

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN'S *LA NOSTALGIE DU FRONT*

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(with thanks to Yves Buffetaut and Claude-Noelle Peabody)

Introduction

Some years ago I came across a reference to *La Nostalgie du Front*, an essay by the once controversial French Jesuit anthropologist/ geologist/paleontologist Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The article I had glanced through told me that the essay had been written while he was a stretcherbearer during the Great War.

Several years later I found a series of wartime letter/essays translated into English. To my surprise, however, I discovered that *Nostalgie* had not been included in the translation, though it was clearly listed in the sequence from which the book was translated from French, *Ecrits du Temps de Guerre*. (1) Why had it been left out? I found the original *Ecrits*, copied *Nostalgie*, and proceeded (though, with difficulty) to translate it for myself. Once I had done so, I began to wonder again why it had been excluded. There appeared to be a kind of censorship going on, and Fr. Teilhard, whose speculative writings on the interrelationship between religion and evolution had been suppressed by the Vatican during his lifetime (only to make him famous when *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu* were published after his death), might even have been amused to find censorship here, too, but working in reverse!

Dr. Annette Becker, in her book *War and Faith*, confirmed that *Nostalgie* shocked his later admirers; they failed to find here the scholar's mind open to challenging thought, (2) meaning that they found that their idol displayed feet of clay in his portrayal of his experience in war as something transcendent, even at times glorious, in a terrific sort of way. Disapproval resulted, despite the fact that, as Dr Becker also notes, 'an exalted vision of the war, with its beneficent aspects, even including death, was shared by many long-term [my italics] combatants!'.(3)

Chardin was born on 1 May 1881 at the chateau of Sarcenat near Orcenes. His mother was the 'great-grand-niece of Voltaire'. (4) Chardin was educated at Jesuit schools, and at the age of seventeen he decided to become a priest. He began his lengthy training; however in 1901 his schooling was transferred to England when France closed down the activities of religious orders. He was sent to Cairo to teach for three years in 1904, returning to study in Hastings, Sussex (and was there during the discovery of the Piltdown Man). He was ordained on 14 August 1911 at Hastings, and in 1912 began to study at the Sorbonne for his doctorate in geology and paleontology which, interrupted by the war, he would finish in 1922.

He was called up to serve in December 1914 and arrived at the front in January 1915 to serve with the 4th (Mixed) Moroccan regiment of 'light infantry and Zouaves... To become more "Arab" he had exchanged his field service blue for the khaki of the African troops and his kepi for a red fez'. (5) Chardin served at Ypres and Champagne in 1915, Verdun in 1916, Chemin-des-Dames in 1917, and the second battle of the Marne in 1918,(6) and also 'the

final counter-offensive, crossing on 30 January 1919 the Kehl bridge into Germany'. (7) Sir Julian Huxley, writing in the *Introduction to The Phenomenon of Man*, notes: 'He learnt a great deal about his fellow men and about his own nature. The war strengthened his sense of religious vocation, and in 1918 he made a triple vow of poverty, chastity and obedience'. (8) The Moslems of the regiment called him *le sidi marabout* (the honourable holy man). A lieutenant who served with him recalled that once in the line at Nieuport, where the boggy terrain permitted trenches only three feet deep, he celebrated a whole Mass on his knees, because it was impossible to stand upright. 'As Teilhard was replacing in his little case the vessels and vestments he had used at Mass, the Germans sent a hail of shells down, on our sector. Not a one of us was touched by the bursts; Teilhard, in a calm and serious voice said, "I had still my blessing to give you. God being with us, did not wish one of us to be hit". With that he gave us his blessing and returned to his aid post'. (9)

Always cool and brave under fire, Chardin was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Medaille Militaire, and in 1920, 'upon proposal sent by all grades of command', he was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. (10) The only reward he refused was being promoted to chaplain with the rank of captain. To this proposal, Corporal Fr. Teilhard de Chardin responded: 'Leave me among the men'.

References

1. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: *Ecrits du Temps de la Guerre*, (Bernard Grasset, Editeur, 1968.)
2. Annette Becker: *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914-1930*, trans. Helen McPhail, (Berg: New York, 1998), p.23.
3. Becket, p. 22--
4. Abbé Paul Grenet: *Teilhard de Chardin, the Man and His Theories*, (Paul Eriksson: New York, 1966), p. 11.
5. Claude Coenot: *Teilhard de Chardin, A Biographical Study*, (Helicon: Baltimore, 1965), p. 22.
6. Grenet, p. 16.
7. Cuenot, p. 22.
8. Sir Julian Huxley: Introduction, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, (Harper & Row: New York, 1955), p. 22.
9. Cuenot, p. 26.
10. Cuenot, p. 25.

