

HOMESICKNESS FOR THE FRONT

IN THE DUSK I have climbed the hill from which can be seen the sector we have just left, to which we will soon, no doubt, be returning. In front of me, beyond meadows veiled by rising mist where the bends of the Aisne make milk-white patches, the bare crest of the Chemin des Dames stands out, clear as a swordblade, against the golden sunset dotted with shrapnel-bursts. From time to time a mortar bomb sends up a silent whirl of smoke.

Why am I here this evening?

In the line I am afraid of shells like everyone else. I count the days and I watch for signs that we are about to be relieved like everyone else. When we are pulled out of the line I am as happy as the next man. And each time it seems to me that now at last I really am satiated, saturated, with the trenches and with war. Only this afternoon I was drinking in the unclouded joy of being alive again in the midst of inoffensive nature. I was savouring the happiness of stretching out under the trees in perfect safety, contemplating their foliage with a completely relaxed mind.

And then I came back, as I do each time, instinctively, to look at the Front and the battle...

Is it not absurd to be so obsessed by the war that one cannot spend a week at the rear without looking for the line of "blimps" on the horizon as if it were the shore of a beloved land? To the extent of not being able to see, at night, the silver spark of a descending rocket, or even just its reflection on the clouds, without feeling a faster heartbeat, a regret, a call?...

This evening, more than ever, the Front bewitches me as, in this setting of wonderful calm and excitement, away from the violent emotions and unbearable tensions of the trenches, I feel the revival of impressions left within me by three years of war.

And I eagerly scan the hallowed line of earthworks and explosions, the line of balloons which regrettably sink to rest, one after another, like curiously-shaped, burnt-out stars, and the line of flares beginning to go up.

What really is so special about this fascinating, deadly

line? By what secret power does it hold to the most living part of my being - drawing it inexorably closer?...

Because at this moment my vision is calmer and more penetrating, I want to analyse myself more closely than I have ever yet done. I want to know.

The first identifiable feeling to which I can compare my present emotion is a passion for the unknown and the new.

If I half close my eyes and relax the bonds of consciousness, letting my imagination run free to return to its pre-war habits and reminiscences, vague memories of long childhood journeys come back to me. I see once more the moment when multicoloured lights are switched on to guide great trains hurrying towards a marvellous, enchanted morning. Little by little, the trenches, lit by signal-flares, blur in my imagination with a vast transcontinental line leading far, far away...somewhere beyond all the world.

And my dream becomes clearer.

The devastated crest whose silhouette, turning a deeper violet-blue, is dying away into the paling yellow of the sky, suddenly becomes that high lonely plateau where I have so often cherished mirage-like projects of science and discovery in the East. The whitening water in the valley is no longer the Aisne: it is the Nile whose distant mirror used to haunt me like a call from the Tropics. Now I believe myself to be sitting in the twilight, near El-Guiouchi, on the Mokattam, looking southwards.

There: I have given myself away.

That puzzling and importunate self which persists in loving the Front I now recognise as the self of adventure and quest, the self which always wants to go to the furthest limits of the world, to see new and unusual sights and to be able to say that it is ahead of the rest.

I confess that when it happened that I went into the trenches for the first time, some two-and-a-half years ago, it was in this spirit that I set out. I was curious and eager: I wanted to see everything, and to see more of it than anyone else. Even now, those who remain rooted in the rear are a living problem in my eyes. Ambulance-men, drivers, radio operators: how can they spend weeks close to the line and not burn with desire to go and see what goes on there?... They are neighbours to the Front, they may perhaps believe themselves to be there, but in reality they are further away than a man living in the suburbs of Timbuctoo! Probably they have never felt the desire to travel. But if that is so, are they absolutely, fully, men?

In spite of having become used to it, in spite of tiredness,

in spite of the discovery, too, of attractions deeper than that of novelty, the Front remains for me that mysterious and dangerous Continent which has risen up in our universe whose pretence has been laid open to the day. I always see it as the frontier of the known world, the Promised Land open to the bold, the edge of no man's land...*

Those who have suffered almost unto death from thirst and cold can never again forget the desert or the icefloe where they tasted the heady intoxication of being alone and of being the first there.

