

Alain

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I have known few great men; few, that is, of absolutely flawless metal. They could be counted on the fingers of one hand. The philosopher Alain was one of these, and quite a few of us, his pupils or readers, are aware of it. The truth about him, already widely known, is bound to spread further; and a hundred years hence Alain will rank, among writers of our day, alongside Paul Valéry; while many who to-day naively think themselves assured of immortality will have sunk into oblivion.

I was sixteen when I met The Man, as we called him. On that October morning in 1901 when we were awaiting our Sixth Form Master for the first time, we were filled with a lively curiosity. Older schoolfellows had told great tales of this young master, whose fantasy and whose genius made his lessons so different from all the rest. Suddenly he appeared, “a friendly giant, solidly and compactly built. With his big nose, heavy moustache, floppy bow-tie and broad-brimmed grey felt hat, he looked a most peculiar compound of cavalry officer and artist.” He strode briskly in. For one moment he looked at us in silence. Then, picking up a piece of chalk, he wrote on the blackboard two sentences from Plato: *We must strive after truth with our whole soul* and *We must travel by the longest road*.

Thus began the glorious year we were to spend with Alain. Every class was a fresh surprise. Sometimes he would sit down among us on a bench and send a boy to the board to work out the plan of a *dissertation*. Sometimes he would grab up an object, the inkwell or the chalkbox, and around this concrete image build up a whole philosophy. But never would he lay down the law and impose a system; never would he say “This is what you are to think.” His method was very much rather to teach us to doubt. Sometimes he would demonstrate, in a manner apparently irrefutable, the truth of some paradox, and then incite us to discover for ourselves the weak points of his demonstration.

On teaching he had his own intransigent ideas. He thought that work ought to *be* work, not play; that obscurity is a good teacher because it sets us problems and makes us more alert; and that it is better to have thorough knowledge of a few things than superficial knowledge of many. He would say too that what is easily learnt is easily forgotten and that in a really useful lesson the pupil

is working harder than the master: “What one ought to hear is the sound of young voices, not a monologue from the platform.”

He liked using the blackboard because the written phrase, and above all the formula (which is not far removed from poetry) can crystallize thought and help the memory: “In the Army,” he would say, “they don’t give you lectures on the rifle. Each soldier has to take his weapon to pieces and put it together again, using the same terms as the instructor. After he has done this a score of times the soldier knows what a gun is and he has the vocabulary for expressing what he knows. Similarly, you don’t learn how to think by listening to a thinker. What you need to do is take your own arguments to pieces and then put them together again until the subject and the vocabulary become a part of yourself.” That is what Valéry also declared, in another way: “One must add one’s discoveries unto oneself.”

When I told him I was hoping to become a writer, he advised me to copy, from beginning to end, the eight hundred pages of Stendhal’s *La Chartreuse de Parme*: “The art of learning,” he would say, “as musicians and painters know, boils down to a long apprenticeship of imitating and copying. . .” He taught me not to despise the commonplace. “Only fools,” he would say, “think they are being original when they neglect the ideas of previous generations. True originality consists in giving commonplace ideas new shape.”

He would invite us to illustrate our philosophic *dissertations* with examples and images: “Your phrases should be alive with men and women, filled with stones, metals, chairs, tables, animals. A wholly abstract style is always bad. Concrete examples alone furnish style. . .” We also had to learn to be concise. “It’s easy to be long-winded,” he would say, “but to be brief takes time.” Occasionally he would set a difficult subject and ask us for exactly fifty lines. In the margin of my exercises he would write: “Tighten up, condense, and end with a punch.”

The subjects he set thrilled us: *A young woman is just about to jump from the Pont des Arts and drown herself. A philosopher pulls her back by the skirts. Dialogue.* Or again: *The captain of a firebrigade is having a discussion with a sacristan on the existence of God.* Or another time: *School-life in Utopia.* You can well imagine that Sixth-Formers had plenty to say.

