

The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

January 1999 Issue #22

© Department of Religious Studies

University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620

Conversations with Jacques Ellul

About This Issue

Welcome to Issue number 22 of the *Ellul Forum*. This issue is a special treat, for the entire issue reflects contributions from Ellul himself. Although he is no longer with us, thanks to these publications, he is still very much a part of our lives. Our *Forum* features excerpts from a new book of conversations with Jacques Ellul by Patrick Troude-Chastenot. Chastenot worked as Ellul's research assistant for over ten years and published these conversations in a French edition, *Entretiens avec Jacques Ellul* (La Table Ronde) in 1994. The English translation is being published by the *University of South Florida-Rochester-St. Louis Studies on Religion and the Social Order* through Scholars Press. We express our appreciation to Scholars Press for permission to publish these excerpts from *Jacques Ellul on Religion, Technology and Politics* by Pierre Troude-Chastenot. See the ad on page two for details if you wish to order a copy. In addition, we have selected poems translated and reviewed by James Lynch. Lynch reviews two books of Ellul's posthumously published poetry. These books reveal yet another side to this complex scholar. We owe both Chastenot and Lynch a great debt for bringing Ellul to us in these contributions.

The next issue of the *Ellul Forum* (July 1999) will devoted to the issue of human rights in relation to Ellul's work. Articles included will be: "Natural Law or Covenant: Human Rights and the Rights of Others" by Sylvain Dujancourt, "Law Rights and Technology" by Andrew Goddard and "Human Rights and the Natural Flaw" by Gabriel Vahanian.

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New from Scholars Press

Jacques Ellul on Religion, Technology and Politics

Conversations with Patrick Troude-Chastenet

Patrick Troude-Chastenet

Joan Mendès France, translator

Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), historian, theologian and social philosopher, was among the very first to look upon Technique as the key to our modernity. Because of the gloomy picture he paints of a society delivering humanity up to the manipulations of propaganda, state oppression and political illusion, this prophetic thinker has often been accused of describing today's world as little more than a wasteland. Yet hope and liberty are at the very heart of all his thinking. This book tells the story of Ellul, the anarchistic Christian, through a series of conversations where, for the first and last time in his life, he bares his heart to reveal to us what is tantamount to an intellectual legacy. It also gives us an overview of an immense lifework as yet insufficiently known.

Patrick Troude-Chastenet is a senior lecturer in Political Science at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in the University of Bordeaux in France. He has published three books and numerous articles on Jacques Ellul. He is a member of the editorial board of The Ellul Forum.

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Forum: Jacques Ellul in Conversation with Patrick Troude-Chastenet

Jacques Ellul: On Religion, Technology and Politics Conversations with Patrick Troude-Chastenet

From Chastenet's Introduction:

"I describe a world with no prospects, but I believe that God accompanies man throughout his whole existence". This is what Jacques Ellul told me one day. The man who wrote *La Foi au prix du doute* (The price of faith is doubt) died with this certitude on the 19th of May 1994 at his home in Pessac, just a few kilometers from the Bordeaux campus.

Right to the very last his long illness was to provide an illustration of one of his favourite themes namely that of the ambivalence of technological progress. It was to prevent him from completing our last two interviews. He, who used to thank his Maker continually for having given him an iron constitution and computer-like memory suffered agonies at not being able to find the name of this or that poet or painter that he had so loved. In the twilight of his life his body, which he had for so long overlooked, claimed its due forcing itself in a myriad ways into our conversation. My *maître* was made of more than just his great intellect. Having to face this fact left me feeling very uneasy.

I should point out that for more than ten years, no doubt out of a sense of propriety, so-called personal questions, even the usual platitudes about general well-being, had been singularly absent from our conversations. The name of the collection where this book was originally to appear left no doubt as to the biographical nature of the undertaking, but by tacit consent we were constantly putting off the moment when we would leave the work and talk about the man.

It is probably not a coincidence that our relationship took a new turn following the death of his wife on the 16th of April, 1991. From that date on Jacques Ellul's life was never the same again. He was overcome by grief. For a while I thought he may never be able to get over it. He had covered the walls of his sitting-room with photos of his wife, Yvette. This is where he used to receive all his guests. I think he was filled with regret and felt that it was urgent that he bear witness to how important she had been in his life. He wanted to convince me that his wife had shaped his destiny and that without her he would never have achieved his life's work.

I remember once when he handed back the manuscript of an introduction to his ideas that I had written, having conscientiously corrected the misprints and spelling mistakes, like the good teacher that he was, he turned to me and said: "That's good work but you haven't once mentioned my wife." I found

this remark rather unjust since I was presenting the work in an academic context, nevertheless I promised to repair the oversight. In fact it wasn't an oversight but a deliberate, admittedly debatable, decision on my part to treat the work without systematically referring to the author's life.

If one is to go by the definition given by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey the work of a biographer is firstly to determine the objectives of the subject of the biography and then use these to throw light on how he lived his life and did what he did. There are extremely few lives that actually lend themselves to such a mechanical approach but if one were to apply this method to Jacques Ellul one would have to say that he always wanted to be a free man and a free spirit. Too bad if the word free has become a hackneyed term today; there is no better word to describe the underlying value that guided Ellul in all fields and in all circumstances.

Ellul cherished this freedom throughout his whole life having received it, as he said, as his father's legacy to him. Just six months before his own death, at an international conference dedicated to his work, Ellul revealed to us that his father had bequeathed him three guiding principle: never lie to anyone including yourself, be charitable towards the weak and stand up to those more powerful than yourself.

