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Jean Cranmer

University of New Orleans, jcranmer@uno.edu

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Recommended Citation

Cranmer, Jean R. "Jules Supervielle: Is Le Forçat Innocent?" *French Review* 60.2 (1981): 193-200.

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Jules Supervielle: Is *Le Forçat innocent*?

by Jean R. Cranmer

THE POETRY OF JULES SUPERVIELLE seems filled with contradictions. To begin with, it is as accessible and delightful to the reader as it is elusive and puzzling to those who like to classify and codify literature. The latter are never quite sure where to file Supervielle's verse but are always sure to include it in anthologies of modern poetry. Marcel Raymond tries to get around the question by placing Supervielle "en marge du surréalisme," which, of course, tells us nothing at all about what he is, but rather about what he is not. And, except for the fact that his "margin" of poetic odds and ends is populated with such notables as Léon-Paul Fargue, Pierre-Jean Jouve, and Saint-John Perse, Raymond's classification is misleading.

Following the publication of *Gravitations* in 1925, the term "cosmic poet" became a very popular one in Supervielle criticism because of the richness of images in the collection that set man, animals, and all of nature against a backdrop of interstellar space. But with the publication of *Le Forçat innocent* in 1930, it became clear that Jules Supervielle's true poetic universe was an interior one and that it was only then that the poet "came into his own," to use Etiemble's phrase.¹

In a critical work published in 1939, Christian Sénéchal traces the evolution of Jules Supervielle's poetry along a double track that ultimately leads the poet to the discovery of his inner self: "L'évolution de Jules Supervielle n'est autre en effet, que la double oscillation, qui, de l'enchantement des escales et des débarcadères, le ramène à la méditation solitaire, et, des pérégrinations imaginaires dans l'espace, le fait plonger au plus profond de lui-même."² In *Le Forçat innocent* Supervielle seems to arrive at the very core of his *moi profond*, where these dual tendencies become fused and synthesized. The movement from antithesis to synthesis can be observed in his imagery in general, and in the poetic persona of the *forçat* in particular.

The dualism that characterizes this work of Jules Supervielle stems from a pre-creative disposition to view primarily the binary, even antithetical nature of reality ("Il y a en moi un dédoublement permanent," he confided in a newspaper interview³). This disposition is in turn responsible for generating the style, structure, and themes of the collection. In other words, dualism can be seen as the infrastructure upon which the entire work is built. An obvious manifestation of

¹ Etiemble, "L'Évolution de la poétique chez Supervielle entre 1922 et 1934," *Les Temps Modernes*, 59 (September 1950), 533.

² Christian Sénéchal, *Jules Supervielle, Poète de l'univers intérieur* (Paris: Les Presses du hibou, 1939), p. 50.

³ Cited in "Les Rendez-vous de Paul Guth," *Le Soir*, Brussels (17 August 1955), p. 6.

this structure is in the title of the collection itself, in which the antithetical notions of guilt and innocence are juxtaposed. All of which brings us back to the question posed initially: is *Le Forçat innocent*?

In the very first verses of the collection—"Je ne vois plus le jour / Qu'au travers de ma nuit"⁴—we are introduced to the *forçat*, identify him as the antecedent of *je*, and are drawn into his interior universe. As a complete reading of the collection bears out, these verses point to at least three interpretations of the nature of the poetic persona, all of which relate to the thematic register. He is first of all the poet whose creative act takes him from the outer world (*le jour*) to the inner depths of his *moi profond* (*ma nuit*). This internalized world is imprisoned, so to speak, in the poet's mind and body. The voice of the *forçat* is secondly the voice of the dead one whom the living being will become. He is a prisoner condemned to death and is constantly reminded of his destiny by this future self who dwells within him. Finally, he is the subconscious embodiment of the poet's fears and guilt. Our discussion of these three identities will begin with that of the persona as poet who internalizes the universe around him.

