
Pierre Guyotat
Art is what remains of History

Tatiana Kondratovitch: Dostoyevsky said that, in order for someone to write a novel, it's imperative that he has lived something deep in his life. What are the facts of your life that have stimulated your own writing and influenced most your work?

Pierre Guyotat: First, I think one has to state straight-away that what influences most the work one does is the work itself. As soon as, in adolescence, you start to write, consciously, I mean, knowing you are writing, that it will be your destiny, the work you are doing takes on its independence, it lives its own life, like an organism, and it's the work, rather than yourself, which influences you, which drives your life, mainly. Of course, there is the life you lead, what the epoch, society, and, already established, your ancestry, religion, faith and the State make you live. What your inner strength, your knowledge, your senses make you live.

That which in my scenes, my characters, surprises, unsettles, scandalizes, is for me so everyday – because of that formal shaping, so fraternal – those characters, dispossessed of any rights, dispossessed, disentangled, even, from all civic existence, from 'being', simply, are so close to what is deep in 'me'.

I'm compared repeatedly to Sade, Genet, Artaud. Sade, yes, more than anybody else: for the logic and the eloquence. I think that Sade, that extraordinary hero, is in a way, the French Shakespeare, and he is for me as big as Shakespeare. But it's Molière I'd feel closer to – the game, the false in order to have the true, the true to have the false, the use of aside, etc. What if they compare me to 'myself' finally? For it has been so hard to accept

myself as 'Pierre Guyotat', a type of work and individual not known before me!, to accept myself as being outside the pattern. That has been very painful: a long and cruel conquest of the self, of one's unique self.

As you evoke Dostoyevsky, I remember on my return from the war in Algeria, end of 1962, 63, I read *The House of the Dead*, as I was then in that infinite bleakness surrounding my return from the war – and, for me, particularly, from prison – and, like most of my comrades, isolated in the misunderstanding, and, at best, in the indifference of most of the people I returned to in France (except for a few friends), as the family link had been severed before my departure for Eastern Algeria, I read that book intensely. For me the war had been, of course, the war itself, the racism, the humiliation of re-grouped populations, the reciprocated cruelty, the missed opportunities, the tragedy of the Algerian-born French and the Harkies [North-Africans who fought alongside the French (trans.)] but also my subjection to stupid minds themselves enslaved, my indictment, my arrest, the humiliation of ten days of interrogation, my often contemptible imprisonment, my doubts also, political and moral, in the darkness of an underground cell, etc – one has less doubt in daylight: that interrogation and what followed had confirmed, re-inforced by all the power of the army and the State, the constant questioning by my family of my desires, my hopes, my very person, prior to my flight from Lyon to Paris. Despite the relative happiness of a few months at the end of the war spent in a disciplinary unit in Western Algeria (from my comrades of that time, coming from all manner of backgrounds, common or political laws, with whom my adaptability has worked wonders, I've drawn a few good characters for *Tombeau*), but in the poverty rediscovered in Paris (the hunger), and, above all, in continual empathy with my father's heartbreak, widower of my

mother, then remarried, and despite the friends, that crisis of melancholy and revolt, deep and impossible to describe, having intensified, I wrote, after that reading of Dostoyevsky, a text called *la Prison* which concluded, I think, with a sort of paraphrase of a very desolate fragment of the text of *The Passion according to St John* by J.S. Bach, that I'd sung as a child. For me it's the matrix-text of *Tombeau*.

But, increasingly, I think that, since childhood, in the heart and spirit of every artist, author or other, the private drama, the spiritual drama, the political drama pre-exists, with more or less degree of sharpness to subsequent violent reality or experience, and already gnaws at the little body, isolates it – that separation from the 'others' is already a drama, a suffering. The reading done at an early age maintains the vigour of this 'innateness', difficult to take on: the Bible, Joseph sold by his brothers, etc. Later, the bulk of life, passion, war, disease, incomprehension, only confirms the painful intuitions of childhood. It's this confirmation that can release the work, but it's added to that initial core of childhood to make it bigger and harder.

