

**Henri Pourrat and Suzanne Renaud**  
**An epistolary friendship and the birth of a book, *Romarin ou Annette et Jean*.**  
***Ballades et poésies populaires tchèques et moraves.***

There have been recent studies<sup>1</sup> and publications in Dauphiné about the life and work of Suzanne Renaud, who was born in Lyon in the late nineteenth century and lived in Grenoble for thirty years before settling down in Bohemia with the Czech printmaker Bohuslav Reynek. In 1926, she married this great artist, poet and translator, who has never ceased to be fervently admired in his homeland.

This union between a French poet and a Czech artist began like a fairy tale. In 1922, Les éditions du Pigeonnier in Saint-Félicien en Vivarais published Suzanne's first collection of poetry, *Ta vie est là...* ("Your Life Is There..."). Less than a year later, the young Bohuslav read the book in his country, and liked it so much that he went to Grenoble to ask the author for permission to translate it.

Their meeting changed Suzanne's life forever. During her first ten years of marriage, she spent summers in Petrkov, winters in Grenoble. In 1936, Bohuslav brought her definitively to his native Bohemia.<sup>2</sup>

Suzanne dropped off the horizon of French letters.

\*\*\*

By 1947, over ten years had gone by since Suzanne had left France.

With sadness and subdued rage, she had witnessed the Munich agreement and lived through the war. The beauty and profound culture of a country where her work, translated and illustrated by her husband, had been published for twenty years was not enough to make her forget that she was living far from home, and how fragile an uprooted soul is.

She dreamed of seeing her family and homeland again.

Courageously, despite the red tape and insecurity of traveling in those days, she managed to return to Grenoble in August 1947, where she was delighted to be reunited with her friends from the Dauphiné and visit her sister in Lyon. Her niece, Suzanne Dutheil, had just given birth to a baby girl named after the heroine of *Gaspard des montagnes* ("Gaspard of the Mountains"), Anne-Marie Grange. The godfather was Henri Pourrat, author of the Auvergne saga.

That is how the relationship between Suzanne and the French writer began.

Suzanne Dutheil had already given Pourrat two books of Suzanne's poetry, *Ailes de cendre* ("Wings of Ash") and *Victimae Laudes*. He liked them and wrote to their author, beginning a twelve-year epistolary friendship that ended only with his death in 1959.

But the author who published many poems in Czechoslovakia and the writer from Ambert never met in person.

After her brief stay in Lyon, Suzanne returned to Czechoslovakia, where she remained for the rest of her life.

\*\*\*

Suzanne was already familiar with Pourrat's name and work when their correspondence began. "When my husband, who was still just an acquaintance, talked to me about his dreams and what he was reading, he mentioned you," she wrote in her first letter. "Then, we were friends of 'Champs', which disappeared too soon. Later, I introduced my son to you when he was nearly seven. I would read to him in French and often it was 'Le village rouge' or a description of ferns and wildflowers."

Before the war, Suzanne and Bohuslav read the *Almanach des Champs* ("The Field Almanac"), a collection of stories by rural writers edited by Pourrat at Horizons de France. Bohuslav found works by Camille Mayran and Giono to translate there. In 1932, Pourrat's Czech friend Jan Čep translated *Gaspard des montagnes* in Czechoslovakia.

In 1938, Pourrat definitively moved to Ambert in his native Auvergne. During the war, he wrote *Vent de Mars* ("March Wind"), which won the Prix Goncourt in 1941. Pourrat had always been deeply attached to Auvergne, where many hours of rest and long walks in the open air were prescriptions for his poor health. Wearing a wide-brimmed hat immortalized by photographer Albert Monier, the author spent many years roaming the Livradois hills and other places whose mysteries and legends he wrote about in his books.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1983: *Un grand poète, la dauphinoise Suzanne Renaud* by Pierre Dalloz.

1990: *Suzanne Renaud (1889-1964). La vie grenobloise et les années d'exil du poète*, by A. Auzimour.

<sup>2</sup> 1991: *Bohuslav Reynek (1892-1971). Les années grenobloises du graveur tchèque* by A. Auzimour.

In her mind's eye, Suzanne often pictured the sheepfolds of Auvergne, the fern and digitalis forests and the tall columbine that she loved to see swaying in the light while reading *Le Meneur de loups* ("The Leader of the Wolves"), *Sous le pommier* ("Under the Apple Tree") and *L'Homme à la bêche* ("The Man with a Hoe"). The poet wrote that Pourrat had "a deeply moving sense of nature and human destiny", which she also found in *La Bienheureuse Passion* ("The Blessed Passion"), a book published in 1946 where "the author put the experience of a lifetime as a poet and Christian".

