Saint-John Perse and the Sacred

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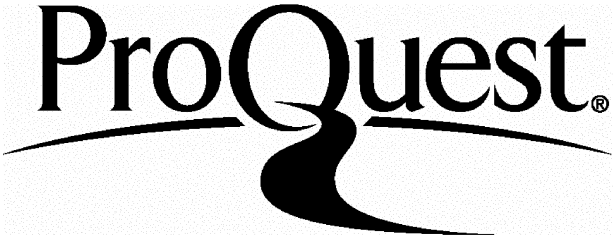

ABSTRACT

The aim of the thesis is threefold. First, it endeavours to define the sacred in general, using concepts from different fields such as anthropology, philosophy and ethnology in order to present the sacred in human experience, and to offer an operative conceptual framework indispensable to guide the analysis of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. Then it proceeds to demonstrate that this notion constitutes the very essence of Saint-John Perse's approach to poetry since fundamental religious, symbolic and mythological patterns of the sacred can be found in the very structure and images of his early works.

The second part proposes to examine the evolution of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's subsequent works. Linked to the forces and elements of the natural world, in particular the wind and the sea, the sacred is presented by the poet as a conscious and pagan response by man to the mystery of his creation. Having created a poetic ritual of the sacred and defined himself as a divine medium, Saint-John Perse embarks on a quest for transcendence through his poetic powers. Yet his Promethean humanism remains marked by an unbridgeable gap between human and divine worlds.

In the third part, it is argued that Saint-John Perse attempted to deconstruct the sacred itself in order to allow the ontological investigation of the human condition. The concepts of Being and time then prove to be instrumental to the new vision of the sacred, then prompting a critical approach to language. The thesis demonstrates that Saint-John Perse's poetry of the sacred echoes the quest for religious fulfilment of a man who could not reconcile himself with the ethical and spiritual demands of any given religion, and Christianity in particular, thereby offering a genuine and unique contribution to the universal question of man's destiny.

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PRIMARY TEXTS

Œuvres de Saint-John Perse (first date of publication)

Note: (All quotations in this work are from the "Pléiade" edition: Saint-John Perse, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1972))

Éloges et *Gloire des Rois*

Images à Crusoé (1909)
Écrit sur la Porte (1910)
Éloges (1911)
Amitié du Prince (1924)
Chanson du Présomptif (1924)
Anabase (1924)

Exil, Pluies, Neiges, Poème à l'Étrangère

Exil (1942)
Pluies (1943)
Neiges (1944)
Poème à l'Étrangère (1943)
Vents (1946)

Amers (1957)

Chronique (1960)

Oiseaux (1962)

Chanté par Celle qui fut là (1969)

Chant pour un Équinoxe (1971)

Nocturne (1973)

Sécheresse (1974)

The Bible

The Oxford Large Print Reference Bible: Authorized King James Version, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Reprinted 1993)

PART ONE: APPROACHING THE SACRED

CHAPTER I: THE SACRED

I-Characteristics of the sacred

1-The sacred threshold

The concept of sacredness is universal in humankind. The word "sacred" conveys an immediate meaning inasmuch as it refers to the vast and complex area of what is called "religious". These two terms seem to be linked like an idea and its illustration, a notion and its example. However, this does not say much about sacredness itself, although the idea appears to belong to the realm of common knowledge. It is commonplace to have recourse to the metaphor "a sacred cow" - by reference to the protected animal in Hinduism - in order to designate a subject that one should consider as a sort of forbidden question or object that should remain unspoiled. From a religious point of view, the cow represents more than the visible and living animal. It incarnates a superior being associated with a force that belongs to another world or another reality. The sacred expresses an idea that should not be dealt with in the way that others are. The notion is indissociable from that implied by the term "taboo".[1] It constitutes an area of human activity ruled by very strict laws constituted to prevent uncontrollable forces from being liberated within the mundane world. Thus, human behaviour is partly governed in part by the recognition of another sphere of reality beyond our own and whose power is acknowledged even in profane situations.

[1]Roger Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 23.

Religious rituals may be described as an attempt to keep balance between the natural and supernatural worlds.

Although religion itself evidently plays a very important part as far as the sacred is concerned, it seems preferable to consider first the dichotomy involved in the nature of the sacred. This dichotomy is almost certainly the most striking mark of the sacred, the least dubious sign of it: the sharp contrast between two sets of qualities in the same object - the "sacred cow" is at the same time itself and something else - is the most distinctive sign to be found. This ambivalence is usually referred to as the opposition between "sacred" and "profane". More than anything else, this duality "shows" the sacred and may be called a "hierophany".[2] Although the opposition between sacred and profane is as obvious as that of a positive and a negative pole in a magnet, the two concepts are inseparable and are mutually defined. This accounts for the very specific status of a sacred object.[3] Necessarily dual, the sacred object is a "Janus Bifrons", a double-faced being that is, or at least stands for, one thing and its antithesis at the same time. Therefore, sacredness appears to be a quality that is given to someone (priest, king...), or something (animal, stone, and place...), without depriving this one of its own reality. Moreover this quality may be attributed to - and withdrawn from - almost anything. The consecration of an object makes it very different from any other object of its kind. Despite its unchanged shape once consecrated, one may not use it as a "plain" object. As a consequence, it is clear that the sacred reveals itself in a hierophany based upon a paradoxical association between two opposites that complete each other. Their absolute separation is an essential feature: although the frontier between them may sometimes appear unclear, as we shall see later, it is

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[2] See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), p. 11: "Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*; it is a fitting term because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that *something sacred shows itself to us*".

[3] See Mircea Eliade, p 12: "It is impossible to overemphasize the paradox represented by every hierophany, even the most elementary. By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*".

nevertheless important to bear in mind that the very boundary between them is the guarantor of their existence. At this point, all one can say about the sacred is that, while it is the opposite of the profane, it is helpful to focus on the distinction in order to gain a clearer idea of the meaning of "sacredness".

The first thing that can be asserted as far as the sacred is concerned is that it necessarily involves a frontier between itself and its antithesis, the profane. Thus, there is a threshold that has to be recognized and that allows the sacred as such to exist. As the term "profane" itself suggests, the sacred divides into two parts: one consecrated and governed by special laws, and another "in front of it", or "before it", that belongs to the world of ordinary life: these two states may communicate, but they never merge.[4] Therefore the concept of threshold seems appropriate to designate the boundary between the two areas: a limit between two different worlds and a passageway from one to the other at the same time. This limit may or may not be incarnated; but whether it is embodied or not, it is felt as an unbreakable separation whose role is to maintain a balance between two segregated worlds, and to guarantee an "ordo mundi". One may thus discern that the world is no longer a homogeneous space as soon as the sacred is recognized in a hierophany: the limit is not put between two portions of the same space but actually between two intrinsically different spaces. The sacred draws a line between two spaces that differ in nature, and one may rightly say that the sacred is what is radically "other". This is why some authors have developed the idea that one needs an "ontological leap" in order to conceptualize the sacred from a profane point of view; and this can be seen as a leap over the threshold[5].

Moreover, it is interesting that the concept of threshold remains valid as far as the notion of sacred time is concerned as well. The break

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[4] "Profane" derives from the Latin "profanum" which refers to the accessible space in front of an altar but strictly cut off from it for religious reasons. The objective is to keep everything unclean out of reach of the altar.

[5] See Sabino Samele Acquaviva, *The Decline of the Sacred in Industrial Society*, trans. By Patricia Lipscomb (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p.28: "For those who experience it the sacred is something qualitatively different from the profane, and thus a

in the homogeneity of space presents an equivalent in the conception of time: the sacred time of festivals may be interpreted as a fundamental change in the ordinary temporal duration. During festivals, profane time - in others words an historical progression led by a dialectical process - is momentarily suspended, leaving open the possibility of a radically different time whose characteristic is to recur regularly throughout the year. Moreover this return of a cyclical time evokes the origin of the world, the "illus tempus" when the gods or the divinity created the world. Sacred time is a moment when man, having left normal temporal duration, can participate in "eternal time"[6] and celebrate the creation of the world. Once again the passage from one time to the other has to be effected as a transition between two different dimensions: one would be a line that goes from the past to the future, the other would be the circle of eternal time. In short, the rupture between historical and cyclical time is a hierophany that enhances the threshold of the sacred. This is particularly true in a pagan perspective. On the other hand, Judaism and Christianity break this model since God reveals himself in the course of History, through a process that, following Hegel, one may call "dialectic". Therefore, a distinction must be made between two conceptions of the sacred: on the one hand, that of "revealed religions" which implies an *evolution* of human time; on the other hand, that of "pagan religions" which is based upon a perpetual *revolution* of the cycle.

The symmetry between space and time, as far as the sacred is concerned, appears in etymology: "templum" and "tempus" both contain the radical "tem-" which means "cut". The "templum" in space and the "tempus" in time both mean that a caesura has been made between two radically different realities experienced by mankind. The recognition of a threshold between these two realities may constitute the first step in the characterisation of the sacred.

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leap of ontological level is required to reach the reality to which hierophanic significance is attached".

[6]Mircea Eliade links this concept to the myth of the "Eternal Return". See *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), p. 87.

2-Ambiguity of the sacred

For the Romans, the "sacred" is a quality that may be attributed to many things. Its etymology indicates that the term refers to "what cannot be touched without soiling or being soiled".[7] Hence sacred "things" range from priests ("sacer-dos") to sacrileges ("sacri-legus"). This duality of meaning is the same in Greek (hagos /sagos): the sacred and the damnable are two sides of a single reality.[8]

Not only does the sacred create a dichotomy between itself and its antithesis, but its very nature also contains a very clear opposition between two attitudes: respect and disrespect. This is the same twofold reality that Roger Caillois calls "sacré de respect" and "sacré de transgression".[9] The important thing here is that, whatever man's attitude towards the sacred (respect or disrespect), the value and the consequences of its behaviour are regarded as equally intense and definitive. The sacred is originally an oath and a pledge taken in front of the gods in order to give a promise of absolute strength and validity. Whether one complies with this plight or not is, however, irrelevant as far as the characterisation of the sacred is concerned. The important thing is the fact that "sacredness" is from the beginning the quality of a commitment that is a very concrete one, whose guarantee lies beyond human reality, in the kingdom of the gods.[10] Hence, from that point of view, the notions of "sanctity" and "sin" are symmetrical, like two faces of an identical reality. This duality has been lost in modern languages (in

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[7] See Roger Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, p. 40: "A Rome on sait assez que le mot *sacer* désigne, suivant la définition d'Ernout-Meillet: "Celui ou ce qui ne peut être touché sans être souillé ou sans souiller. Si quelqu'un se rend coupable d'un crime contre la religion ou l'Etat, le peuple assemblé le retranche de son sein en le déclarant *sacer*. A partir de ce moment, s'il y a toujours risque mystique à le tuer (*nefas est*), le meurtrier du moins est innocent au regard du droit humain (*jus*) et n'est pas condamné pour homicide (*parricidii non damnatur*)".

[8] See Roger Caillois, ibidem: "Le mot grec αγος « souillure » signifie aussi « le sacrifice qui efface la souillure ». Le terme αγιος « saint » signifiait en même temps « souillé » à date ancienne, au dire des lexicographes. La distinction est faite plus tard à l'aide des deux mots symétriques αγις « pur » et εναγης « maudit », dont la composition transparente marque l'ambiguïté du mot originel".

[9] Roger Caillois, ibidem, pp. 71-145.

itself an interesting comment on to how civilisations have evolved), as in the German word *Sach* or the English *sake*. These terms have lost their religious implications and focus on an exclusively legal use.[11]

The ambiguity of the idea of "pure" and "impure" exemplifies this duality of the sacred. In early times, the Greek *hagos* meant both "holy" and "soiled"; later, these two notions were distinguished. However, it is clear that they have a common etymology. It is worth noting that what is or is not pure is a matter of interpretation, and therefore is governed by religious laws. What "pure" and "impure" have in common is to be external to the profane world. Oedipus, for instance, is soiled because of his incestuous love for his mother; but he is also "holy" because this sin turned him into an "outlaw", or more precisely someone who is beyond the moral law. On the one hand, he became less than a man because he failed to comply with moral rules; on the other hand, he is more than a man because he joined the world of the Gods for whom incest is not banned (one may recall that Hera, Zeus' sister, is also his wife). In most mythologies, incestuous love is often the source of life in the divine world. Therefore, incestuous humans are turned into "heroes", both pure and impure, that is to say sacred characters. At this point it is essential to bear in mind that "sacredness" is not the equivalent of purity, as common sense so often dictates. The "sacred" man is at once a pure and impure character, holy and soiled. These two notions are like two reversible poles of a unique reality, and they respond to each other in the same way as magnetic poles. For the Hebrews the scapegoat is the quintessence of sin and evil. However, for this very reason, the animal is regarded as holy and is used as a medium between men and the divinity: it is both soiled and holy and may therefore cross the threshold between profane and sacred because it is immune to the terrible power of divinity. Many other examples could confirm this ambiguity of the sacred. The thing – or the being – regarded as sacred is a sort of "outcast" soiled and sanctified in order to make it able to deal with the supernatural forces that

[10] For instance, the "sacramentum" was a sum of money, a deposit given as a guarantee for an oath.

[11] See F. Martin, *Les Mots latins* (Paris: Hachette, 1976), p. 222.

are associated with the world of the gods. The sacred is a polarized reality that things or beings cannot touch without themselves becoming polarized.

3-Axis and tempus: Structuring the world

Duality and ambiguity without any regulation would mean chaos and eventually destruction of the world. Religion could be described as an interpretation of phenomenological experience based upon the need to distinguish the physical from metaphysical forces and reality. This specifically human behaviour is an attempt to tame fearful forces, divine powers, such as those symbolized by storms, hurricanes, etc., in an animistic view of the world. By drawing a line between the sacred and the profane, and by keeping control of the distinction between the two, humankind gives a shape to the world and creates an order of the space and time in which it lives. In that sense the sacred founds the world because the latter gives the former a recognisable face, a human print and a meaning. The sacred is the first - and perhaps only - force that urges mankind to organize the world, so that the profane and the sacred spheres should be protected from each other. In the western world, churches and cemeteries have often constituted the centre of villages and towns, and have always been surrounded by houses and shops. But a wall has usually been built between them so that sacred and profane spaces do not contaminate each other.

Human space is therefore an organized world, with landmarks and a recognisable plan. This designed space corresponds to the Greek word "cosmos". To a great extent, the ordered world appears to be the result of a balance between sacred and profane; this is made possible not only because they are clearly distinguished; but also because they communicate with each other. The threshold is at once a line of demarcation and a line of communication. In the temple, a reality from another world may be anticipated because it symbolizes a break in the homogeneity of space. Simultaneously, it allows a communication with

this "other world" because it is a "centre": the place where a contact between the profane and the sacred is possible without the risk of engendering chaos.

Sometimes the "temple" is a pole that represents the totem of a tribe. Sometimes, it is a tree, or a column. Whatever the object that happens to embody it, it always symbolizes the axis of communication with the "other" world. It constitutes the "medium" through which human and divine natures may have contact. It is therefore evident that this spot is designated as a starting point, a point of perfection from which all things are organized in the world.[12] Upon this frame, co-ordinates of the profane and the sacred world are based, just as a centre of symmetry is the point in which the whole figure communicates with its image.

Time also is a dual reality: a continuous stretch in temporal dimension or cyclical revolutions continually recurring in temporal reality. The former corresponds to profane, historical time, whereas the latter is obviously linked to the sacred time of the recurrent festivals. Here again the radical difference in their natures does not prevent them from being firmly joined in one point: the original time, the "illud tempus".[13] Profane and sacred time share a common point. Firstly, profane time is linked to the sacred by the continuous duration of its nature, because in the profane view there is no gap between the instants of time. Sacred time is a recurring celebration of this very first instant, when the world came into existence. Festivals are by nature "anniversaries", and therefore may theoretically or symbolically be traced back to the origin. The sacred involves a communication between two worlds in a meeting place which is in space, the "templum" in the broad sense, and in time, the "illud tempus", the origin, the recurring genesis of the world pictured by the cyclic pattern of the seasons. One cannot fail to recognize the vertigo – both intellectual and metaphysical – implicit in the notion of "the origin of time", or "the origin of space"

[12] One may recall that the point "zero" of maps – from and to which all the distances are measured - is situated at, for example, Notre Dame in Paris and Westminster Abbey in London, the most sacred places in these respective countries.

because that starting point seems to flee and vanish beyond what human intelligence can grasp.[14] The sacred presents itself as a response to the mystery of the creation of the world.

4-"Illo tempore" and cosmogony

The question of cosmogony constitutes the core of the idea of sacred. The sacred appears to be an answer – albeit a not entirely satisfactory one – to the mysterious question of the origin of the world, and, consequently, of mankind. The invention of mythology can be seen as an attempt to deal with such matters and it is enlightening to notice that human civilisations have always and everywhere produced imaginary models of interpretation in order to comprehend the physical and moral phenomena encountered by human beings. This fundamental questioning about the origins implies that men have always seen themselves as "creatures", that is to say, beings that are the result of a creative process.[15] The absolute impossibility of finding, or even of

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[13] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 80.

[14] From this point of view, one may assert that contemporary astronomy has now reached a point where it deals with "sacred" matters. The theory of the "Big-Bang", aiming to explain the starting point and the creation of the universe fixes an absolute reference, beyond which no reality is conceivable, and that resists mathematical approach. S. Hawking gives an illustration to this point when he uses the term "God" to describe all what cannot be scientifically described, particularly as regards the determination of the laws of the universe. Moreover, this confirms Saint-John Perse's argument that poetics and science do indeed rejoin in modern times because they both attempt to unveil the mystery of man's origin: "Au vrai, toute creation de l'esprit est d'abord « poétique » au sens propre du mot; et dans l'équivalence des formes sensibles et spirituelles, une même fonction s'exerce, initialement, pour l'entreprise du savant et pour celle du poète. De la pensée discursive ou de l'éllipse poétique, qui va plus loin, et de plus loin? Et de cette nuit originelle où tâtonnent deux aveugles-nés, l'un équipé de l'outillage scientifique, l'autre assisté des seules fulgurations de l'intuition, qui donc plus tôt remonte, et plus chargé de brève phosphorescence? La réponse n'importe. Le mystère est commun." ("Poésie", Allocution au Banquet Nobel du 10 décembre 1960, Pléiade, p. 444).

[15] See R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Enquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, trans. by John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923). The author develops the idea that the "creature-feeling" is the main element in the experience of the numinous. Otto criticizes Schleiermacher and the "feeling of dependence"; for Otto this is wrong because there is only a difference of degree with other feelings of dependence and not one of "intrinsic quality" (p.9). He quotes Abraham: "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (Genesis, 18. 27). Otto interprets this verse as a self-confessed feeling of dependence. He calls it "creature-consciousness" or "creature-feeling". For

imagining, a time before this time - or an absolute "non-being" before ours - may account for the necessity to organize the world according to the pattern of the sacred. It is essential that what cannot be "safely" dealt with by man should remain safely contained in an appropriate sphere and, above all, kept away from the world itself.

In this conception, the world may appear like an island whose shores protect it against its opposite: land against water. This is probably why mythologies so often create the theme of the island emerging from nothing - or more precisely from its opposite. The Earth (Genesis), Atlantis (Plato), Ys island (Celtic mythology), all tell the same story of a creation consisting in a separation of elements, solid and liquid, giving birth to a "world". It comes as no surprise that a huge flood, mixing everything again in the original chaos often gives the image of the end of the world. In particular, each of the above mentioned examples is related to destruction by overflowing of water or some sea flood. The sacred is a human reaction to, and perhaps participation in, creation in order to keep the world as it is, i.e. segregated from its antithesis, and therefore its destruction.[16] The metaphor of the island seems to be highly appropriate here. On the one hand, it accounts for the creation – and possible destruction – of the world, on the other hand, it can be used as a picture of a distant world "beyond" or "after" this world – the world of the dead. The island is very much a sacred place and also reserved for "impure" activities: imprisonment (Alcatraz), slave trade (Gorée)... The island as an isolated place, as a land defined by waters, may be regarded as the epitome of the sacred inasmuch as it embodies a necessary rupture in the homogeneity of the world in human experience to ensure that the world is kept ordered.

Sacred and profane constitute a pair that reflects an interpretation of the world. It is a dual concept that epitomizes the experience of

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Otto, the creature is "submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (p.10).

[16] Saint-John Perse insists on this point very early on: speaking of the island of Marie Galante, in the West Indies – where he spent all his childhood – he writes to his friend Gabriel Frizeau: "Comme vous avez su comprendre tout ce que cette île signifie de retranchement! « Se-creta » = « Se-clusa »: d'où « *O*missa »." (Letter of the 7th February 1909, Pléiade, p. 741).

mankind facing the world. Being an interpretation, it may therefore be described as a "reading" of the world, taking objects or phenomena as signs bearing significance about the world. In particular, sacred and profane account for the conception of "creation": they illustrate the idea that the world is a "product" whose cause lies outside itself. This interpretation orders the world and allows mankind to escape the absurdity of a mere existential experience. The sacred enables man to take a part in the symbolic construction of the world as an island of intelligibility and coherence. Thanks to the distinction between sacred and profane, man can read the world, which means that he can choose an "epistemological" pattern that is necessary to his thirst for meaning. This break through the homogeneity of space and time involves the irruption of transcendence. The hierarchy brought into the structure of the world is essential to its reality and arguably sacred and profane found the world by allowing a vital communication between two interactive poles. Transcendence permeates the world and a metaphysical reality is therefore accessible and – to a certain extent – conceivable in human experience. But this transcendence itself is problematic because it does not appear clearly either as a cause or as a consequence of sacred phenomena. In short, the question is to determine whether transcendence is an a priori or an a posteriori idea.

II-Sacred and religion

1-Religion and creation

The sacred is sometimes referred to as "the essence of religion" and indeed it is an essential element in religious attitude: religion is the human creation which enables humanity to deal with such a dangerous area as the sacred. The etymology of the word is not clear. One interpretation explains the Latin word "religio" by using the verbs "ligare" and "religare" suggesting the idea of a link. According to this

view (initiated by Lactance and Tertullian and followed by some Christian authors), religion would link men and divinity and would enable them to communicate through a set of rituals and celebrations. Another etymology (given by Cicero) is more likely and convincing: "religio" comes from "legere" meaning to pick up, or "religere" meaning to gather or to collect. Whereas this last verb is known only by its past participle, Emile Benvéniste interprets it as meaning "to look back at what has been done", "to catch up again mentally", or even "to apply oneself with great attention".[17] It conveys the idea of care, zeal and fervour. This meaning is suitable for religious acts and states of mind. Whatever the interpretation, the interesting thing about it is that they both show a way of thinking that isolates sacredness from sociality by organising a special activity – namely religion. This distinction is typical of the Indo-European societies (priests, warriors, producers). It is not found in other societies, where everyday life is itself full of the sacred because the world is suffused with sacredness, by the "mana". This first point enables us to put aside "magic" and "superstition" as being radically different from religion: they seek a pragmatic result, their ambition is to provoke a physical causality. It is essential to clarify that this pragmatic goal is not at all the object of religion. For this reason magic and superstition have nothing to do with the sacred: they pretend to act as intermediaries between two worlds whereas they do nothing of the kind – since theirs is an irrational causality, not a rational one. Singing in order to bring rain implies referring to irrational conceptions, while ignoring rational ones, and undertaking an action on a world governed by rational laws: there is a hiatus between the nature of the action and the object. In contrast, religion may be described as an interface between the human and the divine world, whilst aiming to keep contact and balance between them by using its own means. Although magic and superstition both use a purely conceptual language (rational and irrational), religion develops a language of its own which is symbolic. From a religious point of view, only symbols can translate one

[17] Emile Benvéniste, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 2 vols (Paris, 1969).

reality into another and guarantee a communication. This is why one may say that religions are essentially mythical: they create and use images whose function is to transmute one reality into another. By creating its own imaginary representations, a religion establishes its own poetry, and may be called a "poetic" view of the world.

From a religious point of view, one may distinguish two different attitudes: on the one hand, there is a religious behaviour that involves a "revelation", a transcendental truth given to men whose response is therefore faith. On the other hand, there is a religious attitude that is based upon a "natural" truth, as opposed to a supernatural one, and whose transcendence therefore is defined by the opposite movement, namely a pagan "theourgia". These alternatives present two different responses in the order of human creation: one may be called a Theosophy, a philosophy of the knowledge of God (a theology without rational epistemology), the other would be a literary "thaumaturgie", a making of miracles through the powers of language. These two contradictory attitudes correspond to two contrasting types of poetry. They both seek to place man into a transcendent perspective by a creative and meaningful act. But one is a poetry that aspires to divine revelation, whereas the other creates its own transcendence by the power of words. The former may be called religious poetry, the latter a religion of poetry. Two poets illustrate this point: Claudel and Saint-John Perse. They knew each other and were friends, they both wrote poetry of homage. Nevertheless, they stand at two opposite points: Claudel's poetry is a prayer to the god of his faith - a person revealed to him and who transcends everything else.[18] The poet's words create harmony and communion with God. In Saint-John Perse's poetry, the verbalisation itself is intended to create a transcendent reality, a synthesis between the human language and the world.[19] This poetry is essentially a "theourgia":

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[18] Addressing God in a prayer-like poem, Claudel writes: "Vous m'avez appelé par mon nom
Comme quelqu'un qui le connait, vous m'avez choisi entre tous ceux de mon âge", and also "Vous êtes ici avec moi, et je m'en vais faire à loisir pour vous seul un beau cantique, comme un pasteur sur le Carmel qui regarde un petit nuage". P. Claudel, *Cinq Grandes Odes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1913), pp. 54-55.

[19] Speaking to the sea, the poet celebrates the fusion between the sea and the language:

it is at once a mythical and mystical way of thinking. It is an operative symbolism, thought to be sufficient to create transcendence and to evoke the divinity itself. As opposed to this pagan transcendence and mythical efficiency, one must distinguish the efficiency "ex opere operato" of the Christian sacraments for instance. There are clearly two kinds of sacredness here. One asserts the paramount transcendence of God, the other endeavours to urge the divinity by means of language. This poetry gives birth to a god, a verbal power that proposes to create the god by and within the scope of linguistic powers. The sacredness involved here is essentially pagan, and its ethics are essentially aesthetics. The manifestation of the sacred through religion is linked to poetry, because religion, like poetry, joins human creativity and the desire for transcendence. Therefore, the sacred and poetry might prove not only to be linked, but perhaps also to be of the same nature.

2-Anthropology of the sacred

Why does mankind create religions? Many different reasons have been given; the following three appear to be particularly enlightening. Firstly, man seems to be the least well adapted to natural conditions. He is the most developed mammal and the one who lacks a natural defence system – hence his learned skills. Even so, these skills are not sufficient to deal with all the challenges of life. Therefore, some consider the "invention" of the sacred as an attempt to compensate for the lack of intelligibility of the physical world, and an endeavour to tame the wildness of nature. Secondly, the sacred is created by the need for social organisation and particularly by the ned for regulating political power between humans. Thirdly, the metaphysical anguish caused by death is obviously a powerful incentive for devising and conceiving a response to such a quandary.

"Nous t'invoquons enfin toi-même, hors de la strophe du Poète. Qu'il n'y ait plus pour nous, entre la foule et toi, l'éclat insoutenable du langage" (*Amers*, p. 378).

The ritual and the symbol of vital activities (hunting, protecting from natural forces...) engendered a complete mythology able to "account for" such things as the eruption of a volcano for instance. A god or a spirit is created – the volcano becomes something more than itself – and its "wrath against men" is a useful metaphor to reassure people, because the destruction it may cause is not left without meaning. At this point, it is obvious that science and technology threaten this imaginary "explanation" directly. As a response to the mysteries of nature, the sacred exists only as long as science and technology cannot account for it. This point will be developed further. Mythology founds humankind because it allows it to think of itself as a "gifted" species: Prometheus is obviously the founder hero of humanity, the provider of fire and light. But the environment is not the only aspect of the world which causes the sacred to appear: social organisation may produce it also.

Man is essentially a "social animal" who survives only within the framework of the social fabric. The sacred finds its source also in the social structure of human life. The concentration of power that man can achieve by himself is so great that he may come to the point where he is fascinated by the power he has created. He therefore endeavours to make sacred the figure that impersonates it (king, prince, and emperor...). By investing the figure of power with infallibility or immortality, it achieves the status of divinity. This is all the more evident because the figure remains separated from ordinary people and everyday life. Similarly, men may be made sacred for political reasons, such as, for instance, pharaohs in Ancient Egypt, emperors in China and the Inca in Ancient America. The figure of the king and that of the emperor embody the concept of power and guarantee the cohesion of a political entity by their presumed link with the divine world.

The main source of the sacred is probably the mystery of death. Through his ability to envisage his own death, man is confronted with the most certain event of his life. Death as a blunt fact is not acceptable for the human mind. Nevertheless, the fact remains and cannot be ignored: this is why man has to come to terms with it. He does so by using his symbolic powers: man tames death through his faculty of interpretation.

The rituals of death preparing the soul for a journey to another world are probably the first manifestations of the sacred. Human death cannot be accepted as a fact; it has to be symbolized through a metaphor, for instance. The use of one word for another implies a "leap" from one thing (a physical event) to another (an imaginary representation). One may recall that a metaphorical understatement such as "passing away" or "journey" often refers to death. This forms the basis of the two areas (profane and sacred), and the passage from one world (human) to another (divine) is dealt with by religion.

The gap between profane and sacred is a protection against a mixing that would result in a destruction of the world. The sacred appears to be a force that cannot be released without control and religion guarantees this. Religion may be described as a symbolic management of the sacred. Perhaps this is why it often presents itself as a set of rules, expressing what is allowed and what is forbidden. Modern man – especially in western societies – sometimes experiences difficulties accepting that religion should come with a law, because individual freedom has become a value in itself. But one has to remember that originally religion is a set of imaginary representations to which corresponds a set of rituals, whose aim is to keep a balance between forces or states of being that belong to two essentially different worlds. Thus, religion may be seen as an acceptatance of responsibility for the creation of which man is a part. Religion pursues a double aim: maintaining transcendence and consecrating social organisation. In both cases the problem is to create and maintain an order in the human world, sometimes in the divine world itself, and, in any case, between the former and the latter. This is why religion may be regarded as "law", a law which enables man to keep symbolically under control "extraneous" forces as well as "inner" forces in a world divided between profane and sacred. The interesting thing about this law is that whether one observes it or transgresses it, one is still within its boundaries. Because of its dual – and in some ways contradictory – nature, religion accepts two apparently opposed, but actually linked ways of dealing with the sacred: what one can call after R. Caillois a "sacred of respect" and a "sacred of

transgression". Festivals for example, may have as their objective, the celebration of the most sacred event of a given religion, but it may engender at the same time profane and even blasphemous manifestations. Like any law, religion needs a caste of priests, consecrated people, who are in charge of its administration. It comes as no surprise that they should be considered in a particular way by society at large. Priests, Shamans and holy people of every kind are to a certain extent alienated from everybody else. They obey special rules, wear special clothes, and sometimes live in a secluded area (in convents or monasteries for example) precisely because they deal with the sacred. This does not prevent them from being involved in temporal power, either as an ally of the sovereign or as a counterpoise.

Religion also manages the sacred by producing a mythology, that is to say an answer to the question of the "meaning" of the world. It deals with the problems of the origin and the end, those of cosmology and teleology. The answers, albeit very imperfect, appear to be of the utmost importance to the human mind. It is a condition of its survival as a species. The mythological creation has its own language, based upon the symbol as opposed to the "sign" used by conceptual language. Allegory, personification and metaphor all contribute to make the world intelligible for the human mind. From this perspective, religious language can symbolize anything from elements (water, fire, air...) to feelings (love, hatred...) in order that such an anthropocentric view may bring some meaning in a world otherwise deprived of it.

Consequently, some have presented religion as a myth itself (and even an illusion).[20] For Freud, religion is a collective neurosis of humanity and religion would be a sort of "abnormal" activity, a source of lies and errors. In two major books, he explained that first men killed (or disobeyed) their primitive father – this corresponds to the third chapter of Genesis.[21] Then they have to come to terms with their feeling of guilt, and eventually to rebuild a totemic figure of the deified father. In Freud's

[20] See S. Freud, *L'Avenir d'une illusion*, trans. by M. Bonaparte (Paris, 1932, edn 1971).
[21] See S. Freud, *Totem et Tabou* (*Totem und Tabu*, 1912), trans. S. Jankélévitch (Paris, 1947).

views, the monotheism of the Jews is a continuation of this pattern, and Christianity achieves the process by making men fully aware of their original sin against the Father and giving them a way of reconciliation through the Son. It follows from this interpretation that the sacred, violence and death react to each other, and violence emerges as an essential constituent of the sacred since it is used as a regulator between sacred and profane in the rituals of sacrifice.

3-Sacrifice

Sacrifice is the religious act par excellence. Its etymology suggests the meaning "to make sacred" (from the Latin verb "sacrificare"). It is immediately associated with the idea of violence: animals, even humans put to death either really or symbolically. For R. Girard this connection is essential.[22] It is a fact that the sacred manifests itself through rituals using blood, probably because of its ability to represent the ideas of life and death, purity and impurity, at the same time. The nature of the sacrifice seems to appear quite clearly in a religious context. Loisy sees in sacrifice "une action rituelle – la destruction d'un objet sensible, doué de vie ou qui est censé contenir la vie – moyennant laquelle on a pensé influencer les forces invisibles soit pour se dérober à leur atteinte [...] soit afin de [...] leur procurer satisfaction et hommage, d'entrer en communication et même en communion avec elles".[23] Sacrifice is clearly a sacred act (communication with superior forces) and a violent one. Since death is likely to be the main cause of the sacred, it is quite logical that religious behaviour should base its rituals upon it. The cruelty of the sacrifice is regarded as a way of regeneration: the victim's blood is a surplus of life available for the rest of humanity to compensate for its illnesses or weaknesses. This accounts also for some cases of anthropology. Various

[22] See René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972).
[23] A.Loisy, *Essai historique sur le sacrifice* (Paris, 1920).

interpretations have been derived from the intricate relationship between sacred and violence through sacrifice.