From the Interviews:

Chapter One

Patrick CHASTENET - *You seem to be the perfect personification of the old adage, "no man is a prophet in his own country"! In your opinion, what explains your success abroad and your belated popularity in France? Far from Paris, no salvation?*

Jacques ELLUL - To a large extent my success abroad was due to the fact my book on the technological society came out in America at a time when the Americans were experiencing the sort of problems I was talking about. As far as France is concerned, being provincial is always a determining factor if one wants a career as a writer or a philosopher. Several years ago a Parisian journalist came home here to interview me and

asked : "But how can you be an intellectual if you live in the provinces ?" That was a very typical reaction ! Anyhow I've always been quite marginal in all the activities I have been involved in.

I had a university career but did little work in my speciality. I am a Christian, but being a Protestant I am in a minority religion and within Protestantism I belong to an even smaller minority. Naturally I've always been on the side-lines because I've always refused to join any of the mainstream political currents. Perhaps this has something to do with my character. I have the habit of always starting by criticizing all the things I like, which does not necessarily endear me to those who are close to me. Consequently I don't tend to criticize right-wing ideas or people since I have nothing in common with them, but I do criticize the left because I have friends there and a certain affinity for them. So it is obvious that I have always found myself alone and out of place. . . .

Without God, does your work still have a meaning ?

Without God, my work would have an eminently tragic meaning. It would have driven me to taking the same way out as Romain Gary: suicide. I describe a world with no prospects but I have the conviction that God accompanies man throughout history.

You are aware that some of your readers are atheists ?

Yes, but I believe that what I have to say about Christianity is open to everyone including non-believers. By that I mean that hope is transmissible, even without reference to a given God. Hope is the link between the two sides of what I write, which communicate back and forth in a sort of dialectical exchange in which hope is both the crisis point and the solution.

Chapter Four

What is your earliest recollection ?

It must have been in 1914 when I was two and a half. I was playing in the park, the Jardin Public, and I remember being drawn towards the sound of music, military music, when I saw some soldiers coming towards us carrying rifles and my mother saying to me : "Look at them they are soldiers going off to the war". Then I don't really know what got hold of me but I went over to a flower-bed picked a small bunch of flowers and took it over to one of the soldiers and said : "Here soldier this is for you".

I remember that he then took me in his arms and kissed me. I was extremely moved by that procession. Naturally at that age I had no idea what war was but I did understand that something extremely serious was going on. . . .

You once described yourself as being "cold and calculating". Is this true ?

I would say so. Even though I am very moved by poetry for example. I am both very passionate and very cold. I would describe myself as being cold insofar as I cannot help distancing

myself from events. When I take part in social gatherings I do so wholeheartedly, I share the emotions of those who are close to me and afterwards I "ponder the matter". I try to analyse why certain things had been said and done.

What would you say has changed in your character over the years ?

I have become more open towards other people this has happened under the influence of Christianity and of my wife. At sixteen I was a little brute interested in absolutely no-one except my friend Farbos and I was an absolute glutton for work. Work and books were my passion. You mustn't forget I was an only child.

In your spare time did you have a typical loner's activities ?

Not as far as my taste for a good fight was concerned. But it is true that I did have a hobby which was rather unusual for a antimilitary type like me (laughs). I would spend whole afternoons making lead soldiers. I would take the little lead figures and work on them with a soldering iron. Then I would paint them taking care to be absolutely faithful to real-life uniforms because I was already deeply fascinated by history. I can show you my collection, I still have it. I believe it must be rather unique. . . .

Do you see yourself as an austere and undemonstrative Calvinist ?

First of all I am not a Calvinist. I am a follower of Karl Barth who was just the opposite. He was joyful and warm-hearted. Calvin wanted to introduce an unshakeable logic into a domain that I consider not as intellectual. I can't go along with that.

But you were a Calvinist at the outset ?

No. I was much more influenced by Luther and by Kierkegaard than I ever was by Calvin. I've studied Calvin (Laughs). When I was reading theology I was landed with the task of writing a critical summary of Book IV of the *Christian Institutes*. I read the whole work and believe me I found it deadily boring. I have never been attracted by that kind of rigour.

You would agree, wouldn't you, that you are rather cold, even though this does not stem from your spiritual convictions ?

Yes. Despite the fact that I am Latin I am not demonstrative.

How do you account for this reserve ?

I would say that it comes from the distance that existed in my feelings for my father. He was always extremely kind with me but he was never demonstrative. I suppose I've followed his example.

I can't put my finger on it but I feel that you are leaving something out when you describe the influence of your parents.

Perhaps I should have mentioned that my mother passed on her love of poetry to me. Fortunately I always had intelligent

teachers who let us choose our own recitation texts. Mother, who adored poetry, always guided me towards the better poets. From the age of six or seven I have had a taste for poetry. Poetry is the art form which pleases me the most and in which I find deep meaning.

Have you ever thought of publishing your own poems ?

No. I believe I've told you before if my heirs feel like publishing my note-books of poems, if they feel it's a good idea, they can. That is the way I am. In poetry one bares one's soul and I don't like baring my soul. [Forum editorial note: Some of Ellul's poems are published in this issue.]

For those of us who have read your "What I believe" it is clear that you do not like confessions.

Quite honestly I have to tell you that I am not enormously interested in myself. For example I've never been able to stand Proust's style. All that business of writhing tormented souls, tearing things to shreds, and going deeper ever deeper, it all leaves me stone cold. I may not be demonstrative but I am very outward-looking.

But surely in order to understand others you must also understand yourself ? Is introspective work necessarily self-satisfying ?

That is what I have always experienced, even in sociology. I watch a film or a T.V. program and feel this or that about what I've seen. My feelings are spontaneous, I'm a very good audience. It is afterwards that I start to turn it over in my mind.

I analyse my own feelings which I later transpose. I use myself as a model of the average man, usually I react like any man in the street. I'm rarely mistaken, quite simply because I'm well-equipped intellectually and that I don't consider myself as being different in any way. . . .

