

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

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I FEEL some hesitation and find it difficult to overcome an acute sense of intrusion at the idea of writing for a musical magazine. Would I myself ever have admitted, in the pages of a review consecrated to poetry, the manifestation of refractory tendencies, hostile to poetry? Certainly not. There are to be found in the cult of any art necessary prejudices that are always on the alert to drive away the profane, and with even better reason, the scoffer. Whatever he may say in his defense he will be held guilty in the eyes of the faithful who could not very well admit extenuating circumstances because his crime, the most terrible of all if not immediately suppressed, is that of lèse-attraction.

It is, however, strangely disconcerting in these times of extreme specialization – which in itself holds so many perils – to hear even first rate thinkers, deserting their own fields of experience and investigation, discourse with assurance on a subject they know badly and that they do not feel. I remember, for example, the embarrassment I once felt at Paul Valéry's observations on cubist painting. Was it possible for intelligence, prudence, to say nothing of tolerance, to relish such complete abdication?

If I feel that I should disregard these powerful contraindications it is because I believe that, from the point of view of general knowledge, it is not without interest to go to the root of that antagonism which, to say nothing of my personal reaction, alienates from music most of the artists of language: meaning poets worthy of that name and a few prose writers who show a marked concern for verbal harmony.

Not to rely solely on my own observations which are of doubtful impartiality, I call upon testimony that could not be more positive, that of the Goncourt brothers: "After that Gautier jumped to the criticism of *The Queen of Sheba*. And as we admitted our incurable infirmity, our musical deafness – military music being the very limit of our musical appreciation – Gautier exclaimed, 'Indeed, it gives me great pleasure to hear you say that. I am just like you. I prefer silence to music. It is

true that, having lived part of my life with a primadonna, I can manage to tell good music from bad, but it is all the same to me. How curious that all the writers of our day are like that. Balzac detested music. Hugo can't bear it. Even Lamartine – himself a piano for sale or rent – has a horror of music. One finds only a few painters who have any taste for it.' ”* We know that Baudelaire and Mallarmé – the latter rather late in life – were exceptions to the rule expressed by Gautier, but, at least in France, nothing in the attitude of contemporary writers (the ones I have just specified) would indicate that it is not still valid. While only a few writers are violently hostile to music and exhibit a belligerent attitude, many others feel merely indifference or else treat it with a sort of polite amiability that has never, to my knowledge, gone so far as to make them inquire into its current problems nor fanatically defend it, as they have done for modern painting. In the last twenty years this antipathy has perhaps been still further accentuated by the fact that in Paris the cause of modern music acknowledged as its champion a notorious fake-poet, one of those versifiers whose role is to debase rather than to elevate everything he touches, who is therefore naturally recalcitrant to any melodious arrangement of words.

III

In spite of my diametrically opposite attitude toward poetry and music, due to my individual makeup, I have not renounced all objective judgment concerning them. Should I hold to the hierarchy proposed by Hegel, music by virtue of its aptitude to express ideas and emotions, would come immediately after poetry and would precede the plastic arts. But above all I am convinced that the antagonism which exists between poetry and music (affecting, apparently, poets much more than it does musicians) and which for some ears seems to have reached its height today, should not be fruitlessly deplored but, on the contrary, should be interpreted as an indication of the *necessity for a re-casting* of certain principles of the two arts. Here I am merely taking up again one of my favorite themes, namely: that we should never miss an opportunity “to take by the horns” all the antinomies presented by modern thought, in order first to protect ourselves from them, then to tame and overcome them. It is thus I have proved, I believe, that on the visual plane “physical and mental representation – which to the average adult seem radically opposed to each other – are to be considered as the results of the dissocia-

* Edmond et Jules de Goncourt: *Journal*, Volume 2.

tion of a *primitive single faculty* whose trace may still be found in savages and children."* It is this faculty that today we should contrive to re-create because the antagonism between perception and representation is a cause (among so many others) of apprehension and anxieties. The painter will fail in his human mission if he continues to widen the gulf separating representation and perception instead of working toward their reconciliation, their synthesis. In the same way, on the auditive plane, I believe that music and poetry have everything to lose by not recognizing a common origin and a common end in *song*, by letting the mouth of Orpheus get farther every day from the lyre of Thrace. Poet and musician will degenerate if they persist in acting as though these two forces were never to be brought together again.

