

ON FRANÇOIS GEORGE'S *SILLAGES*

How does one give to all things their just weight? What is so immediately estimable, what so immediately touches us in the writings of François George, is this singular sensibility, this philosophical *tenderness* which enables a gifted intelligence to accede to that kind of privileged intuition whose source must always be a genuine purity of the heart. Yet, we would not be mistaken if we assumed that it is precisely for this reason that François George remains an author, a philosophical intelligence, virtually unknown in the Anglo-Saxon intellectual world. Doubtless, it is our abjection. Because a book such as *Sillages* is the kind of book which can warm our spirit and refresh our intelligence, and it is a book which can provide in a special way an introduction to the author in question.

But, naturally, our Anglo-Saxon culture will find still more to complain about. Philosopher or writer? Because this tension is little tolerated this side of the Atlantic, which is to say that our culture demands that this tension be resolved, and at all costs, come what may. But François George, knowing this tension intimately, does not choose to resolve it, and above all because he adheres admirably to the first model maxim of intelligence, *VIZ* that spirit must not be compromised. However, it *is* above all a *philosophical* intelligence which animates the writing of our author, and this intelligence knows very well how to fulfill the philosophical craft. George's 1976 essay, *Sur Sartre*, and his 1978 meditation on contingency, *La loi et la phenomena*, ably testify to this.

But there is more. Because the moving sensibility of which we speak also exists in relation to (and has as one more of its constituents) a critical and polemical spirit of the very first order, one of great charm and depth. One more reason, then, why it is the essay and not the treatise which has engaged our author. One more reason, then, why our author's works achieve that very special kind of levity in which seriousness and humor find a balance common only to the spirit of maturity, spirit which is always inimical to any and all intellectual corporation and profession. And it is easy to see, therefore, why François George, in authoring a sagacious consideration of the politics of our modernity, has responded so very ably to his critical and polemical special election.

We speak primarily of *Sillages*, however, a book to warm, and a book which can bring, rare and wonderful thing, solace to those who weary of an epoch, doubtless, no more crass than previous ones, but which certainly is an epoch of unremitting *noise*. Because genuine intelligence moves quietly, albeit not always serenely. *Sillages*. Furrows. In the wake of Sartre, in the wake of Merleau-Ponty, in the wake of Jankélévitch, in the wake of Aron. Five of *Sillages'* essays are devoted to these philosophers. But we are also given essays on Husserl, on Descartes, and on Freud. And we will also find truly lovely meditations on Debussy, on Chopin, and on Proust, as well as several political essays devoted to our tormented modernity and which essays can be seen as epilogues to George's previous collection, *Souvenirs de la Maison Marx*.

Yet, notwithstanding the inspired breath which aerates, as it were, essays such as the one on Chopin (which essay is grouped along with two essays on Debussy in a section headed by an essay on Jankélévitch, it being Jankélévitch, naturally, who has given the inspiration for the inspiration in question), we think that it is *Sillages'* long-introductory essay which gives the greatest moment to our author's virtuosity. Here our author has set himself the task—but one begun already in his 1983 *Histoire Personnelle de la France* and continued in an essay subsequent to *Sillages*, the 1988 *Alceste Vous Salue Bien*—of thinking the trajectory of our contemporary intellectual life, which is to say of attempting to think a moral of thought which does not resign itself either to the complacent conclusions of our epoch or to the latter's equally abstract enthusiasms, which halves always add up to that very common form of contemporary comportment found, for example, in so many of the generation of Mai 68, this *abstract* maturity in which pronouncement has taken the place of reflection and self-importance the place of giving just weight to all things, including oneself.

Of course, to speak of *abstract* maturity is to speak also of maturity itself. But maturity is a word that can scarcely escape an inevitable recuperation. It seems almost impossible to utilize it free of the signification of surrender, of an inevitable resignation. But if maturity is to have any meaning at all it must be understood not as the abandonment of enthusiasms, but rather as their constant re-adoption (on the basis, of course, of enrichment and experience), which is to say that at the heart of maturity lies that kind of lucidity which can only be born from and *enthusiastic fidelity*. "Let us not name being..." says our author, "nor God nor absolute nor matter nor history, let us not name at all, for

only then shall we be able to honor the absence which alone gives us the right to the word." (p.48). But we should not misunderstand, because it is precisely the "right to the word" which must be emphasized. We cannot escape our chiasmatic condition; despair must always despair of itself. And our author, in an admirable expression, writes: "Philosophy...is the knowledge of the abyss which rends our fall less inglorious and, maybe, less fatal." (p.54).

How does one conjugate hope and regret, the inclination to resignation to which all lucidity gives rise and the necessity of living life which the same lucidity at the very same time demands? *That* is the riddle not only of all maturation, which is to say of all living, but it is also the riddle of lucidity itself and, we must say, of the word, of all utterance and expression. And this is to say that this conjugation must always be emphatic and, thereby--and not contradictorily--*sensitive*, because it must never become a maneuver, because it must be, if it is to be at all, a *manner* of that which Jankélévitch, has everywhere called *charm*. "I am not a *Selbstdenker* [the one who, acceding to truth, lives only for the truth]," writes François George. "But, at least, guarding myself from abstract devotion and from repetitive paraphrases, I can reconstitute the path of our intellectual adventures, take up again in my own way their exceptional work while acquitting myself of my debt to them...." (p. 35). And this is to say, once more, why *Sillages* charms us at the very moment in which it gives us that special kind of melancholy which, by virtue of its absolute sincerity, transcends the inevitable pain from which it emerges.

Because *Sillages* is also a volume which is "an adieu to three friends recently passed away." (p.35). Sartre, Jankélévitch, Aron. Literature (and philosophical literature), already from its inception (and conception!), is a good-bye. And, yet, each must take up this task again and again, and is this not precisely what our author means when he speaks of "honorary silence"? Read, then, our author's lovely little digression on Jankélévitch, or his sustained reflection on Sartrean paternity. But read too the remarkable adieu to Raymond Aron which is at once a testimony of friendship and of the melancholy of a friendship just barely snatched from the terrible oblivion of the "too late!" and "never-more!", albeit that we cannot here help but add that this tender evocation, sounded as it is in the register of friendship, has, perhaps, softened some of its questions, or, at least, some of its answers.

Yes, the author of *Sillages* is not a *Selbstdenker*. He has

declined systematic philosophy. His manner is that of giving philosophical discursivity not only *immediacy*, but also this kind of iridescence which is not so much color as warmth. Is he not a kind of philosophical Reverdy in whom thought heaps up its intuitions as the very manner by which it propels itself forward and in which the concept emerges only as the product of all these commencements themselves? There is a vitality here which, as the other side of a philosophy of affectivity, gives us the marvelous flavor of something newly discovered and felt! How do we give just weight to all things? By itself intelligence always fails. This is only one of the cardinal lessons, not even so much of our author, but of that which he has written. Philosophy always needs, and always seems to need, one more effort, one more turn, and not just of the mind!

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