The suffering, the anguish of my father, as soon as my mother fell ill in 1951, then his grief after her death, and other anxieties, have marked my brothers and sisters, have marked me. More than Algeria at war, more even than my imprisonment, it's the heartbreak of my father (one night he ripped apart his clothes and started to tear at his own body with his nails before I calmed him, knowing however that his suffering would only cease with his death, or my mother's resurrection), to have interiorized it, that made *Tombeau* the book it is.

With Prostitution in 1975 you made a step in the opposite direction to the general reader...

I didn't premeditate any *'step in the opposite direction to the general reader'*: there is no longer any 'general reader' in France today, there's only a 'general televiewer'. I go where my internal voice, my logic, my heart takes me. There where 'it' sings closest to subversion (it's always there one finds the 'universal'); towards more strength, music and truth. But those books which appear more 'popular' to you, *Tombeau* and *Eden Eden Eden*, were and still remain 'difficult' because non-conforming and free. It is this non-conformity and freedom, and this 'contrast' which makes them sought after and liked by the younger generations, fed up with reading only 'the dull'. The habit has been lost here to read rhythm, contrast. The proliferation of novel production, in France anyway, has erased all memory of the language as 'contrast', hence the stupor of the critics when faced with *Progénitures*, accepted only because it was 'me' and obviously (verses on the page) for the people there's a logic and a breathing in it. Much general and daily heroism is needed to pass through this blindness of today's French cultural middle-class and continue working, 'composing'.

You've been very close to the Arab world. What do you think of the fanaticism that's spreading there?

The accentuation, the North-African voice has helped me to sexualize my writing. The life style, the sounds, the scents, the customs have become so essential to my fiction that now it has become an almost abstract frame, an indispensable frame to the unfolding of my scenes.

I think this madness, these massacres, the suicide bombings, etc, don't have one single cause. If the effect is unique, the causes are many. One could think that what unifies them in their accomplishment of the atrocity is the 'service' to God. The massacres: I think,

myself, more and more, and thought it already at the time of *Tombeau*, that 'God' disappears when the slaughterer is faced with their future victims. It's their fright which becomes their 'God', then their blood and other less 'noble' matters. The blood spilt excites like wine and the less noble matters reinforce the contempt of the slaughterer for their future victim. More generally, the attraction of war, that human beings, knowing the knife cuts, the gun kills, engage in together – thinking perhaps that the mass will protect them from the shooting which kills or mutilates – is an endless mystery. War is the central mystery of History. But 'we' too, we have, in the past, cut throats, disembowelled, burnt in the name of 'God'. 'We' certainly appeared, for the civilisations we invaded, as barbaric, despite the fact we were building cathedrals, as, for us today, the Islamists. They could one day organize themselves as armies, infiltrate then conquer fragile States – look at Pakistan: the nuclear suitcases of the red mafia in the hands of the God mad, what a terror! They dishonour what is beautiful, good and sweet in Islam, and they especially dishonour the human reason that each generation contrives to destroy and rebuild. Generation is the motor of History. The experience of past generations is useful at different levels than the Historical one. What remains of History is art, but it's not the artists who make History.

What's your stance on homosexuality?

I think the 'normalisation' of what is called 'homosexuality' is at the same time legitimate and dangerous. Legitimate if only to repair the damage done, in History (and repair in advance, if I can say so, the damage that will continue to be done) to this sexuality (sexual impulse) and allow the widening of sexual desire (the rending), of the senses; dangerous, because it risks

producing exclusivity, specialization, fanaticism in a field which is the explosion of limits, play, risk, derision.

What we call 'homosexuality' should awaken sexuality entirely, 'play' a driving and disturbing role in sexuality in general, give back a bit of the freedom it loses in the institutionalisation of what we call 'heterosexuality'. Its normalisation makes it lose altogether this fragile and courageous role, besides, to say of somebody that he 'is' homosexual or heterosexual is a revolting stupidity: how to fix what is only movement. The 'homosexual' social demands perhaps took part in this fixation against nature, but, after all, how not to desire to demand, facing the persistent laziness of spirit, heart, sensations and words of those who are so instilled in the dominant sexual institution.

