



La Lettre - January 2021



Paysage de Provence, tapestry woven at Aubusson under the supervision of Marie Cuttoli, after a cartoon of 1957, 200 x 300cm. Private collection.

“Without doubt, there are misnomers and there are misunderstandings.” So wrote Vincent Bioulès in a text\* inviting us to recognise the meaning disguised in Jean Hugo’s lovely compositions. The aim of the association of Friends of Jean Hugo is contribute to knowledge of Jean Hugo’s work; this Lettre is one means at our disposal to fulfil this mission. As such, it is a valuable forum for information and thought. The theme chosen for the previous issue, *La Paix Verte*, allowed us to explore Jean Hugo’s vision in the face of modernity as it transpires in his works. For this new edition of the Lettre, we have asked Florian Michel to pursue this reflection in the light of the writings of the philosopher Jacques Maritain, who became aware very early of the spiritual dimension of his godson’s paintings.

I hope you enjoy reading it, with my best wishes for tranquility and peace in this new year.

Vincent Bioulès, “Le regard d’un peintre” in Jean Hugo, une retrospective. Actes Sud, 1995, p. 39

Jean Baptiste Hugo,  
President

## JEAN HUGO - RESPECT FOR CREATION IN THE INDUSTRIAL AGE

Florian Michel

“I’m thinking of a picture: a goatherd is guarding his flock amid the ruins of industrial civilisation. In the foreground, a fig-tree is bursting through the carcass of a dead automobile.”<sup>1</sup>

Jean Hugo’s denunciation of the “trash of the industrial age” dates from immediately after the second world war. In June 1947, briefly in Paris, he remarked that the cars actually prevented him from painting: “Automobiles have multiplied; they make such a noise that I can’t see anything”.<sup>2</sup> On 31 July 1949 in a letter to Louise de Vilmorin, he lamented “going through a bad time”: “I can’t wait for the end of the holidays”, he wrote, “the roads present a terrifying spectacle, one car after another, as in 1940, with mattresses, boats and cradles on the roof.” In his notebook, on 5 January 1957, he wrote “I feel a stranger in this world - I who, even as a child, preferred to stay put.” On 7 June 1958, visiting Gustave Thibon at the community founded by Lanza del Vasto in the Ardèche, he noted approvingly that “everyone here wears a black wooden cross; they go barefoot; there’s no electricity, they light with candles. They make things in wood, pray in a chapel with Oriental carpets, they drink local grape juice and eat black bread”.



La taille de vigne, ca 1960. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40cm. Private collection.

On 1 June, he observed with humour: “General strike! No-one lives in fear of dying of hunger, just of not being able to drive! We’re confusing the essence with the existential”. The “generation of 68”, although inspired by Sartre, shifted all his perspectives. “Existence comes before essence”, wrote the master of nihilist existentialism. Now, diesel oil and fuel oil are the prime movers of life. In Toulouse on 29 May 1969, in the old port de la Daurade, Jean Hugo deplores “motor vermin”: “No more life, no more boats, no more anglers, no more tramps sleeping in the sun”.

<sup>1</sup> Jean Hugo, *Carnets. 1946-1984*, Actes Sud, 1994, p. 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Hugo, *Carnets. 1946-1984*, Actes Sud, 1994, p. 26.



L'homme à la huppe, 1947. Tempera, 22 x 27 cm. Private collection.

Echos of a conversation appear in his notebook in October 1969: “Why is Jean Hugo less well-known in France than in the United States? Because he doesn’t know how to answer the telephone”. On 5 February 1974, we may read in his notebook: “The highway is more alien than the railway to the landscape through which it passes. It eviscerates it, kills it. It has no life: no ploughman, no shepherd, no peasant tending his vines”.

In the perpetual struggle between Ancient and Modern, Jean Hugo occupies a singular position. His art has nothing of the Ancient, but by virtue of his generation, his temperament and his culture, he is anti-Modern. Or, to express it in the scarcely gentle words of Jean Cocteau, Jean Hugo is “serenely out-of-date”, having a “certain obsolete charm”. He likes neither cars, nor highways nor tourists, nor “humanity on vacation - vacua, literally vacant”<sup>3</sup>, nor telephones, nor advertising, nor the “diabolical language of television” (Carnets, 6 February 1974). He is attached to peace, he loves silence, trains, boats, latin liturgy, walking and a noble slowness of being. He loves flowers, insects and birds of which he speaks as a knowledgeable botanist, naturalist and ornithologist. He calls them by their latin names, he identifies them by their foliage, their song or their flight. He knows their natural history and he loves nature, not for itself but for intimate bonds which unite it with man. Wrong-footed by the violence of the modernism of the 1960s and 1970s, the figure of Jean Hugo seems today to possess a very contemporary relevance in rethinking, for our arts and our century, the rightful place of the creative person within creation.

