

Max Jacob and the Struggle for the Avant-Garde, 1919–1921

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Author's Introduction

The following piece is excerpted from *Max Jacob: A Literary Biography*. Jacob was born in 1876 to a nonobservant Jewish family in Quimper, Brittany. After succeeding brilliantly at the lycée, he went to Paris to pursue advanced study in the École Coloniale and in law school. He gravitated quickly, however, to a life in the arts. He met Picasso in 1901, and their intense friendship became the nucleus for the community of modern art at the ramshackle studios in Montmartre, Le Bateau-Lavoir. Jacob experienced a vision of Christ on the wall of his shabby room in 1909 and formally converted to Catholicism (with Picasso as his godfather) in 1915. He is most famous for his collection of radical prose poems *Le Cornet à dés* (1917) (The Dice Cup), but he published many other collections of poems in verse and prose, novels, short stories, plays, and aesthetic meditations. He reinvented the genre of the prose poem, casting out allegory and anecdote, fragmenting narrative, and scrambling registers of diction to create a new art of controlled discontinuity tending toward abstraction. His verse poems were equally inventive: he mixed high and low styles, multiplied sense through puns, and pressed traditional cadences into savvy discord. He spent two long periods of retreat in association with the Benedictine monastery of Saint Benoît in the Loire Valley (1921–1928 and 1936–1944). He was arrested by the Gestapo in February 1944, and died on 5 March 1944 of pneumonia from the rough conditions of the camp at Drancy. His name was on the list for the next transport to Auschwitz.

A biography is a collective enterprise. I have drawn on Hélène Seckel's catalogue for the show at the Musée Picasso in 1994, *Max Jacob et Picasso* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), and

on John Richardson's monumental biography of Picasso. Further documentation can be found on *Raritan's* website. I am grateful to Jacob's literary executor, Sylvia Lorant-Colle, for her support. Jacob's poems are quoted courtesy of Éditions Gallimard.

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MILITARY PEACE DID not bring peace to the arts. The years immediately following the Great War saw the final spasms of Cubism and the brutal rivalry of two new avant-garde groups, each claiming more radical credentials than the other: Dada and Surrealism. Jean Cocteau, meanwhile, tried to establish himself as the impresario of his own chic avant-garde with rapid-fire publications and theatrical productions. Emerging from Dada, the Surrealists did their best to eliminate competitors: Dada itself, Cocteau, and eventually Max Jacob. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the legendary German Cubist art dealer, returned from exile in Switzerland and started up his gallery again from scratch; since the French government had sequestered his entire stock, he had to woo his artists back from other dealers. What was at stake was nothing less than the legacy and future of Modernism, torn among Pierre Reverdy's austere formalism, Max Jacob and Cocteau's playful pluralism, the nihilism of Dada, and the prophetic claims of Surrealism. For Jacob, the years 1919–1921 traced an arc from hope to bitter disappointment, ending in his retreat to the monastery of St.-Benoît-sur-Loire.

In 1919 he was still living in his room on the rue Gabrielle in Montmartre on the ground floor at the back of the courtyard. A tall wardrobe with a full-length mirror divided the chamber, with the sleeping nook in the rear and Jacob's working and living space in front; the mirror faced outward, to the courtyard. Guests were invited to sit in the faded red velvet armchair or on two chairs with fraying straw seats; if those seats were taken, they sat on the table or lounged against the wall. Jacob had his "central laboratory" at the large table; here in the litter of manuscripts, cigarette butts, pastels, and tubes of gouache he composed his poems, tales, plays, and paintings. On the wall he had scrawled in large letters, "Never go to Montparnasse!"¹

He went out a good deal, sometimes to Montparnasse, or to visit the Prince and Princess Ghika in St.-Germain-en-Laye, or to readings, art openings, and theater, or to the cafés and restaurants in Montmartre, especially the Savoyarde where he held court. Each morning he arose early to attend Mass at Sacré-Coeur, returning down the street humming a canticle. As he entered the courtyard, the tiny crippled woman who lived above him, a professional beggar, hollered, "Fine goes on! Sacré-Coeur in the morning, orgies at night!"²

December 1918 set the stage for the literary dramas that would play out in Paris for the next few years. Tristan Tzara, in Zurich, brought out the Dada Manifesto, and it reverberated in the French capital; though Tzara and his friends had learned from the prewar avant-garde movements, their gleeful celebration of mayhem and contradiction made Cubism look like classicism and Futurism like a form of idiot optimism. "We shred the linens of clouds and prayers like a furious wind, preparing the great spectacle of disaster, fire, decomposition...DADA MEANS NOTHING."³ To these young people, revolted by the war and by the corruptions that had produced it, only a clean sweep of all previous art and philosophy would suffice.

In France, André Breton was brooding his way toward a new poetry. Aged twenty-three, from a modest family, he had been a medical student and soldier for the last three years, and had worked as a stretcher-bearer at Verdun and an intern at various military hospitals. Adrienne Monnier, who ran the bookstore La Maison des Amis des Livres, thought him beautiful as an archangel, with his "massive" head, his hair thrown nobly back, and his stern gaze the color of jade.⁴ His friend Aragon celebrated him in his autobiographical novel, *Anicet ou le panorama, roman*, as Baptiste Ajamais, a commanding figure with "his steely gaze, his proud lip."⁵ Having just lost his idealized friend the dandy-nihilist Jacques Vaché to an overdose of opium in January 1919, Breton wrote immediately to Tzara in Zurich, in a sense inviting him to take Vaché's place, and for three years he made common cause with Dada until his search for meaningful (rather than meaningless) revolution took shape as Surrealism.⁶

Max Jacob occupied an ambiguous position for these radical young writers. On the one hand, and especially since the publication of *Le Cornet à dés*, he represented a force of renovation and subversion of official culture. On the other, he was already an elder and as such, suspect, all the more suspect since his conversion to Catholicism. For now, the young writers courted him. Breton, who had become quite close to Apollinaire and Reverdy and, in other moods, Valéry, was intrigued by Jacob and in the beginning welcomed his contributions to *Littérature*, the journal he started in March 1919. But Breton always held him at arm's length. Aragon, however, Breton's comrade at the Val-de-Grâce Hospital and co-editor with Philippe Soupault of *Littérature*, visited Jacob often at the rue Gabrielle, and for a time considered him a guru. In *Anicet* he casts Jacob as Jean Chipre (a version of Jacob's Christian name, Cyprien). Aragon's Chipre is a mystic and a figure of exemplary poverty; some of his statements come right out of Jacob's preface to *Le Cornet à dés*: "Poverty, purity. Riches in art are called bad taste. A poem is not the display window of a jewelry shop..."⁷ *Anicet*, the Aragon character, is tempted by this sacrificial vision, but the exchange is interrupted by the arrival of the painter Bleu, a cruel caricature of Picasso who lights an expensive cigar, announcing, "I am glory."⁸

It was in Jacob's room that Georges Gabory met the other ambitious young men, Radiguet, Artaud, and Malraux, and Breton and Aragon in their sky-blue medical-military uniforms, Breton "solemn, important, pinched and dogmatic, Aragon arrogant, insolent..."⁹ Aragon read aloud the first chapter of *Anicet*, and Breton recited the poems he would publish later that year in *Mont de piété* (Pawn Shop).

At this stage, André Breton wobbled like a compass needle between opposing literary magnetic poles. At age eighteen, just before the war, this intelligent, intransigent young man had written to Valéry, and the elder poet generously guided him, offering him an exquisite literary education. But attracted though he was to Valéry's classicism, Breton was increasingly drawn to Rimbaud, and even more to the sadistic *Chants de Maldoror* of Isidore Ducasse, the

fictive Comte de Lautréamont. Now he was experimenting with Dada. Smelted in the furnace of war, Breton embodied his era and its contradictions: fiercely rational, he pursued techniques of the irrational (hypnosis, psychoanalysis, automatic writing); contemptuous of art, he sought the grounds and forms for new art; resistant to authority, he imposed his will on others and had a genius for organizing. Flirting with nihilism, he sought revelation. Even at this stage, Gabory reports, his friends nicknamed him “Vladimir Ilitch” (Lenin).¹⁰

In 1919, Breton imagined he could rally the old and new literary avant-gardes in the pages of a single journal. The *Nouvelle Revue Française* had ceased appearing during the war and wouldn't resume until June; Reverdy's *Nord-Sud* had folded; *SIC* and *L'Élan* were flimsy. The field lay open. In January, Henri Cluquennois invited Breton to join him in running the journal *Les Jeunes Lettres*. It's typical of Breton that he translated this invitation into a takeover, writing to Aragon, “We're thinking of invading the journal *Les Jeunes Lettres* and rechristening it.... Contributors will include Gide, Valéry, Larbaud, Fargue, Royère, Spire, Salmon, Billy, Max Jacob, Reverdy, Tzara, Mireille Havet, Paulhan, Giraudoux, Morand, Drieu La Rochelle, Philippe [Soupault], you, and me.”¹¹ The list reads like a catalogue of literary Paris; with the exception of Proust and Claudel, it corrals the key writers of the period and shows not only the breadth of Breton's taste at this point, but also his cunning: famous elders from the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and the old days of Symbolism would attract readers to the young authors. Breton even invited Cocteau to contribute, though he loathed him.¹² The list also reveals the masculine character of French letters: the only woman, Mireille Havet, was a song writer and an open lesbian, and so was allowed a place in the imagined fellowship.

