

Aristide of *Le Figaro*

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By

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5615-0

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5615-7

In loving memory of my husband Peter
(Thomas Peter Hill 1916-2005)

Aristide of *Le Figaro*



Aristide at Coye-la-Forêt in 1986

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FOREWORD

ARISTIDE OF *LE FIGARO*

The publication of this book has been timed to coincide with the twenty-fifth anniversary of Aristide's death. Maurice (Aristide) Chapelan was born on 1 January 1906 at Valence (Drôme) and died on 14 March 1992 at Deuil-la-Barre (Val d'Oise), barely 30 kilometres from his home at Coyela-Forêt (Oise).

The book is intended for all who know and love the French language—students and teachers alike—especially those who appreciate its innate clarity and precision and perhaps despair when they discern too rapid a change in its written or spoken form. The work of Aristide, *chroniqueur du langage*, sheds light on the state of the French language during the latter decades of the twentieth century.

From my schooldays I have been a passionate Francophile. One of my main ambitions in life was to speak and write perfect French and to teach others to do the same. In my desire to achieve such perfection I seemed blessed from the beginning. At primary school I was taught the mechanics of language—parts of speech, sentence structure and clause analysis—and at home I was privileged to have a father who was a gifted linguist and sound grammarian, who spoke excellent German and Spanish and loved the English language: he encouraged me in my endeavours. At the Hull High School for Girls, Tranby Croft, my *professeur de français* was a well-read, cultured Frenchwoman, who taught me for six years before her retirement and return to France in 1960. We wrote to each other regularly and met frequently until her death in the 1980s. She was fond of me on account of my love of her language and my linguistic ability.

Mademoiselle Marguerite Canel, born at Sées (Orne) in the closing years of the nineteenth century, had contacts in Paris through whom she found *correspondantes* for us all. The pen-friend allotted to me, Michèle Guilhem, was a perfect choice and became a life-long friend. Michèle was an only child. Her father, Jean, a teacher of *français-latin-grec*, was as a young man of 38 in 1956 already *proviseur* of a *lycée* in Paris. Among his many activities he wrote a weekly column, *Université Jeunesse*, for *la Dépêche du Midi*; Jean would eventually become *Directeur du Centre*

National de documentation pédagogique. Michèle's mother, Thérèse, was a successful judge, destined to become one of the highest-ranking *magistrates* at the *Cour de Cassation*. Both were *décorés de la Légion d'honneur* and Jean received the *Palmes Académiques*. Despite their undoubted education, neither knew more than a few words of English: Jean spoke German and Thérèse had studied Spanish. Although Michèle often wrote to me in English, she usually preferred to speak French, saying « Je m'exprime mieux dans ma langue ».

Jean and Thérèse, both born in the Tarn, welcomed me warmly and treated me as a second daughter. I stayed with them every summer at Cordes-sur-Ciel (Cordes en Albigeois—Tarn) and often at their apartment in Paris. The linguistic and cultural experiences I thus enjoyed with the Guilhem family were infinitely more profitable to me than the undergraduate years I spent in Regent's Park, at Bedford College, University of London, in the early 1960s, pleasant though they were.

My ambition was gradually being realised, thanks to Marguerite Canel and her choice of penfriend for me—Michèle—who, with her parents and grand-parents, became my French family, all of them dearly loved and now sorely missed.

Whenever I found myself in France I enjoyed reading the *chroniques du langage*, those in the provincial newspaper, *La Dépêche du Midi*, as well as those in the national press, especially *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*. Finding *Le Monde* somewhat austere and forbidding, I had always preferred *Le Figaro* and read it avidly. Later, when my husband and I stayed on the Côte d'Azur, I discovered Alain Guillerrou's *chronique* in *Nice-Matin*.

In 1986 I completed a dissertation on Aristide and his *chroniques du langage* ("Aristide of *Le Figaro*") for my MA degree at the University of Hull. During my research for that work I had become so engrossed in the *genre* that I decided to pursue my study of it in greater depth: hence my PhD thesis on Aristide and the *chroniques du langage* in the French press, which has inspired this book.

Not only did I have the privilege of corresponding with Aristide and visiting him between 1986 and 1991 but, through him, I also had the honour of meeting some of those illustrious *Académiciens*, of whom Aristide and other *chroniqueurs* had so often written and many of whose books I had read. On account of my continuing work on the *chroniques de langue* I was invited to attend the special session of the *Académie française* held on Thursday 26 May 1994, in celebration of the 300th anniversary of its *Dictionnaire*. Of the *Académiciens* I met, Jean Dutourd

was the wittiest and the most charming. He was a great admirer of Maurice Chapelan.