Chapter Five

At what age did you discover the Bible ?

I began reading the Bible at the age of seven or eight. It was a book that I found fascinating. Of course there were lots of things I didn't understand in it.

Don't you think that that is rather normal for an eight-year-old ?

It wasn't the actual content that I had trouble understanding. In the version of the Bible that we had at home some words were printed in italics. I asked my mother what that meant. She was unable to come up with an answer so she sent me off to a preacher she knew. I took my Bible along to show him but he couldn't give me an answer either. I was very disappointed and put a second question to him.

There's a passage in the Bible where God says he will spare all those he loves for a thousand generations but those who sin

against him he will punish for three generations. I asked the preacher to explain to me how the calculation worked. What happens if in the middle of the thousand generations one man should disobey, this would imply that the next three generations should be punished, in which case what happens to the remaining five hundred generations who were entitled to be spared ? He just stood there dumb struck, unable to answer this my second question. At which point I felt extremely frustrated and I said to myself : "You're going to have to manage on your own. Grown-ups simply don't understand anything." This episode pretty well illustrates how I would read the Bible later on. . . .

When and how did your conversion occur ?

I would have preferred not to talk about that. When it did occur it was overwhelming I would even say violent. It happened during the summer holidays. I was staying with friends in Blanquefort not far from Bordeaux. I must have been seventeen at the time as I had just taken my final exams at school. I was alone in the house busy translating Faust when suddenly, and I have not doubts on this at all, I knew myself to be in the presence of a something so astounding, so overwhelming that entered me to the very centre of my being. That's all I can tell you.

I was so moved that I left the room in a stunned state. In the courtyard there was a bicycle lying around. I jumped on it and fled. I have no idea whatsoever how many dozens of kilometers I must have covered. Afterwards I thought to myself "You have been in the presence of God." And there you are.

Could you physically see or hear this presence ?

No. No words were uttered. I saw nothing. Nothing. But the presence was unbelievably strong. I knew with every nerve in my body that I was in the presence of God.

What happened to your usual critical faculties, which in any other situation would make you doubt your first impression, would make you check again and search out any counter-evidence ? They didn't come into play here, did they ?

I very quickly realized that I was experiencing a conversion and that indeed I should put it to the test to see if it held strong or not. So I set about reading antichristian writers. By the time I was eighteen I had read Celsus, Holbachref EX "de Holbach Paul Henri" and also Marxref EX "Marx Karl" whom I'd come across earlier. My faith did not budge. It was for real.

At the moment that this "revelation" occurred did it cross your mind that perhaps your senses were playing tricks on you ?

No. I was in excellent shape both physically and psychologically. I was well-balanced. Of course I did entertain that possibility but finally I rejected it.

Have you ever felt like writing about your conversion and how it happened ?

I have never written about it and have no intention of ever doing so. Once again, I don't like talking about myself. As I have already explained for my poems, they give away too much about me. And I certainly wouldn't like to behave like a second Claudel. After all my conversion is a matter between me and God and it really isn't anyone else's business.

Perhaps it's because you are afraid of ridicule that you don't want to?

Don't worry on that score. I've never been in the least afraid of ridicule.

From your description it was sudden, violent and disturbing. There was nothing of the beatific illumination about what happened?

Certainly not. And it didn't involve fear either but I was stunned. Meeting God had brought a complete change in my whole being. To begin with this meant a re-ordering of my ideas. I would have to think differently now that God was near me.

Following this "startling" encounter I believe your actual conversion happened at a much slower pace?

Yes, it was a process which went on for years. On the one hand I knew that I had experienced something fundamental and unquestionable but on the other hand I wanted to avoid God's presence in my life. No doubt this has to do with my need for independence. I didn't want to have to depend on anyone in my life. What I hadn't understood was that faith can bring extraordinary freedom. For me Christianity was a sort of orthodoxy, a moral constraint and not at all a sort of liberation.

You spoke of having to re-order the way you thought. Does this mean you already had a structured mind at this stage?

I had an academic mind. In secondary school we didn't do anything too fanciful, believe me. I had done very well in my final year, majoring in the humanities. I had studied metaphysics but that left me cold. Intellectually I was in good working order but nothing more

When and in what circumstances did you meet Bernard?

We were together from the beginning of the secondary school onwards. He was already remarkably eccentric and untidy. I was fascinated by his brilliant mind but was rather put off by his savage wit which frightened me somewhat. He was just the opposite of me. He did not work hard, he did not do well. We had nothing in common until one day, during our freshman year at the university, he invited me to go camping with him in the Pyrénées.

There were just the two of us, entirely by ourselves in our camp up in the mountains. I was bedazzled to find myself with someone who was ten times more cultivated than myself, who could talk about loads of writers I'd never even heard of and who miraculously seemed to have found something in me that

he appreciated. Perhaps it was my gravity or perhaps my ability to listen. And goodness knows Bernard needed someone to listen to him. (Laughs). After that we often went on camping holidays together and became close friends.

What did you get out of this friendship?

Charbonnauref EX "Charbonneau Bernard" taught me how to think and how to be a free spirit. Between the way I had been brought up by my father and the education I had received at school I had the single track mind of the good student. He got me out of this mindset and taught me how to think critically. Among other things he taught me, a confirmed city-dweller, to love nature and the countryside.

You were a self-confessed Protestant and he was rather antichristian?

Strictly speaking Bernard could not be described as antichristian. The Protestant scouts had left a deep mark on him but from the very outset he always claimed to be an agnostic and from that he never wavered even though he was to go through some experiences which would bring him closer to Christianity.

Do you consider him as your intellectual equal?

Today the answer is yes, but for years he was my intellectual master. He was the one who told me what to read and influenced my views on society. Make no mistake about it he was the captain and I was an excellent first-mate.