Breton's personal magnetism and the complexity of his aesthetics at this stage may be measured in his relations with Pierre Reverdy. Embittered at having had to close *Nord-Sud*, jealous of Max Jacob, and infuriated by the upstart Cocteau, Reverdy expressed his vision of the corrupted avant-garde in *Les Jockeys camouflés*

(The Camouflaged Jockeys), a slim collection of poems he published in December 1918. Composed in free-floating vers libres, the poem “Les Jockeys mécaniques” (The Mechanical Jockeys) imagines a cavalcade of robot horses clattering across the sky, leaving behind nothing but darkness. The following poem, “Autres Jockeys alcooliques” (Other Jockeys, Alcoholic), presents a caricature of Max Jacob with false teeth, accompanied by another drunk jockey, perhaps Cocteau.¹³ In August 1918, Breton, who loved making lists and ranking artists and writers, included Reverdy among his heroes: Rimbaud, Picasso, Braque, Derain, Jarry, Lautréamont.¹⁴ Breton admired Reverdy’s harsh integrity, and for a while the sensitive Southerner thought he had found a responsive soul and maybe even an acolyte. Reverdy was soon disabused. His letters to Breton from June 1918 through February 1919 express, painfully, his affection and his craving for affection. But he was wounded when Breton waffled on his promise to lecture on Reverdy’s poems at Léonce Rosenberg’s gallery in March 1919. On 20 February Reverdy wrote him angrily, “If you fear too much being accused of being my disciple, just read the poems because I like the sonority of your voice and the way you control it. But know that I no longer count on you for anything.” Two days later his disappointment broke out in a private attack, in a letter, on Breton’s new journal: “I don’t like *Littérature*.”¹⁵ Breton compromised by reading two of Reverdy’s poems at the *Matinée Reverdy*. The first issue of *Littérature*, published that month, featured a poem by Reverdy and “Clé de sol” (Key of G, Key of Earth), a poem by Breton dedicated to his difficult friend in a clear imitation of his style.¹⁶

Breton wasn’t the only one imitating Reverdy. In early December, Cocteau brought out *Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance* (The Cape of Good Hope) from the Éditions de la Sirène, the publishing house he controlled with Cendrars.¹⁷ On 5 February he published “L’Ode à Picasso” as a fancy pamphlet, a poem of embarrassing adulation in words sprinkled across the page, partly gesturing to Mallarmé’s “Un Coup de dés,” partly to Reverdy.¹⁸ Cocteau, who picked up every poetic experiment he saw around him and originated none, was one

of the “mechanical jockeys” Reverdy derided in the race for the avant-garde. *Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance* was dedicated to Cocteau’s friend the aviator Roland Garros, who had been shot down in October; the chic scattered lines, all avant-garde mannerism, couldn’t hide the poem’s stunning pretentiousness; “I premeditate no architecture // Simply / deaf / like you Beethoven”; “I tease eternity.”¹⁹ Reverdy detested the book. Breton turned his back and walked out after Cocteau’s reading of it at Valentine Gross’s salon in September.²⁰

The first issue of *Littérature* appeared in March. Gide led off with pages extending his earlier rhapsodic *Les Nourritures terrestres* (The Fruits of the Earth, a call for youthful revolt) followed by Valéry’s “Cantique des colonnes” (Canticle of the Columns), a majestic opening for a new journal. André Salmon contributed a war poem of a certain journalistic freshness, followed by Jacob’s “La rue Ravignan,” a love poem to the prewar Bohemia of the Bateau-Lavoir. Implicitly, the poem acknowledged a graceful kinship between two generations of Modernists. After the first two lines spoken by God, the poem takes up in verse an image Jacob had used in a prose poem in *Le Cornet à dés*, a burning house as a rose on a peacock’s tail:

To pester my Son at the hour when all repose
 To consider a hurt you think is trivial?
 The burning house is like a rose
 Open in the gray peacock’s spreading tail.
 I owe you all, my sorrows and my joys...

The poem ends tenderly, evoking the days of youthful inspiration:

Limpasse de Guelma has its corregidors
 And the rue Caulaincourt its dealers in art
 But the rue Ravignan is the one I adore
 For my standard-bearers’ interwoven hearts.
 There, cutting designs in my beloved gems,
 My greatest faults were those in my own poems.²¹

The issue concluded with lyrical evocations (rather than reviews) by Aragon of Tzara's *vingt-cinq poèmes* and Reverdy's *Les Jockeys camouflés* and, to indicate the aesthetic position of the new venture, a review of other journals: insult to the *Mercur de France*, admiration for *Les Écrits Nouveaux* (which carried Breton's essay on Jarry), and celebration of Tzara's "Dada Manifesto." The final statement demonstrates Breton's strategy of containing explosive new art within the framework of the old, somehow flattering and threatening in the same breath: "We are happy to announce the forthcoming appearance under the direction of M. André Gide of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, the prewar journal that won the most esteem in the world of letters."²² This synthesis of old and new would not last long.



Raymond Radiguet was still a schoolboy in the Lycée Charlemagne in Paris when he met André Salmon while delivering his father's drawings to the newspaper where Salmon worked as an editor. At age fifteen, Radiguet was strikingly handsome, with a "Greco-Buddhist" face, a proud straight nose, full lips, tousled hair, and a sulky expression.²³ He was also strikingly gifted. Albert-Birot had already printed his poems in *SIC*, and Tzara had published him in *Dada*. He lived with his family in a suburb of Paris and took the train into the city for school. Salmon introduced him to Max Jacob, who took him up immediately, though probably not in a romantic sense. They seem to have met by February 1919, and within days they were using first names and addressing one another with the familiar *tu*.²⁴ In June, as Jacob reported to Picasso, Radiguet joined other poets in a celebration of Apollinaire at Léonce Rosenberg's gallery, and it was there that Cocteau caught sight of the young prodigy. A few days later Jacob sent the boy to call on Cocteau at 10 rue d'Anjou, where Cocteau lived with his mother, and from that encounter grew one of the most intense infatuations of Cocteau's life. Years later, Jacob told Marcel Béalu, "One can't tell the truth....I've been asked recently for memories of Radiguet. What do you want me to say? Radiguet was a young man whom X, I, and others killed. That's the truth."²⁵

In 1918, Radiguet saw Georges Gabory almost every day. Just a few years older and passionately literary, Gabory was publishing his harmless poems in *SIC*, and was close to Aragon, Cocteau, Jacob, Gide, and Malraux. From his memoirs, one gets a sense of the fluid sexual mores in this milieu. At age fourteen, Radiguet had had an affair with a young married woman, "Alice," whose husband was off at war; the boy was said to have treated her callously, and Salmon found himself in the position of trying to comfort her.²⁶ Radiguet would use her as a model for the character of Marthe in his novel *Le Diable au corps* (The Devil in the Flesh), a story very like theirs, narrated with chilling clarity. Gabory was having an affair with—in fact, was living in Montmartre with—a considerably older woman he calls Irma, whom he had met through Max Jacob. But both young men were also, in their different fashions, attracted to men. To the distress of his parents, Radiguet would soon be carrying on in a very public way with Cocteau, who spirited him off to nightclubs, aristocratic parties, and the Côte d'Azur. (Radiguet continued, however, to have flings with women, including the much older Beatrice Hastings, who was mad for him, and the sexual sophisticate Irène Lagut.)

Gabory's sexuality seems even more complicated, and his remarkably frank account sheds light on Max Jacob's erotic life and on the culture of semicloseted Parisian homosexuality. Gabory objected that he would never have submitted to "the appalling Carlos" (Vautrin) of Balzac's novel *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (Splendor and Misery of Courtesans) when Jacob facetiously called him by the hero's name, Lucien de Rubempré. "I'm too feminine, I preferred women," declared Gabory. "A Lesbian, Uncle André [Gide], the great virile Doric [Greek] would have said, in his Journal, not yet published at that period; before having read it, I had already intuited my own nature. Everyone has his own way of being homosexual."²⁷

When Gabory took up with the erotically voracious Irma, Jacob "pardoned" him: after all, it was he who had introduced them. But the older writer held to a subtle code of homosexual loyalty. Once, when Gabory permitted himself "a smile a little too 'hetero' about the behavior of a friend," Max said, in a pinched tone, "We know very

well you're 'not a member of the club; you!'"²⁸ And Gabory describes a scene of attempted seduction by Jacob. In his memoir, it comes right after the episode of Jacob converting his irreligious young friend and serving as godfather at his baptism in the little church of Saint-Pierre-de-Montmartre, a ritual Gabory submitted to more out of passivity than from religious zeal. This would not be the last time Jacob would mingle conversion and seduction. On the night Jacob made a pass at him, the two had dined at La Savoyarde, entertaining a Breton cousin of Jacob's, a clerk or accountant. Max put on a fireworks display of wit and brilliance. After they accompanied the cousin to the Metro stop at Pigalle, Jacob invited Gabory back to his room to write a comedy about the provincial guest; to wet their whistles, Jacob bought a bottle of eau-de-vie, set the bottle on the work table, and arranged the chairs in a state of mounting excitement. Wanting no part of that initiation, Gabory said he needed to go to the bathroom. Out in the dark courtyard, he let himself out the main door and fled.