In an anonymous tribute to *Alain as a Teacher*, published in 1932 by an old boy of the classical side of the *Lycée Henri IV*, I find: “We see in this teaching a current of thought more invigorating than Bergsonism, and that without any striving after originality or posing as a Master. The secret of it cannot be

conveyed in a couple of lines; it has innumerable secrets. For here is a perpetual fount of ideas and at the same time a cheerful, direct and virile activity whose impress has been left on every one of his pupils, even the least bright.”

That is a fact. There are in France some thousands of men who declare with pride, by way of recalling their finest memory and displaying their greatest honour: “I was a pupil of Alain.” Such a one, among others, was Jean Prévost, sorely missed among us, who would have been one of the best minds of post-war France, and who never lost a chance of saying how much he owed to his master. For myself, I have said a hundred times that I owe him everything, even some of my troubles, for he taught me to fly too high. But his thought, itself unswervingly religious, has remained my religion.

What then were Alain’s secrets? It is the nature of secrets to lie hidden and I would be quite incapable of explaining all his. One of the foremost, to my thinking, was Alain’s direct contact, as teacher and writer, at once with the world of material objects and the world of the mind. Before Alain, other teachers had talked to me of subjects well worthwhile, but which in their hands remained academic, outside myself as it were. With him, the real world came into the classroom. He would search for the truth in front of us, along with us. Alain taking a lesson was a vigorous Oedipus battling with the universal Sphinx, a man of genius thinking aloud. And all of it was spontaneous, fresh, mysteriously exciting.

Alain’s second secret was that here was a philosopher with the instinct of a poet. He loved suggesting ideas by means of images, fables and parables. They were like landmarks in his lessons. Some of them would turn up almost daily: the Rabbi’s maidservant, the arctic duck, the dream of the guillotine, the subaltern on colonial service. Among his *Propos* my own favourites are prose-poems, fables of a kind, which have the charm of *Candide*. He was familiar with the starry heavens and knew, as Shakespeare knew, how to take them for a back-cloth; the deep, dark waters of love were known to him, and he could talk of it like Stendhal. He did not overwork the word sublime, but he was not afraid to use it, and never out of place.

His third secret: reading. There was never such a reader as Alain. He read and re-read. Not a great number of authors. He cared nothing for the tyranny of fashion, but remained steadfastly attached to the few spirits that had never failed him. Philosophers: Plato, Spinoza, Descartes, Hegel, Auguste Comte. A few poets: Homer, Hugo, Claudel, Valéry. A few novelists: Stendhal, Balzac, Tolstoy, Kipling and – coming nearer our own times – Proust. A few memoir-

writers: Retz, Saint-Simon, Chateaubriand, Napoleon. And then Montaigne, Rousseau, Voltaire. The thing is that he always remained a man of few books, but that he had explored his favourites to the very depths.

In the light of his knowledge, a text would suddenly become aglow with undiscovered beauties. Often his classes at Rouen or Paris would consist of just that: the reading of a page of Homer or Balzac with the teacher's commentary. Certain of his own books: *Avec Balzac*, *En lisant Dickens*, preserve the type of such extempore lessons, which were masterpieces, unique among their kind. I have noted with some satisfaction that men too young to have been Alain's pupils have nevertheless recognized how profoundly revealing is this literary scrutiny. Claude Mauriac, when I praised his book on Balzac, told me how much he owed to the analyses of Alain.

Knowing how to read... is there any other humane culture? The mistake most professional critics make is to search out an author's weak points. They pick his ideas or his works to pieces in order to demolish. Their history of philosophy is gleeful massacre and it leaves the disciple dejected. What's the use, he asks himself, and why such an expenditure of effort to demonstrate the vanity of human enquiry? Alain is different. He reveals the glorious element of truth in each system. Neither Plato, nor Spinoza, nor Hegel is absolute truth. But each of them is one aspect of truth. Auguste Comte has his aberrations, but what matters is the truth in Comte. "I don't think," said Alain of Kant, "that you have read him enough, nor that anyone has read him enough." At any rate, no one has read him as thoroughly as Alain. Personally I am still, in comparison with my teacher, a mere fledgling mistrustful of its wings. I like to get from him my philosophical pabulum and I only find it digestible if he has chewed it over first.

