

ON THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME IN CHARLES OF ORLEANS

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The poetic *persona* of Charles of Orleans, one of the foremost French poets of the XVth century, is markedly determined by nostalgia, a specifically time-related kind of melancholy which his poetry is permeated with even more than that of his contemporary Alain Chartier. The expression of this disposition of mind and spirit seems more lucid in the poems of the Duke of Orleans than in any poetic corpus of the time. For this poet, member of the highest French nobility, "la tristesse n'est pas une humeur, mais un mode d'être, dans lequel le moi s'installe".¹ Even though his poetry of nostalgia reminds the reader of the topic *ubi sunt*, Villon's "où sont les neiges d'antan", it is more subtle and less dominated by regret than the poetry of the *bel enfant*. The "historical" time gone by is nevertheless replicated on the personal level since writing is its tomb in both cases, for indeed, "on n'amasse pas le temps mais sa trace".²

A paraphrase of the aristotelian definition of time turned the other way round could be used for the purpose of expressing the gist of the temporal experience also in the Duke's poetry (namely, "love is the measure of time") with the following addition: only true and faithful love can save itself and the time that belongs to it. True love

¹ A. Strubel, "En la forêt de longue actente' : réflexions sur le style allégorique de Charles d'Orléans", in *Styles et valeurs - pour une histoire de l'art littéraire au moyen âge*, Paris, SEDES, 1990, p. 176. Translation: "... sadness is not a simple disposition but a modality of being which the self has grown into..."

² J. Cerquiglini, "Actendez, actendez", in *Le nombre du temps. Hommage à Paul Zumthor*, Genève, Slatkine, 1988, p. 47; same author, "Écrire le temps. Le lyrisme de la durée aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles", in *Le temps et la durée dans la littérature au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance*, Paris, Nizet, 1986; M. Zink, *Froissart et le temps*, Paris, PUF, 1998, p. 48. Translation: "... one does not gather time but its traces".

alone is a manifestation of identity if the self keeps following the way initially chosen where every new choice of direction confirms all the previous without losing from the sight the goal set at the beginning and straying away from the path leading to it. As such, the desire of faithfulness is well present in the poetry of Charles of Orleans:

*L'amant. - Que pourroit plus faire la belle
Que de tant pour vous se pener?
Le cueur. - Loyauté soustient ma querelle,
Qui lui fait faire sans doubter.
L'amant. - Pensez doncques de bien l'amer.
Le cueur. - Si ferai je, toute ma vie,
Sans changier, de tout mon povair.*³

This inner dialogue makes clear that the poet is searching for his identity (an experience of the temporal integrity of his being) through love. Although his poetry is fraught with this specific kind of desire, not that which like divine grace confers identity by taking it away but the desire for identity itself which pushes one into a never-ending quest, there is yet no place for fulfillment in it. The changing reality is the only experience apprehended and, indeed, the word *changement* appears everywhere in the poetry of the Duke. Aspiration and desire, yes, but no belief and firm conviction:

*Le trouveray je ja mais
Un loyal cueur joint au mien,
A qui je soye tout sien,*

³ *Poésies*, Paris, Champion, 1982, 2 vol.: vol. I, p. 53 (ballad XXXIII, ll. 19-25); all the quotations are from this edition. J. Huizinga (*Le Déclin du Moyen Âge*, Paris, Payot, 1948, p. 357) believes that the vehicle used in XIVth and XVth centuries for the expression of the fleeting moment was the direct speech.

Sans departir desormais? ...

*Autant vault se je m'en tais,
Car certainement je tien
Qu'il ne s'en fera ja rien.* ⁴

As if the cyclical poetic form of *rondeau* was a reflection of an illusory attempt to stop the moment which has just disappeared forever, and a manifestation of a self caught in the vicious circle of the past with no possibility of moving forward and none, either, of an optimistic view of the future since the self loses its fragments along the way due to the absence of a solid goal. Instead of trying to seize one's present, one looks for oneself in the past, where one no longer is, until a final disappointment.

*Plus ne prens plaisir qu'en pensee
Du temps passé; car, sur ma foy,
Ne me chault du present que voy* ⁵ ...

What matters is the *coffre* of memory ⁶ where the time past is supposedly stocked, or, better, where are stocked its traces since the past is all about dead time, not about time alive in the present. The poet, insisting on the *coffre* of memory, marks off even further the discrepancy between the past and the present and reveals his true source of poetic vs. esthetic pleasure, which is absence and distancing, not the presence. A past-related absence brings to an end the old love psychology of the troubadours, for whom a possible absence could never be but future-related. Charles of Orleans contributes towards the formation of a new psychology of love and, at the same time, a new experience of time which can hardly hide behind the ancient façade of the troubadour love rhetoric. The beauty

⁴ Vol. II, pp. 395-6 (rondeau CLXXXIV, ll. 1-4 et 9-11).

⁵ Vol. II, p. 518 (rond. CCCXCII, ll. 9-11).

