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La brisure

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R.W. Emerson et le 11 septembre 2001

La brisure

Maurice Gonnaud

- 1 Peut-être sous l'effet d'une longue cohabitation avec la pensée d'Emerson, il m'a semblé que la rupture créée par les attaques mortifères du 11 septembre dernier au sein de la conscience américaine relevaient de la même intrusion d'une réalité jusqu'alors impensable que le traumatisme provoqué chez le « sage de Concord » par l'adoption en 1850 d'une loi sur les esclaves fugitifs, qui piégeait chaque citoyen, au Nord comme au Sud, en faisant de lui le complice, voire l'exécutant, d'une insupportable violation du droit de chacun à vivre librement. Comme George W. Bush, et avec lui beaucoup de ses concitoyens, s'étaient installés avant le 11 septembre dans une problématique qui prenait instinctivement appui sur l'exceptionnalisme américain, ainsi Emerson, avant 1850, s'était persuadé qu'en toutes circonstances la force d'âme individuelle (« the infinitude of the private man », comme le dit beaucoup plus éloquemment son anglais) suffisait à conjurer les menaces et les périls extérieurs. Il n'est que de lire son essai sur le Tragique (1844) pour apprécier la fondamentale sérénité de son regard. Rien ne le préparait à l'expérience crucifiante de 1850.
- 2 D'une certaine manière, la prise en compte de cette révélation tardive, mais dévastatrice, avait orienté l'ensemble de la réflexion que j'avais conduite sur les engagements et les désengagements d'Emerson tout au long de sa carrière, et elle m'avait permis de remettre en cause l'optimisme massif dont il était de bon ton de le créditer. Intuitions obstinément heureuses, certes, mais en contrepoint conscience sinon malheureuse du moins inquiète, travaillée par un incessant besoin de questionnement. Or cette lecture, à la croisée de la philosophie et de l'histoire, de l'œuvre publique et du Journal, n'avait guère convaincu nos homologues américains. Lorsque néanmoins la traduction de mon livre [*Individu et société dans l'œuvre de R.W. Emerson, Essai de biographie spirituelle*, Paris, Didier, 1964] fut envisagée, je proposai à l'éditeur d'en rédiger la préface, avec pour arrière-pensée de rendre palpables les lignes de force qui soutenaient mon argument. Une version anglaise fut effectivement

publiée [*An Uneasy Solitude, Individual and Society in the Work of R.W. Emerson*, translated by Lawrence Rosenwald, Princeton N.J., Princeton U.P., 1987], mais, faute de se trouver en résonance avec l'orthodoxie du moment, le texte liminaire que j'avais soumis ne fut pas retenu. Il est donc resté inédit jusqu'à ce jour, et il m'a semblé intéressant d'en proposer la publication, au moins partielle, dans un contexte historique entièrement renouvelé, susceptible du coup de resituer mon commentaire et de lui redonner une certaine pertinence :

- 3 [On se reportera aussi au numéro « Emerson » de la *Revue française d'études américaines*]
- 4 [...] Very soon I was made crucially aware of the absorptive faculties of Emerson's mind when stirred by external stimuli. While the transcendentalist vision of life focussed on its simplicities, a mere record of Emerson's unfailingly sensitive responses to circumstances, whether social or economic, parochial or broadly national, left one with a sense of his immense ability to adjust to the changing panorama of the United States. But adjustment, for Emerson, was not tantamount to renunciation. For an observer standing at the far end of his intellectual trajectory, fidelity and adaptability appear almost miraculously fused in a stance illustrating, and at the same time concealing, the conflicting demands of the self and society. His introduction of the concept of race, with racial inequality as its squarely-faced corollary, into the fabric of his thought might serve as an example of this mental resilience, though it also demonstrates his propensity to adorn the ugliness of facts and to smooth out the tragedies inherent in individual experience.
- 5 Gradually, however, I came to recognize the heavy personal price that Emerson had been made to pay at every stage of his successful strategy. I became convinced that the debate between his private self and the public figure with which he had had, willy nilly, to accept identification—first as Unitarian minister, then as acknowledged leader of the transcendentalist group, later still as America's foremost thinker—had been far more dramatic, and had reached down to a much greater depth, than was usually realized. I could not help visualizing Emerson as a sort of austere, morality-ridden Victor Hugo (if this is conceivable at all), cut out for producing New England versions of *Les Contemplations*, and stubbornly deflected from his appointed course by religious or secular calls, which eventually turned him into a fighter and compelled him to write, through his two « Fugitive Slave Law Addresses » and other such discourses, his own minor brand of *Les Châtiments*.
- 6 How these recurring urges to public commitment affected the tenor and balance of his work, how they were responsible for a pattern of moral compulsion, self-doubt and partial withdrawal resulting in a reaffirmation of his vocation as a poet, is one of the points to which this book addresses itself with deliberate emphasis. Beyond the tensions which developed between the private man and the public figure, it purports to document the dialogue, both subtle and taut, through which private self sought to establish an acceptable compromise. Examined from this standpoint, the *Journal* appears to be much more than the quarry from which Emerson extracted blocks for the construction of his lectures or the illustration of his books. It is, quite fascinatingly, the hidden face of his public writings, the portion of truth that he was withholding from his contemporaries for reasons that never ceased to put him on the rack. When in 1838 he brought himself to write a letter to President Van Buren to protest the removal of the Cherokee Indians from their Georgia territory, the *Journal* registered his reluctance to enter the political arena in terms verging on loathsomeness. Fifteen years later, in

