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For the poetry of life

Lope Vargas

May 2000

*How many people have gone through life without ever waking up!
And how many others have been noticed who live only for the
monotonous tick-tock of the clock!*

To the most attentive eyes, it does not go unnoticed that in the past poetry signified a tendency toward the critique of the given world, to the transformation of this world through the fire of poetic revolt and necessity. Beyond words, and more precisely against them, poetry strove to transgress the somewhat contemplative plain to which it had been confined, in order to affirm itself in an active, concrete, material form. Thus, to embody itself in this world, hurling itself into the fray in order to try to occupy a place on the first level in the struggle for its transformation. It is therefore desirable to see the authors of works that have been considered merely literary up to this point in a new light, to start hearing their voice as if it was that of authentic men of action calling us to battle. Rimbaud the communitarian and Mayakovsky the Bolshevik are just two of the innumerable examples that could be made in this sense. Hence, it seems extremely strange that no one, or nearly no one

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has that of taking the opposite path that looks at individuals who have passed into history for their actions as authentic poets.

From this point of view, awareness of the works of Emile Henry, one of the greatest French poets of the nineteenth century, is barely dawning. Perhaps it would be necessary to find the colors Lewis used in *Monaco* to be able to create the appropriate atmosphere that greeted the appearance of this twenty-one year old boy. In comparison to the poets of the time, but also to many contemporary poets, his interventions in Paris in the rue des Bons-Enfants in 1892 (five police agents killed in an explosion in a police station) and at the Café Terminus in 1894 (about twenty wounded in the local meeting place of the bourgeoisie) explode with and incomparable splendor; they are expressions of a total revelation that seems to exceed human possibilities. Indeed, aren't the great poets characterized by their tenacious search to get beyond the limits to which their lives could aspire? Emile Henry went such a long way on this path, remaining alone. In the years that follow, all the boldest things that would be thought and undertaken against the dullness of a putrefied social order found in him a magical precursor. With Emile Henry, action reaches a fundamental turning point, it indicates a *recommencement*, abandoning the dry shores of the *beau geste*.

Besides, I have the right to leave the theatre when the comedy becomes odious to me and even to slam the door while leaving, at the risk of disturbing the tranquility of those who are satisfied with it.

Even though he has expressed better than anyone else the reasons that might push someone to end it all in using bad manners, nothing is more foreign to him than desperation. On the contrary, with Henry, the individual act ceases to be martyrdom, i.e., a religious manifestation. Before him, and unfortunately after him as well, the guillotine did not just constitute the punishment that order constructed as a threat against the Rebel, but a destiny, considered unavoidable, that was deliberately chosen.

“In this war without pity that we have declared against the bourgeoisie, we ask no pity. We give death, we know how to suffer it.”

At the first light of May 21, 1894, Emile Henry was beheaded. As Maurice Barrés, a witness to the execution, wrote: “Sixty kilos, an entire social system, fell on the neck of this adolescent, shattering his chin.”

Perhaps Emile Henry would be better placed in the sphere of French poetry. Perhaps we should speak of Lautréamont or Rimbaud, whose violence and rebellion he subsequently seemed to embody. But as we have seen, we cannot stop at considerations of an aesthetic order when dealing with Henry's work. The very element that had given his beneficial actions birth overflows from them, and that is an *awareness without measure*.

Today, everything makes us suppose that oblivion has fallen on Emile Henry. Shadow surrounds him, a cold shadow that consigns him to the archives of journalists, judges and police. But for wise spirits, the night that covers him is not able to take away his lesson. The rebellious taking of responsibility of a man who did not hesitate to carry theoretical questions onto the fertile terrain of life and to live them finally in his flesh and in his blood, ultimately confers on a him a fierce greatness. His death does not leave a void; it breaks through the wall of compromises and submissions behind which the human being suffocates. Through this opening, the very existence of the individual starts to flow and rumble, with no more muzzle or restraint.

denoted disease and madness. How to manage this? By resorting to aberrations borrowed from Freud and his ilk: the starting point of Henry's endeavor would have been an amorous illusion, an emotional lack. This is how the sinister shadow of idiocy has tried to banalize the endeavors of revenge for the desire Henry put into action.

In his declaration to the court, the reasons he gives for his actions have such a passionate accent that they don't appear at all cynical. Not only is Henry not a cynic, he is not even a fanatic as so many have tried to portray him, even among his comrades. His rage is not that of an idealistic puritan who destroys because he is mesmerized by a messianic vision, but rather is total revolt against what oppressed him. Emile Henry does not justify himself in terms of the future that will be – the anarchist paradise – but in terms of the present that is – a miserable existence. Peace, justice, equality and universal love may perhaps exist in the world of tomorrow, but today's reality is the struggle between authoritarian society and the individuals who want freedom because they are responsible for themselves. It was no accident that Henry took the phrase that Zola put into the mouth of Souverine, a character in his most famous novel, as his own:

“All arguments about the future are criminal, because they hinder pure and simple destruction and block the road of revolution.”

Against every temptation for reconciliation, against every hope of being able to assist in peaceful declines, Henry acknowledged:

“having brought a deep hatred into the struggle, a hatred which is stirred up daily by the nauseating spectacle of this society in which everything is an obstacle to the expansion of the human passions, to the generous tendencies of the heart, to the free impulse of thought.”

