

Cœur, Temps and Monde in Le forçat innocent of
Supervielle: A Poet's Existential Metaphors of Prison and
Shelter

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This article proposes an examination of Jules Supervielle's book of poetry *Le forçat innocent* 'The Innocent Convict,' published in 1930, through the motif of the "poetic prison."¹ I offer to interpret the collection as an elaborate metaphor for the poet's heart: an inspiring and sensible heart, but also an oppressive and defective heart—concurrently hosting and detaining each other. Most commentators have tied the haunting imagery of guilt complex and confinement to the poet's biography with no conclusive elucidation to the enigmatic title. I wish to show that Supervielle's poetical skill goes beyond personal anecdotes and epitomizes, in a very suggestive language, the existentiality of the human condition. I will distinguish three central themes amidst the well-organized poems, and I will open up new theoretical avenues to suggest that these images unveil a much larger project of "being-in-the-world." Interestingly enough for our study, phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of an "existential tide" while elaborating on schizophrenic and dream images, and he uses the simile of diastolic and systolic heartbeats.² To my knowledge, a phenomenological reading has never been sought and seems a very dynamic approach to justify Supervielle's ambivalent statement. I will first survey his poetics and the intriguing structure of his book, and only then will I look into phenomenological concepts that can give a genuine appreciation of the novelty and productivity of his poetry as a whole.

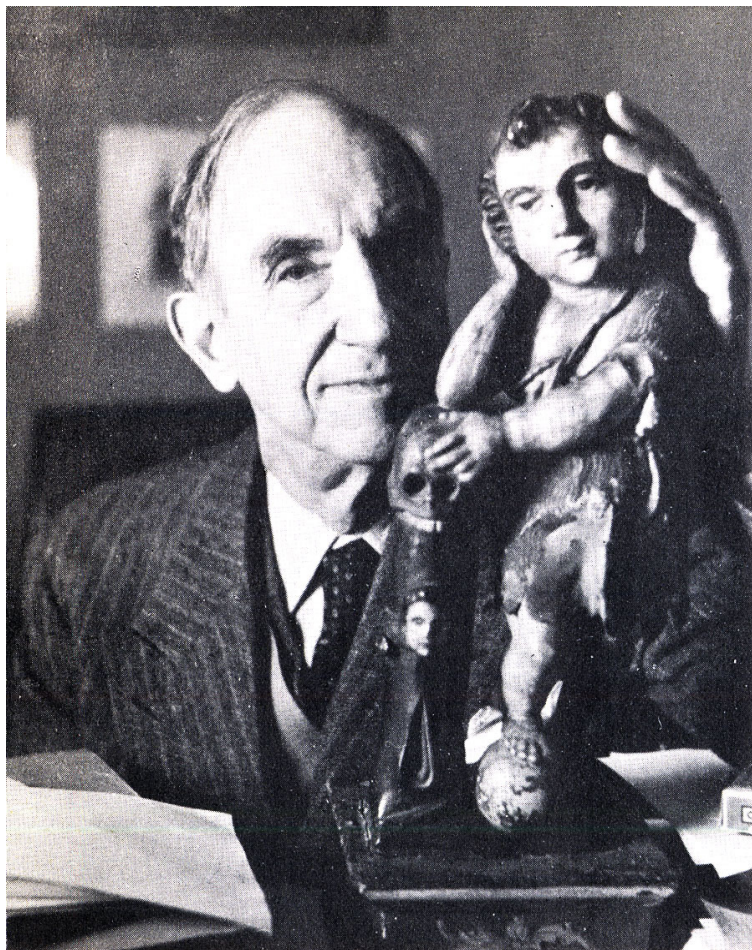


Fig. 1. Supervielle in 1959, in his Parisian apartment, 15 quai Louis Blériot, with a 17th-century Spanish statue of St. John-the-Baptist (estate of the Supervielle family). N° 199 in the centennial exhibition catalog: *Jules Supervielle, poète intime et légendaire* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1984).

Supervielle (1884-1960) was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, and during his first visit to France became an orphan at the age of eight months; both parents died within a week of each other after drinking tainted water. From that time, he lived in a restless exile, traveling back and forth between two continents, from his country of birth to his parents' homeland. Supervielle's aunt and uncle (joint owner of the family bank in Montevideo) made up for the loss of his parents, which he remained unaware of until the age of nine when a relative made a slip before him; his father and uncle had indeed married the Munyo sisters (Marie and Marie-Anne).³ He therefore sought an identity in many backgrounds among the adoptive family of his uncle-father, aunt-mother and cousins-siblings, with his Uruguayan wife, Pilar Saavedra, in his future life as husband and father to six children, as well as among the unknown dead of his French Basque ancestors. Supervielle's life was complicated at an early stage by the fact that he frequently suffered from an anxiety disorder and irregular heartbeats. Being that he was always under the threat of heart failure, he, in effect, became a life-long prisoner of this vital organ. Nonetheless, Supervielle developed ingenuity in his artistic work that allowed him to transcend and escape his physiological frailty.⁴ This transcendence happened to be the allegorical heart of his poetry, the poetic expression itself being the prisoner of pragmatic realities such as health and the proximity of death. Above all, Supervielle embodies the absolute type of expatriate as he is isolated from both *patria* and *pater* 'parent.' It is, therefore, not surprising to find endless concern for a sentimental and existential shelter in his poems, plays, and children's stories.