Although these days fewer newspapers in France publish weekly language articles, the Canadian press has more than amply compensated for this deficiency. The dwindling number of such *rubriques* in France would have surprised Aristide. Faithful to the precepts of Grevisse, he often recommended *Le Bon Usage*, calling it in *Le Figaro littéraire* of 8-14 September 1969 *vade-mecum des grammairiens*. He hinted humorously to his readers that, if people consulted that book, he and his *confrères* would soon be redundant. On 9 January 1989, wishing his readers a New Year, *bonne et heureuse*, he asked rhetorically:

Est-ce à dire sans fautes de français? Ce serait ma mort, ressemblant dans mon boulot aux médecins et aux marchands d'armes ... Aucun risque. Dieu merci!

Aristide had already remarked on 20 December 1985 that, despite the profusion of dictionaries, grammars and reference books, marketed by publishers,

[...] pour réduire, dirait-on, les pauvres grammairiens dans mon genre au chômage,

there was little likelihood of his ever losing his job: *Dieu soit loué, ce n'est pas demain la veille.*

Yet, who would have believed that within another couple of decades the situation could have changed so much?

Having given an account of how I came to be so interested in French grammar and the *chroniques du langage*, it is now my great pleasure and privilege to offer you, the reader, a glimpse into the gifted man, Maurice Aristide Chapelan, and his work.

Bonne lecture!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Shortly after Aristide's death in March 1992 I was privileged to lead a seminar at the University of Hull, where I found enthusiasm and support for the research I had so far completed in preparation for my doctoral thesis.

Among those present on that occasion, I wish to thank Professor Pauline Smith, Professor Brian Rigby and Mr Douglas Jamieson for their positive reception and approval of my project.

I completed the thesis in November 1993 and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in June 1994.

INTRODUCTION

ARISTIDE OF *LE FIGARO*

Although my study is primarily of Aristide's *chroniques de langue* in *Le Figaro*, frequent reference will be made to the work of his predecessors and contemporaries—grammarians and fellow-*chroniqueurs*, at *Le Figaro* and elsewhere, as well as prominent authors, including members of *l'Académie française*, such as Jean Dutourd and Jacques Laurent.

Maurice Aristide Chapelan became Aristide of *Le Figaro*, the celebrated newspaper grammarian, on 1 April 1961, having worked for *Le Figaro* and *Le Figaro littéraire* since 1948. His language articles appeared on a weekly basis for over thirty years, until shortly before his death. During the period 1971 to 1986, when there was no *Figaro littéraire*, Aristide's *chronique de langue* appeared in *Le Figaro* itself, as was the case in later years when he wrote an extra article during the summer holidays. Certain writers, such as Harmer (1979: 11) and Cellard (1982b: 54), did not realise that, when *Le Figaro littéraire* ceased publication, Aristide's *chronique de langue* was simply transferred to the main newspaper. On the return of *Le Figaro littéraire* in 1986, this time as a weekly *supplément* rather than an independent *hebdomadaire*, Aristide's article was naturally moved back to its former place.

In my quest for more information on French *chroniqueurs* and their history, I wrote personally on several occasions to Alain Guillermou, both at his Paris address and at *Nice-Matin*, and to Pierre Bourgeade at *Le Figaro*, but to no avail. Other letters addressed to French newspapers, rather than to individuals, with the exception of *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde* and *Nice-Matin*, were left unanswered. Of several sent to Monsieur Quemada at the *Institut national de la langue française*, part of the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* in Nancy, only one received a reply, which gave me the title of a book, *Le Roseau vert : chroniques de langage*, by Albert Doppagne (1985) which was unfortunately concerned solely with the Belgian press and was in any case out of print. He also mentioned two or three *mémoires*, again relating to *chroniques* in the Belgian press, written by students at the Catholic University of Louvain. Very little appeared to have been written about the *chroniques de langue* in the French press.

