

*The 5 o'clock Man (Extract) :*

« Above all, don't listen to those who say it and repeat it! » He could have easily gone on working a little longer, but you can't fool around with the seventeenth century. The Bibliothèque Nationale, that distinguished public institution founded by Cardinal Richelieu, had extremely strict schedules. The first bell, indicating the quarterhour before five o'clock, had just sounded, so, like all the other readers Paul Béhaine had resigned himself to collecting his things and handing in his books at the central window. Some people had quickened their step in order to overtake those overhead of them, like unruly schoolboys too impatient to wait in line or fearful of being punished for not obeying instructions on the spot. The fact is, closing time was irremediably set at five o'clock in the evening.

Paul Béhaine took the rue Vivienne, crossed the Palais-Royal gardens and walked past the Comédie-Française as far as Place Colette. Would he take the bus, telling himself, like Colette's own little Claudine in Paris, "Here comes the Pantheon-Courcelles, peaceable and zigzagging" – in short, leap aboard a Parisian omnibus? No. A walk would be more likely to clear his mind. He made for the Pont des Arts and leaned on the guardrail as he contemplated the crowd around him. His gaze swept over his contemporaries: tourists out for a good time, hyped-up Parisians leaving work while others quietly walked their dogs, searching for some small patch of grass.

It would be untrue to say that he no longer gave a thought to what had been occupying his mind since this morning, yet many of the words of his day, painted or handwritten, were beginning to fly away, like so many autumn leaves scattered by a sudden gust of wind. You can take the metaphor or leave it, but on reflection it did not strike him as ridiculous – on the contrary, it seemed to him rather apt. That's it, he told himself, now be an atom among atoms once again, one passerby among the many: lift up your nose, sniff the air, walk let your fancy fly free and relax. Come on, don't hate yourself for not going on working.

The air was borne by a cool breeze, the Seine languidly drawing to itself the last rays of this autumn late afternoon, while overhead the clouds were fighting bizarre duels with the playful wind. Sensitive to the Parisian panorama, Paul thought of Impressionist paintings while mentally greeting Apollinaire, who loved to stroll along the two banks. His mind freer now, he did not immediately notice the person approaching him. He only paid him attention when he heard these few words, whispered confidentially rather than spoken aloud: "Don't listen to those who say it and repeat it!"

The man's face was marked by two large parentheses around the mouth, which was overhung by a bushy mustache, the forehead marked by a thick lock of white hair. He took a watch from his vest pocket and grimaced:

"Clearly one cannot always be exact, but what can you do? Words and time have not always been good bedfellows. We must resign ourselves to the idea the inexactness is part of this world and is even one of its constituent parts. Despite my lifelong passion for mathematics, I still cling to the conviction that sometimes a little disorder is necessary, and I shall stand by my conviction. As the American poet Philip Freneau said: 'In spite of all the learned have said, I still my old opinion keep'. I am indeed persuaded that great catastrophes come from too much precision, and that the freedom on which we can still pride ourselves in this

world of madmen must benefit from a few salutary and liberating inaccuracies. Do you not share this opinion, you, learned, spirit whose conscience suggests you should spread your daydreams all over the world?"

Paul was not really surprised by these unusual words, as we believe we have already indicated, the experience of the moment could never care him—now, even less than at another time. The solid power of reason cracks, happily, when reverie flows free. This last sentence does not constitute a theory but suggests, in somewhat pompous terms, that Paul Béhaine was sufficiently weary not to be surprised when an unknown person addressed to him remarks to which, in ordinary times, he would have paid only the most distracted attention. This late-afternoon hour, in fact, sanctioned the impulsive, the improbable, and argued for the discontinuous. If he had seen Moby Dick blowing beneath the Pont des Arts or a giant squid clasping a bateaumouche with its enormous tentacles before dragging it down to the riverbed, he would not have taken offense in the least, convinced in that suspended-in-time moment that every creature, be it man, whale or cephalopod, has the right to live its life as it sees fit. Thus it was that, in order to keep up the thread of the story, and encouraged by a silence that he interpreted as an invitation to continue, his neighbor did in fact continue.