

When
we are
truly
in love,
we love

what we love without knowing we are in love, and that is how it should be. It is even the best, I would say the strongest, the most enduring, and the most authentic way to love. And when all is said, the only way. We become one body with the object of our love. Later we discover reasons why. It is a way of justifying our love, and love does not care much for our justifications. Love has no need of being justified. It has only one thing to justify it – its own existence. Enough that it is. That explains everything.

Here then is our starting point, not with giving reasons for a passing emotion, but with the pleasure of stating our love, and there is nothing more exalting than this. It is a source of life itself.

For it awakens, attracts, expands, broadens, lifts, and ultimately admits into the universal Love what until then seemed only to be able to manifest itself in a quite individual body, a limited setting, a circumscribed state of one's being,

while the object of one's love, before awakening to the knowledge that it is loved, was quite caught up in the order and beauty of the world. Modest or vast, there it had its part. There is no heart that beats only for itself. The humblest one feels the throbbing of the soul that beats at the heart of the Universe.

Before speaking of the love that I feel for my native land, I have been eager to make clear by this preliminary declaration that this is not a matter of some commonplace feeling of tenderness. Facile sentimentality has nothing to do with it. For to love Provence requires a steadfast heart. This I know by experience. Provence is a mother, and there can be few others that as mothers demand so much. She is sometimes so sensitive that she gets irritated when we laud her clumsily. Alas, all too often we do! Even her sons may wound her if, for the sake of gratifying the ignorance or even the malice of those who are not born of her soil, they present features that grotesquely mask her beautiful, pure face, where the firm hand of an intelligent demiurge has modelled in minimal clay just enough for the job – the presence of a fullness of spirit.

So I have loved my native Provence in the way I have just mentioned, that is to say at first without knowing what I was doing.

Yet I was born on the banks of the Rhône, no mean river the Rhône, uniting the Alps with the sea in a torrent of strength. Then I spent my childhood at the confluence of that major river and a wild river, the Durance which, flowing from the same mountainous massif, drives an icy current into the side of the mother river. A sacred marriage of the rivers that was sometimes dramatic with the rains of November and in springtime with the thawing snows. Anyone who is born at this confluence is destined in his blood to carry the scent and keenness of these waters pouring headlong from the mountains.

That today, I have come to know, but as a child I was not aware of it.

The only emotion I recall, as I think on these two wild creatures, is the fear that they inspired in me.

My parents wisely kept me away from their banks. I was forbidden to go near them. If I went nevertheless – behind their

backs, being born inquisitive and secretive by nature – every time it was with trembling, and I never came upon those waters through the reeds or the willows on their banks, waters that were truly dangerous, without vowing to myself that I would never come back.

And I did go back.

Already I had fallen in love with what filled me with terror, and if the terror overlay the love, though I was unaware of it, love did not cease to increase.

It was a kind of love that takes deep root. And for that I provide good soil. The roots plunged deep, but it was a long time later, perhaps half a century later, that I felt in myself their extensive inroads that demanded a time of fruit-bearing.

And one fine day, of necessity, the fruit came. It is entitled *The Boy and the River*. So I discovered, tardily no doubt, that the boy I had been still lived on in me as a mature and even overripe man, and still loved the noblest waters of the old native country.

This simple story is the payment of a debt of gratitude. And now, having reached fullness of years, I know that I owe to these waters, the living waters of my childhood, the ability still to sense the grandeur of great rivers. *Malicroix* is the song that I have dedicated to them.

Diis sacrum omnibus votum libenter dico.

And what about the town, you ask me? What about Avignon? You were born there, under the tower of the Carmelites. Isn't that a stroke of fortune?

An illustrious town, the most monumental town of France, raising against the back-drop of the river, its islands, and a famous bridge, the colossal fortress which for three quarters of a century was the very head of Christendom!

Churches, palaces, monasteries, chapels, and ramparts still bear testimony to that past. Surely that is something that must have left its mark on you?...

