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REFLECTIONS ON VIOLENCE

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A la mémoire
de la compagne de ma jeunesse
je dédie ce livre
tout inspiré par son esprit

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Introduction: Letter to Daniel Halévy

My dear Halévy,

I would no doubt have left these studies buried in the bound volumes of a review if friends, whose judgement I greatly value, had not thought that it would be a good idea to bring to the attention of a wider public reflections which serve to make better known one of the most singular social phenomena that history records. But it seemed to be that this public deserves some explanations, since I cannot often expect to find judges as indulgent as you have been.

When in *Le Mouvement socialiste*[a] I published the articles that are now to be brought together in a volume, I did not have the intention of writing a book. I wrote these reflections as they came to my mind, knowing that the subscribers to that review would have no difficulty following me as they were already familiar with the theories that had there been developed by my friends over several years. But I am convinced that the readers of this book will be bewildered if I do not submit a kind of defence that will better enable them to

[a] *Le Mouvement socialiste* was established by Hubert Lagardelle (1874–1958) in 1899 and ceased publication in 1914. During its existence it was subject to considerable change in political position, but throughout managed to secure the participation of an impressive array of French and European writers of the Left. Initially Dreyfusard and supportive of what Lagardelle termed the 'humanitarian intervention of Jaurès', from 1904 the review became one of the principal advocates of revolutionary syndicalism, publishing most of Sorel's writings of the period as well as the articles of his most enthusiastic admirers in the so-called '*new school*'. As the syndicalist movement itself entered a period of crisis at the end of the decade, so too did *Le Mouvement socialiste*. After the departure of Sorel and his friends, the review lost much of its political and intellectual direction.

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see things from my own point of view. In the course of our conversations you have made critical comments which fitted so well into the system of my own ideas that they have led me to investigate certain interesting questions more thoroughly. I am sure that the thoughts which I here submit to you, and which you have provoked, will be very useful to those who wish to read this book with profit.

There are perhaps few studies in which the defects of my method of writing are more evident; time and again I have been reproached for not respecting the rules of art followed by all our contemporaries and therefore of inconveniencing my readers by the disorder of my arguments. I have tried to render the text more clear by numerous minor corrections but I have not been able to make the disorder disappear. I do not, however, wish to defend myself by invoking the example of great writers who have been criticized for not knowing how to write. Arthur Chuquet,[b] speaking of J[ean-Jacques] Rousseau, said: 'His writings lack harmony, order, and that connection of the parts which constitutes a unity.'[1] The defects of famous men do not justify the faults of the obscure, and I think that it is better to explain frankly the origin of this incorrigible vice in my writings.

It is only relatively recently that the rules of the art of writing have imposed themselves in a genuinely imperative way; contemporary authors appear to have accepted them without too much difficulty because they wish to please a hurried and often very inattentive public which is, above all, concerned to avoid any personal investigation. These rules were first applied by the producers of academic books. Ever since we have wanted pupils to absorb an enormous amount of information, it has been necessary to put into their hands manuals suitable to this extra-rapid form of instruction; everything has had to be presented in a form so clear, so interconnected and so arranged to avoid uncertainty, such that beginners come to believe that science is much simpler that our fathers believed. In no time at all the mind is very richly furnished, but it is not provided with the instruments which facilitate individual effort. These methods have been imitated by popularizers of knowledge

[1] A[rthur] Chuquet, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* [Paris, Hachette, 1893], p. 179.

[b] Arthur Chuquet (1853–1925); professor at the Collège de France.

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and by political publicists.[2] Seeing these rules of art so widely adopted, people who reflect little have ended up believing that they were based upon the nature of things themselves.

I am neither a professor, a popularizer of knowledge nor a candidate for party leadership; I am a self-taught man exhibiting to other people the notebooks which have served for my own instruction. This is why the rules of the art of writing have never interested me very much.

For twenty years I strove to free myself from what I retained of my education; I indulged my curiosity by reading books less to learn than to efface from my memory the ideas that had been thrust upon it. It is only during the last ten years or so that I have really worked with the purpose of learning; but I have never found anyone to teach me what I wanted to know; I have had to be my own master and, in a way, to teach myself. I write notebooks in which I set down my thoughts as they arise; I return three or four times to the same question, adding points that amplify the original and sometimes even transform it completely; I only stop when I have exhausted the reserve of ideas stirred up by recent reading. This work is very difficult for me; it is for this reason that I like to take as my subject the discussion of a book by a good author; I can then more easily arrange my own thoughts than when I am left to my own efforts.

You will remember what Bergson has written about the impersonal, the socialized, the *ready-made*, all of which contains a lesson for students who need to acquire knowledge for practical life. The student has more confidence in the formulas that he is taught and consequently retains them more easily, especially when he imagines that they are accepted by the great majority; in this way he is distanced from all metaphysical concerns and gets used not to feeling the need for a personal conception of things; often he comes to regard the absence of any inventive spirit as a superiority.