⁶ Cf. vol. I, p. 52 (refrain); *id.*, p. 55, v. 25.

of the *fin'amor*'s "object"⁷, seen by the lover once or many times, or never, ideally remained forever locked in his heart. Such love, residing all within, did not depend, or should not have depended on external circumstances which continued to challenge the physical "object" itself. Indeed, in his beloved, the lover loved what he believed was beyond time: his love, born in time, liberated itself of temporal laws while the lover should have strived to achieve its inner transformation into ethical if not divine love, or simply let this happen (something the troubadours never really managed and the conceptualisation of which had to be left to a great poet like Dante). In the troubadour rhetoric, *velheza*, for instance, signifies a disposition without love regardless of the biological age. For Charles of Orleans, on the contrary, love is inevitably tied up with youth, similarly in mediaeval literature generally, where *senex amans* is the type *par excellence* of a comical character, like in the *Roman de la Rose* which excludes *Vieillesse* from the garden of Love; the *fin'amor*, at least on the declarative level, could not care less about this *locus*:

*Tant sont les yeulx de mon cuer endormis
En Nonchaloir, qu'ouvrir ne les pourroye:
Pource parler de Beaulté n'ozeroye,
Pour le present, comme j'ay fait jadiz.* ⁸

The experience of beauty in these lines permanently depends on the physical "object" and never achieves its inner transformation: out of sight, out of mind. A love forever affected by the tribulations and contingencies of life, of which death is certainly the definitive one:

*Aveugle suy, ne sçay ou aler doye;
De mon baston, affin que ne forvoye,
Je vois tastant mon chemin ça et la;*

⁷ In the sense this word kept until at least the XVIIth century.

⁸ Vol. II, p. 305 (rond. XXVI, ll. 1-4).

*C'est grant pitié qu'il couvient que je soye
L'omme esgaré qui ne scet ou il va!*⁹

Such love is incapable of personal identity and, therefore, of faithfulness:

*Tout est rompu, c'est a refaire.*¹⁰

It is always at the beginning:

*Et ne cesserez vous jamais?
Tousjours est a recommancer,*¹¹

are lovers warned by the poet. This type of changing love, based on the *moment*, reminds one of the donjuanesque “love”, of which courtly literature only knew the reverse, negative side. Likewise “negative” for Charles of Orleans, the deception of the poet consists precisely in his coming to realise that this is apparently the only love there is. Every new and different choice comes as a refusal and, therefore, as a negation of the previous, of one’s own past and of the self which is its source and which prefers new ways to the continuous effort of searching to rediscover or restore a living relation between its initial choice and its present moment. Every novel choice, every new way is but a new beginning tearing to pieces the temporal experience of a life which, deprived of a goal and of the possibility of advancement, becomes static and, really, dead. Charles of Orleans, very lucid on this point, is however incapable of finding a way out of such an existential crisis. Identifying the *moment*, he is incapable of accepting it like Montaigne, with his memory

⁹ Vol. I, p. 89 (bal. LXIII, ll. 25-9).

¹⁰ Vol. I, pp. 89-90 (bal. LXIV, refrain).

¹¹ Vol. II, pp. 371-2 (rond. CXLII).

impregnated with *temps entier* which will from now on become ever harder to integrate into the living experience. This is what makes the poet's lamentations on his time badly managed or simply lost easier to understand:

*Se j'ay mon temps mal despendu,
Fait l'ay, par conseil de Follye*¹²

or:

*Las! ne suis le premier de France
Qui sottement s'est abusé
En la promesse d'Esperance
Ou j'ay temps perdu et usé.*

*Et de ma nysse gouvernance
Devant Raison, j'ay accusé
Mon cuer; mais il s'est excusé
Disant que deceu l'a Fiance
En la promesse d'Esperance.*¹³

Another reason for his melancholy and nostalgia. Under the old world's surface, a new world is emerging, historically, mentally, spiritually. The nostalgia of Charles of Orleans is that of a disappearing world:

¹² Vol. I, p. 179, ll. 25-6.

¹³ Vol. I, p. 243 (chanson LXVI, ll. 5-13); cf. vol. II, pp. 344-5 (rond. XCVI); p. 521 (rond. CCCXCVII). The quotation probably merges two discourses, lay and religious – see V. Minet-Mahy in “Charles d’Orléans et son ‘moulin de pensée’: allégorie et polysémie”, *Lettres romanes*, LIII/1-2, 1999, p. 27: *Raison*, “miroir de Dieu en l’homme” (*id.*, p. 21), relates to the latter, *mon cuer*, to the former.

*Que cuidez vous qu'on verra,
Avant que passe l'année?
Mainte chose demenee
Estrangement, ça et la ...*

*Quand nouveau monde viendra,
Que cuidez vous qu'on verra,
Avant que passe l'annee?*¹⁴

Or:

Tout vient et va ...

*Vieuls temps desja
S'en sont courus,
Et neufs venus ...*¹⁵

The formal, cyclical aspect of Charles' poetry and his perpetual returning and recurring to the allegorical *topoi* could indeed function as vehicles for the expression of a temporal dead end, but no less could they imply the tacit conviction of a wise man that there is nothing new under the sun: the new world will not be any different from the one which is getting away. With the rather important difference that the wise man will no longer be there to observe it. The awareness that the vanishing world takes away also the eclipsing self that observes it is henceforth only to be melancholic and nostalgic. As a fusion of thought and emotion, this awareness reduces to nothing the distance with which Charles of Orleans would like to contemplate the world, and changes the wise man into a poet.

¹⁴ Vol. II, pp. 328-9 (rond. LXVIII, ll. 1-4 and 12-4).

¹⁵ Vol. II, pp. 484-5 (rond. CCCXXXVII, ll. 4 and 9-11).