Levi-Strauss convincingly dismissed the view that sacrifice was linked to totems in any way whatsoever.[24] The totem establishes a link between an animal species and a clan, he argued, whereas in sacrifice it is possible to substitute one thing for another. Totems therefore suppose a discontinuity between two different entities, whereas sacrifice creates continuity between sacred and profane.[25] Not only does this interpretation of sacrifice keep a very sharp distinction between the concepts of sacred and profane, but it also shows clearly how the symbolic faculty of man operates in sacrifice. The object used as a means of communication is replaceable (fruit, animal, human...), which reminds one of the fact that sacredness does not depend on the nature of the object in itself but on the particular status that is thrust upon it for the purpose of sacrifice. Moreover, violence may very well be a metaphor itself. As we have already seen, the blood spilt is both pure and impure, it represents at once life and death, and this ability to imbue the objects of the world with ambiguity is a characteristic of the sacred. Violence in sacrifice provides the energy necessary to move from profane to sacred; "cruelty" – in its etymological meaning – is a concentration of energy. Sacrifice is therefore an expense of vital energy in order to gain access to the "other world". This idea appears all the more clearly when we look at it from a distance, or from a mere concrete point of view. Following the moral debate that Jean Valjean holds with himself (when a former fellow convict is accused instead of himself), Hugo describes the sacrifice of Jean Valjean's freedom and happiness (a moral sacrifice) in terms very similar to those of a physical sacrifice. First, it is clearly a sacred matter that defines two distinct worlds: "Il se détourna de toute illusion, se détacha de plus en plus de la terre et chercha la consolation et la force ailleurs".[26] This distinction and the desire to go from one area to the other

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[24] See C. Levi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage,* (Paris, 1962).

[25] "[...] le but du sacrifice [est] précisement d'instaurer un rapport, qui n'est pas de ressemblance (comme dans le totémisme), mais de contiguité" (C. Levi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage*).

[26] See V.Hugo, *Les Misérables* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Folio), p. 313.

are clearly of a sacred nature. After having considered the possibility of remaining free but unhappy with his conscience, he goes on: "(...) tandis que, s'il accomplissait son sacrifice, au bagne au poteau, au carcan, au bonnet vert, au travail sans relâche, à la honte sans pitié, il se mêlerait une idée céleste!". Here two extremes meet and communicate (the most sacred and horrible fate) through "sacrifice", a moral violence that has to be accomplished. He characterizes the situation by the following dilemma: " (....) ou la vertu au dehors et l'abomination au dedans, ou la sainteté au dedans et l'infâmie au dehors." One can find the distinction between sacred and profane and the communication between them in the symmetry of the alternative. Moreover, the ambiguity of the sacred is suggested by the idea of visibility or invisibility attached to it. This form of sacrifice, namely sacrifice of oneself, is probably the most complete. It is a religious act in the sense that someone accomplishes the destruction of oneself, in a free act, that is to say in a moral act.

The sacrifice of the self – which clearly echoes that of Christ – seems to be the quintessential ground for the sacred, as expounded by J. Frazer. He argues that men considered primitive gods as mortals: "Man has created gods in his own likeness and being himself mortal he has naturally supposed his creatures to be in the same sad predicament".[27] It is clearly a strict anthropomorphic view of the world that is implied here. Nevertheless, Frazer links it to the sacrifice of Christ. The death of a god, indeed the killing of a god constitutes a very important feature of the religious organisation of the sacred. It is always linked to a cult of death followed by regeneration and resurrection. From the great gods of Babylon to those of Egypt, such as Attis, Osiris and Demeter, one can find that the death or the killing of a god is the condition for the continuing existence of the world. The killing of a god is regularly re-enacted in some primitive religions by the killing of the king, especially as his "strength fails", notes Frazer. " The mystic kings of fire and water in Cambodia are not allowed to die a natural death. Hence when one of them is seriously ill and the elders think that he cannot recover, they stab

[27] Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1993), p. 264.

him to death".[28] Sometimes this violent death is simply regarded as a ritual, for example when "Kings are killed at the end of a fixed term".[29] This indicates that violence is not a mere and unpredictable outburst of rage when linked to sacrifice. On the contrary it is an organized act. Moreover, violence is an element of balance in the regulation of the world, especially when applied to a god. This may be interpreted as a need for transcendence: the only thing that can make life continue in the physical world is a metaphorical impulse. The killing of a god – or, alternatively, that of a king – is therefore to be regarded as an essential act in religion, and even politics. The killing of the king by the French revolutionaries in 1792 may be seen as a sacrifice of the symbolic father to unify the nation as well as a strictly political act. The killing of what is revered or divine (the king's power, divine life...) is probably a way of making the vital energy that it contains enter the physical world. However, the dangerous forces that it brings with it are neutralized and may therefore spread their benignity over the world. Through the violent sacrifice of a god, transcendence has been created to regenerate the world.

Sacrifice is essentially an intrusion into the divine world. The ritual of sacrifice is one that first prepares a point of contact between profane and sacred; then it regulates this communication and finally operates a return to the human world. Sacrifice not only confirms the distinction between sacred and profane, it also perpetuates the balance between them by its regulation. It is always a "consecration" that underlines the absolute distinction between these two poles. Sacrifice is therefore a ritual that imposes order on the cosmos as well as the society, the former being a reflection, a mirror image of the latter.

Religion distinguishes the two areas while establishing a communication between them. To a certain extent, sacrifice may be described as an exchange mechanism between human and divine worlds. This interaction may have different aims: homage, regeneration, gifts to the gods in an exchange of services. According to these various

[28] Sir James Frazer, ibidem, p. 266.
[29] Sir James Frazer, ibidem, p. 274.

intentions, the ritual itself varies. It seems impossible therefore, to try and find an element of unity in the pattern of sacrifice. It is altered by the type of religion, the time, the people who perform it, and by many other parameters. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that, whatever the place and time, man has always produced religions, based on mythical imaginary and rituals, amongst which sacrifice is a constant vector for transcendence.

The need for transcendence – a sign of man's awareness of his own incompleteness – seems, therefore, to be an essential feature of humanity. It comes as no surprise that this need should make the unity of the sacrificial practice. By transcendence man not only assents to his own ontological insignificance but also creates a symbolic response to it. At this stage, one can see that, on the one hand, sacrifice is a communication between sacred and profane; on the other hand, it is a participation in the creation of the world, albeit symbolic. As far as the sacred is concerned, a "mere" communication or a participation does not have the same symbolic value and effectiveness as a religious act. This is particularly evident when we consider sacrifice as being linked to the thanksgiving for the first crops of the year. The *first* things have always been considered extraordinary things: either pure or impure, they have to be dealt with in a special manner. First born children, first crops or the first time one enters a home all give rise to some kind of sacrifice as a reward or a homage to the gods. The aim is always to free oneself from a situation of constraint, to clear a debt in order to keep a balance between the human and divine worlds. Hence, the sacrifice is essentially a catharsis, a will to abandon something to gain something else. The cathartic characteristic of the sacrifice is clearly due to the degree of violence involved: violence is a sudden outburst of excessive energy which makes possible a return to a more stable, balanced situation. Too much purity is seen as an impurity, too much power is seen as a weakness, and violence in sacrifice allows man to rid the world of any excess and guarantees a steady perpetuation of life. Sacrifice may be considered therefore, as a regulator in the symbolic interpretation of the world. Its specifications are many, but its aim is essentially to rule the

exchanges between sacred and profane, and to prevent, by its own ritualized violence, the world from being destroyed by the chaos of unbalanced forces in the world.

At this point it seems important to make a distinction between two different sorts of sacredness: as discussed earlier, sacrifice may either lead to communication with the divine world, or to participation in it. This is an essential distinction as far as the sacred is concerned. In the first case, man is allowed contact with gods; in the second, he becomes an actor, even a member of a divine plan. This corresponds to the distinction currently made between "revealed religions" (human participation in a divine project), and the others (communication with the divinity on an eternally unequal basis).

Moreover, another distinction is to be made in the way the sacred is dealt with. On the one hand, the participation of man in a divine project may be called a "sanctification"; on the other hand, a communication between men and gods may be called "sacralisation". It is important to note that in the latter case man is not less active than in the former. Nevertheless, he acts in his own name, in a completely humanist perspective: like Prometheus, man is against the gods, face to face with them. As the violence of sacrifice testifies, communication between the sacred and the profane worlds is never a peaceful one. This communication is a struggle, like the one fought by man against the elements. "Sacralisation" is very much a process of this world, whereas "sanctification" defines itself as a radically different way as a means of reaching transcendence. This produces two sets of consequences. First, in "sacralisation", the sacred is a human response (or even invention) to the mystery of the world and of human life. Its aim is to interpret and eventually to control the forces of the cosmos. The sacred of "sacralisation" is like the epistemological process of a science. Although they may be said to be not of the same value, as far as the cognitive criteria are concerned, they remain two attempts to comprehend the world. As opposed to this mundane sacred, the sacred of sanctification is more spiritual. "Sanctification" implies a different conception of the sacred: it is rather a shared experience of man and the divine entity in a

spiritual mystery. This distinction is not the opposition between concrete and abstract: neither of them is an exclusive quality of the two kinds of sacredness. Secondly, and consequently, communication and participation in sacredness imply two different sorts of dynamics. As we have seen previously, the communication involved between two levels of reality (sacred and profane) is essentially cyclic. This sacred is based upon the "revolution" of time; this revolution does not change the world fundamentally. On the contrary, it guarantees the return of the same. The sacredness of the "sanctification" is of a radically different nature since it appears to be a dialectical process, not a perpetual "return" but a perpetual "renewal". The "Holy History" is a proper history, in the Hegelean sense. The renewal of the Alliance in the Bible is not a cyclical process in spite of being repeated: it creates something anew. This is why this form of sacredness may be described as a dialectic progression, a spiritual dynamism towards holiness – although the sacredness of communion may be referred to as a world which exists on the border between the sacred and the profane. By giving fire to mankind, Prometheus transgressed a divine ruling, and the sacredness that has resulted from it is marked by this transgression. By contrast, the sacredness that arose from the revelation of god involves sharing in the creation; it cannot be based upon a separation because "God is with us" (Immanuel). In the Christian perspective even blasphemy is not strictly "transgression": it is a call for the "Hidden God" who intends to reveal himself to men.[30] Two different aspects of sacredness arise from this; both attempt to deal with transcendence – an essential aim for the human spirit - but they do it in two incompatible ways: one through communication with transcendence, the other through participation in it.

[30]Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. by Philippe Sellier (Paris: Bordas, 1991): "Console-toi, tu ne me chercherais pas si tu ne m'avais trouvé" (751).

III-The Sacred and poetry

1-The poetry of origins

The sacred and poetry seem to have been linked for a long time. In the Bible in particular, many elements tend to suggest that poetry, among other literary forms, has been frequently chosen in order to express a certain experience of sacredness. From Genesis to the parables of Christ, the poetic function of language has been fully used to create a picture of the sacredness of God for the human mind. The recourse to metaphors, metonymies and allegories, among other figures of speech, does not show a desire on the part of the sacred author for mere aesthetics. It is the result of a need to put into words a reality that goes beyond the intelligibility of ordinary human experience. Hence the need for figures of analogy or of substitution, because only these symbolical operations of the mind can represent the metaphysical and spiritual experience of the revelation of God. The poetic function of language is particularly able to "translate" the sacred experience into a profane one, and to effect a symbolic "leap" over the border between these two entities. Therefore, one may regard the verses of the Bible as a "form" that participates in the very nature of divine speech. At this point one cannot fail to notice that the consistent use of biblical verses by Saint-John Perse throughout his poetry is of great significance: it constitutes the sign that his texts are the vehicle of transcendence.

Links between poetry and sacredness are to be found in pagan literature also. Greek tragedy is rightly regarded as a ritual linked with religion. In ancient times, theatrical performance was regarded as a highly important event in both social and religious life and was part of religious rituals. The stage itself was a sacred place - like the stadium where games took place - governed by special laws (women and children were not allowed to attend these games, for instance).

Moreover, the timing of a performance was key: plays were performed only during truces because war ruined and profaned its religious implications. The very structure of the plays shows how deeply sacred Greek tragedy is: the "Khoros" constitutes a voice from a different world, a sort of transcendent speech that is distinguished from the characters' voices. These two levels of enunciation on stage illustrate the distinction between the divine and the human world, between the divine and profane reality. This contrast appears all the more instrumental in that, as always, these two poles are reversible and mutually interdependent. The double enunciation of Greek tragedy is a poetic expression of transcendence, and allows communication between men and gods. It is quite clear that the mythical density of this conception of theatre does not constitute a mere cultural matter but proceeds from an intrinsically religious content.

The same status is given to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* since both start with an "invocation" in which the poet asks the goddess (*Iliad*) or the Muse (*Odyssey*) to tell the story of the heroes to men. In this case, the poet is an instrument, a medium between the divine world and the human one. Through his poetry, and through inspiration, he tells a story on behalf of another world. It is no coincidence that Saint-John Perse uses exactly the same pattern in *Amers*, even though he rearranges these components differently. The first part of the poem is called "INVOCATION", the second "STROPHE", the third "CHŒUR", and the last one "DEDICACE". The result is once again a double enunciation, although the two voices are more entangled than those in Greek tragedy. Nevertheless, a transcendent voice is still present in the poem and, here again, one cannot fail to notice that as far as Saint-John Perse's poetry is concerned, the process of divine inspiration through a preliminary invocation is a recurrent feature. It is possible to say that the poet is a "prophet" - in the etymological sense - because he speaks "on behalf of" someone else, a superior entity that transcends human language.

Writing is very much a sacred activity in itself, considering the way it was first used and its original purpose in the Ancient Middle-East

civilisations, for instance. A radical segregation between those who knew how to write and those who did not, marked the rupture between the sacred and profane spheres of human activities. The scribes were often civil servants and priests of the state at the same time. They constituted an elite that gathered all the powers simply because they had control over all scriptures. Their power over the illiterates was so great that it was considered divine. Appropriatedly, the Egyptians called their letters "hieroglyphs": they were indeed sacred signs and all the more sacred in that their value and interpretation remained isolated from profane knowledge – to the point where they became esoteric. To a certain extent, all writings were regarded as sacred scriptures because it was believed that the power of fixing an idea or an utterance was so extraordinary that it had to proceed from a superior or "sacred" power.

The link between language and poetry, through the poetic function of language, seems to have been immediate, and Rousseau goes as far as to say that the figures of speech preceded speech itself.[31] The example he uses in order to explain this paradox is most interesting: primitive men frightened by other men, whom they saw as being bigger than they actually were, created the word "Giants". They then realized their mistake, and found another term, such as "men". But the word "giant" remained to designate the illusory character of the myth. This illustrates the way our passions deceive us and create a language of figures. Another instructive point is that in the same development, Rousseau argues that the idea of fright and the idea of fascination are instrumental to and inseparable from the creation of language. R. Otto uses the same idea to characterize the sacred.[32] Perhaps this is an indication that by its very nature, and especially because of its poetic function, language is essential to an understanding the sacred. The aptitude for language seems to be entwined with the faculty for

[31] "Voilà comment le mot figuré nait avant le mot propre, lorsque la passion nous fascine les yeux et que la prémiére idée qu'elle nous offre n'est pas celle de la vérité". Rousseau associates two classical notions: the precedence of passionate behaviour over the rational; the recourse to tropes to express a passionate state. See J.J. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine des langues* (Paris: Gallimard Folio essais, 1990), ch.3 pp. 68-69.

sacredness in man. By its power of abstraction, language is perhaps the starting point for and certainly the vehicle of the sacred. The distinction between meaning and matter may be a symbol of the contrast between sacred and profane.

2-Poetry and religion

The link between poetry and religion appears to be problematic as regards its nature. Two conceptions may be considered: the first presents the relation between poetry and religion as one of circumstance. There is a religious poetry in the same manner that there is a love poetry, an epic poetry, and so on. In this theory, poetry is a commentary on the world from a religious point of view, or even a commentary about religion itself. But in both cases, the sacredness of poetry depends on either where it comes from, or its subject – the enunciation or the theme. Thus poetry is a profane means of presenting or supporting a sacred meaning that exists by itself, and before poetry. This is the case for all the poetry of the Christian world, for instance, simply because the writers implicitly or explicitly accept the idea that the Revelation has been made once and for all, and therefore transcendence exists "a priori". Whether a writer has in mind to laud or to blame, whether he believes or not in this Revelation, transcendence seems to be accepted as a fact. From Saint Augustine to Chateaubriand, from Montaigne to Voltaire, or even Baudelaire, transcendence is not questioned in its reality, although it is discussed in its relation to man. The irony of Voltaire in a poem such as "Le Mondain", for instance, cannot be understood if it is not read as a provocation aimed against transcendence: the pleasures of this world are all the better for being defiantly preferred to those of the "other" world. Voltaire is confidently mundane because he knows that he can bank on transcendence even though he opposes it. Even the grotesque in Western literature is defined by transcendence: Rabelais feels free to indulge in

[32] "The daemonic-divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm [...]. It is the Dionysiac-element in the numen". Otto, R., *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 31.

some mundane humour because he has a clear notion of what is profane and what is not. Therefore all his jokes, contained within the boundaries of profane life, do not interfere with the sacred and only confirm by contrast the writer's sense of sacredness. In the theatre by Claudel, even the blasphemies uttered by clowns may be understood as desperate and tentative calls upon God. The only rebel is probably Rimbaud; he tries desperately to find a world without this transcendence because he wants to found his own. The "Voyant" is a prophet of his own and is not accountable to transcendence present in the world "a priori". He wants to escape this and to create his own necessity by referring to the "other" inside himself. In this way, because "je est un autre", the poet creates an inward transcendence between this profane "I" and the sacred "other". But perhaps the sudden and definitive silence is a sign that "I" is only "myself", and that "le livre païen" cannot be written by mere blasphemy.

The other conception of poetry is based on its first meaning: making, fabrication, creation, and production. In this case, "poiesis" is opposed to "praxis" because it is transcendence itself. Language orders immediate contact with the reality that would be chaos without it. This is why language creates the world and poetry introduces the sacred into it.[33] Hence the primitive beliefs that a magical intervention and action on the world is possible through language (shamanism, sorcery). This idea comes from the conviction that the essential characteristic of poetry is to be a "divination": poetry produces meaning without referring itself to something existing in the world. Therefore this meaning is thought to be the referent of another world (since the human mind necessarily creates a link between sense and reference) and this analogy leads to the idea that poetry is the discourse of someone else, coming from somewhere else. The link between poetry and transcendence may account for this ability of language to express transcendence.

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[33] It is noteworthy that this aspect has already been encountered previously in connection with the sacred rituals associated with the centre of the world. As M. Eliade puts it: "...the center is precisely the place where a break in plane occurs, where space becomes sacred, hence pre-eminently real. A creation implies a superabundance of reality, in other words an irruption of the sacred into the world [...]. It follows that *every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model.* The creation of

3-Poetry and transcendence

Modern linguistics offers an interpretation of the link between the two entities referred to by the terms "poetry" and "transcendence". Emile Benveniste distinguishes two different levels in a language.[34] On the one hand there is the tongue, on the other hand discourse. The first is the system of signs used to communicate - the code (written or oral) invented and susceptible to infinite variations. The second is the meaning itself that is produced by a speaker. Frege distinguishes again two levels: on the one hand "Sinn" (sense), on the other hand "Bedeutung" (reference).[35] Thus discourse can create many different senses for a single reference: "the victor of Iena", "the loser of Waterloo" are two different locutions, containing two different senses, and designating the same man. Moreover, a discourse can produce sense without a reference: this is exactly what one is doing when one is speaking of a speed superior to that of light. Sense is ideal: it cannot be reduced to the reality of things nor even to the reality of their representations. The representation adds itself to the creation of sense in order to seize, to comprehend, and to order reality. Frege insists on the fact that one is not satisfied with sense – which is prior to the reference. One wants reference in addition to it. This desire, this intention, this impulsion ("Drang"), to "go forward" from sense to reference simply corresponds to the human demand for truth. One can see here how transcendence is made possible – and even necessary. The absence of an exact coincidence between sense and reference in discourse reflects the gap between sacred and profane. The correspondence between them is based upon a similarity of structure.

It is therefore possible to envisage how poetry can speak of an "other" world by creating a sense whose reference remains to be found and that can only be guessed by means of analogy. There are clearly two

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the world becomes the archetype of every creative human gesture [...]". (M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 45).

[34] E. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, (Paris, 1966).

[35] G. Frege, "Sinn und Bedeuntung", in *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, (Iena, 1893-1903).

aspects of poetry, which make it intrinsically linked with the sacred. Firstly, the fascination caused by the countless possibilities in the creation of sense by language, secondly the awe that this power inspires. Both echo Otto's concepts of "fascination" and "mysterium tremendum". The latter is evoked as a reaction of awe and fear to the discovery by man of what he calls "creature-feeling", which in turn leads to the experience of the "numen praesens".[36] Hence the feeling of respectful fear due to the mystery of its cause. This mystery engenders the hypothesis of the "Wholly Other", the entity that cannot be dealt with in ordinary ways. The important point here is that the sacred is intrinsically linked with poetry through its Dionysiac trance and demonic element.

Thus, a more organized picture of the sacred may emerge, one that is connected to the structure of language. It is quite clear that the sacred is not a mere circumstance of the human mind, but on the contrary a psychological and symbolical pattern of human life, opened to levels of experience different from that of immediate perception. Poetry appears to be not only the elected way of expressing the need for transcendence, but also the vehicle for it. Therefore poetry and the sacred are closely related, in the production of myths for instance, and seem to be welded together by man's absolute need for transcendence.

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[36] For Otto one deals with the "mysterium tremendum" when the mind is profoundly affected by a "wellnigh bewildering strength [...]. It may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide [...]. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul [...]. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul [...]". R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p.12.

CHAPTER II: PREMISSES OF THE SACRED IN *ANABASE*

I-The voices of the sacred

1-The conqueror of dreams

In *Anabase*, the poet presents himself as a conqueror. Although Saint-John Perse dismissed quite clearly any bond between his poem and Xenophon's story, the two texts share the theme of the conquest. More precisely, in *Anabase* the conquest is presented as a "quest". Saint-John Perse creates the figure of the Conqueror, founder of a city and ruler of his people. The decisive difference is the fact that this Conqueror deals with dreams and explores the unknown area of "le songe".[1] He asks: "Puissance, tu chantais sur nos routes nocturnes! ...Aux ides pures du matin que savons-nous du songe, notre aînesse?" (I, p. 93).[2] He acknowledges the pre-eminence of "le songe" and links it to "nos routes nocturnes"; that is to say to the area of "la nuit de l'homme". It is remarkable that the "Puissance" is present on the "routes nocturnes", in the night of man. The same word has already been used in the verse: "Et le soleil n'est point nommé, mais sa puissance est parmi nous". Therefore it is possible to say that the poet perceives what might be called an "anonymous transcendence", a Sun in the Night, perhaps in the same way as Pascal acknowledged a "hidden God". This entity might be described as a divine presence which cannot be identified or personified by means of a name. It therefore remains irrevocably unearthly, like a mere essence that cannot be embodied. In *Anabase*, transcendence is an active principle ("mais sa puissance est parmi nous") and yet necessarily an obscure one because it appears nameless ("le soleil n'est point nommé").

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[1] "Le songe" is not "le rêve", a word that Saint-John Perse never uses. "Le songe" is the actual "vision" of the poet, his perception of "other" reality. It does not correspond to the dreams studied by the Freudian psychoanalysis.

[2] All page references regarding Saint-John Perse's poems throughout this dissertation are given from the "Pléiade" edition of the complete works by Saint-John Perse (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

For this reason, one may say that Saint-John Perse acknowledges the "Wholly Other", in other words "He who cannot be named". This may be seen as the starting point of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. The sacred appears as an attempt to try and solve a dilemma: on the one hand, the poet feels a need for transcendence, on the other hand, he is faced with the impossibility of *naming* it, which is the same as to say *knowing* it. Perhaps the difficulty for Saint-John Perse is to name God. Of God it can be said that He named all things, He is intrinsically defined by His power of naming His Creation – and indeed He creates the world by this very power of naming things.[3] In fact, He is "the name", the word by essence. Yet for Saint-John Perse, He remains unnameable. This is actually consistent with the Biblical tradition, although the poet will develop the implications of the fact in a personal way. For Ancient Israel, a person's name was considered an intrinsic part of the individual, who was absolutely defined by his or her name.[4] By extension, somebody's *name* may signify the person itself. This particularity is true of *the name of the Lord*, an expression standing for the Lord himself and implying his presence.[5] This is why "the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there" (Deuteronomy 12.5), and "the house I said, My name shall be there" (II Kings 23.27), and even "this house, which I have builded, is called by thy name" all designate the temple dedicated to the Lord. The same kind of expression is sometimes used for Israel (Deuteronomy 28.10; Isaiah 63.19; Jeremiah 14.9), for the people (Jeremiah 15.16), or for Jerusalem (Jeremiah 25.29). In the New Testament as well, one can find periphrases in which the word "name" is so powerful that it is sufficient to mean "God" or "Christ" (John 18.28; 17.6; Acts 3.16). The expression "in the name of" is frequent and may have various implications; it provides a series of actions with their full

[3] See Genesis, I.

[4] For example: "Let not my Lord, I pray thee, regard this man of Belial, even Nabal: for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him: but I thine handmaid saw not the young men of my lord, whom thou didst send". (I Samuel 25.25) "Nabal" means "fool" in Hebrew.

[5] See Jeremiah 14.9: "Why shouldest thou be as a man astonied (sic), as a mighty man that cannot save? yet thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name; leave us not." See also Psalms 20.7: "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God."

religious meaning: indeed it is by the power of "the name" that the disciples can perform miracles (Matthew 7.22), pray (John 14.13-14), baptize (Matthew 28.19; Acts 8.16; I Corinthians 1.13), prophesy (Matthew 7.22), and welcome somebody (Matthew 18.15). Finally, "to invoke the name (of the Lord)" means to call upon God, and consequently those who do so are the disciples. The power of the *name* is absolutely essential in the biblical "poetics": the *name* is transcendence.

However, the most interesting point as far as the name of God is concerned, lies in the fact that God himself rules out the use of his personal name and does not reveal his identity. This is true even when Moses asks him on behalf of his people: "And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them?/ And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you./ And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations " (Exodus 3.13-15). The personal name of the God of Israel was Yahweh or Yahwoh (the exact pronunciation is unsure). By the 4th century B.C., the Jews no longer used this name for fear of mentioning it wrongly, or rather "in vain" as the Bible puts it: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Exodus 20.7). Instead, they used "The Lord", or even other expressions such as "I am", or "The Name" always put in capital letters. The periphrasis "I AM THAT I AM" is particularly interesting on many accounts: far from being sterile, the tautology conveys the reality of God – as far as it is possible for the human language.[6] It is exactly the same idea that John

[6] As a rule, the tautology is a fault. But there is also a truth of the tautology, which might be interpreted as victory of the existence over the essences as argued by Vladimir Jankélévitch: "Parce que parce que. Forme du cercle non pas vicieux mais vertueux qui fait du bien sa propre origine" (*Traité des vertus*, p.108). In the same way, René Char describes the situation of the poet: "Je suis seul parce que je suis seul, amande entre les

expresses in the very last book of the Bible: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1.8).[7] In this case the tautology is the linguistic equivalent of God's perfection, the expression of his unity. Moreover, various translations of this Hebrew expression are possible: "I AM HE WHO IS" by contrast with the other gods that "are not"[8], and even "I AM WHO I AM", which, in other words, implies a refusal from God to let his personal name be known.[9] The taboo cast upon the name God might represent the enigma that Saint-John Perse wants to solve. Finally, the periphrasis presents itself as a symmetrical structure, like an image reflected in a mirror. God's perfection is illustrated by the perfect reflection between His name and His nature. "I AM WHO I AM" is the linguistic equivalent of the infinite space created by two mirrors facing each other and opening a cascading virtuality in which the mind is easily lost. Likewise, the tautology by which God presents Himself to His people symbolizes the impossibility for man of fathoming God's nature, which definitively puts a limit on human language. This accounts for the importance of mirror images in sacred texts, particularly those by Saint-John Perse.

The crucial point here is that God himself forbids his people to call him by his name and instead suggests some periphrases in order to avoid a fatal permeation between sacred and profane.[10] Nonetheless, God allows his transcendence to reach humankind, making possible a communication and a covenant between Himself and men. Indeed, this implies an attitude of faith, which in the Bible means proclaiming the

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parois de sa closerie" (*la Parole en archipel*, p.159). The tautology conveys the absolute coincidence between the existence and the essence of a being. Only God – or indeed the figure of the poet who is by definition a creator himself – may achieve this perfection.

[7] The "three seasons" in the beginning of *Anabase* may be seen as coinciding with the three temporal dimensions upon which God's power rests.

[8] "Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me" (Isaiah 43.10).

[9] "And Manoah said unto the angel of the Lord, What is thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honour? /And the angel of the Lord said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret?" (Judges 13.17-18).

[10] The same caution is observed as far as the Messiah is concerned: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his

name of God without even knowing it, as does Moses: "And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord" (Exodus 34.5). This is precisely what Saint-John Perse cannot resolve to do as he thinks of himself as unable to receive transcendence out of sheer trust in God. Moreover, one can hypothesize that Saint-John Perse wants to break the divine law by looking for God's name in spite of the taboo created by God. As God's word and name are not recognized by Saint-John Perse in the revelation of the faith, he will have to embark on a Promethean attempt to *steal* the light of the truth from God. By his own word – which is to say his poetics – Saint-John Perse will endeavour to enlighten the night of man. Therefore his poetry is intrinsically a transgression against the major law of God, and a desire to recreate the flow of transcendence not by faith in the name of God, but by the powers of the human language. Transgression, conceived as a reverse transcendence, constitutes the essence of poetics for Saint-John Perse. The first step of this transgression is the almost complete absence of the word "God" or any of its substitutes.

Claudel perfectly understood what was at stake in the poetics of his young friend, even if he did not do so until more than twenty years after the publication of *Anabase*, and did not share all the implications of such a work. On the publication of *Vents* (1946), Claudel was struck by the metaphysical quest of his fellow poet and decided to write an extensive study of the poem.[11] He makes a point of presenting personally his article to his friend a few months before its publication. In a letter, he explains:

> "J'ai mis huit jours à l'écrire, mais en réalité j'y ai consacré, dans mon subconscient, tout l'hiver. Il ne me fallait pas moins de temps pour intégrer, au moins partiellement, une pensée et une expression aussi particulières que les vôtres.

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name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9.6).

[11] Paul Claudel, 'Un poème de Saint-John Perse: *Vents*', *Revue de Paris*, 1 November 1949. Large extracts are reproduced in the Pléiade edition of the complete works by Saint-John Perse (pp. 1122-1130) in the same form as they were chosen by Claudel as his contribution to the international homage in the *Cahiers de la Pléiade* (Paris, été-automne 1950).

J'ai négligé les points de vue techniques et accessoires, cependant fort intéressants, pour m'en tenir à la ligne principale. Leurs points essentiels sont:

-*Vents* est un poème épique.

-Saint-John Perse est un païen ou plutôt un préchrétien, pour qui l'*expectatio creaturae* n'a eu ni satisfaction, ni commencement de satisfaction.

Vous pourrez méditer les dernières lignes de mon étude. Je crois qu'elles vont loin, très loin. Il est assez mélancolique pour moi de songer à quel point, malgré la très vive et sincère affection et admiration que j'ai pour vous, nous sommes et sans doute resterons-nous éloignés. Il ne faudrait rien de moins qu'un miracle pour nous rapprocher".[12]

This is how these "dernières lignes" read:

"Ce souffle de la mousson, jadis, qui faisait bruire les grands stores de ma véranda, cette haleine à grandes reprises de la mer, cette solennelle fonction respiratoire de notre monde, on sait que c'est l'échange de la zone surchauffée de l'Equateur et de l'air froid du nord, dévié par le mouvement de la planète, qui le détermine, l'alizé cérémonialement évinçant le contre-alizé. C'est bon de savoir ça et de recevoir en pleine figure la volonté de Dieu. Mais Dieu est un mot que Saint-John Perse évite, dirai-je religieusement? et que pour un empire il ne laisserait pas sortir de ses lèvres. Et cependant, conduit par le soleil au rebours de ce souffle tantôt violent, tantôt perfide, et tantôt méditatif, qu'allait-il chercher au-delà de toute barrière, qu'allait-il demander aux réservoirs de l'Incommensurable?"[13]

Perhaps the answer is the "Incommensurable" himself. Whatever the answer Claudel's view rings true, shows great lucidity about Saint-John Perse's poetics, and seems retrospectively to account for *Anabase.*

A few verses further on, the poet describes his mission among men: "...Or je hantais la ville de vos songes et j'arrêtais sur les marchés

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[12] Letter of the 9th August 1949, quoted in Pléiade p.1121.
[13] Pléiade, pp. 1129-1130.

déserts ce pur commerce de mon âme, parmi vous / invisible et fréquente ainsi qu'un feu d'épines en plein vent". The poet describes himself as a spirit or a ghost haunting a mysterious city, which may be understood as an exploration of the common sub-conscious of man. He compares his soul to an invisible fire – a metaphor very close to that of the Spirit in the Gospels. There is clearly a dimension of sacredness in this exploration of "le songe". The "pur commerce" to which he refers is obviously a sacred activity, the purity of this commerce being a mark of sacredness: this expression, which sounds like an oxymoron, signifies an exploration of the invisible world.[14]

Further in the third canto of *Anabase*, the poet returns to the importance of the "songe": "Ha! plus ample l'histoire de ces feuillages à nos murs, et l'eau plus pure qu'en des songes, grâces, grâces lui soient rendues de n'être pas un songe! Mon âme est pleine de mensonge, comme la mer agile et forte sous la vocation de l'éloquence!". This "action de grâces" contains a clear link between water and dreams: but they are opposed in the same way that water is opposed to the sea because they are two different substances. Moreover this verse suggests that the inspiration is a lie ("mensonge/vocation"), and that there may be something untrue about the poetic inspiration.