That, in the first place, is how and why I can no longer do without the Front.

So I begin to puzzle out the secret of my homesickness. I need the Front because I am, as every human being should be, an explorer and a seeker after what is new and strange. But is this first explanation of my restlessness any more than an approximation, or even a metaphor? Geographical and spatial exoticism is only a particular and minor form of the passion which leads us to extend and renew ourselves. The airman who takes possession of the air, the thinker who scales new and difficult heights of thought, the opium-smoker who embarks upon his dream, are seekers after the new and strange in their own ways. Each of them is a conquistador landing on a new shore.

What is it then that I have seen at the Front, and what is it therefore that I so much want to find there again, in spite of my fear of suffering and pain?

Is it new deserts or new volcanoes? a new harmony of lights and sounds bursting wildly forth?

Is it the great silent expanse of Flanders, where the armies facing each other seem to sleep among dead waters?

Is it the burial mounds of slagheaps among the ruined miners' cottages?

Is it the burnt ravine of the Hauts-de-Meuse, where the heavy bursts make the earth smoke all over as it were from innumerable geysers?...

Yes, no doubt, it is all these things. But above all it is something else, subtler and more substantial, of which this great machine is merely the shell and, as it were, a bait; something which I can only define as a unique atmosphere, penetrating and dense, in which all this luxuriance of violence and majesty is bathed; or again as a superhuman state towards which the souls finds itself invariably borne, in the line, in spite of the differences between sectors and

* in English in the text

and the vicissitudes of the fighting.

The unforgettable experience of the Front, in my view, is that of immense freedom.

At the first communications trench, the man going up to his sector lets fall the burden of social conventions. From the moment where civilian life ends, there ceases to be a difference between day and night. Instead of the commonplace alternation of getting up and going to bed, the man in the line sees nothing before him except a vast stretch of time full of the unexpected where sleep and meals are taken as circumstance and chance allow, without any fixed relationship with light and darkness. In the line, one washes when one can. One often sleeps in any odd place. All the constraints and the compartmentalisations of ordinary life collapse like a house of cards. It is curious to observe in oneself how much this casting-off of slavery delights the spirit. That may be a little rebellious perhaps, but right and noble if correctly understood.

Make no mistake. The slightly ironic "goodnight" of the infantryman to the dutiful orderly behind the lines is not only a farewell according to the regulations. It is the symbol and proclamation of an inner liberation from selfishness and narrowness of personality.

To go up the line, no one will contradict me, is to go up into peace.

As life at the rear fades away into the distance, the constricting, gnawing straitjacket of worries large and small - health, family, success, the future - sloughs away from the soul of itself like an old garment. The heart takes on a new skin. A higher or more urgent reality drives away and disperses the dust-storm of individual cares and servitudes. Going down again, one will perhaps find them crowding in again, importunately. For the moment they remain below one, like a mist. And I will not even try to explain the serenity of that region where the soul, saved from some terrible danger, finds time to notice what brilliant light that same danger lit in it.

I can still see myself as I was, in this peace, a fortnight ago.

It was at night, a clear calm night, in a sector of rough land cut through by ridges and swamps. The smell left by the last gas attack hung on the low ground under the poplars. Higher up, in the woods, a rustling could be heard at times, like that of a startled woodcock; a bomb falling to burst in a sudden fluffy star-scattered disintegration. And through it all the crickets never stopped chirping.

I was free, and I felt free.

I could, as it seemed good to me, walk in the moonlight,

pick any apples I found and then sleep in the first hole I came across. Everything that interested or worried me at the rear I still loved, but in a more controlled and slightly detached fashion. My life seemed more precious to me than ever; and yet I would have left it at that moment without regret, because I no longer belonged to myself. I was free, and relieved, even of myself. I felt myself endowed with an inexplicable lightness.

Precious as it was, this emancipation was still no more than the negative part, or the envelope, of a higher liberty which I will call positive. The air I was breathing was not only pure and subtle, it was full and sustaining - full and sustaining (a paradoxical phenomenon, but one which I can vouch for) through those very scents which hung, poisonous and suspect, in the high grasses among the wild mint, full and sustaining through these sudden explosions which periodically shook the calm of the night, full and sustaining through all the manifestations, hushed at that moment, of the immense human Presence which fills the Front.

