

## TRACINGS

Gilles Ortlieb

(Translated from the French by Jacques Houis.)

### *Letters from Rocher Noir: Patrick Mac'Avoy*

A thin collection of short stories, or tales, or little proses, call them what you will, an even more etic novel, or fiction, or disguised memoir, both published in the 1960's, then a chapbook of poetry layered with hermeticisms offered twenty years later by Saint Germain-des-Prés editions: such is the entire published and unknown work of Patrick Mac'Avoy, son of the portrait painter Edouard Mac'Avoy, famous in his day, when we consider that he knew Bonnard and Vuillard, and captured the features of such diverse and notable figures as Tristan Bernard, Somerset Maugham, Arthur Honegger, Montherlant, Picasso, Elise and Marcel Jouhandeau, Mauriac, Chagall, Gide, Tournier and Cocteau, all the way to Pope John XXIII, and to Jean-Claude Killy. As for Patrick M.A. (as he signed his letters), the second of the painter's three children, we can conjecture that frequenting some of the important artists and writers of his time must have been, early on, a daily reality. The information, as we can see, is thin. And how do you discuss someone about whom almost nothing is known, even whether he is still alive?

<sup>1</sup>All the more since the encounter was completely unexpected: a few black and white shots from a documentary short available in the archives of the INA, on the Prix Goncourt, its rituals, what goes on behind the scenes, and two of its candidates, shortly before its presentation in November 1970. The interviewee, filmed on the banks of the Seine (the Louvre's façade seems visible on the opposite bank) has just enough time to express his distrust of rewards in general and of this prize in particular, liable to harm any writer, a beginner even more so. Enough time, anyway, to arouse your curiosity, to make you want to know more about the author, and thus to discover that his very first book, going back a half-dozen years already, bore the a priori appealing title, *Les Hauts Fourneaux (The Blast Furnaces)*. I began to search for the volume, that I ended up unearthing at a bookseller Rue Saint-Jacques, who also offered a number of letters written by the budding writer to the person who would be his editor at Julliard, Jacques Brenner.

A fragment of a core sample, the readings of an intimate barometer; these are spontaneously brought to mind by the missives sent by the then nineteen year old conscript, the "warrior P. Mac'Avoy, S.P. 87434, Section E" garrisoned in a small town of Lesser Kabylia- and in prey to an out of the ordinary internal ferment. Let's begin with the place, this Rocher Noir [Black Rock] renamed Boumerdès after the "events," on the Eastern coast of Algeria:

"Here I am in distant Africa, and better off than I would have expected. If I haven't written you before now, it is because I didn't know yet where I was supposed to go. Well! here I am in

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: He is still alive as of this writing 12/2020.

Rocher Noir, on the seashore and unfortunately far from Algiers. We are relatively comfortable here, with a certain amount of calm, since we are two per room in low-income housing apartments, that are ugly, but less so than barracks or other buildings of the absurd...”

“...As for Rocher Noir, a rather dead artificial city, but one that you can leave as you please. The city is half filled with soldiers and half with indigenous people. I won’t dwell on the independence and well-being this situation procures. A real stroke of luck. There is no better place for a soldier in Algeria. Indeed, in the South, it’s the Legion that supervises. That means, iron discipline and labor despite the heat. That’s where I am...”

“Currently Rocher Noir is a furnace, especially when the burning wind blows, the Sirocco that saps you...”

“(Dawn) It’s raining on Rocher Noir, I flex my muscles to drill through the silence, and in a mechanical motion, the waves collapse, the sky heckles an orgy of clouds, expires on the trees, the ashes move around in my mind.”

As for the living conditions on-site, much leads us to think that they don’t fundamentally differ from those formerly experienced in the barracks of Épinal, Sète, Mourmelon or elsewhere.

“The soldiers currently in Algeria don’t do anything. Their numbers, for that matter, are being reduced all the time. But ‘not doing anything’ means precisely that the officers also have a lot of time on their hands to mind the privates. So, all that needs to be done is the internal servicing of the bases and the barracks (materiel, Kafkaesque paperwork, supplies.) For most, there is no clearly free time. A twenty-four seven climate of inanity slowly anesthetizes the mind, mine at least, and, in the end, is quite restful. There.”

