Advice to a Young Poet

Max Jacob

Advice to a Young Poet

Conseils à un jeune poète

Translated from French
and introduced by John Adlard

with a preface by Edmond Jabès
and an afterword by Jacques Evrard
translated by John Adlard

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Preface

Max Jacob: Man of the Secret

The last message I sent to Max Jacob, in February 1944, via the Apostolic Delegation in Cairo, where I lived – twenty-five words of affection and concern – was returned to me with a note on the back: *Deceased.*

What remains is the future,
Not the present which breaks my heart.

The future, for Max, is today; for thirty years it has been every day; for a long time yet it will be tomorrow; for his work holds us ceaselessly, and largely by just what eluded the best of his contemporaries: that is to say, by the seriousness of Play.

'The voices said to me *na*, which means *secret* in Hebrew,' he had written in the *Défense de Tartuffe.*

Man of the secret and not of a legend, Max Jacob, though careful of the legend, is intent on piercing the mystery of an existence dedicated to Heaven and Hell.

There is always a beyond – or a within – lived or to be lived, in the least significant sentences of his work. Poetry transfigures them. Poetry, that permanent mystery into which enter all mysteries.

Extremes, extravagances nourished by humour, disarming excesses controlled or uncontrolled are ridges enumerated on the horizon: no doubt difficult passages towards God; for God, who became the centre of his meditation from the famous night when Christ appeared to the poet, is also the pace which precedes the pace on his road.

Situating himself with regard to God and language, that was his constant care.

He writes for the benefit of Marcousis: 'We are inexpressible simple fellows and I wish *you* to express yourself by something … which hardly expresses you, but with luck expresses something which isn't you but expresses something of you.' *[Rivage]*

In the possibility which is given us to speak dwells the impossibility of expressing ourselves.

To express with luck something which isn't oneself but expresses something of oneself, that is the aim of all creation The work is its revelation.

Haunted by suicide – had he not written, as early as 1919: 'Quarrels, the growth of insatiable pride, all intoxications do not silence the secret and obsessive idea of suicide'? – and as if he had constantly to redeem himself by destroying himself, he advanced towards the death reserved for him by the yellow star sewn on his jacket: a death glimpsed time and time again.

Edmond Jabès

INTRODUCTION

It was in June 1941, less than three years before his death in the Nazi camp at Drancy, that Max Jacob wrote *Advice to a Young Poet* in an exercise book bought at a grocer's, and presented it to Jacques Evrard of Montargis, a student of medicine, eighteen years old.[1] Marcel Béalu gave an account of this episode in his preface when he edited the text in 1945. Now, for the first time, as an afterword to this translation, the 'young poet' himself offers a different account.

In *Advice to a Young Poet* Max sets out to answer a question posed by the young man's father: 'What is a lyrical line?' It is his last major statement on poetry, the final development of the thinking of twenty-five years. 'Men used to believe,' he wrote in the 1916 preface to *Le Cornet à Dés*, 'that artists are inspired by angels and that there are different categories of angels.' By 1941, after the years of prayer and contemplation at Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, this is no longer what 'men used to believe', but a fact in the interior life of a poet, the interior life without which a poet cannot be permeable. Only in a mind that is permeable is that conflagration possible ('the conflagration,' he called it in his *Art Poétique* of 1922,[2] 'after the encounter of a harmonious man with himself') which produces the lyrical line, the 'consecrated line' identified by its euphoria and its euphony. Permeability is a condition of both thought and feeling, yet poetry has nothing to do with ideas. However, ideas 'cease to be ideas if you feel them with passion, with experience, if you transform them into feelings.' This is almost the axiom in *Art Poétique*: 'One thinks well with ideas become forces of conviction or feeling.'[3] One must also describe with passion, and to do this one must study syntax, one must know every possibility of syntactic variation. In letters to

Jean Rousselot Max gave the same advice and praised the 'varied syntax' of Verlaine.[4]

The conflagration which produces the 'consecrated line' gives density, linguistic density, which is a sign of maturity, of major writing, of essential seriousness. Nineteen years before, in *Art Poétique*, he described that linguistic density as 'the principal charm of the 17th Century' and something no one cared much for today.[5] The vital paradox lies in the fact that, despite the primacy of seriousness, 'art is a game – so much the worse for anyone who makes a duty of it.' This is what the theologian Hugo Rahner urges us to understand. 'A true and full human being,' he writes, 'must be a creature of light-hearted, carefree play, a creature whose play is filled with the spirit and is, for that very reason, serious.'[6] And Max, too, tells his young poet to be a true human being, to be a Christian, to be a man, to be a poet-man, that is, a permeable man. The creator of sublime literature must be himself sublime. That does not mean sermons; the great comic writers are also sublime. 'Max had a great comic gift,' Picasso, in his old age, told his young mistress, recalling Montmartre days when Max and he were theatre-lovers ejected for eating sausages and Max could always make him laugh with monologues or with dialogues in which he took each part.[7]

