

PETRKOV, GRENOBLE, MOUX... THROUGH WAR AND COMMUNISM, FOUR POETS WRITE TO EACH OTHER

Today our small publishing house, Romarin, presents its eighteenth book¹: the bilingual French-Czech edition of the letters exchanged between the Czech poet Bohuslav Reynek, his French wife the poet Suzanne Renaud and two of their friends, the French poets Jean Lebrau and Andrée Appercelle. This literary correspondence complements the epistolary exchange between Renaud and Henri Pourrat, published in 2001. All the original texts are in French, Reynek having written to his friends in their own language.

We enjoyed bringing these four poets together. Three of them were contemporaries born around 1890. A native of Lyon, Renaud moved to Grenoble at the age of five and lived at 9 rue Lesdiguières. Lebrau was born in Moux, in the Aude, twenty-five kilometres from Carcassonne, and Reynek in Petrkov in eastern Bohemia. Appercelle was born thirty-five years later in Grenoble.

What do these poets have in common? I am tempted to say their solitude. Reynek was fiercely free-spirited, while Renaud had the homesickness of exiles and Lebrau possessed the severity of an ascetic. All three lived in remote villages, shunning the spotlight despite their talent. Christians, they professed a quiet, private faith in their art. Troubled by the plight of the humble, the combative Appercelle put her faith in communism. But all four shared a love of nature, human beings and animals: cats, pheasants, goats and sheep, and for Andrée, also a monkey named Judith. These fraternal presences are the subject of tenderness, poems and drawings.

Despite the circumstances — geographical distance, language barriers, and, tragically, war and communism — these epistolary friendships grew out of the authors' mutual respect and natural curiosity. It is also striking to note how these links were forged through local and original cultural initiatives. At the beginning of a relationship, there is almost always a messenger. In this case, it was a collection of poems, and, to welcome it, a remarkable man who fostered the friendship in poetry between authors who did not know each other.

Many of you know this couple's story, which for today's Czechs has come to symbolise their country's interwar golden age. It is the story of the unlikely union between Suzanne, a poet from the Dauphiné who grew up in a comfortable, early 20th-century middle-class home in Grenoble, and Bohuslav, a Czech poet and engraver living in an austere little village on the Czech-Moravian plateau, the Vysočina.

¹ Bohuslav Reynek, Suzanne Renaud, Jean Lebrau, Andrée Appercelle : *Correspondance – Korespondence*, Romarin 2019. The extracts from the letters in italics come from the book. Letters and poems were read by Maire-Odile Tourmen during the literary evening.

Grenoble is where they met. Originally, this was a love story between France and Czechoslovakia, a translation story and a love story, period.

France loved the young Czechoslovak Republic founded in 1918, which became resolutely Francophile and French-speaking after centuries of Austro-Hungarian rule. Until 1938, there was a mixing of cultures between the two countries, a period of sharing and fraternity.

Translation, of course, served this exchange of creativity between countries. Reynek was a young translator with a passion for French literature. He worked for the publisher Josef Florian, an eccentric character living in Moravia who ordered works from foreign literary journals and catalogues for translation and publication. Poets, writers, translators and illustrators collaborated with each other around him. It was a kind of phalanstery, a true regional, rural cultural hub far from Prague.

What about France? Mirroring the Moravian experience, another publishing adventure began, this one in Saint-Félicien-en-Vivaraïs. In 1920, the poet Charles Forot founded the publishing house Le Pigeonnier, launching a regional artistic and literary movement where a quality cultural life thrived. Sculptors, engravers, poets, actors and writers from the Rhone Valley, Paris and the South, including Paul Valéry, Louis le Cardonnell, Louis Pize, Jean Paulhan, Francis Carco and Tristan Derème met, exchanged ideas and published there.