My method of work is entirely opposite to this; I put before my readers the product of a mental effort which is endeavouring to break through the constraints of what has previously been constructed for common use and which seeks to discover what is

[2] I am here reminded of the sentence of Renan: 'In order to be of use reading must be an exercise involving some effort': *Feuilles détachées* [Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1892], p. 231.

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personal. The only things I find it truly interesting to enter into my notebooks are those that I have not come across elsewhere; I readily skip the points of transition because they nearly always fall into the category of commonplaces.

The communication of thought is always very difficult for someone who has strong metaphysical preoccupations: he thinks that speech will spoil the most fundamental parts of his thought, those which are very close to the motive power of the mind, those which appear so natural to him that he never seeks to express them. The reader has great difficulty in grasping the thought of an inventor because he can only understand it by finding again the path followed by the latter. Verbal communication is much easier than written communication because words act upon the feelings in a mysterious way and easily establish a bond of sympathy between people; it is for this reason that an orator is able to produce conviction by arguments which are not easily comprehensible to anyone who later reads the speech. You know yourself how useful it is to have heard Bergson if one wants to understand the drift of his argument and properly to understand his books; when one has followed his lectures one becomes familiar with the order of his ideas and gets one's bearings more easily amidst the novelties of his philosophy.

The defects of my manner of writing prevent me from gaining access to a wide public; but I think that we ought to be content with the place that nature and circumstances have assigned to each of us, without wishing to force our natural aptitude. There is a necessary division of functions in the world: it is good that some are content to work in order to submit their reflections to a few studious people whilst others prefer to address the great mass of busy humanity. All things considered, I do not consider my lot to be the worst, since I do not run the risk of becoming my own disciple, as has happened to the greatest philosophers when they have tried to give a perfectly symmetrical form to the intuitions that they have brought into the world. You will certainly not have forgotten with what smiling disdain Bergson has spoken of this fall from genius. I am so little capable of becoming my own disciple that I cannot take up an old work with a view to stating it better while completing it; it is easy enough for me to add corrections and to annotate it, but I have many times vainly tried to think the past over again.

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Much more am I prevented from becoming the founder of a school;[3] but is that really a great misfortune? Disciples have nearly always exercised a pernicious influence upon the thought of him they call their master, and he in turn has often believed himself obliged to follow them. There is no doubt that for Marx it was a real disaster to have been transformed into the leader of a sect by his young enthusiasts; he would have produced much more useful work had he not become the slave of the Marxists.

People have often laughed at Hegel's belief that humanity, since its origins, had worked to give birth to the Hegelian philosophy and that with it the Spirit had at last completed its development. Similar illusions are found to a greater or lesser extent in all founders of schools: disciples expect their masters to close the era of doubt by providing definitive solutions. I have no aptitude for a role of that kind: every time that I have approached a question I have found that my enquiries have ended up by giving rise to new problems, the further I push my investigations the more disquieting the results. But perhaps, after all, philosophy is only a recognition of the abysses which lie on each side of the path that the vulgar follow with the serenity of sleepwalkers.

It is my ambition to be able occasionally to awaken a personal vocation. There is probably within every man a metaphysical fire which lies hidden beneath the ashes, and the greater the number of ready-made doctrines it has blindly received the more likely it is to be extinguished; the awakener is he who stirs the ashes and who thus makes the flames fly up. I do not think that I am unduly praising myself when I say that I have sometimes succeeded in liberating the spirit of invention in my readers; and it is this spirit of invention which it is, above all, necessary to arouse in the world. To achieve this result is far better than gaining the banal approval

[3] It may be interesting to quote here some reflections borrowed from the admirable book of Newman's: 'It will be our wisdom to avail ourselves of language, as far as it will go, but to aim mainly, by means of it, to stimulate in those to whom we address ourselves, a mode of thinking and trains of thought similar to our own, leading them to their own independent action, not by any syllogistic compulsion. Hence it is that an intellectual school will always have something of an esoteric character; for it is an assemblage of minds that think, their bond of unity is thought, and their words become a sort of *tessera*, not expressing thought but symbolizing it': [John Henry Newman,] *Grammaire de l'assentiment*, French trans. [Paris, Bloud, 1907], p. 250. [See John Henry Newman, *An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London, Burns, Oates & Co., 1870).]

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of people who repeat formulas and who subjugate their own thought to the disputes of schools.

I

My *Reflections on Violence* have annoyed many people because of the pessimistic conception upon which the whole study rests; but I know that you do not share this opinion; you have shown brilliantly in your *Histoire de quatre ans*[c] that you despise the deceptive hopes with which the weak console themselves. We can therefore speak freely about pessimism between ourselves, and I am happy to have in you a correspondent who does not rebel against a doctrine without which nothing of greatness has been accomplished in the world. I have felt for a long time that if Greek philosophy did not produce any great moral results it was because as a rule it was very optimistic. Socrates was at times optimistic to an unbearable degree.[d]

The aversion of our contemporaries to every pessimistic conception is doubtless derived to a great extent from our education. The Jesuits, who created nearly everything that the University still teaches, were optimists because they had to combat the pessimism which dominated Protestant theories, and because they popularized the ideas of the Renaissance; the latter interpreted antiquity by means of the philosophers, and consequently misunderstood the masterpieces of tragic art so badly that our contemporaries have had great difficulty in rediscovering their pessimistic significance.[4]

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a concert of groaning which greatly contributed to making pessimism odious.