Can you explain why his work has gone unrecognized?

As Bernard used to say "I attacked society at its most sensitive points. If you attack society, society will hit back, the weapon it uses is silence." I believe he was right.

Can you tell me more about your activities during your student days?

I divided my time between attending classes, reading and working to keep myself. I used to give private classes every evening for a couple of hours. From 1932 or 1933 onwards much of our time was taken up with meetings of the Bordeaux section of the Friends of Espritref EX "Esprit". By then Bernard was studying History at the university and we saw each other every day. We would organize camping holidays to which we would invite along fellow students we found interesting.

Were these mixed-sex camps?

Of course.

What were your views on that matter?

Strange as it may seem Bernard who always seemed be rather lax was very straight-laced on sexual morality and so was

I. As far as I was concerned it was out of the question to have a steady relationship with a girl if I didn't intend to marry her.

Indeed, but surely nobody even thought of you as being "lax" did they?

No. (Laughs). But then I suppose the fact that I didn't have a cent to my name was a bit of a godsend from that point of view too. While all my friends were able to treat their girlfriends to dances or take them for coffee, there wasn't the slightest chance that I could do the same. I couldn't even treat myself to such things I simply had no money. I never tried to approach a girl and indeed I never met any girls.

Didn't this make you feel frustrated?

No. I was happy with my private life, my reading and the more time went on the more I withdrew into my books. It was my wife who got me out of that, but that was much later on.

Did you feel any antagonism towards people who were different from you, did you feel contempt for womanizers?

Not at all. My best friend at university a young man named Léca, was an incredible womanizer. He used to have a new girlfriend every three months, and that didn't shock me one bit. I was very strict with myself as far as morals went but completely openminded towards what others got up to. It was this attitude that enabled me to work with delinquency prevention clubs in later years. Léca was to become very useful to me, he was an extremely good boxer, so after 1934 when the serious fighting began he became my bodyguard. ...

You just mentioned the strikes over Jèze Gaston! What happened exactly?

They happened in 1934 or 1935 shortly after Mussolini's ref EX "Mussolini Benito had invaded Ethiopia. Professor Gaston Jèzeret EX "Jèze Gaston" was defending the cause of Ethiopia before the International Court of Justice in the Hague. This provoked an incredible mobilisation of extreme right-wing students in all the law schools throughout France, who called for the resignation of Jèze on the grounds that, in their view, fascist Italy was acting within its rights.

In the turmoil I can still see myself grabbing demonstrators by their jacket lapels out of the fray and asking them "But do you have the faintest idea who Jèzeret EX "Jèze Gaston" is?". They had no idea but kept on shouting "Jèze must go!". For me that was quite a revelation into the base mentality of the masses.

In the end there were only three of us left standing against these baying hounds. There was Henri Rödel EX "Rödel Henri", who was shot by the Germans during the war. There was a girl, who looked as if she may be Dutch and who was trying to curb the demonstrators. And there was me.

And who was the Dutch-looking girl?

She was my future wife. We married in 1937. She was a first year law student and I was working for my doctorate. When we met she had already trained as a nurse. Her father lived in South Africa and didn't look after her at all. It was her grandfather who had decided that she wasn't strong enough to be a nurse, which was quite true. On his advice she had turned to law, but that didn't interest her at all.

Was she involved in politics?

Strictly speaking, no. She had leanings towards the Jeune Républiqueret EX "Jeune République" movement but what really disturbed her deeply was crowd behavior. It was enough for the crowd to shout against a man for her to leap at once to his defence.

Was she a Christian?

She had been an ardent Catholic. She was brought up by a former nun of an order that had been secularized who was a most admirable woman indeed, and whom I came to admire enormously later on. At about the age of eighteen she started asking herself the usual questions one asks at that age so she sought out a chaplain to help her. He listened to her very patiently with a gentle smile on his face then said: "My dear little Yvette, I've already dealt with all your questions in the catechism class. Now you just look back through what you learned and you'll find all the answers."

Yvette stood up and said "Goodbye. You won't be seeing me again." That was how she broke with Christianity as a whole, to the great sorrow of the former nun who had brought her up.

Was that in Bordeaux?

Quite near, in Cadaujac. My mother-in-law lived in Paris. By the time I met Yvette she had become antichristian and was very much under the influence of Nietzsche EX "Nietzsche" Error! Bookmark not defined.. One day I had invited her to come camping with me. There were three or four of us on that trip. I used to read the Bible quietly in my corner. Now this intrigued her as she had never opened a Bible herself. She then asked me to explain certain passages to her and that is how, thanks to the Bible we became close. We would always read and discuss the Bible together from that time on. ...

Chapter 6

Around 1930 when you organized your first camping expeditions in the Pyrénées were you actually unaware of the Wandervogel which after all had been in existence for some time?

Completely unaware. Our goal was simply to get closer to nature and to enable young city-dwellers to come and live in

the countryside. This corresponded deep-down to what we were and to our own experience.

Wasn't there something of a initiation rite in what you were doing which could be compared with the ideology of those German youth movements ?

No, we did not share the same ideology. But it is true that we required anyone who wished to take part in our camping expeditions to be able to spend a weekend alone in the mountains. No-one actually did that however ! As for the rite of diving into ice-cold water, that was something we had already been doing for a long time, from the time of the Protestant post-scout movement in fact. We took those scouts who were able to stand an extremely tough existence. Among other things they had to go though there was the what we idiotically called "the drawing of lots" every morning which involved diving completely naked into one of the lakes in the Vosges.

Were you all around the same age ?