After long and painstaking searches through the Modern Language Association of America publications database, exhaustive explorations at the *Bibliothèque nationale* and the *Centre Pompidou*, between 1985 and 1992, and extensive study of available works of reference, I found the following: the two volumes of Quemada's own *Bibliographie des chroniques de langage* (1970 and 1972), covering the period 1950 to 1970, a *mémoire de fin d'études* by Philippe Commère, a graduate of the *Institut national des techniques de la documentation*, which is little more than a list of the *chroniques de langue* of the early 1960s, and two separate chapters by Jacques Cellard, at the time *chroniqueur* at *Le Monde*, the first entitled *Les Normes de la communication informative*, in the periodical *Le français dans le monde* (May-June 1982), and the second bearing the title *Les chroniques de langage*, in the book *La norme linguistique*, edited by Édith Bédard and Jacques Maurais (1983). I myself presented a study of some of Aristide's *chroniques* as a Master of Arts dissertation at the University of Hull in 1986 and in 1994 submitted an in-depth account of the work of Aristide and some of his predecessors and contemporaries as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at that same university. Despite the paucity of work devoted to the *genre*, references to language articles appear quite often, for example in the writing of Sverker Bengtsson (1968), André Martinet (1969), Lewis Charles Harmer (1979) and Nicol C W Spence (1976), and, as would be expected, in the work of those who are themselves *chroniqueurs*, among whom we find René GeorGIN, Marcel Cohen, Robert Le Bidois, Jacques Cellard and Maurice Chapelan himself.

Since the man and his work are inseparable, whether as the *chroniqueur*, Aristide, the prose writer, poet and literary critic, Maurice Chapelan, or the author of *romans galants*, Aymé Dubois-Jolly, I consider it both useful and desirable to offer some personal glimpses of Chapelan, not only as an author at work in his preferred surroundings but also as a private individual and friend.

My husband and I had the pleasure of meeting Maurice Chapelan on many occasions between July 1986 and September 1991, and I corresponded regularly with him, our letters helping to forge a warm friendship. Apart from his *compagne*, Jeanne Cressanges, I am probably the only person to have had such a deep understanding of this writer, a man who was essentially *solitaire* and as he wrote in his *Amours, Amour* (1967: 57):

Casanier, et de plus en plus. Parce que j'aime à voyager en moi-même et que pour ce genre de voyage on est mieux assis chez soi.

I was fortunate in being able to observe him at work and honoured to be privy to some of his innermost thoughts. It is hoped that the personal insights contained in this book will not only enhance appreciation of Maurice Aristide Chapelan as a writer but also shed light on his *modus operandi* as a *chroniqueur de langue*.

Having already learned something of Aristide and *les chroniques de langue* in the French press through my previous studies and having met him on numerous occasions, I naturally wished to extend the scope of my work, first as an academic pursuit and then as a more public acknowledgment of Aristide's contribution to the literary and linguistic world.

Chapter One of this book concerns Aristide—Maurice Chapelan—the man and his work, *l'homme et l'œuvre*, his life, character and reputation, showing how he came to love and respect the French language.

In Chapter Two, although the emphasis is still on Aristide, I refer to the main newspaper grammarians since Abel Hermant (*Monsieur Lancelot* of *Le Figaro* and *Le Temps*, the forerunner of *Le Monde*) and mention other predecessors and contemporaries, including also his principal successor, Claude Duneton. At the same time I endeavour to establish the nature and purpose of the *chroniques de langue*, which undoubtedly reflect both the state of the language and the current linguistic preoccupations.

Aristide often appears to be leading—or at least supporting—some campaign or other, for instance against the use of *nommer* instead of *nommer* and the frequent confusion of *envahir* and *investir*, and is sometimes perceived as waging a war by many of his readers, who repeatedly call on him to intervene in the battle. Most of his correspondents, however, simply wish him to remind them of long-forgotten rules or to settle a linguistic argument.

It might be tempting to assume that Aristide's *chroniques* consist of his own ideas and that he falsely claims to have received letters from readers, requesting him to answer queries, when all the time the questions are of his own invention. I can personally refute any such assumption, having seen Aristide's voluminous post from readers and observed how, more often than not, he chose to base his *chroniques* on items from their letters. Bourgeade's readers likewise determined much of the content of his *chroniques* in *Le Figaro Magazine*, as is clear from the letters he published in his *Chroniques du français quotidien* (1991).

