

ly enjoyed listening to him. Pierre Reverdy was not only a “dazzling conversationalist” (how regrettable, in order to be understood, to have to resort to such worn-out phrases) but also a stunning and spellbinding orator. His voice was very beautiful, deep and warm. His slight Narbonne accent punctuated the sentences.

He also spoke with his hands. Strong, heavy hands, but always graceful. Watching his hands, I sometimes forgot to listen, which irritated him. Because you had to listen to him. And how right he was.

In those years, he talked about nothing but poetry. He neglected the war, the lies, the propaganda, the mud, the blood, the carnage, the absurdities, and the rest. Poetry became essential. It is because of him that I now agree that some people should devote themselves to poetry. And he imposed this vocation on me, even though I was tempted to outsmart, to gain power, and cheat like many of my contemporaries. He taught me purity. He taught me to hate cheaters. And if, though it repels me when speaking of Pierre Reverdy, I feel obliged to write “I,” or “me,” it is because I was, and remain, one of the rare witnesses (as he himself told me later) to this period in his life when he tried to define the powers of poetry. At the same time in the same city, a theorist, a faithless disciple of Mallarmé, was doing his best to set artificial limits on it.

Pierre Reverdy had no wish to take notice of such maneuvers. I can’t help comparing Pierre Reverdy’s attitude with that of the man who called himself a poet and who, sadly, would end up in Anatole France’s seat in the French Academy, where he would a little later sing a hymn of praise to Pétain.<sup>4</sup> I am deliberately recalling these memories, contrasting two ambitions, because I want to exalt the dignity of the author of *La Lucarne ovale*.<sup>5</sup> He did not set out to be considered a *poète maudit*. He was filled with pride and was perfectly aware of his genius, but he would never have stooped so low as to solicit or prompt admiration or praise. Too proud to be vain, he accepted being ignored or forgotten, even if it was painful. He was

not, however, so surprised, when he was editing his review, *Nord-Sud*, that young people in love with poetry came to see him. Neither Louis Aragon nor André Breton nor I hid our admiration, which he recognized as quite sincere. He trusted us, since he spoke to us at length many a time about what seemed most precious to him, poetry. Many of these observations can be found in a book to which, he assured me, he attached great importance, *Le Livre de mon bord*, that he didn’t publish until 1948. Already, in *Nord-Sud* and in *Le Gant de crin*, he had defined what he considered essential in his conception of poetry.

He strove to convince us and readily succeeded. He was convinced. Useless to contradict him or even to dispute. He had long pondered the propositions that he emphatically threw in our faces like a couple of smacks. At this time, Reverdy was dedicating a large part of his life to contemplation. He had chosen to make a living proofreading for a printer of daily newspapers. It was a necessity that he accepted since he had to live, but he never mentioned or took any interest in it. You knew that he had only one urgency: to go home as fast as possible and sit at his dear table. His desire for solitude was intense. Despite the kindness he showed to some of those who were to him only visitors, you had the impression that he wished they would leave. But he liked to talk about his discoveries. He spoke often and extremely well, but these conversations, or rather these monologues, ended up irritating him. He liked reading the poems that his friends showed him, but liked even more to critique them and find examples of what to delete. He was not afraid to be severe, without any desire to be mean or cruel. But he didn’t stop thinking.

What must be remembered, what must be emphasized, is that Pierre Reverdy—for his attitude, for his dignity, for his exaction, for his integrity—is one of those rare men that one is proud to have known, to have respected, to have loved.

—Translated from the French by Alan Bernheimer

**Alan Bernheimer’s** most recent collection of poetry is *The Spoonlight Institute* (*Adventures in Poetry*, 2009). In addition to Soupault, he has translated writing by Valéry Larbaud and Robert Desnos.

## THOMAS CAMPBELL

*Medium Sewn Flower*, 2014  
Paper, Acrylic, Packing Envelope, Thread, Acrylic,  
Spray Paint, Pencil, Rice Bags, Money, 13 x 13.5 in



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