In 1917 Max wrote to Jacques Doucet: 'You have already understood, dear sir, that I abhor naturalism, realism…'[8] Now, in 1941, he tells us to be realists, but qualifies this. We should be realists who are permeable. Unlike most realists he believes firmly in inspiration, in angels good and bad. He echoes St. John's warning: 'Beloved, believe not every spirit…' He also believes that the poet performs an act of magic, and he expects Jacques Evrard to believe so. The scope of that magic was clearly explained to Jacques Doucet twenty-four years before; it was what Max called the 'situation' of a work of art. 'I understand by situation,'

he wrote, 'that kind of magic which separates a work (even a pictorial or musical work) from the lover of art, that kind of transplantation which makes the work set your feet in another universe." In *Art Poétique*, 1922, a situated work was 'a work surrounded by silence'.[10]

To believe in inspiration is not to strike a passive attitude; the poet must be like Rockefeller, intent on making a fortune from every object he touches. He should never read mediocrities. Yet in the nineteen-twenties Yvon Belaval found Max reading the verses of Joséphin Soulary, to 'set himself going', as Bach 'set himself going by playing the music of mediocre composers.'[11] A poet should never be bored, unless it is the positive boredom of a Byron, which is fertile ground. As long ago as 1922, in his little *Art Poétique*, he was considering different kinds of boredom.[12]

'Love a word,' he tells Jacques Evrard. 'Repeat it. Gargle with it.' Seventeen years before, in a letter to Jean Grenier, he recommended 'verbal sensuality.'[13] 'You must read the dictionary,' he told Belaval in 1927. 'Each day I read Larousse. How many astonishing words that we don't know or that we forget. You take a word, you break it, you turn it over, you turn it over again.'[14] Now he tells Jacques Evrard that round a word a line, a strophe coagulate. That is exteriorisation. He insists (as he did in that letter to Jean Grenier in 1924) that poetry must be concrete. 'The abstract is bad and boring.' He told Grenier 'not to be afraid of the word which strikes, which colours, which, above all, makes concrete, which synthesises.'[15] 'Avoid clichés,' he urged Armand and Lucienne Salacrou in the same year.[16] Now, in 1941, he recognises that, although the poet is not a man of clichés, he must use some for fear of being incomprehensible.

He tells Jacques Evrard: 'Exteriorising is everything.' Yet he admits that each has his own method; the point of departure may be erudition, the observation of human life, or a single word repeated with love. But how few

works are really exteriorised! 'With Balzac it's always Balzac speaking.' But Musset in his comedies exteriorises, and so does Shakespeare.

On style Max quotes the rather hackneyed words of Buffon: 'Style is the man' – as he quoted them in 1916, in the preface to *Le Cornet à dés*. Then he commented that this meant a writer must write with his blood, adding that the definition seemed to him 'salutary' but 'not exact.' Style was 'the will to exteriorise oneself by chosen means.' But in 1941 he seems more satisfied with Buffon's axiom, explaining it as meaning' 'what is most profound in the breast and blood of man.' In 1916 he was anxious to distinguish style from situation; now it is development that he stresses. 'Develop,' he says. 'All art, of whatever kind, is in that word.' And as a preliminary exercise one should write plenty of pastiches, in order not to write them unintentionally, This was an exercise which always pleased Max. Yvon Belaval remembered him improvising Hugoesque verses with great gusto more than a decade earlier.[17]

Max has little enthusiasm for youthful success; it is mostly an embarrassment in later years. There is no need to be in a hurry, no need to catch the spirit of the age before it fades, anything worth saying being eternal and the spirit of the age mere fashion. 'Abhor fashion,' Max told the Salacrous in 1925. 'Love only that fashion you create."[18] Hard work is the first requirement and there are three conditions of work: separation, silence and ignorance – by which last he implies astonishment, which means candour, and 'candour is the road to all discoveries in art as in science.' And part of that hard work is the taking of notes. Otherwise the loss is incalculable. Yvon Belaval received the same advice when he left for America in 1930.[19] So much for work – the essential gift, he wrote to Marcel Béalu a few months before *Advice to a Young Poet*, is 'the gift of love and sorrow.'[20] This was not a passing thought; it is repeated in verse:

On the walls of Edinburgh
So much sorrow
Is espoused to so much love
That your courser Poetry
Wears a veil of black tonight.[21]

John Adlard

Notes

[1] In his Gallimard edition, Marcel Béalu always refers to the 'young poet' as 'J.E.' Among others, René Plantier (*Max Jacob*, Paris, 1972, p. 11) has stated that *Conseils à un jeune poète* was written 'for the poet, Edmond Jabès', Even before we learned the identity of 'J.E.' from Marcel Béalu, Edmond Jabès informed us that M. Plantier's statement was not correct. Jacques Evrard is now [1976] a surgeon.
[2] P. 26.
[3] P. 11.
[4] Jean Rousselot: *Max Jacob: L'homme qui faisait penser à Dieu*, Paris, 1946, pp. 113, 179.
[5] P. 28.
[6] Hugo Rahner: *Man at Play*, translated by Brian Battershaw and Edward Quinn, London, 1965, pp. 3, 4.
[7] Genevieve Laporte: *Sunshine at Midnight*, translated by Douglas Cooper, London, 1975, pp. 5, 6.
[8] François Garnier, editor; Max Jacob, *Correspondance*, Volume 1, Paris, 1953, p. 133.
[9] Garnier, p. 132.
[10] P. 28.
[11] Yvon Belaval: *La Rencontre avec Max Jacob*, Paris, 1946, page 29.
[12] Pp. 19, 20.
[13] Max Jacob: *Lettres à un ami. Correspondance, 1922–1933*, avec Jean Grenier, Lausanne, 1951, p. 41.
[14] Belaval, p. 27.

[15] *Lettres à un ami*, p. 41.
[16] Max Jacob: *Lettres aux Salacrou*, 1923–1926, Paris, 1957, p. 65.
[17] Belaval, p. 29.
[18] *Lettres aux Salacrou*, p. 109.
[19] Belaval, pages 32, 33.
[20] Max Jacob: *Lettres à Marcel Béalu*, Lyon, 1959, p. 211.
[21] 'Angoisses et autres.'

CONSEILS
À UN JEUNE POÈTE

ADVICE
TO A YOUNG POET

J'ouvrirai une école de vie intérieure, et j'écrirai sur la porte: école d'art.

*

La vie intérieure est le discernement des esprits extérieurs, les discussions de la Raison avec ceux-ci. Les anges sont inégalement qualifiables, or que dire des démons? *Mais la voix de Dieu n'est pas celle de la Poésie.* Les génies ne sont pas Dieu bien qu'ils aient été créés par Lui. Apprenez donc à discerner ces voix inspiratrices et faites qu'en vous Dieu les domine. D'abord exercez-vous à Dieu, car c'est le meilleur fond de tableau, l'unique fond de tableau. Trouvez Dieu d'abord.

*

Le résultat premier de la vie intérieure est le nous rendre *perméable.* Un poète imperméable ne fera que des œuvres superficielles.

*

On peut se demander si toute poésie n'est pas autre chose que superficialité.

Je réponds «oui». C'est dommage. Mais on peut se demander à soi-même d'essayer autre chose. En tout cas ne vivront que les œuvres non superficielles, je veux dire celles qui, ayant l'apparence du superficiel, ont *passé par le gouffre du sérieux.*

Donc soyez d'abord *perméable,* c'est-à-dire sérieux.

*

I shall open a school of interior life and I shall write on the door *Art School.*

*

Interior life is distinguishing between exterior spirits, is Reason's discussions with them. Angels are not to be ranked equally, so what can you say of devils? *But the voice of God is not the voice of Poetry.* Geniuses are not God although they have been created by Him. Learn then to distinguish between these voices of inspiration and see that in you God controls them. First pray to God, the best background, the only background. Find God first.

*

The first result of interior life is to make us *permeable.* An impermeable poet will produce only superficial works.

*

It may be wondered whether all poetry is nothing but superficiality.

My reply is 'Yes'. It's a pity. But one can ask oneself to try something else. In any case only those works will live which are not superficial, I mean those which, for all their appearance of superficiality, have *passed through the abyss of the serious.*

First of all, then, be *permeable,* that is to say, serious.

*