

## Divided Consciousness: A Pessimistic Pilgrim's Progress

An Essay in Honor of Patrice Higonnet

CES, May 31, 2009

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I wanted to say a few words about the historian as outsider, because "outsiderness" is, I think, one of the traits of character that Patrice and I share and one of the cornerstones of our friendship of more than thirty years. Now, in one sense, of course, it strains credulity to describe the Goelet Professor of History at Harvard University as an outsider. Diffident though he may be about it, he occupies an *ex officio* place in an institution that does what it can to educate, within the distinctly tragic limits of the possible, more than its share of the Republic's guardians. Hence he stands firmly inside the walls of what the rumbustious comrades of my youth liked to call the Establishment.

And yet, and yet ... here he is, neither altogether American nor completely French. What is more, anyone who knows Patrice will recognize his affinity with two quintessential figures of the outsider, the Jansenist philosopher and the Parisian *flâneur*. These figures are outsiders because they *judge* the societies in which they live, the one morally and the other aesthetically, and the judge, being the embodiment of self-conscious reflection, can never be quite at one with his fellow man. For Rousseau, this divided consciousness of the judge had something of the quality of original sin, the thing that ensures that Eden must remain forever a lost garden. For Patrice, I think, it's rather the touchstone of a fully mature and fully sentient humanity, which may come to

the same thing as original sin: it was a token of Rousseau's childishness, after all, that he thought that the stain of reflective judgment might be expunged and the Garden regained, if only on the small scale of an ideal community.

For the historian, in one almost trivial sense, divided consciousness is a condition *sine qua non*. By definition, the historian studies the past, in which he can never be fully at home. Unless he commits the *faute professionnelle* of supposing that he can *identify* with the denizens of the past, he can never achieve the undissociated consciousness of existence that is supposed to have obtained before whichever Fall looms largest in one's personal theodicy. In a rather dazzling article in the *Tocqueville Review*, Olivier Remaud reminds us that François Furet, sitting Godlike as if in final judgment, separated historians on these grounds into the Saved and the Damned, the latter exemplified by Michelet, the former by Tocqueville. Michelet's sin was to try to "revive the Revolution from within, ... to dwell in revolutionary transparency, to celebrate the memorable coincidence of values, *le peuple*, and the actions of men and women." Tocqueville, by contrast, redeemed history by supposing that such transparency "masked a maximal opacity between human action and its real meaning," which real meaning he took it to be the historian's task to restore.

One way of putting Remaud's formulation of Furet's point would be to say that Michelet's enthusiastic revivification of the past connoted ultimate moral approval of what his resurrected revolutionaries believed they had achieved and absolution for what they had done to achieve it. In other words, to suppose a *lack* of "opacity between

human action and its real meaning" is to supply historical actors with alibis. "We did what we did because we *knew* that it would usher in a better world." Historians who write the past in these terms are *insiders* in two senses: they put themselves on the side of the historical actors whose justifications they embrace, and they champion would-be emulators in the present by assuming that such a transparency of realizations to intentions is the norm in actions of a certain type, which we might call the world-historical heroic.

The *outsiders* among historians assume, rather, that in collective action the norm is that men know not what they do. Whether this means that they deserve to be forgiven—"Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do"—or merit blame all the more for acting in self-deluded pride of their own mastery is, I suppose, a matter of temperament. Tocqueville in this respect was closer to Marx than to Michelet: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please," is one Marxian apothegm of which the Norman aristocrat might have approved. The American pseudo-aristocrat T. S. Eliot delivered himself of at least one stanza that might have been a gloss on Marx's sentence: "Between the motion and the act/Falls the shadow," was the way Eliot put it, and insofar as Eliot was interpreting Baudelaire, we are not surprised to find him anticipating Patrice's reading of that poet, by way of Walter Benjamin, as a writer who "yearned to wipe out the present by establishing 'correspondences' between present and past sensation, a perennial wish since it would enable him to overcome his 'spleen' and horror of modern life" [Paris, 281].