"You ran off last night," Jacob chided him the next day. But he forgave him. Perhaps the most interesting part of the story is Gabory's conclusion: "My prudence hadn't surprised him; at that time one still had the right 'not to belong'" — suggesting that by 1988, when he wrote those words, Gabory felt homosexual identity to have become a more rigid and exclusive category.²⁹



In the first months of 1919, Jacob had every reason to feel hopeful. He was on friendly terms with the ardent younger writers, cheerfully announcing to his old patron Jacques Doucet that he would be "collaborating regularly" with *Littérature*, "little Breton's journal."³⁰ Three of his books were about to appear, an exhibit of his paintings was planned for April, and his one act play *Trois Nouveaux Figurants du Théâtre de Nantes* (Three New Understudies at the Nantes Theater) would be presented at the Barbazanges Gallery in June.

On 11 May, Léonce Rosenberg hosted a presentation of Jacob's poems at his gallery, an occasion that turned ugly, though not for

Jacob. Paul Dermée, a run-of-the-mill but busy poet, opened with a lecture. Dermée was a hanger-on of the avant-garde whose work was to be seen in the pages of *SIC*, *Dada*, and the early issues of *Nord-Sud*; having started as a devotee of Reverdy's, he had been closely connected with *Nord-Sud* at the beginning. But by August 1918 Reverdy had become irritated by Dermée's imitations of his style and by his presumptuousness, writing to Tzara that his former collaborator was "a charming fake."³¹ In his lecture at Rosenberg's gallery, Dermée compared the work of Apollinaire and Jacob to the productions of the insane. He seemed to be fumbling toward a serious idea, not a critique of modern poetry, but he expressed himself so badly he ignited a firestorm. Cocteau circulated a note through the audience: "Dermée isn't crazy but he's an imbecile," inspiring people to whistle and stamp. Jacques Doucet was dumbfounded. Gabory, who had been friendly with Dermée and his wife, the novelist Céline Arnould, describes how cowardly he felt as he joined the gang punishing Dermée: at the end of the session they all turned their backs on the guilty lecturer and his wife. When Dermée murmured to Gabory on the stairs, "And you also," Gabory kept silent and walked off with Irma to join Jacob, Reverdy, Radiguet, and the others as they made their way out to celebrate their victory with an aperitif.

By this time, Jacob and Picasso saw one another only rarely. Aragon's depiction of Picasso as Bleu signaled a real social fact: Picasso's fame and his absorption in the worldly life Olga, his new wife, desired separated him from Max Jacob, his oldest French friend. Picasso and Olga were now installed in a grand apartment on the rue la Boétie in the Eighth arrondissement, a bastion of the *haute bourgeoisie*. Jacob's New Year's greeting to his "dear godfather and brother" in January 1919 sounds uncomfortably formal, and in March, when Jacob learned that Picasso had connected their names on an etching, he wrote in some surprise: "Dear friend and godfather, I was touched and moved that you put my name along with yours on an etching you gave Galanis. You think of me sometimes and I was truly pleased to see it. *Ever more yours*, Max J."³² Picasso was about to leave for three months in London to make the sets and costumes

for yet another of Diaghilev's ballets; obliging, as usual, Jacob dug into the archives in Paris to send his friend material about Spanish costumes.³³ With some diffidence, he announced to Picasso the opening of a group show at the Térésse Gallery where his gouaches would be exhibited; he wrote with similar modesty to Jacques Doucet, "I neither wanted nor desired this hardly brilliant manifestation..."³⁴

La Défense de Tartufe, one of Jacob's most notable books, made its first, fragmentary appearance in the pages of *Les Écrits Nouveaux*. A medley of prose and verse, the selection "Le Christ à Montparnasse" is pure Max Jacob, himself a medley of contradictions. In Rousseau fashion, the author presents himself in a disguise of naked sincerity: professions of humility sound like boasts; self-revelations are larded with lies (the altered birth date, and the claim that he had not used drugs before his Apparition in 1909).³⁵ But if we hold Jacob to a standard of imaginative reality rather than documentary realism, we may accept the invitation into his world of fiction, the experimental truth granted by art. For better or for worse, for better *and* for worse, in "Le Christ à Montparnasse" we watch Max Jacob inventing a myth of himself in terms of his idiosyncratic adopted Christianity. And here we find the essential threads of his story with Picasso: "February.—I'll be baptized on the 18th. P. will be my godfather."³⁶ Discussing pride and humility: "I helped so-and-so, I lived with him! We shared all our thoughts! And this [I tell] so that the blaze of his glory should shine on me."³⁷ "My godfather gave me an inscribed copy of *The Imitation of Christ*. Dear P., this new claim on my affection for you cannot increase it. You are certainly that which I love most in the world after God and the Saints who already consider you one of their own."³⁸



Cocteau and Jacob had been growing steadily closer, and Cocteau's publicity for Jacob's *Trois Nouveaux Figurants du Théâtre de Nantes* gave the play a good boost. This friendship would prove one of the steadiest in both their lives. It was untroubled by erotic complications; both were attracted to younger men so there was no

danger of falling in love with one another, nor did they compete for the same lovers. Both were histrionic, liable to a strain of hysteria. By now, they understood each other well and could confide in one another with refreshing openness; their letters overflow with playful exuberance, and the relief, one senses, at not having to prevaricate about whom or how they loved.

Cocteau's article on 23 June announcing the play added to Jacob's mystique. André Salmon would not have been pleased to see himself deleted from the story of the birth of Parisian Modernism: "Picasso, Georges Braque, Max Jacob, Guillaume Apollinaire, four friends of pain and glory." Cocteau presented them as reviving a "somnolent" Montmartre and inventing a new Bohemia. His remarks on the new art have the acuteness of an acolyte; Cocteau had carefully studied the revolutionary art he strove to join. On Jacob, he wrote,

Many of his pals thought he was a "joker." Max amuses them. Max is a card. He makes puns. Frightful misbehavior.

Poetry is a vast pun. The poet associates, dissociates, turns over the world's syllables...

Max Jacob a tightrope dancer, Max Jacob at the boarding-house table, Max Jacob with his great Jewish melancholy, his conversion, his monkish good humor, his faith which he never exploits, his Breton imps, his cattiness, his heart of gold, I love him, I admire him, and we all owe him something...

Max Jacob lives in a little room opening on a courtyard in Montmartre. He goes to the Sacré-Coeur, writes, paints charming gouaches which bibliophiles fight over, visits painters.

His neighbors call him M. Max. They're convinced that one day M. Max could have his own statue in the old Place Ravignan, the cradle of modern art.³⁹

When Jacob wrote Picasso about his play he also described the hostilities percolating in Paris: "Everyone keeps badmouthing everyone else. There's the Reverdy clan, the Cocteau clan and the generals don't have any soldiers, or at least the soldiers keep slipping from one

clan to another.”⁴⁰ The clan Jacob didn’t foresee, or foresee as a danger, was the group around Breton, for now allied with Dada.

In June, Jacob’s verse poem “Mort morale” (Moral Death) came out in *Littérature*. It takes up the Christian apocalyptic scenario Jacob had already explored in the prose poem of nearly the same title in *Le Cornet à dés*. But whereas the prose poem imagined a fairy-tale sweetness at the end of the world, the verse poem projects a violent fantasy, part comic, part grotesque, of Paris turned topsy-turvy, the Eiffel Tower quenching its thirst in the river; fashionable boutiques, shirt factories, and greengrocers dripping blood; bourgeois hanging from their coat racks—all presaging Christ’s triumphant appearance, naked, out of the clouds.⁴¹ The poem’s first noun, “revolution,” had a strong spiritual meaning for Jacob: it was what he had experienced in his encounter with the divine. One can imagine Breton being drawn to the apocalyptic scenario and at the same time repulsed by the theology.

A change in the weather can be observed in the next issue of *Littérature*. Readers opening the magazine in July were struck by an eye-catching, full-page advertisement for Tzara’s journal *Dada* in brash typography that offended French canons of taste: “LITTÉRATURE oui mais DADA.” Not the least of Tzara’s talents was as a graphic designer. The issue led off with the cynical letters of Breton’s dead friend Jacques Vaché, texts Breton was now treating as holy writ.

The August issue featured another poem by Jacob, “Autre Personnage du bal masque” (Another Character in the Masked Ball). Its opening lines now had an ironic relevance to Jacob’s position vis-à-vis the younger generation. It’s hard in English to catch the willful oddity of these alexandrines: “Réparateur perclus de vieux automobiles/ L’anachorète hélas a regagné son nid...”