In *Anabase* IV, the figure of the poet as a conqueror of dreams is still present: "Duc d'un peuple d'image à conduire aux Mers Mortes, où trouver l'eau nocturne qui lavera nos yeux?". Here again, the poet expresses the need for pure water against death and impurity. The vision is not clear and he perceives a confusion between purity and impurity: "Trahissant l'âme la moins sobre et soulevé des pures pestilences de la nuit, / je m'élèverai dans mes pensées contre l'activité du songe". The oxymoron "pures pestilences" is a distinctive feature of the sacred because it represents two faces of the same reality. They can be reversed but they also bring excessive power and are therefore sacred. This is why the poet concludes this experience: "Ablutions aux rives des Mers Mortes!". This ritual allows him to wash away all impurities that the

[14]This is reminiscent of Moses and his powers of divination. He interprets dreams – which are actually "visions" – of Pharaoh: God confers this power onto him.

dreams might have brought to him. But it has to be noted that the expression "Mers Mortes" evokes the Dead Sea, with its high concentration in salt – an element of purification that itself needs to be washed off. Only after a feminine voice intervenes in the poem (*Anabase* X) can the "songe" be presented as a positive force. This voice proclaims: " « ...Je t'annonce les temps d'une grande faveur et la félicité des sources dans nos songes»". This is made possible because the woman presents herself as being linked to the water: " « que j'aille sous la tente, que j'aille nue, près de la cruche, sous la tente, [...] nulle servante sous la tente que la cruche d'eau fraîche [...] »". The woman is by metonymy the fresh water that can wash away the impurity of "le songe". The link between femininity and water is not particularly original. But in Saint-John Perse's poetry it gains its full meaning because it is an element of a whole conception of sacredness. Being "eau fraîche" the woman replaces the "Mers Mortes" and cleanses all the impurity of the dream. In the course of *Anabase*, there is a problem related to the powers of the dreams to which a solution is found at the end (IX) thanks to the irruption of a feminine voice in the poetic enunciation. This represents an unusual way of dealing with the commonplace relation not only between woman and water, but also between water and dreams.[15] In Saint-John Perse's poetry the triad dreams-water-woman is a dialectical process operating in the imaginary of the poem which revolves around the concepts of purity and impurity.

2-The double enunciation

Anabase has been discussed by Jean Paulhan in terms of a "static epic" in which the "poet-hero" constitutes the central figure.[16] Paulhan argues that Saint-John Perse's poetry is "une épopée sans héros". This notion, he claims, accounts for one of the forms of the enigma in Saint-John Perse's poetry, and constitutes a "solution" to it. He dismisses the

[15] See Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les Rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: José Corti, 1942).

[16] See Jean Paulhan, 'Enigme de Perse', in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1969), vol. IV, 163-94. Quoted by Saint-John Perse in la Pléiade, pp. 1309-11.

figure of the hero in this poetry on the grounds that the latter cannot be the author himself ("Cependant, quel est l'homme; et qui, le héros? A quoi il est trop facile de répondre: l'auteur lui-même"). Paulhan then turns to the various avatars of the poet and appears somewhat baffled by their number ("Pour le reste, il dira: le Prince, le Régent, le Maître d'Astres et de Navigation; ou encore le Conteur, le Poète, le Conquérant, le Chœur. Et parfois l'Enchanteur ou l'Etranger "). He fails to recognize in these metamorphoses the same poet-hero embarked on a sacred quest. This failure is all the more ironic in that Paulhan implicitly admits that he cannot get rid of the figure of the poet; in the next sentence he acknowledges:

> "Mieux encore, il semble que le héros de l'*Anabase* soit triple, et tantôt chef militaire et dictateur (comme Gengis Khan), tantôt le poète ou l'historien qui escorte ce chef et lui sert de scribe (comme Xénophon), tantôt le sage, le moine, l'illuminé qui interroge les étoiles et dégage le sens de l'aventure (comme Nostradamus): bref trois fois ambigu, insaisissable".

Paulhan proves the point that the figure of the hero cannot be dismissed from Saint-John Perse's poetry. In the very first verses, the presence of the figure of the poet is signalled in the pronouns and adjectives of the first person ("je", "m'", "ma"). This figure is clearly in control of both space ("le sol") and time ("trois grandes saisons") with which it is associated. This is all the more evident in that the poetic "je" shows its power on the three aspects of time (three seasons): the past ("j'ai fondé"), the present ("m'établissant"), and the future ("j'augure"). The reader therefore enters a poetic world in which "je" has total control over space and time, to the point where the poet may tangle these two concepts (he *establishes* himself upon three *seasons*) and so create a new approach to these dimensions.

The "je" has a leading role in this poetic space ("j'augure", "j'arriverai", "j'ai dessein"). The poetic voice shows itself in the poem as a master, acting and creating, as if the poem were at once a creation and a demonstration of this creation. This situation recalls that described by Alexis Leger for whom poetry is poetry *and* critique. In *Anabase* Saint-

John Perse puts this idea into practice: the poetic voice creates poetry and comments on it at the same time. The poem is a beautiful artefact that brings with it a certain distance which enables the reader to look at it. This perhaps provides the evidence of the poet's power over his poetic world, a power created by the invention of a pseudonym. But the situation of the poet's voice is not a simple one: from the very first part of *Anabase* to the end, the poet's voice is diffracted and split between at least two different instances. This phenomenon recurs throughout in Saint-John Perse's poems and may be seen as a consistent characteristic of his poetry. It is noticeable through the use of two textual marks: first quotation marks which introduce a different voice, or a different aspect (a different "tune") of the main poetic voice, but are still clearly related to it (by words, rhythms or themes). One could call this phenomenon "internal quotation". Second, through the extensive use of the brackets, resulting in numerous parentheses in the course of the poem. Here again, the content of these parentheses is closely related to the main theme or themes of the poetic voice. As in the case of the "internal quotations", there is no obvious logical reason for doing so (no second poet identified as such and willing to speak, for instance). The "internal critique", as one may call it, is therefore the expression of a double message – perhaps a double truth – in the poetic work. This is the most remarkable aspect of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry, not because these internal quotations or critiques represent a sacred part of the poem as compared to the main profane voice, but rather because they remind us that the reality of poetry is – at least – twofold. If this phenomenon implies a fragmentation of the poetic voice, it does not mean that the latter becomes heterogeneous or incoherent; rather the poem refers to different sources of enunciation – which are clearly hierarchical if not precisely identified – in order to express the different levels of inspiration. This multiple referentiality constitutes the very structure of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's overall project.

However, the split enunciation does not threaten the unity of the poem. On the contrary, the recurrent structure provides the text with a very strong cohesion. The use of internal quotation and internal critique

establishes the validity of an "inspired" poetry. This opens a perspective for a divine intervention, and yet conveniently leaves the merit and responsibility of the poetic creation in the human sphere. The link between this phenomenon on the one hand, and the role of the chorus in the ancient Greek drama on the other hand is compelling. In both cases, a new level of enunciation intervenes in the course of the main text (poem or tragedy) like a parallel voice, introducing a comment on the principal flow of the text. Above all, this parallel voice brings a sacred dimension to the text, like a divine word upon human affairs. In both cases – Greek drama and Saint-John Perse's poetics – a second voice produces a comment whose main function is to remind the spectator or reader that the text is to be taken in its sacred dimension. The structure thus created by the recurrence of the internal critiques and quotations constitutes a sort of textual frame that gives the poem full meaning and coherence. Centred on this metaphysical interrogation, *Anabase* paves the way to the creation of transcendence, which will be completed in *Amers*. Present within the text is a double reality marked by a sharp frontier between two levels of poetic expression. These two levels of enunciation are separated from each other by textual marks.

Moreover, these two instances of enunciation create an effect of "echo", when each voice responds to the other by using slight variations of the same recurrent word or expression. Sometimes the effect appears symmetrical, when images reflect one another, like an object and its picture in a mirror, but there is always a slight transformation. In the first part of *Anabase*, there are two instances of this phenomenon. The third verse reads: "Et le soleil n'est point nommé, mais sa puissance est parmi nous / et la mer au matin comme une présomption de l'esprit" (I, p. 93). The sixteenth verse reads: "(Et le soleil n'est point nommé, mais sa puissance est parmi nous)" (I, p. 94). In the poem the brackets have no grammatical or logical explanation and the second sentence must be read as an echo of the first one, but the brackets urge us to interpret it as being uttered by an "other" voice, a voice from beyond the first level of the poem. The symmetry between the two sentences suggests the same sort of effect as that pictured in some seventeenth-century paintings in which

a mirror adds a new dimension to the picture. The observer is thus referred to an "other" dimension or world, most of the time an image of the invisible world beyond death upon which the soul reflects. The same effect is found in Saint-John Perse's poetry with the use of quotation marks. The ninth verse reads: "Au seuil des tentes toute gloire! ma force est parmi vous!" (I, p. 93). And the nineteenth echoes: "« Ma gloire est sur les mers, ma force est parmi vous! [...] »" (I, p. 94). The variation may suggest that the two voices share the enunciation in the poem and that they echo each other in two different textual dimensions. They are clearly distinguished one from the other like the sacred and the profane, by the quotation marks used to enhance the meaning of the second occurrence. The symmetry and the reversibility of the two constitute major characteristics of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. It should be noted, though, that this reversibility does not consist in reproducing identical images; rather it is a transformation, as the last quoted example shows: "Au seuil des tentes toute gloire!" becomes: "« Ma gloire est sur les mers »". This reversibility is thus a dynamic process that does not exclude the reshaping of a verse; indeed, it is intrinsically a creative process in the course of the poem, inasmuch as it enables the poet to renew his poetics *ad infinitum*.

3-Purity and impurity

Purity and impurity are the two faces of the sacred for Saint-John Perse. Although they are two distinct – and indeed opposed – states of the same reality, they cannot be separated and constitute a set of characteristics that are always reversible. First, the poet suggests a symmetrical or parallel image of two places opposed. In the beginning of the fourth part, the poet-conqueror organizes the foundation of his city and declares: "C'est là le bien du monde et je n'ai que du bien à en dire – Fondation de la ville. Pierre et bronze. Des feux de ronces à l'aurore / mirent à nu ces grandes / pierres vertes et huileuses comme des fonds de temples, de latrines [...]". "Temples" and "latrines" are the most unlikely places to be associated one with the other. Nevertheless, in the poetry of

the sacred, they epitomize the two poles: pure and impure. The interesting point is that they both show the same appearance ("pierres vertes et huileuses "). Impurity and the sacred present the same signs, "Temples" and "latrines" are two "sacred" places, two faces of the same reality.

In the first part of *Anabase*, purity is associated with salt: "...et l'idée pure comme un sel tient ses assises dans le jour". But in the third part, purity and impurity are again entangled: "Et des morts sous le sable et l'urine et le sel de la terre, voici qu'il en est fait comme de la balle dont le grain fut donné aux oiseaux". Purity and impurity lose their usual meaning and their habitual distinction because they are categories of the sacred, which in turn has no meaning beyond death. When urine and salt become mixed under the earth, the sacred disappears because the poet approaches the secret of the night of man: death. "Et mon âme, mon âme veille à grand bruit aux portes de la mort". Perhaps this salted urine is an omen of the sea to come in *Amers*. As a conclusion to *Anabase* IX, after a feminine voice appears in the poem and introduces an erotic atmosphere, the poet insists on the division between night and day: " – et debout sur la tranche éclatante du jour, au seuil d'un grand pays plus chaste que la mort, les filles urinaient en écartant la toile peinte de leur robe". Again the reader finds urine as a sacred element (impure and erotic) to mark the rupture between life and death. It seems that the sacred is organized like a triptych with each of its three panels arranged as follows:

Night Death Purity	Threshold	Day Life Impurity

This trilogy appears to be the foundation of the poet's imagination in which the threshold is a centre of symmetry around which the sacred revolves.

II-The poet "voyant"

1-The eye, the sun and the invisible light

Since the perception of the sacred was initiated by Saint-John Perse in the metaphor "la nuit de l'homme", it is logical that the view should be considered as the essential way of investigation for the poet. This is why he mentions so often the presence of the eye: "L'œil recule d'un siècle aux provinces de l'âme" (X). It is the instrument of communication with the sacred. Through his "vision" the poet explores the soul – and death. But this vision is neither "exterior" nor "interior": it is a global perception of poetic reality. Sometimes the view is diffracted and the point of view is that of the sailor: "et le navigateur en mer atteint de nos fumées vit que la terre, jusqu'au faîte, avait changé d'image (de grands écobuages vus du large et ces travaux de captation d'eaux vives en montagne)" (IV). Here the land is seen from the sea and as a consequence its "image" has changed. In this way the poet finds what he has been looking for: a new image of the world. In (V) he asks: "Duc d'un peuple d'images à conduire aux Mers Mortes, où trouver l'eau nocturne qui lavera nos yeux?". He is a man of images but since they come from a sacred night these images have made his eyes impure and they require an ablution before they may "see" again in the profane world. At this stage, the comparison with the blind men of the Gospels is compelling water is the essential element for the recovery of sight.[17] The poet is indeed a "leader of images" and *Anabase* presents itself as a succession of "pictures" which appear to the eye like a film consisting of many different scenes. Sometimes the vision is made altogether impossible. "Âme jointe en silence au bitume des Mortes! Cousues d'aiguilles nos paupières! louée l'attente sous nos cils!". In his

[17] See Mark 8.23 and John 9. 6-7. This is especially reminiscent of the way Jesus uses His own saliva and the water from the pool of Siloam to purify and wash the blind man's eyes.

exploration of death, the poet remains blind and has to accept that he must stay in the "darkness". He endeavours to "enlighten" this night. It is only to this extent that Saint-John Perse's poetry may be said to be "obscure" as he himself explained.[18] Saint-John Perse insists that his poetry is an exploration of the night of the soul and it is therefore not surprising that it should be marked by it. In addition, this point of view is given to another character: "Le vieillard bouge des paupières dans la lumière jaune". This is a figure that Saint-John Perse might have observed during his stay in China: a wise and old man, either Buddhist or Confucean, whose vision is directed equally "inwards" and "outwards". This capacity of sight to diffract itself and to shift from one incarnation to another in the poem, makes it a versatile faculty like the sacred.

As a "sacred instrument", the eye is sometimes associated with violence of a sacrificial nature: "et le poulain poisseux met son menton barbu dans la main de l'enfant, qui ne rêve pas encore de lui crever un œil...". For Saint-John Perse, horses are more than animals. He boasted of being able to communicate with them and to heal them by magnetism. In particular, he was able to tame Alan, a young Mongol pony that was given to him when he was in China, simply by means of magnetic influence.[19] The cruel act evoked in the poem is seen as a form of sacrifice. It is the mutilation of a "totem animal". Perhaps the child dreams of piercing its eye because he can see awesome – sacred – things in it. Finally "l'Etranger" reappears in the poem (V): "Son œil est plein d'une salive, / il n'y a plus en lui substance d'homme". His profane vision is certainly blurred but this is because he is looking at a reality beyond the visible, beyond the human world, in order to discover new

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[18]"Et c'est d'une même étreinte, comme une seule grande strophe vivante, qu'elle [la poésie] embrasse au présent tout le passé et l'avenir, l'humain avec le surhumain, et tout l'espace planétaire avec l'espace universel. L'obscurité qu'on lui reproche ne tient pas à sa nature propre, qui est d'éclairer, mais à la nuit même qu'elle explore, et qu'elle se doit d'explorer: celle de l'âme elle-même et du mystère où baigne l'être humain. Son expression toujours s'interdit l'obscur, et cette expression n'est pas moins exigeante que celle de la science." *Poésie*, (Allocution au Banquet Nobel du 10 décembre 1960), Pléiade pp. 445-446.

[19]This point is discussed on various occasions by the poet himself in the correspondence with his mother. (See in particular: letter of the 4th April 1917 p. 840, letter of the 2nd February 1918 p. 852, letter of February 1919 p. 871, letter of the 20th February 1919 pp. 871-872.)

pictures. The poet has become "l'Etranger" because in his vision he has departed from human nature and reached a divine world. As words lose their meaning at the threshold of death, the picture remains as the poet's only means of expression and this is why "[il] se fait encore des partisans dans les voies du silence [...]". Image is his language. The "Etranger" is not a foreigner or an outsider. He belongs to this world but knows the other as well: "- De la fissure des paupières au fil des cimes m'unissant, je sais la pierre tachée d'ouïes, les essaims du silence aux ruches de la lumière [...]" (VII). In the poetic experience, vision is a fusion of the poet with the world in such a way that he may perceive and know through the silence of the words, and through pictures and light, what lies beyond. Light is a concrete matter for Saint-John Perse, just as it is for a painter: "Et la lumière comme une huile" (VII). Like a painter, he uses vision and light as brush and paint to create a picture, or perhaps "receive" it. The link between vision – or indeed its opposite, poetic blindness – and sacredness is explicitly underlined by Saint-John Perse himself in *Anabase* VII: "A l'orient du ciel si pâle, comme un lieu saint scellé des linges de l'aveugle, des nuées calmes se disposent, où tournent les cancers du camphre et de la corne...". The sacredness of the depicted place is due to "des linges de l'aveugle". The blind man is a sacred figure because of his ability to see differently, to see a poetic sky beyond blindness. But this blindness itself is not unconnected to the sacred. The "linges de l'aveugle" (an unusual plural in French) evoke some sort of cloth that he might use to clean or protect wounded eyes. Perhaps this picture refers us to that of the child dreaming of piercing the colt's eye as a sacrifice. The sacred blind man is close to Œdipus, the incestuous son who gouges out his own eyes because of his impurity. Having murdered his father and married his mother, he subsequently becomes *sacer* – in other words beyond the reach of human laws – and the punishment that he inflicts upon himself stigmatizes him. The poet is a "voyant" as Rimbaud put it, but for this very reason he is also menaced with blindness: he is likely to see what he should not see in the sacred world. This is precisely why the "lieu saint" is sealed: it must be protected from the profane.

This is consistent with what I have suggested earlier: a sacred place is necessarily closed, or at least clearly distinguished from the profane by a barrier. One might go so far as to say that the poet "voyant" is necessarily blind because he chooses not to look at the world in an ordinary fashion: he prefers to see it in "le songe" which represents a different level of reality. The "songe" is the result of a voluntary act: "Et à midi, quand l'arbre jujubier fait éclater l'assise des tombeaux, l'homme clôt ses paupières et rafraîchit sa nuque dans les âges...Cavaleries du songe au lieu des poudres mortes [...]" (VII). Once again the poet closes his eyes in the full glare of the sun ("midi") to communicate with the world of the dead ("éclater l'assise des tombeaux"). This constitutes a recurrent image in *Anabase*: a solar transcendence linked to the quest for meaning in the night of man. The problem for Saint-John Perse is that in *Anabase* this transcendence, although effective, is not a reality that anybody, including the poet himself, can deal with. The reason is simply that it is not named: "Et le soleil n'est pas nommé mais sa puissance est parmi nous" (I). This is probably the starting point for the search for the sacred for Saint-John Perse: the need for transcendence is inevitable but it is also impossible to fulfil.

2-Mirror as the visible gate to the sacred

The voice of the poet is essentially diffracted. It is split in two halves: "« Je vous parle mon âme! – mon âme tout enténébrée d'un parfum de cheval! »" (VII). Here the rupture between the two halves is clearly marked by the hyphen. Like sacred and profane the two halves of the sentence are hyphenated – which is a link and a frontier at the same time. Moreover, the symmetrical structure created by the position of the expression "mon âme" suggests the reflection of an image by a mirror.[20] The soul associated with "je" is reflected in the sentence beyond the hyphen as if it were transposed into another world beyond the surface of

[20]The figure of speech used here is known in French either as "anadiplose" or even as "réduplication". It occurs frequently in Saint-John Perse's poetry. This reduplicative structure enhances rhetorically the sacred dimension of the poetic voice whose meaning is twofold like any sacred object.

things. It is the same aesthetic – as well as ethic – effect that is seen in the mirrors of the "Vanities" in 17th-century paintings. Very often, the mirror reflects a candle (symbol of the soul) isolated in a dark image. The role of this image is to invite the viewer to "reflect" upon his life in the face of death.[21] Cocteau used the same technique in his film *Orphée* in which Orphée communicates with the world of death, and eventually penetrates it, through a mirror. The decisive evidence in favour of this interpretation is the expression "enténébrée d'un parfum de cheval". The poet's soul is in the darkness and is therefore marked by it: interestingly enough, it is marked by the presence of the animal-totem. "Je" discovers his own identity through the mirror of the reduplication and can see beyond it into the darkness – "la nuit de l'homme". Moreover, this split sentence is framed by two quotation marks which indicate that it is given a special status in the text. Here again, the comparison with the "Vanities" is striking: the sentence is a mirror image (framed by quotation marks) within a painting (itself also framed). By contrast with the text of the poem and the poet's voice on one level of signification, the quotation marks open up a new dimension, in which one can find another poem and another poetic voice. More precisely, this phenomenon can be linked to a "mise en abîme" of the second voice whose task is to explore a parallel reality, such as a "reflected" image. This is all the more striking given that the following sentence reads: "Et quelques grands oiseaux de terre, naviguant en Ouest, sont de bons mimes de nos oiseaux de mer" (VII). The mimetic behaviour that the poet notices here is the mark of a symmetry between two different worlds – that of land and that of sea separated by the shore that draws a line of symmetry between them. A similar sort of relation exists between an image and its "reflection". This phenomenon is noticeable in the poem itself: a voice imitates and copies another in an echo that reminds the reader of the presence of two different spaces, two dimensions in the poem. At this stage one can see how important the role of the internal quotations and internal critiques are as far as the sacred is concerned. And the poet concludes in VII:

[21] One thinks of paintings such as 'Madeleine repentante' by G. de la Tour, for instance.

"(L'ombre d'un grand oiseau me passe sur la face)". The poet and the bird join in a solar alignment: once again the sun is not named but its power radiates in the poem as in *Anabase* I. Through the presence of the bird, the poet expresses his two major themes: that of the two symmetrical dimensions of the world, and that of the transcendent presence of the sun in this world. The idea of the mirror is suggested by the poet himself. Just before his conclusion in (VI), he commands: "Levez un peuple de miroirs sur l'ossuaire des fleuves, qu'ils interjettent appel dans la suite des siècles!". This comes as a response to the preceding question: "Et soudain, ah! soudain que nous veulent ces voix?". It is clear that the mirrors will reflect ad infinitum the message of these voices just as Saint-John Perse's poems will do. The mirrors constitute therefore the gates or the windows opened onto the area of the sacred from which the voices emanate.

3-The figures of the poet

In *Anabase*, the complexity of the poet's identity is illustrated by the diffraction of the poetic point of view. Confronted with the infinity of images and enigmas produced by the world, the poet's response is to break up his own identity so that he can become a diffuse consciousness in the world and therefore an explorer of the night of man. The most obvious sign of this is probably the fact that, although *Anabase* is essentially a poem of the land ("la terre"), one is occasionally reminded that it is designed as an "anabasis". In the poet's words this means "un retour à la Mer, à la commune Mer d'où l'œuvre fut tirée (dans sa définitive, et peut-être cruelle, singularité)".[22] At first, the sea is nothing more than a desired and almost mythical object on the horizon of the imagination.

Time and again, the poet shifts his point of view towards the sea, as if his mind were ubiquitous: "Il vient, de ce côté du monde, un grand mal violet sur les eaux. Le vent se lève. Vent de mer. Et la lessive / part! comme un prêtre mis en pièces..." (II, p. 95). The priest torn to pieces is

without doubt the symbol of the discrediting of religion by Saint-John Perse, and the rejection of it after a metaphysical crisis. The priest appears as a mere puppet, and religion can only be seen as a vain disguise that fails to resist the natural forces of the earth. *Anabase* creates a divided and orientated world: two spaces are juxtaposed. Like the two faces of the sacred, they oppose each other, but this conflict allows the poet to travel from one to the other: " « [...] On fait brûler la selle du malingre et l'odeur en parvient au rameur sur son banc, / elle lui est délectable »" (III, p. 97). This confrontation-communication is developed further: "[...] Les cavaliers au fil des caps, assaillis d'aigles lumineuses et nourrissant à bout de lances les catastrophes pures du beau temps, publiaient sur les mers une ardente chronique: / Certes! une histoire pour les hommes, un chant de force pour les hommes, comme un frémissement du large dans un arbre de fer!..." (VI, p. 102). In these two examples, one can see a recurrent and principal element: the horse ("la selle", "Les cavaliers"). It is a central figure in *Anabase* and is always associated with the idea of "going back" to the sea – which is a fundamental concept of the poem. This may be traced back to Alexis Leger's personal experience when he was working in China. In a letter to his mother – who was a very keen rider herself – he writes of this amazing habit that he shared with his Mongol pony: "De cette immensité d'espace qui semble m'entourer, seule la mer, immensément, commence à me manquer. Et c'est une étrange sensation, qu'il me semble partager parfois avec mon cheval, qu'arrêtés en quelque lieu perdu de la plaine chinoise et comme mus mystérieusement par on ne sait quelles ondes secrètes, nous nous orientons tous deux d'instinct, de la tête d'abord et puis de tout l'axe du corps, d'un seul tenant, vers ce que ma petite boussole de poche indique comme la direction de la mer. Vous connaissez, j'en suis sûr, cette loi magnétique animale que nient nos scientifiques d'Europe. Mais vous n'avez pu, comme amazone, l'expérimenter vous même, étant trop étrangère à la mer, votre ennemie".[23]

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[22] Letter to Mr. J. Rivière of 21st October 1910, Pléiade p. 677.
[23] Letter to Mrs A. Leger dated Peking, 4th April 1917, Pléiade p. 841.

This ability to switch from a terrestrial point of view to a maritime one in the virtual space of the poem, is one of the most important features of Saint-John Perse's poetry. It is more than a simple literary prerogative: Saint-John Perse shapes his world using two poles – land and sea – in order to prepare a structure for the sacred. The sea is a pole of desire that is already reflected in the mirrors of the poet's imagination. Evoking the contents of the "riders' chronicle" further, he describes: "-les déploiements d'étoffes à loisir, les confitures de roses à miel et le poulain qui nous est né dans les bagages de l'armée - les déploiements d'étoffes à loisir et, dans les glaces de nos songes, la mer qui rouille les épées, et la descente, un soir, dans les provinces maritimes, vers nos pays de grand loisir et vers nos filles / parfumées, qui nous apaiseront d'un souffle, ces tissus..." (VI, p. 103). The repetition of the same expression, enhanced by two hyphens, is yet again a double image of the same reality, as if reflected in a mirror, and, of course, transformed by the process already mentioned, as if a painting had undergone a modifying process. The expression "les glaces de nos songes" in the second part of the sentence leaves no doubt about this. The sea, which was only "presumption" in (I), has become a mirrored image in the poet's mind. The material shivering in the wind is a terrestrial element in the first part of the sentence – in which the figure of the horse is present again ("le poulain"). Then, in the second part, it becomes a metaphorical substitute for the sea itself, probably through its wavy undulation. Land and sea reflect each other by means of metaphor, they both reproduce similar patterns (slopes, waves). As a consequence, the poem presents itself as a reflective structure. It is therefore no coincidence that this diffracted sentence should contain an internal critique depicted as a mirror image. Placed between brackets *and* quotation marks, the expression "vers nos pays de grand loisir et vers nos filles / parfumées, qui nous apaiseront d'un souffle, ces tissus..." is not only a variation on the theme of "les déploiements d'étoffes à loisir", but also an echo of the first verse of the sixth part "avec nos filles parfumées, qui se vêtaient d'un souffle, ces tissus" (VI, p. 102). Thanks to the mirror of poetry, the "reflection" – or second poetic voice – has made significant changes: the

past tense has become a future; the daughters no longer dress themselves but "apaiseront", introducing an obvious erotic dimension – as well as an image of transgression (incest), very often linked to the former in Saint-John Perse's poetry. Erotic transgression and future pleasure constitute two elements of variation in the internal critique; they both are associated with the sea. The variation is in fact an opposition because the first level of reality is the antithesis of the second – in other words reality mirrors itself in fantasy.

This phenomenon accounts for the fact that the poet, who must establish the link between the two worlds, is split between two different entities and must adopt two points of view. Logically, the last verse of *Anabase* reads: "Terre arable du songe! Qui parle de bâtir? – J'ai vu la terre distribuée en de vastes espaces et ma pensée n'est point distraite du navigateur" (X, p. 114). The conclusion of Saint-John Perse himself is that the poet "cultivates" his dreams and by doing so reaches the point where he can "see" a new space – and eventually gain a new identity. He will become the "navigateur" in *Amers* under the features of the " Maître d'astres et de navigation". In *Anabase* the poet is not yet this navigator and perhaps this is why the poet-"voyant" has not yet reached his maturity. This may account for the fact that he presents himself with various identities, all involved in the sacred.

From the beginning of the poem, the poet speaks in such a way that one immediately associates him with a "holy man". In *Anabase* the poet is less a "conqueror" than a "prophet" who speaks for the future: "j'augure bien du sol où j'ai fondé ma loi" (I, p. 93). In the same part he uses such words as "présomption", "présages", "destins promis". Moreover, he is like a priest or a messiah giving his law to men and twice announcing the length of his stay on earth: "Pour une année encore parmi vous!" (I, p. 93). He brings purity: "...En robe pure parmi vous. Pour une année encore parmi vous" (I. p. 94). The tone is that of a prophet announcing a new era.

The same phenomenon occurs with the feminine voice in (IX): " « ...Je t'annonce les temps d'une grande chaleur [...]/...Je t'annonce les temps d'une grande faveur [...]/...Je t'annonce les temps d'une

grande chaleur [...]/...Je t'annonce les temps d'une grande faveur [...]". This feminine voice is explicitly distinguished from the rest of the poem by means of stars and cannot be mistaken for the poet's voice. It is already an attempt to build a dialogue between the poet and a female figure in the course of the poem. This attempt will be completed in *Amers* ("Etroits sont les vaisseaux") thanks to the figure of "l'amante" who will be treated by the poet as a real partner in the creation of the poem.

In *Anabase* however, the two voices are still separated. The interesting point is that this second voice is prophetic in the tone, and structure by a repetitive and symmetrical pattern. This "Annunciation" concerns the night, for the female voice concludes its speech by " « mais pour l'instant encore c'est le jour! »". Obviously, this text presents a diffuse erotic atmosphere and the happiness forecast by the woman is that of love. Interestingly, for Saint-John Perse eroticism and love constitute an antidote to the anguish of the night of man; this is how eroticism becomes a sacred element for him. This speech, divided into four equal parts, may represent the four seasons of a new time (perhaps in contrast to the three seasons of the first part).[24] Together, the four parts illustrate a perfect double symmetry introduced by a feminine presence. Thanks to this prophetic female voice, and its geometrical structure, the poetic world of Saint-John Perse is ordered. However, this perfection is not within the poem itself yet, and this is why in canto X the poet comes back to a world of sacredness including violence and sacrifices. In canto VIII he concludes: "Un grand principe de violence commendait à nos mœurs". In canto X, he evokes "des sacrifices de poulains sur des tombes d'enfants, des purifications de veuves dans les roses [...], des célébrations de fêtes en plein air pour les anniversaires de grands arbres et des cérémonies publiques en l'honneur d'une mare [...], et des acclamations violentes, sous les murs, pour des mutilations d'adultes au soleil [...]". In short, the poem returns to a world of violent and primitive sacredness.[25] The rest of canto X is a long enumeration of various and

[24] "Sur trois grandes saisons m'établissant avec honneur" (*Anabase* I. p. 93).
[25] See R.Girard, Girard, René, *La Violence et le Sacré* ([Paris]: Grasset, 1972).

unusual behaviours and rituals, as well as a list of "toutes sortes d'hommes dans leurs voies et façons". Interestingly, there is no woman in this extensive "poetic casting". This may account for the fact that the poem loses some of its harmony and symmetry.

In *Anabase* Saint-John Perse seems to be trying to come to terms with his poetic vocation and his sacred vocation. He announces a sort of "liturgy of the sea" and refers himself to a transcendent power ("Puissance, tu chantais sur nos routes nocturnes!" (I, p. 93)). Although efficient, this power remains taboo ("Et le soleil n'est point nommé, mais sa puissance est parmi nous" (I, p. 93)). The first words of the poem may constitute an acknowledgement of the "Mysterium Tremendum" associated with a solar cult, which would provide the poet with an immanent transcendence. In *Anabase*, the quest for transcendence has been formulated in a way that is consistent with the initial metaphysical interrogation: Saint-John Perse's poetics intends to go further: "Lorsque les philosophes eux-mêmes désertent le seuil métaphysique, il advient au poète de relever là le métaphysicien; et c'est la poésie alors, non la philosophie, qui se révèle la vraie « fille de l'étonnement », selon l'expression du philosophe antique à qui elle fut le plus suspecte".[26] This "étonnement" echoes the concept of "Mysterium Tremendum" proposed by Otto, although it is important to note that for him the feeling involved is not separated from an element of "awefulness" and even "horror" when the mind is confronted with a "wellnigh bewildering strength", whereas for Saint-John Perse it is rather a positive and creative experience.[27] Nevertheless the connection between Saint-John Perse's "étonnement" and Otto's "Mysterium Tremendum" is plausible inasmuch as they both acknowledge the existence of a transcendental power that may be defined ironically by its inability to be defined, which implies that no available name exists for it. As Otto puts it: "The truly "mysterious" object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it

[26] "Poésie", (Allocution au Banquet Nobel du 10 décembre 1960), Pléiade p. 444. The philosopher in question is Plato.
[27] R. Otto, *The idea of the holy*, p. 12-16.

we come upon something inherently "wholly other", whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own".[28] Hence, the ned for what could be called anonymous transcendence in Saint-John Perse's poetry.

III-Transcendence and transgression

1-Death and the sacred

Anabase may be called a metaphysical poem in so far as the poet is mainly concerned with death. He announces: "Et mon âme, mon âme veille à grand bruit aux portes de la mort – Mais dis au Prince qu'il se taise: à bout de lance parmi nous/ ce crâne de cheval!" (*Anabase*, III, p. 97). Death is a recurrent feature in the text, and is evoked in a variety of ways. From the beginning of the poem it is presented as a gate, a passage through the night of man. It is therefore a transgression, an attempt to cross a limit and to reach a reality "beyond" death itself. Despite this theoretical interpretation, death does not constitute an abstract theme in the poem: it is also a very concrete and almost crude reality. "Et des morts sous le sable et l'urine et le sel de la terre, voici qu'il en est fait comme de la balle dont le grain fut donné aux oiseaux" (*Anabase,* III, p. 97). As one would expect, death is immediately linked to the sacred through the problem of purity and impurity: the two symbols of purity and impurity are mixed together (salt and urine) in the underground world of the dead. This point is significant: the poet associates death and the sacred because of their common characteristics, and perhaps simply because the former is the cause of the latter.