Also in Chapter Two I consider the manner of composing columns of the *genre*, as well as the titles of the *rubriques*, the pseudonyms of their authors and the kinds of metaphor common to most *chroniqueurs*. I shall note, too, the differing linguistic attitudes of *chroniqueurs*, from the extreme purism of the conservative Abel Hermant to the almost subversive laxism of the

communist scholar Marcel Cohen, and we shall see to what extent the stance of the *chroniqueur* conforms to the character of the newspaper for which he writes, and whether, for example, he will be more or less likely to defend the norm and proscribe, prescribe or describe *l'usage*. The stance of the *chroniqueur* will, of necessity, reflect the interests and attitudes of both the publication for which he works and the readers for whom he writes, those who, indirectly, pay his salary.

The first two chapters are followed by consideration of some of the main concerns of the *chroniqueurs de langue*; hence Chapter Three deals with linguistic rules and norms and provides a brief survey of the history of the concept of *le bon usage*, with particular reference to Vaugelas. Chapter Three considers also the seminal work of Grevisse, *Le Bon Usage*, and shows how Aristide and most other *chroniqueurs* uphold and promote the accepted norms, their desire being to defend the French language by controlling the pace of change, if not rejecting change itself. In this respect they may be regarded as working hand in hand with *l'Académie française* and such organisations of guardianship as the Association *Défense de la langue française*.

Subsequent chapters concern spelling, especially the vexed question of reform, and I examine Aristide's apparently inconsistent views on the subject. As Cellard confirms in « Les chroniques de langage » (in Bédard et Maurais 1983: 660) and as I myself have observed in Aristide's articles, spelling reform is a recurring theme. I seek to assess the significance of Aristide's particular contribution to the debate of 1990 on the proposed *Rectifications* and observe how he holds up to ridicule the perpetrators of spelling mistakes in official documents.

In the following chapters I consider the domain of syntax and such matters as tense sequence, *la concordance des temps*, and the use of the imperfect and pluperfect subjunctive. Again we shall see how Aristide highlights the points he is raising by making fun of people in authority who commit elementary errors. Agreements of all types will be treated separately, since they belong to two domains: that of spelling proper, *l'orthographe d'usage*, and that of grammar, *l'orthographe grammaticale*.

Among other matters to be reviewed is lexis, *le mot juste*, where we shall see how Aristide tends to be more exacting about precision in the choice of vocabulary than almost any other aspect of the language. We shall later consider specialist language of various kinds as well as observing the perpetual problems of editorial interference and misprints, especially those appearing in Aristide's *rubriques*, sometimes destroying the sense of the entire column.

Our *chroniqueur* is seen to promote the feminisation of professional titles in the face of strong objection from certain successful career women who write to him, expressing their abhorrence of such feminine forms, wishing to retain the masculine for themselves. Of these correspondents Aristide seems to despair.

As I have sought to establish the uniqueness of Aristide's contribution, it is his perennial humour that has impressed me most strongly. He seems to write his *chroniques* primarily to entertain and amuse his readers, so that his presentation of the points of vocabulary or grammar under discussion will be all the more attractive and palatable and thus more readily assimilated.

Maurice Chapelan's conversation never failed to amuse, peppered as it was with *propos grivois*, based more often than not on *jeux de mots* and *contrepets*: this same type of verbal humour, which as a boy he so admired in his father, is to be found in all his writing, not least in his *chroniques*.

Since Aristide's humour is all-pervading, there is no separate chapter on the topic; nor, in spite of the many occasions on which his readers raised questions on the subject, is there a chapter specifically concerned with pronunciation, since Aristide did not consider himself competent to pass judgment on matters of phonetics. Occasional items of pronunciation are treated, nevertheless, where appropriate, especially where mistakes betray an ignorance of etymology or when they lead to misunderstandings. I include references to the language of prominent media personalities of the day such as Ève Ruggieri, whose spoken word probably had far more impact on the general public than any written usage, given the influence of radio and television.

As my *corpus* I have taken Aristide's later *chroniques* (almost exclusively from the period 1984 to 1992), certain other of his press articles and his published anthology of language articles, *La langue française dans tous ses débats* (1989), covering the period 1961 to 1988.

In order to place Aristide in the context of all *chroniqueurs de langue*, I have referred to the articles of his *confrères*, former and contemporary, especially to the collections published by Marcel Cohen of *L'Humanité*, Jacques Cellard of *Le Monde* and Pierre Bourgeade of *Le Figaro Magazine*. Reference is made also to individual *chroniques* written by Alain Guillerrou of *Nice-Matin* and Denis Slakta of *Le Monde*.