Crippled restorer of old automobiles,
The anchorite crawls back to his nest, alone.
Jeepers! I’m old, too old to live in Paris;
Your sharp-edged houses knock against my heels.⁴²

But the warning shot to Jacob came in Vaché's letters. In August 1917, Vaché had written to Breton: "So we love neither ART nor artists (down with Apollinaire)...We've nothing to do with Mallarmé, without hating him, but he's dead....Reverdy, amusing as poetling, boring in prose; MAX Jacob, my old joker—PUPPETS—PUPPETS—PUPPETS..." In May 1918, Vaché wrote (using his own jargon word for approval, UMOREU (FOONY): "Art should be amusing and a little dull—that's all—Max J—once in a while—could be FOONY—but, you see, he's ended up taking himself seriously, a curious intoxication."⁴³ No wonder Jacob began to doubt the good intentions of his young friends at *Littérature*. As he wrote to Cocteau in January 1920, "I think *Littérature* is friendly to us (??)—I doubt everything."⁴⁴

The October issue of *Littérature* carried Jacob's poem "Plaintes d'un prisonnier" (The Prisoner's Complaints), a gracefully absurd, melancholy, and camp lyric, mingling pastiche and dream-like imagery. It concludes:

Birdcage of mute fingers, jail
 The muse is a bird flying through
 The bars across my prison cell
 I saw its grace, I saw its smile
 But couldn't follow on its trail.

Farewell, muse, go let people know
 This festival evening in town
 In the prisons where they keep us down
 We die from having loved them so.⁴⁵

That issue held the seeds of future conflict. Tzara had not yet arrived in Paris, but his poem in *Littérature*, "Noblesse galvanisée" (Galvanized Nobility) sounded a revolutionary note. Inspired by Dada proclamations arriving from Zurich and by Tzara's book *vingt-cinq poèmes*, Breton and his friend were eagerly awaiting this new guru. Tzara, a Romanian, had been living in Zurich, speaking German, and spoke French poorly; his poetry has no allegiance to the deeply remembered cadences of French poetry that pulsed in the

lines of Apollinaire and Max Jacob. Disruptive of syntax, harshly prosaic, startling in its jammed-together images, “Noblesse galvanisée” contrasts violently with Jacob’s lyricism:

i sterilize myself mask slow lemon bell
 vulture goes to bed in the black and crinkled air
 if i smash the vase mow down the birds of fixed ecstasy
 among the fruits speed plays exerts the incandescence
 of the trident.⁴⁶

Another revolution was brewing in the same issue, in the opening chapter of Breton and Soupault’s experiment in automatic writing, *Les Champs magnétiques* (The Magnetic Fields). In June, René Hilsun had brought out Breton’s first book of poems, *Mont de piété*, with illustrations by Derain in his small press, Au Sans Pareil. Very much a young man’s collection, it reflected Breton’s adolescent poetic crushes, echoing Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Reverdy, and ending in the proto-Dada “Le Corset mystère” (The Mysterious Corset), a collage of snippets of advertisements. Breton had already lost interest in the book by the time it appeared. Something far more exciting had occurred that spring: after jotting down random phrases that had come to him as auditory hallucinations, he had drawn Soupault into the secret project of driving themselves—almost to the brink of madness—to take dictation from the unconscious and had composed in this way the prose of *Les Champs magnétiques*. Necessarily, the writing is imbued with the young men’s reading; certain scenes sound like Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*: “The marvelous train stations never shelter us any more...”⁴⁷ But just as necessarily, their personal experiences outside of literature welled up in the texts: the shocks of war, hospitals, and losses. Death haunts the landscape of *Les Champs magnétiques*: “The cities we no longer wish to love are dead.” “Only ungrateful death respected us.” “This evening we are two in front of this river overflowing with our despair.”⁴⁸ But out of desperation arises revelation: “We’ve nothing left to do but to open our hands and our chests to be as naked as this sun-struck day.”⁴⁹ Max Jacob had been experimenting for years with dream visions and dictation from

the unconscious, but Breton had his own reasons for writing him out of the story. For the rest of his life, Jacob would keenly resent the injustice.



The year 1920 found Max Jacob in a perturbed state of mind. On the one hand, he was enjoying more success than he had ever known: *La Défense de Tartufe* was receiving good reviews and selling well; *Cinématoma* was about to appear; the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery planned a one-man show of his paintings; the art journal *La Renaissance de l'Art Français* would run a long article by Salmon about his art; Pierre Bertin was preparing the production of another of his plays. At the same time, Jacob's recent defense of Cocteau's *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* had drawn scorn from various quarters. He wrote Cocteau, "Did I tell you that Reverdy proudly walks by me in the street.... That Gris didn't come greet me for the New Year and that I think all their pals must share their contempt.... The naive children no doubt imagine they'll sink me for ever. I laugh in their faces."⁵⁰

He expressed less bravado in a letter written at the same time to the *salonnière* Mme Aurel, who had called on him at the last minute to give a talk on Paulhan at one of her gatherings. Mme Aurel had been celebrating "young poets who died for France" and had earned the nickname of "la Mère Lachaise," though she also attended to some of the living, like Jean Paulhan.⁵¹ Jacob's letter starts with an egregious compliment—"Your letter full of genius like everything coming from you surprises me greatly"—and then degenerates into hysteria. He upbraids Louis de Gonzague Frick for suggesting him, and lists all the reasons why he cannot comply: "I don't know how to speak in public, I'm hyper-timid and in front of such a public, the most demanding in Paris, having been so spoiled by you. I admire Paulhan but I haven't analyzed him, in fact I don't know how to analyze. I'm a savage. Even if I could analyze I wouldn't have time to analyze Paulhan." Then he lists everything he has to do: prepare a show of his paintings, rehearse his new play, oversee the publication of two books, keep painting gouaches to keep up with the demands of his

collectors. The conclusion explodes: "Don't count on me, Madame! Scold Frick for having proposed me! Pardon me, and be assured of my immense admiration for your great genius and your great beauty, and of my profoundest respect. Max Jacob. PS Madame, I'm sorry, terribly sorry, about all this: I love Paulhan; in the name of heaven don't get me in a quarrel with him. Frick should have consulted me. PPS I have no friends!" (Mme Aurel must have told him he could invite his friends to her salon.) "Don't save any places for them because I haven't got any. I don't have *one* friend. I've been robbed, betrayed, robbed, hated, scorned. And if I didn't have God I'd be dead of sorrow and disappointment. Is it in cruel irony that you underlined *your friends*? I thought you were good-hearted. Or at least humane, as you appear in your books."⁵²

The real fireworks began with Tzara's arrival in Paris on 17 January. He turned up at the door of Picabia's mistress Germaine Everling. She had just given birth the week before (while Breton and Picabia, in their first meeting, were engaged in a conversation in the adjoining room about art and philosophy, and had to be evicted by the midwife). Now Everling was asked to welcome the penniless Romanian as a guest; Breton, Éluard, Aragon, and Soupault rushed over that afternoon to greet Tzara, and for a while her apartment became the command center of Parisian Dada. The editors of *Littérature* had already planned an artistic, musical matinée for 23 January at the Palais des Fêtes in a working-class neighborhood; by adding Tzara to the mix, they created the first of an incendiary series that introduced Dada to Paris.

The plan, before Tzara's arrival, was fairly conventional: Salmon would kick things off with a speech advertised as "The Crisis in the Exchange Rate" which turned out to be about post-Symbolist poetics, and Jacob's actor friends Pierre Bertin and Marcel Herrand were to recite poems by the old avant-garde, "the great ancestors" Apollinaire, Cendrars, Reverdy, and Jacob. Paintings by Léger, Gris, De Chirico, and Lipchitz would be displayed, and Les Six would play their music. Neither Reverdy nor Jacob was present. Things unrolled peacefully until Picabia's antipaintings were brought out, including

Le Double Monde (The Double World), a scribble in black and white adorned with the inscription from Duchamps's mustachioed *Mona Lisa*, L.H.O.O.Q. (Sounded out, in French, it says: She has the hots in her ass, "Elle a chaud au cul.") Avant-garde art already depended on an outraged response from the public, but Dada pushed that provocation to an extreme. The audience began hooting at L.H.O.O.Q., but when Tzara himself stepped out on stage—his presence in Paris until that moment having been kept secret—things flared as he monotonously declaimed the text of a speech by the nationalist Léon Daudet while Breton and Aragon rang bells. The older artists, like Salmon and Gris, began shouting in protest, and Florent Fels, Jacob's friend the pacifist anarchist who edited the new journal *Action*, hollered, "Back to Zurich! Shoot him!"⁵³

A new force had entered the city. *Ubu Roi*, *The Rite of Spring*, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, and *Parade* had been works of art that shocked. Dada undid the very idea of art: the medium was shock itself, and a galvanized relation to the audience, which itself became part of the spectacle. As Fels's insult made clear, Dada not only caused a crisis in the definition of art, but also brought out a strong strain of French nationalist chauvinism. This strain would become evident in the responses in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, and eventually in Breton's own reaction.