Moreover, the poem itself seems to be a means of communication with the dead, as if it were whispered to them: "A voix plus basse pour les morts, à voix plus basse dans le jour" (*Anabase,* VII, p. 105). Through the poem, the poet creates a language destined to explore the metaphysical night of man and to reach the world beyond the physical

[28] R. Otto, *The idea of the holy*, p. 28.

one. Death is therefore an essential feature of Saint-John Perse's poetry because it represents a challenge to man to overcome his own limits. By attempting this "leap" beyond death, the poet endeavours to discover possible transcendence in the transgression thus implied.

In the first instance, death is evoked in a rather indirect but striking way: "(Un enfant triste comme la mort des singes – sœur aînée d'une grande beauté – nous offrait une caille dans un soulier de satin rose.)" (IV, p. 99). Human death is depicted only as an "imitation", or a "copy" of that of monkeys. It is the same parallel as that established previously between seabirds and land birds.[29] For Saint-John Perse the world is full of correspondences – and it is precisely the poet's aim to express them, for example by means of metaphors. Here, periphrasis is a "precaution" taken by the poet to deal with a sacred "matter". As such, human death cannot be uttered. It must remain a taboo for fear that its evocation "contaminates" the ordinary world. Moreover, human death is not the highest or most pre-eminent aspect of the Creation: that of the monkey, for instance, is considered "une sœur aînée d'une grande beauté". The implications are twofold: first, the precision "d'une grande beauté" implies a lesser beauty in human death compared to that of animals. Secondly, man can recognize his own death in that of the monkey, as in a "mirror". The monkey's death is actually an omen of man's destiny, and its seniority lies simply in the fact that it occurs "in advance" compared to that of man – or perhaps it appears nobler because it is not foreseen, and is therefore free from any sacred preoccupation. The monkey of *Anabase* is certainly a mirror image of the human condition, and of the poet in particular: it is worth noting that Saint-John Perse never mentions it again until he concludes in his very last words " « *Singe de Dieu, trêve à tes ruses!* »" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1400). The double "sacralisation" of this sentence (quotation marks and italic) shows that the text has reached the ultimate point "aux portes de la mort", and that death's image is no longer a mirrored reality.

[29] See *Anabase*, VII, p. 106.

Among the wonders of the world, the poet mentions "les feux de ronces et d'épines aux lieux souillés de mort" (X, p. 112). Death brings impurity and must be kept at a distance (through the use of parentheses or of quotation marks as in the previous quotations); its impurity must be annihilated (by fire). Moreover, it is remarkable that it should be the same fire that revealed purity and impurity in canto IV: "Des feux de ronces à l'aurore / mirent à nu ces grandes / pierres vertes et huileuses comme des fonds de temples, de latrines" (p. 98).

Because it is pictured as a "gate" open onto the unknown, death has always been a source of fear and anguish. Therefore, the notions of purity and impurity have been introduced to tame the fright thus created: they allow humanity to symbolically keep death away from living things. Consequently, death has become a sacred matter. The sacred is the human response to the mystery of death, so that its dangerous powers may be kept at a distance and so that life may be protected. This attitude implies that a transcendence be acknowledged somehow (either by religious faith, transcendental ethics, or animistic beliefs, etc.). For Saint-John Perse however, things are somewhat different. Given that he is in search of a transcendence which he cannot find otherwise, the poet needs to face death directly in order to try and explore the "beyond" of immanence. This constitues the core of the question of the sacred in Saint-John Perse. His poetry is sacred inasmuch as he creates a language which, by means of immanent signs (words), has embarked upon an attempt to name what is beyond itself – the Wholly Other – and eventually to unveil a potential transcendence. Therefore, acknowledging "la beauté d'un lieu de sépultures" (X, p. 113); the poet is prepared risk approaching death itself: "Que la mort saisisse le vif, comme il est dit aux tables du légiste, si je n'ai vu toute chose dans son ombre et le mérite de son âge" (X, p. 113). It is remarkable that the poet presents himself as the "hero" who incarnates life and is not afraid of dealing with death. The first canto of *Anabase* contains the following challenge that the poet issues to himself: "J'aviverai du sel les bouches mortes du désir!" (I, p.

93). Once again, salt is used as a means of purification, so that, symbolically, the poet might be in contact with death.[30]

Death is present in the poem through various images. The poet does not hesitate to call upon the dead: "Rire savant des morts, qu'on nous pèle ces fruits!..." (II, p. 95). The contact between the poet and the dead is even clearer and closer in canto V: "Que j'aille seul avec les souffles de la nuit, parmi les Princes pamphlétaires, parmi les chutes de Biélides!... / Âme jointe en silence au bitume des Mortes! Cousues d'aiguilles nos paupières!" (p. 100). With his eyes closed in the night, the poet joins silently the "other" world. In the poem, Saint-John Perse crosses the forbidden limit and transgresses the boundaries of immanence. In the rest of the poem, death is pregnantly present and often related to animals or things.[31] These occurences constitute the background of the poet's main aim: to approach death because it is the gate to the "other" world, and therefore a source of transcendence. In this task, the poet is accurately depicted in canto V: he regards himself as a "Duc d'un peuple d'images à conduire aux Mers Mortes..." (p. 100). His people of images, namely his poems, is *en route* to Dead Seas, in search of "l'eau nocturne qui lavera nos yeux" (p. 100).[32] The aim is to reach a pure vision in the night of man, perhaps to discover a truth in the enigma of the human condition. The only way for the poet to account for man's existence is to risk his own life in poetry. Only through poetry may a man approach death's realities, and this thanks to the sacredness conveyed by sacrifice.

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[30] Interestingly in this example death is pictured as an absence of desire. This explains why eroticism will play such an important part in all the poems, and particularly *Amers*. Eroticism is seen as an "antidote" to the powers of death, and consequently becomes sacred itself. Desire and sexual impetus are considered as a "sacred" protection against the deleterious powers of death. For this reason, sex and death become two opposite faces of the sacred that both put man in contact with the "Wholly Other".

[31] See in particular:
- "...poudres mortes de la terre" (VII, p. 105)
- "...de grands morceaux de palmes mortes, débris d'ailes géantes..." (IV, p. 99)
- "...en ce point mort où flotte un âne mort..." (IV, p. 98)
- "celui qui traîne un aigle mort comme un faix de branchages sur ses pas..." (X, p. 112).

[32] The interpretation is quite obvious if one remembers the nine poems of *Images à Crusoé* ("Les Cloches", "Le Mur", "La Ville", "Vendredi", "Le Perroquet", "Le Parasol de Chèvre", "L'arc", "La Graine", "Le Livre"): nine images of a man and his life painted by the poet.

In *Anabase*, the idea of sacrifice is conveyed by many different images. First of all, sacrifice is presented as a mere "execution", a death penalty for ethical reasons: "Et le doute s'élève sur la réalité des choses. Mais si un homme tient pour agréable sa tristesse, qu'on le produise dans le jour! et mon avis est qu'on le tue, sinon/ il y aura une sédition" (III, p. 96). By using this striking image Saint-John Perse confirms that "un grand principe de violence commendait à nos mœurs" (VIII, p. 108). Another death evokes more directly a sacrifice, or some kind of ritual involving a pyre: "A la troisième lunaison, ceux qui veillaient aux crêtes des collines replièrent leurs toiles. On fit brûler un corps de femme dans les sables" (IV, p. 99). Death is also found among the "choses excellentes", "des sacrifices de poulains sur les tombes d'enfants" (X, p. 111). Because of his particular link with horses, Saint-John Perse would certainly have considered the killing of a colt a sacrifice – almost as significant as a human one.

Finally, the theme of death is dealt with through the concept of immortality. In fact, the poet attributes the quality of being immortal to things, rather than to humans: he evokes "les capitaines pauvres dans les voies immortelles" (*Anabase*,VI, p. 103). When considering his land, he enjoys its colour, "couleur de soufre, de miel, couleur de choses immortelles, toute la terre aux herbes s'allumant aux pailles de l'autre hiver" (*Anabase*, VII, p. 105). Immortality is thus considered as a mere quality of things, with the result that the meaning of the word becomes even more abstract. Paradoxically, the "immortal" things are more likely to change, and more difficult to seize. Immortality is nothing more than an abstract perspective; it is perhaps only the cyclical renewal of things on earth. Nevertheless, it is sufficient to create a real horizon for the idea of transcendence. By suppressing the ending of life, immortality opens up the human mind onto a space and time – should such concepts remain valid beyond death. Thus, it is clear that this theme is closely related to that of eternity, which refers us to the first canto of the poem. In an address to his people, the poet exclaims: "Hommes, gens de poussière et de toutes façons, [...]/ vous ne trafiquez pas d'un sel plus fort quand, au matin, dans un présage de royaumes et d'eaux mortes hautement

suspendues sur les fumées du monde, les tambours de l'exil éveillent aux frontières/ l'éternité qui bâille sur les sables" (*Anabase*, I, p. 94). This eternity that yawns on the sands is a "space" that stretches beyond the "frontières" of the exile, the latter being a metaphor for the human condition. As eternity awakes, transcendence becomes a potentiality. At this stage, poetry might open up onto the "other world", and find a possible transcendence.

In the poem, death may represent the temptation of transcendence, an "other world" to be visited, implying a crossing over the boundaries of the visible world. The poet allows himself to "trespass" and cross the threshold in an attempt to discover transcendence. This is how, in my view, the sacred is involved in Saint-John Perse's poetry. It is not a decorative theme, but rather the very essence of his poetic quest - which is also a metaphysical one. Hence the role of violence as a protection against the forces of the sacred, and against the dangers of transgression. At this stage, it is clear that the access to transcendence consists of transgression, which in turn becomes a vector of poetic inspiration.

2-Inspiration and transgression

In *Anabase*, poetic inspiration becomes an essential theme in itself. It is not at all affectation, or pretence on the part of a self-indulgent poet. Saint-John Perse was never interested in exploring the mystery of inspiration for the sake of it, and therefore never got involved in extreme experiences, such as taking drugs for instance, as other poets were tempted to do.[33]

Since the poet regards poetry as a sacred activity in search of transcendence, inspiration is itself sacred. The poet feels compelled to write, as if urged in spite of himself and his own will. Describing his position as a "poet-conqueror" in canto V, he writes: "Solitude! nos partisans extravagants nous vantaient nos façons, mais nos pensées déjà campaient sous d'autres murs:/ « Je n'ai dit à personne d'attendre... Je

vous hais tous avec douceur... Et qu'est-ce à dire de ce chant que vous tirez de nous?... »" (*Anabase*, V, p. 100). The two levels of enunciation ("nous", "je"), split between two different voices, illustrate the fact that two "voices" interact with each other in the poem. Moreover, one at least is not recognized by the poet himself and appears to him as a surprising and alien voice. He expresses his astonishment at the way poetry is "drawn" from him. This bewilderment is visible in many other parts of the poem. "Et soudain, ah! soudain que nous veulent ces voix?" (*Anabase*, VII, p. 106). Situated in the core of the poem itself, such interrogations show that the poet experiences inspiration as a form of "alienation". Poetic inspiration remains a source of wonder that strikes the poet and haunts him throughout the poem. On many occasions Saint-John Perse makes sure that the reader is aware of the conditions of production of the poem by means of messages emanating from one of the voices. "Mieux dit: nous t'avisons Rhéteur! de nos profits incalculables" (*Anabase*, III, p. 96). This address may sound like a comment on the style itself and the rhetorical powers of the poet who seems to be challenging an opponent. But in fact, the comment "Mieux dit", along with the exclamation mark, shows clearly that Saint-John Perse does not separate the poem from the critical speech it generates. The meaning of such passages is explicitly given a few lines further on: "Et l'homme enthousiasmé d'un vin, portant son cœur farouche et bourdonnant comme un gâteau de mouches noires, se prend à dire de ces choses: « ...Roses, pourpre délice: la terre vaste à mon désir, et qui en posera les limites ce soir?... » Et un tel, fils d'un tel, homme pauvre,/ vient au pouvoir des signes et des songes" (*Anabase*, III, p. 97). The poet is "l'homme enthousiasmé d'un vin", but the exaltation described here is certainly not drunkenness. One must turn to etymology to unveil the true meaning of the verse: "enthousiasme" actually means "divine transport" (Greek *enthusiasmos*, from *theos* "god"). This man is in fact animated by a divine power. For the ancient Greeks, the word describes the state a priest or a priestess – such as Pythia for instance – might be in when

[33] One thinks of Rimbaud or Michaux, amongst others.

under the sacred influence of his or her god (Apollo or Dionysus). It is a sacred delirium experienced by a specifically chosen person, by means of which he or she interprets the divine message. The word suggests therefore a kind of "trance", which in turn refers us to a communication with the other world – that of spirits or gods.[34]

Thus, one can see how poetic inspiration is linked to death because it implies a communication with the world of "beyond". In search of transcendence, Saint-John Perse acknowledges the importance of becoming an "inspired" poet and accepting the irruption of a "voice" in his poem. This is how he might reach the divine domain, and this is why his poetry might be said to be a "sacred" poetry. Very lucidly and consistently, he accepts the need to deal with death in the process; hence the omnipresence of the theme in the poem. The poet's "enthusiasm" necessarily imparts a sacred nature to his creation because a divine element is brought to it. Trance is a means of realising the conditions for transcendence, and in that sense inspiration is basically a transgression. For Saint-John Perse the "transe poétique", which is a completely lucid and conscious process in spite of the wondrous way it manifests itself, is a transgression because it allows him to communicate with a world that transcends visible and expressible reality. Therefore, the poet might be an anonymous and ordinary man ("un tel, fils d'un tel, homme pauvre"), and at the same time a "chosen" man, who needs a new and "revealed" identity (represented by the pseudonym Saint-John Perse) because he is

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[34] Although "trance" is actually a "state of partly suspended animation" or "a sleep-like state" or even "a state of profound abstraction or absorbtion" (Webster's dictionary), "a sleep-like state, e.g. that induced by hypnosis" or "a dreamy state in which a person is absorbed with his or her own thoughts" (Oxford dictionary), which implies a still and even passive attitude, the word originally had a more active meaning. The term was introduced in English from the Middle French "transe", from "transir" ("to pass away", "to swoon"); the origin is obviously the Latin "transire" ("to cross over", "to pass away"; from "trans" + "ire" *to go across*). It is therefore clear that the word conveys a strong dynamic meaning: it implies not only a movement, but also a "breakthrough", a transition of the mind to another state beyond the limits of consciousness (mental abstraction, spiritual rapture or even death). Surprisingly, the word "trance" in English retained a passive implication, whereas it was reintroduced in French during the 19th century with the then fashionable practice of the spiritualism, and, on occasion, recovered its dynamic meaning. In modern French, "transe" suggests more of a frenetic dance than a quiet rapture of the mind. The decisive point here is that, through the theme of the trance, poetic inspiration is intrinsically linked to death, because its very nature for Saint-John Perse is to cross a physical limit in order to find – or at least to create the conditions of – transcendence.

given a sacred attribute (the "pouvoir des signes et des songes"). In *Anabase*, Saint-John Perse has created a sacred figure of the poet whose nature is twofold: on the one hand he is a humble and common man, on the other hand he belongs to the élite of those selected to convey the divine word. The reversibility of his nature is a sign of his sacredness. But at this stage, the poet has not yet reached a point where he might build a theory of transcendence.

Poetic inspiration is like a divine benediction given to the poet, providing all the symbols of a blessing in spite – or perhaps because – of the contact he establishes with death through the night of man. Having reached the sacred area of the dead, "Âme jointe en silence au bitume des Mortes!" (*Anabase*, V, p. 100), the poet may declare in the next verse: "La nuit donne son lait, qu'on y prenne bien garde! et qu'un doigt de miel longe les lèvres du prodigue:/ « ...Fruit de la femme, ô Sabéenne!... »". Milk and honey symbolize the abundance of wealth granted by the gods to the men during the Golden Age. In this case, the abundance comes from the night of man, explored by the poet, and it nourishes the poet's inspiration. The image is clear: a finger touches the poet's lips and immediately a "second" voice arises, like a quotation from another speech, opening a new dimension in the poem. By the contact with the dead through the night the poet draws inspiration, represented here by a feminine and anonymous allegory (milk, finger), which commands the whole theme of femininity in the image ("Mortes", "Fruit de la femme", "Sabéenne"). Because he is touched by inspiration, the poet may become "le prodigue": he abundantly produces a poetic discourse which by definition exceeds what a profane discourse could express. In this sense, the "prodigue" is already partly a prophet, or to be more precise, the poet of *Anabase* is a *transcriber*: he puts into words a vision received from the night of man. He claims no merit for himself, but acknowledges that poetry "creates itself" through him in a process that originates in and indeed goes far beyond, the scale of his own life. The last verse of the first canto is a conclusion to the poet's portrait and to his presentation of poetry: "Mathématiques suspendues aux banquises du sel! Au point sensible de mon front où le poème s'établit, j'inscris ce

chant de tout un peuple, le plus ivre,/ à nos chantiers tirant d'immortelles carènes!" (*Anabase*, I, p. 94). The "poet-shipwright" is the vector of poetry; he builds a shape, a style that is marked by immortality for the very reason that its inspiration comes from beyond death.[35]

Saint-John Perse is left with a dilemma, and an unsolved metaphysical enigma. On the one hand the materialistic approach to life is obviously rejected; but on the other hand the transcendence that might have enlightened the night of man is open to suspicion. It is quite clear that the poet does not value materialism: "Homme pèse ton poids en froment. Un pays-ci n'est pas le mien. Que m'a donné le monde que ce mouvement d'herbes?..." (*Anabase*, VIII, p. 107). Man cannot be reduced to his weight in wheat, although he is obviously materialized in an existential dimension.[36] The material world cannot fulfil the expectations of the poet and the "mouvement d'herbes" brings indeed more questions than answers; hence the search for transcendence. However, the latter appears to be a dubious thing, if not an imposture: "Va! nous nous étonnons de toi, Soleil! Tu nous a dit de tels mensonges!...Fauteur de troubles, de discordes! nourri d'insultes et d'esclandres, ô Frondeur!" (*Anabase*, III, p. 96). This defiant address is all the more striking because the sun is an essential feature in *Anabase*; it appears as early as the third verse in the first canto: "Et le soleil n'est point nommé, mais sa puissance est parmi nous (...)" (*Anabase*, I, p. 93). The doubt cast on potential transcendence may account for the fact that *Anabase* remains a quest that does not reach its object. This is due to the underlying idea that the poet seems to foster about the nature of the relations between the two worlds. In canto VIII, in a short, and apparently uncompleted verse, the poet seems to offer some sort of clue: "Autre chose: ces ombres – les prévarications du ciel contre la terre..." (p. 107). At first sight, this is a mere apposition, mentioned moreover in

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[35] Chateaubriand created the same effect, although for different reasons, in his *Mémoires d'outre tombe*; his voice speaking from beyond death, even before he died, has gained immortality.

[36] It is interesting that Saint-John Perse should have chosen such a metaphor: it cannot but remind us of the figure of Christ who compares himself to the wheat and the bread. It seems that the poet rejects two different approaches to life at once. Both materialism and Christianity are dismissed in the image.

the course of the poem as an idle digression, having no connection – at least apparent – with the main theme ("Autre chose"). "Les prévarications" is too peculiar a term to pass unnoticed. The term comes from the Latin "prevaricatio", a term of law meaning "collusion" (if a prosecutor, for instance, is in league with the other party). This suggests a deceitful action from heaven against the earth. However, the word "prévarications" is found in Middle French with a new meaning: "abandonment of the divine law"[37]. In the context of the above mentioned verse, the word may sound like an absurdity, unless the two meanings are brought together in their essential implication, namely the idea of heaven's treason or treachery against humankind. One may deduce the metaphysical and spiritual conceptions of Saint-John Perse: perhaps transcendence is impossible because the poet still resents divine abandonment. God's default is probably the starting point of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. For him, God is not a "hidden God" (the "Dieu caché" of Pascal for instance), He is rather a "missing God", or even an "omitted God". In *Anabase*, transcendence may be said to be an impossibility – despite being desperately looked for – because of a fundamental defiance towards a failing divinity. Hence the attempt to build a new sacredness based on a recreated transcendence, a transcendence the initiative for which would be entirely that of the poet, a man on his own, in short "l'Etranger", but also the founder and designer of his own necessity – the poet of *Anabase*.

[37] Dictionary "Robert". "*prévarier*" (1120) means "to transgress the divine law".

CHAPTER III: EPIPHANY OF THE SACRED IN *VENTS*

I-The quest for the absolute

1-The world as sacred text

The Bible undoubtedly constitutes an important point of reference throughout the poem *Vents*. However, it is divested of any religious value or divine implications. It is regarded and used as a sort of inevitable landmark in the area of the sacred, but systematically denied any metaphysical profundity. On the contrary, the poet insists on the very physical or down-to-earth images that it can engender. Evoking the rain in the wind, he writes: "Et la beauté des bulles en dérive sur les grands Livres du Déluge n'échappe pas aux riverains" (*Vents*, II, p. 206). The essential spiritual dimension of the sacred books is diminished to the point where they no longer stand for divine manifestation but rather for the Flood itself in its physical reality. As always in Saint-John Perse, the abstract conception of the sacred dwindles into a mundane reality. This phenomenon extends to the sacred texts themselves: "Ces vols d'insectes par nuées qui s'en allaient se perdre au large comme des morceaux de textes saints, comme des lambeaux de prophéties errantes et des récitations de généalogistes, de psalmistes..." (*Vents*, II, p. 208). The first element of this comparison is in fact the concrete one, with the second one bringing the more abstract image of the "textes saints" and the "récitations de généalogistes" which might correspond to some extracts from the Bible. This suggests that the principal centre of interest lies in the physical phenomenon ("ces vols d'insectes par nuées"), whereas the Bible is referred to only as a cultural object or as a source of sacred iconography.

Some comparisons leave no doubt as to how the poet sees the link between the world and the sacred texts of the Bible. He celebrates "Toute la terre aux arbres, par là-bas, sur fond de vignes noires, comme une Bible d'ombre et de fraîcheur dans le déroulement des plus beaux textes de ce monde" (*Vents*, II, p. 199). While it is clearly relegated to a strictly sensual source of images ("ombre" and "fraîcheur"), the Bible is nonetheless still valued as a point of reference for the sacred vision of the world. In fact, Saint-John Perse uses the rich set of connotations associated with the Bible. It is the word itself and its expressive powers rather than the book and its historical or religious reality that the poet wishes to introduce in his poem. He is certainly more fascinated by the connotations of the word "Bible" than by its denotation. Saint-John Perse was undoubtedly a keen reader of the Bible, but, as noted before, he read it not as a believer, but rather as a poet – which is to say as a creator. Indeed, the metrics, the rhythm and the tone bear the mark of the profound influence of biblical verse on Saint-John Perse's poetry. However, this aesthetic influence does not entail any religious implications for Saint-John Perse. In the poet's religious experience, divinity cannot be conveyed to humans by means of a meaningful continuity between the divine and the human worlds. There is a permanent discrepancy between them, which may never be solved.

Therefore, the poet's world is one of dereliction, containing no possibility of illuminating divine intervention. As the poet puts it, "Les dieux lisibles désertaient la cendre de nos jours" (*Vents*, I, p. 195). If there is a meaning in the message of the gods, it is not to be grasped through plain human language because of the gap that exists between the two worlds. But what is noticeable at this stage is the fact that if the divine presence is "readable" in some way, interpretation of it is kept tantalisingly beyond human knowledge. This predicament is linked with the theme of God's silence.

While carefully avoiding naming "Him", Saint-John Perse repeatedly evokes God's absence and silence. This attitude reveals that, for the poet, naming God is a question of "taboo": since God cannot be named in Saint-John Perse's experience, his presence, and above all his

word, cannot be grasped by the human mind. Moreover, God appears to be refusing to pay any attention to the poet's quest:

> "Au seuil d'un grand pays nouveau sans titre ni devise, au seuil d'un grand pays de bronze vert sans dédicace ni millésime, / Levant un doigt de chair dans la ruée du vent, j'interroge, Puissance! Et toi, fais attention que ma demande n'est pas usuelle"; "Je t'interroge, plénitude! – Et c'est un tel mutisme..." (*Vents*, II, p. 204)

Having reached the limits of this world and facing an other-worldly space (deprived of the usual landmarks left by a human presence), the poet knows he now can contemplate or at least call the absolute "Other". Standing on the threshold of the sacred, he raises the ultimate question on behalf of his fellow humans and demands an answer to the mystery of the human condition. Different periphrases allow the poet to mention God without naming him; among them, one is particularly expressive: "Puissance". Not only is this word capitalized, but it also reminds one of the "puissance" mentioned in the first verses of *Anabase*: "Et le soleil n'est point nommé, mais sa puissance est parmi nous [...]. / Puissance, tu chantais sur nos routes nocturnes!" (*Anabase*, I, p. 93). The reference to the sun is a symbol of the absolute power that may be associated with God. Moreover, in *Anabase*, this absolute power is already taboo, and divine power has to be acknowledged without being named. In *Vents*, the divinity is explicitly called upon, yet it remains silent and ignores the poet's wish to understand the significance of the world. The poet notes in the course of his poem: "Et le dieu refluait des grands ouvrages de l'esprit" (*Vents*, I, p. 179). This time, the picture is even clearer: the god (as a substitute for "God"?) recedes from the point where the poet hoped he could "meet" him (in other words, the poem itself) and the poet's quest is met with a refusal. At the end of *Vents*, the poet observes: "...C'était hier. Les vents se turent. – N'est-il rien que d'humain? / « moins qu'il ne se hâte, en perdra trace ton poème... » Ô frontière, ô mutisme! Aversion du dieu! / Et les capsules encore du néant dans notre bouche de vivants" (*Vents*, IV, p. 233). And also: "Avertissement du dieu! Aversion du dieu!...Aigle sur la tête du dormeur. Et l'infection

dans tous nos mets...J'y aviserai" (Vents, II, p. 211). At this stage, the poet is faced with what he perceives as a clear rebuff from the presence he had identified as the divinity. His inquiry in the domain of the "Wholly Other" is being thwarted thus leaving him with a feeling of emptiness and hopelessness. The divine rebuff is also a rejection from the sphere of Being, which results in the poet experiencing an overwhelming feeling of nothingness. Eventually, he recognizes that an understanding of sacred mysteries is perhaps beyond his reach, and on the subject of the great forces that roam the earth, he notes: "Ou disputant, aux îles lointaines, des chances du divin, elles élevaient sur les hauteurs une querelle d'Esséniens où nous n'avions accès..." (Vents, I, p. 183). This last detail sounds like an admission of defeat from the poet. He has been repelled from the sphere of the divinity and his criticism of Christian themes will be even harsher as a result.

2-Condemnation and profanation

The poet responds with a kind of blasphemous rebellion in which he infuses a variety of sacrilegious remarks or images into his text. Most of these relate to the Christian faith – an obvious target since it is the religion of reference for Saint-John Perse. Many Christian symbols are dismissed as pointless or even as vile tokens of a depreciated religion. For instance, among all the things dispelled by the great forces of the wind, the poet includes "les palissades d'affichage et les Calvaires aux détritus" (*Vents*, I, pp. 184-185). Another specifically sacred Christian place is used in a derogatory way. Speaking of the great forces of the wind, the poet notes: "Elles couchaient les dieux de pierre sur leur face, le baptistère sous l'ortie, et sous la jungle le Bayon" (*Vents*, I, p. 184). The principal sacred area of Christian rituals – namely that of baptism – is abandoned among weeds as a sign of its worthlessness in the poet's eyes. Not only are the sacred statues knocked down to the ground, but also the very place where Christian life begins appears to be God forsaken. Interestingly, the baptistry is overgrown by tropical vegetation;

this could refer to an image of the poet's childhood in the West Indies at a time when his Christian faith was already shaken. Moreover, holy places may be reduced into profane areas:

> "Le philosophe babouviste sort tête nue devant sa porte. Il voit la Ville, par trois fois, frappée du signe de l'éclair, et par trois fois la Ville, sous la foudre, comme au clair de l'épée, illuminée dans ses houillères et dans ses grands établissements portuaires – un golgotha d'ordures et de ferraille, sous le grand arbre vénéneux du ciel, portant son sceptre de ramures comme un vieux renne de saga [...]" (*Vents*, I, p. 192).

The capital letter tends to suggest that the city in question might be Jerusalem – or its poetic equivalent. The mention of the storm, the lightning and Golgotha can refer only to Christ's death on the cross. Saint-John Perse borrows a few, very telling – indeed quintessential – images of Christianity in order to downgrade their religious implications and to use them as dramatic and spectacular poetic pictures.

The poet endeavours to deprive these powerful images of their strictly religious momentum in order to recycle them in his own textual and spiritual quest. In particular, the poet makes use of the sharp contrast between the image itself and its new profane context and meaning. This is certainly a major aesthetic achievement by Saint-John Perse. However, it leaves open the question of his ambiguity towards the Christian religion. On the one hand, he makes every effort to ruin it; on the other hand, he cannot escape the fact that he needs it in order to express his spiritual quest, even though he does it through reprocessing Christian icons to produce a distinctively new sacred dimension in them. Therefore, the relation of Saint-John Perse with Christianity appears to be one of fascination-repulsion, as if, like Rimbaud, the poet could not escape it in spite of himself.

Furthermore, the poet exclaims in an emotional confession: "Un homme s'en vint rire aux galeries de pierre des Bibliothécaires. – Basilique du Livre!...[...] Ha! qu'on m'évente tout ce lœss! Ha! qu'on m'évente tout ce leurre! Sécheresse et supercherie d'autels..." (*Vents*, I, p. 186). And immediately after that, he repeats his stance: "sécheresse et

supercherie d'autels, carie de grèves à corail, et l'infection soudaine, au loin, des grandes rames de calcaire aux trahisons de l'écliptique..." (*Vents*, I, p. 186). Christian faith is discarded as a mere superstition which infects the world. There is no doubt, however, that Christian vocabulary is used in conjunction with the theme of general and widespread decay of the world. For every sterile natural element, there is a counterpart from the Christian world. Using a series of metaphors and periphrases, the poet underlines what appears to him as a vision of barrenness cast upon the world (dust is a particularly strong symbol here). Christianity is associated with bleakness and aridity not only through space metaphors, but also through time comparisons: "L'Hiver crépu comme Caïn, créant ses mots de fer, règne aux étendues bleues vêtues d'écailles immortelles [...]" (*Vents*, II, p. 202). Therefore, a widespread loss of memory seems to dispel any kind of Christian heritage among men; the poet asks: "Qui se souvient encore des fêtes chez les hommes? – les Pâlilies, les Panonies, / Christmas et Pâques et la Chandeleur, et le Thanksgiving Day..." (*Vents*, I, p. 188). Through a paradoxical effect, the quest for the sacred entails the rejection of religious festivals, and not only Christian ones: pagan festivals are stigmatized too with the same opprobrium. This is surprising, given that festivals play an important role in the sacred as many people experience it.

The poet seems to regret the laicization of the world which clearly does not match his vision of the human experience: "Et c'est bien autre exil, ô fêtes à venir! dans l'élargissement de la pâque publique et la tristesse des grands thèmes de laïcité" (*Vents*, III, p. 223). In fact, he waits for a new and universal festival ("la pâque publique") to emerge and to be shared by everyone. Perhaps Saint-John Perse dreamt of a fresh and trully "catholic" rite through which to celebrate the world. Indeed, he seems to be suddenly inspired by a spiritual revelation, like Paul on his way to Damascus: "C'est en ce point de ta rêverie que la chose survint: l'éclair soudain, comme un Croisé! – le Balafré sur ton chemin, en travers de la route, / Comme l'Inconnu surgi hors du fossé qui fait cabrer la bête du Voyageur" (*Vents*, IV, p. 239). This mysterious meeting with

"l'Inconnu" represents an experience of the other world; indeed, an experience of the "Other", which marks a turning point in the poem. The simple fact that this "Unknown" remains unnamed signifies the failure of the poet to reach a satisfactory knowledge of the world he expected to perceive through the pattern of the sacred. Nevertheless, this pattern remains an essential feature of Sain-John Perse's poetic rhetoric, and might even be said to constitute its very framework.

II-The structure of pagan sacredness in the poem

1-Sacrifice and violence

In an attempt to lay the foundations of a new type of religiousness, the poet compares himself to a pagan holy man performing a blood sacrifice: "Le Narrateur monte aux remparts. Et le vent avec lui. Comme un Shaman sous ses bracelets de fer: / Vêtu pour l'aspersion du sang nouveau – la lourde robe bleu de nuit, rubans de faille cramoisie, et la mante à longs plis à bout de doigts pesée" (*Vents*, I, p. 181). The poet associates himself with a violent image to give substance to his view that violence is required in order to rejuvenate the world. In doing so, he merely lends weight to the argument put forward in *Anabase*: "Un grand principe de violence commandait à nos mœurs" (*Anabase*, p. 108).[1] In *Vents*, the winds prolong and intensify this incitement to violence. The poet asks the winds for advice, and the answer comes back with no ambiguity: "Et c'est par un matin, peut-être, pareil à celui-ci, / Lorsque le ciel en Ouest est à l'image des grandes crues, / Qu'il prend conseil de ces menées nouvelles au lit du vent. /Et c'est conseil encore de force et de violence" (*Vents*, I, p. 189). Indeed, the theme of violence permeates the

[1] The themes of violence and sacrifice are frequently referred to in Anabase. "Allez et dites bien: nos habitudes de violence, nos chevaux sobres et rapides sur les semences de révoltes [...]" (p. 103), "Mais si un homme tient pour agréable sa tristesse, qu'on le produise dans le jour! et mon avis est qu'on le tue, sinon / il y aura une sédition" (Anabase, p. 96), "...et le poulain poisseux met son menton barbu dans la main de l'enfant, qui ne rêve pas encore de lui crever un œil..." (Anabase, p. 101).

whole poem through a variety of sacrificial images of animals, in what can only be described as pagan rituals.