Indeed it did make a very deep impression, but strange it seems, that the impression received was not at first so noticeable as it ought perhaps to have been.

To the child and to the growing youth brought up in its shadow, such monumental grandeur becomes a familiar presence.

You are rich, you do not know it, and you go on your way...

Basically I did not see Avignon, I lived there. A commonplace blindness that is not the product of indifference but merely the effect of custom.

Yet still I loved my native town, but it took a jolt, an unexpected jolt to reveal it to me. The jolt of a departure from it.

When I was about fifteen, I had in fact to leave it for three months. I awoke to find myself borne away into a little town in the Alps. It was just like all of them are, and I do not want to speak ill of it. I owe it a lot. For straight away I was very unhappy, devilishly unhappy, so unhappy I wept, unhappy at seeing before me a landscape that had nothing to say to me, with its dark valley, its mountain that blocked out the sky, and all about me a race of people (surely no worse than I) but whose words, gestures, feelings, thoughts, and minds were painfully foreign to me. I knew that I was being unfair, but I had been deprived of a love, and there is only one such love, as we then discover. I realised that I had been wrenched apart from my mother. Then I began to love her desperately and in full consciousness.

So much and so well did I love her that post-haste I had to decamp from the Alps and get myself back to the Durance, back to the Monclar neighbourhood, a flat region, but one that immediately struck as me as the most beautiful place on earth. Ah! when I saw it again, what a genuine delight it was, and what a happy chance! for it was filled with the joy of a fine Sunday, wonderful Palm Sunday. *Hosanna in altissimis!... Et caedebant ramos de arboribus!*... It is since that day that I love this Sunday above all others. Before it had never occurred to me. And whoever saw, in those beautiful years, the Festival of Palms in Avignon retains the savour of the event for the rest of his life. He will know what I mean. For me Avignon is the quintessential town of Palm Sunday. The boughs are blessed with the living waters of the Rhône, palms or olive branches, on the square before the Popes' Cathedral. An ancient papacy, our very own, felt to be the friendliest of them all, more paternal too than the Roman one, a papacy in accord with our character, one that calls for simple good-heartedness.

The irruption of this passionate emotion, if it revealed to me what I had been unaware of within myself, a filial love that was all the more ardent for having been so tardily recognised, led me into a good many other discoveries. Fate determined that I should reside for three years in Tuscany and Umbria, at Florence, Siena, Pisa, and Assisi, where still quite young, about eighteen years of age, I saw, admired, and understood what well-constructed towns and harmonious character (man being the worker of this harmony) offered that was rare, moving, solid and gracious, and above all inspiring, in the way of mental achievements. And in the spiritual realm, what could be of a higher plane? From that sojourn, when I returned home to Provence, I brought with me a new way of looking at things. I saw in what I loved the reason why I loved it. In my town I found a replica of that Italy so close to us, and I ranked Avignon as highly as the most illustrious Italian cities, but with the addition of one wonder extra: the presence of a major river, my river, a river whose size, torrential power, and imperial function outclassed all the rivers of Italy.

It has to be said, because it is true.

That did not prevent me, from that time, pairing in my mind the two Latin countries.

"Latin sanguine gentile," sang Petrarch.

When I was about twenty, I even wrote a thesis in which I studied the intellectual relations in the fourteenth century between the Avignon papacy, renowned for its learning, and Italy which had filled Avignon with its children. Among the Florentines alone, eight hundred families were numbered. Among this intellectual movement it is Petrarch who ranks as the most glorious personality. What's more, he was in love with Laura. But he was ungrateful. He had nothing good to say about Avignon. It was a second Babylon. For that I have never forgiven him.

But it is not Avignon that awoke me to this vaster love in which I embraced all of Provence.

It was born of a first glance when, still a boy, I opened my eyes by chance and saw on the horizon a bluish chain of hills.

