

collapse of all simple good feeling which they had themselves had to endure. At such a time the theatre can act as a sanctuary, or, more clinically, as a source of reviving gas; and these plays of Sartre and Camus are the proof that in France the fourth wall of the theatre is still, as it has always been, a triumphal arch of the mind.

JEAN PAULHAN

BRAQUE, LE PATRON

I. *The Lobster and the Lemons*

'HAVE you seen the Braque of a table with some fruit and a tablecloth in the Rue la Boétie?' I asked my doctor. 'No,' he replied. Then, remembering something: 'Oh, the lobster!' For a moment I had to recall that there really was a lobster. And even, unquestionably, a lobster in detail, with its feet as distinct as a centipede's, but rather fat like dumplings. Then the doctor said that it wasn't to his taste nor the kind of thing he admired, that there was nothing in it, and that he preferred a small landscape by Duplat which he had seen the day before when passing the Galerie Vavin. And I told him that that was exactly where he should be on his guard. That the picture we admire at first sight is most likely to be a superficial picture which disillusions us fairly quickly, one which lacks all reserves and which you realize (with disgust) was made in order to please. For painters are not so innocent; nor, whatever they may say about it, so stupid. Now it is easier to get oneself liked by the first person one meets than to convince him. It only needs a few recipes and admiration can be had for the asking.

It so happens that I have information on this subject. I am easily won over, shyness is not my strong point. I am afraid that in the past I have admired Moreau (Chocarne): I was very young. I have certainly admired the other Morot (of the Dragoons). And, not so long ago, there was a time when the last of the Moreaus (Gustave) held me under his spell. How I have always let myself be convinced. By Jean Grave and by Charles Maurras. By Doctor Freud and by all the economists. It has even been

lucky for me to accept everything in this naïve way. Soon enough I was to get over this admiration or the evidence of it. Let us look a bit further.

I do not say that I have found it. 'But what is it then,' the doctor asked me, 'if it is not admiration?' I replied (but I was becoming a little vague) that it was a certain rather considerable importance that the picture was taking for me; a certain personality (one that was rather disturbing). The personality of the painter? No—not at all. But as I was becoming vaguer still, I returned, as we say, to the facts.

I was going down the Rue la Boétie when the picture which was on the opposite side of the street (the side of the even numbers) called after me—I would not know how to put it more exactly. Well, I crossed the only crowded street in Paris. Seen from close up, the painting had changed. It was no longer noisy in its appeal. More silent and dull; without anything easy or fluid (in spite of the violet tablecloth and those two patches of brown amadou going off in silence). It would never have occurred to me to say that it was beautiful. Nor could I have said that it was agreeable. Nor call it 'a small picture' (although it was small). This lobster and these lemons were almost too lifelike; as if they had been seen from all sides at once. However, they retained something transparent—like some incongruous sentence. Obscure, yet complete, like a proverb. I would not have wanted to add anything to them.

Later, on several occasions, I used to recall them with reference to easier pictures. I suddenly noticed that if this jug of water, that glass of wine or tablecloth were visible to me, they were so by allusion to Braque's paintings (which are difficult). What seemed to prove the doctor right in spite of everything was that he first remembered the lobster and I did not. However, I could have defended myself on that point as well. I will return to it.

2. *More lifelike than Nature*

I don't really believe in apparitions or in ghosts. But I see that I am wrong. Because in reality we all believe in them and it would be more honest to admit it. An ordinary man has never completely recognized himself in his portraits. The day we are made to watch our profiles in reflecting mirrors, hear our voices

on records, read our old love letters, is a bad day for us: and straight away we feel like howling. It is so completely obvious that we are somehow different. Anything but that. Accurate photographs, exact portraits can be powerful, subtle, beautiful or ugly. They possess a quality which far surpasses all of these: they are not *true to life*. Montaigne was roughly the opposite of the sadistic rat shown in his portraits. Leonardo da Vinci did not really look like a chrysanthemum, nor Goethe a melon. From today we must warn our grandsons that we have nothing in common with the sad likenesses they will retain of us.