Cut off from her culture, Suzanne wrote that meeting Pourrat was "Providence smiling on a hard road." She never forgot the thrill of receiving his first letter. He paid warm tribute to *Victimae Laudes*, a veritable act of literary resistance published in 1939. "How fitting that a Frenchwoman should write such excellent poems in praise of the first victim. I remember what Jan Čep told me in '39 [...] (Betrayed! Betrayed!), the daze, the anger. I find that in your verses. I even find what I have never seen but have often imagined, the roads lined with apple trees, the village by the pond, the inn, the girls like poppies, the peddler, old Prague, the low-slung stores with their marshy glow and I do not know what else that is the dream of these people, full of apples and hazelnuts, poppies and roses."

Here, Pourrat is referring to the vigour and rare beauty of *La Ville aux cent clochers* ("The City of a Thousand Steeples"), the last poem in the *Victimae Laudes* collection and one of the longest Suzanne ever wrote.

\*\*\*

The Communists took over Czechoslovakia less than a year after Suzanne and Pourrat exchanged their first letters. Bitterness, anxiety and humiliation followed. Fear and worry gripped Petrkov and every home throughout the country. People must live "without security, with very little freedom, continually worrying about material conditions [...] and feeling anxious about growing old in this grim, awful world."

Suzanne missed her country more than ever.

Distant Bohemia was brutally off from the rest of the world. Like everyone who received letters with their neat, looping and supple handwriting from this quiet, generous woman, Pourrat discovered the quivering sensitivity, the deep spirituality, the sense of humour and the gift for finding the right image that makes Suzanne's work so appealing.

As the seasons changed, scents and colours flowed from Petrkov into Pourrat's world: "skies were tinted ivory and gold or the colour of faded heather" during Bohemia's Indian summers. Then came the Advent season. Little boys would chase each other on the frozen ponds singing "Koleda! Koleda!" at Christmas in "the melancholic cloister of winter life". In December 1950, Suzanne wrote to Pourrat: "There is a lot of snow this year, and many red berries like joyous drops of blood, the blood of a child who has pricked his finger on the thorns of an enchanted tree. [...] May God grant us all real peace, like a beautiful blanket of snow where birds' feet write their little celestial messages!" On Christmas Eve, Suzanne's thoughts were with all her friends. She always wrote to Pourrat about the holiday feast as well as the Easter light.

Throughout their correspondence, the landscapes of Ambert and Petrkov called out and responded to each other in beautiful descriptive passages. In Auvergne, "oak and maple trees take on their autumnal hues, clouds mingle with mountains [...]," wrote Pourrat in turn. "Yesterday, my wife and I went to get some grain for our seven or eight white hens. On our way back down the winding road to Ambert, we looked up at a green half-moon high in the sky, which was taking on pink tones against the background of the south. The mountain too was turning pink, though it was more or less free of snow. God's world refreshes us, man's burns us."

Suzanne and Pourrat's letters also provide the interested reader with insights into the publications and literary circles of the time. A friend of Jean Paulhan and Alexandre Vialatte, Pourrat discovered Suzanne's old links with the Pigeonnier poets, the novelist Bernanos and Giono, who sent his book *Village* from Manosque to Petrkov. "A good, simple text refreshingly illustrated by a friend of ours,<sup>3</sup>" wrote Suzanne, who loved receiving magazines, newspapers and books from France. Pourrat always sent her his books as soon as they came out.

However, in the early 1950s, the Stalinist period's grimmest years, Suzanne was plagued by "a painful emptiness". She stopped writing, and suffered for it.

In *La porte grise* ("The Grey Door"), Suzanne published poems written before and during the war. "Can you work in this calamitous world?" she wondered. "Faith is increasingly understood as a virtue."

Bohuslav found refuge in prints—this was the period of his Book of Job series—while Suzanne reread her psalms. "Nolite timere", have no fear, it is written in the Gospel. But the poet's Christian faith often faltered.

---

<sup>3</sup> Édith Berger (1900-1994), Giono's painter friend, who lived in Lalley in the Trièves (Isère).

In 1950, Pourrat sent her *La Maison-Dieu* ("The House of God"), a life of Saint Robert. The book enchanted Reynek, who wrote back right away, not without a harsh assessment of his contemporaries: "Thank you for these deeply important pages, so close to the spirit of the Beatitudes. If today's Christians, who have lost their way in 'social' actions [...] could still learn from such books, they would soon be brought back to the Gospels and saved immediately."

