

## A Voice from Elsewhere

When I was living in Èze, in the little room (made bigger by two views, one opening onto Corsica, the other out past Cap Ferrat) where I most often stayed, there was (there still is), hanging on the wall, the likeness of the girl they called “The Unknown Girl from the Seine,” an adolescent with closed eyes, but alive with such a fine, blissful (but veiled) smile, that one might have thought she had drowned in an instant of extreme happiness. So unlike his own works, she had seduced Giacometti to such a point that he looked for a young woman who might have been willing to undergo anew the test of that felicity in death.

---

*Anacrouse* initially appeared under the title “Une voix venue d’ailleurs,” from Éditions Ulysse, in 1992.

The poems by Louis-René des Forêts to which Maurice Blanchot’s texts refer are collected in *Les Mégères de la mer* (Mercure de France) and *Poèmes de Samuel Wood* (Fata Morgana). “The White / The Black” refers to extracts from *Ostinato* (Mercure de France; English edition: University of Nebraska Press, translated by Mary Ann Caws, 2002).

It is out of tact that I evoke this image, in order not to alter the haunting quality of the poems of Samuel Wood—Samuel la Forêt—where there rises up in the night dream the childlike figure, sometimes smiling among the asters and roses, standing “in the full light of her grace” or holding up a candle that she blows out as if reluctantly so that she won’t be seen disappearing. *“She makes herself seen only in dreams / Too beautiful to put the suffering to sleep”* and on the contrary aggravating it since she is there only in dreams, a presence about which we know at the same time that it is deceiving. Deceiving?

*“No, she is there, really there / What does it matter if sleep takes advantage of us.”*

It would be better to abandon prudent reason and destroy the daytime wisdom that seeks to destroy *“the wonderful apparition / Welcomed as one trembles at the sight of a face seized by death.”* *“She is there to watch over us / Who go to sleep only to see her.”*

Thus the dream and the rational day pursue an unceasing battle.

*“A dream, but is there anything more real than a dream?”* And how can one survive without dreaming *“That the child, drawn to her familiar places / Comes into this garden of roses, and every night / Returns to fill the*

*bedroom with her candid flame / That she holds out to us  
like an offering and a prayer”?*

*“There is also that woman seated on a window  
ledge / And she is always the same. Who is she, then?  
What sign is she making with her fingers gloved in red?”*  
And if we tear ourselves from sleep to question her  
and lose her, here she is again, returning on the fol-  
lowing nights in a similar posture, resting against  
another window.

A figure that disturbs me, since I have met  
her too, but during the day, diurnal and spectral.  
Messenger of Melancholy, so similar to the apparition  
evoked by Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw*,  
motionless like a woman conscious of her guilt, slightly  
turned away so that we can escape from the memory  
of our own guilt.

Figures that are too real to last.

And that is when the questioning that exposes  
the illusion intervenes: *“These visions were only an error  
of oblivion.”* It is forbidden “to ignore the laws of nature”  
and pretend to checkmate death. Samuel Wood or his  
double utters the judgment: *“Irreparable crack. Let us take  
note of it. / Now we are sorry as long as we live.”*

But then another temptation occurs: why not  
cut the moorings so as to go toward her in death, by

a death that is not only consented to, but summoned, “*chosen like the perfect form of silence*”?

Or, in another realistic perspective, why not wait for the memory to weaken, ceasing “*to suffer by ceasing to see her / Joining us on nights favorable to encounters*”?

A temptation that rejects “the uncompromising boy,” the one we learned to know before in “Une mémoire démentielle” [A demented memory], who formulates the implacable sentence.

“*To unite with nothingness, nothing engenders nothing.*”

And there again is the effort of a rigor for which forgetting even what we call oblivion brings no consolation, all the while sustaining another survival, an infinitely more obscure demand: “*The tenderness that keeps the voice throttled / The duty of vigilant friendship.*”

“The duty of vigilant friendship.” What agitation we feel at these words that are so simple, so beautiful. Whatever the objections may be, the oscillations by which “*attraction and terror go hand in hand,*” we are no longer permitted to be silent. You must speak (even if speaking has always had either too much

or too little meaning). Scarcely have you made this resolution, than the “you must be quiet” comes back: it is better “*to abandon the leaves in progress that clutter up your table.*” “*Silence itself tells more about it than words. And everything that speaks is made of mortal flesh.*” But let us speak, for we have no other instruments but words, which “*remain our masters in all things / Since we have to make use of them in order to be quiet.*”

This is when the dreamer interrogates the figure who lends him a byname and thus unburdens him of it. “*You about whom nothing says that you live under this name, Samuel, Samuel, is it really your voice I hear / Coming as if from the depths of a tomb / To strengthen my own voice struggling with words / Or to act as echo to its great destitution?*”

The answer is within each one of us and we know that, close to death, we still have to “*keep watch in silence,*” to welcome the secret friendship by which some voice from elsewhere comes to make itself heard. Vain voice? Perhaps.