All around us, in the countryside, we saw only cultivated fields. There the vegetable was king in a multitude of little kitchen gardens. From them there emanated only the smells of

vegetables. It was useless for people to tell me with an air of satisfaction that these fertile luxuriant places were our Provençal Normandy, for what had I to do with this Normandy? Each to his own. It is a miracle that much later I was able, in spite of all, to admire all the rich pastures of Normandy, in the place itself. At heart I love the dry land, even very dry land, and as a child I grew up in a moist environment. It saddened me and through it I have kept an ingrained hostility against the percolating waters that our garden was saturated by.

In order to forget this market-garden moisture and to find space to breathe, I would go up into my room where the window, looking out towards the south, permitted my gaze to run far away, towards that visible south marked by hills, and to imagine a South even more distant, a land beyond...

For what I saw with rapture was the chain of Alpilles, and everybody knows that there are no hills in the world more favourably disposed towards flights of fancy.

More distant than I can remember, what I contemplated with the liveliest pleasure, and ever-heightened pleasure, was that jagged wall of crystal stones the living crests of which called me away, and I well devined it was the sea...

There, at first sight love came to me, and as yet I did not know with what future spells this scenery of such pure limpidity was charged. For, between it and me, there lived an old village and in this village a man, Mistral, and in this man, the whole of Provence.

At that time I had a school-master, Aristide de C... who, at the lycée, taught us literature. An unforgettable master, to whom I am indebted for having read Theocritus and Virgil as if they had spoken Provençal. For sometimes Aristide would lead out the whole class of ten or twelve pupils to the south of Avignon, towards Barbentane, up the Little Mountain, as far as the convent of Saint-Michel-de-Frigoulet. We would always stop beneath the olive trees and there, sitting on a stump, we would read either the *Thalysia*, or the 4th canto of the *Georgics*, sometimes conjuring up Simichidas and Ceres, sometimes the ploughed fields, the ploughs, the time of seed-sowing, and one evening (how could I forget it?) poor Orpheus! and Eurydice...

"Forever, forever goodbye... An endless night encircles me and bears me off...

I stretch out to you my powerless hands..."

*"Jamque vale, feror ingenti circumdata nocte,
Invalidasque tibi tendens heu! non tua palmas..."*

Ever since then, I have not ceased to stretch out those hands so often futile and distressing. The great Orphic myth has never ceased to haunt my spirit and to trouble my heart.

Greece, Rome, and Provence, intimately blended together, have no longer been for me anything but one single thought. I ask myself if this meeting, in an olive grove burnt beneath the sun, of a Provençal youth and the most dramatic couplet of Virgilian verse did not reveal to me, for my bliss, that double genius of the race to whom I have offered the little that I have been able to, and which so many times has repaid me for it a hundred fold. Could it simply be for the special favour of knowing what privileges the place of my birth had endowed me with?

There are from time to time certain events, quite simple events, that bring illumination. This one was for me an illumination. This Provence already so much loved and already so much endangered, was she not like a Eurydice, whom we must not at any price lose?... Happily, one could look at her. And even that was what one had to do.

I was doing that, that evening, in the midst of those olive trees. I turned my gaze towards the plain. The night had not yet fallen there, but already there could be seen rising from the solitary farm-houses the first whiffs of smoke. Thick protecting walls of cypress stretched in lines, towards the north, all around Maillane. And we went on listening to Aristide...

"It's over there," he said, "where our Homer lives."

Homer?... And why not?...

We did not think he was exaggerating.

This happened about 1902, in the month of April, if my memory is correct. And I was burning to go and see our Homer.

You will understand what I mean.

But it was only possible four years later. Then, still led by the inestimable Aristide, I was admitted in very simple fashion to the presence of the poet.