I then found, by experience - through a favour rarely accorded to man down the centuries - that I could release the potential of my life unconstrainedly upon a palpable object! I could, at last, plunge into reality without danger of hitting the bottom; I could breathe earthly life in deeply without fear of running out of air!

How painful it is that one is so rarely faced with a task to accomplish wherein the soul can feel able to give itself wholly! However consoling and fortifying may be the viewpoints of faith and supernatural intention, which can extend and give unlimited value to the most humble act, they are not normally enough to replace experience as a stimulator and awakener of our faculties. That is why, in the setting of a dull life, many things sleep and suffer, hidden within us.

At the Front, the released power of Matter, the spiritual greatness of the conflict on hand, and the triumphant mastery of moral energy set free join with noble pride and the instinct for survival to pour a stirring mixture into the heart. A victorious conviction takes over, up there, that one can "go ahead," in terms of both heavenly and earthly action, with all one's strength and with all one's soul. All the springs of being can tense themselves. All kinds of courage are brought into play. For once, the human task reveals itself greater than our desires.

I maintain that in this relaxation, pursued to the point where the self is exhausted, lies the supreme freedom, the liberation of all the unknown aspirations and unquiet powers lying dormant in us, which we can often not develop for lack of scope. It must be so discouraging to die without having released them.

No, nothing but the Front can give me back ~~that~~ freedom which carried me away that September night. Not only does it seem, today, that I have returned from far, far away, but I have the impression of having lost a Soul, a Soul far greater than my own, that lives in the front line and which I left behind there.

One can only fully explain the emptiness and disenchantment of the most fervently-desired return to the rear in terms of these almost mystic considerations...

The Front is not only that sheet of flame where the opposing energies accumulated in enemy forces come to light and neutralize each other. It is at the same time a bond of special Life in which only those can participate who risk themselves in it, and that only so long as they remain there. When the individual has been admitted somewhere on the Sublime Surface, he positively experiences a new existence spreading over him and taking him over.

His individuality, to be sure, is secure. No conscious centre, distinct from his soul, appears to him. However, as soon as he takes his place on the hallowed periphery of the World in action, a personality of another order reveals itself within him, covering over and effacing the everyday man. The man at the Front acts on behalf of the whole Nation, and of all that is concealed behind the Nations. His personal activity and passivity are directly used to the benefit of an entity greater than his own in richness, and endurance, and future. He is no more than secondarily himself. He is, in the first place, a part of the piercing tool, an element of the prow cleaving the waves. He is that, and he feels it to be so.

An irresistible, pacifying realization comes to the man whom his country has destined for the fire, in the new and dangerous part he must play. Such a man has concrete evidence that he is no longer living for himself - that he is freed from himself - that Something other than himself is living in him and dominating him. I am not afraid to say that this special abandonment of individuality by which the combatant reaches some human essence higher than himself is the ultimate secret of the incomparable impression of freedom he feels, and which he will never again forget.

If each man observes himself closely when he goes up the line or, for that matter when, behind the lines, he sees the next imminent attack coming upon him like a tunnel about to swallow up his life, he will see a painful and continuous travail in the realm of his feelings, a sort of detachment produced inexorably by the growing imminence of D-day or zero hour. It is not exactly melancholy that spreads over things, it is rather a kind of indifference which makes the details of each individual life seem distant and drained of colour while the fundamental taste for definitive action grows more intense. - At Verdun, in the Citadel, during those days of unforgettable turmoil when, amid dust and shouting, rations, flares and grenades were being distributed pell-mell to those about to go up for the big push; and then a few hours later, in the course of the interminable night march, above Belleville and Froideterre, I often noticed in myself that searing, victorious detachment, followed at length by peace and exaltation in the sphere of the more-than-human as the soul became used to living there again.

It was the Spirit of the Front being reborn in me...