But it is more difficult to know *what* we are and the *physical* idea that we make of it. Perhaps we see ourselves secretly as flayed creatures? No, it's something less blood-stained. As skeletons? No, something less conclusive. Something which is at the same time intangible and exceedingly precise. It is fairly exactly what we call a spectre, and after all, that is familiar enough since we have it all the time in our heads. It is of as practical a species as a snail or a lemon.

A lemon. That is what I wanted to come to. For, naturally enough, it seems to us that the snail and the lemon should be contented with their appearance even if man is not; that the fact that he only did not have to be a snail himself is all that he deserves. But it is possible that he is nothing of the sort. It is even probable (immediately we think about it) that the snail also never stops (silently) protesting against his shell, his eyes on stilts, and even against the mother-of-pearl skin we see him in. It is possible that one day we shall find painters subtle enough—or, who knows, sufficiently informed to take the side of this inner snail; to treat the horns and the shell as they want to be treated.

I am only trying to be accurate, so much the worse if I appear stupid. That Braque has a secret, as there is a secret in Van Gogh or in Vermeer, is proved by an output which is at every moment curiously rich and satisfying: fluid (without there being any need for air); dazzling (without the slightest source of light); dramatic (without pretension), and at the same time considerate and calm: thought out in order to give the impression of a mirage imposed on its reality. However, as soon as I want to put a name to this secret or at any rate to the impression it gives me, this is what I find. Braque gives to lemons, grilled fish, and to tablecloths

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exactly the quality they would expect to have. What they were longing for: their own spectre. There is something sad in a duty, something bitter in waiting: it is the fact that we are afraid of being disappointed. But each one of Braque's pictures gives the impression of an enjoyable effort and of a duty done.

Of course, it is necessary to give proofs of this. And I will give them. After all, I am only saying things which are quite commonplace. (It would be enough to use another word—to speak of *ideal*, for example.) So much the better. What I also wanted to say is that Braque's painting is commonplace. Fantastic, of course, but ordinary. Fantastic in the same way in which (as soon as one thinks about it) it is fantastic to have a nose and two eyes; with the nose exactly between the eyes.

3. *Camouflage, guitars and papiers collés*

I spoke of proofs. Here is one: not so long ago they wanted to change the appearances of barrack huts, guns and trucks. These were thought to be vaguely dangerous. They would have liked them to look more like trees or rocks. Now they should have called in Braque and Picasso.

Camouflage has been the cubists' achievement: and if you wish, it was also their revenge. Those whom public opinion had consistently accused of making canvases which didn't resemble anything were found to be the only painters whose work was able to resemble precisely everything. The trees, meadows and leaves were witness to this: they were able to recognize themselves in the still-lives of Braque. In them, they found their own spectres, or guardian angels. The pilot who was uncertain of the forests of Ardennes or of Beauce no longer hesitated in front of a gun touched up by Braque: there at last was a real tree, a flat field or dead leaves which were really dead; he pulled away. I know why a canvas as large as a pocket handkerchief gave me a strange feeling that the painter had forgotten nothing. For the canvas could stretch itself out and conceal lorries, the countryside, the whole of France.

Of course, all the criticisms made about the cubists were not absurd. For instance, they were certainly satisfied with very little: a guitar, a pipe, a pack of cards or a fried egg. And (in the camouflage) with trees and fields—when it should have been

correct to imitate the sea. Only it so happens that these are the criticisms we should first make to painting itself.

If the painter had only had to reproduce the various aspects of things, (colour) photography would have sent him back to his family long ago. But we must really presume that painting adds a certain risk and mystery to photography. Some kind of metamorphosis, as we have had to speak of guardian angels or of spectres. Now, in any case, a metamorphosis is more striking if the object is more commonplace: more within our experience. We might be surprised to hear that a whale had changed itself into a palm tree. But we should be far more astonished if, in front of us, a fly changed itself into a violet. More agreeably surprised. Because a whale is already vaguely fantastic whereas a fly is not. We should never stop catching fresh flies for the pleasure of watching them turn into violets. Perhaps that is the reason (and what other can there be?) for the alleged monotony of cubist canvases; it looked as if Braque and Picasso had re-discovered the proof and the justification of painting just as previous painters had one day created perspective. The fact is that the pipe and the guitar *did not cease* being marvellous. We could take pleasure indefinitely in their adventures and tell them (like children), 'Start again'. Finally—but I am coming to my final argument.