I was certainly very excited. In those days a boy of my age could be excited in the presence of a great man. For we admitted without any difficulty that there were great men. For me such a man was Mistral. I had read *Mireille*, in the original language of course, and I was entranced by it. Aristide had something to do with it. In class, ten lines of Latin or Greek could not be explained without his reading as many or even more of Aubanel or Roumanille, but above all of Mistral, *Les Iles d'or*, *Calendal*, and *le Poème du Rhône*. Wonderfully eloquent readings accompanied by noble gestures... And, believe me, our class didn't dare move a muscle. Our class was lost in wonder.

In my case, what is more, my parents spoke to each other most of the time only in Provençal. The best Provençal.

In this way I had been well prepared for these enthusiasms. Already the words were warm in my mouth...

Yet, what happened was something quite different.

First I saw in the doorway a tall old man wearing a frock coat. Imagine, he had come out to the doorway in order to welcome us.

Quiet and erect, very tall, and straight away affable in his manner. Yet I was only a child, or not much more. So he welcomed me in a fatherly way.

He directed me towards an armchair and took his own seat between Aristide and myself.

Throughout the whole duration of our visit, that lasted for more than an hour, he steadfastly kept himself from talking, however little, about himself. I remained silent and was in fact struck quite speechless. But what could I say, and how could I even dare to open my mouth?... doubtless he enjoyed praise. Quite naturally. So what did he think of me? But later I got to know through my teacher, again through Aristide, that he had been more touched by my silence than by any words I might have been able to speak.

They would inevitably have been clumsy ones.

Yet he himself did speak. What did he talk about?... Poetry?... Not at all!... He spoke about Pius X, the pope, from whom he read a long and affectionate birthday telegram in which

moreover, oddly, this good pope asked him if he had been to Easter mass...

Next he read us a letter from Leconte de Lisle. It was about an oar, the oar of Ulysses, which was exactly the same as that wooden shovel that was then in use in Provence when the corn was threshed on the threshing floor.

Aristide looked at me, delighted. Just think! the oar of Ulysses! and as he looked at me I thought what he too was thinking: "Homer is speaking to us about Homer..."

Then Mistral served us a glass of wine. As he poured it out, he said to us, "Mr. Mariani made it, Mariani, in Corsica. At Christmas I always receive a good crate of it... A good custom, what!... And he's a pleasant man..."

As we stood up to leave, I saw that he was a good head taller than me.

He seemed very handsome to me and still standing firmly with his two feet on the earth; but his look ran much farther off, passing high up above our heads.

He accompanied us as far as the road and there, he spoke gently to me: "Laddy, don't forget your mother Provence. She still needs children of courage..."

And he touched my shoulder.

A friendly, concluding gesture, the unction and the seal.

Since then I have never been able to separate the image of this tall old man from my image of Provence.

And all my life that has proved a blessing to me.

Such it was, sixty-four years ago, one summer's afternoon, that simple meeting.

For it was indeed simple. That is what has made it unforgettable to me.

And now, having said all that I have said, for good or bad, what is there yet to say?

Of love, I have related how it had dwelt in my heart almost without my knowing it, how it had germinated there, how it had taken root there, how, having grown into the light of day, it had nourished me. As for what it is, trying to define it, what does it matter? It is, and that is all that matters.

Yet perhaps I have still to make clear what it has given to me. So, if you wish, I will clarify...

I suppose it has given me what I was myself.

Still a secret, perhaps a miracle, but there is nothing else in this land. You cannot take a step in it without hearing the echo of a mystery reverberating within yourself. So, in order to learn more of it than the outward appearance offers, would it not be best to look at it?

But you must look at it for a long time, with faith in your heart, for it requires faith, and no trite faith that smugly finds satisfaction in its picturesque quality.

Without faith, the land remains silent. Moreover, it is a strange land. It has its way of replying which is not always easy to understand.

You begin to hear it speak when you have learnt how to choose a site from which it loves you to contemplate it. Then it listens, murmurs, and speaks, always with discretion as befits its character. I know this, I'm used to it.