In particular, the poet chooses a recurrent image, that of the sacrifice of a horse. This is striking, since for Saint-John Perse the horse is a totem animal. The meaning of the killing is therefore transparent: it is a ritual designed to establish a kind of transcendence between earth and heaven. The spirit of the killed animal is supposed to bring divine benediction. Not only does the poet in *Vents* consistently bring together the two themes of violence and sacrifice, but he also impersonates the perpetrator of the sacrificial act on his emblematic animal. Through this sacrifice, the poet intends to create the conditions for a pagan spirituality that purges its existence of all Christian references. This image is clearly at the core of this entire poetic vision. It is a vision marked by a tendency to re-enact the sacrifice of the totem horse in a recurrent pattern. First, in the same canto, the poet envisages different incarnations he may have, the final being: "Ou bien un homme s'approchant des grandes cérémonies majeures où l'on immole un cheval noir. – « Parler en maître, dit l'Écoutant »" (*Vents*, I, p. 182). The poet expresses the view that the ritual is highly significant, and what is especially interesting is the fact that, immediately after he comes across the ritual, a different – perhaps supernatural – voice intervenes in the poem to suggest that a message is about to be delivered and that "l'Écoutant" is ready to receive it.

Sacrifice plays an important role in the inspiration for the poem as can be seen from the fact that the same image recurs yet again. As a conclusion to the first canto, the poet foresees the visions he may have: "Et tout cela qu'un homme entend aux approches du soir, et dans les grandes cérémonies majeures où coule le sang d'un cheval noir..." (*Vents*, I, p. 196). There is no doubt that this motif reflects an essential preoccupation of the poet. The sacrifice of the horse brings a new dimension to the meaning of the poem and the nature of its source. It opens up a perspective onto the "Wholly Other", all the more so because the poet does not specify through words what the message may actually be. He perceives "tout cela qu'un homme entend aux approches du soir" but he does not specify what that may be. It seems that through sacrifice

the poet reaches an unsayable reality. He may suggest that transcendence is inspiring him but he is not able to reveal it through words. Periphrasis allows him to mention the existence of a "divine" influx in man's perception of the world, but he is still prevented from actually verbalising it. This probably accounts for the fact that the theme of animal sacrifice is then developed into that of human sacrifice.

The poet encapsulates all the power conveyed by the concept of human sacrifice in a striking image. Although he seems to have renounced violence, the poet considers a new figure in his poetry – that of the woman taken as a sacrificial character because of her capacity to embody at once purity and impurity, chastity and eroticism.

> "Là, qu'il y ait un lit de fer pour une femme nue, toutes baies ouvertes sur la nuit. / Femme très belle et chaste, agréée entre toutes femmes de la Ville / Pour son mutisme et pour sa grâce et pour sa chair irréprochable, infusée d'ambre et d'or aux approches de l'aine, / Femme odorante et seule avec la Nuit, comme jadis, sous la tuile de bronze, / Avec la lourde bête noire au front bouclé de fer, pour l'accointement du dieu, / Femme loisible au flair du Ciel et pour lui seul mettant à vif l'intimité vivante de son être... / Là qu'elle soit favorisée du songe favorable, comme flairée du dieu dont nous n'avons mémoire, / Et frappée de mutisme, au matin, qu'elle nous parle par signes et par intelligences du regard. / Et dans les signes du matin, à l'orient du ciel, qu'il y ait aussi un sens et une insinuation..." (*Vents*, I, p. 189).[2]

While the idea of violence is not explicit here, it is clear that the erotic qualities of the woman play an important part in the communication between the human world and that of the gods. The woman is used in order to lure the god, to seduce him, and eventually to bring back some revelations from her encounter with the mysterious divine presence. Indeed, the image is that of sexual intercourse between a woman and a

[2] This figure will remain present in Saint-John Perse's poetry, and will find its ultimate expression in *Amers* with the traits of the woman lover through whom the poet reaches a degree of completion in his quest.

god. This may be linked with a variety of myths and also with the widely attested rituals known as "sacred prostitution", in which priestesses prostitute themselves for religious reasons. They are in charge of maintaining a particular temple as well as maintaining a balance between the human world and the divine one by their self-sacrifice. Their sexual activity is meant to allow a necessary exchange of forces between the two worlds. The same concept is used in Saint-John Perse's poetic image. The woman is sexually in contact with the divine presence ("Femme loisible au flair du Ciel et pour lui seul mettant à vif l'intimité vivante de son être"). The presence of the bull (a traditional symbol of virility) confirms not only the erotic presence of a god, but also the sacrificial implications of this act. Indeed, if violence is not mentioned explicitely, it is latent since all the verbs in the subjunctive imply an order given by the poetic voice or some other entity. The notion of sacred prostitution is therefore not devoid of an element of rape. This in turn is essential if the image is to have its full sacred meaning. Although the intervention of violence is attenuated, it is still instrumental in allowing the woman to actually reach the divine world and receive a message from it.

As a consequence of her nightly encounter, she is able to transliterate the divine message into silent signs and mute expressions of the face the following morning.[3] Saint-John Perse calls this unworldly message a "songe favorable". The "songe favorable" is not simply a kind of blessing from which the woman benefits; it is a message that she is in charge of transmitting to men. The poet himself comments on the phrase in the course of his text: " « Favorisé du songe favorable » fut l'expression choisie pour exalter la condition du sage" (Vents, p. 182). The woman is therefore the receptacle of divine speech and may be entrusted with a precious message that she does not understand, perhaps precisely *because* she does not understand it. This is where the poet intervenes: he collects the meaning through a non-articulated language –

[3] This phenomenon is a reinterpretation of ancient divination. Saint-John Perse himself allows the comparison between his "sacred woman" and the sacrificed animal: "Jadis, l'esprit du dieu se reflétait dans les foies d'aigles entrouverts, comme aux ouvrages de fer du forgeron, et la divinité de toutes parts assiégeait l'aube des vivants. / Divination

in other words a non-human language – and endeavours to pass it on to his fellow humans.[4] In this respect, the woman is truly considered as an instrument for transcendence through which a covenant may be passed between men and gods. Such transcendence is established by means of violence and sacrifice; and Saint-John Perse's world returns to its usual cycles because order has been restored. "Quand la violence eut renouvelé le lit des hommes sur la terre, / Un très vieil arbre, à sec de feuilles, reprit le fil de ses maximes..." (*Vents*, IV, p. 251). What is interesting here is the fact that sacrifice does not lead to new creation. Everything returns to the way it was before, nothing has been created or discovered and all the poet can do is observe a set of rituals that he cannot but reject because are futile with respect to his quest.

2-Pagan rituals and signs

A pagan vision of the world pervades the poem and the poet goes so far as to link the contents of his poem to the pagan art of divination:

> "Jadis, l'esprit du dieu se reflétait dans les foies d'aigles entrouverts, comme aux ouvrages de fer du forgeron, et la divinité de toutes parts assiégeait l'aube des vivants. / Divination par l'entraille et le souffle et la palpitation du souffle! Divination par l'eau du ciel et l'ordalie des fleuves... / Et de tels rites furent favorables. J'en userai. Faveur du dieu sur mon poème! Et qu'elle ne vienne à lui manquer!" (*Vents*, I, p. 181).

The text is explicitly given a sacred status by this "meta-poetic" invocation. Through its own incantation, the text is blessed by a superior intervention, which confers upon it a value and a function that go far beyond the traditional attributes of literature. Through the images of sacrifice, the poet infuses his verses with an ineffable magical aura.

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par l'entraille et le souffle et la palpitation du souffle!" (Vents, I, p. 181). The woman too sits on an iron bed and offers her "entraille" (through sexual intercourse) to the god.

[4] This is entirely consistent with many other passages in Saint-John Perse's poetry where he declares that he considers himself a mere translator of divine speech – in this respect, he may be called a "prophet-translator". In *Vents*, for instance, he defines the

Indeed, his poetry seems to contain both the sacred act (in the form of a sacrificial ritual) and the sacred word (calling upon the divinity for a blessing on the poem). For these reasons, one might be tempted to assert that *Vents* is not so much a poem as a magical incantation. The poet seems to leave aside the strictly linguistic approach for a more esoteric conception of his art. Presenting itself as a sacrificial enactment, the poem claims a superior status: it is not merely an *image of the world* (albeit aesthetically designed to reveal a new viewpoint on it), it is a *new world* in its own right.

Saint-John Perse's poetry may be regarded as a theurgy inasmuch as it is a divine creative process implemented by and directed at man. This process implies the action of perceptible signs such as invocation, gesture, use of an object, all of which serve to actualize what they stand for or represent. This new category of writing may be described as an operative symbolism whose object is to awaken the power and presence of the divinity. The poetic image operates not as an immanent trope but as an effective transcendental stream of energy. The poetic language triggers an upward spiritual flux, which recreates the conditions of divine transcendence. For Saint-John Perse, sacrifice is performed through the powers of language since poetry is regarded as a force sufficient to break the limits of the meaningless "night of man". The consequences are twofold: first, the poet acquires supernatural powers – indeed hieratic ones. Secondly, Saint-John Perse's poetry must be read as a theurgy since it endeavours to cross over the threshold of the comprehensible world.

The poet evokes the fascination that the vision of a sacrifice exerts upon him when he describes a traditional Andean ritual:

> "Et la Montagne est honorée par les ambulations des femmes et des hommes. Et ses adorateurs lui offrent des fœtus de lamas. Lui font une fumigation de plantes résineuses. Lui jettent à la volée des tripes de bêtes égorgées. Excréments prélevés pour le traitement des peaux. / Je me souviens du haut pays de pierre où les porcheries de terre blanche, avant l'orage, resplendissent au

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poet's role: "Son occupation parmi nous: mise en clair des messages" (*Vents*, III, p. 229).

soir comme des approches de villes saintes" (*Vents*, IV, pp. 235-236).

The anaphoric structure of these phrases accurately reflects the repetitive pattern of the sacred ritual. In this respect, it may be said that Saint-John Perse's poetry presents itself as sacred poetry: it reproduces in its very rhythm not only the recurrent frame of an incantation but also the periodic act of the sacrifice performer. The process is an efficient one since, through the sacrificial action, impurity is turned into sainthood (the "porcheries" glow like "des villes saintes"). Metaphorically, this sacred poetry succeeds in transforming the world and making it a "holy" place. But the poet is not his own dupe; he immediately wonders: " – Qu'irais-tu chercher là?", by which he means that he can see no prospect of finding a solution in a strictly pagan approach to the world. This sanctified world is but a fictive space that holds no answer to his metaphysical quest. At best, this approach may be described as a temptation, but it is not one in which the poet indulges. He discovers that in dealing with the images of sacrifice he jeopardizes not only his poetic status, but also his own integrity. In *Vents*, the poet is forced to recognize that the dialectical question of the pure and the impure constitutes the cornerstone of his entire pursuit.

The first thing to note about these antithetical concepts is that the pure and the impure appear entwined in human experience. Speaking of the great forces that roam the world, the poet notes: "Elles s'en allaient où vont les homme sans naissance et les cadets sans majorat, avec les filles de licence et les filles d'Eglise, sur les Mers catholiques couleur de casque, de rapières et de vieilles châsses à reliques [...]" (*Vents*, I, p. 184). Prostitutes and nuns are gathered together in the same exile, as if pure and impure cannot be separated from eachother in a sacred perspective. Not only is Christianity once again rejected, but also the feminine characters who most clearly embody purity and impurity in a Christian perspective are united in the same group in order to express the idea that these two concepts are no longer to be envisaged with their ordinary meaning. They now all belong to the same caste of those women who play an important role in Saint-John Perse's poetry, like the woman

offered as a sacrifice through sacred prostitution. Indeed, they will be fused into a single figure a few verses later.[5]

Purity and impurity are still separate entities that can be told apart by the simple fact that they are embodied by two different allegorical figures. The "filles de licence" and the "filles d'Église" are truly sacred characters because they are cast aside; they stand at the edge of society and deal with what can be described as the most symbolic urges of humanity – physical and metaphysical drives. But for once they blend into a single sacrificial character enabling the poet to reach the point of transcendence where he finds himself threatened by the stigma of sacredness. After the sacrificial woman has been visited by the divine presence on the iron bed, the poet acknowledges the consequence for his own enterprise. "On ne fréquente pas sans s'infecter la couche du divin; et ton ciel est pareil à la colère poétique, dans les délices et l'ordure de la création" (*Vents*, II, p. 205). Poetry is about dealing with impure and unclean material for the sake of attaining a superior truth. Poetic creation itself is an ambiguous activity since it implies both "délices" and "ordure" at once – which is only logical, since pure and impure are now mixed in the sacred approach to the world. The "colère poétique" echoes the violence found in sacrifice. Elementary force is released in this process, and the creative movement operating in the text is marked by the dirtiness and indecency involved in the image of blood sacrifice – hence the omnipresent theme of filthiness in sacred poetry.

This entails repercussions on the poet himself. He is now a man involved at once in the usual business of humans and in the extraordinary task of exploring the divine sphere. He is stigmatized for this awesome destiny of his, by being split between two irreconcilable spheres.[6]

> "Et le Poète encore est avec nous, parmi les hommes de son temps, habité de son mal... / Comme celui qui a dormi dans

[5] See *Vents*, I, p. 189.

[6] The words "stigmatize", "stigmata" etc. will be used hereafter in a strictly religious sense, referring in particular to the stigmata left on Christ's body by the Crucifixion. These marks are not simply the sign of social disgrace. Above all they signal the sacred outcast. Stigmata constitute an essential feature of the sacred. The poet is not stigmatized because he would be unfit for social life, but rather because of his sacred

> le lit d'une stigmatisée, et il en est tout entaché, / Comme celui qui a marché dans une libation renversée, et il en est comme souillé, / Homme infesté du songe, homme gagné par l'infection divine [...]" (*Vents*, I, p. 230).

Saint-John Perse accepts that he cannot escape being soiled and infamous among the men of his time because, like Prometheus, he has dealt with divine prerogatives and must now take on the burden of an initiated man. He has violated the sacredness of the boundary between the two worlds and is infected by a divine element. The poet has infringed a sacred law and must now embark on an investigation into the unknown – and for this he has to become a medium himself.

III-The poet as the medium for the divine

1-Divine inspiration

In the first canto of *Vents*, Saint-John Perse evokes a mysterious kind of man whom he endeavours to find and intends to join:

> " « Qu'on nous cherche aux confins les hommes de grand pouvoir, réduits par l'inaction au métier d'Enchanteurs. / « Hommes imprévisibles. Hommes assaillis du dieu. Hommes nourris au vin nouveau et comme percés d'éclairs. / « Nous avons mieux à faire de leur force et de leur œil occulte. / « Notre salut est avec eux dans la sagesse et dans l'intempérance »" (*Vents*, I, p. 190-191).

Indeed, these men of power reduced to idleness look much like himself at the time when he wrote the poem.[7] Interestingly, these men are found "aux confins" – which immediately put them apart; they are sacred because they are also "assaillis du dieu". The poet joins them for two

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idiosyncrasy. Stigmata, however socially infamous, are always to be regarded as a kind of hierogram.

[7] Saint-John Perse was in exile in the United States of America after having fled from France because of the German invasion and the death sentence that the Vichy

reasons. First, because they changed their power for strength, which implies a more primitive and elementary energy which the poet requires in order to deal with the fundamental questions he asks about the mystery of man. Secondly, and most importantly, because they are gifted with an "œil occulte": this alludes to the importance of the eye in the sacred.[8] The occult eye suggests vision and blindness at the same time; the phrase introduces the idea of a secret and hidden image that only initiates can contemplate. Moreover, this eye is essentially linked to the concept of sacredness because it assumes two incompatible concepts at the same time, a duality which, as discussed previously, constitutes a distinctive feature of the sacred. It is vision and blindness at once, and therefore establishes the necessity for initiation to the sacred. This is why the mysterious men are assailed by the god. Only a divine intervention can reconcile the two antagonistic aspects of their sight. The true power of these sacred "Enchanteurs" lies in their ability to look in two dimensions, one visible and material, the other immaterial and not visual – in short they are poets.

These verses echo the decision that Saint-John Perse took at the time he wrote *Vents*: aghast and disappointed with his public and diplomatic life, he chose to turn definitively and exclusively to poetry and to join his fellows "Enchanteurs". Nevertheless he remains an extremely humane figure, as well as being an inspired soul. He declares: "Et le Poète encore est avec nous, parmi les hommes de son temps, habité de son mal...[...] / Homme infesté du songe, homme gagné par l'infection divine [...]" (*Vents*, III, p. 230). Being endowed by a divine spirit does not mean that the poet stands apart from the rest of humanity. On the contrary, he feels more than ever that he is entrusted with a mission for the benefit of his fellow humans. However, this means that he has to accept being stigmatized to a certain degree because he deals with the complex and reversible question of purity and impurity. "Ainsi dans le foisonnement du dieu, l'homme lui-même foisonnant...Ainsi

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government passed on him for his previous political role as secretary general in the Quay d'Orsay.

[8] See *Anabase* and the theme of vision and blindness.

dans la dépravation du dieu, l'homme lui-même forlignant..." (Vents, II, p. 210). The poet accepts that he must run the risk of being excluded from the human sphere for the sake of his quest on behalf of humanity. To a certain extent, it is possible to say that the poet offers himself as a sacrifice in order to gain access to the "impurity" of the gods. Thanks to this sacrifice, he can reach a language and messages that he can understand only because he has taken them from the gods – just as Prometheus stole fire. He adopts an external and ambiguous voice to portray himself, so as to formulate the ultimate definition of the poet:

> "Et vous pouvez me dire: Où avez-vous pris cela? – Textes reçus en langage clair! version données sur deux versants!...Toi-même stèle et pierre d'angle!...Et pour des fourvoiements nouveaux, je t'appelle en litige sur ta chaise dièdre, / Ô Poète, ô bilingue, entre toutes choses bisaiguës, et toi-même litige entre toutes choses litigieuses – homme assailli du dieu! homme parlant dans l'équivoque!...ah! comme un homme fourvoyé dans une mêlée d'ailes et de ronces, parmi des noces de busaigles!" (*Vents*, II, p. 213).

Saint-John Perse presents himself as a recipient for the divine speech that he has the task of translating in human words. This makes him quintessentially bilingual, even ambiguous and equivocal. He depicts himself as the Sybil on her iron chair because, like her, he receives messages from the gods that are confused if not undecipherable.

To be precise, the poet receives the poetic message from a unique god. He no longer deals with the gods or gods from some improbable Pantheon; he acknowledges the influence of a single divinity – indeed he welcomes it: " « Le cri! le cri perçant du dieu! Qu'il nous saisisse en pleine foule, non dans les chambres [...]. » / Et le Poète encore est parmi nous...Cette heure peut-être la dernière, cette minute même, cet instant!...Et nous avons si peu de temps pour naître à cet instant! [...] – « Le cri! le cri perçant du dieu sur nous! »" (*Vents*, III, p. 230). Interestingly, this passage is followed by a line of dots, so as to create a rupture and a border across the page, beyond which no word can be said or heard. This typographical presentation clearly draws a line between

the two worlds and the two languages – human and divine – and constitutes an essential image of the sacred in the visual appearance of the poem. However, the singularity of the god does not make him the unique God of monotheistic religions. Saint-John Perse makes it clear that the sacred does not lead to the God of Abraham. Accordingly, he distances himself from biblical heritage and excludes it from his poetry of the sacred.

2-The poet-shaman

Among the many different figures assumed by the poet, one is especially interesting for it represents the typical spiritual leader in pagan societies: it is that of the shaman. Surprisingly, this figure does not affect the poet himself straight away. It is first related to the earth – as though the shaman actually emerged from the earth complete with his natural powers. Indeed, this is precisely how animist thinking portrays this character. It is produced by the earth's forces, it communicates with them for this very reason, and it reduplicates the earth's patterns through the mirror image of the sacred: "Toute la terre nouvelle par là-haut, sous son blason d'orage, portant cimier de filles blondes et l'empennage du Sachem [...]" (*Vents*, II, p. 200). Later in the poem, the image becomes animated and the earth seems to inspire and perform the shaman's rituals: "Les vallées mortes, à grands cris, s'éveillent dans les gorges, s'éveillent et fument à nouveau sur leurs lits de shamans!" (*Vents*, II, p. 211). As a fundamentally pagan character, the shaman is linked to the earth and its mysterious forces. He is the one who deals with the "Wholly Other" in animist societies, and Saint-John Perse chooses this figure as a sort of double of the poet, for they both pride themselves on being in charge of the sacred. The shaman "commands" the forces of the earth through his verbal powers. He addresses his acclamations towards the earth, and creates a pattern of recurrent words in order to match the recurrent patterns of the earth's forces. The life of the earth is dominated by cyclical structures, and the sacral approach endeavours to master its general framework in an attempt to restore or maintain its balance.

This goal is pursued through the regenerating powers of language. The poet writes: " « Ô vous que rafraîchit l'orage...Fraîcheur et gage de fraîcheur... » Le Narrateur monte aux remparts. Et le vent avec lui. Comme un Shaman sous ses bracelets de fer: / [...] Et sa parole nous est plus fraîche que l'eau neuve. Fraîcheur et gage de fraîcheur... « Ô vous que rafraîchit l'orage... »" (Vents, I, p. 181). The recurrence of certain patterns of speech are due to the shaman's voice, but they permeate the poetic voice without breaking or interrupting its own logic and harmony. This duality in the poetic enunciation reflects accurately that of the sacred – the poet and the shaman being respectively the voices of the profane and the sacred. The bi-polarity of the poetic voice is an essential feature of Saint-John Perse's poetry and it is quintessentially linked to the recurrent patterns that constitute the rhetoric par excellence of the sacred. The poet's ability to let an inspiring voice be heard through him introduces the idea that he himself is inspired by the gods also.

In *Vents*, repetitive phrases are frequent. They are often linked to the expression of the sacred because they take the form of incantations addressed to gods. As a shaman, the poet exclaim: "...Eâ, dieu de l'abîme, ton bâillement n'est pas plus vaste" (*Vents*, I, p. 188). And he repeats further: "...Eâ, dieu de l'abîme, les tentations du doute seraient promptes / Où vient à défaillir le Vent..." (*Vents*, I, p. 195). The wind acts as a messenger from the gods, and indeed it is the form in which the gods' spirit materializes. This image is not original in itself, but the way in which it is used and developed in the poem implies a new thinking on the part of the poet. He is not merely the man who seeks beautiful images for the sake of it, rather his poem sets out to explore man's soul in new ways. The aim is to break the conventions dictated by the material word and to unveil a truth that lies beyond them. This mission enthuses the poet: "Et c'est un temps d'étrange confusion, lorsque les grands aventuriers de l'âme sollicitent en vain le pas sur les puissances de matière. [...] / Je serai là des tous premiers pour l'irruption du dieu nouveau..." (*Vents*, III, p. 220-221). The object of his search becomes apparent here. The idea is nothing less than to create a "new" god. This is, in the etymological sense, a titanic enterprise, because the poem

endeavours to be the instrument of a theogony – even though the poet is not directly involved in the process.

However, *Vents* itself is a poem inspired by the gods: "Les dieux qui marchent dans le vent susciteront encore sur nos pas les accidents extraordinaires" (*Vents*, I, p. 196). Indeed poetry constitutes an "extraordinary accident" and for Saint-John Perse it is caused by divine intervention. Moreover, the poet is overwhelmed by his task and overawed by this experience of communication with the gods.

Having pursued his sacred quest to its limits, Saint-John Perse formulates a conclusion that is twofold. First, he acknowledges the necessity of transgression, since the image of the sacrifice has now been exhausted. The poet may be inspired by the gods, yet he remains baffled by the mystery of transcendence in his own creation. Even the violent energy of sacrifice has not been sufficient to carry him through the night of man to a satisfactory level of understanding. This is where the temptation of transgression is introduced. Interestingly, it is immediately associated with the presence of the sea or to be more precise, with the image of the beach as a place of sacred rupture between two worlds: "Ici la grève et la suture. Et au delà le reniement... La Mer en Ouest, et Mer encore, à tous nos spectres familière" (*Vents*, IV, p. 237). A few verses later, the poet continues with the same idea: "...Et au delà, et au delà, qu'est-il rien d'autre que toi-même – qu'est-il rien d'autre que d'humain?...Minuit en mer après Midi... Et l'homme seul comme un gnomon sur la table des eaux... Et les capsules de la mort éclatent dans sa bouche..." (*Vents*, IV, p. 238). Eventually, he goes as so far as to situate the sea in its full problematic status vis-à-vis the poem by declaring it taboo – thereby making it a fully sacred entity beyond any referential mark or name: "Jusqu'à cette autre masse d'irréel, jusqu'à ce haut gisement de chose pâle, en Ouest, / Où gît la grâce d'un grand nom – Mer Pacifique... ô mer de Balboa!... Celle qu'il ne faut jamais nommer" (*Vents*, IV, p. 237). Indeed, this new challenge will be dealt with and developed in *Amers*, the great poem on the theme of the trespass as an alternative to the deadlock of sterile and virtual sacrifice that cannot free itself from the contingency of immanence. Through the sea, the poet

is already able to envisage a new discovery, namely the notion of "Being".

It is interesting that Being is envisaged in *Vents* through the movement of the sea which enables the poet to "experience" Being in the most physical and sensual way: "Ainsi du même mouvement le nageur, au revers de sa nage, quêtant la double nouveaté du ciel, soudain tâte du pied l'ourlet des sables immobiles, / Et le mouvement encore l'habite et le propage, qui n'est plus que mémoire – murmure et souffle de grandeur à l'hélice de l'être [...]" (*Vents*, I, p. 249). Borne along by the movement of the sea, the poet swims in harmony with it and consequently with all the great cycles that it commands. The poet thus finds a means of communicating with the overwhelming forces of the world in the hope that he will be able to reach beyond their effects to their actual awesome sources. Moreover, Being is already recognized as a major concept. In fact, it is linked to the sun (itself a divine figure, as in *Anabase*), and it seems to take over from it to become the ultimate figure of the "Wholly Other" whose mystery the poet endeavours to enlighten. "Et toi, Soleil d'en bas, férocité de l'Être sans paupière, tiens ton œil de puma dans tout ce pain de pierrerie!" (*Vents*, I, p. 214). However, this figure is still hopelessly blind and mute and rigidly petrified in an uncommunicative attitude towards the poet. In spite of being called upon by the poet, Being remains distant from human understanding, and has still to be carved out of the impenetrable thickness of sacred stone. In the process, the poet accepts that he must become an eternal outcast, and even a sort of traitor, in order to attain his goal. As a medium between humans and gods, he necessary becomes a renegade for both sides. "Et toi, Poète, ô contumace et quatre fois relaps, la face encore dans le vent, chante l'antiphonaire des typhons [...]" (*Vents*, I, p. 193).

PART TWO: SACRED THEURGY

CHAPTER I: ELABORATION OF THE SACRED IN *AMERS*

I-The sea as the space of the sacred

1-Calling upon the divinity

The poet consistently presents the sea as a sacred area by creating a sharp distinction between the two opposing faces that characterize the sacred: "L'abîme infâme m'est délice, et l'immersion, divine" (Strophe II, p. 282). At once "infâme" and "délice", the sea constitutes the perfect element with which to embody the idea of the sacred. Pure and impure are interchangeable concepts, in the same way that the sea reverses itself in a cyclical manner. For this reason, the poet is keen to note the different phases of the sea's movements and above all to link them to the theme of the sacred: "...la chose sainte à son étiage, la mer étrange, là, et qui veillait sa veille d'étrangère" (Invocation 6, p. 266). The sea is simply a "sacred thing", it is something that evolves on a cyclical basis and yet remains quintessentially the same – like time in a sacred perspective. It is in this way that the sacred is associated with the idea of eternity: " « ...il est dans la continuité des choses à venir/ comme une salive sainte et comme une sève de toujours [...] »" (Strophe VI, p. 311). The cycle of the sea offers a guarantee of everlasting time in the future – which is precisely what the sacred rituals seek to do also.

The sea is therefore linked consistently to the divine – either through a divine presence or influence or by means of symbolism. " « ...La pluie, sur l'océan sévère, sème ses soucis d'eau: autant de fois

se clôt la paupière du dieu [...] »" (Strophe VI, p. 311). Here, the link is purely metaphorical but it allows the poet to open the sea out onto the world of the divine by creating a non-referential metaphor.[1] Since nobody can verify what a god's eyelid looks like, the poetic image is justified by its own transcendence and is emancipated from any immanent – and therefore superficial – motivation. The temptation might be to indulge in an inclination towards more abstraction and a more hermetic pattern of language. But no such tendency is seen in Saint-John Perse's poetry. On the contrary, he constantly seeks to ensure that the experience of the sacred remains as close as possible to an existential and even materialistic – although not trivial – experiment. Walking on – or perhaps swimming above – the sands of the beach (in other words the sacred space of the threshold), the poet depicts the graphic sensation that will lead him to knowledge of the sacred. " «[...] Et de la paume du pied nu sur ces macérations nocturnes – comme d'une main d'aveugle parmi la nuit des signes enneigés – nous suivons là ce pur langage modelé: relief d'empreintes méningées, proéminences saintes aux lobes de l'enfance embryonnaire »" (Strophe VI, p. 312). The essential point here is that for the first time in the poem – and indeed in the entire work of Saint-John Perse – the sea-sacred-language trilogy appears in a unique and complex interrelationship. Whereas the motivation for the metaphor is transparent on this occasion (the ripples on the surface of the sand, due to the movements of the sea, and visible at low tide, remind the poet of the wavy texture of a brain), it appears that the poet is actually describing the function of the poet. He tries to decipher the meaning of the world – taken as a visible and *invisible* thing – through the darkness. Here again the poet compares himself to a blind person, but this does not prevent him from reaching the signs of a "pure language" written upon the sacred area of the shore. This time, the idea of sacredness is conveyed by the phrase "proéminences saintes" which suggests a new approach: "saint" refers itself to a more religious sphere than "sacred", but the poet uses

[1] However, there is clearly an assumption of anthropomorphism within the poet's theological approach to God. The point is that by referring to the closing and opening of

this nuance to underline the marked separation between the two. Saint-John Perse is fiercely opposed to anything that might suggest a religious connection. For him, the sacred is defined by an immanent spirituality as opposed to a religious one. In other words his mode of spirituality is materialistic and does not imply transcendence from a metaphysical source.

The sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry is on no account a mark of religiousness but paradoxically emphasizes a pagan approach to the world. As seen earlier, the young Alexis Leger cut himself off from any religious approach to life – and in particular the Christian one – in spite of a spontaneous urge to find a spiritual dimension in his life. The religious world and its values, symbols and rituals are rejected. " « Tourment des hommes, feu du soir! Cent dieux muets sur leurs tables de pierre! Mais la mer à jamais derrière vos tables de famille, et tout ce parfum d'algue de la femme, moins fade que le pain des prêtres [...] »" (Strophe I, 4, p. 276-277). The "bread of the priests" is seen as being tasteless compared to the strong smell of seaweed shared by the sea and woman. It would be erroneous to interpret this preference as a mere materialistic or hedonistic view on the part of the poet. The fact is that in his existential experience nothing could overcome an overwhelming feeling that the sacred depends on a direct link between man and his perception of the world. This is why erotic experience is stronger than any other experience; as a consequence, the woman becomes a sacred icon and an alternative sacrificial object: " « [...] Et ta saveur de mer est dans le pain du sacre, est dans le corps des femmes que l'on sacre »" (Strophe IV, p. 301). The explicit insistence on the body of the women constitutes a clear sign that the sacred is ultimately a physical experience.

It would be too simplistic a view to regard Saint-John Perse as an iconoclast or a libertine; although the comparison between the blessed bread and the woman's body may be seen as sacrilegious, it is sacrilegious only inasmuch as it heralds a new sense of sacredness, an emerging sacramental poetry. The parody of the Christian Eucharist that

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an eyelid, the text is drawing the reader into a consideration of his /her determined notion of what god(s) look(s) like.

emerges here is not meant to shock religious minds. Rather, the poet uses it as a metaphor of his personal liturgy. He expresses the view that eroticism in his poetry can play the part of the sacraments in religion. Both sacrament and love imply that human beings consciously perform a series of actions whose effect is to make it possible for them to *be* differently. From this perspective, the comparison with religious festivals continues in order to launch a new sense of religiosity through the sea: "J'ai vu sourire aux feux du large la grande chose fériée: la Mer en fête de nos songes, comme une Pâque d'herbe verte et comme fête que l'on fête [...]" (Invocation 1). The sea (with a capital letter in the poem) is no longer an oceanic mass of water, but rather a principle that can transcend the immediate reality – as the reference to the "songes" clearly indicates. This transcendence opens the way for a new sense of sacredness that owes nothing to the pattern or frame of religious thinking. Although a reference may once again be traced back to the Christian faith, the poet expresses and indeed proclaims a new poetic sacredness invested in the sea which is a source of liberation from what may be seen as a failed attempt to reach God. Only a celebration of this world responds to sacredness: " « [...] Nous t'avons lu, chiffre des dieux! Nous te suivrons, piste royale! ô triple rang d'écume en fleur et cette fumée d'un sacre sur les eaux [...] »" (Strophe IV, p. 302). This movement, announced by the future "Nous te suivrons", starts a spiritual dynamics that is omnipresent in the rest of the poem.

2-Christianity and paganism

The sea is a space that seems to call for a spiritual quest. Its movement and its incessant transformation make it the perfect symbol for the reversibility of the sacred. Its ever changing appearance in the poet's eyes makes it a far more suitable sacred place than a terrestrial temple that is too immovable and rigid to follow the evolving – indeed revolving – shape of the sacred: " « Ô Voyageurs sur les eaux noires en quête de sanctuaires, allez et grandissez, plutôt que de bâtir [...] »" (Strophe VI, p. 312). The movement towards the sacred continues and all the characters

of the poem embark on a journey in which natural elements are transcended: " « Enfants, qui vous coiffez des plus larges feuilles aquatiques, vous nous prendrez aussi la main dans cette mi-nuit d'eau verte: les Prophétesses déliées s'en vont, avec les Pluies, repiquer les rizières...»" (Strophe VI, p. 312). The capital letters signal a metaphorical link between the "Pluies" and the "Prophétesses". Both are presented as symbolically mighty so that their poetic image performs a sacred transfiguration of the world. Here again movement is essential to this process and the force involved is natural. This confirms the idea that the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry has nothing in common with any supernatural manifestation. Whereas it is of the same nature as "le songe", the sacred is a rational response to the mystery of the creation. It consists in allowing the cosmos to emerge from original chaos by establishing order and correspondences within the existing world. The sacred may be paradoxically described as a rational attitude towards the world inasmuch as it makes sense out of sheer matter and prevents the human mind from losing itself in absurdity.