Finally, I believe that the conclusions to be drawn from this book will indicate both the purpose and the significance of the *chroniques de langue* in the French press and will explain, if only in part, the reasons for the gradual decline in the *genre* since the 1970s. Above all, I hope to have been able to evaluate the particular contribution of Aristide, for so long

chroniqueur at *Le Figaro*, whose influence on the French language was, I feel sure, not inconsiderable.

It will be seen that all quotations from the conversation or the works of Maurice Chapelan or from the *chroniques* of Aristide, including those I have indented, appear in italics.

CHAPTER ONE

ARISTIDE : *L'HOMME ET L'ŒUVRE*

Personal Reminiscences

There being no reply to the letter I had sent to Aristide in October 1985, I wrote to him again in January 1986, enclosing a photograph and a *curriculum vitae*. He replied charmingly, both privately (23 January 1986) and publicly (10 February 1986), using a degree of poetic licence when he informed his readers:

Surprise bien agréable pour mon quatre-vingtième anniversaire (1^{er} janvier) : une lettre de femme—et d'Angleterre.

The letter to him, addressed to *Le Figaro*, had not in fact been posted until 5 January. Aristide's personal reply was to be the beginning of a long correspondence, all the more precious as Chapelan states in his *Lire et écrire* (1960: 200) and elsewhere that he seldom, if ever, wrote letters.

Our first telephone conversation took place on 19 August 1986, the day before our meeting. When I introduced myself and asked whether he was Madame Cressanges the peals of laughter were almost deafening. He sounded exactly like a woman: he knew it and took advantage of it, saying that it made life easier for him when ordering a taxi or flowers or buying a theatre ticket. He was in fact rather difficult to understand on the telephone, as not only did he speak very rapidly and in a high-pitched yet slightly husky voice but also laughed and joked all the time.

As Jean Dutourd wrote of Aristide in his letter to me (11 April 1992):

Nous nous téléphonions de temps en temps et j'entendais toujours avec joie sa voix perchée, ses rires et ses plaisanteries grivoises.

In the flesh, his voice, though light—*j'ai la voix couverte, et, j'ajoute, la voix seulement*, as he commented in his *Radioscopie* programme (28 May 1975)—was unmistakably masculine.

We therefore first met on 20 August 1986, following a correspondence of some eight months, during which time he had sent me copies of his books. Subsequent visits to him were made at least once a year from 1987 to 1991. On each occasion two or three meetings were arranged. Sometimes Jeanne Cressanges would prepare a meal for us all, though at other times we ate at one of the restaurants in Coye-la-Forêt, where Aristide regaled the proprietors with stories of how he spied for the Russians and had a mistress in England. From 1990, however, when his health began to deteriorate seriously, he preferred to eat at home, since by then he could tolerate only the plainest of food.

Looking forward to a renewal of our acquaintance, Aristide wrote to me on 11 June 1987:

Le temps est proche où votre visite espérée nous permettra de rire encore ensemble, si ce sacré merdier d'univers n'a pas fait explosion d'ici-là. Le Créateur, s'il en est un, c'est une ORDURE. Comme aurait dû l'écrire Racine, dans ATHALIE:

*Aux petits des humains il ôte la pâture
Et sa rigueur s'étend à toute la nature.*

Cela pourra vous être un inépuisable sujet d'homélies dominicales. Amen.

The quotation from Racine, a pastiche of *Athalie* (11.7. 647), the correct form of which he uses in *Le confesseur confessé* (Aymé Dubois-Jolly, 1981: 202), is typical of his irreverence and provides a useful illustration of his refusal to believe in a deity who allows evil of every kind, sickness, misery and calamities, such as floods, earthquakes, drought and famine, to befall his creatures.

Despite his poor health, Aristide had a long life. As a child and young man he had been so seriously ill with asthma that he had not been expected to live; indeed it was a matter of constant surprise and delight to him that he had reached the age of eighty. His sight was poor, owing to cataracts and blocked tear ducts, and he had a long-standing prostate problem as well as a spastic colon. He prided himself on the fact that much of his medication was of his own choosing: herbal teas, infusions of various seeds and peppermint indigestion tablets.

Aristide could not tolerate extremes of temperature and was therefore at his happiest in the spring and autumn. From December to March he was recurrently ill with depression. In his Christmas 1986 greeting he wrote: *C'est ma période de déprime annuelle ...* World events used to depress him: every flood, famine and war he interpreted apocalyptically. Even a harsh winter would make him think of the end of all things, as he wrote to me on 14 April 1988:

J'ai beaucoup pensé à vous durant cet hiver affreux. Si j'avais la foi, je croirais que c'est la fin du monde. Ce ne serait pas une grande perte...