Reynek and Pourrat shared a deep faith, and, in the face of the outside world, the strength of absence.

In 1951, Pourrat published *Saints de France*, which Suzanne and Bohuslav read with enthusiasm. This beautiful book is "a breath of hope, of confidence in our country, a heavenward gaze. [...] The old wooden saints by the fountains emerge from the shadows, illuminated in their rustic or domestic atmosphere, their hearts overflowing with expectation and hope for a higher life. One must stay with them for a while longer, together before the enormous enigma [...], close to each other for a moment more before being separated."

Under Petrkov's old trees, where, towards eventide, she would stroll past the flowering periwinkles, Suzanne sometimes also felt the familiar, simple presence of God, as Bohuslav engraved it in his etchings.

Beyond the rowan trees lining the grounds, at sunset the poet's gaze would linger on "a meadow beside a pond, a meadow like all the ones we ran through as children, but more serious, more secret. [...] All you see there is an old woman with a walnut face tightly wrapped in an austere kerchief, or a little girl leading a cow. If it is a little girl, she sings a few plaintive notes. Then the landscape listens and deepens again. It recognizes these songs."

\*\*\*

For quite some time, Suzanne had been interested in her adopted country's folk poems. She now had an in-depth knowledge of the Czech language and felt close to this rural people, heir to traditional beliefs and so naturally religious. In France, she focused on Grenoble's literary and artistic life between the wars. In Bohemia, she learned to live by the rhythm of the land. On the family farm in Petrkov, whose furrows stretched right up to the edge of the forest, with an eye well versed in rural life by then, she observed the frosts that threatened the coming harvests or the beautiful silvery-green hay that sprang up after plentiful rain.

Near the pond, a cross standing alone and forlorn on a low rise in the middle of a field bore witness to a time when rural and religious life intermingled. Suzanne recalled her year-long stay in Stará Říše with the surprising Florian family in 1944, when they had to flee the old house in Petrkov because it had been taken over by the Germans. From her memory and her new culture rose one of the pious hymns sung on Good Friday evening in Moravia, "a barren, unforgiving land covered at this time of year by a thin layer of green or, even more often, by fresh snow, which looks like a musty, moth-eaten shroud. People, peasants like the ones back home, gather round a crude roadside chapel, a simple granite pillar enlarged into a reliquary containing a "Pietà" called *Boží muka* ("Martyr of God") [...] singing a tender song of naive devotion."

When Pourrat read some of the sad Moravian hymns Suzanne had sent him, he felt a twinge in his heart. "I became emotional reading your letter," he wrote back. "How these poems speak to me. They are so close to the songs of the Passion, to the peasant songs I collected in the old dialect, to certain old ballads. [...] And you can translate them, which is so difficult. How close our people are, the Slavs and the Celts, a great peasant community. [...] I wish others could love these poems as much as I do."

In the following letters, Suzanne explained to him that this folk tradition comes from Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. The writer and poet Erben gathered the Bohemian texts together in the nineteenth century: "Born 1811 in a small town amidst great forests, he became the archivist of the city of Prague and never stopped looking for these lyrical treasures hiding everywhere, even in the smallest villages." Three voluminous collections were published around 1845 and another collection of 2,500 songs twenty years later. Suzanne was also working on another book, published at the same time in Moravia by a Catholic priest named Sušil, who was succeeded in collecting Moravian songs by František Bartoš. To complete these very serious sources from which Suzanne drew the original texts she wanted to translate, the magnificent Špalíček was published around 1939: the folk poems were written in calligraphy and finely illustrated with pen drawings by the Czech painter Aleš.

This huge work by scholars and poets probably had no equivalent in France when, in 1948, Gallimard published the first of thirteen volumes of *Trésor des Contes* ("A Treasury of Tales"). From 1946 until his death, Pourrat worked on this monument left to posterity: a thousand tales, 2,000 proverbs, 500 songs, legends, customs and beliefs collected since 1911 from the inhabitants of Auvergne's rugged land with patience, perseverance and a rigorous method recently highlighted by Bernadette Bricout in her book *Le Savoir et la Saveur* ("Knowledge and Flavour").

Pourrat was overjoyed when these delightful songs, sayings, riddles, nursery rhymes, legends, laments and hymns reached him from behind the Iron Curtain. He immediately set about making them known. *Bonne nuit, ô Jésus* ("Good Night, O Jesus"), *Les trois lits* ("The Three Beds") and *Le sang du Seigneur* ("The Lord's Blood") were published in the Easter 1948 issue of *Témoignage Chrétien* as *Pâques en Moravie* ("Easter in Moravia"), while the translations of three lighter poems, *Le cimetière* ("The Cemetery"), *La lettre* ("The Letter") and *Annette et Jean* came out in *Vie Art Cité*, a magazine in French-speaking Switzerland, while Pourrat was in that country.