Diaghilev's ballet *Tricorne* with sets and costumes by Picasso had opened to lavish applause in London in July, and the Paris premiere took place at the Opéra on 27 January. Four days later, Max Jacob carefully dressed himself in a coat and tails and an opera hat—a collapsible top hat called a *claque*, specifically designed for the theater—and set off down the rue des Martyrs to the Place Pigalle where he intended to catch the Metro to attend the second performance.⁵⁴ In Place Pigalle he was caught in the whirl of traffic; a large, glossy automobile knocked him down, rolled over him, and then sped away. His head had been under the vehicle, witnesses reported; "I profited from seeing the underside of a car," he later quipped. A

crowd gathered him up. "My left side suspender is bothering me," he said when he came to. "You aren't wearing suspenders," he was told. "Then have I broken my collarbone?"⁵⁵

What followed was a nightmare even worse than the accident, and it produced one of Jacob's best pieces of writing. He translated the episode into the long, hallucinatory prose account "Nuits d'hôpital et l'aurore" (Hospital Nights and Dawn), and one can piece together the events from its nonchronological fragments. He was taken to the public hospital, the Lariboisière; in a delirium of pain, he was interrogated about "my respected mother's maiden name"; he was left for hours alone on a metal chair in an unheated waiting room; finally a woman attendant arrived, huffing and puffing, and with the help of a male nurse undressed him and bathed him in icy water. By this time he was in agony with each breath torn up from his crushed lungs; as pneumonia set in, they wheeled him through freezing corridors and deposited him in a room crowded with sickbeds, air thick with tobacco smoke. Here he spent the night in such pain he even forgot to pray. For the next several weeks he drifted in feverish hallucinations. As he slowly regained lucidity, he made friends with the patients suffering in the adjoining beds—the Arab dentist, the tubercular chauffeur, a young house-painter. All night long, every night, as the sick and injured groaned and tossed, the attendants refused care: no medications, not even a glass of water.

From this experience, Jacob crafted a vision of hell and a furious indictment of the indifference and institutional arrogance, the vicious collaboration of science and bureaucracy, that ran the hospital. And as always for Jacob, reality appeared on many levels at once: "The hospital is a train station: travelers for the land of shadows! Travelers for another health!...Hospital, mausoleum for the living, you're between two stations, yourself a station for the departures from which no one returns. I kneel in contemplation before your threshold; I thank God who left me among the living upon the earth....Oh, you people hurrying in your cars, you'll die! Olé! Sexy dogs, young and old, you'll die! Housewives and grandes dames, bluestockings, you'll die, my friends! Drivers of cars, listen! Listen to

my death knell, I say you'll die. I just learned it at the hospital and I cry it aloud on the Boulevard Magenta. You will die, we will die..."⁵⁶

As soon as he was well enough to receive visitors, friends flocked to his side, his hysterical complaint to Mme Aurel notwithstanding. Picasso loyally came, and exclaimed, "To think I wanted to name you Fiacre for your baptism, and here you are wounded by a fiacre!" "A fiacre? I was run over by a luxury car," Max snapped.⁵⁷

While Jacob slowly recovered his strength in the hospital, literary life churned on. His reputation grew day by day even as he lay wheezing in bed. The work of many years had suddenly become visible in two utterly original books, *La Défense de Tartufe* and *Cinématoma*, and they were reviewed in the most prestigious journals, a transition for Jacob from shabby, marginal Bohemian to chic Bohemian. But he would never really fit the Establishment: his art proved too various and peculiar, his whole person too disreputable.

Another journal entered the lists in March 1920. In 1918, still in uniform, Florent Fels, a young soldier who had been decorated with two crosses for valor and the Medal of Versailles, came to see Jacob, and since then they had corresponded affectionately, with Jacob advising the young man on his hopelessly stiff and earnest poems. Fels soon gave up the idea of being a poet, and directed his energy into founding *Action*, a journal of literature and art, a venture reflecting Fels's gentle form of anarchism and his commitment to the idea of art as a positive force. (Hence his outrage at Dada's nihilism.)

Breton and his friends perceived *Action* as a direct threat. It represented a humanism they now rejected, and its contributors were drawn either from the *Nouvelle Revue Française* or from the older avant-garde they intended to replace (Salmon, Jacob), and their bête-noire, Cocteau. The March issue of *Action* featured Jacob in four verse poems and an essay about him by Henri Hertz. He would collect two of the poems the following year in *Le Laboratoire central* (The Central Laboratory). "Plus d'astrologie" (No More Astrology) plays on his guilt at continuing to practice the science of the stars prohibited by the Church:

Battles, we battle in the shade of destiny
 And the red of planet Mars is the red in which we die.

.....
 What does God the Father think of these disastrous wars
 His friends suffer in the battles of his stars?⁵⁸

“Allusions romantiques à propos de Mardi-Gras,” in its code-switching frolic, hints at the layers of disguises and of complex feelings, from stylish nonchalance to depression, experienced by a gay man in that society:

Romantic Allusions to Mardi-Gras

No, Monsieur Gambetta, Bolivar’s taken his leave
 We saw his top hat and his meteorite
 Under the jet of the gas lamp’s flare
 Pierrot companion and cascade.
 His smock at the end of the quay betrayed
 I’m dining at home tonight.
 The Seine has seen kings roll to the guillotine.
 Night’s horrors spy you from gothic dead-end streets.
 O bicycle, your saddle is a velvet mask.
 Love’s opera boxes shivered in the Eastern breeze.
 If we must die, Madame, hear me. Farewell!
 Hemlines and hearts plummeted to the ground
 And one curled one’s little finger to drink in style.
 My life is a tango, my heart a grand-guignol.
 Fate! a halo of fear hovers over Notre-Dame!
 It’s a whip, you fool, what you took for a fencing foil
 Forgive him, Gerald, in the name of our love, forgive
 I want no more kisses from you
 Ah! when will you escape the penitentiary of love.
 Women offered themselves like bitches in heat.
 At times, after midnight, the Seine resembles Hell.
 Come! Monsieur Beelzebub, I challenge you hard.
 I’ll crack you like a soft boiled egg. *En garde!*
 One or the other of us must leave this earth,
 he said! And there spread the immense, blank ennui
 of a moonless night.

When Jacob emerged from the hospital on 5 March, he stepped into a temporary aureole: his show at Bernheim-Jeune opened on 8 March and was a success in all respects, earning him three thousand francs, and establishing him as an artist worth collecting. The catalogue contains one of his most often cited self-portraits, by turns whimsical and serious: "I know dance, singing, piano, madrigals. I know the respect owed to the elderly, to scholars, to white sepulchers; joy, love, hunger, isolation, success. I have university degrees (ex-student of...) I believe that only in sorrow does man recognize himself as human, know and recognize other men. I'm forty-three years old, I'm almost bald, I've almost no teeth, I'm writing this in an airy and charming hospital where my pneumonia is being cured." He described his humiliation by the art teacher in the lycée in Quimper, and his timid attempt to study painting in Paris at the Académie Julien: "M. J.-P. Laurens stared at me from my feet to the crown of my head with his eyebrow raised and his little hardworking eye; he took my pencil and voluptuously followed the line of a leg to correct my drawing."⁵⁹

For his convalescence, Jacob headed for Sainte-Maxime, a fishing village on the Côte d'Azur across a small bay from Saint-Tropez. Still weak from pneumonia, he settled into the Grand Hotel and wrote and painted ten hours a day, pausing only for solitary meals in the hotel dining room and short walks. It rained for two weeks, a cold wind blew, the "azure" sea looked black, and the mountains rising steeply behind the village looked blacker. So much for azure. Jacob took relish in describing the dismal scene in letters: he hated the palm trees (overgrown feather dusters), the dinky gardens, the pretentious tourists, and the equally pretentious residents who tallied the number of dukes they'd sighted.⁶⁰ But he worked well, writing the story of his stay at the hospital, and he confided to Salmon that a "horror of Paris" had pushed him to leave "the Dadas" and the throes of Cubism behind.⁶¹ When the rain let up, he did begin to explore the coast, visiting Nice, Cannes, Hyères, and, most happily, Marseilles, to which he took a strong liking; it was an energetic working city, not a resort, and its hues of blue, blonde, red, and ochre delighted him.⁶²



The *Nouvelle Revue Française* first deigned to notice Dada in September 1919 when Jacques Rivière declared, in a note on “The Dada Movement,” “It’s deplorable that Paris seems to welcome such nonsense, that comes to us directly from Berlin.”⁶³ A few months later, after Tzara’s appearance in Paris, the powers at the *Nouvelle Revue Française* changed their tune, influenced in part by their protégé Breton. The pages of the journal began to serve a double purpose: the public reflections by Gide and Rivière on the meaning of a new movement can also be read as a private argument with Breton, whose intelligent service they did not want to lose. At the same time, in the course of 1920 one can trace in the pages of *Littérature* and *Action* the abandonment of Max Jacob by the new militant avant-garde.

Jacob wasn’t the only older writer being outflanked by the young. In *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897), *L’Immoraliste* (1902), and *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914), Gide had led the way in questioning the foundations of bourgeois society. He confronted the new revolution in an essay entitled simply “Dada” in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in April 1920. It’s a strange piece, revealing a streak of anti-Semitism uncharacteristic of Gide, and marked by the trauma of war. Without naming Tzara, he calls him “the inventor of Dada,” and observes, “I hear he’s a foreigner. — I’ll easily believe it. A Jew. — It was on the tip of my tongue.”⁶⁴ Gide asks why foreigners should care for “our French culture”; contrasts the constructive nature of Cubism to Dada’s destructiveness; and names the war as the machine of ruin that had inevitably produced Dada: “While our fields, our villages, our cathedrals have suffered so much, would our Word remain intact?”⁶⁵ He describes the self-devouring logic of aesthetic revolution, which in Dada has already attained “an absolute meaninglessness” and has therefore fulfilled its function and consumed itself. He concludes by expressing sympathy with the desire for new forms, citing Christ’s injunction in Matthew 9:17 not to put new wine in old bottles, but hoping “that in this cask [Dada], the best wine of youth will soon begin to feel a little smothered.”⁶⁶

A still more pointed exchange took place in the August issue of the journal, where the elders allowed Breton to have his say. In the fervent essay "Pour Dada," Breton celebrated the revolutionary work of poets in "the revision of moral values," naming Rimbaud and Lautréamont, but canonizing Vaché, who had distinguished himself by producing nothing. Affirming a solidarity that would soon fly apart, Breton quoted poems by Soupault, Éluard, Tzara, Picabia, and Aragon, and brandished Apollinaire's word "Surrealism" for the explorations of the unconscious. Rivière followed Breton's piece with his own, tempered "Gratitude to Dada." Instead of sneering, Rivière now praised Dada for exposing a theoretical weakness in the "subjectivism" of earlier radical writing he admired (Mallarmé, Apollinaire, and especially Jacob); the proper response, Rivière concluded, was not Dada, but a new literary art based on a sense of the real and "a passion for truth."⁶⁷ Thus did the enlightened establishment maneuver to contain the brushfire.