Readers may also wish to refer to Prof. U.M. King: *The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, (Orbis, 1996).

LA NOSTALGIE DU FRONT

by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

from *Ecrits Du Temps De La Guerre, 1916-1919*,

Bernard Grasset Editeur, 61 Rue des Saints-Pères, VIe Paris, 1965.

At twilight I climbed the hill from where one can still look out over the sector we are just about to leave, and where we will no doubt return soon enough. Before me, beyond the meadows, veiled in a breathing fog, where the bends of the Aisne stand out in milky spots, the denuded crest of the Chemin des Dames stands out clearly, clean as a neatly shaved chin, against the golden sunset, flecked with drachen. Every now and then, a torpedo would make a swirl of silent smoke gush up.

Why am I here this evening?

In the line, I feared the shells like everyone else. I count the days and I'm on watch for symptoms that our unit will be relieved. We'll be relieved, like everyone else. When we get sent down I am as happy as anyone. And it seems to me, after each time, after each particular attack, at last, I am sated, saturated with trenches and with war.

No later than this afternoon. I drank again the joy of living again, without a backward thought, in the breast of inoffensive nature. I savored the happiness of stretching out under the trees, letting myself look complacently at their foliage in a totally relaxed spirit, fully serene.

And then it comes back to me, each time, instinctively, the face of the Front, and of battle.

Isn't it absurd to be thus polarised by the war, hardly able to be eight days in the rear without looking to the horizon, like towards a beloved river bank, to the immobile line of sausages. Hardly to be able not to be surprised in the night by the silver sparks of a Verey light which slants, or only its reflection on the clouds, without being afflicted by a beating heart, a regret, a call?

This evening, more than ever, in this setting both marvellously calm and exciting, where, in a shelter from the violent emotions and excessive tension of the trenches, I feel breaking out again, in their native form, the impressions deposited in me by three years of war, the Front casts its spell on me. And I seek ardently the sacred line of heavings of the earth and explosions, the line of balloons which are winched down every evening with regret, one after another, like bizarre and extinct stars, then, the line of Verey lights which starts rising.

What are the properties, finally, of this line, so fascinating and deadly? By what secret virtue does it stick to my very being as the most living thing, clasp my being to it in such a way, so invincibly?

Seeing that, in this moment, my gaze is most calm and penetrating, I want to analyse myself more than I have yet done ---I want to know.

The first level of sentiment to which I can compare my current emotion is the passion for the new and unknown. If, half closing my eyes and relaxing the bonds of my conscience, I abandon my imagination to my own conscience, their ancient furrows, their reminiscences, I feel rising up in me vague memories of long voyages, when I was a child. I see again the

hour where, in the stations, the van-coloured lights lit up to guide the trains rushing towards an enchanted and important morning. Little by little, the trenches, illuminated by signals, confused themselves, in my spirit, with a vast transcontinental line, which will travel far, far away: somewhere, beyond everything.

And my precise dream.

The devastated crest whose silhouette became more and more cleaned away by violence, dead in the paling yellow of the sky, has all of a sudden become a deserted plateau where I have so often suckled, as if in a mirage, my projects of discovery and science in the East. The water that whitens, in the valley, this is no more the Aisne: it is the Nile, whose far-off mirror obsessed me in days gone by like a call of the Tropics. I believe myself seated in the sunset toward El-Guijoudif, or the Mokattam, and I took towards the South

It's a fact, I am deceiving myself. The enigmatic, importunate 'me' who obstinately loves the Front, I recognise it ---it's the me of advent and research, the one who always wants to go to the ends of the earth, to enjoy new and rare sights, and to say it is 'advanced'.

I admit it. When it hit me, it was thirty some months after going into the trenches for the first time, it's certainly in this spirit that I set off: like a curious man, a jealous man, who wanted to see everything, and see more of it than anyone else. Still today the personnel dug in behind the front ---ambulance drivers, radio operators, and so forth --- are a living problem for my eyes ---how can they spend weeks so near the lines and not thirst with a desire to go and see what is happening --- these neighbours of the Front, who perhaps believe in it, and who are really farther away from it than a suburbanite from Timbuktu! Without doubt they have never known the desire to travel. But, then, are they essentially men?