Working a thousand kilometres apart, these two trailblazing publishers, Florian and Forot, unintentionally brought Suzanne Renaud and Bohuslav Reynek together. In 1922, Renaud published her first collection in Le Pigeonnier, *Ta vie est là...*²

*Ta vie est là, comme un roseau
Sur de mornes rives;
Ta vie est là, comme un fuseau
En des mains oisives;

Et le roseau ne veut chanter
Qu'aux lèvres du songe,
Et le fuseau ne veut tourner
Qu'aux doigts de fées;

Suzanne Renaud
in *Œuvres – Dilo*,
Romarin 1995, excerpt.*

Your life is there? Where? In poetry of course! The collection came to the attention of Florian, who had read a review of it. The young Reynek liked the book, wrote to the author and came to Grenoble to ask for permission to translate her poems. The translation was published in 1926.

The same year, Suzanne and Bohuslav were married in Saint Joseph's church in Grenoble. It was love.

² The poems are quoted only in their original version.

The couple had two sons, Michel and Daniel. They spent winters in Grenoble, summers in Petrkov. In the 1920s, radio was in its infancy. There was no television, high-speed train or web. People gathered around a piano, read each other's poems, swapped books. They collaborated with literary journals. Grenoble was then a city of about 80,000 inhabitants surrounded by villages, Poisat, La Bajatière, etc. Reynek, not very keen on bourgeois niceties, escaped from the city to draw: *Dear poetess*, he recalled twenty-five years later in a letter to Appercelle, *with feverish excitement, I have just read Grillon mon cœur at the end of the day it arrived. After locking up the sheep and chopping wood for the evening soup, I took the cherished book to an old shed in the back of the garden where I pile up what I love: pictures, poems, apples, peaches, nuts, memories and prayers. There I reread "Le Mulet de Paverant", "Mon Ami le clochard", "Nuit", "Magie", "Os" and the rest. Thank you for thinking of an old vagrant from La Bajatière and Poisat – the dear, sad and swampy Poisat where the City of Grenoble dumped its rubbish a quarter-century ago. Poisat, a corner of old dullards and skinny, skittish dogs looking for their 'life'. A vacant lot criss-crossed by small trails in the freshly fallen snow, crows and magpies quietly landing on a sign announcing a hunting preserve. Happy memories to all of you there, and thank you again.*

In 1936, the couple settled in Bohemia for good. Suzanne considered her first poem, *Ta vie est là*, an omen. She discovered "the bleak shores of a hard life" in her husband's country. In 1938 came the Munich Agreement, the beginning of silent years and broken connections. But poetry glimmered in the darkness.

*Les aiguilles du givre
scintillent aux roseaux, aux arbres,
épinés sur la branche noire,
et sur la lune
épinés d'argent.*

*Dans la glace de l'étang
la lune se reflète,
fruit léger,
feuille tombée
d'une branche nue.*

*Et l'ombre de la branche
coupe la lune,
disque doré du dies irae
et d'un autre chant
inconnu.*

Bohuslav Reynek
in *Bohuslav Reynek graveur poète*,
Le Verbe et l'Empreinte 1986.
Translated by the author.

*J'écoute dans la nuit
Tes invisibles doigts,
Ô pluie!
Heurter à petit bruit
La vitre... et chaque fois
Je tressaille et je songe à des heures enfuies,
À tous ceux d'autrefois
Dont les muettes voix
M'appellent
Et demandent tout bas
Si nous n'oublions pas,
Si nos cœurs sont fidèles;
La pluie, au soir de la Toussaint,
C'est l'imperceptible tocsin,
C'est, parmi le vent qui l'emporte,
Si perdu, si tremblant, si las,
Le frêle glas
Des choses mortes.*

Suzanne Renaud in *Œuvres-Dilo*, Romarin 1995.

The Reyneks re-established their ties with their friends in France shortly before 1947, the year their correspondence with Lebrau began. Once again, a relationship emerged from reading a collection of poems: Lebrau's *Le Cyprès et la Cabane*, published in 1922.

Lebrau was from Béarn and Corbières. He earned a living working first at the prefecture of Pau, then the prefecture of Aude, as well as by writing articles, and won many literary awards. In Moux, where he owned vineyards and fields, he made wine and loved the silence of the countryside and the nearby mountains, Alaric and the Montagne Noire. His great-nephew Henri Montanié, whom I consulted to learn more about him, mentioned “his very rich mind and heart, a bright reflection of his inner life”.

