

I

“Yes, my lads, it’s me, Père Yvernaux, who is telling you this! And not ironically, as a straight-faced joker, a boreal humorist—nor, as you might think, because, from time to time, I’ve drunk a good half-dozen too many, thanks to which, that supplementary drop of liquid activating my word-mill...”

But the speech was cut off in mid-sentence, its continuation shredded in advance by a fusillade of violent interruptions, which burst forth from all sides at once—cheerful rather than malicious, though, turning the matter into a joke, as was natural toward a loquacious sexagenarian drunkard in a gathering of young friends. There was a crossfire of:

“Enough! Enough! Shut him up!”

“To Hell with this palaver!”

“One last half in his beard!”

“And send the beard to bed!”

“To bed, Père Yvernaux!”

“Sit down, eternal Père.”

And many other more-or-less witty interjections, before which the interrupted gentleman did, in fact, end up sitting down, he too gaily taking things with a broad smile, and even another half, with his nose in his glass and beer in his beard.

But what, then, had annoyed the brave and worthy Père Yvernaux, among his chosen companions, in that environment he liked so much, where he was understood and often even admired by all—and to some he was a sort of god? The true milieu, he said, required by a twentieth-century thinker.

Now, this thinker—and, until further notice, *the* thinker of the new century, as Père Yvernaux rated himself—was a failed doctor of philosophy, but a doctor of letters nevertheless, and was the doyen of the students, since, even now, he was attending Metchnikoff’s lectures,¹ and had just, at the age of 62, registered for an open course. He was proud of that, moreover, and rightly so, glorying in still learning—and was singularly cherished because of his “discipular deanship,” as he put it, in that special milieu for which he had such a strong affection.

In fact, the environment was exciting and impassioned, genuinely new and very much of the 20th century, of a kind that had been sought in vain for fifteen years, before the final years of the present millennium. It was, however, simply a brasserie in the Latin Quarter, nothing more, situated within the confines of the student realm on the frontier of Montrouge; and it seemed that an amalgam was in the process of taking place there between two worlds so long opposed, the bourgeoisie and the people.

Here, in fact, in the evening, *intellectuals* of the traditional sort—students, medical students, people of the legal fraternity and the fine arts, painters and apprentice writers—gathered and fraternized, communicating in amicable discussion with the *intellectuals* of today, almost of tomorrow: technologists, electricians, chemists, people from the Arts et Métiers, readers of vulgarized sciences and cut-price masterpieces. The latter were taking an interest in the others’ old established “humanities”, while the former, in return, were initiating themselves in the ardent hopes of the modern conquistadors of Nature.

Entering there by hazard, an habitué of the cafés that had flourished in the Boulevard du Montparnasse 25 years before, would not have relished, or perhaps even understood, the new conversations. The doyen of the students, the student in his fortieth year, perpetually rejuvenated by incessant study, Père Yvernaux, drunk on conversation as much as on beer, was on one of his favorite subjects: *the propeller of images and the triggering of ideas*.

It was with pleasure that they listened to him, and it was often profitable, even when he multiplied baroque images and the dance of his ideas became excessively jerky, turning into St. Vitus’ Dance. Even when that happened, he still kept his listeners—or rather, followers—who never ceased taking his words as Gospel. And rarely, save for evenings of dead-drunkenness when he lapsed into nonsense, was silence imposed on him, as had just occurred.

¹ The Russian biologist Élie Metchnikoff, who joined the Pasteur Institute in 1888; he won the Nobel Prize in 1908.

This time, however, he was not in what he called the *displaced state*—meaning that of the total abolition of self—but still in the preceding phase of full and high excitement, which always abounded in paradoxes, original observations, lyrical outbursts and suggestive hypotheses. To be interrupted in that fashion, he must have uttered some blasphemy against the true faith that one of his priests had in him, and thus suddenly broken the charm that ordinarily bound his disciples to him.

That is what he had done. The “Yes, my lads, it’s me who is telling you this” and so on had fallen into the silence of a general bewilderment, caused by the simple brief affirmation that he had proffered beforehand, in a dogmatic and imperious tone:

“The airplane was stillborn.”