I have a favoured site in which these exchanges are possible. It faces the Luberon, on the side of a hill where my *bastidon* is built, a modest dwelling. It is hardly visible in the midst of the trees, cypresses, oaks, and pines, above hundreds of olive trees and some knotted vine-stocks. Lower down in a hollow is the village of Lourmarin. Such is the disposition of this site.

I look as usual at my horizon. It is bright. The weather is fine, a gentle, airy sort of weather. The quince tree gives forth its fragrance. The air carries the bitter-sweet scents of fruits. A rocky path goes down from the *bastidon* to the Collongues road and there passes along it a cart that is still drawn by a mule, the last one in the land, alas! Steep and unfriendly, my path. But I love its harsh dryness.

Above me rises my hill. Up there the lavender grows.

Opposite, the hillocky massif of ancient Luberon rises slowly, a solemn mountain.

For in our land of Provence things as well as animate beings have a moral character. So these distant Alpilles (that I espy to the south of my hill), do they not express by the sweep of their ridges and their crystal-clear translucency, a lively and spirited

train of thought? They are intelligence itself.

By contrast, our Luberon suggests more than it actually reveals. It is absorbed in a meditation brooding since the dawn of time over some sombre mineral dream. A dream that is always unfinished, but wanders underground seeking for an outlet, a cave, a mouth where its immemorial desire to speak may perhaps tell you what it knows of the world into which its stone roots sink. It retains the mind of the earth's original depths.

For me there is no doubt that here all things seem engaged in thought and all things speak. Here in my own land, there passes from matter into the blood the wave of an identical magnetic soul. It intermingles with and grants to this human life, noticeably distinct from non-human things, the very life of things, silently infiltrating the fibres of human life and bringing it nourishment. At least, here, that is what becomes perceptible to anyone who can attain the sense of imposing spectacle that this mountain offers, at first sight so definable and yet, as one goes deeper, so mysterious...

There, from the shadows where the spring draws its water that in the open air becomes limpid and familiar, to the woods where soft and tearful voices speak in the wind, all things are full of meaning.

There is nothing seen and nothing heard, nothing breathes and nothing is felt that does not religiously incline us toward the gravity of a thought that has been long worked over and defined.

It is a land of slumbering gods that the least breath of air, the slightest movement of the soil may sometimes stir from seeming rest. There in the very heart of things they have found their sleeping places. A sleep that is visited by those dreams that, without reaching the level of speech, murmur what was perhaps at the time of creation the first human thought. Whatever man is taught to wait for and hear this indefinable language, god, from the depths of his sleep, calls to a reverence toward oak trees, rocks, caves, and hidden waters. He is called by the god to respect the places of solitude.

So, before this aspect of my land, there runs a train of thought that is brotherly.

Where most people generally see only scenery, where they

are touched only by colours and shapes, where just possibly they admire the play of light and shadow on the swellings and hollows, I always imagine the presence of a living being.

You see what is there, they say, but what is there, isn't it only that?

But that is all too facile. For this Provence that so many hasty or superficial travellers imagine they know because they see its shining outer face, and nothing more, is it not like the mountain before which I dream, at the same time just what they discover of it – which delights them – and what always escapes the trifling gaze of passers-by?

Pleasantly, not too high in the air, commonplace ideas hang over what is called Provence. This is the scenic aspect.

But one must go beyond scenery to reach the soul, from the Provence that is seen to an invisible Provence.

It is everywhere, in the landscapes, in the monuments, and in the people. For if you consider closely each of these, you come in the end to the conclusion that it is a single architecture that underpins and links them.

It is the very essence of Provence.

All this might appear pure fiction or some imagined mystery. But it is not that at all. Other provinces are immediately accessible because they conspicuously offer the characteristics that reveal their soul, and have no concern to hide anything.

In Provence where people are often excessively modest and where they are so courteous as to present only what may please the passer-by (who sometimes passes judgement on it), people also have a liking and even a strange habit of not allowing anything to be seen of the old, sometimes tragic dreams whose presence nevertheless haunts the land and the people.