It matters little. What has SPOKEN to us will always speak to us, just as we never stop hearing (is it eternity?) the final harmony extinguished in [Messiaen’s] “Quartet for the End of Time.”

## Rough Draft of a Regret

I wrote this commentary (or what seems to pass as a commentary), and while I was writing it, led along by the movement that is the gift of the poem, I closed my eyes to my fault, which lies in transforming the poem (the poems) into a prose approximation. There is no alteration graver than that. These poems by Samuel Wood have their voice, which one must hear before thinking one understands them. *On a touché au vers* [“The line has been meddled with”—a phrase of Mallarmé’s]. But Mallarmé still recognized in “free verse” the old “worn-out” alexandrine. How I would like to be able to express the rhythm that, prolonging the ancient line, gives it a somber, sometimes solar glory—the sublime within simplicity—yet here, by these epithets, I stifle the voices that summon us and draw us toward the ultimate point.

## The White The Black

I think we have to speak of *Ostinato*, but we would have to speak of it without words, in a language that haunts me by failing me.

*Ostinato* is a musical notation. It is a theme without variations, a stubborn motif that returns and doesn't return. Alban Berg hears it in Schumann, and I too hear it as that single note that kept resounding in his head without being able to develop.

It is also "the obstinate rigor" of Leonardo da Vinci whose enchantment the young Paul Valéry experienced, while committing himself to retain only its rigor.

However, with Louis-René des Forêts, we come up against a central difficulty. I suppose an immense, infinite, irremediable catastrophe occurred in his life. The abyss, absolute disaster. After which he was deprived of the gifts of writing. I do not think

there was an oath: “I will not write anymore.” An oath that did not need to be uttered. Shipwreck in which the one who wrote was as if swallowed up. “*See here, in the corner in the very bottom of the virgin canvas, the remnants of a shipwreck.*”

I dare say that that it was real (alas). For years, the writer stopped writing. And, as if to make such an interruption even more fatal, he spent his time in other arts: painting, drawing—music, perhaps, for all I know.

How was he one day brought back to the demand of writing, which neither suffering, nor the unspoken vow, nor perpetual emptiness succeeded in conquering? Perhaps he realized that, in order to stop writing, one has to continue to write, to write endlessly until the end, or starting from the end.

There are no white spaces unless there is black, no silence unless speech and noise are produced, in order to cease.

Thence (but that is not the only reason) the fragmentary disposition, the discontinuity of the text of *Ostinato*. I know from experience that nothing is more perilous than writing that lacks narrative sequence or the necessary movement of argumentation. If one follows a trajectory, it is “*a blind trajectory.*” One goes nowhere. The commodity of a goal, even a

distant one, does not exist. Nor do maxims, or aphorisms, or expressive words, and even less the anything-goes of automatic writing.

Are we dealing with an autobiography? That would be to misjudge the text, written in the present (outside *durée*) and calling into question someone always designated in the third person, without being able to recognize in it a distant “I,” already neutral, even impersonal. (The previous récits by Louis-René des Forêts were most often written in the first person, and already had a particular status, I without I, a mode in which questioning, uncertainty were at play, the balance between the real and the imaginary.)

The present in *Ostinato* has various characteristics: sometimes hidden recollections that an incomparable memory—a tragic memory—brings back to light, compels to experience again as if it hadn’t already happened, as if to experience its actuality once again; sometimes an epiphanic message that has a sovereign beauty, even if implacable awareness seeks afterward to betray its glamour—sometimes . . . but I’ll interrupt myself: it is up to each reader to pursue, to sound out, its riches.

I’ll return to the obligation of speaking, of writing, which the author experienced, after a long

silence, as a condemnation, even a damnation. “To be silent, no, he no longer had the means, even if he knew a trembling of hatred and fear in hearing his voice climb back up from the abyss where he thought he had forever cast and lost it. No, he no longer had any strength to resist it, unconscious, veiled perhaps, but still there, insistent, unwavering, as if to catch him while his vigilance lapsed, and throw him back into a new torment.”

That is why, in my turn, I will be silent, incapable of bearing the insufficiency of commentary and of reestablishing the main thread connecting the elements of a discourse that tries to make us hear the *ultima verba*, the haunting fear of definitive fracture.

○ Ostinato, o bitter beauty.