These debates directly affected Max Jacob. Rivière had quoted the preface to Jacob's *Le Cornet à dés* several times, treating him as an authority on Modernism. It was just at this moment that the tide turned against Jacob. He had already irritated Breton by his friendship with Cocteau and by signing the letter protesting Dada in February. But his sympathy for Fels's *Action* made him an outright enemy. The July issue of *Action* led off with nine prose poems by Jacob; July would also be the last month in which Jacob's work appeared in Breton's *Littérature*.

The first of Jacob's prose poems in *Action*, "Ma Vie en trois lignes" (My Life in Three Lines), curiously links the two antagonistic journals, because just as Breton was preparing to expel Jacob, Paul Éluard, always more tender-hearted, singled out "Ma Vie en trois lignes" for praise and reprinted it in his review of journals in the July issue of *Littérature*. The poem also relates to Jacob's running quarrel with Reverdy, and Reverdy would pick up the main image, the cooking pot, for his nasty attack on Jacob in the next issue of *Littérature*. Though Jacob never collected it in a book, the poem has more than documentary interest as a meditation on originality and

influence, and Jacob's painful sense of having had his art consumed by others.

My Life in Three Lines

I dreamed I was in water boiling in a cooking pot shut with a padlock. I vaguely heard people shouting and laughing. Someone opened the pot: "Who do you want to eat you first?" The pot was opened a second time: "You want the other one to eat, does that mean you're not my friend?" The water kept boiling and as cooks say, I was reduced, reduced, reduced and finally I was hardly there at all. There was nothing left of me to eat. What remained said, "Adieu!"⁶⁸

The real twist of the knife came in September in *Littérature*, where Breton used Reverdy against Jacob. In the group of Reverdy's prose poems opening the issue, three attacked Jacob. The cooking pot reappeared in "L'Ami de l'homme ou parasite" (Man's Friend or Parasite): "The cooking pot wasn't placed by the fireside, but on the large shabby armchair, near the table.... In the smoke, the pot and the old man who was writing seemed to blend. And the pages of the books that this great inventor copied were stained. And all the stains fell on the signatures—which allowed the old man—with his curling fingernails, his hooked nose, his bad teeth—to replace them with his own, and...they are the names of our best authors."⁶⁹ The anti-Semitic rage continued in "Le Vieil Apprenti" (The Old Apprentice): "Up close, my God, it's the same rag merchant, the same junk dealer, this line of hooked nose and the sale of old trimmed-down books resold as new and signed with a fake name."⁷⁰ In "Trois Étoiles" (Three Stars), Reverdy takes aim at Jacob's homosexuality: "Then there are the masculine garments of the strange woman, somewhat too old."⁷¹ Reverdy was turning the accusation of plagiarism back on his accuser: Jacob had attacked him in 1915 for imitating his (Jacob's) prose poems, and now Reverdy lashed out at Jacob for using the discoveries of others (Reverdy meant primarily Rimbaud, and the accusation was baseless, as Jacob disapproved of Rimbaud and certainly didn't imitate him).⁷²



Jacob was hurt by Reverdy, but he was more and more taken up with Cocteau and Radiguet. His affection for Radiguet is evident in “Nocturne,” a poem he dedicated to him and published in the summer issue of *Le Coq*, the broadsheet Cocteau and Radiguet edited together. In these rhyming quatrains, Jacob does what he had advised Cocteau, “use all the old techniques”; the traditional octosyllabic cadences and slightly old-fashioned diction cast a spell. In the last stanza, the lines lengthen and the rhyme relaxes, and a mysterious experience takes shape. As Radiguet moved rapidly to adopt more classical forms in both poetry and prose, part of the “return to order” so bruted in postwar France, he and Jacob shared a deep understanding about what it meant to write a modern poem: not as an explosive device, but as a cadenced enchantment carrying the older art into new space.

Nocturne

Welcome, Goddess, to our barn
Behold the glorious ears of corn
You will not wake with quiet step
The tired laborers as they sleep.

Flowers murmur to the soil
For the dead the moon replies
Letting its silver light reveal
Four houses, a pair of trees.

I hear crooning toward the skies
A dream becoming melody
A woman, naked—oh! surprise!—
In the barn as on a balcony.

Serpents, slumbering, my initials twined
The concert of forest animals fell dumb
Each blade of grass thrust a shaft of madness up
And to their own beauty the distant trees
were blind.⁷³

In December in *Littérature*, Aragon took a smack at Jacob. No longer the romanticized Jean Chipre of *Anicet*, now Jacob was grouped with other triflers in a list under the title, "Are There Still People Who Amuse Themselves in Life?" The company wasn't all bad—Aragon insulted the crew at the *Nouvelle Revue Française* along with Matisse, Pierpont Morgan, and the Unknown Soldier—but Jacob saw himself consigned, here, to the ranks of the irrelevant.⁷⁴

Jacob now needed friendship more than ever. On 4 February, Picasso's son Paulo was born. Picasso didn't invite Max to be the godfather and didn't even send him an announcement of the birth. Jacob was deeply hurt. He complained to his old friend the dealer André Level, to Gertrude Stein, and others, but no amount of complaining could change the bitter fact. When he went to visit the new parents, he said, even the baby turned away from him. (This scene is colored, of course, by Jacob's passionate neediness and jealousy.)⁷⁵

He received another blow in March from Breton and the Dadaists. The March issue of *Littérature* opened with a chart (appropriately entitled "Liquidation") ranking a long list of artists and intellectuals. In a pastiche of the lycée system of grading, the rankings ran from -25 ("total aversion, or absolute indifference") to 20, the grade in each case being an average of the grades assigned by the evaluators. Of course, the colleagues graded one another generously, so that Aragon, Breton, Éluard, and Tzara came out triumphantly. Jacob's humiliating grade of -1.27 put him in the company of Christ, Beethoven, and Gide, and higher than Homer and Virgil. Picasso emerged with a respectable 7.90, and Reverdy with 5.36. More than the insult of the average grade was the personal wound of the individual judgments. Aragon, who had come to Jacob's room at the rue Gabrielle to learn about poetry, assigned him a 1; Breton 0; and Benjamin Péret, whom he had welcomed and helped, gave him 4. Only Éluard, in whom poetic instinct trumped ideology, awarded him an appreciative mark (13). Tzara gave him a paltry 3. Breton's vicious and talentless friend Théodore Fraenkel brought Jacob's average down with his -20, as did the -10 from the young novelist Drieu la

Rochelle, later to distinguish himself as a violent anti-Semite and Vichy collaborator.⁷⁶

From one point of view, the list could be dismissed as a juvenile prank. But the rankings mattered: they made brutally clear that some of the most talented of the younger writers had organized to demonstrate their contempt. A new spirit of militaristic cruelty had entered the world of the arts, very different from the playful bitchiness of prewar Bohemian Paris. Nor would it have escaped Jacob's attention that Jacques Doucet had now hired Breton to write him reports on the cultural scene, taking Jacob's old role. Though he would not have seen Breton's letter to Doucet of 21 January 1921, about the "new spirit" (no longer defined by Apollinaire "or the impressionism of a Max Jacob or even by the Foony of Vaché"), the writing was on the wall.⁷⁷ The adoption of the lycée grading system for the liquidation was presented as satire but at some deep level it expressed Breton's seriousness and obsession with power and hierarchy.



Jacob's *Le Laboratoire central* came out on 1 April. The book gathered poems of many years, some dating back to 1903 and 1904, some freshly composed. Like the poems in *Les Oeuvres burlesques et mystiques de Frère Matorel*, these pieces roughly followed the arc of their creator's experience, from dissipation and sorrow through visionary crisis to an acceptance of the sacred; as in the Matorel poems, Jacob pressed sense to extremes of nonsense, with puns and rhymes rushing toward phonetic delirium. The verses are dissonant and hybrid, mingling traditional metrics and free verse with irregular punctuation, clashing registers of diction, and cockeyed allusions and clichés: by playing with and against conventions, Jacob made convention itself a theme. The versification was so sophisticated, the ironies so multiple, even readers accustomed to modernist poetics in his day had trouble, at times, grasping what he was up to. He may have had to wait for the twenty-first century to find a hearing sympathetic to this wild mixture.

The oldest poems include one written to Picasso around 1903, entitled “Comme Marie-Madeleine.” It’s a desolate love poem, hiding the identity of the human beloved under the veil of God.