Paulo Breitmayerref EX "Breitmayer Paulo was the eldest. Then there were two or three boys of my age, that is to say less than twenty. One of those was Pierre Fouchierref EX "Fouchier Pierre" who was later to become a remarkable pastor. We were the organizers of this movement which was supposed to be anti-boyscout. We would perform some of the scout rituals backwards. For us the scouts were far too disciplined and far too likely to become a youth movement in the service of the State. Whereas what we were proposing was totally anarchistic. I can still remember some of the things we got up to at night that were extremely funny.

Can you give me an example ?

Certainly. Two or three of us would decide to create havoc throughout the camp. We would start by pulling up all the tent pegs so that the tents collapsed on their sleeping inhabitants.

Was this a Protestant scout movement ?

No it was rather a Protestant anti-scout movement. (Laughs)

Did you have a uniform ?

Absolutely not. The scouts made a ritual of raising the flag. So we performed a mock ceremony for the lowering of the flag.

Did Bernard Charbonneauf EX "Charbonneau Bernard" come along with you ?

No. He had once been a scout but after that he refused to let himself be dragooned into any organized group whatsoever.

So at the same time as you were attending the anti-scout camps and you were also attending those of Bernard Charbonneauf EX "Charbonneau Bernard". Did he attach any importance to tests of endurance ?

He didn't devise endurance tests specifically. Our endurance was tested by the activities we indulged in. For instance

we would walk twenty-five kilometers through the mountains because we wanted to get to such and such place.

So this was in no way linked to a belief in physical effort or a glorification of virile strength ?

Not at all. Not at all. Absolutely not. We never ever held that kind of belief. Charbonneauf EX "Charbonneau Bernard" was always saying to anyone who would listen to him that he did whatever he pleased. Of course this quest for what pleased him could entail the most incredible marches through snow-flows high up in the mountains.

I believe you attended a Nazi meeting in the thirties. Is that right ?

Yes, I went to Germany for the first time in 1934. I went again in 1935 when I attended a Nazi gathering in Munich.

Had this any connection with your activities in the personalist groups ?

Not at all I had been invited to Germany by some Protestant associations.

So how did you wind up attending a Nazi meeting ?

I went out of curiosity. There were such meetings taking place all over at that time, you know.

Did these meetings give you food for thought for your later work on propaganda ?

Absolutely. It was fascinating to see how easily a crowd could be whipped up and welded into a single unit... No-one, absolutely no-one, had any individual reactions left.

What about you ? Did you get caught up in the crowd reaction at that instant ?

No, but it was difficult not to raise my arm in the general salute. We did get lots of funny looks but somehow managed to contain ourselves nevertheless. . . .

Chapter Seven

What did you actually do in the Resistance ?

I was never involved in any fighting. Basically I did relief and liaison work. We were able to help a good number of Jewish families from our area. We also worked with friends from Poitiers who redirected "deliveries" from Paris to us from time to time. Despite being very run down our home was very large so we were able to house anyone who turned up : French

resistance-workers, escaping Spaniards and even three Russian refugees from prison camps in Germany.

These three guys had crossed the whole of Germany and the whole of France and it was my job to get them into fit condition. They were as nice as could be. It brings a lump to my throat when I remember our first evening meal together. My wife had served them soup and invited them to start. All three of them had their heads bowed and their hands joined. They only began their meal when they had finished grace and crossed themselves with a flourish. This had me flabbergasted I can tell you. These were members of the Komsomol ! We got on extremely well together all the time they stayed with us the only thing that bothered us was their complete lack of sense of danger. They were tall and blond so they were recognizable from miles away and these silly fools roamed all over the place.

The reason we had so many people coming through our house was that it was situated only a few hundred meters from the demarcation line. I spent most of my time helping people get across into the free French zone. I was in cahoots with an organization that dealt in forged papers. So I was able to provide a whole series of people with forged identity cards or forged ration books.

I was also in contact with three neighbouring maquis in Pellegrue, Frontenac and Sauveterre-de-Guyenne and was able to transmit messages from one to the others.

So you were a go-between, in fact ?

Yes I was. I was there to warn them of any danger as well. One day a German motorized company came and camped for a while in our garden. When I saw them preparing to head off towards Pellegrue I leapt on my bike. Since I knew all the side roads I managed to get to the maquisards to warn them just in time.

Was anyone aware of your clandestine activities ?

Yes. Of course. Whenever the gendarmes came to make inquiries about us the mayor would always answer : "No you've got nothing to worry about with the Elluls. I've got nothing on them. They are O.K." And nothing more came of it. Now the mayor was a wily old peasant. He knew perfectly well what we were up to but always covered for us. I never talked to anyone in the village about things but everybody knew. Moreover just before the Germans began their retreat some of the older inhabitants of Martres came to see me to offer their services. Their rifles dated back to the first world war but they wanted to join the fray.

Was it because of your convictions about non-violence that you didn't take up arms ?

I didn't have a theoretical position on the subject. At the end of 1943 I had brought several young people to live with us who were coming to the end of their studies. We came to the conclusion that it would be better if we were armed. I got in contact with the network that provided forged documents but was never able to track down any weapons. That's all there is to it. Had we been able to lay hands on some revolvers or

tommy-guns no doubt we would have joined the maquis in Sauveterre. I was perfectly well aware that if I got involved in the fighting I would be crossing over into the realm of necessity but if I had to I was quite prepared to give up my liberty. . . .

Chapter Nine

Locally I believe you are very much involved in the prevention of juvenile delinquence ?

Yes indeed, this is all due to a meeting I had with Yves Charrierref EX "Charrier Yves" in 1958. He came to me asking for legal and spiritual advice. He had been working as community instructor with a public organization and he felt that very little could be achieved for maladjusted boys by keeping them in institutions. In other words, he wanted to work with young delinquents, not in an enclosed environment, but in their natural surroundings : the street. We therefore founded the Prevention Club in Pessac and I worked there with Yves until he died in 1969 as a result of a diving accident.