This is that the cubists did not hesitate, if necessary, to welcome the patch or the newspaper itself on to their canvas. We have been told a thousand times in the past that art was nature viewed through a temperament. The painters of those times were afraid precisely of lacking temperament. Paying attention to the tree, of course, and to the sun—more intent still in reproducing the tree or the sun in a way which would be personal to them; to show exactly that they were really there. One painted using cross-hatching, another commas, and another dots. It looked as if even painting itself might escape them, and that they were obliged to retain it each minute by their personal tricks and traps.

The cubists do not have so many anxieties probably because they hardly have any reason for uneasiness. They quite simply put in a newspaper or needlework itself wherever they might have to imitate newspaper or needlework. Painting has never completely been able to dispense with imitation. It is one of its natural resources. It is also one of its dangers. It is continually being threatened by imitation (as is the novel by realism). And

we may well be afraid that at any moment imitation will consume it. But Braque and Picasso had passed the danger. They could dispense with all personality to the point at which even the objects themselves instead of their images took their place on their canvases.

In short, once and for all, with them the painter had made his discovery. After that he kept quiet, engrossed in the foregone conclusion of things, and everything was audible down to the most diffident whisper of a lemon or a lobster.

4. *Myths of Georges Braque*

Braque's expression is so humble that he seems to have seen peace. But he has woodcutter's shoulders and a giant's figure.

'Do you understand, I am worried,' Vollard said to him. 'If my Renoir is burnt and all that remains is a small corner, I will always know that it is still a Renoir. But if it were my Braque...' 'Thank God,' said Braque, who that very day gave up signing his pictures.

Housepainters, Braque's father and grandfather were responsible for all the imitation wood to be seen in Le Havre towards the end of the nineteenth century. 'They were working for my good conscience,' said Braque.

'Scholars are lucky people. If I were a scholar I would know how to do one of my pictures over again.'

'I have heard it said that once you took one of your pictures into a field.' 'Yes, I have had a passion for dragging them around everywhere, to have them meet things. To see if they would hold their own.'

He is rather doubled up. He comes and goes, pulls out ten canvases at a time, some of which rest on easels, others on a kind of grid on the ground. Sometimes he moves a dead leaf, a crab's foot, a lizard's skeleton. What were they expecting on the table?

Looking at a still-life, someone remarked to him, 'But this lighting doesn't exist in nature'. 'And I, am I then not a part of nature?'

'But where then does this light come from?' 'Ah, that comes from another canvas which you don't know.' He goes and fetches it. It is a flat grey which would appear dull if it weren't for an unfinished patch of red in the centre. 'I like it,' adds Braque, 'but I hardly ever show it'.

'There is nothing Chamisso denies himself. He speaks all languages. What a talent, what vice! What saves him', said Braque, 'is that he is worried. Jockeys know this: that the most vicious of all horses are those that do not sweat.'

A young girl comes into his studio, walks around, passes comments, and admires until the day when Braque says to his canvas: 'Now, you must defend yourself'.

('Painting is jealous,' said Michelangelo.)

From his notebooks, in which Braque piles up at random guitars, fruit dishes and masses of lines which are neither fruit dish nor guitar, which are nothing at all, I get the impression that Braque doesn't so much look for things as let them look for him. By something obsessional which multiplies clues and signs and prompts from every side.

He cuts out an advertisement from the *Petit Parisien*. It is a wireless set—box, bars of music, on a watered black background—which reminds one oddly of a Braque. 'But don't let us obstruct our memory,' he said.

'The painter,' said Braque, 'is stuffed with natural elements. He is never quite sure what he is going to *bring up*.'

People were surprised that he did not use a large number of subjects. 'Even so, I take what I need, wherever it finds me!'