Like Mary Magdalen

My God, you gave me a soul of solitude
 And in my heart, a fort untenanted
 Ramparts that the owners long since fled.
 My God, you gave me a monastic soul
 A soul for whom your absence is a grief
 Yearning for stars, devoted to art’s control
 Centrifugal like the spines on the holly leaf
 And you rigged my vessel for tenderness
 From the high shrouds hear the long-drawn wails
 It’s the wind of love, Lord, in my sails
 Love, my God! Say rather, storm, distress
 Ship-rammed heart
 Ideally starred
 How broken, downcast?
 By lust! Alas!⁷⁸

In these poems, sound often leads sense: in “L’Explorateur,” “Côtes, coteries, échos des côtes et des cottages / Des cottages et des boycottages!” (Coasts, coteries, echoes of coasts and cottages / Of cottages and boycottages!)⁷⁹ Or in “Musique Acidulée” (Acidulous Music), “Boum! Dame! Amsterdam!”⁸⁰ In this central laboratory, one can trace Jacob’s whole poetic development to date. Though the style is mixed, it expresses a powerful unifying vision as the poet wrings language hard to find his mystical and erotic truth, as in “Atlantide”:

In this dormitory room Our Lord is nude
 He offers his wounded hands
 The new continent will take work and thought
 It’s at Sacré-Coeur it will be wrought.⁸¹

Le Laboratoire central opens with a delicate song to the composer Georges Auric. But the real opening is the long, ambitious

poem, partly in verse, partly in prose, celebrating Jacob's joyous stay with Picasso and Eva Gouel in Céret in the summer of 1913. Picasso, reading the book, could not but have recognized this appeal to their old friendship. The volume closes with the utterly unironic "Litanies de la Sainte Vierge" (Litanies of the Holy Virgin) as Max Jacob adjusts his free verse to the task of devotion.

The indefatigable Mme Aurel devoted an evening in her salon to Jacob's poetry on 7 April, with Henri Hertz discoursing on "Max Jacob in Ten Minutes," and the actors Suzanne Métivier, Charles Léger, and Pierre Bertin reciting his work. Reverdy and Gabory were among the guests, along with the perfidious Péret. Jacob wrote describing the evening to Cocteau and Radiguet, then vacationing in the South of France, and half-apologized for submitting to Mme Aurel. He also touched on the awkward matter of Radiguet's having agreed to write a review of *Le Laboratoire central* for the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and then reneging; Radiguet excused himself, saying he was in a fever of his own poetic composition and in no mood to write critical prose (and that the only thing to say about Jacob's book was that it was "marvelous"). Jacob replied tactfully that he too found criticism burdensome, but added, "Besides, this book, in spite of your compliment, seems not to have pleased you very much, it sums up twenty years and reflects twenty states of soul, often twenty styles either suffered or created by me—I have the right to say so." He goes on to report that he had taken the completed manuscript of his book of stories (probably *Le Roi de Béotie*) to Gallimard with whom he had a long talk about modern literature. "As you can imagine, I spoke about my friends, only my friends. Because the Dadas are playing tricks on me and I'm not a saint." Several months later, as he was leaving for the monastery, Jacob was disheartened by the cool reception of *Le Laboratoire central*, and wrote to thank Cocteau for his praise: "A handshake at the cemetery gate. I've been mistaken all my life.... I thought I was a poet!"⁸²

Sick of the turmoil and treachery of Paris, Jacob began to think seriously of retreat. The Abbé Weill, a priest he had known before the war who was now teaching at a Catholic college in Orléans, came

to see him in Paris. Jacob confessed that he wanted to live in the country under the guidance of a priest, and Weill suggested the Romanesque Benedictine abbey of St.-Benoît-sur-Loire, where Jacob could live in the parish house with the priest, the Abbé Fleureau. Before this could be arranged, Jacob had to submit to a tough interrogation by Fleureau, who traveled to Paris to interview him, but the penitent poet managed to convince his new host to accept him, and he began to paint gouaches furiously to earn the money he needed for departure.⁸³

At times, life proves more “surreal” than any aesthetic movement. At some point in the spring of 1921, Jacob acted out the Passion of Christ as a music hall routine in a café while Reverdy was present. Brought up a freethinker by his socialist father, Reverdy was suddenly struck by the spiritual reality Jacob was enacting; all his suffering and depression welled up in a passion of his own, and he was converted. Once again, Max Jacob led the way. Reverdy was baptized on 2 May in the little church of St. Pierre-de-Montmartre with Jacob as his godfather. Max gave him a prayer book inscribed, “To Pierre Reverdy in memory of his baptism. May this baptism give you a new life, and give new life to our friendship. Max Jacob, Monday, 2 May, 1921.” After the ceremony, Reverdy confessed the huge burden of hatred and jealousy he had been carrying, and Jacob wept.⁸⁴ Just as Max Jacob was starting his *vita nuova*, Reverdy began one of his own. The two men would be as competitive in religion as in poetry.

Leaving Paris meant bidding farewell to Picasso. On 4 June, Jacob wrote a heart-wrenched letter to his godfather, defending himself against some unspecified accusation from gossip. Another, longer letter, on heavy decorated stationery, sums up the history of their friendship, telling Picasso that he has been involved in all the joys and distresses of Jacob’s life, that he represents the whole world of the arts for him: “You are on my horizon and you are near me, in me, and around me.” If “third parties” hadn’t come between them, Jacob thought, they never would have stopped being friends. “Alas! So many third parties between us!”⁸⁵ With something like a broken heart, Max Jacob set off at the end of June for the dusty, secluded

life of a village parish and a mostly empty monastery in the Loire Valley.

Picasso, that summer in Fontainebleau with his wife and son, translated his feelings into two versions of a dramatically chiaroscuro, late Cubist, majestic, and funereal painting, *Three Musicians*. Theodore Reff and John Richardson have read these works—each with three monumental figures of a Pierrot, a Harlequin, and a monk—as portraits of Apollinaire, Picasso, and Jacob, respectively, and both paintings as elegiac evocations of their lost, Bohemian youth in Montmartre. The version now in the Philadelphia Art Museum seems the earliest; it's more colorful, more crowded, and the figures seem to be smiling. The starker work in the Museum of Modern Art in New York much more obviously suggests death—either literal death, for the Apollinaire-Pierrot in his brilliant white playing-card costume, with an ominous black dog (Anubis, Cerberus) under his chair, or figurative death, for the Jacob-monk on the right, his face covered in a stringy mask that Reff reads as a Bakota mask from Gabon, and Richardson reads as the fishnet and raffia masks worn at Carnival by transvestite *mascarones* in Andalusia.⁵⁶ Whatever the source, the effect is eerie and threatening, a transaction with the underworld, a propitiation of dark forces. That July, Picasso made a large drawing of a Benedictine monk in a cowl. Max Jacob had taken his leave. For Picasso, his old friend, he was out of sight, but not out of mind.

Notes

1. Georges Gabory, *Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Gide, Malraux & Cie* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1988), 22.
2. Ibid. 26.
3. Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto," in Mary Ann Caws, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln NB and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 297-304.
4. Adrienne Monnier, *The Very Rich Hours of Adrienne Monnier*, tr. Richard McDougall (New York: Scribners, 1977), 88.
5. Louis Aragon, *Anicet ou le Panorama, roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1921; 1949), 133.
6. Breton broke with Tzara in February 1922 when Tzara undermined Breton's attempt to organize the various avant-gardes in a "Congress of Paris." Tzara's mischievous anarchism collided with Breton's authoritarianism and the congress exploded in the planning stages, with Breton attacking Tzara in xenophobic terms: "a publicity-mongering imposter...a person known as the promoter of a 'movement' that comes from Zurich, whom it is pointless to name more specifically, *and who no longer corresponds to any reality.*" Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 170. See also Henri Béhar, *André Breton: le grand indésirable* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1990), 127; and the account in Michel Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris*, tr. Sharmila Ganguli (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2009), 233-253.
7. Aragon 1921, 103.
8. Ibid. 106.
9. Gabory 26, 54.
10. Ibid. 55.
11. Béhar 73.
12. Ibid. 74.
13. See Andrew Rothwell, "Reverdy's *Les Jockeys camouflés*: from Aesthetic Polemic to 'art poétique,'" *Nottingham French Studies*, v. 28, n. 2, Autumn 1989, 26-44.