Each of us sees in Jean Hugo’s paintings what our inner eye presents to us. For some, they present beautiful colours in happily arranged compositions. For others, it is the expression of virtue, the sign of an art of life, of living in creation, establishing belief in a world that the eye cannot see. A good illustration is the composition of *Le jardin potager* (The kitchen garden) of 1942. The “subject” of the painting, despite the title, is not so much the motif of the garden itself as the evident but discreet relationship between the garden and its gardener - the man in the straw hat that we see in mid-ground through a gap in the garden. The gardener is obviously a man who loves to work with his hands in nature. He improves it for his pleasure but also for its usefulness, for its beauty and harmony. In this he is the opposite of the lazy and hopeless person who cannot be bothered to do the weeding. He is also the opposite of the demiurge who takes himself for the Creator.

<sup>3</sup> Lettre de Jean Hugo à Gustave Thibon, 29 juillet 1961, archives Thibon.



The gardener is humble, patient, attentive, vigilant, always anxious, on edge; he sows, he reaps, he shapes, cares, prunes, weeds and waters. Endlessly. He likes to introduce - not always order, but harmony and taste. In the same way, the “subject” of the painting *Nathaniel sous le figuier* (Nathanael under the fig tree) (1933) is clearly the call of Nathanael. “When thou wast under the fig tree I saw thee”, Christ says to him. And the vines in the background are there to signify the vines of the Father and of Him who is the scion. The garrigue is “the landscape of my whole life”, he writes in the same vein on 3 April 1946, hearing the distant Angelus of Vérargues: a landscape of colour and proportion, but also a landscape of smells and sounds - the bees, the hoopoe, the distant bell. In *Regard de la mémoire*, Jean Hugo emphasises the extent to which the garrigue landscape is itself transfigured by revelation, becoming as it were a representation of the Gospel: “I saw the road to Emmaus winding through the garrigue, the Apostles’ black boats on the Mauguio lagoon, and the eunuch pointing out the river Vidourle to Philip. On the arid slopes of the Pic Saint-Loup I imagined Saint John Colobos making the dry wood flourish and watering it each day and Saint Paul the Simple burning the baskets he had woven” (p. 318).



Le jardin potager, 1949. Oil on canvas, 60,3 x 73 cm. Private collection.

A few pages further on (p. 395) he once more underlines the harmonies of nature, work, man and eternity. “The colours of the garrigue recognise neither weather, nor time, nor seasons. They are the colours of eternity. The olive tree is the symbol of the Virgin, bride of the Spirit. The wind’s shadow passes over it, like that of the Holy Spirit over the Blessed Virgin”. Even the industrial world seems sometimes to be touched by grace, redeemed by relief, perspective and weather. “I went up to the top of Mont Saint-Clair with Charles. The weather was bright and icy. The spires of the cathedrals of petroleum bore plumes of flame and smoke”.<sup>4</sup>



Nathaniel sous le figuier, 1933. Tempera on canvas, 63 x 79 cm. Private collection.

In the work of Jean Hugo, there are many canvasses depicting gardens, fields, forests and meadows, vineyards and ploughland, where the shepherds are Christ-like and the walkers are pilgrims.<sup>5</sup> Nature is sometimes difficult but she is generous if managed skilfully by man's efforts. How can one not perceive this spiritual plainsong, these words of all-embracing consecration in the work of Jean Hugo? The fruit of the soil, of the vine and of men's work is destined to be eaten and drunk in the joy of the marriage-feast. The gardener, the peasant and the painter are all enlisted in an act of creation, in support and defence of Creation itself. This spiritual standpoint is the heart of that "mysterious oneness" that Vincent Bioulès points to when he emphasises both the "inner austerity" and the conquest of simplicity which amount in Hugo's work to "a small share in the attributes of God".