'Oh, I don't know,' he said again, 'if what I am putting on here will be a cliff or a woman!'

'When I begin, it seems to me that my picture is on the other side, only covered over with this white dust, which is the canvas. All I have to do is to dust it off. I have a small brush to liberate the blue, another for the green, or for the yellow: they are my paint brushes. When everything is cleaned, the picture is finished.'

5. *Seeing the wrong way round*

Michelangelo, although weakly built, used to sculpt with ferocity. To anyone expressing surprise at this, he replied, 'I hate this marble which is separating me from my statue.'

We must believe him, and Braque also. Whoever wishes to approach a painter (or a sculptor) is resigned soon enough to taking the part of *what* obsesses him against him. It isn't so easy.—Ah, it's even absurd. Be serious. It is the painter who makes the picture; not the picture the painter.—Yes.—Then that would be

to see things the opposite way round.—Probably, but as far as that is concerned. . .

Just now I alluded to the impressionists. We must come back to them. I am not one of those timid people who at all costs would like to forbid painters showing us violet shadows and green cows if it pleases them to do so. A green cow seems to me to have a certain charm; it might also have its justification. But this justification is surely not the same as that which the nineteenth-century painters gave us, one which has always appeared to me painfully weak.

For Monet or Signac persisted in demonstrating that it was necessary for them to paint violet shadows (for example) because the shadows were in reality violet (and not black as ordinary sight sees them). It was enough to bring up a few physical laws; amongst others, that the shadow is always slightly coloured with its complementary. According to the case, this was called the optical mixture, the complementary colour or the simultaneous contrast. The painter, in fact, was continually appealing to the expert against the man in the street, to specialists instead of to ordinary people: he did not in any way claim—as perhaps he would have been wise to do, if he had been really courageous, that he was quite free to paint green cows; he claimed, strangely enough, that he was not free not to paint green cows—since this, he said, is how the sun makes fun of him and of us. (And who would dare object to the sun?) As we have seen, he was punished for it and his painting became more personal—confetti, commas or squiggles—as his theory became impersonal. Of course, he could have pushed still further in this direction and shown us the light nebulae (since, according to modern physicists, it seems that such is the nature of cows). But in this case it is a question of optics and another example will be more obvious: it is a well-established fact that nature, cows and even the sun impose themselves on the reverse side of our retina. And their learned, much too learned, theory would logically have led Signac and Monet to show us men and trees upside down. This they did not dare to do because of some remnant of shame. To tell the truth, it would be absurd to do this; for a thousand reasons which can incidentally be so clearly seen that we can draw another conclusion from them.

It is often said that painters change the appearance of the world to our eyes; men no longer see exactly the same clouds after Turner, the same women after Watteau—the same lemons after

Braque. In short, art imitates nature less than nature imitates art. But perhaps the reason for this is quite a simple one. That in the very principle of vision there is an absurd and paradoxical action: something purely arbitrary. If we see men standing on their feet, it is because it has pleased us to see them standing straight. Everything was against it: our eye only offered us a forked tree. Nature led us to believe that cows rested on their backs and houses on their roofs. We have had to defend ourselves from this. By a really human choice. By a painter's choice.

I haven't said either that Braque was always obvious: but his most difficult canvases came to illuminate for me other pictures which had no mystery. He painted lemons and it seemed to me that in some way or another it was the lemon which had begun. I found it common-place, but just as strange as it was common-place. At last I learnt that Braque himself conceived his painting in the wrong way round order in which I saw it. In short, in order to understand Braque, I had to repeat the same absurd choice and prejudice which make us see the world in space. As if the painter was forcing us the whole time to reconsider the oldest, most serious human decisions.

I spoke just now of presence and of a certain position which the picture occupied for me. But perhaps you begin to suspect what position I mean, and of what presence an active yet silent, fiery yet suppressed painting tells me. After all, it is serious enough for me to be forgiven for having forgotten the lobster.