In spite of habituation and lassitude, in spite of discovery, also, of attractions more profound than those of novelty, the Front remains for me a Continent, full of mystery and of dangers, which thrust up in our fixed universe and saw through it. I perceive it always as the frontier of the known World, the Promised Land open to the bold, the border of no mans land.

Those who suffered, and died of it, of thirst, of cold, no longer know how to forget the deserts nor the ice floes where they tasted the great drunkenness of being alone and being there first. It's the why and wherefore, firstly, of why I can't get over the Front. Thus, I begin to decipher the secret of my nostalgia. I need the Front because I am, just as all humans ought to be, an explorer and an exotic. But this first explanation given to my inquietude, is it more than an approximation, or even than a metaphor?

The spatial and geographical exoticism is only a particular and inferior form of the passion we possess to stretch, to renew, ourselves. The aviator, who takes possession of the sky ---the thinker, who raises difficult or rare points of view --- the opium smoker who embarks upon his dream, are exotics in their own fashions. Each of them is a conquistador who reaches new shores.

What have I then seen at the Front, myself, and what is it that I so much wish to find there again, in spite of my terror, its pain and its evil? Is it new deserts, new volcanoes, a new harmony of lights and of bursting sounds? Is it the great mute stretch of Flanders, where the opposing armies seem to sleep among the dead waters? Is it the gloomy tops of the slag heaps among the ruined miners quarters? Is it the burnt ravine of Hauts-de-Meuse, where

heavy artillery creates a smoke everywhere across the land like innumerable belches of sulphur?

Yes, without doubt, this is it. But it is something else more subtle and more substantial, of which all this great apparatus is only the surface, the skin, and like the bait, something else which I can only define for myself as a unique atmosphere, penetrating and dense, either shrouded in all the luxury of violence and majesty or again by a superhuman state to which the soul finds itself uniformly transported, in spite of the diversity of sectors and the vicissitudes of the struggle.

The unforgettable experience of the Front, in my opinion, is that of an immense liberty.

Those who enter a sector first let drop at the entrance of the first trench bay, the burden of social conventions. At the moment civilian life ends, the difference ceases between day and night. In place of the banal getting up and going to bed, the man in the lines sees only before him one vast trench of unforeseen length where rest and sleep are taken according to circumstances and occasions without well-fixed relation between light and darkness. In the line, one washes when one can. One often sleeps no matter where. All the constraints and compartmentalisations collapse like a house of cards. It is curious to observe in oneself how this overthrow of day-to-day slavery can bring satisfaction to the spirit, a little rebellious perhaps, but just and noble if one understands it rightly.

Let no one mistake one's self about it. The 'bon soir' addressed a bit ironically by the poilu to the batmen in the rear isn't only a greeting signifying military regularity. It symbolises and it announces an emancipation very much more intimate, that from bad egotism and narrow personality.

To go up to the lines, no one will contradict me, is to go up to a kind of peace. As that which lies behind one fades away and eventually becomes faraway, the uniform devouring and making awkward both great and little preoccupations, whether of health, family, ambition for a career success, the future... all slides from the soul, now all alone, like an old suit of clothing.

The heart makes a new skin. A higher, more compelling order of reality, dispels the whirlpool of personal cares and obligations. In returning to everyday life, perhaps one will rediscover this troublesome harness. For the moment they remain, down below, as if in a fog. And I renounce trying to understand the serenity of the zone where the soul perceives thus, when from the shelter of a too-menacing danger the soul has the leisure to see what light this leisure will make in her.

I see myself now as I was, in this peace, fifteen days ago.

It was night, a clear and tranquil night, in an undulating sector, cut with crests and bogs. At the bottom, under the poplars, floated the smell left by the last gas attack. In the woods, higher up, one heard, at times, a rustling, like that of a startled woodcock, taking flight, the falling trajectory of a bomb, which burst open in a sharp and snowy explosion sowing out sparks. And the crickets did not stop singing just because of that.

I was free; I experienced my freedom. I could, if it seemed good to me, take a walk by the light of the moon, going to the right in front of me, gather some apples if I found some, and

then sleep in the first hole that came along. Everything that interested me or upset me in life behind the lines I still liked, but in a very controlled way, a bit at a distance. My life appeared to me more precious than ever; and nevertheless, I would have left life at that moment without regret, because it no longer belonged to me. I was free, and worry-free, as far as I went. I felt I was gifted with an inexplicable lightness of being.