Let it be understood that it is beyond my intention to ordain a closer collaboration between musician and poet. Certainly it would save us from all those "*poems set to music*" (that even make us prefer to have them left between the covers of a closed book) and would rid us of the silly nonsense of opera librettos. But such a suggestion implies a "reformist" attitude which is not mine. Here as elsewhere the evil is too great, the habit of dodging the issue too firmly rooted. Now only the most radical methods could hope for success. I shall abide by this, ambitious though it may be: that we must determine to *unify, re-unify hearing* to the same degree that we must determine to *unify, re-unify sight*.

Because of my complete ignorance of the laws governing musical composition, it is not for me to intimate how this re-unification of hearing may be effected. But I suppose anyone connected with music who possesses means equivalent to mine in poetry and in painting would be able to supplement me in that sense. Besides, the process of re-unification should not vary essentially for the different senses, so that it would be simple to transfer it from the visual, where at present it can be understood, to the auditive. For the first audible diamond to be obtained, it is evident that the fusion of the two elements — music and poetry — into one, could only be accomplished at a very high emotional temperature. And it seems to me that it is in the expression of the passion of love that both music and poetry are most likely to reach this supreme point of incandescence.

III

Never, to the same extent as in surrealist writing, have poets so relied on the *tonal* value of words. The negativist attitudes aroused by instrumen-

* *Point du Jour*: Le Message Automatique.

tal music seem to have found compensation here. In the matter of language nothing has captivated, still captivates, surrealist poets so much as that peculiar tendency of words to form themselves into curious chains in order dazzlingly to reveal themselves – and always at the moment one least expects them. What surrealist poets have wanted, beyond all else, was to bring these chains out of the dark places where they form, to make them brave the light of day. And what has made them accept these verbal groupings without changing them, even when, to the consternation of the reader, they seemed contrary to the sense – the immediate sense – or to do violence to that sense, was that their structure showed the inevitable aspect of musical concatenation, and that the words composing them were grouped according to unaccustomed but deeper affinities. "The words have stopped playing," I could say when I discovered these. "The words are making love." I had already discerned that thus organized and defying, to a certain extent, narrow reason – always plunged in its myopic calculations of "debits" and "credits" – they constituted the very vehicle of affectivity. Of such words Taine has said, "Our whole past life is stored up in them and through them is brought back to us."* The "inner word" that surrealist poetry has chosen to make manifest and that it has succeeded, whether we like it or not, in establishing as a recognizable means of exchange between certain men, is absolutely inseparable from "inner music" by which, very probably, it is cradled and conditioned. How could it be otherwise since the inner word, as it is registered by "automatic writing" is subject to the same acoustical conditions of rhythm, pitch, intensity and timbre as the outer word, although to a lesser degree? In that it is the effectual opposite of the expression of controlled thought which has kept no organic contact with music and only uses it occasionally as a luxury. But above all, being independent of the social and moral obligations that limit spoken and written language, inner thinking is free to tune itself to the "inner music" *which never leaves it*. I have already protested against the designation of "visionary" being lightly applied to poets. Great poets have been "auditives" not visionaries. At least, with them, vision, "illumination," is the effect and not the cause. I take Lautréamont literally in the following: "*Come now music.*"† Yes, good people, it is I who command you, on a spade reddened in the fire, to burn with brown sugar the duck of doubt with vermouth lips . . .‡ These things, I believe, were only seen after they had been heard. This is what I meant when I wrote: "In poetry verbo-auditive automatism has

* Taine: *Essais de critique et d'histoire*.

† Italics mine.

‡ Isidore Ducasse (conte de Lautréamont: *Poésies*.)

always seemed to me the creator for the reader of visual images far surpassing in exaltation the visual images created for the reader by verbo-visual automatism."* Thinking that for painters it might be otherwise, I then tried to provoke their testimony on this point, but their avarice in the matter of confidences is well known.

It is evident then that poets, in spite of their lack of comprehension, have gone a long way on the only road that, in such times as these, is great and sure; that of a return to principles. This I should like to point out to musicians. However, for want of a common vocabulary, perhaps I will be unable to measure *their* steps toward those who with them, in order to revive it, must share some of the virgin soil of sound.

Translated by Louise Varèse

* *Point du Jour*, Le Message Automatique