Thoughts now turned to publishing a real collection.

Pourrat increasingly admired Suzanne's work, writing to her, "One day, Jean Paulhan told me that France lacked great translators, with the exception of Vialatte, who translated Kafka so well. But it seems to me that your translations are a success. One would swear they were written in French to begin with, and that is the main thing. They have the abrupt turn, the nerves and the sharp colours of folk songs. They are poetry. And one senses that they are faithful to the original."

Devoted to his work, Pourrat communicated his enthusiasm to the sensitive poet-translator. He encouraged Suzanne to collect her existing translations and continue working as a bridge between two countries united by folk traditions.

Unwilling to have them transcribed—"in foreign hands, they would have come back riddled with mistakes"—Suzanne recopied the poems herself on thin, often lined, loose sheets of various sizes, using whatever paper she could find in those days when everything was scarce. Weary of the task, she made a few mistakes, forgot quotation marks or put in too many and tired of repeating the chorus of laments. She cautiously mailed them in three successive packets. "Don't worry about losing the manuscript," she wrote. "I've kept the titles. I have a lot of duplicate poems and besides, I know them all by heart".

Pourrat was thrilled when he received this "bouquet of wild flowers", a veritable French *Kytice*, meaning "bouquet", the title of a well-known collection by the poet Erben.

He set about classifying the poems in an order he considered more harmonious, a sort of crescendo from riddles to lovelorn laments and hymns. "I'm even more enchanted by the book they form," he wrote. "Nursery rhymes, peasant tales, love, joy, spite, vengeance, laments, religious poems."

Then he had them typed up, carefully correcting any transcription mistakes. A comparative study of the manuscript and the typewritten copy annotated by Pourrat, today at the Centre Henri Pourrat reveals a reflective approach to punctuation. Pourrat filled in some gaps and simplified and modernized the text without, however, changing too much the use of the semicolon, a nuance of the poetry of her time to which Suzanne was quite attached. Around the time the translations were made, however, she was tempted by poetry without inter-punctuation. Pourrat respected her wishes, perhaps sensing that it could add some charm to the spare verses.

Some expressions underwent a few changes in friendly consultations despite the long time it took for mail to reach one country to the other. For example, in the ballad *La Fiancée du mort* ("The Dead Man's Fiancée"), "chevaux" (horses) is replaced by "cheval" (horse), which sounds better—"un pas de cheval dans l'ombre sonore" ("a horse step in the sound shadow". Pourrat advised, "instead of 'cher ami' (dear friend), put 'galant' (gentleman), which seems to be the rule in our folk songs"—"Galant, si j'avais cru d'avoir mon temps perdu" ("Gentleman, if I thought I had wasted my time").

One or two footnotes to the poems, rare because they slow down the flow of the reading, shed light on allusions to Slavic customs, such as the folk belief that sees the image of the crowned King David in the moon.

In early 1952, the pair exchanged many letters discussing what title to choose for the collection.

The word "romarin" ("rosemary"), a fragrant plant and a wedding symbol in Czechoslovakia, often crops up in the poems. Suzanne disliked using names of flowers in poetry, but that one was so modest. Bohuslav, who felt "at home" as soon as the conversation turned to flocks, cypress and olive trees—he had Spanish roots—suggested Romarin, a short, sober title that, he thought, captured the songs' symbolism and fragrance. Pourrat leaned towards the kind-sounding *Annette et Jean*, two plain, very common names, one of them recalling Bohemia's devotion to Saint Ann.

The book was eventually called *Romarin ou Annette et Jean*. It was ready for publication in the spring of 1952.

Pourrat, wrote Annette Pourrat, "called on all his friends and acquaintances: Pierre Fanlac in Périgueux, Éditions de la Colombe, Georges Poulet at La Table ronde, his old friend from Ambert Lucien Maury, who ran "Le Cabinet cosmopolite" at Stock, and many others. [...] The replies came either slowly or not at all, and even the warm ones were always discouraging. [...] This was because the publishing industry's crisis and difficulties were getting worse: 'Poetry? Sales are absolutely zero at the moment. Sorry'."

Yet Pourrat did not give up. He wrote to two poets, Amy Sylvel and Sully André Peyre, who ran the poetry review *Marsyas* in Aigues-Vives in the Gard. A simple offprint paid for by the author was considered. Suzanne was philosophical about it: "It is worth sacrificing a few scraps of paper usually called 'money' to reach some interesting readers," she wrote.