Taboos, thresholds and cycles guarantee that the world is an ordered cosmos which man may call "home" – according to his specific need for meaning – eventhough he did not choose to dwell there. From the "safety" of the sacred the poet can explore reality in a phenomenological way and offer the reader extraordinary revelations drawn from it. He expresses his bewilderment:

> "Nous avons eu, nous avons eu... Ah! dites-le encore, était-ce bien ainsi?... Nous avons eu – et ce fut telle splendeur de fiels et de vin noirs! – la Mer plus haut que notre face, à hauteur de notre âme; et dans sa crudité sans nom à hauteur de notre âme, toute sa dépouille à vif sur le tambour du ciel, comme aux grands murs d'argile désertés, / Sur quatre pieux de bois, tendue! une peau de buffle mise en croix" (Invocation 6, p. 267).

The sea, by its sheer immensity, is the only natural element that the poet deems suitable to expressing his soul. There is a clear equivalence between the two, which enables the poet to treat the sea (once again attributed with a capital letter) as a spiritual concept: it satisfies the need

to find a natural element in this world that exists on a scale comparable to human life. Once again the presence of the cross upon which is stretched a buffalo skin might evoke a Christian symbol. In fact, the skin itself is "crucified" onto a wooden frame and in this image the figure of Christ is compared to an animal skin. The metaphor is somewhat blasphemous. However it leaves no doubt as to the way it should be interpreted: the astonishing and crude beauty of this world is in itself sufficient to justify an immanent transcendence. The human figure of Christ is not needed. For the poet, an animal shape – in other words a purely worldly being – is amply sufficient to serve as a medium for transcendence. In this image, the sea appears as a poetic and physical reality that responds to the poet's search. It encapsulates all the extremes and the opposites of the sacred inasmuch as it reveals the transcendence of immanent things in the world in a poetic vision. In the metaphor, two extremes are joined: the immanence of the animal ("une peau de buffle") and the transcendence of the divine ("en croix"). Here – as in many other images developed by the poet – an unambiguously Christian symbol is associated with a mere material object in order to redirect transcendence from the former to the latter.

Christianity and mere paganism meet constantly in Saint-John Perse's poetry in a way that is not merely antithetical but that produces fertile symbolic transfers. In the same way as Saint Paul met God in a sudden shocking encounter, the poet is lead to a sort of "Damascus Revelation", when suddenly the "sacred spirit" comes to life in him.[2] "Et ce fut au couchant, dans les premiers frissons du soir encombré de viscères, quand, sur les temples frettés d'or et dans les Colisées de vieille fonte ébréchés de lumière, l'esprit sacré s'éveille aux nids d'effraies, parmi l'animation soudaine de l'ample flore pariétale" (Invocation 6, p. 266). Henceforth, the poet will embark on the elaboration of a "pagan

[2] See Acts 9. 1-5: "And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, / And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem./ And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: / And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou

liturgy". Interestingly, the poet resorts to the twofold meaning of the term "effraies" which refers to a type of bird, but is also a form of the verb "effrayer". This idea of fright or perhaps even "awe" conveyed by the term is logically associated with the moment when the sacred spirit awakens in the poet. The image might be interpreted as a reformulation of Otto's concept of "Mysterium Tremendum", the feeling of inexplicable fear that human beings experience each time they come into contact with the superior forces of the beyond. For Saint-John Perse, however, this fright is nothing to be afraid of since it serves only to confirm that he is approaching his goal.

Having refused any reference to a religious code – particularly a Christian one – the poet is nonetheless in need of some sort of solemnization to celebrate the world and to evince its transcendence in a personal liturgy and symbolism. The poet does not intend to set an example or to create a religion. The solemn tone, along with the ceremonial gestures depicted in the course of the poem, is not the result of a given observance, although one does find some recurrent patterns in the ritual rhetoric of Saint-John Perse. On the contrary, it seems that the expression of the sacred necessitates a larger framework than that of a stated ritual. The sacred displays an impetus to pay homage to the greatness of the world regardless of any set protocol. The sacredness of Saint-John Perse is not purely matter of formal eastheticism. His poetic style is characterized by a genuine momentum to worship the sanctity of creation. Dynamism is at the heart of the poet's endeavour. The spirituality that the poems exude conveys a sense of energy and of an elementary urge to move towards a metaphysical objective. Many verses are based on the metaphorical expression of a great energy or tension associated with the sea. He exclaims: " «Et louées Celles avec qui, sur les grèves souillées d'algues commes des bauges désertées, et dans la puanteur sacrée qui monte des eaux vastes – quand l'ipomée des sables vire au rouge d'hyacinthe – et la mer revêtant sa couleur d'holocauste – auront su s'étarquer à de plus hautes vergues!... »" (Strophe VI, p. 311).

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me? / And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks (sic)."

The essential features of the sacred are present in this vivid image. First, sacredness is associated with "puanteur": the oxymoron encapsulates the ambiguity of the sacred which contains purity and impurity at once. In this particular verse the poet is possibly referring to the strong smell that emanates from the seashore mud at low tide. To him, this unique scent evokes the powerful contradiction of the sacred. This evocative scent could parallel the sacred scent of incense for Christians.

Moreover, the idea of sacrifice is also present ("holocauste") and is instrumental in conveying a sense of sacredness to the reality of the sea. The "rouge d'hyacinthe" powerfully suggests the presence of blood spilled during sacrifices, and in the poet's eyes, the sea performs an act of sacrifice by making the "ipomée des sables" turn red. Consequently, the sea becomes the scene of the sacred, the poet's own space and time in which he can give his poetry its real magnitude. For Saint-John Perse it is only from this starting point that a poem may properly pay homage to the sea. *Amers* can certainly be regarded as a "Poésie pour assister le chant d'une marche au pourtour de la Mer. /Comme l'entreprise du tour d'autel et la gravitation du cœur au circuit de la strophe" (Invocation 3, p. 261). The poem itself seems to constitute a ritual with reference to the religious implications of Greek drama. The comparison leaves no doubts as to how Saint-John Perse regards his poem: it is indeed a sacred text. This is why the poet may include the following solemn gesture in the course of the poem: "Elevant l'anse de nos bras à l'appui de notre « Aâh... », nous avons eu ce cri de l'homme à la limite de l'humain; nous avons eu, sur notre front, cette charge royale de l'offrande: toute la Mer fumante de nos vœux comme une cuve de fiel noir, comme un grand bac d'entrailles et d'abats aux cours pavées du Sacrificateur!" (Invocation 6, p. 266). Here, solemnization is at its limit: expression reverts to a sort of primitive shouting, perhaps even that of an animal, in an eruption of sacred violence. Moreover, the presence of blood is again strongly suggested by the slaughtering of animals by the "Sacrificateur". The poem dedicated to the sea becomes a sacred text because the sea provides the essential energy of the sacred: sacrificial blood. In return, the sea receives a human homage: "Et l'homme qui taillait un bol d'offrande dans le quartz cède à

la mer en flammes son offrande" (Strophe VII, p. 317). The sea has indeed become the divinity, the goddess to whom every thought is dedicated, and through whom transcendence becomes immanent. It allows the poet, who "sees" the sacred nature of the sea, to reach the limits of the human world and begin to look towards the "Other", the hidden world whose surface is made visible by the sea.

Nevertheless, the transgression is not yet accomplished; the poet is denied the ability to complete his journey through the power of the words: " «Et l'impatience est sur les eaux, du mot qui tarde dans nos bouches. Et la Mer lave sur la pierre nos yeux brûlants de sel. Et sur la pierre assexuée croissent les yeux de l'Étrangère...»" (Strophe VI, p. 309). Together, the poet and the sea perform the actions of a pagan liturgy. The sea "washes" the poet's eyes in what looks like a purificatory symbol. The poet makes offerings to the gods using the sea as an intermediary. Both images are strongly evocative of the Christian rituals performed by priests during mass. Three essential elements are put into conjunction here: sacrificial blood, the offering of a cup (that could contain blood) and the pouring of purifying water on the poet's eyes. These elements are all part of a coherent design that can be called a liturgy, for they all aim at facilitating transcendence in the physical world. They also refer to a liturgy well known by the poet, since he grew up in a Christian context. However, this liturgy does not seem to point to a reality superior to itself.

This series of emphatic gestures described by the poet seem to be self-sufficient. They convey transcendence by themselves and do not need external justification. The spiritual energy they might ignite is confined within the boundaries of the physical, or to be precise, the maritime world. Poetic language allows the poet to theatricalize the world in the dramatic enactment of a virtual religion. Yet it appears that Saint-John Perse defines his religiosity as a contradiction, indeed a confrontation with Christianity which is clearly perceptible in the way Christian symbols influence his own imagery. He deliberately hints at Christian liturgical components in order to make use of their powerful ability to suggest transcendence in what is otherwise a truly pagan

liturgy. In this liturgy transcendence is a flux that travels within the materiality of natural elements thanks to the theatrical interpretation of the world by poetic language.

3-Divine illness

Although the poet's aim is to reach the divine sphere, something prevents him from going "beyond" human limits. This is due to the paradoxical inferiority of the gods compared with humans. Having been clearly assimilated to a Goddess, the sea reveals a flaw in the kingdom of the gods. " « Ô Mer qui t'enfles dans nos songes comme un dénigrement sans fin et comme une vilénie sacrée, ô toi qui pèse à nos grands murs d'enfance et nos terrasses comme une tumeur obscène et comme un mal divin!» " (p. 305). In the "songes", where the reality of the "Other" may be touched, the poet perceives the degradation of divine life. Indeed, it seems that divine reality has never reached a state of completion. As a result, the gods are frailer than humans, even though the latter are made of clay: "...et cette offrande encore de l'argile humaine où perce la face inachevée du dieu" (p. 288). Saint-John Perse is undoubtedly reminiscent of the Bible, more precisely of Genesis, when he describes humankind as "l'argile humaine" being moulded in the likeness of a god.[3] Once more, the poet who claims to be unconcerned by Christianity is evidently influenced by biblical imagery. But there is more than a mere correspondence of images here. The poet's vision of man is itself distinctly biblical. For him as for the biblical writer, the creation of man as an image of the divine face is an unsuccessful process that leaves humans weak and deprived of their true and full life.

Saint-John Perse does not mention the concept of sin, but he clearly endorses that of failed or flawed creation. The failed replication

[3] See Genesis 2. 7: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul". Also Genesis 1. 26-27: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. / So God created

of god's face in man splits human beings apart into two different spheres that cannot spontaneously communicate with each other. This vision of the human condition explains why the sacred is necessary: it is a means of achieving a balance between the two worlds separated by the original fault in the creative replication of gods. As a consequence, the divine world remains hidden as though by a mask. In fact it resembles a forbidden world put into quarantine and marked by illness, where the sail of the Foreigner evokes an "Ecaille, douce écaille prise au masque du divin, / Et le sourire au loin sur l'eau des grandes lèpres interdites..." (Strophe VIII, p. 321). As opposed to divine illness, human reality appears healthy and even perfect in the solemn dark of night: "La chair ce soir est sans défaut" (Strophe VII, p. 317). The discrepancy between humans and gods has resulted in the divine sphere losing all its powers for the benefit of man. The poet therefore describes a different world in which the traditional gap between the two facets of the sacred is greatly reduced. This generates two major consequences.

First, the world of gods is weakened to the point where it seems in danger collapsing and dying: "Et dans les temples sans offices où le soleil des morts range ses fagots d'or, les mules poussiéreuses s'arrêtent aux arches des préaux" (Strophe VII, p. 317). What emerges from this development of the sacred is truly an evocation of the twilight of the gods.[4] Temples are empty and useless. They are open to roaming animals that are not held at bay as they should be by the insurmontable barrier between the sacred and the profane. Moreover, the sun of the dead stands

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man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them".

[4] In Norse and Germanic mythology, Aesir and Vanir were two tribes of gods, of whom the Vanir were generally the subordinate. Traditionally, the gods were often at war with one another, sometimes taking hostages in battle. Chief among the Aesir were Odin, served by the Valkyries, and his consort Frigga. Other important gods were their son Balder, Tyr, god of war, Thor, god of thunder, and Lokì. The Vanir were gods of fertility and riches; among their leaders were Njord, god of the sea and of riches, and his children Freyr, protector of all living things, and his sister Freya, goddess of love and of fertility. Both tribes of gods meet their doom at Ragnarok (the twilight of the gods). Saint-John Perse was well versed in all kinds of mythology and particularly the Nordic one. Moreover, he read extensively Nietzsche's works during his studies and could not fail to know the importance of the concept of "twilight of the gods" in the philosopher's questioning of the western world. Finally, as a keen music lover Saint-John Perse knew also about Wagner's opera derived from Norse and Germanic mythology and based on

as an image of the twilight of the gods. Their light may still be visible but only as the remnant of an extinct source, just as the light from a dead star can still be seen during the time it takes to reach the earth. Secondly, in this "Armageddon" of the gods, the world seems to be on the brink of chaos, and it is the sea that represents the confusion between pure and impure, man and animal, in a mayhem that threatens the conventional pattern of the sacred. "Et c'est la Mer qui vint à nous sur les degrés de pierre du drame:/ [...] Avec tout son cheptel de monstres et d'humains, ah! tout son croît de fables immortelles, nouant à ses ruées d'esclaves et d'ilotes ses grands Bâtards divins et ses grandes filles d'Etalon [...]" (Invocation 6, p. 265). This sudden pandemonium alters completely the way in which the poet receives his inspiration from the divine world. The sea is elevated to the only source of poetic transcendence.

There is no doubt that for Saint-John Perse poetry is a human creation induced by a supernatural voice and therefore uttered from the divine world. Inspiration is for him a real "enthusiasm" through which the divine comes to manifest himself in man.[5] It may be a physical, perhaps even violent process. This "enthusiasm" seizes the poet in spite of himself, and does not necessarily involve human language. It is a spiritual urge rather than an analytic or rational process in which words could play a part. Paradoxically, the poet suggests that the divine message thus conveyed to humans could be better translated through other channel than language. The poet has recourse to girls whose role is exactly that of the Cumaean Sibyl.[6] " «Les filles liées au bas des Caps y prennent le message. Qu'on les baillonne parmi nous: elles diront mieux le dieu qu'elles relayent...»" (Strophe VI, p. 309). The fact that the poet calls the sibyls "girls" suggests that he regards them as human figures

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the Germanic *Nibelungenlied* saga. The theme of the twilight of the gods is deeply rooted in the poet's culture and constitutes a major feature of his theory of the sacred.

[5] The term is used in its etymological sense: "to be inspired or possessed by a god". With respect to its semantic field, the term is almost a synonym of "trance" or "divine rapture". In this conception poetry can be regarded as the expression of an ecstatic state of consciousness caused by the intuition of the divine world.

[6] Later in the poem, the poet addresses the sea as the Cumaean Sybil herself: "... Sois avec nous, rire de Cumes et dernier cri de l'Éphésien!..." (Pléiade, p. 367). This confirms the importance of this theme in the poet's inspiration. On many occasions the poem is presented as the result of such Cumaean "enthusiasm".

rather than as divine spokespersons per se. They might be enthused by the divine message but they remain "girls", perhaps playful and innocent children, whereas Sibyls would incarnate supernatural wisdom by releasing oracles to men. Interestingly, the sibyls who relay divine messages must remain gagged in order to do so. This suggests that the message in question cannot be uttered in human language. Perhaps dance or some kind of body language might be involved here – as will be the case later in the poem with the "Tragédiennes" who act in front of the sea. This indicates indirectly a sense that human language might be inadequate as far as communication with the gods is concerned.

Moreover, after the divine world has been discredited in the twilight of gods, the sea remains the source of all transcendence and provides the poet with essential influx: "La Mer elle-même notre veille, comme une promulgation divine..." (Invocation I, p. 259). The sea is now the "Sea". It is a substitute for the divine that accounts for all spiritual and poetic stimulus founded at the heart of the poetic experience: "Toute licence, toute naissance et toute résipiscence, la Mer! la Mer! à son afflux de mer,/ Dans l'affluence de ses bulles et la sagesse infuse de son lait, ah! dans l'ébullition sacrée de ses voyelles – les saintes filles! les saintes filles! - / La Mer elle-même tout écume, comme Sibylle en fleur sur sa chaise de fer..." (Invocation 3, p. 261). But it is not enough that the sea should create some turmoil in the sphere of the sacred. It threatens the very nature of the divine and puts the inspiration of the poet to the test: "Mais la lèvre divine errait sur d'autres coupes, et la Mer à longs traits se retirait des songes du Poète" (Strophe III, p. 290). Consequently, the poet must find in the sea the answer to the inspiration that comes from the divine world. Since the gods are no longer a reliable source of transcendence, the poet must have recourse to a totally new conception of transcendence, namely transgression.

The poet implements a radical shift in his endeavour. As far as the sacred goes, he now accepts that the traditional approach based on mythology cannot deliver the kind of communication with the beyond that he seeks. Crucially, the poet now intervenes in this communication, rather than remaining a mere passive receptacle. To a certain extent,

transgression can be seen as the exact opposite of transcendence since the former is initiated by man, whereas the latter takes him as its target. Thus far, the poet has experienced transcendence as a divine intrusion into the human sphere and his own life in particular. In *Amers*, the communication is reversed and the poet endeavours to question directly the divine. Having recognized the twilight of the gods, the poet feels that he must now address the divine from the standpoint of his human reality and explore the mysterious fascination engendered by the "Wholly Other". This Promethean endeavour is transgression, for the poet endorses the Titan's revolt and rebels against the divine foe who has disappointed his spiritual longing. Therefore, the poem systematically reverses the conventional values of the sacred and embarks on a paradoxical quest whereby opposites are turned into each other in order to retrieve the actual meaning that the gods kept secret.

Thus, purity (which defined the sacred, in contrast to the impurity of the profane) becomes impurity and is used by the poet as a potent means of recapturing the sacred. In this perspective, the sea is immediately associated with that form of moral impurity that is the mark of the sacred. Addressing the sea, the poet declares: "Et tu nous es chose insomnieuse et grave comme l'inceste sous le voile" (Strophe V, p. 305).[7] Without doubt, the sea is presented as a vehicle for transgression, given its association with the great myths and taboos that establish the boundary between what is licit and what is illicit for humans. This point differentiates men from gods: the latter may indulge in incest, for instance, without breaking any law and, indeed, even accomplishing thereby an intrinsically divine act.[8] Through its movements the sea lures

[7] Further in the poem, the same attribute is given to the sea. The poet addresses the sea: " ... Nourrice et mère, non marâtre, amante et mère du puîné, / Ô Consanguine et très lointaine, ô toi l'inceste et toi l'aînesse..." (Pléiade, p. 380).

[8] The cases of incest between gods and goddesses abound in all mythologies. Most of them are related to fertility rituals and regeneration of life on earth. When performed by gods, incest is actually a beneficial act for humans. Such is the case of Ishtar, a goddess mentioned by Saint-John Perse himself: " « - Ainsi Celle qui a nom frappe à midi le cœur éblouissant des eaux: Istar, splendide et nue, éperonnée d'éclairs et d'aigles verts, dans les grandes gazes vertes de son feu d'épaves..." (Pléiade, p. 340). In Babylonian mythology, Ishtar is regarded as a fertility and mother-goddess, the personification of Venus, sister-wife of Tammuz, and scorned lover of Gilgamesh. As the daughter of the Akkadian sky-god An, Ishtar was worshipped as a goddess of love and desire. As the

the poet into trespassing its own limits. "La Mer mouvante et qui chemine au glissement de ses grands muscles errants, la Mer gluante au glissement de plèvre, et toute à son afflux de Mer, s'en vint à nous sur ses anneaux de python noir, / Très grande chose en marche vers le soir et vers la transgression divine" (Invocation 6, p. 266). In this context, the python evokes the mythological animal killed by Apollo in Greek mythology.[9] Hence the figure of the pythoness emerges naturally and can be found in *Amers*: "Et la lune au quartier des pythonisses noires / Se grisait d'aigres flûtes et de clameurs d'étain..." (Amers, p. 276). The sea is associated with the power of divination given by a god. Like the Pythian priestess, the sea is believed to carry a message from the gods and the poet is the one who can decipher it.

Moreover, what comes to mind on reading this evolving metaphor, thereby reproducing the movements of a monster reptile, is the Leviathan. This sea monster seeks "divine transgression". This leads to two interpretations. The transgression consists either in breaking the law given by the gods or in acting as the gods do, namely breaking the law from a human point of view. In both cases, this "monster-god of the sea" leads the poet to a new kind of transcendence by smashing the notion of divinity. Typically, the agent of this transgression is figured by the greatest monster of the Bible. Once again, biblical images and references are used as inverted means of figuring good and evil. This is where the intrinsic transgression of the sacred lies for Saint-John Perse – in its ability to reverse the biblical values and symbols. This rebellion against

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moon-god Sin's daughter, she was the warrior goddess, worshipped in Assyria, who sent the vanquished to the underworld. The moral prohibition of incest for humans is based on the genetic degeneration it causes. However, because in the prism of the sacred everything is reversed, it is precisely a cause of regeneration in the human world when engaged in by gods. The paradoxical link between incest and fertility is also confirmed by Roman law, as Frazer notes: "Hence too we can understand why an ancient Roman law, attributed to King Tullus Hostilius, prescribed that, when incest had been committed, an expiatory sacrifice should be offered by the pontiffs in the grove of Diana" (*The Golden Bough*, p. 141).

[9] In Greek mythology, a python (a dragon or serpent) guarded a shrine of Mother Earth at Pytho (later Delphi) on Mount Parnassus. Apollo slew the Python, ousted the deity, and established his famous oracle. Deriving her name from that of the place, this oracle was then called "pythoness" or "Pythian priestess". The term still refers to a woman said to be possessed by, and uttering the words of a familiar spirit or a woman with powers of divination (a witch). The term python itself could be used about a familiar or possessing spirit, or a person possessed by and uttering the words of such a spirit.

Christianity is a constant feature in his work and thinking. In this pattern, what used to be considered impure, such as the human body and the sex organs, becomes the emblem of the sacred. The Tragedians exclaim "Nous faudra-t-il, haussant la bure théâtrale, au bouclier sacré du ventre produire le masque chevelu du sexe..." (Strophe III, p. 289). Therefore the poem enters a new dimension that by definition should have no limits, since it is open to the absolute freedom of transgressing the divine order. The poet himself discovers new prospects "«parmi toutes choses illicites et celles qui passent l'entendement... »" (Strophe V, p. 306).

In *Amers* the whole process of building transcendental communication as the opposite of transcendence is completed. The sea provides the figures of a new sacredness that revolves essentially around the concept of transgression as a substitute for a disqualified divine transcendence. Therefore the notion of the sacred can be reborn from the idea of essential infringement inspired by the sea. But the poet still needs to find the agents of and for such a deed. They need to be both pure and impure, immortal like gods, eternal rebels. Inevitably, it will be lovers who embark on a poetic dialogue and intercourse under the auspices of the sea.

II-Love and the sacred

1-Liturgy of eroticism

The text presents itself like a pagan "Song of Solomon". The reference to the text of the Bible is compelling: the structure is a dialogue between the two lovers who express their desire and depict a lively image of love. What is more, in Saint-John Perse's poëm, the lovers themselves perform the act by which they reach transcendence and become gods. The poem will follow mimetically the sexual act that constitutes the transgression par excellence, the supreme sacred act that triumphantly ends the sacred search by the poet. The lovers may be regarded as the

saints of Saint-John Perse's liturgy because they reach the "Other" in love and they lead the way to a new form of human sanctity.

Love conveys to the lovers a divine status, in relation with the sea: "Entre l'été, qui vient de mer. A la mer seule, nous dirons/ Quels étrangers nous fûmes aux fêtes de la Ville, et quel astre montant des fêtes sous-marines s'en vint un soir, sur notre couche, flairer la couche du divin" (Strophe, IX, I, p. 326). The lovers set themselves apart from the rest of the humans, feeling that they are foreigners among other people. In itself this theme does not constitute a particularly original feature in love poetry. But in Saint-John Perse's poem the implications of the topic are quite different. Love and eroticism establish a clear link with a god-like condition. The mention of the divine couch leaves no doubt about this: love transforms the lovers' reality so that they see each other as equal to gods. This is why the woman compares her partner to a god: "Qu'il [l'homme de mer] rafraîchisse son visage à même la source sous les sables; et se réjouisse sur mon aire, comme le dieu tatoué de fougère mâle..." (Strophe, IX, II, p. 327). She says to him: "...et je serai moi-même ta foule sur l'arène, parmi la faune de tes dieux" (Strophe, IX, III, p. 331). In love, she offers herself to a man whom she sees as a god and master of gods reigning over a "fauna of gods". The poet responds in the same way to his partner: for him, she is "Chair royale et signée de signature divine!..." (Strophe, IX, III, p. 332). Once again, sexual desire and divinity are intertwined, which conveys to the lovers their essential quality of law-breakers.

Lovers are truly transgressors – and this is precisely what makes them divine. The woman in particular embodies divine transgression by violating many taboos at once in the eyes of her lover who exclaims: "Ah! comme Celle qui a bu le sang d'une personne royale!" (Strophe, IX, III, p. 333). Regicide and "theophagy" constitute clear acts of transgression. For this very reason, they are performed in sacrificial ceremonies of ancient cults.[10] The blood consumed is a symbol of divine

[10] See James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*. In particular chapters XXIV "The killing of the Divine King", L "Eating the god", LIX "Killing the god in Mexico". In the latter, he quotes a Spanish Jesuit (Acosta) who recounts the ritual of a sacrifice performed by the

energy given to humans thence allowed to communicate with the divine world. As the Christian Eucharist energizes the Christian's soul through transubstantiation of the wine, the theme of blood represents the essential and primitive urge of sexual desire experienced by the lovers. Driven by their overwhelming desire, the lovers present themselves as having killed the gods in order to benefit from their vital force and to dedicate themselves to love in the exclusive influence and protection of the sea. Perhaps this is why the poet may observe: "La terre un soir pleure ses dieux" (Strophe, IX, I, p. 326). The terrestrial gods are dead because the lovers have killed them and have become gods themselves, and have gone to sea to find a suitable, i.e. sacred, area for their love.

However, the lovers' transformation into gods is not a mere idealisation or reciprocal idolatry. Both lovers remain very much alive, personal and sensitive. For the poet, the woman may embody the idea of purity without losing any of her human qualities: " « Et toi plus chaste d'être plus nue, de tes seules mains vêtue, tu n'es point Vierge des grands fonds, Victoire de bronze ou de pierre blanche que l'on ramène, avec l'amphore, dans les grandes mailles chargées d'algues des tâcherons de mer" (Strophe, IX, II, p. 328). The woman is undoubtedly a sacred figure – at once pure and impure, having drunk the divine blood, she nonetheless remains essentially human and moving in her nakedness. Neither icon nor statue, the woman encapsulates perfectly the mystery of

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Aztecs: "They took a captive, such as they thought good; and afore they did sacrifice him unto their idols, they gave him the name of the idol, to whom he should be sacrificed, and apparelled him with the same ornaments like their idol, saying, that he did represent the same idol. And during the time that this representation lasted, which was for a year in some feasts, in others six months, and in others less, they reverenced and worshipped him in the same manner as the proper idol, and in the meantime, he did eat, drink, and was merry. When he went through the streets, the people came forth to worship him, and everyone brought him an alms, with children and sick folks, that he might cure them, and bless them, suffering him to do all things at his pleasure, only he was accompanied with ten or twelve men lest he should fly. And he (to the end he might be reverenced as he passed) sometimes sounded upon a small flute, that the people might prepare to worship him. The feast being come, and he grown fat, they killed him, opened him, and ate him, making a solemn sacrifice of him." Frazer then evokes the sacrifice of a young girl and concludes: "If the Mexican girl, whose blood was sprinkled on the maize, indeed personated the Maize Goddess, it becomes more than ever probable that the girl whose blood the Pawnees similarly sprinkled on the seed corn personated in like manner the female Spirit of the Corn". This illustrates how the sacrifice and the eating of a god (or god-like human) benefit human beings by giving vital energy and fertility to humanity.

love inasmuch as it is linked to the sacred. She observes her partner: "Et moi, j'ai vu changer ta face, prédateur! Comme il arrive aux ravisseurs d'offrandes dans les temples, quand fond sur eux l'irritation divine...Toi dieu notre hôte, de passage, Congre salace du désir, remonte en nous le cours des eaux" (Strophe, IX, III, p. 331-332). The lovers unite in the secret of sacred desire, and sexual pleasure is experienced as an eminently sacred experience. The image of the "Congre salace du désir" is a transparent metaphor of the male sex, yet it is also a maritime image. The picture is both graphic and symbolic: the conger evokes lustful movements. Yet the whole image is neither abusive nor obscene. Something essential is at stake in this suggestive image. The ability to go beyond the limits of the visible is given by love. In love, the poet is a sacrilegious being who steals from a temple, perhaps from the temple of his lover herself. The act of sacrilege makes him sacred: he is alone in the company of the gods, perhaps even alone in place of a god. "Irritation divine" constitutes a crucial play on word inasmuch as it means at once "divine wrath" and "divine excitement". In this way, Saint-John Perse links the idea of transgression and that of divine pleasure in love. Therefore the union of the lovers is regarded as a celestial and blessed decree. "Decret du ciel et qui nous lie!" (Strophe, IX, III, p. 332). Love is an effect of fate, which means that – etymologically – the divine word is involved. The "fatum" – the gods' speech that dictates human destiny – is heard by the lovers in the act of love. This is why love may also be passion: it occurs between two beings as an irrepressible attraction that is imposed upon them. In the same way, poetic inspiration is imposed on the poet against his will.

In *Amers* the collusion between sacredness and sexual ecstasy is noticeable and total. In spite of their illness, the gods are linked to a quite explicit sexuality: "Ainsi les dieux, gagnés d'un mal qui n'est point notre, tournent à l'or de laque dans leur gaine de filles" (Strophe, IX, III, p. 333). According to the Latin etymology (*vagina*), the expression "leur gaine de filles" clearly refers to the female sexual organ. Sacredness and sexuality are associated in a rather dramatic way as far as woman is concerned: "Comme l'esprit violent du dieu qui se saisit de l'homme à

naître dans la femme, et foule la femme dans son linge et ses membranes divisées [...], plaise au plaisir sacré de joindre sa victime, et que l'Amante renversée dans ses enveloppes florales livre à la nuit de mer sa chair froissée de grande labiée! Il n'est point là d'offense pour son âme..." (Strophe, IX, III, p. 334). This vivid and eloquent verse illustrates the link between sex and violence for the poet. The woman appears to be physically oppressed but not spiritually tyrannized. Because the sexual act is actually sacred, violence is not a destructive process. On the contrary, it is a procreation in which the woman appears to be at one and the same time victimized and honoured. This is precisely the dual aspect of the sacrificial victim, who is symbolically destroyed in order to become available for regeneration through a fruitful interaction between immanence and transcendence, as between male and female. Consequently sexual pleasure is also sacred. "Submersion! soumission! Que le plaisir sacré t'inonde, sa demeure! Et la jubilation très forte est dans la chair, et de la chair dans l'âme est l'aiguillon" (Strophe, IX, III, p. 334). The vivid and rousing experience of love is expressed in the most explicit and beautiful terms by the woman lover to her partner and the verse is built in such a manner as to imitate the excitement mounting towards climax: "Tu frapperas, promesse! – Plus prompte, ô Maître, ta réponse, et ton intimation plus forte! Parle plus haut, despote! et plus assidûment m'assaille: l'irritation est à son comble! Quête plus loin, Congre royal: ainsi l'éclair en mer cherche la gaine du navire.../ « Tu as frappé foudre divine! – Qui pousse en moi ce très grand cri de femme non sevrée?..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 337). The erotic experience is intrinsically sacred because it involves not only the most secret and intimate reality of the lovers, but also because it plays a major part in the general pattern of the universe. Sexual pleasure enables the lovers to have such an intense experience that it seems to originate in an "other" and superior reality that must be traced back to the world of the gods. In this perspective, sacred pleasure constitutes the transcendence that allows a communication between the world of the humans and that of the gods – to the point where the lovers become gods themselves. This is made

possible only through the sacrifice of the woman lover in the erotic experience.

The tribute that the poet pays to his partner leaves no doubt as to how sacred she appears to him. "Tu es comme le pain d'offrande sur l'autel, et portes l'incision rituelle rehaussée du trait rouge...Tu es l'idole de cuivre vierge, en forme de poisson, que l'on enduit au miel de roche ou de falaise..." (Strophe, IX, III, p. 333). The amalgamation of Christian sacraments with pagan ones is a consistent feature of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. The result here is a sort of blasphemy against the Christian Eucharist. The woman's body is compared to the bread on the altar. Nevertheless, one should not regard this image as too offensive – although Saint-John Perse is very well aware of the striking powers of such a controversial synthesis. Rather, I would argue that this encapsulates the whole idea of sacrifice. The woman is bread and fish and honey. She is to be eaten and consumed as a sacrifice that will not only open the gates onto the "other" world, but also make the woman a goddess herself: "J'ai vu briller entre tes dents le pavot rouge de la déesse. L'amour en mer brûle ses vaisseaux. Et toi, tu te complais dans la vivacité divine, comme l'on voit les dieux agiles sous l'eau claire, où vont les ombres dénouant leurs ceintures légères..." (Strophe, IX, III, p. 334). The sacrifice is linked to eroticism; in fact, the sexual act is the sacrifice itself: "Et mon corps s'ouvre sans décence à l'Etalon du sacre, comme la mer elle-même aux saillies de la foudre" (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 336). "L'Etalon" epitomizes the virile desire that the woman lover accepts entirely despite the indecency of lust. The horse is a potent symbol of virility and here represents the poet's sexual desire. In the sexual act the male horse performs a quintessentially sacred act ("l'Etalon du sacre") as indeed does the poet himself because the intercourse between the male and the female bodies symbolizes the fertile tension between sacred and profane. By offering her body to the poet, the lover makes it possible for him to live an experience of transcendence. This acceptance is what consecrates her: "...l'Amante hérissée, et qui recule et s'arque et qui fait front, émet son sifflement d'amante et de prêtresse..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 337). In the climax of

love the woman experiences an "ordination" which enables her to deal with the matters of the other world. She is "priestess" which implies that she has become "other", yet the same person, and an other self emerges in her through this revelation.