[4] 'The sadness which, despite the sense of life they show, exists as a form of foreboding in all the masterpieces of Greek art shows that, even at that time, there were individuals of genius capable of peering beyond the illusions of life to which the spirit of their time surrendered without hesitation': E[duard] von Hartmann, *Philosophie de l'inconscient*, French trans. [Paris, Baillière, 1877], II, p. 436. I call attention to this view which sees in the genius of the Greeks an historical anticipation; there are few doctrines more important for the understanding of history than that of anticipations, a doctrine used by Newman in his research on the history of dogmas.

[c] Daniel Halévy, *Histoire de quatre ans, 1997–2001* (Paris, Cahiers de la Quinzaine, 1903).

[d] For an earlier expression of this view see Georges Sorel, *Le Procès de Socrate* (Paris, Alcan, 1889).

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Poets, who in truth did not have much to complain about, claimed to be the victims of human wickedness, of fate and, worse, the stupidity of a world which had not been able to amuse them; they eagerly took on the attitudes of a Prometheus called upon to dethrone jealous gods; and with a pride equal to the fierce Nimrod of Victor Hugo (whose arrows, launched at the sky, returned bloodstained),[e] they imagined that their verses inflicted deadly wounds on the established powers who were daring enough not to bow down before them; never did the prophets of the Jews dream of so much destruction to avenge their Jehovah as these men of letters did to satisfy their vanity. When this fashion for complaining had passed, sensible people asked themselves if all this display of pretended pessimism had not been the result of a lack of mental balance.

The immense successes obtained by industrial civilization has created the belief that, in the near future, happiness will be produced automatically for everybody. 'The present century', wrote Hartmann almost forty years ago, 'has only entered the third period of illusion. In the enthusiasm and the enchantment of its hopes it rushes towards the realization of the promise of a new golden age. Providence does not allow that the anticipations of an isolated thinker should trouble the course of history by prematurely influencing too many adherents.' He also thinks that his readers will have some difficulty in accepting his criticism of the illusion of future happiness. The leaders of the contemporary world are pushed towards optimism by economic forces.[5]

So little are we prepared to understand pessimism that we generally employ the word quite incorrectly: we wrongly take pessimists to be disillusioned optimists. When we meet a man who, having been unfortunate in his enterprises, deceived in his most legitimate ambitions, humiliated in his affections, expresses his sorrow in the form of a violent revolt against the bad faith of his colleagues, the

[5] Hartmann, [*ibid.*], p. 462.

[e] A letter written by Sorel to Halévy (26 August 1907) explains this reference. Sorel had originally come across it in Ernest Renan's *Feuilles détachées*, believing its source to be the Bible, only to discover that Renan had taken it from Victor Hugo's *La Fin de Satan*. Both, however, were inspired by the image of Nimrod found in *Genesis* 10: 1–13. See 'Lettres de Georges Sorel à Daniel Halévy (1907–1920)', *Mil neuf cent* 12 (1994), pp. 162–3.

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stupidity of society or the blindness of destiny, we are disposed to regard him as a pessimist – whereas we ought nearly always to regard him as a disheartened optimist who has not had the courage to rethink his ideas and who cannot understand why so many misfortunes have befallen him, in contrast to the general law governing the production of happiness.

The optimist in politics is an inconstant and even dangerous man, because he takes no account of the great difficulties presented by his projects; these projects seem to him to possess a force of their own which tends to bring about their realization all the more easily as, in his opinion, they are destined to produce more happiness.

He frequently thinks that small reforms of the political system and, above all, of government personnel will be sufficient to direct the movement of society in such a way as to mitigate those evils of the modern world which seem so hideous to sensitive souls. As soon as his friends come to power he declares that it is necessary to let things alone for a while, not to be too hasty, and to learn to be content with whatever their good intentions suggest; it is not always self-interest that dictates these expressions of satisfaction, as people have often believed: self-interest is strongly aided by vanity and by the illusions of poor-quality philosophy. The optimist moves with remarkable ease from revolutionary anger to the most ridiculous social pacifism.

If he possesses an excitable temperament and if unhappily he finds himself armed with great power, permitting him to realize an ideal he has fashioned, the optimist can lead his country to the worst disasters. He is not long in discovering that social transformations are not brought about with the ease he had counted on; he then blames these disappointments upon his contemporaries, instead of explaining what actually happens as the result of historical necessities; he is tempted to get rid of people whose ill will seems to him to be a danger to the happiness of all. During the Terror the men who spilt the most blood were precisely those who had the strongest desire to let their equals enjoy the golden age of which they dreamt and who had the greatest sympathy for human misery: optimistic, idealistic and sensitive, they showed themselves to be the more unyielding the greater their desire for universal happiness.

Pessimism is quite a different thing from the caricatures that are usually presented of it; it is a metaphysics of morals rather than a

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