Les pèlerins d'Emmaüs, deux cyprès, 1970. Gouache on paper, 21 x 34 cm.

<sup>5</sup> Sur ce point, lire Vincent Bioulès, « Le regard d'un peintre », dans *Jean Hugo, une rétrospective*, Actes Sud, 1995, p. 39-45 ; Florian Michel, « Un peintre spirituel, Jean Hugo », *Communio*, Paris, juin 2017, tome 42, vol. 3-4, p. 144-152.



In 1935, on a famous page of *Clef des chants*, the Jacques Maritain, who was Jean's godfather, sees in his godson's paintings the reconciliation of the contemporary *Zeitgeist* with the sense of Creation; "In the hollow of his humility, a painter reflects and observes; he sees the vines that God has made, the olive trees, the hackberry trees, the bulls, the unicorns - and the heaths and skies of Brittany, too - he sees in slow motion the works and movements of Men - also made by God. What he receives through his eyes falls into the silence of a lake fervent with contemplation, and vegetates slowly before bursting out in a work imbued with the power to act as a talisman to soothe hearts. Through his religious respect for things, which in itself would not suffice without the depth of his soul, Jean Hugo reconciles the spirit of our age and all that we find enchanting in the work of Douanier Rousseau, with the haughty, serious purity of the inspirations of the primitives and the Chinese".<sup>6</sup>



L'Etang de Manguio, 1932. Tempera on cardboard, 22,9 x 39,7 cm. Private collection

In a letter of June 1969, Maritain observed once again: "Your painting washes the soul of all the vanities of the time and bathes it in truth. It is magnificently contemplative painting, which sees with unlimited respect and love and transfigures things by dint of seeing in them what they are".<sup>7</sup>

Jean Hugo's last days are marked by family affection and spiritual intensity - not without humour but with real humility. On 14 June 1984, a week before the painter's death, Vincent Bioulès transcribed in his diary Jean Hugo's last uncertainties. He spoke "with the wisdom and gaiety of a patriarch on the threshold of the Promised Land". The scene is upsetting: "I go to say goodbye to Jean. He is lying in the sitting room. The light comes in from the garden via the great mirror hanging over the fireplace. All his paintings hanging on the walls, so pure, firm, so sweetly intense, as clear as disembodied flowers." He goes on: "We talk. He tells me that he feels well but that it is difficult to get used to 'another time'. 'I must get into the time of angels, it's difficult.' 'I wish I could describe exactly what I feel. It's unimaginable. Fortunately it only happens once.' 'I wonder if I will go straight to Paradise.' A shadow passes, he talks about Purgatory. I tell him it's enough to believe in Jesus Christ and to give oneself completely. That is the price of salvation. I thank him for everything he has brought me and for letting me love him. That pleases him. I tell him his guardian angel is there, ready to help him, that there is nothing to fear.' 'I tell Jean that he has exercised charity through his painting and that it is in this way that he has loved his neighbour.' 'I did what I could.'"<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Maritain, « La clef des chants », 1935, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 785.

<sup>7</sup> Lettre de Jacques Maritain à Jean Hugo, 29 juin 1966. Archives Jean Hugo.

<sup>8</sup> Vincent Bioulès, *Journal (1972-1978)*. « Dieu, les autres, les femmes, la peinture, la vie enfin... », Éditions Méridiennes, Montpellier, juin 2019, p. 127-128.

Nature in Jean Hugo's work is not "naturalistic". This is "contemplative painting" by a painter who lived in the Promised Land that he depicted and who wished with his dying breath to enter "the time of the angels"; a body of work which had become the expression of the theological virtue of charity as much as of faith and hope. The shepherd will still lead his flock to pasture. The fig tree will flourish and give fruit. The promise of life will be fulfilled. Both Jacques Maritain and Vincent Bioulès profoundly illustrate the grounds for a spiritual re-reading of Jean Hugo's paintings. Richard Wattenmaker for his part underlined the "powerfully creative vision", "transcending reality", with which Jean Hugo viewed the world. "The coherence of his outlook on life enables him to unite perception, prayer, meditation and contemplation and to channel them all into his art, which serves the common good in the profoundest possible way". In this sense, and despite the apparent anachronism, to follow this line of thought to its extremity Jean Hugo, in common with many authors and with many communities, familial, friendly or monastic, could be seen as representing the ideal, taken up in 2015 by Pope Francis in the encyclical *Laudato Si* on the need to defend the "common good" and the "common home". "Everything is linked" wrote the Pope in this theologically traditional but societally visionary text. The diagnosis is without concession. On the negative side, the disregard of nature, the pursuit of profit, the loss of the sense of contemplation and service and the collapse of spirituality, are all linked. Christian sensitivity to ecological issues long predated the birth of militant, political ecology.