In the exile of this military indolence (the two terms are interchangeable), the conscript Mac’Avoy shares, one after the other, with his correspondent, the torments of a personal work that seems to take up a good part of his thoughts, of his days:

“Rocher Noir is still as easy to live ‘militarily’ and the book, *Over There in The Grand Canyon* is progressing, is taking shape and tone, interferences, highs and lows of intensity, same old tunes and surprises...”

“Today finished the first part of *Grand Canyon*. A real adolescent’s book. But we are in the century of adolescence. To be finished with adolescence! To be finished with middle age as well...”

“I can’t really send you the Grand Canyon (some pages at least) because it isn’t at all ready. Nothing moreover is ever ready, it is only wear, lassitude, that causes me to abandon a page...”

“All is still well in Rocher Noir, monotonous languid calm and battle with the blank pages. After the *Grand Canyon* I would like to write a play that would shift from the ‘spoken’ to the ‘mass’

and would end in ballet, when the itch would have to explode. But you never know in the end..."

"As for the *Grand Canyon*, I destroyed it. I'm starting from scratch after writing two hundred pages, because nothing structured itself around a concrete axis, it was only a big emetic of pain, of faith and of revolt and nothing at the end that justifies ending."

"A great tranquility reigns over Rocher Noir. So great that I have picked up pen, manuscript and faith again, and that here I am off for the second time on the unnamable and dazzling adventure. The work is strange, to attempt to hold beauty in your grasp."

"I am writing you standing a lancinating guard over nothing and over my manuscript, but now I am frightened. I made a correction, and as far as attenuating goes, I only succeeded in mutilating the text. Should I eliminate it outright? Or is it just a question of words? But words would not be sufficient to modify anything. What's more, the whole thing is so tight. The only thing I care about is communication. Is it the lack of communication that drove so many door-men, sentinels, to primary madness?? I am not in another world. I know that I am here. There was a misunderstanding at once atrocious and necessary in the consciousness of the first writer, it's this illusion, within him, affirming that some miraculous reader is going to level the *lack* that pushed the writer to write. So, is it music? Flags? Could you tell me how, in what spirit, in what direction, to correct my texts?"

And then there are the worries – about the titles, about the form – and the haste inevitably accompanying any publication, multiplied tenfold, in the case of a first book, which is the equivalent, by and large, for any author, of exposing himself to a reception he knows to be unpredictable.

"I received the contract and Javet's letter, etc. Everything seems ready and I am quite anxious to see the *Blockhaus* in print. One problem (a detail that is still important), the contract says that my little book is called *Short Stories*, which is a perfectly neutered title like 'Larousse dictionary' or 'user manual'..."

"It would be too bad to have an awful title like *The Blast Furnaces*...It's a title I hadn't given careful thought to, but which makes me howl. What do you think of it?"

"Here then is *Heat Wave*. *Lost Parodies*, I don't know why, wasn't a good fit for me, I couldn't imagine anything else for my book than this idea of an airless 'Blockhaus,' for the characters are all 'anaerobics'. *Lost Parodies*, that is too 'esthetic.' *The Anaerobics*, *Heat Wave*, *The Blast Furnaces*, *Prayers*, *The Grail*: with all these potential titles, of which I don't know if a single one is suitable, images succeed one another that I wanted to make clear, clear 'in a closed world'. So, ok for *Heat Wave*? If not, as you wish. Changing titles is like changing clothes, they need to be 'made' then 'broken in.'"

"I received, this morning, the final proofs. Since you haven't answered me, I think the title *Heat Wave* has been accepted. Also, I learned that the publication date was June 1<sup>st</sup>. I'm terribly impatient to see this in print, finally, a book; and even, believe it or not, the reactions...In my opinion, this book will provoke a great silence, and I am grateful to you for publishing something that, in advance, promises to be a commercial fiasco, with a quasi-absence of readers to boot There are not many who publish because of an authentic taste and only because of that. Especially as these writings are teeming with flaws...Obviously, I don't care about the flaws, because I only care about these heat waves that I will describe for the rest of my life, those of the *blockhouses* and the *canyons*."