It is possible to see a connection here with the Virgin Mary in that the two women willingly accept the intrusion of the divine in their lives and indeed their bodies.[11] Like Mary, the poet's lover is undoubtedly aware of being connected to the divine world. She implores: "Grâce pour Celle qui fut là, et si brièvement fut là – ah! comme Celle qui a bu le sang dans les coupes royales et qui ne connaît plus sa caste ni son rang..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 338). The transgression that she committed as a sacrificial ritual ("Celle qui a bu le sang dans les coupes royales") transports her beyond the limits of religious laws ("et qui ne connaît plus sa caste ni son rang"). This is why the pronoun has a capital letter: in love, she has been dealing with the "Wholly Other". According to the general patterns of the sacred, the sacrificial victim is simultaneously "pure" and "impure" and may communicate with the invisible world, thereby creating transcendence. This is exactly what the woman does for the poet lover. Sex is "pure" and "impure" because it reverts to the initial innocence of Adam and Eve and original sin. Sex is both Edenic and demonic, and the woman encapsulates this idea. Therefore, she may open the way for transcendence if she accepts to become a sacrificial entity. Of that, she is perfectly aware and she fully co-operates with her partner in creating the conditions for transcendence in love, as her own words testify. "Toi, dieu mon hôte, qui fus là, garde vivante en moi l'hélice de ton viol" (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 337). The violence of the desire in love is the energy liberated by the sacrifice in order to reach the "Wholly Other".

[11] "And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her." Luke 1. 38.

2-Reaching the divine

In the intensity of the erotic experience, the lovers have reached a status of gods which results in the doom of mythological gods: "Courez aux masques, dieux précaires! couvrez l'exode des grands mythes!" (Strophe, IX, III, p. 332). The gods are obliged to reveal their true reality, which is only that of a mask. Therefore they necessarily forsake their traditional status and leave the power of the language to the poet: "...Amie, j'ai mieux à dire, et les dieux sont passés" (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 339). The gods have to go because the lovers have discovered how deceiving they are. Instead, they caused a new religious transcendence to emerge that is neither ancient pagan polytheism nor Christian monotheism. It is embodied by the expression "god" or "the god" (without a capital letter) in order to signify that this transcendent entity is created from immanence, from this world, without any help from the "other" world. This god manifests himself through the trance of the lovers: "Mène ta course, dieu d'emprunt. Nous sommes tes relais!" (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 339). The erotic exaltation actually makes possible the transposition of a human consciousness to a divine one.

Consequently, communication is made possible between the two levels of reality. A sort of language is gradually discovered by the woman who becomes a medium able to translate a divine message: "Et toi l'Amante, pour ton dieu, tu siffles encore ton sifflement d'orfraie. Et toi l'Amante, sur ton souffle, tu t'arqueras encore pour l'enfantement du cri – jusqu'à cette émission très douce, prends-y garde, et cette voyelle infime, où s'engage le dieu..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 340). In this way, the transgression of love has created a transition between the two worlds and the woman appears as the sibyl thanks to whom the divine word may be communicated to human understanding. This is how the problematic image of the gagged girls relaying the message of their god can be understood. The "sifflement" and the "voyelle infime" constitute metaphors for an unutterable language – perhaps poetry. But the communication between the two spheres may contain to confusion as to

how properly decipher the divine message. The poet feels the threat of a backlash from transgression, since it consists essentially of a betrayal.

As his partner attains the status of oracle through direct communication with the divine world, the poet perceives the jeopardy of his entire poetic enterprise: "Inimitié au dieu jaloux qui te vendange dans mes bras! Etrangère la main qui presse la grappe entre nos faces. Toi l'indivise, trahissais...Transgression, transgression, ô tristesse! Hanter l'Être est d'un mime" (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 338). Suddenly the poet realizes that his attempt is flawed because the transgression might recoil against him. In the rapture of the erotic experience, the woman and her divine ghost escape the understanding of the poet who fears being left abandoned by his creation, perhaps like Pygmalion. In the instant when he reaches transcendence through his partner, he experiences the vanity of his desire to become a demiurge. Once again the divine illness reappears as a sign of impairment to the creation of sacred poetry: "Et les vapeurs de mer assiègent la bouche des citernes, et dans les vieilles maçonneries liées au sable de mer s'élargissent les taches de l'infection divine" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 344). Although these "taches" refer to an authentic phenomenon of rust in the cement made from sea sand, the symbolic value of this image is quite clear: as sacred entities, the gods are touched by impurity. Therefore a doubt is cast upon the legitimacy of the entire poetic attempt to unveil an immanent sacredness. The question is how to decide whether the sacred can survive this "fault" of being a flux without object. This is why the poet endeavours to focus on the notion of "l'Être" as opposed to the deficient nature of the gods, in order to try to revitalize the pertinence of the sacred otherwise threatened by the gods'impurity.

The decisive discovery made in *Amers* is the frailty in the consciousness of "being". This must not be mistaken for a philosophical conception such as that which underpins the modern existentialist experience for instance. For Saint-John Perse the point is to find a way to express the supreme beauty and brevity of human life. In the sacrifice of love, the woman is called by the poet "Vaisseau qui s'ouvre sur sa quille, illuminé de braise et d'or, corbeille ardente du naufrage! ô splendeur, ô

tristesse! Hanter l'Être, et si prompt! La mer n'est pas plus âpre à consumer son dieu..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 338). Once again the rapture of love is represented by the image of the sacrifice (the consumption of the god), just as the woman is offered to the man. This enables the lovers to share an experience of absolute "being". But this is only a brief and fugitive experience, one which may cast a doubt concerning its reality. Therefore *Amers* is deliberately orientated towards the assertion of truth in love: "Tu frapperas, foudre divine!... Hanter l'Être n'est point leurre. Et l'amante n'est point mime. Arbre fourchu du viol que remonte l'éclair!..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 340). The doubt that overshadowed the ontological experience is undoubtedly rejected as a sterile doubt. In the pleasure of love – consistently linked to the violence of the sacrifice – the contact with "Being" is the result of a divine touch of the soul.

This is why it is not an illosory process: it remains essentially a symbolic process, operated in a dream state. Thus, the woman appears as the image of the "essence". "Tu m'es la transparence d'aigue du réveil et la prémonition du songe, tu es l'invisible même de la source au lieu de son émission, comme l'invisible même de la flamme, son essence, au lieu très pur et sans offence où le cœur frêle de la flamme est une bague de douceur..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 347). Although invisible, the source of the flame is essentially the flame itself. The comparison may help the reader to understand the essence that the poet perceives: an elusive yet true principle of human life. "Being" is the core of the sacred, the prohibited object that only a sacred quest may reach. It appears to be the pole that orientates desire (sexual as well as intellectual and spiritual desire) without its Christian corollary, guilt. This is why "Being" is used by the poet as a substitute for "God" at this stage of the poem. It is not that the former should be regarded as a true equivalent of the latter. However, later in his poetic works the poet will link the two, and it is of some interest to note the fact here, since this is the first time that the poet explicitly mentions "Being". The essential feature at this point is the fact that the object of transcendence is obtained through the sea. The sea provides "Being" with reality but also with dynamism and life: "Et d'une seule houle très prospère, comme d'un seul pas de Vendangeuse, tôt

foulée, toute la mer en vain foulée, et qui s'abaisse et qui s'élève, lactation très lente, au sein même de l'Être, sa constance..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 349). This idea of a dynamic Being is personal to Saint-John Perse and unique in contemporary literature. He probably derived it from the Pre-Socratic philosophers who developed a conception of essence based on movement, before Plato changed it for a more static interpretation with "ideas" as the only source of essence. The originality of Saint-John Perse is to assign the particular movement of the sea to the dynamics of Being; this enables him to propose a comprehensive and consistent model for his theory of the sacred. In the sea, love and sacrifice are linked to form a complex yet coherent "liturgy" accorded to love.

Having reached "Being", the lovers become aware of their transgression and the poet has recourse to an expressive image to convey the idea of their infringement while avoiding the idea of any "fault" on their part. "Nos lits défaits, nos cœurs à nu, songe à tout ce battement d'orage et de mer haute qui fut notre sang même, en quête de l'aveu; à tous ces astres consumés que nous portions en mer avant le jour, marchand pieds nus entre les myrtes comme des meurtriers sacrés aux mains ensanglantées d'aèdes" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 353). The image of the "murderers" is used to emphasize the fact that the lovers are truly apart from normal rules (as criminals might be) and are intrinsically linked to the violence of sacrifice. But the essential word here is "aèdes": it signals that the two lovers are poets. Therefore the image may be reversed, revealing that the poet must be held as an "outlaw": he clearly puts himself outside the laws in order to reach a sacred reality through "la nuit de l'homme". Like Prometheus, he brings back the fire for Humans but has to pay the price for revealing a truth that should have been held secret.

The theme of absolution is therefore an essential feature of Saint-John Perse's poetry. The woman exclaims: "Vous qui de mort m'avez sauvée, soyez loués, dieux saufs, pour tout ce comble qui fut nôtre, et tout ce grand labeur d'amour que vous avez en moi tracé, et tout ce très grand cri de mer que vous avez en moi crié" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 342). And the woman asks forgiveness on behalf of the poet for the violence he

displays in the sacrifice of love: "Dieux secourables, dieux terrestres! ne prendrez-vous contre la Mer le parti de l'Amante?...Et toi, cœur d'homme non cruel, veuille le Ciel aussi t'absoudre de ta force!" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 353). The poet acknowledges this process of salvation: "...celle qui a dit en moi le vrai, et qui me rachètera des mains du Barbaresque, celle-là, plus forte que douceur, m'a dit de femme plus que femme" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 357). Because she reveals more than what she actually is as a human being, the woman constitutes the divine character by which forgiveness and salvation are granted. This is once more a blasphemous proposition from a Christian point of view. But for Saint-John Perse it is nothing of the kind – not only because his purpose is in no way to offend any religious creed, but also because he deliberately situates himself outside the scope of Christianity. Therefore he may rightly assert that the poet is "redeemed" by his lover because love is the only humane transcendence through which both man and woman may reach divine status.

Nonetheless, the poet feels that this redemption by sensual love is probably not enough to account for its actual completion. Interestingly, he asks: "Et de Qui d'autre graciés, recevons-nous de femme cette faveur d'aimer?" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 346). Clearly, the poet acknowledges the necessity of another, perhaps supreme entity that alone grant grace to the sacred lovers. This question will remain unanswered. The "Qui" remains silent and anonymous. However, the capital letter strongly suggests that the poet is referring to a divine entity. A "Wholly Other" stands beyond everything that is conceivable, yet never allow Himself to be seen and this "Absence" of "Qui" constitutes one of the driving elements of Saint-John Perse's poetry. In this perspective, man and woman keep their status as sacred characters.

More than a prophet, the woman reaches the status of goddess. Moreover, she is hailed as one of the most important goddesses of ancient times: "Istar, splendide et nue, éperonnée d'éclairs et d'aigles verts, dans les grandes gazes vertes de son feu d'épaves..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 340). In the religions of ancient Mesopotamia, Istar (or Ishtar) was the goddess both of fecundity and of war. In the subsequent syncretism

that occurred in ancient Greece she was consequently associated with Aphrodite. The poet depicts his lover with the features of the Greek goddess Aphrodite too: "Ô Voyageuse jusqu'à moi hors de ta nuit de femme, et qui t'éveilles en mains profanes, comme fille d'immortelle prise aux aisselles hors de l'écume mère" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 349). The image evokes Aphrodite's birth from the ocean (as Poseidon's daughter). It is likely that Saint-John Perse thought of the famous painting by Botticelli in which the goddess emerges from a shell surrounded by the foam of the ocean. The fact that he calls her "fille d'immortelle" confirms that for him his lover has become divine. The interesting detail is that at this point only the woman is sacred. She wakes up in "profane" hands, namely those of the poet. She is clearly elevated to the status of a divinity and she seems aware of it: "Regarde-moi, Puissant! en cet endroit princier du front, entre les yeux, où du pinceau très vif se fixe le rouge vermillon du sacre" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 354). She accepts this status and acknowledges the distinctive marks that are the lot of consecrated women (in Hinduism for instance). The poet confirms: "- et voici, tu t'éveilles, le front marqué du pli sacré" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 349). The woman is therefore transformed into a divine character who can infuse a new energy in the poet's soul: "Mains périssables, mains sacrées! vous renouez pour moi la dignité de vaincre" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 357). This almost sacerdotal role of the woman leads to a kind of acme in the course of the poem. *Amers* contains a few verses that clearly suggest the solemn tone of a decisive sacred text.

Interestingly, *Amers* recalls passages in the Gospels, such as various blessings invoked by the poet: "La paix des eaux soit avec nous!..." (Strophe, IX, V, p. 342). Further in the poem, he declares: "Amants! Amants! Qui sait nos routes?...A la Ville ils diront: "Qu'on les cherche! Ils s'égarent! Et leur absence nous est tort." Mais nous: Où donc l'abus? Les dieux s'aveuglent sur l'eau noire. Heureux les égarés sur mer! Et de la mer aussi qu'on dise: heureuse l'égarée!..." (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 358). This passage hints at the "Sermon on the Mount".[12] As far as

[12] See Matthew 5. 3-11 and Luke 6. 20-22.

the message is concerned, one may notice a clear challenge to the actual meaning of the biblical text. But once more, this is not the object of the poem. What the poet is seeking is a style that can encapsulate the solemnity of the revelation he wants to pass on to humankind. It is paradoxical that he should have recourse to this eminently Christian text, for he clearly distanced himself from the Christian heritage on many occasions. Nonetheless, he seems to take into account Christian discourse. This is all the more striking, given that the pagan message running through the entire text is in contradiction with these biblical allusions.

3-Victory over death

Having accomplished their union, the lovers go to sea following a sacred route: "Derrière nous [les amants en mer] tout ce sillage qui s'accroît et qui s'allaite encore à notre poupe, mémoire en fuite et voie sacrée" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 358). The wake generates a sacred tack which cannot be seen before being actually sailed but which becomes visible in the wash left by the ship. This metaphor of the poet's vision unveils the way the sacred works. Like the navigator who "sees" his way and plans his route on the open ocean thanks to the "sea marks", the poet makes his way through the sacred thanks to some spiritual marks that he alone can see. At the end of *Amers* the poet restores the pre-eminent role of the gods. The lovers have accomplished their own access to divinity, everything is back to normal and the balance between the humane and the divine spheres is re-established: "Les dieux vont nus à leur ouvrage" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 358). The gods are reinstated in their power over the world: "Et du talon divin, cette pulsation très forte, et qui tout gagne..." (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 358). The equilibrium of the world is brought back and the gods are once more controlling its movement. In the experience of love the barriers between profane and sacred had been abolished and the lovers had reached a status of gods which caused chaos and cast a doubt upon the reality and veracity of the gods themselves. Now, the poet

exclaims: "Hommage, hommage à la Vivacité divine!" (Strophe, IX, II, p. 327). Further he concludes in an echo: "Hommage, hommage à la véracité divine!" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 358). The separation between the two worlds is firmly strengthened, and humans and gods are clearly differentiated again after the confusion created by the transgression of the lovers.

The first element signalling the return to normality is that a clear line is made between humans and gods. Interestingly enough, it is illustrated by the fact that the quality of being divine is attributed back to animals: "Les bêtes déifiées s'éveillent dans les urnes" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 344). The gods appear less like proper characters of their own than ghosts wandering from being to being. When they incarnate themselves in humans the balance of the world is threatened because too many sacred forces coexist in the same entity without a sufficient counter-power. On the contrary, gods and animals can be safely associated in a common entity because sacred and profane are well balanced. This corresponds to a stable state of things in an animist perspective, which is illustrated by the worship of the totem animal. Therefore a real communication between gods and humans may take place again, since the frontier between them has been restored: "Ô dieux, qui dans la nuit voyez nos faces à découvert, vous n'avez vu des faces peintes ni des masques!" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 355). The absence of masks between gods and humans means that the traditional pattern of the sacred may be rebuilt, including offerings from humans to the gods ("L'hiver venu, la mer en chasse, la nuit remonte les estuaires, et les voiliers d'offrande se bercent aux voûtes des sanctuaires" (Strophe, IX, VII, p. 359)) and inspiration from the gods to the humans ("Les dieux nous hèlent à l'escale" (Strophe, IX, VII, p. 360)). Nevertheless the woman wonders about her lover: "L'oiseau taillé dans ton visage percera-t-il le masque de l'amant?" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 351). Something remains to be achieved. In the woman's eyes, love has still to set free his soul from death.

Love and death constitute two opposite poles of the human condition. "Aimer aussi est action! J'en atteste la mort, qui d'amour seul s'offense" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 354), the poet exclaims. This dichotomy is

essential in the system of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. As in *Anabase*, the main threat in the exploration of the sacred is death inasmuch as it constitutes the "nuit de l'homme" that the poet wants to enlighten on behalf of his fellow human beings. Yet love and death are linked because both encapsulate the very essence of human condition. However, as profane and sacred, they are opposed and complementary in the cycle of life. Both participate in the complex processes of destruction and regeneration of life. The result of their interactions is immortality. The transgression perpetrated by the lovers allowed them to know immortality. Immortality for Saint-John Perse does not consist in not dying, but rather in the taming of death through love. Since love has been able to open the gates of the sacred onto the "other" world, the lovers have experienced the vanity of death compared with the intensity of "being" in eroticism. This is how the lovers can be immortal even in death: "Et celle qui veillait, sur son flanc droit, sa veille de mortelle, se lèvera encore auprès de l'homme pour ce grand rire d'immortels qui nous liait tous deux à la dissipation des eaux...Et ma prière alors aux dieux muets: qu'un même lé de mer, au même lé de songe, nous joigne un jour, de même mort!" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 354). For the poet, death is but the experience of absolute solitude in the "nuit de l'homme". Remaining united even in death, the lovers actually defeat it. "Et nous voici, contre la mort, sur les chemins d'acanthes noires de la mer écarlate..." (Strophe, IX, II, p. 329), they declare jointly in the first verses of the poem.

Rejecting the cliché that woman is linked to death or is responsible for it, the poet lauds her on the contrary: "...ô femme prise à son arôme et femme prise à son essence, lèvres qui t'ont flairée ne fleurent point la mort..." (Strophe, IX, V, p. 346). Here again Saint-John Perse distances himself from the traditional Christian heritage that makes woman responsible for the introduction of evil into the world and consequently the introduction of death itself. The poet repudiates this conception and sums up his view in a few words at the heart of the poem: "Allez plus doucement, ô cours des choses à leur fin. La mort navigue dans la mort et n'a souci du vif . La nuit salée nous porte dans ses flancs" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 341). In the protective presence of the sea the lovers

know that their transgression has dismissed death. Of course, all things have their end, but this fact must be included in the everlasting regeneration process of the sacred and cannot be called "death".

Confronted with death, the patterns of the sacred become clearer than ever. In particular, one finds the figure of the threshold explicitly mentioned and fully explained: "La pierre du seuil est en travers du seuil, et la mer au-delà de la pierre du seuil. Mort hérétique et vaine, graciée!" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 342). Death is kept safely apart from the human world, thanks to the forces and structures of the sacred, which enables the poet to dismiss death as a vain awe. What the poet means by "vain" is that compared to love death cannot really threaten his true life. In love, he has attained a high degree of consciousness about the reality of life. Transcended by love, human life is safe even whilst he explores the deepest mysteries of death. The fundamental element of the image is the sacred stone of the threshold. It is the mark beyond which the lovers have explored the "nuit de l'homme" only to come back and proclaim the vanity of death. Indeed, at the heart of the erotic experience, the lovers encounter death: "La mort à tête biseautée, l'amour à tête carénée, darde sa langue très fréquente. L'Incessante est son nom; l'innocence son heure. Entends vivre la mort et son cri de cigale..." (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 337). However, the intensity of the sensation annihilates the power of death: "Ô splendeur! ô tristesse! et très haut peigne d'Immortelle coiffant l'écume radieuse! [...] La Mort éblouissante et vaine s'en va, du pas des mimes, honorer d'autres lits" (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 337). The paradox of death being both "éblouissante" and "vaine" is now clearer. Death fascinates and almost hypnotizes the poet because it stands as the ultimate instant of life. However, it is vain because the lovers have experienced the transcendence of love against which death is impotent. For the poet, the simple fact of having experienced love at least once in a lifetime is enough to dissolve all fears caused by death. Such is the metaphysical power of love that the poet encapsulates it in the oxymoron "Entends vivre la mort".

In Saint-John Perse's experience, death has lost its final destructive powers and has become a part of life. This is not an original

combination on the part of the poet. Love and death have been frequently linked as essential driving forces of the human being in recent time in a rather psychological perspective. Represented by the Greek gods Eros and Thanatos, Freud included them in a psychic frame to try and delineate the nature of modern man's drives. But the interesting thing here is the fact that Saint-John Perse asserts the fundamental role of the sacred that no science can replace. For Saint-John Perse, man can truly grasp the veritable extent of his condition not on a psychological level but on a spiritual one. This is why the concept of "le songe" is reintroduced as the proper sphere of human fate. "Le songe" enables love to win over death: "Le taret de la mort est dans le bois du lit, est dans la quille du navire. Mais l'amour frappe plus fort aux boiseries du songe" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 348-349). As it has been previously said, "le songe" is not "le rêve". It is rather a supreme state of consciousness and reality that cannot be struck by death. The poet addresses his partner in these terms: "Ô toi qui vas, dans le sommeil, ta part mortelle répudiant" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 347) and through her the human body is turned into the "chair immortelle" (Strophe, IX, V, p. 347). Once again, it has to be said that this immortality is not a hollow denial of the death. On the contrary, Saint-John Perse insists on the necessity of death in human life, expressing the view that it is an indispensable element of pride and truth in the human condition. In a dramatic and soulful verse he enunciates his truly humanist creed:

> "-Mortelle? Ah! plus aimée d'être en péril!...Tu ne sais pas, tu ne sais pas, ô Parque, pour le cœur d'homme très secret, ce prix d'une première ride de femme au plus insigne du front calme. « Gardez, disait l'homme du conte, gardez, ô Nymphe non mortelle, votre offre d"immortalité. Votre île n'est pas mienne où l'arbre ne s'effeuille; ni votre couche ne m'émeut, où l'homme n'affronte son destin. »/ Plutôt la couche des humains, honorée de la mort!...J'épuiserai la route du mortel – fortune de mer et malencontres – et garderai de male épine Celle qui s'abrite sous ma voile. Mains périssables, mains sacrées! vous renouez pour

> moi la dignité de vaincre. Aimant, je vais où va la mort aventureuse et vaine" (Strophe, IX, VI, p. 356-357).

The sacred led to the discovery by the poet of his superiority over any other power, included death, for *he* knows that nothing can equal the power to face one's fate – and this is the prerogative of man. Death seems an empty shadow that inevitably exhibits itself as a vain character after the demystification realized by the transgression of the lovers. "L'hiver venu, les mouches mortes, on tire des coffres de théâtre les grandes étoffes vertes à motifs rouge vif. Les habilleuses des morts se louent dans les théâtres avec les figurants" (Strophe, IX, VII, p. 360). If love is the actor because it is the living force that regenerates life, then death is the character embodied by love. The metaphor of the actor and character may encapsulate the complex links developed by the poet between death and love. Somehow, however, they never mix and ultimately death is dismissed as a deceptive horizon for humans. The woman concludes after the powerful experience of love: "Ces larmes, mon amour, n'étaient point larmes de mortelle" (Strophe, IX, IV, p. 337). Death has been defeated because the transgression accomplished by love in the night of man has revealed it to be mo more than a theatrical illusion.

CHAPTER II: THEOGONY

I-Transgression of the sea

1-The pagan god

Three "sea-marks" punctuate the poem and stress an essential feature of *Amers*, namely the divine nature of the sea. I have already argued that the entire poem accepts the Bible as a "model", albeit an antithetical one. Therefore the godlike nature of the sea is conveyed by images of the plural heathen gods of the Bible – as opposed to the single God of Israel. The first occurrence of these three marks can be found in the very first lines of "Chœur": " « Mer de Baal, Mer de Mammon – Mer de tout âge et de tout nom, / Ô Mer sans âge ni raison, ô Mer sans hâte ni saison, / « Mer de Baal et de Dagon – face première de nos songes" (Chœur, 1, p. 365). Not only is it confirmed that in the poem the sea is the first reality of "nos songes", but also the sea is clearly associated with pagan gods mentioned in the Bible as evil and stigmatized as mere idols as opposed to the living God of Israel. The genitive metaphors recurring three times ("Mer de Baal", "Mer de Mammon", "Mer de Dagon") create a pagan trinity that may be considered as an imitation, or rather a symmetrical copy, of the Christian one. This is all the more striking, considering that at least two of the three gods belong to the culture of Canaan, against which Israel fought, and that they are closely related to each other. In the mythology of the Philistines, Dagon is the god of crops and of germination. His name has been linked to the Hebrew word "*dâgân*" ("corn"). However, the Hebrew text of Samuel suggests a play on word between Dagon and "*dâg*" ("fish"). While the ark of God, seized by the Philistines, is exposed as a trophy in the temple of the god at Achdod, the statue of Dagon is miraculously thrown twice to the floor,

breaking both its hands and leaving only the "fish part"[1]. An interesting detail is that the head and the hands of the statue fell on the threshold of the temple. The Bible reads: "And they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of Dagon was left to him. / Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day."[2] As far as the sacred is concerned, this detail about the threshold is particularly important since it marks a limit and a taboo that nobody – not even the priests – is prepared to break, for fear of the god and the evil forces that he might unleash. This pattern is consistent with the general system of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. The threshold between the profane and the sacred worlds is crucial for the balance of the universe from a pagan point of view.[3] Moreover, it is clear that Dagon is a pagan divinity in competition with the God of Israel, as the god of its enemies. Saint-John Perse endeavours to recapture a pagan sense of the sacred through the image of the conflict with the God of monotheism. This point is consistent with his personal views concerning Christianity. However, what is still unclear is why he should associate Dagon with the sea: every detail points to the fact he is very much a god of the earth; all the more so, given that his son is said to be the victor over the god of the sea.

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[1] I Samuel 5. 1-4. In fact the Hebrew text is not very clear and the translations remain unsure. Most of the old versions render the fourth verse by the idea that only the body or the trunk of the statue remained unbroken. The Authorized King James Version reads: "only the stump of Dagon was left of him." As for a more modern version, such as the French "Traduction œcuménique de la Bible", it proposes "Au moins, était-il resté là quelque chose de Dagôn."

[2] I Samuel 5. 4-5.

[3] In the same place, then called Azot, a temple dedicated to the idol could be found in the time of the Maccabees, before being destroyed by Jonathan, along with the fleeing Syrians from the defeated army (see I Maccabees 10. 83-84, TOB p. 1273: "La cavalerie se dispersa dans la plaine. Les fuyards arrivèrent à Azot et entrèrent dans le « Temple de Dagôn », le sanctuaire de leur idole, pour y trouver le salut. / Jonathan incendia Azot et les ville alentour. Il les dépouilla et livra aux flammes le sanctuaire de Dagôn et ceux qui s'y étaient réfugiés."). Many other places are signalled as having their own temple of Dagon. It is possible to mention places such as Beth-shan (if one compares I Samuel 31.10 to I Chronicles 10.10) and Gaza (Judges 16. 21-23) where Samson shakes the pillars of the temple and destroys it (Judges 16. 26-30).

Dagon is the father of Baal, who in turn is the god of the mountains, the clouds and the storms.[4] Baal is also "the prince of the earth" because he defeated the god Ym "prince of the sea". Married to his own sister Anat – later assimilated to the goddesses Achera, Achtart and Astarte, then to Aphrodite and Venus – he is associated with the myth of Tammuz resurrecting every year for the spring.[5] Finally, he is associated with Adonis who resurrects every year for the love of Aphrodite. His cult was widely spread in the biblical Middle-East, to such an extent that his name was used in many place and personnal names, and came to represent the god par excellence for his worshippers. But Baal is undoubtedly the pagan god most consistently reviled by the holy writers and the prophets. He appears either as a personalized god or as a divinity established in its own myth.[6] Sometimes he is represented as a sort of Moloch asking for human sacrifices.[7] He is always reviled and condemned as a fake god, a mere idol.[8] Here again, the god associated with the sea of Saint-John Perse is the direct rival of the unique God.

As for Mammon, he is a god of wealth and personifies money.[9] The fact that he is more clearly a kind of allegory makes him also more abstract. He is mentioned in the Bible only in the New Testament – on three occasions in the Gospels[10]. He may be seen as the third element completing the trinity of the Father, the Son and the Spirit - all being antithesis of the Christian Trinity. Therefore it may be asserted that "Chœur" contains a blasphemous dimension inasmuch as it expresses an

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[4] It is him whom the prophet Elijah chases and ridicules on the Mount Carmel (I Kings 18. 19).

[5] See Ezekiel 8.14.

[6] See in particular Judges 6.25; I Kings 16.31-32; I Kings 19.18; II Kings 10.18-22; II Kings 23.4-5.

[7] See in particular Jeremiah 19.5.

[8] I Kings 18.20-40; Jeremiah 2.23; Hosea 13.1.

[9] This Aramean term means "wealth" and everything that can bring material security – hence, money.

[10] Matthew 6.24: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Luke 16.9: "And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations." Luke 16.11: "If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" Luke 16.13: "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

attempt to recreate a religious interpretation of the world based totally on pagan creeds specifically targeted in the Bible.

The invocation of the pagan gods is found a second time, in the middle of the poem: "« Mer de Baal, Mer de Mammon, Mer de tout âge et de tout nom" (Chœur, 3, p. 371). It is finally uttered at the very end as a conclusion: "Mer de Baal, Mer de Mammon" (Chœur, 5, p. 380). The simple fact that one can find the same phrases in three capital parts of the text indicates how important they are. However, one might be puzzled by the unexpected link between two exclusively earthly gods and the sea. This apparent paradox actually means that the sea has become a perfectly abstract entity, detached from the materialistic reality of the oceans. It is now a pagan god who commands his own worship, rituals and liturgy. The sea has become a proper god created by the poet's imagination in search of a transcendence that might enlighten the night of man. The sea is now this spiritual enlightenment engendered by the sacred attributes of the "aquatic" sea.

The poet can acknowledge the divine nature of the sea in a variety of images. He pays homage to the sea, "Car ton plaisir est dans la masse et dans la propension divine, mais ton délice est à la pointe du récif..." (Chœur, 2, p. 370). Or he sees "...la Mer aux mille fronces / Comme la tunique infiniment plissée du dieu aux mains des filles de sanctuaires" (Chœur, 3, p. 371) in a comparison that reveals the true meaning of the sea's appearance in his view. The sea is undoubtedly a sacred space because it has consistently been used as a metaphor of the rupture between the sacred and the profane. But it is also a sacred time: "Nous nous portons un jour vers toi dans nos habits de fête, Mer innocence du Solstice, Mer insouciance de l'accueil, et nous ne savons plus bientôt où s'arrêtent nos pas..." (Chœur, 2, p. 367). The solstice is a sacred time for twice a year it marks the moment when the sun is furthest from the equator, dividing two opposite periods of time: on the one hand the shortening nights and lengthening days, on the other hand shortening days and the lengthening nights. Like space, time is split in two halves and the sea is probably the natural element that echoes this phenomenon most accurately through the variations of the tides. Thus not only are

space and time united in a comprehensive vision of the sacred, but also the bi-polar pattern of space echoes the cyclical conception of time in the sacred. The poet insists on this idea by mentioning for a second time this temporal dimension of the sea: "Mer innocence du Solstice, ô Mer comme le vin des Rois!..." (Chœur, 3, p. 372). The capital letters signal that the time in question is a special date and is endowed with sacred powers. It is interesting that Saint-John Perse does not evoke the equinox as the other notable moment of the solar rhythm. The equinox marks the moment when day and night have the same length – it therefore constitutes a point of equilibrium in a single movement, not a threshold between two different movements of the earth towards the sun, as does the solstice. This is wholly consistent with the general pattern of the sacred. Saint-John Perse explicitly refers the sea to the cyclical time through the image of the woman: " « Nous te disons l'Epouse mi-terrestre: comme la femme, périodique, et comme la gloire, saisonnière" (Chœur, 4, p. 377). The sacred cycle is now completed: space and time are closed on themselves like the cycles of the woman who, through the image of the lover, has already been associated with the sea. As a sacred space and a sacred time the sea must be declared a forbidden area.

Quite early in the poem the sea is struck by the stigmas of prohibition: "Et toi-même, au matin, toute laquée de noir, comme la vierge prohibée en qui s'accroît le dieu" (Chœur, 2, p. 369). The image of the maternity of the Blessed Virgin illustrates very well the contradictory forces acting in the sacred: purity and impurity may coexist in a very complex relation only because they are kept away one from the other, thanks to the power of the taboo. Therefore the sea is organized as a forbidden area showing strong signs of segregation between antagonistic forces. "Et l'on t'a vue, Mer de violence, [...] rouler aux bouches de ta nuit, comme des meules saintes marquées de l'hexagramme impur, les lourdes pierres lavées d'or de tes tortues géantes" (Chœur, 2, p. 370). Sanctity and impurity exist side by side in the sea, precisely because the violence enables them to retain their respective powers. In this image the sea obstructs the enlightening of its night as a sign that its deepest mysteries must remain secret in order to continue to be sacred. The night

of the sea is sealed because it is a forbidden area that only the poet may reach in special circumstances. The poet addresses the sea as "Mer ouverture du monde d'interdit, sur l'autre face de nos songes, ah! comme l'outrepas du songe, et le songe même qu'on n'osa!..." (Chœur, 3, p. 375). The "songe" represents the sea inasmuch as it is a non-material reality that sets the rules and creates the images of the forbidden world. The sea incarnates the interdiction beyond which the poet wants to go to find transcendence. The sea forbids the passage and for that reason it encourages the poet to transgress. The decisive notion is the "outrepas du songe" because it implies the action of "passer outre" as an act of rebellion against limits.