Now, a few days before, on the subject of a flight at an altitude on 2700 meters, he had taken flight himself, in one of his fine fits of enthusiasm, relative to the conquest of the air by twentieth-century humankind. And here he was today, without even having the excuse of the *displaced state*, burning what he had adored the day before, and burning it in that summary and scornful fashion, as if setting fire to a crumpled piece of paper. Was it an aberration? Senility? Treason, perhaps? Two or three people thought so, secretly, without daring to say so. And doubtless they—for there were those who were envious of him—would have made some sharp remark if he had not been sitting there so feebly, with his nose in his glass and beer spilling into his beard.

Suddenly, all the sympathy reverted to him, with the patent evidence of his joke—excellent, in sum, since they had let themselves be taken in by it. One of his friends—an admirer devoid of respect—translated everyone’s final sentiment by tapping him on the belly and treating him as a sublime fraud. To which Blaise Yvernaux—speaking almost to himself, without gaiety now, but, on the contrary, with a sad gravity—replied:

“What good would it do to explain? They don’t understand. They’re still in the twentieth century—as I was, forty-eight hours ago. But today, after what Geneviève said the day before yesterday, oh no, by no means! Finished, buried, their twentieth, my twentieth! I’ve leap-frogged them, and others, and I’m far away, far away, far way...at the antipodes, damn it!”

And he chewed a few shreds of phrases vaguer still, which he submerged beneath another half, the inarticulate words and the swallowed mouthfuls mingling in the glugs of a drowning man. That was his rational consciousness drowning, already plunged into the *displaced state*, advertising the total abolition of the voluntary self. After which, the poor fellow was no more than a limp and gentle drunkard, abandoning himself without resistance to the arms of two friends, faithful unto the future apoplectic fit, who were accustomed to carrying him home when he happened—once or twice a week—to surpass the measure of the *displaced state*.

These two venerated him even in that abdication of self, perhaps savoring what there was still to admire in him, claiming that the semi-darkness in question was particularly propitious to the most fulgurant flashes of his genius—for they found that in him.

It ought to be added that one was a Comtois,² with a mystical turn of mind, a former Fourierist well-acquainted with the occult sciences, and that the other was a Scandinavian steeped in Ibsen, Max Stirner and Nietzsche—and that each of them gladly contemplated Blaise Yvernaux’s drunken visions through the prism of his own imagination, discerning therein symbols, figures and meanings with double or triple locks, to which he alone had the pass-key. In consequence, the more drunk, babbling, lit-up and goggle-eyed the fellow was, the more chance he had of being reckoned fecund in marvels.

It is only fair to admit, by way of compensation, that his worst divagations, amid tiresome drivel, sometimes did, indeed, illuminate abrupt images, opening like phosphorescent portals on gulf whose depths one seemed to plumb. And often, too, even for rational minds, some of his affirmations then had a sort of magnetic power that hypnotized you into an absolute need to have faith in him: a rigorous, mathematical, convinced faith.

So it was this evening, in particular—and his two companions were enjoying, more than ever, having him to themselves. Beneath the night swarming with stars, the brain of the old monologuing philosopher appeared to them to be even more splendid, like a scintillating firework-display. And yet, what he was saying, which was dazzling them, bore no resemblance, at least for someone judging with mere common sense, to a harmoniously-organized sky. It was incoherent verbiage, the very image of chaos; things like this, for example, cast into and snatched from the wind:

² i.e., a native of Franche-Comté, a province in eastern France.

“Monoplane! Biplane! First, please, not biplane but diplane, if you know Greek. I do. Then again, diplane or biplane, it’s all on the same plane, and even ranplaneplane!³ For sure. Yes, obsolete. De profundis! An old game, what! Stillborn, I tell you, the airplane. Stillborn! For what Geneviève says shatters it all. It blows up all the blades of all the propellers, so there! Centrifugal force, isn’t it? But centrifugal is only centripetal exasperated. Or if not, make use of it! She’s right, of course. Diffusion, then? Yes—without which, confusion. Perfectly? Better still? Fusion—since opposites are identical. You think it’s Hegel who said that? Ha ha ha! Bunch of ignoramuses! Did he speak Greek, Hegel? No, eh? Now, the formula is Greek. And here it is.”