As for me, I always felt and more or less lived both sexual 'orientations' at the same time. But I think the two desires are not of the same nature: the internal rendering is reinforced. To finish, I'll tell you that the show which touched me the most sexually when I was a child, was women mud or sand wrestling that the village priest had forgotten to cut from the newsreels projected before the main film in his cinema. More generally today, it's still, in the porno movie, the sight of women having sex which arouses me the most.

What do you think of the state of French culture today? It seems to me it's not the best period. Could it be the lack of vital conflicts and strong events?

Today in France there are magnificent artists, remarkable writers... but the critics here, unfortunately, transmit abroad, in their articles or gossip, their ignorance of the new things that are happening here, and the critics abroad, repeat the gossip and 'judgements' of those 'inside' critics. What critic could have, in

1951, drawn attention and transmitted to his co-workers outside, the publishing of pieces like Artaud's *Suppôts et supplications*, a sublime book if ever there was one? Instead, Sartre, Camus and others were talked about endlessly. France has exported so many of that kind of author, masters of thinking or debating, that abroad now, people only expect that kind of writer from France. You've noticed too, obviously, what France officially often presents, abroad, as specimens of contemporary French culture: enough to discourage you to look any further, except if you know that France never dies, never dies entirely.

Yes, it's said that the lack of historical violence produces a soft and flat literature (another cliché: Shakespeare wrote in a period of relative historical calm in England); should we wish people to fight again between themselves or to kill others, elsewhere, for literature to become stronger!

I think the truth is elsewhere, that there are always, everywhere, underground disorders, internal rendings, strategic stakes, questions of so-called ethics which are equivalent, in order to produce Art, to all the massacres.

Finally, in order to judge a period, one has no longer to be part of it, and it's certainly not today's system of critics, preoccupied solely with what is happening that week, a corrupted, arrogant and laughable system, that can judge what they have no part of.

In your youth, you were a Marxist. I also know that in the Sixties, Fidel Castro invited you to Cuba with other French intellectuals. How do you feel about it now?

When I was very officially invited to Cuba, in July 1967, with French, Italian, German, Spanish and Latin-American writers and artists, I was not at all a 'Marxist'. *Tombeau* (whose proofs arrived in Havana through the

diplomatic bag and which I had not corrected, given the ambience...) was to be published in September. There was no reputation or title for me to be invited except for the shock the manuscript had produced on my first readers and the fame I was supposed to have in the very near future. I was twenty-seven at the time, the youngest of all the delegates, and I had no idea about that kind of intellectual gathering – I've never attended another since. In Cuba at the time, the Castrist power, close to China (I stayed at the prestigious Hotel Nacional, right next to the ambassador whose children I babysat once or twice) and welcoming all the world revolutionary movements (I met there Black-American leaders, African, Asian, Latin-American guerrilla leaders), rejected what was then called 'revisionism', the bureaucratic ultra-conservatism of USSR and the traditional communist parties all over the world, that forgot the revolution to be done and to be done immediately. I listened to Castro's long diatribes against the 'betrayal' of those parties. I don't have the time here to develop the impressions drawn from that journey and stay, where Castro was often with us, with all his life strength and conviction. As soon as we arrived, I have to say to be truthful to what happened, the oldest amongst us had inquired after the existence or not of political prisoners and they hadn't stopped asking themselves that question until the very end of our stay, through petitions I think. Two things had surprised me, disappointed me and made me furious. The first in an agrarian centre, a young and very zealous militant, repeating gracelessly an obligatory speech, explained the aim was that production was equal, then surpassed that of capitalist countries. I had a different view on the Revolution, in the minds, customs, passions even, and that discourse reminded me, despite the interest I always had for economy in the grand sense, the little I knew then about

the most heavy Stalinism. The second, more important, in the presence of the President of the Republic, Dorticos, some prisoners, Cubans from Miami captured when they landed on the island, some wounded, still wearing bandages around their heads, 'were holding a press conference' before journalists from Cuba and elsewhere, from the Western radical left, to tell their counter-revolutionary drift, to 'confess' their 'mistakes'. That spectacle revolted me – I had, six years earlier, been arrested too, charged, humiliated, incarcerated – I said so to some of the French intellectuals who were present, they were very surprised by my stance and proclaimed that those counter-revolutionaries only got what they deserved. That is when I started to understand the inconsistency of a lot of intellectuals, their difficulty in acting according to their words.