the midst of the slavery crisis which wrenched him from his principled aloofness, he turned to his journal for inner reassurance and, over and over again, reaffirmed in its pages his faith in the primacy of solitude. A fuller awareness of this semi-clandestine dialogue will drive home to the reader I believe, the intensities and reverberations of the debate which was set going in the United States when, to paraphrase Tocqueville, the emergence of individualism as an almost national philosophy vindicated the right for every individual to isolate himself from the community—an attitude ultimately leading to a traumatic redefinition of the dynamics of society. In this larger context, even the idiosyncrasies characteristic of Emerson's temper were taking on genuine representativeness.

- 7 The reference to Tocqueville is probably as reliable an index as any of the broader cultural frame in which I intended to situate my book. At the time of its inception, myth criticism was at its zenith, and provided scholars with tools combining insight with comprehensiveness. However, the organic links which it predicated between individual perception and collective representation filtered out most of the detailed evidence of History, with its baffling array of interlocking factors. It also attenuated one's sense of the immediacy of experience, insofar as it tended to substitute abstract patterns for the rough-and-tumble urgency of individual situations... More precisely, I was helped in my attempt to throw light on Emerson's predicament by a chance similitude with my own past, which was that of a young Frenchman who grew up during Word War II under the Vichy government, and was immersed for a long time in its stultifying, sanctimonious atmosphere, before he could—rather painstakingly—begin to move away from it, and learn to measure its devious destructiveness. I was well equipped to respond with keen sympathy to the Emerson of the late 1840's and early 1850's, who discovered with anguished fury that the « castle in the air, » to borrow Thoreau's phrase, that he had been so anxious to erect, rested in fact on the quicksands and treacherous marshes of History. His premature repudiation of social encumbrances, glorified in the experience of the sole self confronted with the universe, had blinded him to Nature's deceptiveness. He could now name « Illusions » the final chapter of *The Conduct of Life*, just as « Prospects » had furnished a coda to *Nature*, his first book. The hydrostatic paradox was at best only a beautiful chimera.
- 8 It seemed to me that the agonizing reappraisal thus forced on Emerson had not elicited the critical attention that it deserved. If the final chapters of my book were explicitly conceived to fill in this gap, the earlier ones were meant to chart the meandering course of a thought which paradoxically suffered from the civilized softness of its environment, and was prompted to throw off subversive challenges almost exactly in proportion to the lack of any foreseeable retaliation. There is an irony in the fact that Emerson's political philosophy crystallized under the influence of Fichte's electrifying, warlike *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, at a time when New England was blissfully exempt from any major social or national upheaval. And there is a symmetrical irony in Emerson's outrageous, glaringly mistaken optimism derived from his unqualified endorsement of the cause of the North during the Civil War. No less than political innocence, political alignment could be pregnant with danger.
- 9 [...] All in all, the image of Emerson which this book tries to convey is human, exceedingly so. It incorporates hesitations, gropings, remorse, errors, rigidities, in a fascinating interplay of self and society. But it also testifies to an unshaken faith in man's ability to think through his destiny. Much of Emerson's continuing cultural

appeal lies, I would submit, in this irreducibly complex identity, this peculiar and yet meaningful blend of soul-searching and pride, insight and purblindness, transcendence and social guilt, eventuating in the figure of an impassioned, if fragile, Puritan Prometheus.

- ¹⁰ Une dernière remarque : dans un entretien télévisé récent, l'historien Jacques Le Goff expliquait, à propos de son livre sur Saint Louis, qu'il avait pris peu à peu conscience de la signification d'une vie saisie dans sa totalité, en-deçà et au-delà de ses moments-phares. Appliquée à Emerson, l'approche suggérée par Jacques Le Goff pourrait faire émerger une image plus subtile, moins schématique, et finalement plus accomplie, à l'échelle du siècle en quelque sorte, que celle du « representative man » auquel les écoles critiques qui se sont succédées ont entrepris, chacune à sa manière, de le réduire.
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