But, Patrice added, "this attempted elision was bound to fail." What makes Baudelaire essential, Patrice argues, is his "inability to deny the destructive nature of modern, commodified life by invoking allegorical links to a premodern, pre-Parisian past." The ambient ideology of progress does not delude him, in other words. This makes his *témoignage* invaluable. Here I think we have a characteristic configuration of the Higonnettian historical sensibility. At its core there is a figure, the poet, out of joint with his times because cursed with *une âme trop sensible* to abide with the consolatory ideology of progress that is modernity's pathognomonic secretion. This figure, though distinguished, even admired, for its sensitivity, is nevertheless confused. Defined by his resistance to the ideology of progress, the seer reacts viscerally by substituting an ideology of decadence. The poet becomes a pilgrim, who, having seen the dark light, reinscribes what others take to be progress as the *allegory* of a fall, to use Benjamin's term.

This stratagem brilliantly serves the poet's purpose: it makes the misery of the present vivid. But it leaves the philosopher unsatisfied, because it does nothing to clarify the passage from past to present, to explain the transition that would make the defining difference intelligible. The critical intellect therefore seizes on the vivid perception and insists on providing it with an intelligible narrative: "Baudelaire," as Patrice puts it, "would have liked to make of Haussmannian modernity a new version of an eternal misery. For the more or less Marxist Benjamin, by contrast, it was important to recognize that Haussmannian modernity was something unprecedented in human history."

Thus far Patrice has merely followed Benjamin to the second stage of his dialectic. But for the more or less un-Marxist Higonnet, no synthesis can follow. One cannot look forward to any ultimate withering away of delusion in which Woman—to take Baudelaire's example—is neither symbol of Man's intrinsic wickedness nor exploited sex worker but rather free to fish in the morning and hunt in the afternoon while Man stays home darning socks and caring for the children.

Benjamin's demystification of Baudelaire's allegorization thus takes on a problematic status in Patrice's de-eschatologized reading. False consciousness has not succumbed to critique. Rather, critique is itself exposed as incomplete, as in its own way an allegory of yet another ahistorical myth, namely, intellect's persistent delusion that by exposing naïve feeling as the Great Deceiver it can lay bare the true path to righteousness or progress or the classless society or whatever soteriological concept commands the moment. The influence of Pascal and Jansenism will be clear—"neither dogmatism nor Pyrrhonism" might be the Pascalian slogan for Patrice's conception of historical praxis—but I think Patrice's attitude toward historical truth may have been anticipated best by the crypto-Jansenist La Rochefoucauld. What we have in Higonnet is not a sequence of truths supplanting one another in a défilé of dialectical *Aufhebungen* predetermined by history's, or the historian's, own Telos. Rather, as La Rochefoucauld puts it, "*un sujet peut avoir plusieurs vérités ... le sujet qui a plusieurs vérités est d'un plus grand prix, et peut briller par des endroits où l'autre ne brille pas ; mais, dans l'endroit où l'un et l'autre est vrai, ils brillent également.*" [A subject can have several truths ... the subject

that has several truths is of greater value, and can shine in places where the other does not ; but in the place where both are true, they shine equally.]

This coexistence of coequal truths, none more ultimate or fundamental than any other, is not simply an expression of a profound skepticism. There is, for one thing, a painterly quality to the evenness of surface in Patrice's work, the patient accumulation of detail, and the learned armature, as firm in each single work and as varied throughout his oeuvre as throughout Poussin's. The blue in the robe shines equally, as La Rochefoucauld might have said, with the silvery green in the leaf of the olive tree. But there is no insistence that any particular layer or corner of the canvas is the key to its meaning. Each passage has a truth of its own, and these truths shine equally brightly and enliven one another, like sparkles of sunlight on the endless surface of the sea, *toujours recommencée, dixit Valéry: le temps scintilla et le songe est savoir.*