Garrigue au cabanon noir, ca 1978. Gouache, 9 x 13 cm. Private collection.

Despite its obvious progress, and perhaps not in its principle but in its more morbid applications, modernity - so attractive, lively, dynamic - is perhaps no more than a dead end if it fails first of all to cultivate a taste for that which is slow, good and of lasting beauty. Such was the lesson of Ben Sira, according to the latin text: "Studium pulchritudinis habentes, pacificantes in domibus suis": "They cultivated the taste for beauty and spread peace in their habitations". And such, too, was the strong suggestion made by Jacques Maritain in *Art et Scolastique* (1920), quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas: "Ex divina pulchritudine esse omnium derivatur." Divine beauty is the reason for being of everything that is, and everything that is derived from it, in the sense of originating in the beauty of God. "The beauty of the thing created is nothing other than its likeness to the divine beauty inherent in things."

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## ACTIVITIES OF THE ASSOCIATION

Future activities (dates to be announced in the light of the evolution of the present health measures):

A- Visit to the exhibition “Jean Hugo, a universe in his hands” at the Médard Museum, Lunel.

B- Lectures related to the exhibition:

- Olivier Muth on the correspondance between Louise de Vilmorin and Jean Hugo of which he has published an annotated edition (for which he has just been awarded the Sévigny Prize in recognition of the critical apparatus of the work): Louise de Vilmorin Jean Hugo, Correspondance croisée 1935-1954. Honoré Champion 2019

- Geneviève Haroche Bouzinac, whose biography of Louise de Vilmorin, *Une vie de Bohème*, won the Académie française 2020 award for literary biography, will come to talk about Louise de Vilmorin’s friendship with Jean Hugo, superbly illustrated in their joint publication *L’Alphabet des Aveux*.

- We also hope to organise a lecture on Max Jacob’s *Cornet à dés*, with Cécile Coutin, honorary chief conservator, Doctor of History of Art, who was in charge of the collection of maquettes and costumes at the Department of performing arts, National Library of France, from 1990 to 2013.

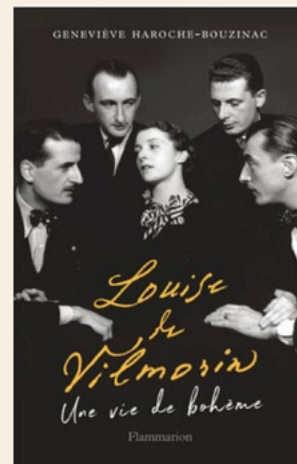
- The opening date of the exhibition “Jean Hugo, a universe in his hands” at the Médard Museum, Lunel, is still unclear. The intention will be to extend the length of the exhibition until 19 September, subject to possible modification.

A virtual visit is available at the following link:

<https://www.canva.com/design/DAEMXkR1ywo/view>

Saturday 23 January 2021, 17:00 to 18:00  
Meet the author with Geneviève Haroche Bouzinac,  
presentation of Louise de Vilmorin, *une vie de Bohème*  
(Flammarion, 2019) CANCELLED

Lunel District Intercommunal Documentation Centre,  
520, avenue des Abrivados, 34400 Lunel



## MISCELLANEOUS

The editorial director of the *Lettre* is Jean Baptiste Hugo, who is also the president of the association of Friends of Jean Hugo: [jbhugo5@gmail.com](mailto:jbhugo5@gmail.com). Telephone +33(0) 06 02 38 54 67.

Applications for membership of the association of Friends of Jean Hugo are welcome: the subscription is 20 euros for an individual and 30 euros for a couple. Cheques should be made out to “Association Jean Hugo” and sent to the Treasurer, Chantal Teulon-Nouailles, 419, rue Frédéric Mistral, 30310 Vergèze, France.

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