And why is it that when a man picks himself up, dusty but whole, after the explosion of a shell close by, he feels a joyful expansion of the heart, a lightness of the will, a new taste for life which no-one feels who has just missed falling under a train or been

grazed by a carelessly-fired bullet. Is it only the joy of "continuing to exist" which fills the souls of those who have escaped with their lives from the war, and makes their world young again? I think myself that the hitherto unknown savour of living that follows a narrow escape* comes above all from the profound insight that the existence which a man thus returns to, consecrated now by danger, is a new existence. The physical wellbeing which fills his soul at such a moment is a sign of the higher Life into which he has just been baptised. Among men, he who has been under fire is of a different species...

Not long ago, cutting across fields to get back to the lines (I was going Hurtebize way; the smoke rising from it was visible five kilometres away), I was suddenly stopped by a farmer who complained of my crossing his ploughland. The man was right to complain. But when I heard him, I felt an inner shock, a vertigo, as if I were falling from a great height... We looked like two similar beings, he and I. We spoke the same language. But he was confined within the individualistic preoccupations of a man belonging to the land. And I - I was living the life of the Front. Who has not felt, on leave, in the midst of people and things welcoming one as in the old days, that melancholy impression of being a stranger, or someone seeing things out of proportion, as if there were a great gulf fixed between oneself and other people, visible from one side only - and that side, of course, not theirs?

In truth, but for this new and superhuman spirit which comes to the aid of our own at the Front, the trials and sights seen there would be unbearable; and yet they seem quite simple; in fact they even leave behind an imperishable trace of plenitude and blossoming.

I maintain that there is a world of feelings which I would never have known or suspected had it not been for the war. No one who was not there can ever know the memory charged with wonder that a man may have of the plain of Ypres in 1915, when the Flanders air smelt of chlorine and the shells were cutting down the poplars along the Yperle; or of the burnt hills of Souville, in July 1916, when they smelt of death. These superhuman moments impregnate life with a lasting and definite breath of exaltation and initiation, as if they had been spent in the Absolute. In one's past, all the enchantments of the East, all the spiritual warmth of Paris, cannot compare in value with the mud of Douaumont.

And so when the peace comes that is so much longed-for by the nations (and by myself above all), something like a light will at once be extinguished upon earth. The war tore into the crust of banalities and conventions. A "window" opened on the secret mechanisms and deep levels of human development. A place came into being where men could breathe an air full of heaven. When peace comes, everything will be covered over again by the veil of monotony and mediocrity as before. Around Lassigny, for example, the areas evacuated by the enemy seem sad already, empty and uncertain, the life of the Front having moved on.

Happy, perhaps, those whom death took in the very act and

*in English in the text

atmosphere of war, when they were clothed with and animated by a responsibility, a consciousness, a freedom greater than their own, - when they were exalted to the very limit of the World - and close to God!

The others, the survivors of the Front, will always keep an empty place in their hearts so great that nothing visible can ever again fill it. To overcome their homesickness, they may tell themselves that, despite appearances, it is still possible to feel within themselves something of the life of the Front. They may be sure of it; the superhuman reality which manifested itself to them, among the shellholes and the wire, will never withdraw completely from the world once more at peace. It will always dwell there, even if more hidden. And that man will be able to recognize it, and to join himself with it, who gives himself to the tasks of daily life, no longer selfishly, as before, but religiously, with the knowledge that he is continuing, in God and for God, the great work of creation and sanctification of a Humanity which always comes to life at times of crisis, but which can never be fulfilled except in times of peace.

Night had fallen completely now on the Chemin des Dames. I got up to go back to the cantonments. And as I turned once more to look again a last time at the hallowed line, the warm and living line of the Front, I saw, in a flash of incomplete insight, this line take on the appearance of a greater Thing, something very noble, which I saw forming before my eyes, but which it would have taken a more perfect spirit than mine to master and comprehend. I thought then of those prodigiously great cataclysms which, in times past, only animals had witnessed. - And it seemed to me at that moment, in the presence of this Thing in process of evolution, that I was like an animal whose soul was awakening, who could see groups of connected realities without being able to grasp the link of that which they represented.

With the Forces.

Attached to the Sharpshooters.

September 1917

Translation

P. M. Gingell

May 1983

For Brian McRoy, with gratitude and all good
wishes

HOMESICKNESS FOR THE FRONT

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

from Ecrits du temps de la guerre 1916-1919