It strikes me that the instability of history conceived in this way, as a scintillation of time captured in knowledge dreamlike rather than graven in stone, is one of its attractions for Patrice. As worthy as the project of unknitting the revolutionary mythology might be, what would have been the point of adding revisionist brick upon revisionist brick to an edifice constructed in another country for an alien purpose? It was more amusing as well as more enlightening to rehabilitate the Jacobin, to show that he was something other than *un godillot* in a proto-totalitarian project interpreted à la Cochin. And was not the inspiration for that effort a sort of Baudelairean-Benjaminian moment? The admirer of Benjamin Constant might prefer *la république moderne* to the

antique revival figured in the oath famously painted by David, but the citizen of today's republic, French or American, could scarcely help finding much to regret in the slack hedonism that passes for the enjoyment of civil liberty today. Still, it would not have been enough to deplore the philistine's slouch toward the multiplex; the distance traveled from Year I's exaltation to today's ennui had to be explained. Similarly for the Sister Republics: who but an outsider at home in both and neither could have found as many paradoxes in the conventional comparisons. Americans were more republican than they knew, French more communitarian. And then of course came the shock of *Attendant Cruelties*, the fruit of another Baudelairean moment: the American republican had throughout history worn two faces, one of which was as hideous as anything a *flâneur* might have seen in the streets of Paris: no more Citizen Paine, only Dick Cheney reprising the role of the syphilitic prostitute.

Which brings me to "moral action in historical context," this weekend's theme. A superficial reading of my rapid gloss of Patrice's work might lead to the conclusion that the coexistence of coequal truths that I detect in it is but a buffed-up version of the postmodern aporia: the French Revolution was *both* unspeakable cruelty and exalting liberation, Manichaeon America is *both* a city on a hill and a perpetrator of attendant cruelties, and when asked to declare for or against, the fastidious aesthete can only sigh in exasperation. Nothing could be further from the spirit of Patrice's work. There is a famous passage from Pascal's *Pensées* that I think gets at the nature of Patrice's thought. It's the passage in which Pascal explains why certain minds are incapable of "turning toward the principles of Geometry." I say this as an erstwhile geometer myself, who

sometimes suffers from the geometer's pride. In this connection I hope Patrice won't find it indiscreet if I share an anecdote with you. Some weeks ago, he attended a gathering of historians at my house, during which I noticed he whiled away the time by perusing the spines of books of economic theory and econometrics that happened to be ranged on shelves next to his chair. Afterwards I asked him if he'd found anything interesting, and in a characteristic moment of self-deprecation, he said, "I look at all these books, and I say to myself, I don't even recognize the titles and he's read all of them, I'm a hopeless antediluvian." With *l'esprit de l'escalier*, I will remind him now of Pascal's words:

Ce qui fait que des géomètres ne sont pas fins, c'est qu'ils ne voient pas ce qui est devant eux, et qu'étant accoutumés aux principes nets et grossiers de Géométrie, et à ne raisonner qu'après avoir bien vu et manié leurs principes, ils se perdent dans les choses de finesse, où les principes ne se laissent pas ainsi manier.

[The reason why geometers are not subtle is that they don't see what is in front of them, and, being used to the clear but crude principles of geometry, and to reasoning only after having understood and wielded their principles, they go astray in matters of finesse, where principles cannot be wielded in this way.]

And Pascal continues thus:

One scarcely sees those principles [that is, the principles that guide *l'esprit de finesse*]. One feels rather than sees them. It is infinitely difficult to make anyone aware of them who does not sense them in himself. Those principles are so



numerous and so delicate that one needs a very clear and very delicate sensibility to be alert to them, and usually they cannot be set forth in order as in Geometry ... [for] it would be an endless task to attempt to do so. The thing must be grasped all at once, in a single glance, and not by the progress of logic. Geometers want to treat subtle matters geometrically, and make themselves ridiculous, trying to begin with definitions and then moving on to principles, which is not the way to proceed in this type of argument. Not that the mind does not reason logically, but it does so tacitly, naturally, and without artifice.

What even the plodding geometer senses at the heart of Patrice's work, then, is the very clear and very delicate sensibility that Pascal has enshrined as *l'esprit de finesse*. The Baudelairean-Benjaminian couple that I take to be its figure is appropriate because it shows that, while the historian partakes of both the poet and the philosopher, neither can replace his own contribution. Yet he would be the last to claim that he transcends either one, because his philosophy of history is one of peaceful coexistence of coequal truths rather than *Aufhebungen*. It is what it is: the expression of a very clear and very delicate sensibility, what is at bottom a moral sensibility whose medium of expression is, to borrow from the title of this colloquium, the historical context. That is a rare thing, and this geometer is grateful to have been the object of his *mission civilisatrice*.

[end]