Like *Ta vie est là...*, Lebrau's collection *Le Cyprès et la Cabane* had crossed borders and come to Florian's attention in Moravia. Reynek immediately liked the Moux poet's sober, bare-bones verse, without affectation or imitation:

*Automnes, légers vins, derniers plaisirs des yeux,
Celui de la prairie où la rose est charmée
Par la mélancolie, en leurs teintes, des cieux,

Celui du safran nu dans la branche gelée
Éclairant le gazon... Automne au fard lilas
Sur le coteau que signe une tombe isolée...
Soleils jaunes ou verts comme des chasselas...*

Jean Lebrau in *Le Cyprès et la Cabane*, Le Divan 1922, excerpt.

Cyprès was translated without the author or publisher's permission, an oversight Renaud admitted twenty years later in a letter to Lebrau, who began the correspondence: *We are distant friends of your poems. My husband loves their bittersweet fragrance and ardent sobriety. Long ago he translated “Le Cyprès et la Cabane”, a small edition that was quickly sold out because here we have always been and still are very sensitive to French culture. The author, then young and shy, did not dare to send it to you; we are now repairing this oversight.* Then Reynek himself wrote to Lebrau: *I had many good times with you in Moux and you don't even know it. How many times have I dreamed of your farm since the translation of “Cyprès” so many years ago.* Much later still, he again picked up the threads of these musings: *I have been piously and faithfully accompanying you in your solitude since “Le Cyprès et la Cabane” about 40 years ago. I love your garrigue, the Montagne-Noire and your A[la]ric perhaps more than you do, because you have borne your sorrows there and I have not... For me, all that happened elsewhere, and your country, with the Haute Provence I have seen and known, has become my refuge of dreams, peace and prayer. Thanks to you, thanks to its severity, which attracts me, thanks to unfathomable affinities, thanks to the poetry that does not die.*

Reynek would have liked to be a shepherd in Provence. He became one under the communist regime, which turned his Petrkov estate into a kolkhoz. Everything was hard during the Stalinist and post-Stalinist years, especially in Czechoslovakia. The oppressive atmosphere comes through as a leitmotiv in the letters, which span the years from 1947 to Reynek's death in 1971. He and his family endured their fate quietly, with humility and resignation. For the most important thing lay elsewhere. Over the course of an unclouded friendship, there is a sense of long-distance complicity against all odds. In their homes open to nature, the authors share their emotions. The harsh regions of Moux and Petrkov are called and respond to each other, one full of smells and wind, scorched by the sun, the

other silent, icy, buried in snow for many months of the year. Lebrau, the poet-winemaker, waited for rain to fall on his vineyard; Renaud worried about the kolkhoz crops. Reynek admired his distant friend: he was not very happy in his solitude, but conveyed it with true grandeur in short, dense verses that sometimes recall Goya's prints.

*C'est le mardi-gras
Et la nue est triste;
Un masque lilas
Fait en vain l'artiste*

*Dans la rue où geint
Comme un chien malade
Le volet déteint...
Foin d'arlequinade!...*

*Pour le comble il me vient
Par la cheminée
Non le bruit d'un train
Mais la mélodie*

*D'un doux ramoneur
Quand le vent s'apaise...
Je songe au bonheur
Les pieds à la braise.*

Jean Lebrau
in *Le Cyprès et la Cabane*, Le Divan 1922.

This edition was published after years of searching for the original manuscripts. Their French addressees piously kept all the letters they received but very few of their replies to Czechoslovakia were found. These precious documents were scattered or lost in the home of the Reyneks, exhausted by their living conditions.

Why read a book of correspondence now? Because “a letter is incomparably more eloquent than any photograph. It is a direct connection with a man’s mind” (Jules Barbey d’Aureville). And why read a book of poets’ correspondence? Because, as Hölderlin said, “they can inhabit the land poetically and capture the humblest manifestations of beauty.” So, epiphanies of beauty will appear to you on the poets’ road.



B. Reynek, *Mas en Provence*, 1929

Annick Auzimour
Grenoble, 24 October 2019