

The Far Side of Appearances

St.-John Perse: Letters, translated and edited by Arthur J. Knodel, *Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (Bollingen Series LXXXVII: 2), 1979. xxvi + 719 pp. \$20.00.*

IT WAS with no great enthusiasm that I sat down to read these letters. The self-absorption and literary self-consciousness in the letters of many modern writers, particularly in France, quickly becomes both irritating and wearying. Are there not those, after all, who write not with their correspondent but with posterity chiefly in mind? Are there not those, too, who depart from spontaneity and naturalness to such an extent that they make careful copies of their draft letters as well as of those contrived and final missives which they actually place in the post? Very happily St.-John Perse does not come into this category. In the very first letter in this collection we find him asking: "...isn't any letter that goes beyond one's true feeling an absurdity?" Shortly after this he claims to hate nothing more than "cultural or dilettantish design" and adds: "I hate 'art' for being an end and no longer a means."

The further one reads the more one is impressed by the personality which shows

through this correspondence. There is dignity, tact, warmth, intelligence, genuine modesty and much generosity to others. Views are expressed which continually arouse interest and often compel assent as they reject some of the worst manifestations of prevailing intellectual and moral fashion. There are references to St. John Perse's craving for "freedom from what is merely contemporary"; to the existence of a world in which "taste is no longer the natural extension of good breeding, but stems rather from acquired culture"; to his belief that the imperatives of religion are "wholly metaphysical" rather than social; to "the dangers of excessive consistency in politics"; or to "a whole industrial society that is not yet mature enough in human terms."

Throughout these letters we are in the presence of a man of wide-ranging intellectual curiosity and impressively broad knowledge. Here is a diplomat who was a considerable amateur botanist and ornithologist as well as a major poet. And here is a major poet who was a legal expert, who contemplated a career in high finance, and who was a distinguished civil servant. Far from being exclusively a man of the study, he sailed, swam, and rode throughout most of his long life. In short, St. John Perse is revealed as an exceptionally rich and diverse human being who responded with equal enthusiasm and imagination to the physical world and the potentialities of language.

This volume, generally well translated and unobtrusively edited by Arthur J. Knodel, is essentially the *Correspondence* section of St. John Perse's *Oeuvres complètes* published in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 1972. There are 366 letters covering a period of sixty years from 1906 to 1966. The recipients are a galaxy of twentieth-century figures ranging from Jacques Rivière and Valéry Larbaud to Claudel and Gide, and from Conrad and T.S. Eliot to Allen Tate and Archibald MacLeish. The letters are grouped into three sections: the early letters written between 1906 and 1914; those written from Asia (chiefly from Peking) between 1916 and 1921; and the

"letters from exile," mostly sent from America and dating from 1940 to 1966. Inevitably, one often wishes that it had been possible to include some of the letters which St. John Perse received from his many celebrated correspondents. As things stand, we frequently have a sense of hearing someone speak into the telephone and of having to guess at the unheard half of the conversation.

The early letters are mostly directed to literary men. At the same time they emphasize St. John Perse's view that literature, far from being a substitute for life, must be seen as a by-product of living. For example, a letter to the poet Francis James in 1911 contains the observation: "...if I occasionally indulge, quite in spite of myself, in writing poetry, it is without the slightest thought of publication, but simply to aid me in seeing things more clearly and vitally within myself, in this mystery of life through which I journey alone." As he developed his strong musical interests, wrestled with law examinations, and, ultimately, with entrance into the French foreign service, St. John Perse claimed that he did not seek a job which would give him leisure for literary pursuits. This is one of many ways in which he deliberately erected barriers between the diplomatic aspirant, Alexis Léger, and the very private poet, St. John Perse. Later, when he began to publish more freely, he continued to insist on a total separation between his biography and his poetry. He wrote, for example, in 1948: "...any connection established between St. J. Perse and Alexis Léger inevitably ends up by deforming the reader's view and basically vitiating his poetic interpretation." In more than one letter he demonstrates the folly of "explaining" his work in biographical terms, though we shall see below that his correspondence throws considerable light on his general conception of poetry.

In view of the point just made it is perhaps sufficient simply to note that St. John Perse wrote his celebrated poem *Anabase* in a small Buddhist temple during his appointment to the French legation

in Peking. It was near the end of his stay there that he crossed the Gobi desert into outer Mongolia. The letters of this period, many of them written to his mother, are of absorbing interest. He shows an impressive measure of political insight and the ability to understand, almost intuitively, certain essential characteristics of alien peoples. He is critical of the way the Western powers interpret the Chinese situation (he is writing in 1917) and of their complacent view that the rural tradition which has shaped the Chinese people means "an assurance of social stability that will be a guarantee against all future change."

The "letters from exile" are not lacking in gratitude to St.-John Perse's various American hosts and helpers, and indeed they are a monument to American hospitality and generosity. He was even moved to write to Francis Biddle in 1965: "I love the American alliance as much as Charles de Gaulle hates it!" Naturally enough, however, despite the fascination of "this planetary America consumed by industrial fever," a sense of exile remained. As he wrote to Archibald MacLeish: "...my last breath, like my first, will be chemically French."

In these and the Asian letters there are many references to the importance for St.-John Perse of space ("the greatest luxury"), the sea ("My dear Mother, you who hate the sea so much, it is not blood that you put in my veins, but sea-water"), and movement ("the play of natural forces"). This throws light on his poetry, as does his repeated rejection of abstract rationalism and an exclusive preoccupation with material things. He expresses a "loathing" of "'existentialist' philosophy" and of "'naturalistic' esthetics," and regards poetry, in terms of human knowledge, as "a way of organizing life which keeps us more alive, even more painfully alert, to the far side of mere appearances." In this

consists the greatest challenge, and the greatest achievement, of the poet St.-John Perse. Unfashionably, and quite determinedly, he located poetry on an ideal, absolute plane as a counter to the "erosion of moral values" and the "general depravity in which we live."

It is this feature of his work which the English poet, Kathleen Raine, perceived and expressed so clearly in her admirable collection of essays, *Defending Ancient Springs* (1967):

Accustomed as we are to minimal vision, our attention solicited by, and for, the pathological, the criminal, the immature, the uneducated, the ignorant, and the unskilled of all sorts presenting the articulations of ignorance as communications of knowledge and achievements of art, we have all but lost the capacity for the total response [St.-John Perse's] poetry demands. The 'self-expression' of the individual...has no place in his art. Claudel called him 'a Mont St. Michel immensely accentuated in an ebbing tide'; and if this mountain is generally unnoticed in post-war England this may well be because, by standards designed for measuring molehills, mountains are unperceived. Yet his unbounded vision of 'the visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part' is a liberation offered to whoever is willing to entrust himself to the great open sea (*le mouvement même de l'Etre*) of St.-John Perse's poetry.

To read this collection of letters is to understand more thoroughly the manner in which this particular poet restores the sensible world to the realm of imagination and invites us to explore—and indeed to trust—the far side of appearances.

Reviewed by JOHN CRUICKSHANK