On Jean Grenier’s Les Iles, Albert Camus

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I was twenty in Algiers when I read this book for the first time. I can do no better than compare its overwhelming effect, its influence on me and many of my friends, to the shock a whole generation in France received from Les Nourritures Terrestres.

But the revelation offered by Les Iles was of a different order. It suited us, whereas Gide’s glorification of the senses left us at once full of admiration and puzzled. We really had no need to be freed from the winding sheet of morality, or to sing of the fruits of the earth. They hung on our doorstep in the sunlight. All we had to do was sink our teeth into them.

Some of us knew, of course, that poverty and suffering existed. We simply rejected them with all the strength of our youthful blood. The truth of the world lay only in its beauty, and the delights it offered. Thus we lived on sensations, on the surface of the world, among colors, waves, and the good smell of the soil. This is why Les Nourritures, with its invitation to happiness, came too late. Happiness was a faith that we proclaimed, insolently. We needed, quite the opposite, to be diverted a bit from our greed, to be torn, in fact, from our happy barbarity.

Of course, if gloomy preachers had stalked across our beaches hurling anathema at the world and at the creatures who enchanted us, our reaction would have been violent, or sarcastic. We needed more subtle teachers, and a man born on other shores, though like us enamoured of light and bodily splendors, came to tell us in peerless language that these outward appearances were beautiful, but that they were doomed to perish and should therefore be loved in despair.

Immediately, this great, eternal theme began to echo in us like an overwhelmingly new discovery. The sea, the light, people’s faces, from which a kind of invisible barrier suddenly separated us, receded, but still exercised their fascination. Les Iles, in short, had just initiated our disenchantment; we had discovered culture.

Without denying the physical reality that composed our realm, this book coupled it with another reality that explained our youthful uneasiness. What Grenier did was to remind us that the moments of bliss, the instants when we said “Yes,” which we had experienced only obscurely and which inspire some of the finest pages in Les Iles, were essentially fleeting and would perish. Immediately, we understood our sudden melancholies.

The man who labors painfully between a harsh earth and a somber sky can dream of another world where bread and the sky will both be light. He hopes. But men whose longings are fully satisfied every hour of the day by the sunshine and the hills have ceased to hope. They can only dream of an imaginary elsewhere. Thus men from the North flee to the shores of the Mediterranean, or into deserts of light.

But where can men of sun-drenched countries flee, except into the invisible? The journey Grenier describes is a voyage into imaginary and invisible lands, a quest from isle to isle, such as the one Melville, using other means, illustrates in Mardi. Animals take their pleasure and die, man marvels and he dies—where is his harbor? This is the question that echoes through the book. It is answered only indirectly. Grenier, like Melville, ends his voyage with a meditation on the absolute and on God. Speaking of the Hindus, he writes of a port that can be neither named nor situated in any particular place, of another island, but one forever distant, and in its own way deserted.

Once again, for a young man brought up outside traditional religions, this prudent, allusive approach was perhaps the only way to direct him toward a deeper meditation on life. Personally, I had no lack of gods: the sun, the

night, the sea … But these are gods of enjoyment; they fill one, then they leave one empty. With them alone for company I should have forgotten the gods in favor of enjoyment itself.

I had to be reminded of mystery and holy things, of the finite nature of man, of a love that is impossible in order to return to my natural gods one day, less arrogantly. So I do not owe to Grenier certainties he neither could nor wished to give me. But I owe him, instead, a doubt which will never end and which, for example, has prevented me from being a humanist in the sense that it is understood today—I mean a man blinded by narrow certainties. From the very day I read Les Iles, I admired its pervasive tremor, and wanted to imitate it.

“I have long dreamed of arriving alone in a foreign town, alone and stripped of everything. I would have lived humbly, in poverty even. Above all else, I would have kept the secret.” This is the kind of music that almost intoxicated me as I repeated it softly to myself, walking in the Algerian evenings. I felt that I was entering a new land, that one of those high-walled gardens which stood on the heights of my city, past which I often walked, catching only a whiff of invisible honeysuckle, and of which, in my poverty, I had dreamed, was finally left open to me. I was not mistaken.

A garden of incomparable wealth was opening up to me; I had just discovered art. Something, someone was stirring dimly within me, longing to speak. Reading one book, hearing one conversation, can provoke this rebirth in a young person. One sentence stands out from the open book, one word still vibrates in the room, and suddenly, around the right word, the exact note, contradictions resolve themselves and disorder ceases. Already, at the same moment, in response to this perfect language, a timid, clumsier song rises from the darkness of our being.

I believe I already wanted to write at the time I discovered Les Iles. But I really decided to do so only after reading this book. Other books contributed to this decision. Their role accomplished, I forgot them. But this book has not stopped living within me, and I have been reading it for twenty years. Even today, I find myself repeating, as if they were my own, phrases from Les Iles or other books by the same author. I don’t regret it at all. I simply admire my good fortune, in that I, who more than anyone else needed to bow down before someone, should have found a teacher, at just the right moment, and that I should have been able to continue to love and admire him from year to year and from work to work.

For it is indeed lucky to be able to experience, at least once in one’s lifetime, this enthusiastic submission to another person. Among the half- truths that delight our intellectual society this stimulating thought can be found—that each conscience seeks the death of the other. At once we all become masters and slaves, dedicated to mutual annihilation. But the word master has another meaning, linked to the word disciple in respect and gratitude.

It is no longer a question of one mind seeking to kill the other, but of a dialogue, which never ceases once it has begun, and which brings absolute satisfaction to certain lives. This long confrontation involves neither servitude nor obedience, only imitation, in the spiritual sense of the word. In the end, the master rejoices when the disciple leaves him and achieves his difference, while the latter will always remain nostalgic for the time when he received everything and knew he could never repay it. Mind thus engenders mind, from one generation to another, and human history, fortunately, is built as much on admiration as on hatred.

But this is not a tone in which Grenier would speak. He prefers to tell us about a cat’s death, a butcher’s illness, the scent of flowers, the passage of time. Nothing is really said in this book. Everything is suggested, with incomparable strength and sensitivity. The delicate language, at once so accurate and dreamlike, has the fluidity of music. It flows, swiftly, but its echoes linger. If a comparison has to be made, one should speak of Chateaubriand or Barrès, who drew new accents from French.

But why bother? Grenier’s originality goes beyond these comparisons. He merely speaks to us of simple and familiar experiences in an apparently unadorned language. Then he lets us translate, each in his own way. It is only on these conditions that art is a gift which carries no obligations. I, who have received so much from this book, recognize the extent of this gift and acknowledge my debt. The great revelations a man receives in his life are few, rarely more than one or two.

But, like good fortune, they transfigure us. To anyone eager to five and to know, this book offers in each one of its pages a similar revelation. It took Les Nourritures Terrestres twenty years to find a public to overwhelm. It is time for new readers to come to this book. I would still like to be one of them, just as I would like to go back to that evening when, after opening this little volume in the street, I closed it again as soon as I had read the first lines, hugged it tight against me, and ran up to my room to devour it without witnesses. And I envy, without bitterness, but rather, if I may say so, with warmth, the unknown young man today who picks up Les Iles for the first time …

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