As precious as it was, that liberty was only still the negative part, or the envelope, of a higher liberty, which I shall call positive. The air that I breathed was not only pure, but subtle. It was full and nourishing (a paradoxical phenomenon, but one which I guarantee) --- made full and nourishing by those perfumes which still lingered, poisonous and suspect, in the high grass among the mints, in the brutal shocks which shook the night periodically, made full and nourishing by all these manifestations, and lulled at this hour, by an immense humane Presence which filled the Front.

Ah! It's this which I proved thus---in an experimental fashion, that, enjoying a favour only granted sparingly to men down the centuries, I found myself in a measure able to loosen without constraint the powers of my life on a *palpable* object! I could, finally, plunge into the real without risk of hitting its bottom, to breathe earthly life to the capacity of my lungs without fear I would lack air.

Oh, how sad it is to so rarely find one's self in the presence of a work to accomplish, where the soul realises it can devote itself entirely! So consoling and strengthening are the outlooks of faith and the supernatural purpose, they give to the humblest actions an unlimited valour and extension: they are not normally strong enough to replace experience in its excitable and sensible function within our faculties. Here is why, in the confines of a dull, daily life, many things stay asleep, and suffer unseen within us.

At the Front, the unleashed power of matter, the spiritual grandeur of open warfare, the overwhelming domination of the moral energies which have been released, unite in their call to noble pride and to the desire to live, and they pour their passionate mixture into the heart. Up there, a victorious conviction takes hold as mistress, that one can 'go there': on the planes of both terrestrial and celestial plans of actions, with all one's physical might, and with all one's soul. All the resources of one's being can have a call-up. For once, all boldness is put into its proper setting. For once, the human task reveals itself as greater than our desires.

I declare it. In this thrust, pushed nearly to the exhaustion of the self, lies supreme liberty, the liberty of all which lies asleep in our unknown aspirations and our anxious powers, which too often we cannot develop for lack of material and space --- and which one must be weary to death of not being able to release.

No, I realise nothing, only the liberty with which the Front intoxicated me that night in September, not only, it seems to me today, when I remember from far, far away. But I have the sense of having lost a Soul, a Soul greater than my own, which inhabits the front lines, and which I left somewhere back there.

It is very necessary to undertake some of these nearly mystic reflections if one wishes to explain to the very bottom the emptiness and disenchantment that accompany the much-desired return to the rest camps behind the lines.

The Front is not only the fiery layer where the accumulated contrary energies of the opposing armies reveal themselves and neutralise themselves. It is also a bond of a particular Life to those who risk themselves as long as it is happening, only with those at the Front. When an individual has been admitted in some part to the Sublime Surface, it seems to him, positively, that a new existence starts in him, and grabs a hold of him.

His individuality, of course, is safe. No other conscious centre, distinct from his own soul, appears to him. In him, nevertheless, who formerly had his place on the sacred periphery of a World in action, a personality of another order unveils itself, which effaces and covers over the everyday man. The man at the Front acts in his function for the whole nation, and all which hides itself behind all Nations. His own particular activity and passivity are directly utilised to the benefit of an entity superior to his own in richness, in duration, and in futurity. He is only secondarily his own self. He is first and foremost a piece of the tool which drills away, a piece in the prow which cuts through the waves. He is that, and he feels that he is that.

An irresistible and peaceful awareness, in effect, accompanies a man who his country has committed to the fire, in his new and risky role. This man has concrete evidence he no longer lives for himself --that he is freed from himself-- that another thing lives in and dominates him. I am not afraid to say that this special disindividualisation which makes the combatant reach some human essence higher than himself is the ultimate secret and the incomparable impression of liberty which he experiences, and will nevermore forget.

Let each man observe for himself, when he goes up to the front lines, or even better, during a bombardment, when he sees it coming at him, like a tunnel which is going to swallow up his life, at the next attack. A sad and continual work keeps continuing to stalk the sphere of his affections, a sort of detachment, working inexorably because of the growing imminence of 'J' day or 'H' hour. This is not melancholy; precisely; which drapes itself over things. It is rather a kind of indifference, which will appear from far away and bleach out the details of individual life, while the fundamental taste for action, 'for forever,' makes more intense. At Verdun, in the Citadel, during those days of unforgettable hubbub, where, amidst the dust and cries, bombs and grenades were issued to the living who were going to go over for a big attack --- and then, some hours later, during the course of an interminable night march, just above Belleville and Froidterre, I often noted in myself this peace and exaltation which followed in the wake of the heartrending and victorious detachment to which the soul had at last again become accustomed in its superhuman environment.