His prostate trouble became much worse in January 1990 and he underwent a prostatectomy at the end of that month at Épinal, where almost all his treatment was to take place, since his friend, Jeanne Cressanges, lived there. He had a further operation in May 1991, when the doctors assured them both that Maurice was not suffering from cancer. He was in fact eventually to die of the secondary effects of that undiagnosed cancer, a disease which became only too apparent to the doctors attending him in November 1991, when Jeanne was informed that he had only a few months to live.

Our final meeting was in September 1991, after which date he was to send me only four more letters, the last being in early December, when he sent Christmas greetings on a card bearing a painting by Grandville with the title « Quand le diable devient vieux il se fait ermite ». This title had added poignancy for me, since Aristide had once jokingly referred to himself in a letter as *le Diable* and had even signed a copy of his self-portrait thus. The Grandville picture, too, was especially meaningful, as it shows the Devil kneeling beneath a crucifix, since, as we know, Aristide was not a believer: he hated the Church and mistrusted all clerics. Apologising for being unable to respond to my request that he should verify some details regarding the history of *Le Figaro*, he wrote as the final paragraph of his card:

J'espère quand même te revoir dans ce monde-ci—ou alors que ce soit en Enfer !

Aristide joked almost to the end of his life, according to Jeanne Cressanges, who, having nursed him for many weeks in Coye-la-Forêt, reluctantly had him admitted to hospital, where she visited him daily until he died. She found my last letter to him lying open at his bedside on the day of his death.

His letters, affectionate and amusing, occasionally expressed care and concern. As he had arranged to have posted to me on 14 March 1989 the very first copy of his published collection of language articles, *La Langue française dans tous ses débats*, he was concerned at receiving no acknowledgment of the parcel, wondering whether my husband and I were both well. He wrote on 18 April:

Il y a tant de troubles du temps et des temps, tant d'horribles catastrophes dans tous les domaines, moi-même ayant été assez souffrant, que j'ai hâte d'être rassuré sur vous.

In fact the book had not arrived, as it had not been sent: Aristide kindly arranged for Bourin to post a copy to me, as a matter of urgency.

Some of his letters contain interesting examples of alliteration and puns, and sometimes include items of original poetry, usually, but by no means always, of the *polisson* type. A copy of the poem dated 29 October 1987 was sent to me by Jeanne after Aristide's death, a copy identical in all respects to the one I had received from Aristide at the time, with the exception of the first line: he had opened with *My dear and great Lady* instead of *My dear and great Mary* and had given it a title: *À une Anglaise*.

There are also differences between the poem he recited and dictated to me in June 1991 and the version sent by Jeanne to *Le Figaro* after his death. The main difference may be explained by the fact that as he grew more aware of the progression of his illness he realised that death could not be far away and added a stanza with a more explicit reference to dying. The longer version is dated 11 December 1991, nine days after he had written the Christmas card in which he seemed to be hinting strongly at his imminent death. The later poem also contains one or two minor changes in vocabulary: for example, *merle* replaces *oiseau*, a substitution affecting the metre. These verses are to be found in the Appendix.

Although always more than happy to recite his poems and to read out his articles, Aristide hated being photographed and recorded; nevertheless I succeeded in taking one or two photographs of him where he is not grimacing. On only one occasion did he allow himself to be recorded and then spoke so softly that his voice is barely audible. He later sent me a cassette-recording of himself reading some of his own poetry, *Quatrains de sable*. Even more surprising than his reluctance to be recorded was his refusal—most of the time—to discuss grammar. In his letter of 26 September 1986 he wrote: *Et n'oubliez plus que je me refuse, avec vous, de parler grammaire !*

Despite this fact, the conversation at mealtimes inevitably turned to matters of language. One day Aristide provoked a discussion concerning the grammatical correctness of such a construction as: *Je nous mets là, mon chéri*, as a hostess might say to her husband when planning the seating for a dinner party. On another occasion the topic concerned interrogative sentences without inversion, dear to Aristide, who frequently asked *C'est quoi, ça ? Tu fais quoi ? Tu vas où ?* When someone complained: « Ce n'est pas français » he replied trenchantly: *Mais si, c'est français, puisque ça se dit ! Il faut que la langue bouge*. He sometimes expressed this kind of tolerance in print, for example in his *chronique* dated 10 September 1990, *Vertes et pas mûres*, when he wrote of « *Tu vas où ?* »:

Eh bien, je ne juge pas cela désastreux et trouve même dans la position inversée de l'adverbe de lieu et du pronom interrogatif une façon de questionner plus pressante. Que presque tout le monde aujourd'hui en use ainsi, la syntaxe française ne s'en porte pas plus mal ...

though such an attitude was not always well received by his regular readers.