To begin with a poetics, the book *Le forçat innocent* is finely structured around simple themes, thus easing the assertion of a noteworthy pattern. There are ten sections of unequal length within which a set of polar ideas contrast (e.g., inside-outside, dead-alive, dreamlike-real), and the poet offers to resolve their apparent tensions with a third alternative. Likewise, I will illustrate a threefold pattern in the collection of poems, as it might well be a common design for any form of artistic invention. The first theme introduces the BODY in three distinctive aspects: i) the body turned inside like a prisoner (*Le forçat* 'The Convict,' eight poems), ii) the body like an exteriorizing grasp on life (*Saisir* 'To Grasp,' eighteen poems of dis-

parate lengths), or iii) the body in communication with the afterlife (*Oloron-Sainte-Marie*; eleven poems).⁵ The second theme presents some interesting aspects of lived TIME: through the opposite periods of i) sleep (*Intermittences de la terre* ‘Swinging of the Earth,’ only two poems), and ii) awakening, with its incidental questions (*Ruptures* ‘Break-ups,’ seven poems), followed by a one-poem section (*Peurs* ‘Fears’), and finally iii) the release from a dead-like existence (*Derrière le silence* ‘Behind the Silence,’ six poems). The third theme that I distinguish deals with the WORLD: considering two sections on i) the poet’s real land (*Les Amériques* ‘Americas,’ three poems), and ii) his dream worlds (*Mes légendes* ‘My Legends,’ eleven poems), and finally iii) childhood redeeming mature age (*L’enfant née depuis peu* ‘The Newly Born Child,’ a single poem dedicated to his youngest daughter Anne-Marie).⁶

Throughout the creative process, the heart acts as a physiological prison to the poet’s expression. As such, the introductory poem “Le Forçat” is also stylistically and visually interesting for the mimicking of an electrocardiogram graph: there are regular and irregular stanzas, alternate short and long lines, rhythmic and arrhythmic beats.

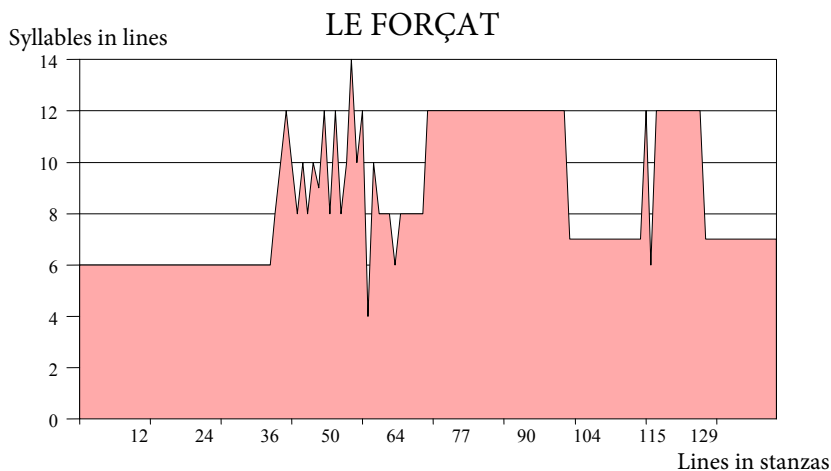


Fig. 2. Visual scheme of an electrocardiogram in the poem *Le forçat*.

The integral versification scheme reproduces cardiac pulsations, much like the famous poem of Victor Hugo, “Les Djinns,” which insinuates alarm and anxiety within the reader (with its alternately growing and declining stanza pattern). From hexameters to free verses, and from classical alexandrines to heptameters, a complete cycle of the heart’s ups and downs is represented in “*Le forçat*.” Supervielle always attended to his untamed heart whose pulsation was of importance to his artistic nature, and Dorothy Blair has corroborated the same observation:

Because Supervielle has listened so long to the uneven rhythm of his own heart, the image of the intermittent beat recurs with great force in his poems and is echoed in the rhythm of the verse itself in the greater part of his poetry. He is aware of this when, in a late poem, he admits: “*Mes veines et mes vers suivent même chemin*,” as if his poetry must perforce echo his own extra-systoles. (55)⁷