In the poetic vision of Jules Supervielle, the exterior landscape is subject to profound metamorphoses; it is endowed with a dubious chronology and is almost always indistinguishable from the interior landscape. It is characteristic of the images from the natural world in *Le Forçat innocent* that they tend to transpose themselves upon striking the poet's consciousness and to become absorbed so entirely in his imagination that they can no longer be considered part of the "exterior" world. Supervielle makes this observation about the process of internalizing the external in "En songeant à un art poétique," an essay on his poetics: "Quand je vais dans la campagne le paysage me devient presque tout de suite intérieur par je ne sais quel glissement du dehors vers le dedans, j'avance comme dans mon propre monde mental."⁵

There are actually two operations at work in this poetic process: first, the "gravitation" of the exterior world toward the *moi profond*, and second, the re-release of this world through poetry. As this dual process is heavily dependent on perception, eyes become a recurrent image in *Le Forçat innocent*. In order to reach the central consciousness, which is often represented in the image of the heart, center of man's interior cosmos, the images presented by the exterior world must pass first through the eyes of the poet. In the closing lines of the poem entitled "Cœur," this function is expressed. The pronoun *lui* here refers to *cœur*:

Par mes yeux bien ouverts
Faire descendre en lui
La surface du monde
Et tout ce qui dépasse,
Les vagues et les cieux,
Les têtes et les yeux! (P. 16)

In another example of the role of perception in the interiorization of the exterior

⁴ Jules Supervielle, *Le Forçat innocent* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930), p. 9. All subsequent references to this work will be noted parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Jules Supervielle, "En songeant à un art poétique," in *Naissances* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 58.

world, the poetic consciousness attempts to draw the light of day inside of itself by concentrating it through a kind of visual tunnel:

Il est dans ses remparts que la mer veut saisir
 Et regarde le jour poindre par un créneau,
 Puis l'ayant fait passer par ce long trou d'aiguille
 Il croit le recueillir dans son obscur cerveau. (P. 81)

In these two examples Supervielle shows that he has inherited little from Baudelaire since the exterior world does not function as a catalyst to the mystical perception of a world beyond, but, quite the contrary, is pulled, in a very physical way, inside the poet's consciousness.

There are two spaces in the exterior world that have particular significance in the poetry of *Le Forçat innocent*: the sea and the sky. As two basic elements, water and air become fused in the poet's conception of the primeval universe. From a cosmic point of view there is no horizon to separate them. Consequently, they often share common properties and are indistinguishable from each other. Depth and altitude lose their definitions as opposites and become integrated into a single perception. Once the divisive vision that separates the seas from the heavens is reshaped into a continuous perspective, waves are transformed into "profondes étincelles" (p. 34), an image that makes ambiguous the direction of the light source striking the water. And if the light on the water comes from the depths instead of from the skies, the stars, in turn, give off "une odeur saline" (p. 62), which when it reaches the lips of the poet completes the fusion of sea-sky images into the taste of salt air.

In cosmic terms the continuation of sea and sky is the continuation of boundless space. For Supervielle, contact with these vast expanses provokes an encounter with the infinite. Again unlike Baudelaire, for whom celestial space provides an escape, Supervielle's exploration of the beyond produces feelings of fear and of vulnerability. This is the sentiment expressed in an important poem of the collection, "Sans Dieu":

Je m'avance et me sens mille fois découvert.
 Prêtant le flanc, le dos, la tête et la poitrine
 A tous les dards de l'Inconnu qui m'avoisine.
 Je vais posant les pieds sur un sol nuageux
 Où mes yeux ne voient pas les empreintes de Dieu
 Et ne laisse après moi qu'un reste de vertige. (P. 62)

In spite of the ascensional expansion of self, the poet has found himself incapable of "touching" the infinite, and so he experiences an abrupt fall toward the center of the *moi profond*. As creator, the poet can more readily seize the infinite of interior space, as evidenced in these lines from the same poem:

Le ciel est toujours là qui creuse son chemin,
 Voici l'écho des coups de pic dans ma poitrine.
 O ciel, ciel abaissé, je te touche des mains
 Et m'enfonce voulté dans la céleste mine. (P. 64)

In these lines the hollowing out of the already empty abyss of the sky is transformed into a physical and interior act through the metaphor of the pick-ax whose blows are echoed in the heartbeat of the poet. The heart has already been alluded to as the center of the interior universe. It is here that the poet places his "lowered sky" (*ciel abaissé*) that he is able to touch poetically. It is the same for each of the examples cited above that illustrate the exterior/interior dichotomy of the creative act for the *forçat* as poet. By drawing the world into itself, the *moi profond* is expanded and the act of knowing becomes an act of self-knowledge.

