

## Perse : "On Poetry"<sup>1</sup>

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*My horse stopped beneath a tree which coos, I whistle a purer whistle ... And peace to those, if they are dying, who have never seen this day. But of my brother the poet we have news. He has once again written something very sweet. And there are those who have known it...*

Anabasis, « Song » (117, OC, 117)

The voice of Saint-John Perse (1887-1975) continues to sound sweet to our ears, if only we take the time to listen. His extraordinary poetic *œuvre* spans more than six decades and is unmatched in this century in its breadth, variety and innovativeness. His translators into English include T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Fitzgerald and Richard Howard. Yet despite his great achievement, Saint-John Perse currently resides in a place of deep unknowing, especially in this country where he made his home for most of the last thirty-five years of his life. I have elsewhere dealt in some depth with each of the major phases of Saint-John Perse's poetic career. Here I propose to treat his two major prose statements on poetry and poetics : the Nobel Prize Lecture (1960), and his essay, « Léon-Paul Fargue, poète » (1963). I hope to strip away the aristocratic mask beneath which Perse the poet has too often been imprisoned, and thus allow his voice to speak to us. For in his essential concerns, in his attitude toward the *métier* of poetry, in his philosophy of life, we may well discover that Perse is still our contemporary<sup>3</sup>.

Saint-John Perse's Nobel Prize Lecture, « On Poetry », is a rare statement that speaks to the situation of poetry in a timeless way. In many ways this speech is worthy of comparison with Sir Philip Sidney Apology for Poetry, with which it shares many rhetorical strategies. Like Sidney, Perse compares poetic thinking to scientific thinking and, like Sidney, Perse finds that humankind truly needs the voice of poet just as much as the work of the scientist. Perse, in his first sentence, states that the honor he is receiving is in fact honoring poetry, not himself. This characteristic self-effacement also allows the poet to address poetry as his essential subject. All original thinking, whether literary or scientific, springs from the same creative impulse. As he states, « in its beginning every creative act of the mind is 'poetic' in the proper [or etymological] sense of the word » (5, OC, 444). He also claims that poetry, is able to go further than science. Through language and the function of image, he says, « the poet clothes himself in a surreality [*surréalité*] to which the scientist cannot aspire »

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<sup>1</sup> [Première publication dans *The Connecticut Review*, XI,1, 1988, p. 55-59. La même année (en avril), P. Baker a publié une présentation de "Saint-John Perse, Alexis Leger, 1960" dans *The Nobel Prize Winners : Literature*.]

<sup>2</sup> [Peter Baker exerce aujourd'hui à la Towson University, Baltimore, Maryland. Il a publié bien d'autres études totalement ou partiellement consacrées à Saint-John Perse. Il a fait une large place au poète dans son ouvrage *Obdurate Brilliance : Exteriority and the Modern Long Poem*, University of Florida Press, 1991. En 1997 il a participé à une journée d'étude sur Saint-John Perse organisée à Cassis par la Camargo Foundation. Titre de sa communication : "Saint-John Perse et le monde entier des choses" (texte paru dans *Souffle de Perse*, n° 8, 1998).]

<sup>3</sup> The quotations from *Anabase* and the essay, « Léon-Paul Fargue, poète », are taken from Saint-John Perse, *Œuvres complètes (OC)*, op. cit., p. 507-532 ; translations are my own. Quotations from the Nobel Prize Lecture, « On Poetry » are from Saint-John Perse, *Collected Poems*, Princeton : Princeton University Press (Bollingen), rev. ed., 1983. The translation is by W. H. Auden, though I have modified it in places.

(7, *OC*, 444). Perse also claims that poetry has inherited the task of metaphysical questioning that the philosophy of this century has largely abandoned.

But poetry is not, for all of this wide domain and apparent high seriousness of purpose, in any essential way cut off from actual life. In one of his most famous statements, Perse once answered a literary questioner's query of « Why write ? » with the response « To live better, and further [*Pour mieux vivre et plus loin*] » (*OC*, 554). In an attitude which Perse claims to derive directly from ancient times, poetry is inseparable from life itself. He states here, « poetry is not only a way of knowledge ; it is even more a way of life – of life in its totality » (7-9, *OC*, 444). This has held true since the time of prehistoric man, he says, and will still be true in the future « atomic ages » (*OC*, 445). What he calls the « divine spark » (*OC*, 445), that inspires religion and mythology, is also the source of poetry. Poetry continues to bear that spark even in the modern era when mythologies have lost their adherents. We can see in this reasoning many close parallels with the thinking of that Connecticut resident, Wallace Stevens, and his idea of the « Supreme Fiction » embodied in poetry.

