

A Therapeutics of Memory: Paule du Bouchet, *Emportée*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2011

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The direct language of feeling is allegorical.¹

Can remembering the fine details of a long period of suffering be a means of alleviating one's hurt? It is to such a therapeutics that Paule du Bouchet appears to commit herself in *Emportée* [Carried Away]. The daughter of Tina Jolas and the poet André du Bouchet, her life from the age of six was, it seems, irreparably blighted when her mother abandoned the family home to go and live with the poet René Char. That was when Tina Jolas was carried away by a passion that overwhelmed her and would never leave her. Rushing off all of a sudden to join her lover at the most unexpected moments, she became for her daughter an image of abandonment: 'the mother who kept leaving'; the mother who, seized with urgent panic, would declare: 'I just have to leave'; the mother too who promised 'I'll come back very soon' – and who wouldn't come back. When she was back in her home, her leaving again was always imminent. To such an extent that her very presence in her daughter's life was 'given flesh by its potential absence and reinvigorated by each departure': 'right up to the fervid point' – writes Paule du Bouchet – 'where the unimaginable door that closed opened in reality on to a strange form of presence' (but wasn't that just seeking consolation in illusion?). Later, Tina would be the person who always left when Paule arrived; the person who, in Paule's dreams, 'was going off in a few days'; someone who refused to be disturbed by telephone when she was with Char, even when her teenage daughter tried to commit suicide. With René Char, Tina had boarded a vessel in which there was no room for anyone else to love Tina: the fickle lover was highly jealous, even with regard to children. Tina was an allegory of disappearance, an allegory of the instant when the loved figure withdraws and leaves you alone.

Emportée traverses forty years of chaotic relationship between Tina and Paule, between mother and daughter; a time of suffering sharper than any happiness for Paule, a time of happiness sharper than any suffering for Tina.

Over a period of thirty years, Tina remained blissfully happy living with René Char, despite the latter's egocentrism. Paule du Bouchet's book is interspersed with letters from Tina Jolas to a close confidant, letters which emphasize the plenitude of her love in the most trying of contexts: the

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initial feelings of guilt of the woman who had abandoned husband and children for an insane passion; the mean-spiritedness of the lover who refused all competition from a daughter's love; the mental and sentimental ramblings of the ageing poet, and to cap it all, Char's marriage to another woman one year before his death. But from Tina there was never even the hint of complaint, but rather, whatever the circumstance, the extraordinary faculty of feeling blissfully happy. Along with the no less extraordinary capacity to put from her mind any discordant note, beginning with 'A', her former husband: 'all it needs is for me no longer to see A for my awareness of him to be completely wiped away'. A cruel remark. Nevertheless, during the last ten years of Tina's life,² and in particular during her last year of life, she began to question 'was this all a dream? Did I really experience what I have lived through?' Were it not for the sense of disquiet which seems to accompany it ('Is that how I really should have lived?'), this question would appear to be purely a formal one. However rhetorical it might have been, this exercise nevertheless took on the quasi-compulsive aspect of the numerous notes scribbled by Tina during her final year, beginning invariably with the heading 'Remembering'. Was she trying thus to escape the grip of coming death? From the earliest years of her life with Char, Tina, who was not a believer, had looked for a form of metaphysical succour in the beauties of the landscape:

I never told you of those triumphant words (why triumphant?) that the tablelands and all the hilltops whisper to me. I try to understand why such almost breathless happiness, such sudden clarity of vision is granted to me when I see these vast landscapes. [...] Beauty (for want of a more eternal word) stands before my eyes like the *release*, the untying of what is inside me. The little knot of forest which releases just where the Epte slips into the Seine is the proof. The proof of what? That I have been on earth and my eyes have seen (p. 29).

