17. In one of his *Conversations avec Eckermann*, dated 18 September 1823 (quoted in Seghers 27).

18. For further discussion, see Jean-Luc Nancy.

19. My translation.

20. Michaux, *Passages* "Pages d'un carnet" (36). My translation.

21. My translation.

22. My translation.

23. Péret: "Even Aragon and Eluard, once atheists, feel obliged to evoke the 'saints and poets' and 'the tomb of Lazarus' (Aragon), or to resort to litany (Eluard), no doubt in order to back up the famous slogan, 'the clergy is with us' " (86). A poem by Edith Thomas in *Les Lettres françaises clandestines* 8 (1943) was entitled "Lève-toi et marche."

24. My translation.

25. Nancy: "Given that there is no sense but in uttering" (12).

26. My translation.

27. My translation.

28. In a note accompanying his translation of certain letters from Paul Celan to Nelly Sachs, Bertrand Badiou (Celan 10, note 1) notes

that the verb *stehen* is invested by Celan with a particular value. It was a sort of motto that the poet used against all adversity. He often evoked it in his letters to those closest to him or compulsively noted it down on pieces of paper that he slipped into books and drawers. Conscious of the impossibility of finding an adequate French verb, he ended up translating *Ich stehe* with a kind of French triad: “Je tiens, Je maintiens, Je résiste” (‘I hold/stay, I uphold/maintain, I resist’).

29. My translation.

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