The fear of the unknown experienced by the poet brings us to the second dualistic identity of the *forçat*: the poet's double, his future self in death. The double has a sinister presence, in that it constantly reminds the poet of his ultimate destiny; but in a fanciful treatment of the motif, Supervielle portrays this other self as being as interested in the world of the living as are the living in the world of the dead. In the following excerpt from "Le Forçat," the voice of the double asks for news from the earth:

Donnez-moi des nouvelles du monde.
Et les arbres ont-ils toujours
Ce grand besoin de feuilles, de ramilles,
Et tant de silence aux racines.
Donnez-moi des nouvelles des rivières,
.....
Ont-elles encor cette façon si personnelle
De descendre dans la vallée,
De retenir l'image de leur voyage,
Sans consentir à s'arrêter. (P. 10)

There is a certain nostalgic tenderness in the voice of this shade who seems to regret the beauties of nature he can no longer perceive. As is evident in the use of the imperative in the above verses, the personification of the double allows for the use of dialogue. In the poem "Oloron-Sainte-Marie" the antagonism between life and death is ironically expressed in a conversation between the living consciousness and his mortal other. The irony arises from the awareness that it is precisely that part of being composed of *living* matter which is responsible for the destruction of the total self. In the following verses, the poet meditates upon his own vulnerability, reproaching his physical being for acting as the instrument of death:

Je les entends qui m'emplissent de leur voix sourde.
Plantés dans ma chair, ces os,
Comme de secrets couteaux
Qui n'ont jamais vu le jour. (P. 52)

The double's response to this illustrates the paradox of unity that binds these two opposing forces together:

—N'échappe pas ainsi à notre entendement.
Ton silence nous ment.
Nous ne faisons qu'un avec toi,

Ne nous oublie pas.
 Nous avons partie liée
 Tels l'époux et l'épousée
 Quand il souffle la bougie
 Pour la longueur de la nuit. (P. 52)

Oddly enough, the *nous* in question here is articulated by the *bones* of the *forçat* he had addressed as secret knives. The somewhat allegorical figure of the poet's skeleton luring him into an eternal "marriage" seems a highly rhetorical conceit when isolated from the continuity of the work. But in Supervielle's fabular world everything is endowed with the power of speech, and the animation of the dead is but an attempt, not unlike that of Montaigne, to take the fear out of the unknown by making it more familiar. There are many instances in the collection in which the double coaxes the poet into death or into a "trial" death. In the following example, the double orchestrates the metamorphosis of the sleeper into a portrait of a corpse:

Ne vous étonnez pas,
 Abaissez les paupières
 Jusqu'à ce qu'elles soient
 De véritable pierre.
 Laissez faire le cœur,
 Et même s'il s'arrête.
 Il bat pour lui tout seul
 Sur sa pente secrète.
 Les mains s'allongeront
 Dans leur barque de glace
 Et le front sera nu
 Comme une grande place
 Vide, entre deux armées. (P. 54)

The eyelids are shut and turned into stone, the heart is stopped, the hands, normally the instruments for grasping life, are made rigid in a coffin/boat of ice, and the brow is emptied of consciousness.

The poet perceives many examples of the dichotomy of life and death echoed throughout the universe. Through his metaphorical embrace he tries, however, to reconcile these opposites. Within this embrace a rock becomes the existential symbol of the poet's eventual non-existence:

Pierre, obscure compagnie,

 Ce n'est pas si difficile
 De devenir mon amie.

 Tu es distraite, tu pèses,
 Tu me remplis la main d'aise

 Le jour, tu es toute chaude,
 Toute sereine la nuit,
 Autour de toi mon cœur rôde,
 Le tien qui s'est arrêté
 Me ravit de tous côtés. (P. 13)

In his desire to grasp all of creation with a profound sense of unity, the poet holds not only a rock but his own death in his hands.

The third identity of the *forçat*'s double is as the embodiment of the poet's subconscious fears and anxieties. There is indeed evidence of certain neurotic tendencies in the poetic persona of the *forçat*, to which we are introduced even in the first poem of the collection. For example, he is described as follows:

C'est un petit bossu
Allant sur une route,
On ne sait où il va
Avec ses jambes nues.
.....
Et puis il est trop loin,
On n'entend plus ses pas. (P. 9)

The attributes *bossu* and *jambes nues* make him appear vulnerable and somewhat inferior, while the last two lines depict him as isolated from and even rejected by others.