What word is 'more eternal' than 'beauty' than that of 'God'? In this way is affirmed the rejection of all belief and its immediate substitution by an even more 'unbelievable' notion: the very object of one's perception – hilltops, forests, rivers – becomes 'proof', and evidence, that one has lived. Does this mean that, in seeing a landscape, I am being seen by it? Such that its memory, which remains, substitutes for mine, which will fade away?³ The beauty of the world, perceived by me and itself having perceived me, would certify that I have lived. According to one common way of thinking, Tina's proclaimed atheism would in this way be accompanied by a resurgence of an ancient pagan pantheism. But all this metaphysics, however astonishing, was insufficient for her to understand her own life: was it all a dream? Whence the question, whose poignancy is palpable despite its oddity, that Tina Jolas put to her ex-husband, André du Bouchet, on her hospital bed at the time of his final visit to her: 'could you tell me my life story?' To ask that of the man she had abandoned and who had never got over it! What could he have said, given precisely that the thirty most intense years of his wife's life had passed him by? Beyond the unconscious cruelty of the question, could it have been a plea for understanding and forgiveness? When one person's memory no longer suffices to set the mind at peace, should that person not have recourse to that of another, be that of a surviving witness, or that imagined memory of an 'inhabited space', or that of the divinity? Isn't it necessary that 'memory be done' for the one about to die to be assured, once calm has returned, that they have indeed lived?

Reflection on memory plays the same crucial role in the long quest undertaken by Paule du Bouchet to reach as well a point of serenity that had so long eluded her. The spiritual exercise that constitutes *Emportée* seems to be developed in three stages: (1) a journey back through memories that are sad, diffuse, fragmentary – hazy images rather than events with sharp outlines; (2) next, the recollection of other memories, also sad ones but this time sharply remembered; (3) finally, the

flow of memories of happy times, moments that were intense and rare – and which culminate in the strange scene of a bull, saved from drowning and ready to take on a new life. These three stages are often superposed in a narrative that frequently oscillates back and forward; but a narrative which nevertheless divides between three time periods (without these completely corresponding to the three aforementioned stages of this long therapy): a first narrative time frame sundered by the two critical events which were Tina Jolas's leaving the family home in 1956 and her death from cancer in 1999; a second time frame which, striving to understand what had happened, broadens the spectrum to include a period from the marriage of Tina Jolas and André du Bouchet in 1949 to the date of Paule du Bouchet's writing of her book between 1999 and 2010; finally, a third time frame, that of the posthumous rediscovery between the deceased mother and the surviving daughter, extending from 1999 to the present day.

1. *Diffuse and sad memories.* Firstly for Paule there is the vague memory of quarrels between her parents. In Tina's defence (to the extent that it is necessary to take sides), the following should be noted: from the very earliest times of their marriage, the couple got on badly. Paule has a memory when she was a little girl of papers belonging to her father screwed up by her mother, of beds in disorder, of 'simple conflict', but whose overall picture was a mass of confusing pieces, like 'a jigsaw puzzle'. In her mind, the sense of being abandoned was associated with the colour red – a colour of ambiguous meaning for her, being both that of the wedding dress of the blissfully happy bride as well as that of the skirt of the lover abandoning her home. The fragments of a past impossible of reconstitution are present in these memories – along with the blurred outlines of a nostalgia and the morbidity of a tenderness which cannot find words to express it, the indeterminacy of passing time and the melancholy of the present. One thing, however, was very clear in the child's memory – the image of the 'other man', the one who had taken her mother away – but it was suffused with a kind of fairy-tale unreality. The best metaphor to fit the way that other man came to mind was that of a 'wild wind'. For René Char was certainly wild: described as a character out of a folk-tale, an ogre of giant stature, with enormously long arms, prominent knuckles, and turned up fingers. He lived in a strange and disturbing place 'black as hell', which was also a place of 'untruth', another form of the indeterminate. Even when she had become an adult, Paule du Bouchet would still be frightened of his hands:

His hands were huge and threatening, cupped half-open as he walked along, arms hanging down his body as if weighed down by those hands with their fingertips slightly turned back, enormous hands, sometimes quivering with unfathomable tremors, hands which seemed to go before him as if cleaving a path for the anger of the man.

2. *Sharp sad memories.* Shortly after the events of May 1968, Paule du Bouchet and René Char were involved in a violent altercation at L'Isles-sur-Sorgue, before stunned witnesses. For several years thereafter there would be no further meeting between them. In contrast to this brutal pseudo-stepfather, her real father was ever more loved by Paule, with a child-like love that sought to protect and console. The little girl would secretly follow André du Bouchet as he walked across the windswept moorland (so present in his poetry) or on the edge of the cliffs of Belle-Isle. She would call him by telephone at night, afraid that he might commit suicide. When she visited him in the rue Le Regrattier on the Île Saint-Louis in Paris, she smelled a scent of death. But a few happy images have also been passed down by this sorrow whose memory had such sensual aspect – for example the memory of André

taking his daughter to the Place de la Concorde one stifling hot summer night and splashing about with her in the fountain. The ability to remember the precise time and place of sad happenings also brought in its wake some small packets of happiness.