6. *Modern beauty and metaphysics*

No. I will no longer pretend to be in ignorance of what all the German art critics have written, of what is repeated by all the museum directors of Germany, and of what the smallest boy from Patagonia knows when he comes to learn painting in Montparnasse—and also of what my doctor (along with a few other good French bourgeois) is the only person to be in ignorance of. That the beginning of the twentieth century was a period of giants. That the period and the country which has seen Braque, Picasso and Rouault suddenly shine out after Cézanne, Van Gogh and Seurat, is favoured among all countries and at all times; even more than the Italian Renaissance and the great epoch of Holland. There is a modern beauty next to which the beauty of the primitives and of the classics looks pale.

It is more difficult to put a name to this beauty. I do not see all its features; but, at least, I see the questions it poses. They are riddles, such as children and primitives make (and it is no accident if negro art has its say about this): what is more true to life than nature? What is obvious without being proved? Magnificent without being admired? Or else: 'It is not the painter who began, it is the picture.' What is it? The more we see it the more it astonishes us. What is it? And again: 'What is there behind space and time?' Briefly, a metaphysical beauty.

On that point there is a misunderstanding. Strangely enough, we admit that metaphysics consist of books which, in any case, are rather difficult and boring. Now, the slightest honesty is enough to see that the contrary is true. We all know what are time and space, liberty and even the eternal. We know it very well so long as we don't think about it. So long as we know it, so to speak, obliquely. It is, on reflection, that everything gets mixed up, and then the boring books arrive, and ultimately metaphysics are not books, they are reality if there is such a thing. That is not something difficult but the most widely-shared thing in the world. Not boring but dazzling: and we see the world by its light. A delicate light I know, if it escapes our notice. Let the painter then show us how to make it permanent.

These last months Braque is opening a large window above his usual still-life. But neither the sun nor the clouds in the least succeed in dislocating or spoiling the table and the wash-basin, the loaf of bread or the two red mullet which he transforms into our delight and our repose: our satisfaction. Have I *evoked* his picture clearly enough? It is also easier to talk of them obliquely rather than directly if this painter whom one might have believed content with a fish and with a crust of bread seems, to take a better look at him, haunted by shells and by hair, by waves and by smiles. However, it is true that the chunk of bread is enough. Without any obvious precedents, or ancestry which is of any value. The whole time Braque gives the impression of a man who commands with precision and who ratifies the authentic. He makes his canvases contain a world which is strangely full: autonomous to the point at which each colour loses its native qualities in them: the green ceases to be rural, the red violent, and the violet ambiguous. People have dealt intelligently with his passion for working-drawings and for problems—

but also with his feminine tenderness; with his exaggerated fantasy—but with his thick and too rebellious a texture. People have called him the master of concrete relations and I would rather call him the master of invisible relations. But someone will say, why Braque rather than . . . ? I can only reply one thing (as I have already said): Braque came to look for me. Besides, these questions of precedence are invidious. I would be embarrassed to have to decide if Braque were the most inventive or the most varied artist of our time. But if the great painter is the man who gives at the same time the most precise and the most nourishing conception of painting, then without hesitation it is Braque I will take for my *patron* and my law.

[Translated by PETER WATSON. Reprinted from *Poésie*, 43]

STEPHEN SPENDER

IMPRESSIONS OF FRENCH POETRY IN WARTIME

It is necessary to preface these impressions with an apology. I have had as little time as most people of my age group to form considered judgements about recent literature in my own language, still less in French. It is only because I am in the fortunate position of having been one of the few people to have the opportunity of reading some of the recent work of French poets that my immediate reactions may, to some extent, be a guide to other readers, as French books become accessible to them.

The poems of Aragon and of Eluard have both been published in England during the war. I doubt whether any of the poets less known here has Aragon's passion and virtuosity or the crystalline quality of Eluard at his best. Aragon's poetry is like a gale of patriotism which contains air-pockets of tenderness, and it sustains its impetuosity because, although it bears one along breathlessly, the thought hardly ever obstructs the reader. Eluard is the very opposite of Aragon; he is a poet of static crystal images full of light and an impression of silence; he is sculptural and it is the forms into which his thought is poured which the reader gazes on. Pierre Emmanuel, Loys Masson, Pierre