Guilt feelings, often associated with neurosis, are also part of the psychological world of the *forçat*. In the following poem, he accuses himself, judges himself, finds himself guilty, and pronounces sentence:

Tu t'accuses de crimes
Que tu n'as pas commis,
Tu tourmentes les chaînes
De ton cœur mal soumis,
Tu cherches qui pourrait
Te servir de bourreau
Et ton meilleur ami
A le regard qu'il faut. (P. 60)

Many of Supervielle's critics have also referred to this obscure feeling of guilt prevalent in his work. Tatiana Greene, for example, remarks: "Le mot 'repentir' est fréquent chez lui. Il se sent souvent coupable, d'une façon obscure, peut-être sans savoir de quoi."⁶ To answer our initial question we could say that, yes, the *forçat* is indeed *innocent*, for his guilt is not real at all, only imagined. We could say this, but there may yet be another answer.

In the exploration of the *moi profond*, the *forçat* encounters his unknown self and his most hidden fears. These fears are the subject of the pronoun *le*, which, like the anxiety that has gone undiscovered and unfronted in the poetic subconscious, has no antecedent:

Il ne faut pas le dire
Ni même le murmurer,
Il ne faut pas en écrire,
Il ne faut pas y songer
Même dans le délire,
Il ne faut le regarder

⁶ Tatiana Greene, *Jules Supervielle* (Geneva: Droz, 1958), p. 73.

Qu'à travers des yeux bandés,
Et surtout ne l'approcher
Qu'avec des gants de fer. (P. 84)

The repetition of the unqualified pronouns *le*, *en*, and *y* provides a context within which to formulate an antecedent. This context is filled with psychological images. There is an effort to repress expressed in the repeated use of the phrase "Il ne faut pas" and through the reference to *des yeux bandés*. The poet who usually reaches out to touch what he does not know seeks here a protection (*des gants de fer*) for the sensitive instruments of perception that are his hands. What is it then that he so fears? It would seem that, despite his efforts to make death more familiar and less ominous, it is precisely the visceral fear of death to which the pronoun *le* refers. Later, in the same poem, he expresses the fear of being "sold into death": "Présences, parlez bas, / On pourrait nous entendre / Et me vendre à la mort" (p. 84).

We have seen then how the poetic persona of the *forçat* is the vehicle for the expression of many dichotomies: exterior/interior, life/death, innocence/guilt. It is interesting to note, in the selections cited above, how Supervielle reinforces this thematic dualism on a structural level, with the use of dialogue and interior monologue forms, and on a linguistic level, with the use of first and second person pronouns and vocative and imperative moods. He clearly feels the need to communicate in his poetry, be it with his own thoughts, a double, the reader, or even with silence. Even though the reader is not always sure who is speaking or who is being addressed, he is constantly party to a conversation of some sort, aware always of a dual presence.

Tracking down the identity of the *forçat* has thus been essentially a question of identifying *je* with each occurrence. *Je*, we remember, belongs to Roman Jakobson's category of "shifters" and therefore has a different meaning with each use, while retaining the constant meaning of "sender of the message."⁷ This linguistic description of the first person pronoun applied to literature is not entirely satisfactory; for in literature, *je* is not only the sender of the message but also the protagonist. This functional duality of *je* is compounded in *Le Forçat innocent* by the thematic dualities we have just examined: *je* as the poet who makes the exterior interior, as the living entity who harbors death within, and as the conscious mind who delves into the subconscious.

An important aspect of Supervielle's poetry that has become apparent in this study of the dualistic implications of his imagery is his counter tendency to unify reality. This tendency has been noted in images that have cosmic implications: the "profondes étincelles," for example, uniting sea and sky. One could even say that meaning in Supervielle's poetry is often the result of an affirmation countered by a negation, an act of reversal, which both destroys and creates in a single gesture to reflect a new reality: the continuous and unified expanse of sea and sky, the fusion of exterior and interior space, or a state of innocent guilt, for

⁷ Roman Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale*, trans. Nicolas Ruwet (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963), p. 179.

example. Thus, while Jules Supervielle, poet of the interior universe, perceives the world in binary terms, Jules Supervielle, cosmic poet, reshapes and reconciles opposites into an integral poetic universe. In this universe, a *forçat* who is both guilty and innocent is not only possible but inevitable.

NEW ORLEANS, LA