After the thought, it was the lot of the whole of bourgeois society to have to defend itself. To have to avenge itself, we should say. Though Emile Henry had tried to avoid such a tragic end, he knew how to face it with dignity:

Ravachol bragged of his deeds in a public place, causing himself to be arrested. Vaillant didn't try in the least to avoid capture after leaving the bomb in the Chamber of Deputies. Caserio and Bresci also renounced their freedom just to see their action realized. On the other side of the ocean, Alexander Berkman and Leon Czolgosz behaved no differently. But the moment that Emile Henry opens fire on the zealous police officers who are pursuing him, trying in every way to escape arrest, he breaks with the ideology of sacrifice, with the mathematical logic of compensation. When the presiding judge of the court reprimanded him for having planned everything in order to keep himself safe, Henry replied: *“It is quite natural; how could I have cultivated the hope of starting over and making even broader applications if, from the first, I allowed myself to be caught?”* Besides, he had always written:

Between the economizers of themselves and the prodigals of themselves, I believe the prodigals are the better calculators.

Behaving in this way, Henry furnishes individual action with its appropriate horizon for the first time. A wager with life, not a promise of death. But it isn't just in the methods, it is also in the very choice of objects at which to hurl his invectives that Henry makes a dizzying leap in relation to his contemporaries. He doesn't cut down symbolic figures of oppression, nor set fire to lightning rods placed to protect an entire class of exploiters: *the entire bourgeoisie and its guard dogs* shudder at the roar of the thunderbolt, and he is convinced that *“there are no innocent bourgeoisie, whoever may please to qualify themselves as such”*.

In Henry, poetic inspiration springs from the rupture between common sense and imagination, a rupture that – when it occurs – usually leans in favor of the latter. Revolt, any revolt, could not yet be considered poetry if it had to indefinitely shore up one form of authority at the expense of the others. So it is among the wreckage of rue des Bons-Enfants and among the upset tables of the Terminus Café that it is exalted, elevated, completed. The flagrant contrast that these two works seem to offer, from a moral point of

view, with the ideal tension that animates them is really hatred for the dominant ideology. If kings and presidents have hands soiled with blood, the knights of industry and the police are just the same. If the former represent *from a distance* the oppression that daily drains our existence of its most intense joys, the latter are what make this concrete *closest to us*. In short, if one probes the human mind in order to recover that which could form the basis of such a fury, one will discover that this rests above all on the impossibility of inventing the conditions of one's existential adventures, forced to submit to banal clichés.

With Henry, the limits within which ideas could enter into relationship with ideas and actions could enter into relationship with actions are put back into discussion. He refuses the supremacy of rhetorical propaganda at the expense of action, since he wants freedom – if it is not a secret prayer made to an abstract idol – to merge into putting the idea into action.

Once an idea is ripe and has found a formula, it is necessary to seek its realization without further delay.

A principle of perpetual mutation thus takes possession of objects as of ideas, striving to achieve a total liberation that entails that of the human being. With utterly wild eyes, Henry keeps himself at the margins of the scientific perfection of the world, passing beyond the consciously utilitarian dimension of this perfection in order to place it, along with everything else, under the black light of the apocalypse. *Definitive apocalypse*, his activity, in which the great instinctive urges in contact with an asbestos cage that encloses a flaming heart lose and exalt themselves.

Modern society is like an old ship that will sink in the storm, because it didn't want to free itself of the cargo it accumulated through the course of the centuries; they are precious things, but they weigh too much.

Though he accepted acting on the world just as it was given to him, he was quite careful not to vaguely modify its form to the measure of an uncertain desire – he knew that doing so would have

compromised the action he dreamed of putting into practice forever. It was necessary for his actions to intervene in this reality of shopkeepers, pensioners, functionaries, waiters, paltry appetites, stupid ostentation and dark envy. And he wanted on the world and not on the phantoms with which it is much too easily replaced. Thus, his decisive path was not that of inventing a parallel universe, but establishing, to the benefit of a precise knowledge, the authentic gravity and the fertile horror in which we all find ourselves immersed up to the neck. The world is made just as we know it: and so it is. But then, what do we make of it? He tried never to lie to himself about this question:

Between the bliss of unawareness and the unhappiness of knowledge, I have made my choice.

And it is really this awareness, this refusal to surrender before the vanity of everything, that guided his hand:

When a man, in the present society, becomes a rebel conscious of his own actions, it is because he has carried out a painful task of analysis in his mind, the conclusions of which are imperative and cannot be escaped except through cowardice. He alone holds the balance, he alone is the judge of the rightness or wrongness of hating and of being wild, "even ferocious".

These words precede those that another great French poet, Antonin Artaud managed to write a few decades later: *"There is no cruelty without awareness, a kind of applied awareness"*.

Emile Henry shocks. He shocks because he destroys an entire system of reference from its foundations, because he corrodes western humanistic culture, because he strikes bourgeois thought and culture without pity. Thought that protects itself by declaring his acts mad and his words meaningless. But the accusations that have been put forward against his work, with the aim of diminishing it, show well that the critic has never been able to approach it without getting burned. In the first rank, as always, the journalists armed with their ridiculous psychiatry from the Court of Assizes. It was a question of demonstrating as quickly as possible that Emile Henry