Perse likewise defends poetry from the charge of « obscurity » (How much more often do we hear that charge today ?) He answers that this obscurity « is due, not to its own nature, which is to enlighten, but to the darkness which it explores and must explore » (11, *OC*, 445-446). The darkness he speaks of here is the nature of human existence, with its essential mysteries. (One could also perhaps evoke Freud's « unconscious ») By staying close to the mystery of existence, he states : « the poet keeps us in touch with the permanence and unity of Being. And his message is one of optimism » (11, *OC*, 446). In spite of the worst events of history, natural and other catastrophes, nothing can happen which exceeds « the measure of man » (*ibid*). And it is through poetry that we come to know « the whole world of things [*le monde entier des choses*] » (*ibid*). Since this is the poet's vocation, to know this entire range of human and natural possibilities, the poet must inevitably remain tied to cultural and historical forces. In fact, it is the poet who shakes us from our lethargy by insisting on the reality of these changes.

For Perse, poetry is above all movement. Not merely a means of thinking through analogy and images, poetry is an essential part of living in an everchanging world. The poet's role is therefore never that of the aesthete, but rather that of the one who attempts to bridge the gulf between the forms of knowledge, our human ways of knowing the world. The poet bears witness to man's possibilities for knowledge as well as his spiritual potential. In a brilliant concluding image, Perse asks :

In these days of nuclear energy, can the earthenware lamp of the poet still suffice ? – Yes, if its clay remind us of our own.

And it is enough for the poet to be the guilty conscience of his time (13, *OC*, 447).

Here we see clearly the double movement characteristic of Perse. On the one hand, he gives us a culminating image of the poet as one who takes the measure of humankind (tire poet's lamp of clay reminding him of his Adamic origins). On the other hand, he insists on the temporary nature of any such formulation. So the « guilty conscience » the poet assumes as his role means he must continue to spur movement, resist complacency and welcome change. The truth the poet urges always lies ahead and emerges in poetry as its way of speaking.

From such a height of poetic insight, the « lamp of clay » (*OC*, 447) may serve as a guide to another important venue for Perse's view on poetry, his essay « Léon-Paul Fargue, poète ». Perse wrote this essay on his friend's work, some fifteen years after Fargue's death, as a preface to a new collected edition of Fargue's poetry. The essay is Perse's most extended statement on poetics and his only piece of literary criticism, as such. In much the same (high) style as the Nobel Prize speech, Perse here places a high value on Fargue's work while

praising its humble virtues. One of these virtues is Fargue's love of words, à propos of which Perse recounts the following anecdote :

Fargue, we asked him one night, you who love words in themselves and for themselves, like living creatures still tied to their birth, would you tell us a word of your choice, and one which still has you in its favor ?

« The word *lampe* » he said simply (this word conveyed, even as his name Fargue, by two uneven syllables, one strong and one mute)

(OC, 530).

This story is confirmed by the importance of lamps in Fargue's work, from gas lamps and electric lamps in public places, to the street lamps of his beloved Parisian streets, to the oil lamp next to which he often depicts the poet toiling. We also see here Perse's attention to the materiality of language, a concern he shares with Fargue.

At the outset of his essay, Perse wishes to claim a high place for his neglected friend and co-worker. He refuses to allow that Fargue be placed in the ranks of « minor » poets (OC, 509). Talking about the French poets who influenced Fargue, from Baudelaire to Corbière, Perse states :

He merges himself instinctively with the best of an elite for whom poetry is an adventure of the living : an aid to living and to knowing, in the most burning place of being [*au plus ardent de l'être*] (OC, 510).

The theme which Perse sounds here resonates with his Nobel Prize speech : poetry is a living force that at its best helps us to live and to recognize our ways of knowing the world. This living force of poetry assures that the text will await its readers with what Rimbaud called an « ardent patience ». This is the force that Perse claims for Fargue, by saying, « Every true poet is a vital force ; there is no vital breath that doesn't propel the work towards the future ... » (OC, 512). This living force of the poetic word helps to counterbalance the strong force of memory and nostalgia in Fargue's work. There can be no mistaking that Fargue's work, even his mature work, participates in a kind of *fin-de-siècle* sentimentalism. The activity of his language, its movement and innovative strategies, is what liberates him from a place with the so-called « crepuscular » poets. As Perse says :

By the light of streetlights as in the intimacy of familiar lamps, the confidential voice of Fargue becomes feverish or tender, sings to us of waiting or of regret, in a same yet double nostalgia

(OC, 514).