A pause, not in speech but in motion—and the orator, posing magisterially and gravely, although unsteady on his feet, proclaimed, with an exaggerated articulation: “*T’enantia tafton.*”

Then he laughed scornfully, like the crackle of a frying-pan, and went on: “*Tafton*, yes! Pronounced in the modern Greek fashion, that goes without saying. Not in your stupid Erasamian style. Geneviève cried with joy when I told her it was Heraclitus. Hats off and on your knees before that one! And a rataplan, rataplan for him! Not a ranplaneplane like your planeless monoplanes or biplanes. He, the Napoléon of Cosmogonists, that author of the *Pata rei* and the *O polemos pater panton*. And they called him *o skotinos*, the Gloomy One! Long live the Emperor!”⁴

He had lurched with enthusiasm, lost equilibrium, almost fallen. The Scandinavian having caught him in his arms, Yvernaux had pushed him away, crying:

“No! Enough! Shut up, with your Nietzsche and his eternal return. No going and coming back! Always going! And it’s my Gloomy One, again, who said that you can’t bathe twice in the same water. And one doesn’t drink the same beer twice. And when they lay me down in mine—the bier—the place where it’ll be buried is the soul of the world, the *To*, by a big Tau,⁵ neuter, like me...”

He blithered on like that for half an hour, without pausing for breath, without resting except to lean, sometimes on one, sometimes the other, of his companions and sometimes on both at once—whose four arms were nevertheless not too many to prevent him from collapsing to the ground—by night, beneath a sky less constellated than his brain: Blaise Yvernaux, sexagenarian, failed doctor of philosophy, doctor of letters, inveterate drunkard; a poor alcoholic condemned to the worst catastrophes of atherosclerosis, but, in the meantime, and in spite of his two sessions of *displaced state* a week, a walking encyclopedia; the admired, cherished protagonist, almost the prophet, of the embryonic new religion of the Brasserie of the 20th century!

And when his two apostles had carried him up to his furnished room in the Rue Montmartre and had piously laid him on his iron-framed bed, where he went to sleep like a baby, on finding themselves back in the street, they both said, in unison: “Well, all the same, he’s a genius!”

That was the affirmation that recurred as a refrain at the end of all their conversations with and about Blaise Yvernaux—which astonished them and enchanted them every time, with the awareness that they were the intimates of that genius. But they only pronounced the affirmation between themselves and the friends at the Brasserie who shared their faith in Yvernaux. To say it in front of Yvernaux in person would have been the worst insult they could offer him. He proclaimed, in fact, there was only one genius in the world at present—and, for that matter, in all the centuries yet elapsed—and one alone, to whom he would not admit that anyone could be compared, not even himself; *especially* not himself, since that unique being was his own godchild, Geneviève.

Geneviève who? That was what no one knew, even among his most intimate friends, for he never referred to her except by that forename and the description of her as his godchild. It had even been suggested that he strove to make sure that no one knew any more about her. His two faithful followers,

³ In French, biplane is *biplan*, which permits the wordplay on *rataplan* [an onomatopoeic representation of a drum roll] and other improvised portmanteau words involving the syllable *plan*, which become awkward when switching languages, even though one double meaning of “plane” survives.

⁴ The only bits of Yvernaux’s Greek of which I can make sense are the Heraclitean maxim *Panta rei* [everything flows] and the nickname *o skotinos*, although its usual renderings as “the Obscure” or “the Dark One” are a trifle ambiguous; I have preferred “the Gloomy One” because it fits better with his other famous nickname, “the Weeping Philosopher.”

⁵ A T-shaped walking-stick or shepherd’s crook, with a slightly curved handle, is sometimes known in France as a tau (masculine gender), by analogy with the Greek letter, and the word can be applied to a person by analogy with the stick. I have retained Richepin’s *To*, although that Oriental syllable is nowadays more often rendered as Tao.

curious about every detail concerning him, had not been able to get any precise information regarding this mysterious being, of whom his thoughts were nevertheless always full and by which they were haunted. He spread her word, with such violent effusions and cries of enthusiasm, in formulae of mad admiration—adoration, rather—as if he rendered her an interior worship, incessantly ready to express it aloud in *Magnificats*, punctuating ejaculatory prayers by telling rosary beads. And the mystic occultist had even, at length, reconstituted an entire bouquet of strange litanies with which he loved to decorate his meditations.

Here are a few of these verses, chosen from among the least incomprehensible:

“The renovatrice of all forms is Her.”

“The revolution, from top to bottom, is Her.”

“Newton’s laws are contained in a petty corollary of one of hers.”

“She’s Pascal cubed.”

“She’s the Euclid of n -dimensional geometry.”

“To multiply zero by infinity; that’s her function.