Like a prisoner trapped within the walls of a jail (“*Je suis un prisonnier*” ‘I am a prisoner’ [FI 9]), the poet’s words in “*Le forçat*” lie under the control of his heart (“*Mes mains sont surveillées*” ‘My hands are under surveillance’ [10]) as does the blood pulsing through his body (“*Notre sang a besoin de son consentement*” ‘Our blood runs at her command’ [12]). But there is at the same time a complete reversal of the “master-slave” relationship, and the heart, in turn, is besieged by the custodian of the body: “*Nos cœurs toujours visés par une carabine*” ‘Our hearts always under the threat of a rifle’ (11). The relationship is inverted and the heart becomes a caring assistant: “*C’est l’œil d’un domestique attentif, aux pieds nus, / Œil plein de prévenance et profond, sans paupière*” ‘It is the eye of a barefoot, considerate servant, / A very conscientious and deep eye, never blinking’ (11). The jail guardian has become a guardian angel. This is the tide phenomenon that Merleau-Ponty has noted. An eye with “no eyelid” (literal French) is a beautiful and insightful metaphor for the heart: a wide open channel for life pervading outer vision and inner reflection. We also can say that this restless open eye is like a lighthouse keeper: always on the watch while chained to his post. Incidentally, the heart itself is an alternate “*forçat*” and becomes “*La force des beaux jours et notre liberté*” ‘The potency

of the good days and our liberty' (12), since after all a "forçat" is sentenced to "travaux forcés" 'hard labor.' In French, "la force" is an archaic term for the police—"faire intervenir la force"—or the name of certain penal institutions known as "maisons centrales de force." Whether or not the poet actually meant this twist on the language, the proximity of "potency" and "liberty" in the same line shows that poetic invention benefits as much from controlled freedom as from aspiration to freedom. The paradox of the poet's shelter then will appear as the depiction of a happy jail, a "romantic prison," about which critic Victor Brombert has initiated the literary concept in a prominent essay. As Brombert writes, the same dialectic is at stake in the cloistered retreat of a monastery:

Prison ... is also a subject of poetic reverie. The prison wish does exist. The image of immurement is essentially ambivalent in the Western tradition. Prison walls confine the "culprit" [and] victimize the innocent. ... But they also, it would seem, protect poetic meditation and religious fervor. The prisoner's cell and the monastic cell look strangely alike. (3; Fr, 11)

In similar fashion, James Hiddleston says, in the notes of the Pléiade edition of Supervielle's works: "the poem 'Cœur' ... comes right after 'Le Forçat' to expose the essential themes of love and of the prison of flesh" (781; my translation). We may say that Supervielle's heart is both his art's harbor and his hard labor. Next, we read in "Cœur" 'Heart:'

Beau visage de femme,
Corps entouré d'espace,
Comment avez-vous fait,
Allant de place en place,
Pour entrer dans cette île
Où je n'ai pas d'accès (*FI* 15: 23-28)

O lovely woman's face,
And body clothed in space,
How, in your wanderings,
Did you discover this

Island that is closed to me. (Trans. James Kirkup, 33: 23-28)

The heart is concurrently a deserted land that needs to be occupied and the vivid presence of a beloved. On the one hand, it is mostly associated with a black hole (the poet's "régions sauvages" 'darkest regions' [14]) that the hosting person cannot comprehend, or an isolated island to which he or she has no access; but on the other hand, it is the hospitable shelter for an idealized Other.

The link to the second prison, Time, is also made possible through the metaphor of the body. As we already know, Supervielle lost his parents when he was eight months old. In 1926, he decided to go on a pilgrimage to Oloron-Sainte-Marie, his ancestors' hometown. A few poems bound in a booklet were originally released as an early separate collection, later added as a section to the bigger project of *Le forçat innocent*. But from this booklet, the poem titled "Oloron-Sainte-Marie" stands as the major contribution to the section: a tribute to his deceased parents, although it is deprived of extreme pathos and subjectivity in that poetic manner. The poem was also dedicated to the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke whom Supervielle had befriended for a short while and who died the same year.

Comme du temps de mes pères, les Pyrénées écoutent aux portes

Et je me sens surveillé par leurs rugueuses cohortes.

Le gave coule, paupières basses, ne voulant pas de différence

Entre les hommes et les ombres,

Et il passe entre les pierres

Qui ne craignent pas les siècles

Mais s'appuient dessus pour rêver. (FI 49: 1-7)

.

Ah comment apaiser mes os dans leur misère,

Troupe blafarde, aveugle, au visage calcaire,

Qui réclame la mort de son chef aux yeux bleus

Tournés vers le dehors ?

Je les entends qui m'emplissent de leur voix sourde.

Plantés dans ma chair, ces os,

Comme de secrets couteaux
Qui n'ont jamais vu le jour (*FI* 51-52: 54-61)

As in the times of my fathers, the Pyrenees listen at the doors
And I feel myself under the surveillance of their rough troops.
The mountain stream flows, eyelids lowered, not wanting a difference

Between men and shadows
And runs among the stones
Which don't fear the centuries
But lean on them to dream. (39, 1-7)

.

Ah, how pacify my bones in their misery,
Pale troop, blind, chalky-faced,
Who call for the death of their chief with the blue eyes
Turned toward the outdoors?