The poet had an almost motherly love for the translations. "I shall send my daughters—these little songs—out into the world in modest garb. I hope they will have, for lack of a ball gown, a nice dress and still find a few suitors. The important thing is that they see the light of day [...] and speak to a few souls."

Friends in Dauphiné offered to invest a small sum in the modest publication project: a handful of poems illustrated with an old folk woodcut.

But even that was unaffordable. After partially coming out in *Le Mercure de France*, there was no longer any interest in publishing *Romarin*.

Suzanne expressed no bitterness about this. She had longed to see Pourrat's unfailing dedication finally rewarded. As for her own self-esteem as an author, she had known for a long time that it was "severely battered by fate. [...] I am well trained in resignation, you know! And I will never regret, on your advice, having completed this work, which will be useful one day."

\*\*\*

Forty years later, the collection was published by Cahiers de l'Alpe.<sup>4</sup>

What about the translations?

Suzanne knew how good they were. "Faithful, accurate, as unliterary as possible," she wrote. "I would not worry about them being examined in this respect; they are not fantasies on a folk theme. If strict word for word translation is not possible in poetry, at least I have always respected the meaning, rhythm and imagery."

Suzanne crafted short, beautiful, regular poems, classic yet with a touch of modernity. She gave the translations the same music and color that she drew upon from her mother tongue for her own poetry. "Czech," she wrote, "a language of declensions where accents change the sound of words and the length of vowels, is a rich, dense yet concise tongue, highly suitable for poetry, but very different from our analytical language. It lends itself to alliteration [and] onomatopoeia. [...] In the original, these songs are rhymed, mostly irregularly, as I do it myself. I have kept the rhythm, generally six or eight feet to a line."

In addition to the rigour and precision demanded by the poet's craft, Suzanne's musical talent was also evident. She played the piano with artistry and confessed to having dreamed of becoming a singer in a letter to a close friend.

Forgotten today by younger Czech generations, the Bakule chorus, an admirable group of poor First World War orphans taken in and trained by a schoolteacher around 1920, once sang these folk poems. The great composer Leoš Janáček also seems to have studied these songs, where he found traces of lost old melodies.

All the ballads are old.

They recall a harsh time when military service lasted seven to twelve years and brothers had total control over their sisters, as in the poem *La belle Julienne* ("The Beautiful Julienne") dating from the Seven Years War. Sung at travelling fairs, the laments *La fiancée du mort* ("The Dead Man's Fiancée") and *Fleurs de sang* ("Flowers of Blood") were known across the country. The pathetic ballad *L'orphelin* ("The Orphan"), which was also famous, dates back to the Baroque period. Beating with Slavic impulse is the poem *Séparation*, in which Suzanne points out to Pourrat the "human role played by the horse." Breaking with the tragic tone of hymns with refrains, a few short pieces bring the collection "a bit of mischievous grace [...] and childlike dew."

In all the songs, the word for mother is capitalized. According to a legend told by Erben, folk poetry is the mother's breath, which children come to breathe at her grave, finding her presence in a tuft of suddenly blooming wild thyme. *Mateřidouška*, "wild thyme" in Czech, literally means "the mother's last sigh".

\*\*\*

Here, with these songs that have come out of the shadows, is a humble word.

That of a people. That of its poet, "a veritable mocha of poetry", said a great Czech bard<sup>5</sup> moved by these translations who had retired to the banks of the Vltava, and whom Suzanne sometimes visited.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Romarin ou Annette et Jean* (Grenoble, Les Cahiers de l'Alpe, 1992). New bilingual edition: *Romarin ou Annette et Jean. Ballades et poésies populaires tchèques et moraves*, translated by Suzanne Renaud (Grenoble, Romarin, 2002). Les Cahiers de l'Alpe had previously published two of Renaud's collections: *Ailes de cendre et autres poèmes* (1986) and *Nocturnes* (1989).

Born in the glow of inner distress before a cosy fire, these sixty folk poems are Suzanne's gift to her native land and her adopted country.

"As I loved them, so I picked them. While they may lack the song that accompanied them like a shadow, like the wind or the humming of the bee, perhaps they have not lost too much rhythm and colour to the breath of a foreign language. I have put them in a pitcher of cool water on the window ledge. Now they are awakening, facing a familiar horizon."

Annick Auzimour  
Grenoble and Clermont-Ferrand, 1992

---

<sup>5</sup> Vladimír Holan (1905-1980).