“The Archimedean screw without the necessity of a fulcrum, that’s her mind.”⁶

“The Egg of Everything in the Chaos of Nothing, that’s her word.”

“The blink of an eye or the *fiat lux* or the *fiat nox*, that’s her gesture.”

“The consciousness of the Unconscious, that’s Her—and *vice versa*.”

“The Self of Selflessness, that’s Her—and *vice versa*.”

“If God exists, he’s Her.”

“If he doesn’t, his negation is Her.”

These sayings, the peremptory absurdity of which was such that there was something almost parodic about them, the Comtois occultist understood fully, and the Scandinavian too; as for Père Yvernaux himself, he gargled them more easily than his beer. But the least bizarre of these formulae, said to Geneviève in person, made her laugh as if it were pure stupidity, like a drunkard’s nonsense. She was not even embarrassed by them, so impossible did it seem to take them seriously. When, very timidly, from time to time, her godfather risked addressing one of them to her, he was certain to find himself snubbed, albeit politely, with a: “Shut up, you idiot!” Unless, entirely in fun, he was scolded for his vice by being told: “So you’re still in the *displaced state*, since yesterday? Watch out, will you? That’s twice in three days. You’re overdoing it somewhat, aren’t you?”

For she gladly bantered, Geneviève, that *Consciousness of the Unconscious*, that *Self of Selflessness*—and her sense of humor was rather joyful, in spite of the powerful reasons she had for being severe, and even morose.

The main one of these reasons was, alas, that she had arrived at the difficult age that designated her as an old spinster, since she was already seven years past 25 and unmarried. Without regrets, however—without even a hint of bitterness. She was the first to joke—like a good sport, she said—about that sad heptad, at the end of which one sees one’s 33rd birthday looming.

“The fateful turning,” she sighed, making fun of herself. “Not for one who has flourished in love and is, at that age, still a young woman, but for one who, having known no flowers, runs to seed, and to bad seed, bitter and poisonous to others and to herself.”

And something else that might have prevented Geneviève from being cheerful was the gravity of her life, entirely devoted to the more demanding and most absorbing studies, with her mind narrowly focused to the lofty speculations of modern science, which simultaneously embrace all the problems, linked in an indissoluble chain, of mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology. Even in her work and her meditation, though, her smile undoubtedly found its place, for Geneviève took to it like a good swimmer abandoning herself delightedly to deep water.

So there was nothing of the female scientist, in the bad sense, about her—any more than there was of the old spinster, in fact, in spite of the famous heptad added to the 25 years, and one could not

⁶ Yvernaux is confusing two of the items of Archimedes’ fame: the Archimedean screw, which was a device for pumping water, and the philosopher’s remark about being able to move the world if he had a lever long enough, a fulcrum and a place to stand. The “error” is repeated, and is evidently deliberate.

divine on her forehead either the head-dress of Saint Catherine⁷ or the mortar-board of the doctor that she could have been in all the sciences.

“Yes, all of them!” Yvernaux often proclaimed. “All of them, and more.” For it only remained for her to pass some exam or other, or to win some diploma. And it was not merely a doctor of sciences that she could have been, if she had wanted to, but a fully-qualified professor of mathematics, physics, chemistry, and she could taken those qualifications in any order, at the whim of her examiners.

Sometimes he reproached her—it was his only reproach—for having scorned these official qualifications.

“Because, at the end of the day,” he said, “that would give you the right to wear the professorial toga, with the red or yellow rabbit-fur border, and at a stroke, you’d amount to something.”

“Don’t I amount to anything, then?”

“Not very much, damn it! To be my godchild isn’t enough.”

“It’s enough for me.” And she embraced her godfather, whom she loved with all her heart. And he, muttering in his beard, his heart bowled over with joy: “To be sure, when one is a genius...”

And into his beard, whose whiteness was yellowed by beer, rolled tears that were pearls of delight and pride. That emotion might have been that of an old crackpot, a drunkard with the trembling lips of an alcoholic, and that opinion might have manifested itself in the absurd verses of ludicrously-formulated prayers, but in spite of everything, the old drunken crackpot was telling the truth. Geneviève really was a genius!

⁷ A woman who reached the age of 25 without finding a husband was long said, in France, to have *coiffé Sainte-Catherine* [coiffed Saint Catherine], the phrase deriving from an obsolete custom by which unmarried women made head-dresses with which to adorn statues of the saint in churches.