I hear them as they fill me with their muffled voices,
Planted in my flesh, these bones
Like secret knives
That have never seen day. (41-43, 54-61)

What remains here, after the poet removed excessive intimate descriptions, is the quintessential fleeting of time, frozen in moments of spiritual communion and perceived as transitory lives. These lines and those that follow still make productive allusions to the universe of penal servitude and imprisonment. Thus we notice the communal “chalky face[s]” (I. 55) and the recurrence of “stones” (I. 5) reminiscent of a quarry penitentiary, a world of confinement with “muffled voices” (I. 58) and a “blind, pale troop” (I. 55) of convicts who “have never seen [the light of the] day” (I. 61) but whose pensive eyes are “turned toward the outdoors” (I. 57). And so within a common captivity, the eyes share with the living outside the body whereas the bones are among the dead—or are rather buried alive with them. The bones are ultimately compared to inmates detained in the body-cage and deprived of light; they live an underground existence and aim at excavating the flesh to a way out, with “secret knives” (I. 60). Subsequently, the sharp bones are also evocative of

hosted or hostage ghosts, the link to the author's parents and ancestors. All through the poem and book, Time could appear synonymous with death. However there is no morbidity. Even though the poet acknowledges fetters and chains, the mountain stream flows from past to present, between the dead and the living ("les hommes et les ombres" [I. 4]), like a source of rejuvenating blood. Critic Albert Béguin speaks of Supervielle's poetics as a bridge between the worlds of past and future: "elle met tout l'univers extérieur dans l'homme, y retrouve aussi un peuple d'aïeux, un cortège de figures ancestrales, que chaque personne mène avec elle-même de la naissance à la mort" 'it encapsulates the whole exterior universe within man and there meets with a host of ancestors, a procession of elderly faces, that everyone takes along from birth to death' (58). In this context, the picture of the poet reproduced on the front page is very characteristic of a phenomenological poetics, though unintentional. Supervielle holds his hand on a cherubim child whose own hand lies over a skull—thus marking the bond from infancy to death, from body to time-set decay—and this juvenile figure has his foot on a ball that could well represent a globe: the world. This cycle is indicative of a semiosis that embraces all images of the poet's heart.

The last of the three poetic prisons, which I call the "world," can be perceived in the conclusive cosmological sections of the collection, with specific titles such as *Les Amériques* and *Mes légendes*. For instance, in the first poem, "Métamorphose" 'Metamorphosis,' the American continent is also associated with a penal colony since it is described as a stony limb severed from its statue and pedestal, deprived of relationship with the body, the same way a prisoner is parted from his human community.

Amérique devenue
Cette faible main de pierre
Séparée d'une statue. (FI 95: 1-3)

America, now like
That weak stony hand
Severed from a statue.

Here again, it is not easy to affirm whether the big land is made the prisoner of the poet or the poet himself the prisoner of the land. For he says: “Je te regarde et te serre / Entre mes mains un moment” ‘I look at you and seize you / In my hands for a while’ (II. 4-5), and two stanzas below, he laments the two coasts of America as if he were nostalgically part of “son grand corps dans le vent” ‘her big body in the wind’ (I. 12) whose legs would encompass both oceans. No wonder, in fact, as the poem is called ‘Metamorphosis’! We also have to remember the wrenching dilemma within the poet born of two distant cultures. For finite individuals plunged in an unrestricted world it is crucial to define the limits. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard speaks of the cure, but also the lure, of escapism: “To make inside concrete and outside vast is the first task, the first problem, it would seem, of an anthropology of the imagination. But between concrete and vast, the opposition is not a true one (*pas franche*)” (215; Fr, 194). In the theme of the “happy jail,” the individual who confines himself to reach self-knowledge exemplifies that sort of concreteness; on the other hand, vastness is representative of the freedom one can experience outdoors though along with all its puzzlement and constraint. But Supervielle encourages us to overcome that initial stage and pursue a cosmologic exchange between interior and exterior.

Finally, the “Légendes” section of the collection differentiates two distant oxen (from China and Uruguay) in their respective cowsheds and a havenless bird.

Un bœuf gris de la Chine,
Couché dans son étable,
Allonge son échine
Et dans le même instant
Un bœuf de l'Uruguay
Se retourne pour voir
Si quelqu'un a bougé.
Vole sur l'un et l'autre
A travers jour et nuit
L'oiseau qui fait sans bruit
Le tour de la planète
Et jamais ne la touche

Et jamais ne s'arrête. (*FI* 102:1-13)

A grey ox from China,
Lying in his cowshed,
Extends his neck
While at the same time
An ox from Uruguay
Turns around to see
If someone has moved.
He flies over each one
By day and by night
That bird who silently
Circles the Earth
Without ever landing
Without ever pausing.

The inside-outside dialectic of heart and body is replaced in the extended world by night and day, as earlier on by memory and time passing. (One could mention some eloquent later poems such as “Nocturne en plein jour” ‘Nocturne in the Daylight’ in 1938, “À la nuit” ‘To the Night’ in 1947, or “Insomnie” ‘Insomnia’ in 1951). Those two oxen in the poem have a shelter while the bird does not, but the former live in a restricted space and time without truly communicating with each other whereas the latter is free to fly from one to the other without, however, enjoying any rest. Béguin writes: “La créature humaine, dans la poésie de Supervielle, découvre qu’elle est elle-même un monde habité, qu’elle est plus vaste que l’immense donnée sensible” ‘The human creature, in Supervielle’s poetry, realizes that she inhabits a world by herself and she is bigger than the infinite tangible environment’ (55). The interest of our study is also to confirm some interplay within human existence and question the related notion of shelter, resulting from a dire need for safety and self-assertion in the poet’s life. We may notice antagonism within the single notion of refuge: “habité” ‘inhabited’ sounds like “abrité” ‘sheltered’ and, as Béguin expresses it, the “inhabited” hints at a reciprocal relationship whereas the “sheltered” only sees the inside as a form of protection without communicating with the outside.