It was the Soul of the Front which was born once more in me.

And in those who pick themselves up, dusty and intact, after the nearby explosion of a big shell, why this joyous expansion of the heart, this gladness in the will, this new perfume in life, which is so much greater than being missed by inches by a speeding train or grazed by the bullet from the revolver mishandled by an idiot? Is it only the joy of surviving which so swells the soul when it escapes the war and rejoins the world? I think, myself, that the unprecedented savour of living coming right after a *narrow escape* [Chardin uses this expression in English] holds above all to the profound intuition that the existence one finds again, consecrated by danger, is a new existence. The physical well-being which spreads into the soul, at that moment, signifies the superior Life into which one has just been baptized. Among men, those who have passed through fire are another sort of man.

It wasn't long ago, cutting across some fields to regain the lines (I'd gone to the side of Hurtebize, which one can see smoking five kilometres from there). I was suddenly scolded by a countryman who reproached me with walking across his handiwork. The good man was right, and carried on about it. But listening to him, I was hit by an interior shock, a dizziness, as if I had fallen from above. We seemed two of the very same sort of beings, he and I. We spoke the same words. But he, he had been confined to his earthly preoccupations. Who has not proved, while on leave, upon finding one's self back among the people and things which welcome him *as before*, the melancholy impression of being a stranger, or a disproportion, as if a chasm had been opened between one's self and others, visible only from one side --- not their side, as it happens?

In truth, without this new and superhuman soul which has just relieved our own soul, at the Front, there would be tests and sights which could not be endured --- which seems very simple however --- and which also leaves, it is a fact, an imperishable trace of fullness and of being in full bloom.

I affirm that for me, without the war, it is a world of feelings I would never have known nor suspected. No one save those who have been there, will, know the amazing recollections, which a man can fully retain of the plain of Ypres in April 1915, when the air of Flanders stank with chlorine and shells cut down the poplars, or else the calcined hills of Souville in July 1916, when they blossomed with death.. These more-than-human hours---impregnated life with a tenacious perfume, definitive, with exhalation and initiation, as if one passed through them into the Absolute. All the enchantments of the East, all of the intellectual ardour of Paris, weren't worth it, the past mud of Douaumont.

Thus, when the peace desired by all nations (and by me first of all) will come, something like a light will go out suddenly on the Earth. A hole has been made by the war in the scab of banalities and the crust of convention. A 'window' opened itself into the secret mechanisms and the deep layers of human development. A place was made where it was possible for men to breathe an air charged with heaven. When peace comes, everything will take back the Veil of monotony and ancient meannesses. Thus, around Lassiny for example, the regions evacuated by the enemy appear already dismal, empty and flaccid, the life of the Front having conveyed itself further away.

Happy; perhaps, those that death will have taken in the act, the very atmosphere of the war, when they are reclothed, animated by a responsibility; a conscience, a freedom greater than their own---when they had been exalted almost to the shore of the World, close by to God!

The others, the survivors of the Front, retain in their hearts forever an empty place, so great that nothing visible will know any more how to fill it up. Let them say thereafter, to conquer their nostalgia, that it is still possible for them, in spite of appearances, to feel something of the life of the Front happening in them. Let them know it: the superhuman reality which manifested itself to them, among the shell holes and barbed wire, which will now draw itself back completely from the World at peace. It will always live in them, although more hidden. And those who can know it again, and be united there again with it, who can become free of day-to-day existence, are not being egotistical, as before, but religiously, with a will, pursue in God and for God, the great work of creation, and sanctification of a Humanity which is born especially in the hours of crisis, but which can only fulfill itself in peace.

Night falls now altogether on the Chemin des Dames. I got up to go down to the rest billets. Now here is something within me which keeps returning to take a last look at the sacred lines, that hot and living line of the Front, I foresaw in the clarity of an as yet unfulfilled imagination, that this line took on the figure of a superior Something, very noble, which I felt myself bonding myself to under my very eyes, but which lacked a spirit more perfect than my own to guide it and understand it. I dreamed of those cataclysms of such prodigious grandeur which in the past, only the animals were there to witness. And it seems to me, at this instant, that I was, before this, something in the process of making itself, like a beast, of whom the soul awakened, and perceived groups of connected realities, without being able to grasp the pattern that they represent.

With the Tirailleurs in the Army
September, 1917.