In politics, Alain was, and remained, a radical. He distinguished between political practice, which is a technique like the training of horses, and which he was willing to learn from Balzac, Auguste Comte or Napoleon, and political theory, which keeps an open mind and, though it may concede obedience, refuses respect. "To serve is noble," he would say; "to serve blindly is anything but noble." Alain, as a radical, insisted that the citizens and their mandatories should never let go of power. "To obey while yet resisting, that's the thing. Destroy obedience and you get anarchy; destroy resistance and you get tyranny." At Rouen he campaigned for the Radical party and wrote for the *Dépêche*. It was there that his *Propos* came into being, bringing honour to journalism and to our province. At that time I myself was a Conservative (à la Disraeli) and

now and again I would send him a retort to some *Propos* which had shocked me. Alain would publish it. "The practitioner writes me," he would begin. To-day the pupil has gone back to the master and acknowledges that this radicalism was the salvation of intellectual liberty.

The man was of the same measure as the philosopher. We could be proud of him. I never knew him make the slightest concession to power, wealth or prestige. He was law-abiding as a citizen, scrupulously observant of his duties as a civil servant, but outside the service he was intransigent, opposed on principle to the powers in authority. At the time, this state of permanent rebelliousness surprised me somewhat. I have come to believe in it as necessary, for power corrupts even the best of men. Given too much power, any man will become crazed. So we owe it to those in authority to protect them against themselves by refusing to hold them in veneration.

It is the laws we must respect, not the men. We must not salute the hat of Gessler. Such was our master's teaching. Brilliant as he was, he could have commanded the supreme honours of his calling. The Sorbonne and the College de France would have felt proud to call him theirs. He would accept nothing and remained a schoolmaster. . . . I am not praising him for it: he loved the job. It would be dangerous for society if every one of its citizens were a Socrates. But Socrates himself has to be Socrates before Criton can be at least Criton.

When war came in 1914, Alain was forty-seven and had never been a soldier. But he enlisted. He was a gunner, battery-telephonist, corporal, a first-rate artilleryman, brave, resourceful and ingenious, well-disciplined; but he kept all his independence of mind. He was one of the very few men of his age and ability who went right through the war without becoming an officer. He had no wish to be. Naturally he recognized that a company must have a commander, but, as he saw it, his own function was to fight harder than ever for human dignity and remain a radical in uniform. "I belong," he would say. "with the 'other ranks.'"

From four years spent at the front, living in dug-outs, he contracted rheumatism, and on demobilization he was lame; but when he went back to his teaching post at Henri-Quatre his lessons were better than ever. His classes were packed, his reputation tremendous. And it was in this period between the two wars that he wrote his finest books.

I was living in Paris at the time, and I would often seek out Alain as he left his classroom, to stroll with him across the Luxembourg gardens. Every time I brought out a new work I would take it along, not without a scared feeling, and

would await his pronouncement in a state of mingled hope and fear, as in the days when I was his pupil at Rouen. Sometimes he said “It’s good,” and then I was filled with pride and joy. At other times he was stern: “This isn’t writing. This is no book.” And I knew he was right.

At last he was forced to retire. The water-logged trenches of 1914–18 had left him an invalid, crippled with pain. In his little house near the railway at Vesinet, he lived henceforward tethered to his table, writing or reading. The colossal body could no longer move unaided, but he never complained. He had taught that happiness is a duty, and he lived this doctrine now in the kingdom of pain. When I felt the need, in difficult days, to rediscover my faith in man, I would go to see Alain. Age had not impaired one whit his vigour as a thinker. We would plunge forthwith into things immortal. Balzac, Stendhal, Plato would be summoned and mediocre spirits despatched with lightning-flashes from the powerful head bent towards me. Alain was still the master, the only one I have ever acknowledged, in whom I would not have wished a single word, a single act, to be otherwise. His was a destiny supremely inspiring, if in his case one can really speak of destiny. That splendid life was the achievement of a free spirit, and to him I owe my own freedom.