14. Béhar 64.
15. Reverdy's long letter of 2 February 1919 is an anguished confession of his jealousy of Braque (of all people!), his disapproval of Gide and Valéry, and his torment at the sight of Breton slipping away from him. Pierre Reverdy, "Trente-deux lettres inédites à André Breton, 1917–1924," ed. Léon Somville, *Études Littéraires* (Québec), v. 3, n. 1, April 1970, 97–120.
16. Pierre Reverdy, "Carte blanche," *Littérature*, v. 1, n. 1, March 1919, 16; André Breton, "Clé de sol," *ibid.* 21.
17. There has been confusion about the Éditions de la Sirène. Anne Kimball describes it as "founded" by Cocteau and Cendrars, along with Jacques Lafitte [sic]. (Max Jacob, Jean Cocteau, *Correspondance 1917–1944* (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée, 2000) 40, note 1). It was founded by Paul Lafitte, a banker, who invited Cendrars and then Cocteau to be "literary advisers." Miriam Cendrars, *Blaise Cendrars: la Vie, le Verbe, l'Écriture* (Paris: Denoël, 1993), 359.
18. Jean Cocteau, *Entre Picasso et Radiguet*, ed. André Fermigier (Paris: Hermann: 1967), 131.
19. Jean Cocteau, *Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française 1925; 1967), 33, 68.
20. Rothwell 1989, 38; Béhar 74.
21. Max Jacob, "La rue Ravignan," *Littérature* v. 1, n. 1, 15. Jacob included the poem in his volume *Le Laboratoire central* (1921); *Oeuvres*, ed. Antonio Rodriguez (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 585.
22. *Littérature*, v. 1, n. 1, 24.
23. Gabory 56.
24. Max Jacob, *Correspondance*, I, ed. François Garnier (Paris: Editions de Paris, 1953), 183. In a letter dated 5 February 1919, "probably" to Radiguet, Jacob addresses him formally and compliments him on his poems.
25. Marcel Béalu, *Dernier visage de Max Jacob* (Paris: E. Vitte, 1959), 56. For the meeting of Cocteau and Radiguet, see Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau* (Boston: Atlantic-Little Brown, 1970), 248–9.

26. Radiguet's cruelty struck many observers; see Steegmuller 1970, 249. One can imagine the confusions and aggressions of an adolescent involved romantically with an older woman. The story of Alice and Radiguet is told in Nadia Odouart, *Les Années folles de Raymond Radiguet* (Paris: Seghers, 1973), 34–54.
27. Gabory 26. Doric refers to Gide's distinction between Greek Doric and Ionic art, made in conversation with the novelist Roger Martin du Gard: *Notes sur André Gide* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 104. Ancient Greece was in itself code for homosexuality.
28. Gabory 37.
29. *Ibid.* 42–3.
30. Garnier I, 184–5.
31. Sanouillet 496.
32. Hélène Seckel, *Max Jacob et Picasso* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), 168.
33. John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso: The Triumphant Years 1917–1932*, (New York: Knopf, 2010), 111. The ballet was Manuel de Falla's *Tricorne*, hence the Spanish costumes.
34. Garnier I, 189.
35. As he would so often, Jacob here claimed his birth date as 11 July, whereas it was the 12th (page 76); he stated that he started using ether only a year after the Apparition (page 79).
36. Max Jacob, "Le Christ à Montparnasse," *Les Écrits Nouveaux*, v. 3, n. 16–17, April–May 1919, 70. *La Défense de Tartufe; Oeuvres* 501.
37. *Ibid.* 71. *Oeuvres* 501.
38. *Ibid.* 82. *Oeuvres* 507.
39. Jean Cocteau, *Carte Blanche* (Paris: Éditions de la Sirène, 1920), 70–74.
40. Seckel 170.
41. Max Jacob, "La Mort morale," *Le Cornet à dés; Oeuvres*, 401; "Mort morale," *Littérature* n. 4, June 1919, 4; *Le Laboratoire central; Oeuvres* 572.

42. Max Jacob, "Autre personnage du bal masqué," *Littérature* n. 6, August 1919, 4; *Le Laboratoire central*; *Oeuvres* 625. It formed one of a group about the Masked Ball, Jacob's allegory for social life, mostly composed in 1913 and mostly published in *Les Soirées de Paris*. Poulenc set three of Jacob's "Bal Masqué" poems to music along with another poem from *Le Laboratoire central*: "Malvina," "La Dame aveugle," and "Autres personnages du bal masqué," with "Madame la Dauphine": *Oeuvres* 603; 624–5.
43. "Lettres de Jacques Vaché," *Littérature* n. 6, August 1919, 10–16.
44. Max Jacob, Jean Cocteau, *Correspondance*, 53. Jacob had asked the editors at *Littérature* to publish his letter defending Cocteau. Breton never did publish the letter, which arrived just as *Littérature* took its radical turn and (for a while) joined Dada.
45. Max Jacob, "Plaintes d'un prisonnier," *Littérature* n. 8, October 1919, 9. *Le Laboratoire central*; *Oeuvres* 592.
46. Tristan Tzara, "Noblesse galvanisée," *Littérature* n. 8, October 1919, 11.
47. André Breton and Philippe Soupault, "Les Champs magnétiques," *Littérature* n. 8, October 1919, 4.
48. *Ibid.* 5, 6.
49. *Ibid.* 10.
50. Max Jacob, Jean Cocteau, *Correspondance*, 53.
51. *Paul Éluard et Jean Paulhan: Correspondance 1919–1944* (Paris: Éditions Claire Paulhan, 2003), 74–5, note 2.
52. Max Jacob, letter to Mme Aurel, Mss BnF 24290 ff 892–902, "Friday January 1920."
53. The classic account of the matinée is in Sanouillet, 102–5.
54. In his account in "Nuits d'hôpital et l'aurore" in *Le Roi de Béotie*, he gives the date as 27 January, but as Seckel points out, it must have been 31 January, since he specified that he attended the second performance. *Oeuvres* 945; Seckel 173.
55. *Oeuvres* 944.

56. Ibid. 942–3.
57. Quoted by Florent Fels, who observed the exchange. Florent Fels, *L'Art vivant de 1900 à nos jours* (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1956), 29.
58. Max Jacob, "Le Damasquineur," "Plus d'astrologie," "Don Quichotte voyage en mer," "Allusions romantiques à propos de Mardi-Gras," *Action*, v. 1, n. 2, March 1920, 24–28. "Plus d'astrologie," *Oeuvres* 587; "Allusions romantiques à propos de Mardi-Gras," *Oeuvres* 595.
59. Max Jacob, "Présentation de l'auteur par lui-même," *Gouaches et dessins, Max Jacob*, catalogue, Exposition, Paris, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, 8–20 March, 1920, n.p.
60. Garnier I, 209–217.
61. Ibid. 210.
62. Ibid. 215.
63. Jacques Rivière, *Nouvelle Revue Française*, v. 6, n. 72, September 1919, 636.
64. André Gide, "Dada," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, v. 7, n. 79, April 1920, 477.
65. Ibid. 479.
66. Ibid. 481.
67. André Breton, "Pour Dada," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, v. 7, n. 83, 208–215; Jacques Rivière, "Reconnaissance à Dada," *ibid.*, 216–237.
68. Max Jacob, "Ma Vie en trois lignes," *Action*, v. 1, n. 4, July 1920, 23; reprinted by Éluard in "Revue des revues," *Littérature* v. 2, n. 15, July–August 1920, 23. The other prose poems in the group seem equally topical, which probably explains why Jacob chose to place only one in a volume: "Jamais Plus" (Nevermore), the most obviously Catholic, came out in *Visions infernales* (1924); *Oeuvres* 658.
69. Pierre Reverdy, "L'Ami de l'homme ou parasite," *Littérature*, v. 2, n. 16, September–October 1920, 1.
70. Ibid., "Le Vieil apprenti," 2.

71. Ibid., “Trois étoiles,” 4.
72. It’s strange that Reverdy reprinted these three vicious prose poems in *Flaques de verre* in 1929. By that time he had long re-established his friendship with Jacob; he had converted to Catholicism with Jacob as his godfather, and in 1924 Jacob dedicated his collection *Visions infernales* to “Pierre Reverdy, my friend.” Old grudges, it seems, cannot easily be erased.
73. Max Jacob, “Nocturne,” *Le Coq parisien*, n. 3, July–August 1920, n. p. *Le Laboratoire central; Oeuvres* 564.
74. Louis Aragon, “Y a-t-il des gens qui s’amusent dans la vie?,” *Littérature*, v. 2, n. 17, 3.
75. Seckel 178, quoting Georges Hugnet, *Pleins et déliés; souvenirs et témoignages, 1926–1972* (Paris: Guy Authier, 1972) 177.
76. “Liquidation,” *Littérature*, v. 3, n. 18, March 1921, 1–7.
77. Béhar 123.
78. LC; *Oeuvres* 632. It was originally called “Fortifs,” and in the manuscript in the Doucet collection it’s dedicated to Picasso.
79. “L’Explorateur,” *Le Laboratoire central; Oeuvres* 575.
80. *Le Laboratoire central; Oeuvres* 606.
81. Max Jacob, “Atlantide,” 391 v. 2, n. 3, February 1917; *Le Laboratoire central; Oeuvres* 599.
82. Max Jacob, Jean Cocteau, *Correspondance*, 64–67.
83. Robert Guiette, *La Vie de Max Jacob* (Paris: Nizet, 1976), 93–4; Pierre Andreu, *Vie et mort de Max Jacob* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1982), 136–140.
84. Stanislas Fumet, “Histoire d’une amitié,” in *Pierre Reverdy 1889–1960* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1962), 319–20; *Le Centenaire de Pierre Reverdy*, Actes du Colloque d’Angers, Sablé-Solesmes (Angers: Presses de l’Université d’Angers, 1990), 376; Alice Halicka, *Hier Souvenirs* (Paris: Éditions du Pavois, 1946), 75.
85. Seckel 181.
86. Theodore Reff, “Picasso’s *Three Musicians*: Maskers, Artists, and Friends,” *Art in America*, December 1980, 124–42; Richardson III, 197–9; Seckel 180–4.