Concretely, what was your role ?

Basically I was an intermediary. I was a buffer between Charrier, the police, the courts and the Social Services Department who paid his salary but wanted assurances. Actually I was the local personality who was there as a sort of caution for the running of such a marginal club. At that time in France there were no more than two or three such experiments being carried out.

Do you have any direct contact with these youngsters ?

Yes, I often went to the club and they knew that I was "the boss" as they would say. I was very well received by these young people who could in fact be very violent. I never had any problems. Something quite extraordinary happened as the deviant behaviour changed pattern from bomber jackets to the beat generation to drug addicts, some of them asked Charrier if he knew of someone who could explain the Bible to them. So once a week I gave Bible classes for thirty or so misfits who I must say turned up very regularly.

Was Charrier a Christian ?

Not explicitly ! Whenever I asked him about it he would always say, "Look, I'll look after doing what has to be done and you can do the believing for me." (Laughs) He wasn't a Christian but he behaved as a Christian should.

I believe Yves Charrier took great personal risks, and to his cost, by physically confronting hooligans.

How did he cope with drug addicts ?

Charrier had less success with the new style delinquents than with the black-leatherjacket brigade. He once said to me : "When all is said and done, what can I do ? I know a young boy who lives in the basement of a tower block in Burck. He spends all day on a mattress on the floor. There are some girls who

bring him food but he does nothing, simply nothing". In other words Charrier felt he could only do something with delinquents whose delinquency took an active form. As he often explained to me : "They have bags of energy but they burn it all up in deviant behaviour. What I do is to try to get them to channel it into doing something good". With lethargic, indolent youngsters he didn't know where to start.

Has the Prevention Club survived his death ?

Yes. After his death I took over the directorship of the club which was not easy. Then I found an excellent instructor, Luc Fauconnet, who was almost the complete opposite of Charrier, but who was the sort of person who could deal with this new type of misfit. He was a man of words. And it's true that drug addicts, although they are very sluggish in behaviour, can be immensely talkative. The most difficult part, as the new director told me, was that they wanted to start talking at two in the morning.

Chapter 10

If you had to sum up in a few words what your wife has brought you, apart from her love, what would you say it was ?

I think I can answer that question by quoting something she said herself. We were not yet engaged but were seeing a great deal of each other and I was preparing for the agrégation exam at the time when she said to me : "Do you realize that if you go on like this you'll end up being nothing more than a book-worm ?"

I replied that I couldn't really see what else there was to do, to which she replied : "But you must live your life !" I was completely baffled by that because I had no idea what living actually meant.

That is what she did for me. She helped me learn to live. This meant that I learned to relate to others. I wouldn't say that before knowing her I was completely insensitive to the simple pleasures of life, but with her I learned to appreciate and enjoy so many things. She also taught me to listen. That is something I didn't know how to do. That's absolutely true. Being a teacher by nature I was someone who talked and who didn't listen (Laughs)

Learning to listen was useful to me in my job and even more so for me as a Christian and the work I had to do there. She used to say to me, "You can't be a good Christian if you don't listen to other people. How can you help people to understand if you don't listen to their problems and questions ?"

Obviously, and I don't want this to be taken as a criticism, I had been modeling my attitudes on those of my friend Charbonneau. He was completely impervious to other people's questions too. He would air his own views without a thought for what others might think. I was rather like that when I was twenty.

So your wife was able to change your character ?

She changed my whole way of being. After that receiving people and listening to them became a very important part of my life. . . .

What were your wife's interests and her tastes when you first met her ? Which of her passions did she pass on to you ?

What she passed on to me was more a certain sensitivity that she possessed than her position on different matters. She was extraordinarily sensitive to atmosphere. Sometimes when we were in a group she would pick up any feelings of unease or tensions between various people there. As for me as long as I was talking I never noticed if anything was the matter. I was completely oblivious of anything else going on.

It was very important for her that the relationships of those people around her should be free-flowing both with her and between themselves. She found it very hard to stand the roughness of exchange that had always existed with my old friends. We could be very violent in our arguments and then be the best of friends when it was over. She would defend her ideas with much more delicacy. . . .

What do you regret most in your life ?

This is going to sound very pretentious but I don't really regret anything. Nothing apart from having been a little impatient with my wife towards the end of her life. Otherwise I regret nothing in my life, even if I have sinned. I'm not a saint.

I was thinking in terms of what you would have liked to have done or to have seen achieved. Or of an area which may have disappointed you ?

First of all there are books that I would have liked to have written and that I never got round to. For example I would really have liked to write a book about what the sea has meant to me. Next I regret having several hundred unfinished poems that I can't be bothered to go back to. I criticize myself for that sometimes.

So that is what you regret about writing. Are there any regrets concerning your life as a man of action or simply your life as a man ?

I don't regret much in fact. Perhaps I focused too much on myself that is true. I always succeeded what I wanted to succeed in. Perhaps I didn't help others enough. Although I do know that my students appreciated me, liked me and I helped them to the best of my ability. I don't judge myself severely even though I wasn't always what I should have been as far as my wife was concerned.

Book Reviews

The Poetry of Jacques Ellul

An Essay-Review & Translation by James Lynch

After Jacques Ellul's death in 1994 (at age 82) there were added to his *oeuvre* two small books of poems: *Silences: Poèmes* (Bordeaux: Opales, 1995) and *Oratorio: Les quatre cavaliers de l'Apocalypse* (Bordeaux: Opales, 1997). Both volumes were published with the assistance of l'Institut des Sciences de la Nature et de l'Agro-alimentaire de Bordeaux. Neither book contains an introduction or a preface, or any explanation to the poems that they contain, save for a blurb on the back cover of each.