Given this nostalgia, it remains for Perse to describe the verve of Fargue's poetic language.

Perse does this with a brilliant, if brief, discussion of the history of the « prose poem » (a term which he rejects) in France. In this history of the prose poem in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Fargue occupies an important place, Perse claims, by « resolving phonetically, in a new way, its problems of lyrical structure and expression, rhythmic syntax and composition » (OC, 518). Perse refers to Fargue's « invisible metrics » :

The invisible metrics of Fargue, faithful to the human breath, but with a very supple and free movement, and an always variable articulation, differ greatly from the monadic enunciation of the grand *laises* or *versets* of Claudel

(OC, 519).

There are some who see in this comparison of Fargue to Claudel an attempt by Perse to distinguish his own meter from that of his great contemporary and rival. Perse goes on to distinguish the strategies of Fargue's prose poems from those of Baudelaire, of primarily « psychological » interest, and the *Illuminations* of Rimbaud, with their constant flashes and disjointed movement « between two reversible poles – sky and earth » (OC, 519).

Related to the innovative practice of the prose poem is Fargue's famous concern for punctuation. He introduced in his work a shortened ellipsis, consisting of two dots instead of three, and he was truly a perfectionist for typography. Perse says, fondly, « Léon-Paul Fargue was the kind of man to jump on a night train and rush out to the country to the printer, to make sure by examining the proofs that a comma appeared in the right place » (*OC*, 526). This concern is not merely the mania of a grammarian, but the desire that the rhythm of a poem – even a poem in prose – be just as he wanted it. In another statement that is self-descriptive in addition to applying to Fargue, Perse says, « [The music] grows, just as the character of necessity in the poetic phrase, where the change of one syllable, the word order, or one single word, would disturb the fatal necessity of the poem » (*OC*, 524). This same scrupulous attention to detail also meant that Fargue, as his career progressed, wrote relatively little poetry. He became famous as an *habitué* of the Paris night life and street life, describing his adventures in a bestselling book, *The Pedestrian of Paris* (*Le Piéton de Paris*).

In an idiosyncratic turn, unique to my knowledge in all of Perse's work, Perse praises the resulting laziness that is the hidden side of Fargue's obsessive perfectionism :

Shadowy and flighty with regard to the written word, he was freely lazy [...] His very active laziness stemmed, as though from a fever, from his artistic intransigence. He knew only too well what extreme exigencies waited for him at his writing desk.

(*OC*, 527)

This seems to me to be not merely a justification but even a paean to laziness. (I can imagine the reassurance this might bring to many writers of my acquaintance.) The poet who is afraid to be lazy, he seems to be saying, is the poet who ignores the playful, childlike quality of artistic endeavors. Perse says that Fargue was, « also born, as every poet is, for the greatest leisure, and for the very great gift of a childhood, in the adult, which is never resolved » (*OC*, 528). This image, I think, works superbly to counter the false image of Perse as an aristocratic, joyless and unapproachable poet.

In the end of his essay on Fargue, Perse returns to a theme he sounded in his Nobel Prize speech, the role of the poet in the creation of a sense of community. Of the act of writing, Perse says. « To write is, from the word itself, essentially, 'to participate'. And the poetic word, in its multiple resonances, is it not also society ? » (*OC*, 526). Almost as a sense of ethical duty, the poet carries the role of speaking for and helping to create a community. Fargue the solitary walker was also Fargue the student of humanity. Or as Perse describes it : « His share of human solitude was due less to insularity than to community » (*OC*, 528). The poet who is able to create works in which the community recognizes itself is the poet whose world lives into the future. Perse concludes his essay by stating :

As long as the mystery in the anxious heart of man asks for the song's goal or the bite of sarcasm : as long as the French language, in the obscure heart of man, maintains its function of exorcism, Léon-Paul Fargue, French poet, will retain his living name in the memory of poets (*OC*, 532).

This beautifully-expressed affirmation holds equally for its author, Saint-John Perse.

The Perse who emerges from these two statements on poetry is a Perse who holds a very high place for the poet. This role that the poet assumes does not result from a quasi-aristocratic inheritance. Rather, the poet is the person who dares to explore the dark mysteries of human existence. The poet is the person who dares to face day after day the impossible trials of the writing desk and the blank sheet of paper. The poet also knows instinctively how to be lazy, how to maintain a childlike irreverence in the face of the accepted pieties. The poet's reward for these arduous researches is to be often alone in life and too often ignored after death. Yet the poet gives voice to our essential human solitude ; by bringing together the forms of knowing and being in the world, the poet helps to create the heretofore unformed human community.