As to the sexual question on Cuba, the homosexual question, quickly, too quickly, this: in 1967 and even later, I likened homosexuality there with the prostitution of young, very young Cubans by American sex tourists, and from the depth of my being I condemned it, that the Revolution had abolished it, and I remember not signing (or rather not having paid much attention to) a petition for the defense, I think, of an 'homosexual' Cuban poet. That had caused surprise at the time. I regret it today, but, you know, I don't act according to the automatism of the moment: it's in me, and through me alone, by experiencing life and my work, that my sexual transformation occurred.

After the publication and the stir of *Tombeau*, after a stay, principally a journey, of almost six months in Algeria and, particularly, in the South Sahara (the geographic scene of the grand finale of *Eden Eden Eden*: the book, in its narrative progress, follows the course of that 'descent' from the pre-Saharan Massif de l'Aurès to the borders of Black Africa), I came back to Paris,

around the 9th May, smack into the beginning of the student revolt. I didn't have a room anymore, so I stayed in the minibus in which I'd just returned from the great deserts (when I started up the ventilation the vehicle still smelt of the delicious and deep scent of a bush from the Ahaggar whose branch was stuck in the pipes).

Although I was arrested and taken and kept in the Dépôt [the central Paris police station on the Quai des Orfèvres (trans.)] twice, and had taken part in a few attacks, I didn't feel very involved in the student revolt: because I hadn't been a 'student' (I thought, and still do, that one can learn by oneself), because most of the students originated from a social class which I'd left behind, somewhat violently, ten years earlier, because I had returned from a country which at that moment was important to me, and upset me (unemployment, the people despised by the officials...) so much more than France; and also because I was incapable of pretending, like many intellectuals then, that it was a true revolution and they would win.

But for the workmen, the real 'workers', to join in, that was a more serious matter, and for the Power to threaten – and a threat coming from the mouth of one de Gaulle, was one to take seriously – and my decision was made: I joined the PCF on the same evening or the next day of the 30th May's speech in which de Gaulle pointed his finger explicitly at that party.

For three years I was a very earnest, but also a very calm, militant. People close to me, although young but long-standing militants, family militants, taught me what they knew and already, for most of them, their doubts on the communist movement in general and in France in particular, their criticisms, their disgust, their hopes: the harder the criticism, the more frightening the revelation of Stalinist crimes and others, the more our will to transform, from the inside, the communist idea

and action increased and found justifications. After a brief bout of Maoist fever, and because the revelation of the infamy was taking us back to Lenin, who remained relatively intact up to that point, and because my work was entering a crucial and painful problematic stage, and my body was entering a crisis, sexually and organically, the question of revolutionary commitment was no longer posed individually, even if, at the time, I participated in more specific actions, judiciary, and collective still (the right to prostitute oneself, freedom of expression for young soldiers...).

In 1974–75, the fight I led for the defense and release from prison of a young Algerian accused of murder, having ended in his release, then the murder of that man, and other cruel events, alienated me from committing myself to a party. I had already left the PCF in 1972.

Since then, the world having changed a lot, my work having brought me closer to my centre, I believe more in the Law than in Evil, in what concerns the oppression of men. I don't think that man is more extraordinary than any other 'natural' creature or element, but I do believe that a man has to do everything to keep and increase his dignity as a living thing.

I do think too that the least insect, the most ephemeral of those Blues (butterflies) that I watched as a child along the riverbanks, would actually think the same.

After the publication of Tombeau pour 500,000 soldats did you have any comeback from soldiers who had been in Algeria? In my country, Russia, and in the United States, the soldiers who fought in Afghanistan and Vietnam were called veterans...