3. *Sharp happy memories.* During the summer of 1999 when her mother was dying in hospital at Vaison-la-Romaine, Paule du Bouchet sat down to write the story of their relationship. It was a sudden decision and the sense of relief was immediate, as Paule remembers:

That summer of 1999 I had already felt the need to sketch out the story, to trace its outlines in broad strokes as quickly as I could while she was dying in hospital. It was August, I was at Bonnieux at my friend Drina's place with the children, it was hot. I wrote the notes about her early in the morning, when the dawn air was shrill with cicadas, in the little cabin I occupied with Petit Pierre at the end of the track. Straightaway it seemed that those notes were bringing me peace, tracing out a cool path to follow through the stifling weather that was threatening.

The described moment – the dawn marked by the shrilling of the cicadas – was a clear announcement of a rebirth in gestation. Tina was on the point of death, the book was half done and turns to the story of a solace: first through tears, whose misty path, she says, 'is in itself the sign of something infinitely grave which left me for a second time overwhelmed by the incomprehensible, the very great reality of the inexpressible'. There was something mystical in the discovery that Paule du Bouchet made at that time about her sorrow. She could look at her mother as she lived her last days with new eyes, as though beholding a *terra incognita*, she says. Of this unknown land it was imperative to trace the geography – its *outer geography*, she adds. Little by little, Paule du Bouchet emerged from the very long incarceration that she had known during her childhood and youth. Certainly her anger towards Char was still there. But as a corollary she met a sublimation of Tina, in her 'luminous smile', her 'total innocence', in the 'purity' of which she was the bearer. But then other 'outside' memories started to flow: her brother Gilles climbing on the roofs when he was a child, laughing picnics; the 'madly funny' episode of the forgotten sandwiches ... Such happy moments mingle with other more bitter memories, but which too were located at a precise place and point in time. Gradually the recollections of happiness seem to gain the upper hand, the laughing over the 'little sandwiches' is linked with the mother, other long-lost memories bathe her in 'an unexpected luminosity, derived from somewhere beyond'. What had been pushed down into a zone of obscurity finally filters through. And, strangely, it is happiness which emerges in this way from the realm of the forgotten:

[I had] 'forgotten' whole periods of my life, not the darkest ones, but undoubtedly the happiest ones. [...] The solid foundation that my life stood upon, that I had obstinately wanted to forget, reasserted itself powerfully: it was made of unmitigated joy.

Now is this not the same joy that Tina Jolas, despite all her vicissitudes, expressed throughout her letters, letters which are scattered through the whole book? Is it her taste for life which, in death, she seemed to pass on to her daughter? The book ends with the story of a bull in the Camargue which, seized with an apparent death-wish, plunged off into the sea. But a courageous herdsman, despite the storm and peril to his life, managed to bring it back to the shore. The final image of the book is of the rescued bull, happy once more, shaking itself vigorously in the reed-beds.

The power of the memory: for this reconciliation with her mother – but also with herself – to take place, Paule du Bouchet plunged very deeply into the thick recesses of her memory, *más*

*adentro en la espesura*⁴ – sifting through shapeless recollections to rediscover events precisely dated and situated. No doubt the amorphous character of memory had allowed her for a time to block out her suffering. But for a life rediscovered to follow upon the allegory of disappearance, she needed it to be passed through the very fine mesh of remembrance.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. Boris Pasternak, quoted by André du Bouchet in: *Aveuglante ou banale* [Blinding or Banal]. Paris: Le Bruit du temps, 2011.
2. René Char died in 1989, Tina Jolas in 1999.
3. One recalls Jacques Benveniste, famous, but soon excoriated, for having believed he had ‘proved’ the memory of water. This idea is currently again being taken up by Professor Luc Montagnier.
4. St John of the Cross: *The Spiritual Cantic*, XXXV.