

Jean Arbousset (1895-1918). Le Livre de 'Quinze grammes', caporal
Source gallica.bnf.fr
Paris: Georges Cres 1917

Preface

to Saint Scholastica¹

These are the poilus² of the Argonne
coming to baptize me.

I like my name because it sounds good.

These are the poilus of the Argonne,
and I want to remind them in song, my patron.

These are the poilus of the Argonne
who are coming to baptize me.

Vauquois, 1915

¹Sixth-century saint of the Catholic church; twin sister of St. Benedict; patron saint of nuns and convulsive children; prayed to in storms.

²Slang name for a French soldier in World War I

[7]

Climbing to Vauquois

to Lieutenant Pézard

In the ravine beside this small road, a death,
then two, then three. Their twisted bodies lie on their knapsacks,
fingers clenched, pallid complexion.

They seem to be still watching us.

Their empty stare is frightening. Thinking,
you would want to say to those that have left,
eager to know the mysteries of life: "Go.
Quickly empty the amphora of a life that has fate as its king.

If fate did want you to fall in this place,
then you will have to cover you, not a tomb
but bluebells, lilies and poppies and
you will soon be forgotten by everyone.
Go. Probably tomorrow your brothers, with a good look, will see
a death, then two, then three aside a road."

Vauquois 1915

[9]

A Morning in the Argonne
to Madame Nelly Martyl³

A mist very nonchalant
holds in its soft basket
life still unconscious
as the earth wakes up.

A good lark sang
in the pale sky, pink and blue,
while a silvery crescent dies,
white, skinny and cold.

And the young rays of the sun
break on this earth, still covered in mist,
like a gray sea on which a green forest floats.
Vauquois, 1915

³Nelly Martyl Scott (1884-1953) was a popular singer at the Opéra Comique in Paris, and at the start of the war she volunteered as a nurse. She became extremely well-known and beloved by the French soldiers for her devotion to the wounded. Twice gassed, three-times wounded, she was awarded the Croix de guerre and the Légion d'honneur.

[11]

Memory

to the sappers of the 5/1
They look to the side of the road
in a ditch, an open tomb.
His corpse no longer resembling anything human.

With a wearied flick of the hand,
because a death is not a loss
they look to the side of the road.

Without an ave⁴, without an amen.
They put him on the unfolded canvas,
His corpse no longer resembling anything human.

A fifth man, his old companion
carries his head, yellow and green...
They look to the side of the road.
Vauquois 1915

⁴Referring to an Ave Maria (Hail Mary) prayer

[13]

An Evening at Vauquois

to Captain Montazeau

Like a dreary lantern that lights up the night,
The moon rose at the end of the parapet,
yellow, murky, with its face cut,
it trails across the sky, without bitterness.

It illuminates the chaotic landscape
the trenches, shelters, holes, bumps, bags, wood,
scrap metal, rabbit burrows
seen fleetingly in the ghostly shadow.

Here and there, a tree, an innocent victim,
stretches his poor black and jagged stumps
to his true god, a god of mercy and kindness,
as if imploring the end of all these crimes.

A dreary lantern now consumed by the morning,
The moon dies at the end of the parapet,
yellow, murky, with its face cut,
it trails across the sky, without bitterness.

Vauquois 1915

[15]

A Gruesome Dance

to Edouard Helsey⁵

Amid the plains and on the hills

blue ties and red caps

the tiny pierrot

and columbine,

the kiddish poppy

and his lover the blueberry⁶

-round head and slender body-

swaying in a crazy dance to

the dull rhythm of a strange melody.

The plain is a pool table

filled with many holes,

such huge wine glasses

that shells have chiseled from the earth..

Quartered soldiers sleep there

on the evenings before a great attack...

How many heads have rolled

into all of these holes and deep gashes?

Amid the plains and on the hills

blue ties and red caps

the tiny pierrot

and columbine

the kiddish poppy

and his lover the blueberry

-round head and slender body-

swaying in a crazy dance

around the holes and cut-off heads.

Vauquois plain, 1915

⁵Édouard Helsey, pseudonym of Lucien-Edmond Marie Couloud (1883-1966), French journalist and reporter.

⁶All common flowers; allusion also to the French infantry uniform of red and blue.

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Song

to the chief doctor of the 290th infantry regiment
Seven wounded men
packed together without much complaining.

Seven wounded men
packed together around an automobile.

It's the aid station,
- go back -
that said, the auto lurches

[22]

to go and carry
customers to the ambulance.

But they are not wounded enough
to deserve help.

because the car does not delight
in being full before leaving
for the ambulance.

The seven injured were punctured,
on the pavement,
like cream puffs

[23]

to have waited too long,
wasted time,
for a month, the eighth.

Vauquois, 1915

[25]

Fantasy

to Cam.

Goethe came to see me yesterday. Goethe was sad,
sad as a night without the moon and without love.