There is a basic antinomy in many of the poems and it is illus-

trated by the polysemous French word *hôte*, meaning alternatively the hosting person and the hosted guest. In the second poem of the book, “Cœur,” we find this ambiguity stated from the start:

Il ne sait pas mon nom
Ce cœur dont je suis l’hôte,
Il ne sait rien de moi
Que des régions sauvages.
.
Sous la voûte charnelle
Mon cœur qui se croit seul
S’agite prisonnier
Pour sortir de sa cage. (*FI* 14-15:1-4, 41-44)

He does not know my name,
This heart housed within me,
He is aware only
Of my darkest regions.
.
Under the dome of flesh
My heart, that a prison’s
Solitude makes restless
Struggles to free himself. (Trans. Kirkup, 31, 33: 1-4, 41-44.)

From the beginning, there is no doubt of an ambivalent relationship between heart and body. The heart is condemned to the body-cage, but reciprocally the body is totally dependent upon the heart to function. That is to say, the heart plays a double role in arousing poetic faculties: the poet’s creativity, as one essence of the heart, lives concealed inside bodily functions (almost unnoticed by its holder) while the sensory external world, as its opposite essence, keeps nurturing it with suggestions of freedom. Now we must recall those lines from “Oloron-Sainte-Marie”: “Ne me tournez pas le dos” ‘Don’t turn your back on me’ (*FI* 51), “Nous avons partie liée / Tels l’époux et l’épousée” ‘We are hand in glove / Like the bridegroom and the bride’ (52). A refuge may become at once a prison when one refuses to accept freedom along with its existential restraints and therefore remains in a state of innocent melancholy. Before compre-

hending the notion of refuge, Bachelard asks to identify the origin of the peril:

The fear does not come from the outside. Nor is it composed of old memories. It has no past, no psychology. Nothing in common, either, with having one's breath taken away. Here fear is being itself. Where can one flee, where find refuge? In what shelter can one take refuge? Space is nothing but a "horrible outside-inside." (218; Fr, 196)

In a letter to his friend Béguin, written later in 1938, Supervielle clarifies to some extent his use of the convict theme in the entire book of poems and its oxymoronic title: "Cette poésie est le contraire d'une tentative d'évasion. ... Et dans la confusion du monde extérieur et de l'intérieur cela m'a paru poétiquement possible" 'This poetry is the opposite of an escape attempt. ... And in the confusion between outer and inner worlds this appeared poetically possible to me' (*Poèmes* (1939-1941); rpt. in OC 855). We note here a clear rapport with Bachelard's dialectic of "inside-outside." In the middle of the letter, the neologism *apatrier*, as opposed to *repatriate* and connoting an *apatride* outcast resounds like the positive term *appareiller* 'to sail off.' In the same way, the "possible" at the end of the letter demonstrates a capability to reveal an intimate poetry through this confusion of "inside-outside," and as such this poetic "capability" (*possible*) must establish a reminiscent parallel with the "culpability" of the *forçat innocent*.

It appears that we have equated the three prisons of "heart," "time," and "world" with the poet's art. As the critic Christian Sénéchal mentions in his book, *Jules Supervielle, poète de l'univers intérieur*, there are three stages of poetic creativity that partake of perfectly depersonalized and therefore authentic poetry: *inclusion*, *exclusion*, and the synthetic process of *complémentation* (209-15).⁸ Inclusion, he observes, considers the immediate sensitive elements (we live along with), exclusion removes this plain reality (as we feel dissociated from it) in favor of more elusive personal details, and complementation balances the first naturalistic features with the subjective adjustments. Sénéchal demonstrates this theory by displaying the successive versions Supervielle worked out before ap-

proving the final print of “Oloron-Sainte-Marie.” The same process is at work in the entire collection. Thus, we can deduce that “cœur” is definitively inclusive of the body, “temps” takes place outside the flesh and evades it through remembrance, and “monde” is the connector between internal and external prisons. Supervielle’s “heartful” poetry is no longer subjective and limited to the experiences of his narrator since anyone, whether or not at risk with heart problems, can relate to his poetry; indeed, the poet has overcome a very personal concern and has transcended it, expressing it as a universal sentiment—the limitations of living in a body with ethereal aspirations. This threefold technique of depersonalized writing constitutes a creative parallel to the existential stance of the poet subservient to his life contingencies. This manner of accommodating two contradictory notions through the mediation of natural phenomena (here, body metaphors) intriguingly points at the transcendence of “hyletic” sensuous matter and “noetic” intentional act through a “noematic” fusion, such as defined by Edmund Husserl.⁹ The two sections of the book, *Oloron-Sainte-Marie* and *Saisir*, were published separately in 1927 and 1928. Supervielle was probably advancing a crucial reappraisal of his life and poetry so as to bind those sections and add new ones under the common title of *Forçat innocent*. Eventually, the concept of “prison,” as the poet has attempted to show us, must be contingent on the “space” we imagine for ourselves: either the most intimate space—the heart being the most tangible example—or the abstract space of time, or the general notion of space in the surrounding world. These shifting confines of a prison are what the dialectic of inside-outside underscores. The sense of space does not only envelop the body but also develops inside. Failing to consider this aspect of space can, according to Merleau-Ponty, create another type of imprisonment:

Our body and our perception always summon us to take as the centre of the world that environment with which they present us. But this environment is not necessarily that of our own life. I can be “somewhere else” while staying here and if I am kept far away from what I love, I feel out of touch with real life. (*PP* 285-86; Fr, 330)

Jean-Paul Sartre once associated Existentialism to a form of humanism, which, in his dialectical view of “being and nothingness,” limits his thinking to the moral and intellectual spheres. Merleau-Ponty added body consciousness to the conscious mind in *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. Supervielle’s metaphor of the heart is an insightful precedent to Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to phenomenological Existentialism.¹⁰ It would go far beyond this poetical evaluation to expound in detail on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of freedom, so I will reduce his theory to broad concepts relevant to the material of this article.¹¹ What is striking when we read Merleau-Ponty is the use of terms such as “imprisonment” and “grasp” (*saisie*), relative to inner and outer perceptions, reminiscent of Supervielle’s images from *Le forçat* and *Saisir*.¹² Two aspects of the conceptions of freedom proposed by Supervielle and Merleau-Ponty require clarification. Human beings are thinking subjects who are taking part in an alienating objective world; this supports the claim for intersubjectivity “people-things-world” (or “heart-time-world”). If they want to act freely, as “in the world,” their subjective reason (or creative mind) must be “incarnated” in a “body-subject” constrained in time and space (the social and the carnal). In so doing, they must envision themselves as two co-operating entities in order to apprehend their problematic existences. From this, we deduce the phenomenological concepts of body/*Körper* (structure) and flesh/*Leib* (matter): the first one is the kinetic and the seizing whereas the second is the sensing and the reflecting, but both exist as one and indivisible.¹³ Secondly, in phenomenology, even abstraction and feelings are considered essential cultural objects worth studying aside from empirical experience: e.g., skills in math or languages, fear of ghosts or anxiety speak through our bodies prior to any mental realization. And getting away from anxiety seems ineffective since the perceived deficit in a personality will give way to another “psychological” object; better to live with it in lucid osmosis. Our scrutiny of Supervielle’s poetics now attests the relevance of the Husserlian terminology of “hyle,” “noesis” and “noema.” Time is a given object (a pure immanence) we cannot modify; the organic body is another given, but at least we can handle it by listening to its needs; the world (of human society) is a construction of both immanence and transcendence that we can also make our

own by “being-in-the-world.” Those givens may be considered as prisons, and we cannot comprehend them very well—nor can we escape them—through mere psychologism or clinical inquiry.

Phenomenology does not attempt to solve these attitudes of self-imprisonment but it does help us to understand them beneath their appearances. To Supervielle, his heart is all at once the core and the surrounding of his creation, which leads to a never-ending dialog between his freedom of expression and his limited existence. In this regard, he sounds very much like an existentialist writer, and his work keeps a strong relation with Time because of a constant threat of dying or the hope to be reunited with a lost link (his heritage, his deceased parents). Merleau-Ponty is notoriously known for theorizing further the folding of *chair* ‘flesh’ to individual intentional acts and social determinants:

human freedom can never be absolute ... it must be constrained by the nature of the situation in which we find ourselves, including the limitations imposed by our own pasts. This applies not only to the freedom of individuals to shape their own lives, but to the capacity of society as a whole to take a new direction. (Matthews 21)

For the blending of containment and opportunity is precisely “the ambiguity of being-in-the-world,” according to Merleau-Ponty, since such an ambiguity “is translated by that of the body, and this is understood through that of time” (PP 85; Fr, 101).

In 1930, Supervielle could in no way have been exposed to such learned thinking as Sartre’s or Merleau-Ponty’s, but he may have heard of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) whose writings led to existentialist philosophy and who brings us back to freedom, anxiety, and a character akin to the poet’s persona, Hamlet.¹⁴ To Kierkegaard, anxiety is fundamental to existence. He perceives it as coexistent with a desire for freedom when one comes up to a phase of “existential leap.” Although dialectical thoughts allow arbitration between two conflicting choices, there still is that swinging which creates anxiety. It can either be anxiety over good or anxiety over evil, culpability—as exemplified in Supervielle—ultimately concurring with the former and innocence with the latter. As good models

for the *forçat* and a Merleau-Pontian *chair*, a skeptical thinker like Hamlet imprisons himself in righteous revenge, and an ingenuous youth like Ophelia wills herself to dissolve into the raving of love and its distressing agony. Living those situations which we cannot dismiss might then give ground to a feeling of inexorable culpability if we fail to harmonize them. What Sartre has characterized as “being” and “nothingness”—implying stark dualism underneath, what Kierkegaard has identified as an “existential leap” toward a new level of consciousness—leaving behind a past experience, Merleau-Ponty has preferred to call an “existential tide,” constantly moving forward and backward under the lapse of time—alternatively sinking in a sense of guilt and a state of innocence. Our discussion of a tripartite structure of Supervielle’s landmark book, *Le forçat innocent*, points to a closer affiliation with this third ontological standpoint. While considering such statements from the poem “Cœur” as “My heart, that a prison’s / Solitude makes restless / Struggles to free himself,” or “And body clothed in space, / How, in your wanderings, / Did you discover this / Island that is closed to me,” we can see how they illuminate an experience that Merleau-Ponty phrased in the following way:

Sometimes between myself and the events there is a certain account of play, which ensures that my freedom is preserved while the events do not cease to concern me. Sometimes, on the other hand, the lived distance is both too small and too great: the majority of the events cease to count for me, while the nearest ones obsess me. They enshroud me like night and rob me of my individuality and freedom. (PP 286; Fr, 331)

A last poem, “Îles sous le vent” ‘Leeward Islands’ from the section *Derrière le silence*, presents a fine summary to the entire collection and supports our phenomenological perspective:

Mon cœur, si mal blotti dans notre solitude,
L’un à l’autre attachés, nourris d’un même sang,
Mon cœur et mon cerveau, mes ramiers sous le vent,
Retenus à leur toit par une corde rude,
Le toit c’est encore moi et même la maison,

Et même les ramiers qui sont à naître encore
Mais devinent déjà les couteaux de l'aurore,
Palpitants et peureux dans un sommeil sans fond. (92:1-8)

My heart, so poorly ensconced in a common solitude,
Nourished by the same blood and bound to each other,
My heart and brain are my leeward woodpigeons,
Kept to their roof on a rugged line,
I am this very roof and the house too,
And even the woodpigeons not born yet
But already perceiving the knives of the sunrise,
Pulsating and afraid in their eternal slumber.

The islands in the title evoke the line from “Cœur,” “Island that is closed to me” (I. 27). The “eternal slumber” is synonymous with an existence in which human beings can hardly achieve their conscious life. The heart lacks a real haven (*mal blotti*), which echoes Bachelard’s refuge of the intimate space. It shares the same blood with the brain like Merleau-Ponty’s *chair* (sensing and thinking), and they both experience isolation in a joint place (e.g., the two oxen in *Mes légendes*). This constraint, however, liberates the poetic images of the *ramiers* ‘birds’ perching on a rope at the rooftop; the ruggedness expresses the difficulty to articulate ideas in written lines. All three components of heart, brain and birds obviously partake in the poet’s existence and parallel Husserl’s transcendental process. The knives also recall the “inmates-bones” in “Oloron-Sainte-Marie” trying to dig a way out of the body with mixed feelings of anguish and liberation as in a Kierkegaardian mind-set.

Many critics have asked the problematic question of whether *Le forçat* is innocent (assuming “falsely guilty” when still seeing a convict behind the *forçat*). By doing so they have missed the psycho-physiological aspect of this word game, which also addresses our existential perspective. Tatiana Greene initiated an early tendency to emphasize the poet’s sense of guilt, although she had no evidence for her claim. She briefly commented on the poet’s frequent usage of a repentance that he was unable to track down (“sans savoir de quoi” [73]). The “accusation” upon the *forçat* has not been cleared up. Hiddleston even wonders what the indicted charges for the accusa-

tory title are. He points out the phonetic analogy in the “grammar lesson” from the short-story *L’Enfant de la haute mer*: “—êtes-vous capable?—êtes-vous coupable?” ‘are you guilty?’ (18). If we want to equate the two terms, then the poet must be guilty of (mis)using his poetic capability to *domestiquer* ‘pacify’ his inner terrors and *être résigné* ‘surrender’ to his human lot (Hiddleston 775).¹⁵ That would make him inevitably innocent in Merleau-Ponty’s sense. In a well-informed article, John Cranmer spares the defendant, “for his guilt is not real at all, only imagined” (198). But in the end, Supervielle is noted for “perceiv[ing] the world in binary terms” and “reconcil[ing] opposites” (200) while only justified through his imagination. If the early premise hinted at an existential stance: “a rock becomes the existential symbol of the poet’s eventual non-existence” (197), then the trial has led to a dead-end. To supplement the preceding line of inquiry, this essay has presented novel assumptions.¹⁶ Poetry mingles everything “inside-outside” and the inner life may be the common essence that shares with the world, while, paradoxically, the external solicitations engage with the mechanical commands of the body/structure. The *forçat* is not accountable for any inexplicable crime: only he is forced to dwell and live inside a body! Through the allegory of his poetic prisons Supervielle teaches us a valuable lesson. By giving in to our private restraints, deeply embedded in ourselves, we can recapture secret feelings and become freer from external limitations. To solve the inner fears and guilt of his *forçat*, Supervielle has declared a forceful bondage between body and being and has valued this bond as an innocent, poetic act of existence.