Aristide enjoyed discussing religion, and his conversation reflected the Catholic teaching he had received during his schooling, the vocabulary of which he would richly exploit both in speech and in writing, the prime example being his Aymé Dubois-Jolly book, *Le confesseur confessé*.

Maurice Chapelan had kept his mother's crucifix, which hung in his downstairs library, near the side-door leading to the garden. He recounted how it had been found, smothered in lipstick-stained kisses, in her hands after her death. It was the only personal possession of his mother that he had retained. As a child he had revered her and admired her for her literary art, especially for her poetry, but later in life he came to despise her as a vain, hypocritical woman and he considered her writing pretentious. In his father, on the other hand, whom he had feared and hated in his youth, he was later to find much that was worthy of respect. He writes at length about his parents and his relationship with them in his *Mémoires d'un voyou* (1972) and in *Rien n'est jamais fini* (1977).

Although he had been educated in Catholic schools and had been a devout little boy, he had gradually learned to loathe the Church, partly through the rigour of the imposed religious practice, partly on account of the pederastic tendencies of some of the priests and lay masters, whom it had been his misfortune to encounter during his school career, and partly through his own experience of life, which convinced him that the God of the Church, the loving Father who cares for all creation, simply did not exist. He considered that the Church, in disseminating the Christian faith, had interpreted the message of the man Jesus in a disgraceful manner. As he wrote (1967: 71):

J'ai trop de respect pour Dieu—tel qu'il doit être, s'il est—pour croire ce que les prêtres en disent.

Although he believed there was no God he always hoped that there was—*Je souhaite qu'il y ait un Dieu*—but not the God of the Church. He firmly refused to believe in a God who could create a hell and, as he said in reply to one of Jacques Chancel's questions, anyone who could seriously believe in the Devil and hell without believing in God must be mentally disturbed.

Maurice Chapelan, who mocked the Bible and the Church, was amused by our friendship, in view of my role as licensed lay minister (Reader) in

the Church of England, on which subject he was outrageously, though entertainingly, irreverent, and on my other position as church organist. He loved church music, however, including the cassettes of organ pieces, hymns and other items that I recorded for him: they sometimes accompanied him as he wrote. In one of his last letters to me (13 September 1991) he said:

Bientôt 86 ans, c'est lourd à porter, et mon travail en souffre. Mais je rêve, chaque soir, à nos chaleureuses et « savantes » rencontres, en écoutant parfois l'une ou l'autre de tes merveilleuses cassettes.

On the day of our first meeting, Maurice Chapelan had declared: *Je suis anarchiste en tout, sauf en grammaire*, a claim strongly endorsed by Jean Dutourd in his obituary of Aristide, published in *Le Figaro* on 25 March 1992, where he writes: « Il était l'irrespect fait homme, sauf pour deux choses : la grammaire et l'amour ».

Aristide loved the French language and admired all writers who respected its clarity. He spoke with enthusiasm of Paul Valéry, with whom as a fellow-*méridional* he felt a particular affinity, Jacques Chardonne, who had mentioned him in his *Propos comme ça* (1966), Léautaud and Jouhandeau, both of whom he had known well, Max Jacob, whose style he revered, Maine de Biran, the philosopher and diarist, and Joubert, who, in the front rank of *pensée*-writers, was a master of the aphorism, a *genre* dear to Aristide, as his prose works demonstrate. He reminisced, too, about his former colleagues and associates: Bernard Grasset, Bernard Privat, Maurice Noël and, finally, Yves Berger, who had succeeded him at Grasset as *Directeur littéraire*. Among the many foreign writers he admired were John Galsworthy and Cyril Connolly, and he acknowledged the special debt he owed to Lichtenberg, who, as another accomplished writer of aphorisms, had had a major influence on him.