"...I am now serene as concerns the title and the advertising banner and used to the *Blast Furnaces* after the previous affectations."

The book came out finally, in May 1963, under this title, finally tolerated by the author, bringing together three stories with plots that cannot be summarized-*Blockhaus définitif* (*Definitive Blockhaus*), *Le Fil de nerf barbelé* (*The Barbed Wire Nerve*), and *L'Épine* (*The Thorn*)- valuable especially for the fierceness of the style and the atmosphere they are able to create. Blast furnaces are never featured, but a claustrophobic love affair with a foreseeable outcome; the fatal odyssey of an Algerian worker in Paris caught up in, and condemned by, the radicalism of the time; the drift, consented to, of a man or his double all the way to Block 17 of the psychiatric hospital of Villejuif. The eventuality, the immediate proximity rather, of madness and disappearance that stalks each character making the whole belong to a difficult to classify genre, comprised in equal parts of elements borrowed from the realistic novel and the fantastic tale. We do not know today, nearly a half century later, whether the eventual reception of *The Blast Furnaces* in Metropolitan France, confirmed the fiasco the author predicted. But no particular piece of evidence allows us to doubt it.<sup>2</sup> Reading the last letters sent from Rocher Noir, in any case, the end of the stay does not seem to have been made more serene by this publication, quite the contrary:

"So, I only have a month or two left to spend in this desert and to suffer from not living and writing. Happy, very, that basically you understand so well the motives that drive me to write and that you used the term 'necessity'. And, currently, after the third destruction of my manuscript, it is in this state that I find myself: the state of emergency, of alert, when it becomes intolerable not to work. Indeed, I have been pontificating on paper for eight months now without really, sincerely, feeling that it was anything other than provocations, vain calls to myself, drab diarrhea. And I am happy: I am going to rediscover the horror and the joy, the faith and the revolt that I feel welling up in me. In a few days I will be twenty, so I will redouble my efforts upon my return."

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: Actually, there is evidence that was not easily uncovered until recently, thanks to the internet, that the book's reception was not entirely bleak. Matthieu Galey, an influential critic, gave it a positive review in the weekly *Arts*. And it was awarded the second Prix des Enfants Terribles Jean Cocteau (*Le Monde*, January 11, 1964.)

“Here I am feeling better, I am regaining my strength. I read a lot. Terribly disappointing, my readings! Yet, I usually go by instinct to the books that interest me, that I need like the cat who eats the grasses necessary to his health. By my convalescence, I will finish the third book I started, and that has thirty pages. One thing worries me: while what I write there is very different in form and content from the two others, the words don’t change: impossible to use or find other ones; these words, I recognize them as mine, but they are always the same ones that return, and it is impossible for me to find another register, another grass to graze on. Impotence? Limits? Limited vocabulary? Insufficient? Nothing to say? Complacency? All of the above? These little observations may annoy you, I understand that. One shouldn’t show language’s undergarments too much. But, as Michaux says, to love is to not be disgusted.”

“As for me, I am somewhat stupefied and incapable of any work, of any movement I would even say, which means I am no longer writing. What’s more, I must undergo a literary transformation because everything I was doing was quite bad, unless it’s a matter of an internal transformation...”

“...The only thing, of course, the two thousand kilometers that separate me from my friends and loves. After the army, I will take every risk, find work, time to write, a place to live, etc. For now, sun, sea, Casbah occasionally, empty intellect and ample faith.”

What risks awaited the ex-conscript upon his return to France, what work, what kind of existence and occupations? We only know that after the return from Algeria, three years went by before the publication, by Julliard again, of *La Ballade (The Ramble)* by Patrick Mac’Avoy, dedicated “To Denyse, [his] wife” and dated, “Hôpital Percy – Avèze 1965.” Barely sixty pages for a tale of mad love told by a woman committed in the imaginary city of Rohannes. While the town is fictional, the Percy hospital, situated in Clamart in the Hauts-de-Seine, has kept to this day its designation as a military teaching hospital. As for Avèze, in the Gard, it is a small community on the road to Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, and perhaps become, in the meantime, blockhaus or canyon. The loop surrounding Rocher Noir had not completely closed.

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