Notes

1 All translations of Supervielle’s poems are mine unless otherwise noted.

2 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 285 (French, 330). When the critical works are available in translation the citations come from the English versions, with page references to the original French (Fr); as for non-translated works the English translations are mine. Pagination of poems and breaking of sections follow the paperback edition “Poésie/Gallimard.” I wish to acknowledge the valuable help of my friends and colleagues, Drs. Ashlee Headrick, Sarah Jourdain, and Neal McTighe, at different stages in my article.

3 Both childhood episodes are narrated in “Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port,” from Supervielle’s remembrance in *Boire à la source* 17-19. Cf. also in the Preface to the

Pléiade volume by Michel Collot (OC x-xi).

4 His physiological frailty turned out to be a “physiological idiom” as exposed in Peter Low’s article, “The Physiological Idiom in the Poetry of Supervielle.”

5 We have the transcription of a 1951 radio show (OC 769): “il n’y a pas dans ce recueil que la prison du poète forçat de lui-même, il y a aussi la prison de l’amour dans ‘Saisir’ et la prison de la mort dans ‘Oloron-Sainte-Marie’” ‘in this collection there is not only the prison of the self-convicted poet, there is also the prison of love in “Saisir” and the prison of death in “Oloron-Sainte-Marie”

6 It is of great benefit to read the “Notice” (OC 773-75) for the primitive structure and argument of the book.

7 The quote is from the collection *1939-1945* (1946), in OC 461; the translation could be “My veins and my verses follow the same path.” Physicians and pathologists are important in Supervillian scholarship. The famous surgeon and renowned Mallarmé scholar, Henri Mondor, is the recipient of a dedication (“L’Homme,” OC 495); the neurologist Thierry Alajouanine received the same (“Les Nerfs,” OC 498) for treating Supervielle’s anxiety; another physician, Maurice Guillaume, related to a cousin-sister, is honored in two instances; eminent practitioners are often invited to sit on the jury for the Supervielle poetry prize.

8 Sénéchal draws this phenomenological terminology from a little known Austrian philosopher, Rudolf-Maria Holzapfel (1874-1930).

9 The terminology is expounded in *Husserliana*, vol. 3, 192-96. For a handy definition, see Zahavi:

The stream of consciousness contains two different components: 1) a level of non-intentional sensuous content, be it visual or tactile sensations, sensations of pain, nausea, and so forth. Husserl speaks of “*hyle*” ‘sensuous matter’ or simply *hyletic* matter; 2) an intentional dimension of animating or meaning-giving components. Husserl speaks of “*morphe*” ‘intentional form,’ but also and more frequently of *noesis* or of *noetic* component. Whereas both of these components are immanent to the act, the transcendent, constituted correlate is now called the *noema*. (57-58)

10 Merleau-Ponty refutes Sartre’s ideas in *Phenomenology of Perception* 434-ff; Fr, 497-ff. Monika Langer gives a useful evaluation of Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s conceptions of freedom. Her conclusion inclines toward Merleau-Ponty’s views, which sounds very much like the forms of commitments Supervielle has envisioned in his book of poetry: “Our past, our temperament and our environment are aspects of the total psychological-historical structure which we are, and it is thanks to this structure that we can be free at all” (147).

11 For a comprehensible and concise introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s works

and thinking, I refer the reader to the fine study by Eric Matthews, in which I have found a good deal of straightforward analyses.

12 A note by Gabriel Bounoure has noticed virtually the same similitude. While this critic cherishes “this figure made captive by innocence and who will, by innocence, strive to escape” (487) he discerns, in “Saisir,” “the very being hidden behind appearances [= phenomena] of beings” (488; my translation and addition).

13 The Merleau-Pontian concept of “*chair*” ‘flesh’ comprises both the inside and the outside of the corporeal space; read in *The Visible and the Invisible* “The Intertwining—The Chiasm:” “We must not think the flesh from substances, from body and spirit—for then it would be the union of contradictories—but we must think it, as we said, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being” (147; Fr, 184).

14 Supervielle might indeed have heard of Kierkegaard from the great Spanish philosopher and philologist, Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), who was an avid reader of the Danish thinker. Supervielle met Unamuno in 1922, in Salamanca (Spain), and again during his political exile in 1924, in Paris (see Paseyro 126-28). I recommend the book by Michael Bielmeier, *Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, and Existential Tragedy*. The case is not isolated in recent scholarship; see also Asli Tekinay, “From Shakespeare to Kierkegaard: An Existential Reading of *Hamlet*.” “Hamlet is the model of the existential man who lives in a symbolic exile, alienated from others” (119).

15 My choice of words, ‘pacify’ and ‘surrender,’ tries to transpose the kind of analogy that the original French intended (to break in someone) and provides the essence of Hiddleston’s idea: “domestiquer” truly means ‘to tame’ and “être resigné” literarily reads as ‘give in.’

16 Most critics have stressed the oxymoron “forçat innocent” in the sense of guilt, either imagined awareness or existential anxiety, without considering a phenomenological bend: the “forçat” gains unexpected force in his prison, as Brombert has shown in his essay; this prison is also a shelter in Bachelard’s point of view; and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception reveals the invisible behind the visible.

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