Among his literary friends and acquaintances he included Jean Dutourd, with whom he never tired of bantering, Jean Guitton, whose religious philosophy he could not share but whose writing he admired, Michel Déon, Michel Tournier, Jean-Louis Curtis, whom he knew particularly well through his friendship with Jeanne Cressanges, and Bernard Pivot, whom he held in affection and esteem. He had known Paul Robert, too, who had inscribed a copy of his book *Aventures et mésaventures d'un dictionnaire* (1965): « À Maurice Chapelan, en gratitude et bien cordiale sympathie », and he often spoke of his fellow-grammarians, his *confrères*, especially René Georquin, Alain Guillerrou, Robert Le Bidois, Jacques Cellard (on whose name he punned frequently—*c'est l'art !*) and Pierre Bourgeade.

When he was not regaling his audience with his *gauloiseries* he was giving accounts of his meetings and interviews with celebrities such as Colette, Brigitte Bardot and Grace Kelly, or speaking enthusiastically about the many writers he had known and about their books and, even more so, about his own, his early work, his poetry, his *chroniques de langue* and especially his Aymé Dubois-Jolly books, which he wished to see gracing his book-shelves in an English translation to match the French, German and Dutch versions already there.

He boasted at least three words of his own invention: *petitcoinqner*, found in his *Ni aveugle ni sourd*, on 22 October 1990, *éminable*, which appeared in his *En être ou pas*, on 4 July 1988, and *humoraliste*, a term since used by Philippe Bouvard and others and mentioned to me in his letter of 15 May 1986, defining the kind of man he was:

Vous avez tout deviné de moi : je suis bien un fervent d'humour noir, cette conjuration de l'horreur par le rire, ce que j'appelle un « humoraliste ».

It is therefore unfortunate that Jean Dutourd's tribute to Aristide (*Le Figaro*, 25 March 1992) contains a serious misprint:

Il avait inventé un mot heureux pour se désigner: *amoraliste (sic)*, ce qui, en somme, le peint très bien.

Since in his letter to me of 11 April 1992 Jean Dutourd typed Aristide's name as Maurice Chaplan, it is possible that the mistake was his own, rather than that of the typographer. In any case, the slip is all the more unfortunate in that Aristide had applied the very word *humoraliste* also to Dutourd himself, both in his *chronique* of 24 February 1986, *Capricornus capricornum fricat*, and in his review, signed Maurice Chapelan, on 3 December 1990, of Dutourd's book *Les Pensées de Jean Dutourd*.

The title *Capricornus capricornum fricat* betrays a surprising trait in Maurice Chapelan's character. In August 1986 he spoke to me of the supernatural and the occult, an interest he had developed following the tragic death of his twelve-year-old son, Dominique, in February 1953. He claimed that these beliefs were entirely rational (*j'en ai la preuve*) and in no way conflicted with his religious agnosticism. He had written (1967: 70): *J'appartiens à l'espèce la plus répandue : les agnostiques spiritualistes*. He believed in astrology, extra-sensory perception and spiritualism, writing about his belief in this last in his *Amoralités familiales* (1964: 189-196).

It was surprising, too, to hear such a serious-looking elderly gentleman, intellectual, and, despite himself, of almost military bearing (*je suis anti-militariste !*), bespectacled, slim and erect, sustaining for well over an hour

a flow of *gauloiseries* and anecdotes, most of them his own and nearly all of them based on *jeux de mots*. He joked good-naturedly about his complete baldness: years earlier, finding his hair growing thin, he had decided simply to shave his head, a style he humorously described as *la seule coiffure indéfrisable*.

His trim appearance matched that of his house, at 71 rue Blanche, Coye-la-Forêt, where he had lived since 1951. The old house, with its whitewashed walls and secluded, walled garden, had once belonged to the Church, having been bequeathed to the ecclesiastical authorities by a maiden lady. The Church had sold it to Aristide in 1955, when he could finally afford to buy it, thanks to the legacy he had received from his mother. Maurice Chapelan loved his house and, with characteristic wit, spoke of it as a gift from heaven, as we read (1972: 349): *Autant dire qu'elle me tomba du ciel*. He loved his garden, too, with its flower-beds and mature trees. To encourage birds to visit, he kept the bird-bath full and the bird-table well stocked. Aristide also loved flowers and enjoyed drying and pressing both petals and leaves, making his own pot-pourri and often enclosing a petal or leaf in his letters to me.



Aristide in his garden in 1989

During his full-time professional life in journalism and publishing, when he was not at his *pied à terre* in the rue Carcel, he made his daily return journeys between Coye-la-Forêt and Paris on the suburban train, the RER (Ligne D), running between Orry-la-Ville, two kilometres from his house at