

JULES ROMAINS / Poetry and Unanimous Feelings

Translated by Louis Cabri

In the contemporary epoch, civilized human life has taken new characteristics. Crucial changes have given another meaning to our existence. No doubt it is banal to state that a transformational change is underway, when in all periods of history change simply manifests the active and productive force of the species. But it is worth noting in each period the meaning of the change. Here are facts some deplore, but no one contests: people's increasing tendency to accumulate in cities; uninterrupted development of social relations; stronger and tighter bonds established by work, by occupation, by common pleasures; ever-larger imprint of the public on the private, of the collective on the individual.

It is impossible that such a mode of living has not determined a corresponding mode of feeling. The moment the individual ceased to be isolated, the individual has been tested by impressions born out of relations with others. The amorous passion is the most ancient and the most known, if not the unique, example. One is not the inhabitant of a village, of a town, of a city, the member of a family, of a group, the citizen of a nation, without suffering the repercussion in one's spirit and heart. This *immaterial action* of all on each remains most frequently confused and unconscious for even the subject. But it aspires to become clear and distinct to the degree that it pursues the contemporary evolution I signaled to above. It does not consist of that vague social pity, nor of the conventional humanitarianism Prudhomme and Homais have discredited. I would like there to be no matter for confusion on this point, for anyone. Far profounder feelings agitate, unbeknownst to us, the most humble among us. In diverse undertones we perceive the continuous, progressive, tyrannical influence society exercises upon us; we imagine the part of our being it has conquered, the deformations it imposes on our ego; we tremble at being absorbed by the human milieu that envelopes us; we savour the strange voluptuousness this kind of nothingness induces in us. Delivered, despite ourselves, body and soul, to the city, we pass from ravishment to revolt. Love's lure is that of social life as well: self's abandonment.

These affects that translate into the heart's language the new relations and the intimate human union are by nature *unanimous*. Even more unanimous still are those affects which are manifested spontaneously by groups, which are affects outside of and beyond individuals. Spectators who fill a theatre, people who plug a street are not only a material assemblage of parties brought together by space, who remain in every other respect independent of each other. The beings who constitute these more-or-less enduring agglomerations do not remain random neighbours. Each one, without doubt, has special reasons for finding himself or herself there. But the theatre, the street, in themselves become a total reality, alive, *gifted with a global existence and with feelings of unanimity*. Some philosophers, some sociologists have already suspected these phenomena; a crowd psychology has been sketched out. Not one satisfactory result has been obtained. Observation has remained summary, superficial, and has resulted in but a few thready comparisons. The procedures of scientific analysis end here. Such feelings—too indeterminate, too unconscious, too distant from the precision of conceptual language—refuse the coldness of reflection that measures and records.

But is it not precisely the role of Poetry to give expression and shape to emotions humankind has been content to experience without formulation? And what is “the shock of the new” if not their brusque awareness brought about thanks to a poet? Unanimist feelings have been sung by no one. But they merit, with the same entitlement as the other feelings, the passionate effort of writers—especially since they offer absolutely new material, which is a precious advantage in these banal times. Such a poetry would respond to the profound needs of our era, will reveal its original essence, and will not limit itself, like Zola or Verhaeren, to describe the gestures, the appearances, the exterior of modern things and *the coloured surface* of collective life. This poetry will be strong and suave, being sufficiently rich to nurture the inspiration of the most diverse talents and the most complete geniuses. In sum, I firmly believe the affective relations between individual and city, thought's totality, the vast movements of consciousness, the colossal fires of human groups are capable of creating a very penetrating lyricism or a superb epic cycle. I believe there is a place in art for “unanimism.”

In truth, it is easy to deny the feelings I invoke here, to attribute to them an imaginary origin. Is the individual heart really interested in communal life? Do we not commit a gross exaggeration by naming the condition of individual absorbed in

city a “state of feeling”? And the other unanimisms, the theatre, the street, the city, aren’t they literary fictions of an unknown kind? City-consciousness has the air of being an ingenious metaphor.... Common sense insinuates these criticisms; but one must intuitively proceed here by the heart’s divination. Reasoned reflection hasn’t a voice for the moment. And afterwards, may history make reasoned reflection circumspect. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Chateaubriand, followed by Lamartine, celebrated, with an unknown tone, the “indistinctness of passion,” the infinite hopes and despair, the desire for the eternal and the attraction of nothingness, the disgust for living and the inspiration of a supraterrrestrial felicity, there was a Morellet and an Andrieux, reasonable persons, who treated as false, imaginary and ridiculous the beauty of these incredible things that terrified them.

The world did not perceive at first how Chateaubriand and Lamartine were renewing for a century the modern sensibility.

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