Oratorio is composed of poems Ellul wrote during the 1960s and embodies many of the major themes of his life work: nature, technology, death, God, man, isolation, and freedom. These poems, divided into five chapters, form a unified whole narrating Ellul's vision of the Apocalypse. As the seals are broken, various narrators describe the world's destruction and the roles they play in it. These monologues are interspersed by different "choruses," whose purpose, as in Greek tragedy, is to comment on and forward the action taking place.

Ellul has chosen to write these poems in a variety of forms and meters, but has a tendency towards alexandrines, often rhymed, which fit his lofty, tragic subject matter. The poems are at turns reminiscent of the mysticism of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross:

Quand le Seigneur des Temps accepte de mourir
et que la liberté s'affirme en cet instant
dans l'accueil de ce pas qu'homme peut seul subir
soumis au plus profond dernier dépouillement
(Mort amère
où la flèche retombe au sommet de sa course)
(from "Quatrième partie: La Mort, III")

*When the Lord of all Times agrees to die
and liberty's affirmed at that moment
in the welcome of the step man alone can suffer
subjected to the final, deepest examination
(bitter Death
when the arrow falls again to the summit of its course)*

or of the beautifully-described horror of Baudelaire:

Pour cet appel!—à ce cheval—le quatrième—
arraché lourdement des mondes inférieurs
fléchissant sous le poids des victoires certaines
et à son cavalier couronné de tumeurs
(from "Quatrième partie: La mort, I")

*As for that call—to such a horse—the fourth
dragged heavily from inferior worlds
sagging with weight of certain victories
and that of his horseman, crowned with tumors.*

Silences, by contrast, is a less unified collection of sixty-six poems originally hand-written by Ellul in a notebook and later gathered into their present format by his secretary, Claude Fauconnet, and his oldest son, Jean Ellul. These poems are more varied in both their themes and forms than those from *Oratorio*, as well as being more personal. The majority are untitled, as one might expect from poems taken from such an intimate source. Despite the shift in focus, these poems deal with many of the same themes as those found in *Oratorio* and in Ellul's work as a whole.

I have chosen for the purpose of my translation two poems from each book which I consider to be representative of the collections in general. I have alternated stanzas of Ellul's original French with my English approximation.

From *Oratorio*:

"Troisième partie: Le cheval noir"
II: Choeurs alternés
Premier chœur
Part Three: The Black Horse
II: Alternating Choruses
First Chorus

L'homme a dit: "Je produis" — Les richesses écloses
au terme du travail des générations
ont répondu sans frein au viol total des choses —
Détruite la Nature, et l'homme en est caution!

*Man said: "I produce"—The riches budding
at the end of the toil of generations
responded unchecked to the absolute rape of things—
Nature Destroyed, and man is the guarantee!*

Ah! quand seront comblés les fossés de ton âme
assainis les marais et construits les remparts
répandus dans la plaine et bunkers et silos —
Élève cette Tour d'où tu comptes tes biens!

*Ah! when will the gaps in your soul be filled
the swamps drained and the ramparts constructed and
scattered across the plain with bunkers and silos—
Erect that Tower where you count your wealth!*

Contemple l'esclavage où tu mis ta fortune
Les fleuves avortés les conduites forcées
Et les monts déboisés qui pleurent leur absence
Les filons épuisés et les poches vidées

*Consider the slavery in which you place your fortune
The aborted rivers the forced canals
And the deforested mountains that weep their lack
The exhausted veins and emptied pockets.*

Les monceaux de scories restants seuls de ta rage
et seul libre, le vent qui disperse tes biens . . .
Devant tant de richesse — regarde donc les mains
qui se tendent en vain — reflétant ton image

*Only the slag heaps of your rage remain
and, solely free, the wind that scatters your goods...
Before so much wealth—look at your hands
that grasp in vain—reflecting your image*

Chaque instant te dévoile un besoin désolé
Tant de travail pour rien que plus d'œuvres encore
nécessaires toujours vide toujours encore
où s'enchaîne l'écho des travaux consommés

*Each moment reveals to you a sorry need
So much work for nothing but still more work
(always necessary always ringing hollow)
following the echo of accomplished tasks*

Où prendrais-tu ce qu'il faut pour répondre?
usure de la terre et de ta propre vie
quand pour l'entretenir et combler ton envie
tu t'énerves, te châtînes

*Where will you find what is necessary for responding?
the wearing-away of the earth and of your own life
when, in order to maintain it and fulfill your desire,
you become nervous, castrate yourself*

Pour ta force tarie tu t'es fait relayer
et tu comptes pour vivre en cette ardente quête
sur les monstres actifs qu tu as embrayés —
Sombres fourriers en toi de l'implacable Bête.

*With your forces run dry, you make yourself step down
and, to live on that ardent quest, you count*

*on the active monsters that you have set in motion
Somber harbingers for you of the Implacable Beast.*

Mais te voici maintenant soudé à tes machines
et rien ne peut plus te dégager de leur destin
La Machine
elle fonctionne —
elle fonctionne de nuit, de jour
Tu te fatigues, tu te crispes, tu te tends tu te trompes —
Tu la suis.

*But here you are now fused with your machines
and nothing can extricate you from your destiny
The Machine
it operates—
it operates by night, by day
You grow weary, you grow tense, you strain, you fool
yourself—
You follow it.*

Bientôt dormir! Non ton repos où le prendras-tu?
quand la machine tourne encore
et ton bras fatigué n'a plus d'ardeur mais elle continue
ignorante — au même rythme et te dépasse
te laisse loin derrière endormi au long des routes
où san faiblir tourne le fer.

Soon to sleep! Where will you take your repose?
while the machine still turns
and your weary arm no longer has fervour, but It continues
ignorant—at the same rhythm and it surpasses you
It leaves you far behind, asleep along the routes
where, without weakening, the iron turns.