It was not at all the Goethe from Strasbourg,
It was not at all Goethe the Spinoza follower.

He led me by the communication lines,
through the trenches
through small paths for water drainage
and by well-hidden trails
under Fritz's eyes,
Fritz the friend of the shadows who dreams of the stars
in the gloom of his canvas.

He led me:

"Slowly. gently. this way. "

and we arrived soon,

[26]

a new Faust, a new Mephistopheles
another Walpurgis night,⁷
when we reached the house of the
heroines of the poet.

And Goethe lowered his head.

How I loved you once, Marguerite!⁸
You would sing the song of the good King of Thule⁹
and turn your spinning wheel,
neither too slowly nor too fast,
the troubled senses.
You sing the song of the good King of Thule,
but your thoughts always went
to the handsome cavalier who told you
of love.

[27]

How I loved you, Charlotte,¹⁰
when cutting bread
for your little brothers,
your little brothers so high that they came to your boots
sweet Werther
as I loved you, Charlotte, with your air

⁷German name for the night of 30 April, eve of the feast day of Saint Walpurga; also believed to be the night of a witches' meeting

⁸Goethe's **Faust, Part One**

⁹"Der König in Thule" ("The King in Thule") is a German poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. It appears in **Faust Part One** as Marguerite's introduction.

¹⁰Goethe's **Sorrows of Young Werther**

of affectionate sister!

And you Dorothy,¹¹
if you were to leave in
a soft chemise (a little cleavage,
O Dorothy)
if you were to leave
at the fountain where the water flowed,
clear as a verse of the Holy Gospels,
how I loved your spell.

And you Mignon,¹²
How I love your song
that you sang barefoot
by roads
like Jesus
for those who doubt
[28]
Oh! tell me what I dreamed
and that what I saw never happened.

Tell me, Gretchen,¹³ that you do not fire
210mm shells for the Germans.
Tell me, Lotte¹⁴, that by your steps
your brothers, who are ready to eat,
never blame you
and that you do not give them
any slices of bread K. K.
And you, Hermann¹⁵ the fiancé,
that the water drawn in your pitcher
is not bleached water.
And you, Mignon the Bohemian,
that your song is not the old
Prussian "Deutschland über alles"

Oh, tell me that I was only dreaming
and that what I saw has never happened.
[29]
And so I will come to you again some day;
your beloved face will appear sad to me

¹¹Goethe's poem Hermann und Dorothea

¹²A French opera based on Goethe's **Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre**

¹³Gretchen/Marguerite

¹⁴Goethe's **Sorrows of Young Werther**

¹⁵Goethe's **Hermann an Dorothea**

but in you I will find again all my love
and I will be a bit like Goethe the follower of Spinoza.¹⁶
Vauquois, 1915

¹⁶Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832) was heavily influenced by Baruch Spinoza.

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The song of the Sapper¹⁷

to captain Laignier, beloved commander of Company 5/1 of engineers

To dig a pit and a mine,
to dig a mine and a pit
our officers have undertaken a mine
It's serious, serious, very serious,
to dig a pit and a mine,
but the captain ordered it,
the lieutenant repeated it,
and the sergeants all looked around.

and the sapper worked
in the mine
in the mine
Good sapper, forward, forward

To continue the mine,
the mine at the bottom of the pit,
our officers have become
even more serious, and then,
to continue work this mine
the captain hesitated,
the lieutenants calculated,
the sergeants were upset.

But the sapper continued.
in the mine,
in the mine,
good sapper, forward, forward.

One day, the mine exploded
that mine at the bottom of the pit
Our officers have set off a mine
even more serious this time, and then,
as she exploded
the captain coughed,
the lieutenants had tea,
the sergeants left
the little Sapper also left
In the mine,
in the mine,
good sapper, there go the vermin.
Vauquois 1915

¹⁷Sapper is an engineer.

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A few Words

to my mother

When death comes to you,
open wide your doors,
open your doors with love
and bless with love
what it brings
that which is not yours:
these tears of friendship,
these pitiful flowers
in a barren white room
with a soft carpet on which your soul walks...

When death comes as a good woman
simply, foolishly, to scythe a body at your house,

[50]

love the detail of the funeral scene,
and if you are poor
you will still love
until the sad sound of nails in the tree
in the boards barely attached
because one lacks the money
for an oak coffin
the silent screw
as nightlights
And if death was a frail consumptive,
you'll love the slow martyrdom
flesh torn petal by petal
by the brambles of his pale road.
For all of them died in the family bed.
Their mother, if they were children,
and if they were old, their daughter
clenched their teeth,

[51]

closed
the eyes
and enjoyed the moments of meticulous care,
almost devout.

But others die in the mud,
without arms, legs or jaws;
we bury them anywhere,
and often we put nothing at all
on their graves.
We bury them where they fall.
Those who did not notice them
walk over them.

When death comes to you,

open wide your doors
and bless this strong joy
to be able to kneel down.
Vauquois, 1915