Here in France, the young soldiers used by the Republic in their 'operations to maintain order' in Algeria, from

1956 to 1962, in reality, minors in legal terms mostly (at the time, one reached one's majority only at 21), have never been referred to by the term 'veterans', for the war they returned from was not considered as a 'war' (a parliamentary decision only taken four or five years ago!); though most, between themselves, used the term 'ex-servicemen from Algeria'; otherwise, officially, the term was 'conscripts', which meant those of 'ordinary compulsory military service', which you couldn't escape from except through illness, disability, bad eyesight (mine was almost bad enough), higher education (delayed), family reasons (supporting a family), or 'string-pulling' (some, today, shamefully making the most of this generalized ignorance, present themselves as 'having refused to go to war in Algeria', as heroes in fact! What an insult to those who lost their lives, their minds or limbs there).

The conscientious objector was immediately considered a deserter, hunted down, captured and imprisoned for a long time. Thus he had to flee France, usually for a long time, as was the case with Jean-Marie Straub, the superb film-maker who made *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*.

The war in Afghanistan, a war of aggression under cover of 'fraternal help' and crusade against its feudal system, didn't cover the same realities nor the same stakes as the Algerian war, a defensive, then an offensive war, some tragic violence with internal tearing apart, atrocities and reconciliations, selfishness and self-sacrifice, repression and middle-term good will. And also, as is often the case with war, to have taken part in a war in one's youth, creates the creator, or at least reveals it, confirms it as such to oneself: not so much through the experience of violence but through the very intimate, painful, for life, solidarity it imposes and perpetuates, through the sight, fright, and revolt that's

been shared, and, above all, the subservience shared too, the subservience to the State. And for me, and for some others, the solidarity of rebellion, interrogation, humiliation, confinement... all the facts and feelings shared with our brothers on the opposite side. I think that in the work I do, that fraternity is felt: the world where I make my characters, human and non-human, develop and speak, is it not the one, transfigured or degraded, of the Maugrabin world?

As I said earlier in the interview, on my return from Algeria and, since then, very few have shown any concern about what I lived through there: a sense of decency?, confusion? (those who in France had marched for the independence of Algeria, against the OAS, considered themselves as your equal – I'm not talking here about those who committed themselves against repression, torture, and had done so until their blood flowed – among them, one of our great historians, Pierre Vidal-Naquet), ignorance?, indifference? Very few, only female friends, women, and it's still true today.

It has to be said also that, to the infamy of being thrown into that repression, young people, minors – one fusses a lot here about sexual offences with sexual minors, what can be said about the offence of arming people who are still legally minors, civic minors! – is added the infamy of having rejected, after use, that youth in civilian life, without any form of compensation, any gratuity, any help for 'reintegration'. When, with my comrades, we were liberated – right up to the end, I was expecting, given my 'service records' in the cell, to be kept a few more months in that atrocious army (the extreme tenderness of all my comrades then, supporting me right up to the release desk with the log books and their promises to support me!), when we came out of the Gare de l'Est, some were able to return to their family, and, for a time, to be sheltered there, fed, petted

perhaps, but many, like me, didn't even have enough money for a hotel room or a meal that evening.

One has to know that it is mainly with the resistance of the conscripts, us in other words, that de Gaulle was able to win over the rebellion of a few generals, of the future OAS, of a nascent fascism, and to save that ungrateful Republic which, nevertheless, we cherish.

But *Tombeau* is not a book 'on' the war in Algeria. It's usual here to say, to write, that Genet's *The Screens* and *Tombeau* are the only two great texts 'inspired by' the war in Algeria. It's not inaccurate, but there is much more to it. I remember my only leave in two years, that was in Autumn 61, I think. I was staying with my publisher, people were celebrating a literary prize there. To those who mechanically questioned me on torture – they would like to make today's new generations believe that France remained silent in the face of torture! – I replied that what shocked me the most in that war was the outrageous behaviour done to dead people, the use made of their ears, their bones, their heads – how could one play football with a head, a skull, that children, women, suffered over, not being able to kiss it any longer, whose return to their hands they dreamt about? Antigone again. Ancient Greece surely haunts this book as much as torn Algeria and the Second World War.