Deuxième chœur Second Chorus

Rêve, oh combien, avant que l'Inexpiable t'arrache le bras
de ses ongles de fer
avant que l'Impardonnable arrache ta cervelle
oublieuse
Elle qui n'oublie jamais — et ne peut supporter qu'on
l'oublie

Rêve de ta possession, de ta maîtrise, de ta gloire
Rêve
de ta production, de ton bonheur qui vient

Ce qui vient c'est la calculante Broyeuse.

Dream, oh how much, before the Inexpiable tears up your
arm
with Its iron nails
before the Unpardonable extracts your forgetful
brain
the Machine that never forgets—and cannot bear that an-
other forgets it
Dream of your possession, of your mastery of your glory
Dream
of your production, of your coming happiness

What comes is the calculating Grinder.

From Silences:

Pèlerinage à la civilisation de la mort
Pilgrimage to the Civilization of the Dead

Quelle ombre, Messieurs, je n'eusse cru si dense
L'absence où je m'enfonce et m'ignore moi-même
Simple question de réflexe sans doute.

Mais nous sommes dépassés par ce jeu provisionnel
dont nous avons l'impression de faire les frais
sans en être encore certains.

Such darkness, Sirs, I wouldn't have believed so dense
The absence into which I plunge and ignore myself
A simple question of reflexes no doubt.

But we are outmatched by that provisional game
of which we have the impression of bearing the brunt
without yet being certain of it.

Quoi donc? une étoile?
Le matin?
Quelqu'obscur souvenir, ou le choix d'un destin.
On ne nous la fait plus. Nous avons laissé tout cela à la
dérive.
Et c'est très loin de nous—Introduction
au monde de la Terreur—Parade sur l'Echafaud.

Nous avons cet azur dans le ventre.
Mais oui—et pas ailleurs—pas même sur le drapeau
Rouge.

What then? a star?
The morning?
Some obscure memory, or the choice of a destiny.
We can do it no longer. We have set all of that
adrift.
And it is very far from us—Introduction
to the world of Terror—Parade on the Scaffolding.

We have that blue in our bellies.
Of course—and not elsewhere—not even on the
Red flag.

L'immense intestin prophylactique nous tympanise sans
arrêt

Et nous nous retrouvons nez à nez
Sans aucune poésie

The immense prophylactic intestine splits our ears without

stopping
And we find ourselves face to face
Without any poetry

sans aucune réciprocité

sans aucune profondeur densité masse épaisseur
sans mythes ni auréoles
dans un état de digestion très avancée

without any reciprocity
without any depth density mass thickness
without myths and halos
within a very advanced state of digestion

Bol alimentaire d'une civilisation mondialisée om-
niprésente
omnicompétente omnispatialisée
Nous sommes ainsi assurés de nous y retrouver

Mais il fait noir et nos desserts se font attendre
Peut-être aura-je l'honneur de me retrouver tout entier
fécal
certainement très saur
Car tout l'utilisable est déjà utilisé et l'on cherche affolé
quelques briques à lui remettre
Enorme coquecigüe qui risque de s'arrêter
(chemise longue—boucle blonde—et les yeux
Rien n'espère que le bistre et que la nuit)

Bolus of a globalized civilization omnipresent
omnicompetent omnispatialized

We are thus assured of finding ourselves there

But it's pitch dark and our desserts keep us waiting
Perhaps I will have the honor of finding myself entirely fecal
certainly very smoked
Because all the usable has already been used and we search,
panic-stricken
for some bricks to put back
Enormous chimera that risks stopping
(long shirt—blonde curl—and the eyes
hope for Nothing except the black-brown and the night)à

part ça vos trompettes peuvent sonner

Pour le boulot, midi sonné—pour le devoir, sainte cohorte

—et la
Patrie ou le Proletariat
Plume la Poule—

apart from this your trumpets can sound

For work, lunchtime blown—for duty, saint troop
—and the
Patria or the Proletariate
Pluck the chicken

Evêques ou Marles, Secrétaire du syndicat, chef de cellule
du

Parti des Fusillés—Croix de Lorraine et croix faucillée—
dollar
et goupillon—sabre—étoile rouge et blanche—
Ambassadeur ET
Commissaire du peuple—Poète Surréalofficiel
du malheur des pauvres et du Maréchal quelque'il soit

Les nouveaux aristos à la lanterne
Mais s'il y a des canons
il n'y a plus de son.

Bishop or Marles, Secretary of the union, chief of the
committee of the
Party of the Executed—Cross of Lorraine and cross of the
reaped—
dollar
and holy-water sprinkler—saber—red and white star
ET Ambassador
Superintendent of the people—Surreal-official Poet
of the misfortune of the poor and of the Marshal whatever-
it-might-be
the nouveau riche at the lantern
But if there are any cannons
there is no more sound.

Adolescence
Adolescence

Avez-vous oublié ces jours de solitude
où rien ne nous pouvait sortir de nos ennuis
quand l'implacable avait organisé nos fugues
et ramenait sans fin l'absurdité des nuits
Toutes les Nuits—et nous allions de l'une à l'autre
les fléaux s'abattaient sur des blés de misère
et nous quêtions les grains jaillis des yeux d'un autre
Lueur seule accordée dans ce désert de pierre

Oh tragique innocent des amours enfantines

Have you forgotten days of solitude
when nothing could save us from our boredom:
the implacable organized our flights
and brought back endlessly the absurd nights
Every Night—we went from one to the next
the plagues swept down on miserable young shoots
we sought the flashing scraps from others' eyes
the sole Gleam granted this stoney desert

Oh tragic innocence of childish loves

These collections serve well both as an epitaph to Ellul and
as a compliment to his scholarly works; they offer insight into
the spirit of a man who is often more recognized for his mind.