2-The threshold

The sea incarnates the threshold beyond which the world of the sacred might be comprehended. The poet asks the sea: "Ou bien est-ce toi, fumée du seuil, qui de toi-même montes en nous comme l'esprit sacré du vin dans les vaisseaux de bois violet [...]?" (Chœur, 2, p. 367). The very concept of limit is essential to the nature of the sea itself. Moreover, the poet needs it to perform his transfiguration as a spiritual discoverer: "Ainsi le Conquérant, sous la plume de guerre, aux dernières portes du Sanctuaire: « J'habiterai les chambres interdites et je m'y promènerai... »" (Chœur, 2, p. 367). The figure of the Conqueror is recurrent in the poem but reaches its full meaning in "Chœur". The poet has become a knight in search of the Holy Grail and he explores the forbidden world defined by the sea in the same fashion as Arthur Rimbaud investigates a forbidden life in "Une saison en enfer". It is a total experience of the soul before which the poet has to take a decisive and uncompromising step in order to reach an other level of reality. He proclaims: "Nous franchissons enfin le vert royal du Seuil; et faisant plus que te rêver, nous te foulons, fable divine!..." (Chœur, 2, p. 367). By the transgression of the "Seuil" the poet accomplishes the "leap" by which he penetrates divine reality and ventures into the world beyond the "Songe"

itself. The achievement of the poet consists in recognising that the powers of poetry may be limited and that metaphor may be an insufficient means of transgression. Not every intuition may be put into words and the ultimate power of the language is to express this limit. Beyond it lies what must be called the Wholly Other for, failing to be apprehended by words, it is something that is not within the grasp of formal logic or conventional human intelligence.

Saint-John Perse does not actually use the concepts of "Mysterium Tremendum" and "Wholly Other" as such. However, from a number of images, it appears that he is very well aware of the importance of both notions as far as the sacred is concerned. Confronted with the limits of the language, the poet calls up the sea in an ultimate and dramatic invocation: "Blessure ouverte au flanc terrestre pour l'intrusion sacrée, déchirement de notre nuit et resplendissement de l'autre – pierre du seuil lavée d'amour et lieu terrible de la désécration!" (Chœur, 3, p. 372).[11] He probably opted for the neologism "désécration" because it contains the idea of violence linked to the sacred, is shorter and therefore more expressive and echoes more accurately the adjective "sacrée" in the same verse. Above all, the neologism is the obvious solution to illustrate the limits of the expressive powers of the language. The above-mentioned verse encapsulates in a dramatic manner the whole question of the sacred for Saint-John Perse. All the essential elements can be found logically linked to each other: the night of man, love, the threshold and the sacred transgression.

However, the true novelty in "Chœur" is that through the sea the poet divines a totally new reality even beyond the transgression of the sea. He perceives the existence of an "other" night through a process that might be called a "hyperbolic" transgression inasmuch as the "désécration" might be described as a reversion of the sacred. The "désécration" is defined within the sacred but introduces a new step in

[11] The word "désécration" seems to be a neologism created by the poet and possibly inspired by the English "to desecrate" ("1. Violate (a sacred place or thing) with violence, profanity, etc. 2. Deprive (a church, a sacred object, etc.) of sanctity.). The term in turn allows the creation of "desecration". The poet could have used the French

the transgression because it proposes to overcome the transgression itself. This is where the element of "Tremendum" intervenes because in this process the poet tackles a truly frightening and unknown reality. So far the sacred has been contained within the boundaries of rituals and symbols. Even transgression has been considered a rather knowledgeable and accustomed practice. But for the first time the poet faces the thrill of a radically different intuition. Once again the sea is responsible for conveying this discovery: "Tu vas, tu vas, l'Immense et Vaine, et fais la roue toi-même au seuil d'une autre Immensité..." (Chœur, 4, p. 377). The sea points at another "Immensity" that is totally unknown – and unknowable – thereby inspiring a feeling of awe. Clearly the poet has reached a point where a formidable and fearsome reality can be experienced. He finds himself in a situation of overwhelming and portentous implications on a spiritual level. His "songe" has led him to an awesome perception of what lies beyond sensory life: "Aux clartés d'iode et de sel noir du songe médiateur, l'anneau terrible du Songeur enclôt l'instant d'un immortel effroi: l'immense cour pavée de fer des sites interdits, et la face, soudain, du monde révélé dont nous ne lirons plus l'avers..." (Chœur, 2, p. 370). The "songe" works as a way to approach the unutterable reality detected through the experience of the sacred. The impossibility of describing it is conveyed by the oxymoron of the "lights of the black salt". Having reached the "sites interdits", the poet is captured by the awe of the instant and suddenly realizes that he has made an irreversible discovery. He may now read and comprehend the other face of the reality, but he knows that this is a process of no return. He has passed through the appearances of this world ("l'avers") to see the same world from the other side. This is why the figure of the mirror becomes so important at this stage of the poem.

At a point that might be called a centre of symmetry in "Chœur" (in the midst of the third canto out of five), the poet inserts a verse that may be described as fundamental in his quest for the sacred. He finds the most striking image of the sea in order to encapsulate its ability to reflect

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"désacralisation" from "désacraliser" ("Dépouiller du caractère sacral, ne plus considérer comme sacré.").

the image of the other world: "Ô Mer fulguration durable, face frappée du singulier éclat! Miroir offert à l'Outre-songe et mer ouverte à l'Outre-mer, comme la Cymbale impaire au loin appariée!" (Chœur, 3, p. 372). The words "Miroir", "Outre-songe" and "Outre-mer" (all having capital letters) describe in a decisive manner the essential function of the sea as a spiritual entity. It is a window open onto the unthinkable and the incomprehensible, whilst also being a meaningful reality concerned with the sacred. One might think of a one-way mirror that enables the observer to see what he should not otherwise see. The sea enables the poet to see through the visible world a reflection from another world. What is more, this other world echoes or responds to the phenomenal world, creating thereby a symmetrical pattern – in the same way as the virtual image seen in a mirror shows an inverted and proportioned equivalent of the reality. In this manner, the poet may produce images from the other reality by sheer deduction from the frame of the visible world. This is the function of the sacred; it enables man to create an intelligible picture – albeit strictly virtual – of an unthinkable reality. For Saint-John Perse the sea admirably fulfils this function – to the point that it seems to disappear as a separate element and to become transcendence itself.

3-Transcendence of the word

In "Chœur", the sea is invoked as a source of poetic inspiration, not simply as an inspirational theme, and ultimately as the originator of the poetic speech. It is a place of offence against the laws, that begets a message originated from a non-worldly source: "Nous t'assiégeons, Splendeur! Et te parasiterons, ruche des dieux, ô mille et mille chambres de l'écume où se consume le délit. – Sois avec nous, rire de Cumes et dernier cri de l'Ephésien!..." (Chœur, 2, p. 367). The figure of the Sybil and the reference to Heraclitus both convey the notion of poetry or philosophy as human creation but entirely dependent on divine speech. In this perspective, it becomes clear that poetry and philosophy are both regarded by the ancients as a religious matter. Saint-John Perse clarifies

any ambiguity by interpreting the metaphor himself. He calls the sea: "Lessiveuse d'ors aux sables diligents, et Sybille diluée dans les argile blanches de la baie!..." (Chœur, 2, p. 369). The sea may be called "Sybille" only because it conveys a message from the "Outre-songe" like the priestess in a state of trance. Therefore the transcendence is established between the two worlds, and poetry becomes the quintessence of the sacred inasmuch as it conveys a speech from one reality to another totally different. In this pattern the sea is both the begetter of the poem and its medium. The poet acknowledges his poetic debt towards the sea by calling it "Et Celle encore que l'on sait: assistée de nos greffes, assise entre nos prêtres et nos juges qui donnent leurs règles en distiques" (Chœur, 3, p. 373). The sea is, amongst the priests and the judges, the entity that dictates a law and therefore rules human language itself.

Indeed this source of language is presented as a reference for the poem: "Nous te citons: « Sois là! » Mais toi, tu nous a fait cet autre signe qu'on n'élude; nous a crié des choses sans mesure" (Chœur, 4, p. 377). Not only does the poet implore the sea to constitute his poem in terms of human language through the injunction to be present in the course of the poem, but he also recognizes that the true influence of the sea goes far beyond what he had expected. In fact, the sea means something that exceeds human language and overpowers its capacity for meaning. The "choses sans mesure" that the sea express are on no account to be put into human words – they belong to another reality and the immanent language cannot deal with them. As a consequence the poem can no longer be regarded as a mere structure of words used according to human rules but as a sacred object whose matter is made of the textual sea.

The climax of "Chœur" is undoubtedly the acknowledgement by the poet of the exhaustion of language's resources. Far from constituting an avowal of failure, this final stage in the poet's quest actually means that the goal has been reached. The combination of the sea and the sacred enable the poet to conceive a new vision of his own works and of his relationship with the poetic language. With a sense of relief, the poet exclaims enthusiastically:

> "Nous t'invoquons enfin toi-même, hors de la strophe du Poète. Qu'il n'y ait plus pour nous, entre la foule et toi, l'éclat insoutenable du langage: / « ...Ah! nous avions des mots pour toi et nous n'avions assez de mots, / « Et voici que l'amour nous confond à l'objet même de ces mots, / « Et mots pour nous ils ne sont plus, n'étant plus signes ni parures, / « Mais la chose même qu'ils figurent et la chose même qu'ils paraient; / « Ou mieux, te récitant toi-même, le récit, voici que nous te devenons toi-même, le récit, / « Et toi-même sommes-nous, qui nous étais l'Inconciliable: le texte même et sa substance et son mouvement de mer, / « Et la grande robe prosodique dont nous nous revêtons... »" (Chœur, 4, p. 378).

This declaration is the final creed uttered in *Amers*. Here we find an extensive development of the idea that words have become of no use in the celebration of the sea for the simple reason that the sea is now the text itself. There is no longer a distance between the names and their object, between the meaning and the substance. The poet acknowledges a conjunction between the sea and the text that endeavoured to represent it. Saint-John Perse describes a sort of transubstantiation between the text and its subject; this signifies the accomplishment of a long awaited transcendence. According to the poet, love creates confusion between words and objects, thereby abolishing the notion of reference between sign and meaning. Words cease to exist as such, which opens the way to a total fusion of the poem and the sea. By erasing the ontological gap between the word and its reference the poet suppresses the very notion of "meaning" and may therefore call the sea the "récit" as the poem and its object are no longer distinct. In this manner the textual sea reaches its highest degree of sacredness: "Et maille à maille se répète l'immense trame prosodique – la Mer elle-même, sur sa page, comme un récitatif sacré: / [...]/ « ...Mer de Baal, Mer de Mammon, Mer de tout âge et de tout nom [...] »" (Chœur, 3, p. 371). The sea and the poem are both textual and can fuse, being two compatible faces of the same reality, resulting in the emergence of a new entity, the "récitatif sacré" that marks the acme of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. Indeed this new

entity is engendered by the fusion of the sea and its name for the poet, i.e. the "récit". This is the exclusive power of God: not to *have* a name but to *be* one's name. For Saint-John Perse the sea is a powerful enough divinity to complete this process of fusion with its own name in the course of the poem. This transubstantiation constitutes the ultimate transgression since it crosses the absolute gap between profane and sacred. Consequently the poet reaches the ecstatic point where he may penetrate and mingle in the sea: "...et faisant plus que te rêver, nous te foulons, fable divine!..." (Chœur, 2, p. 367). This might remind one of the elated state of nirvana reached by Buddhists through meditation. In a way, it could be said that Saint-John Perse has succeeded in building a credible and coherent theory of the sacred. Through the symbolical powers of poetry, he has convincingly elaborated a sacred text whose emblem is the sea. However, an ambiguity remains as to how effective the sacred might be in relation to divinity.

Having attained his goal, namely the creation of the symbolic conditions for transcendence, the poet consecrates the sea as a god. His poem takes a devotional aspect and the sea is worshipped as a god: "Nous t'acclamons, Récit! – Et la foule est debout avec le Récitant, la Mer à toutes portes, rutilante, et couronnée de l'or du soir" (Chœur, 4, p. 379). In the poem, the sea is elevated to the status of a goddess and is invoked as such. However, the poet manifests on three occasions his doubts about the links and the distinctions between art – considered as a sacred craft – and religion. In a particularly expressive trilogy (perhaps even litany), he asks himself: "Faut-il crier? faut-il créer? – Qui donc nous crée en cet instant?" (Chœur, 1, p. 366), "Faut-il crier? faut-il louer? Qui donc nous perd en cet instant – ou qui nous gagne?..." (Chœur, 2, p. 368), "Faut-il crier? faut-il prier?..." (Chœur, 4, p. 377). As an alternative to "crier", the poet envisages successively "créer", "louer" and "prier". The progression encapsulates Saint-John Perse's problematic about the spiritual quest. It draws a line from artistic creation, of which poetry is a part, to laud and then prayer. One can see Saint-John Perse's longing for a genuine religious experience through prayer. But in the absence of God this aspiration reverts to the sea which constitutes the

best god-like entity that the poet could conceive: " - Et c'est à Celle-là que nous disons notre âge d'hommes, et c'est à Celle-là que va notre louange" (Chœur, 4, p. 376). The sea, as a textual and female reality existing in the course of the poem, appears to be the only medium of transcendence and may be called an "idol" since it is a worldly element that replaces a proper divinity by virtue of man's aptitude to sacred symbolism. This point invites the reader to investigate further the question, and more particularly the place of God in Saint-John Perse's thought.

II-Transcendence of the sea

1-God, Being and the sea

In his own way, Saint-John Perse recognizes the divine element in humanity. In the poem, the people describe themselves in front of the sea as being " « Assis à tes confins de pierre comme des chiens à tête de singe, dieux métissés d"argile et de tristesse..." (Chœur, 1, p. 366). The metaphor hints at a divine component of mankind. It suggests that man is made of three elements: a divine spark, clay and sadness. This is not far from the biblical interpretation of the creation of man in Genesis. Nevertheless, if there is a divine fragment in man, the gods appear too human, which results in man being overwhelmed by divine impurity. Therefore, the poet finds himself "dans la promiscuité divine et la dépravation de l'homme chez les dieux..." (Chœur, 4, p. 379). To a certain extent, the gates of the sacred can no longer effectively separate the two worlds and their encounter results in widespread impurity. The gods are reduced to the state of natural elements: "Les temples brillent de tout leur sel. Les dieux s'éveillent dans le quartz" (Chœur, Dédicace, p. 385). Men of clay, gods of quartz, they all belong to this world and the difference between them is no longer sufficient to justify any transcendental intervention. No metaphysical action can be expected

from "natural" gods who perhaps are nothing but symbols created by man as mere analogies between a natural pattern or shape (that of quartz for instance) and a human concept and spiritual need (that of purity in quartz). The pagan idols have failed to fulfil the poet's expectations. They have been revealed for what they really are: tokens of human thirst for spirituality created by human aptitude for metaphor. In fact, "Chœur" exemplifies the idea that the gods carried by the sea were only emblems that denote a fundamental absent element in the quest for transcendence. Therefore, the poet must face the ultimate question, that of God.

The essential issue in "Chœur" is that for the first time in *Amers* Saint-John Perse explicitly acknowledges the reality of God. He mentions God on two occasions, allowing two key elements to emerge in order to understand the poet's vision of God. First, he asserts in the second canto of the poem: "Dieu l'Indivis gouverne ses provinces" (Chœur, 2, p. 369). This sentence constitutes in itself an avowal of the existence of God, which is not the least of the contradictions in a poet who has been attempting to present himself as a pagan creator. Nevertheless, it is logical that this declaration should be found at this stage of the poem, the pagan gods having been dismissed as useless. Moreover, the apposition "l'Indivis" suggests that the poet recognizes the absolute unity of God as opposed to the general fragmentation of the world, including the idols. One element, however, prevents the poet from going as far as "believing" that God has the power to touch him. God is said to have power upon "his" provinces, which must be understood as excluding humanity.

For Saint-John Perse man stands outside God's scope and they both remain strangers to each other. Envisaging a potential encounter with God, the poet, emblem of the whole of humanity, has to witness their divergence: "Dieu l'étranger est à la ville, et le Poète, qui rentre seul avec les Filles morose de la gloire: / « Mer de Baal, Mer de Mammon [...] »" (Chœur, 5, p. 380). Even though God is not far away from men (he comes among them in the city), he remains aloof and apparently unconcerned by them. Therefore, although his poetry is formally a success, the poet must contemplate the inanity of his whole enterprise

because it has led to nothing but a missed opportunity. Consequently, he stands alone and disillusioned ("seul avec les Filles moroses de la gloire"), perhaps even deceived by a distant God. He therefore turns once more to the sea and its gods, and recites for the third time his hymn to the sea: " « Mer de Baal, Mer de Mammon »." Faced with the problem of the consequent emptiness in the spiritual scope of man, the poet reverts to the sea as an absolute presence.

As the unity of God cannot be met, the sea stands as a substitute: "Unité retrouvée, présence recouvrée! Ô Mer instance lumineuse et chair de grande lunaison" (Chœur, 2, p. 368). The poet goes back to the sea as a secure entity that will not fail him. His last doubts are rejected and the sea compensates for the absence of God: " « ...M'es-tu présence? – cri du plus ivre – ou survivance du présage? ...C'est toi, Présence, et qui nous songes" (Chœur, 4, p. 377). This absolute "Présence" (with a capital letter) is an alternative to that of God because Saint-John Perse could not find and experience God's empowering presence. In fact, his reaction goes even further inasmuch as the sea is not merely a substitute for God, but it is also entrusted with three essential attributes of God.

The identification between the sea and "Being" is clear in the first lines of the poem. The poet hails the sea as " « Très haut regard porté sur l'étendue des choses et sur le cours de l'Être, sa mesure!... »" (Chœur, 1, p. 365). Through its movements and sheer immensity, the sea can stand as a symbol of an absolute "Being". Indeed, the sea is regarded as even more than a symbol: it is Being itself. The poem metamorphoses the sea, changing it into a new entity: "C'est la clarté pour nous faite substance, et le plus clair de l'Être mis à jour, comme au glissement du glaive hors de sa gaine de soie rouge: l'Être surpris dans son essence, et le dieu même consommé dans ses espèces les plus saintes, au fond des palmeraies sacrées..." (Chœur, 2, p. 368). Being would consist in a divinity meant to remain anonymous so that the absence of name should not threaten its reality. Saint-John Perse solves the quandary of the personal God of the Christians through this philosophical, yet sensual, concept of the sea. This God is not knowable, directs no transcendence to men, but allows Himself to be perceived by them through the

transgression of poetry. In this verse, the poet introduces a syncretism that gathers in the same vision the poetic power (the comparison "comme..."), the Christian celebration par excellence (the Eucharist "le dieu même consommé dans ses espèces les plus saintes") and finally the sacred space of the poem ("au fond des palmeraies sacrées"). The trilogy might be considered Saint-John Perse's "religion of Being". It is certainly not the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob"[12] acknowledged by Pascal, for instance.[13] However, Saint-John Perse insists on giving him all the privileges of God in an attempt to reach the divinity, yet to avoid the mystery that surrounds the question of his name. It would seem that Saint-John Perse could not deal with the concept of a "personal " God. For this reason, he envisaged the sea as a substitute because it appears as "diversité dans le principe et parité de l'Être, véracité dans le mensonge et trahison dans le message; toute présence et toute absence, toute patience et tout refus – absence, présence; ordre et démence – licence!..." (Chœur, 3, p. 371). The sea encapsulates all the opposite and contradictory forces that create the dynamics of the world, in the same fashion as God encompasses all the elements to order his creation. The analogy between Being and God could match the spiritual expectations of the poet. But on one point he cannot hide the artificiality of the entire process.

It is clear that the transcendence thereby obtained is in fact a movement from humanity to a superior entity entirely created by a human mind. Being does not reveal itself to men. It must be discovered in a new level of consciousness designed by means of poetry. The Being of the sea is consequently an artefact that is built by human words and not an autonomous source of being which could produce its own reality through its own speech. The poet accepts willingly the fact when he states that the transcendence comes from himself: " « Nous t'élisons, Site des Grands, ô singulier Parage!" (Chœur, 1, p. 366). Whereas, according to the Bible, God initially chooses his people and is not chosen, the poet elects his divinity in the "person" of the sea. Being can be described as a

[12] Exodus 3.6.
[13] See Pascal, *Pensées*, fragment 742, Classiques Garnier, Bordas 1991, p. 546.

humanly designed notion – which might prompt one to wonder whether the transcendence thereby completed is not simply fabricated. Indeed, the poet seems to take a distance from himself after the revelation of the artificiality in this transcendence.

The poet concludes with unparalleled sincerity about the partial failure of his attempt. His very last words read: "L'Usurpateur se lève sur sa chaise d'ivoire. L'amant se lave de ses nuits. / Et l'homme au masque d'or se dévêt en l'nonneur de la Mer" (Chœur, Dédicace, p. 385). These three figures are simply three different incarnations of the poet who presents himself as an actor able to play many parts. He can represent several characters; this gives an indication of his versatility and therefore underlines his craftsmanship. Moreover, he calls himself "l'Usurpateur" (the sole name to take the capital letter in the list of three); he has already been seen as an "amant" and as a masked man in the poem. But for the first time he suggests that he could be a fake, and the whole enterprise could be nothing but fabrication. What Saint-John Perse means by this word is that the man must dissociate himself from the poet at the end of the poem, in order that the poem can remain in the sacred sphere to which it belongs. This point is consistent with the general theory of the sacred. But a new idea has emerged: the notion of the sacred as a quest for transcendence might not lead to a proper spiritual experience, let alone a religious one. In fact, Saint-John Perse shows that the pagan sacred is essentially an "art" because it believes that human creative powers can establish a meaningful transcendence. The process is fundamentally mundane and, although it may very well perceive and describe the "Wholly Other", it remains in the area of the "same" because the use of human words implies a convention. Even if it manipulates the figures of speech, human language can never escape the necessity of referentiality. The "meaning" may not exist outside the boundaries of the referential world, even when it tries to reach beyond it. At best the poet approaches the gates of the "Other", but he cannot put it into words. This is what Saint-John Perse discovers in his quest and he accepts as the price to pay to keep the poet's freedom and his creative powers. The poet is the man who stands before God and endeavours to defy him with the powers

of his language, albeit artificial. The pursuit of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry is truly a titanic mission: like Prometheus before him, the poet wants to steal the divine fire to enlighten the night of his fellow humans. But he knows the hazards of this quest and appears aware of the limits in art.

2-The divine sea

It is possible to assert that Saint-John Perse's God is the sea. He gives it all the characteristics of the unique God of the Bible. First he invokes it as "Wisdom": "Nous t'invoquons, Sagesse! et t'impliquons dans nos serments" (Chœur, 1, p. 365). The term is particularly expressive inasmuch as it refers to the exclusive quality of God. In the biblical tradition, God is the sole source of wisdom.[14] The sea inspires not merely the mind on the poetic level, but also the soul on the spiritual level. At this stage, the sea reaches such a degree of abstraction that it becomes the ultimate focus of the spiritual quest. Moreover, the sea is regarded as a promise that cannot fail, being eternal and absolute – like the Promised Land for Abraham: " « Ô Mer promesse de toujours et Celle qui passe toute promesse [...]" (Chœur, 1, p. 365). Further, the poet renews his allegiance to the sea in similar terms: "...ô Mer promesse du plus long jour, et Celle qui passe toute promesse, étant promesse d'Etrangère" (Chœur, 3, p. 371). This "promesse" is taken seriously by the poet and prompts a reaction of trust: in fact it may be said that the poet has "faith" in the sea.

Therefore, he invokes the sea as a source of help and forgiveness, especially in the anguish of death:

> « Sois avec nous dans la faiblesse et dans la force et dans l'étrangeté de vivre, plus haute que la joie, / « Sois avec nous Celle du dernier soir, qui nous fait honte de nos œuvres, et de nos hontes aussi nous fera grâce, / « Et veuille, à l'heure du délaissement et sous nos voiles défaillantes, / « Nous assister

[14] See Job 12.13, Isaiah 31.2, Daniel 2. 20-23.

encore de ton grand calme, et de ta force, et de ton souffle, ô Mer natale du très grand Ordre! » (Chœur, 4, p. 377-378).

The sea "nous fait honte de nos œuvres, et de nos hontes aussi nous fera grâce" in the same way as God judges and eventually absolves men for their sins (here "nos hontes"). The metaphors by which the poet associates God and the sea are rather transparent, and the images follow the pattern of the Christian faith. However, one may wonder whether Saint-John Perse did genuinely believe this idea or whether he took it simply as a reassuring thought. The similarity between this "poetic creed" and the Christian faith is striking and puzzling. Saint-John Perse always denied any involvement in a particular faith and particularly the Christian one. Nevertheless, it would seem that he is influenced by an identifiable religious pattern and this enigma seems to be at the heart of the question of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. This point may have to remain unsolved for the moment, but there is no doubt that the sea is invoked to give support and help in the face of the awe caused by the prospect of death.

Perhaps in a sort of prophecy about himself the poet describes the last moments of a man: "...et l'homme appréhendé de mort s'enquiert encore sur son lit de la montée du flot..." (Chœur, 3, p. 374).[15] In this

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[15] Saint-John Perse died on the 20th September 1975. His friend Pierre Guerre was the only witness of his last moments along with the poet's wife. He recalls: "Saint-John Perse descendait les marches de la mort, lent, presque solennel, mais simple.
Son regard avide d'espace semblait chercher plus loin. Dans la chambre la lumière du jour était suspendue tel un souffle. La mer suzeraine et le poète également suzerain étaient face à face, bord à bord, comme la rive et le flot.
Un moment nous l'avons laissé seul dans la pièce aux murs blancs. Eut-il avec la mer un secret entretien, un altier échange de confronts?
Dans la maison élevée le moteur calme d'une barque de pêche sortant du petit port de Giens résonnait. Dehors c'était la grande lumière d'un automne radieux derrière persiennes closes.
Soudain un léger bruit, un bruit étranger rompit l'ambiance, quelque chose qui se manifestait.
Alors nous sommes revenus. Le Poète était tourné vers la fenêtre où montait la haute table de la mer, comme déjà absent de cette pièce où se faisait lentement l'immobilité: verre, linge, fauteuil, livres et la tache rouge d'un disque non loin de son lit.
Ainsi dans un tableau hollandais le silence saisit les objets, les meubles, le carrelage, et l'éclat vient du corsage rouge de la servante éclairée, de la coiffe blanche.
Il avait les mains un peu en avant, non pas geste pour repousser mais geste pour accueillir.

« Et veuille, à l''heure du délaissement et sous nos voiles défaillantes,
« Nous assister encore de ton grand calme, et de ta force, et de ton souffle, ô Mer natale du très grand Ordre! »(Amers, Chœur, 4)

sacred occurrence par excellence, it is telling that the poet should turn his mind – and indeed his body – towards the sea. He has recourse to the sea as a spiritual help because the sea enables him to deny the power of the death. After completing the transgression of the sea, the poet-Conqueror exclaims about the secret and forbidden places that he is visiting: "Bitume des morts, vous n'êtes point l'engrais de ces lieux-là!" (Chœur, 2, p. 367). The Poet's soul does not haunt the mortuary chambers and he constantly refuses to grant death any power upon life. Saint-John Perse's philosophy stipulates that one should live one's life to the full. In his view, there is no room in life for death and no one should admit any influence of death upon one's own life: "(Et du pénate ni du lare que nul ne songe à se charger; ni de l'aïeul aveugle, fondateur de la caste" (Chœur, 3, p. 374). This disregard for ancestors actually means that life ought to be kept safe from any contamination from death. What the poet categorically rejects is the idea that life should be subservant to the fear of death. He is not naively attempting to pretend that death does not exist, but he firmly asserts that it should not dominate human thoughts. This is why the poet is not afraid of invoking death itself, knowing that it is but a passage leading to an other life. In fact, it is even a passage to eternity: "Et te prions, Mort visitée des Grâces immortelles" (Chœur, 2, p. 368). Although an agnostic, Saint-John Perse always considered that death does not represent an end to life, but simply turns it into something different.[16] This is how death is linked to immortality: it is only a passage

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Il était midi et quinze minutes le samedi 20 septembre 1975. Nous avons soudain compris que son «délaissement» était venu.
Dehors le moteur de la barque résonnait encore, plus loin; le bruit s'estompait.
Ouvert sur la table il y avait les épreuves qu'il était en train de corriger de son dernier recueil, *Chant pour un équinoxe*.
Ainsi le destin de Saint-John Perse, aussi prodigue dans la mort qu'il l'avait été dans la vie en rencontres extraordinaires, l'avait fait disparaître en ce moment même de l'équinoxe, signe de l'égalité du jour et de la nuit, et signe ici d'un parfait équilibre.
Comme le poète à la fin de son long et lent échange de souffle avec la mer si proche et immobile.
Ainsi il a doucement ôté le masque d'émerveillement avec lequel il présentait le monde pour devenir ce gisant exsangue comme encore ébloui par « toutes choses de ce monde ».” (Pierre Guerre, *Portrait de Saint-John Perse*, Sud, 1989, pp. 368-369).

[16] Remembering one of his conversations with his friend, Pierre Guerre writes: “Novembre 1967: « La mort, c'est simplement entrer dans une plus grande aventure, où il y a la vie derrière, sous quelque forme que ce soit.

through the gates of the sacred and opening onto an essentially new life. Therefore the poet defies death by declaring man immortal: " – Nous qui mourrons peut-être un jour disons l'homme immortel au foyer de l'instant" (Chœur, *Dédicace*, p. 385). The interesting point here is that a man proclaims the immortality of his own kind, without any divine intervention or revelation. This is completely consistent with the way in which the sacred has been defined throughout the poem: it is the process by which man can create transcendence in an ascendant movement (from man to the divine entity) rather than in a descending movement (from God to humanity). To a certain extent, immortality is a decree pronounced by the poet through the powers acquired through the experience of the sacred. But the poet is not naïve and he acknowledges immediately the limits of such a vision. The "upwards" transcendence of poetry cannot disguise its insufficiency. The poet wonders: "Et contre la mort elle-même n'est-il que de créer?" (Chœur, 1, p. 366). Somehow, death keeps the essential mystery of human life and the poet has to recognize that his art cannot break through the ultimate part of the darkness in the night of man. However, the sea is invoked as God himself for a third essential reason: its name and therefore its true nature exist beyond human understanding.

Throughout the poem, the question of the name of the sea appears as being of the utmost importance. The sea is a presence that is named both by itself and the poet: "Tu vas encore et tu te nommes, et mer encore nous te nommons, qui n'avons plus de nom...Et nous pourrions encore te rêver, mais pour si peu de temps encore, te nommer..." (Chœur, 2, p. 368). Like God's name, that of the sea seems to stretch human language to the limits. It is somewhat ironic that the poet should admit to being baffled by the naming of the very subject matter of his poem. But in fact this is wholly consistent with the transcendental nature of the sea: it is at once something that can be known and named, and something totally different. As they do with God, men might endeavour

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Le problème, ce n'est pas la mort, qui ne doit pas nous tourmenter, c'est ce qui la précède, le déclin de la vieillesse, la maladie. « La mort est une très grande aventure qui nous échappe. »" (Pierre Guerre, *Portrait de Saint-John Perse*, p.367).

to give the sea all names in an attempt to define its nature, but eventually they must accept that no contingent name can account for the necessity of a divine being. The poet acknowledges this idea about the sea: "...Mer de tout âge et de tout nom; [...], ô Mer prolixité sans nom!" (Chœur, 3, p. 371). For this essential reason that the true nature of the sea expands far beyond the limits of its name in terms of human language, the poet makes it his God because the analogy between the two entities is perfect.

In this respect, God and the sea may be regarded as interchangeable because their modes of existence follow the same pattern. Like God, the sea transcends itself because its essence overlaps its name and therefore provides the poet with a "being" whose justification is derived from a superior meaning. He may therefore "imagine" the sea but no longer name it because he has exhausted the possible names and yet also failed to define the quintessence of the sea. In fact, the entire poetic enterprise could be undermined by these recurrent admissions of failure. Saint-John Perse seems to admit that all the figures (metaphors, allegories, etc.) are but vain plays on words that might be regarded as fallacious combinations. The poet is led to a sort of overwhelming spiritual experience in which he reaches a climax due to the total fusion of the poet and his subject without the medium of language.

Although he is entirely dedicated to words, Saint-John Perse does not completely trust their powers. He actually hails as a success the moment when he can put aside the use of language to integrate himself directly into the sea:

> "Nous t'invoquons enfin toi-même, hors de la strophe du Poète. Qu'il n'y ait plus pour nous, entre la foule et toi, l'éclat insoutenable du langage: / « ...Ah! nous avions des mots pour toi et nous n'avions assez de mots, / « Et voici que l'amour nous confond à l'objet même de ces mots, / « Et mots pour nous ils ne sont plus, n'étant plus signes ni parures, / « Mais la chose même qu'ils figurent et la chose même qu'ils paraient; / « Ou mieux, te récitant toi-même, le récit, voici que nous te devenons toi-même, le récit, / « Et toi-même sommes-nous, qui nous étais

> l'Inconciliable: le texte même et sa substance et son mouvement de mer, / « Et la grande robe prosodique dont nous nous revêtons... »" (Chœur, 4, p. 378).

This looks like an abdication of words to the sea. In the process, the sea ceases to be the object of the words and become the source of enunciation, thereby abolishing the poem together with the poet. The sea "recites itself" in a self-sufficient speech that transcends human language. The parallel with God's speech is compelling. Like God, the sea is now an entity that unites its nature and its speech in a single essence. Interestingly, the poet is incorporated into the new deity through love: this point is consistent not only with the entire development found in "Strophe IX", but also with the Christian perspective. This dual interpretation was probably not meant by Saint-John Perse. Nevertheless, the ambiguity is particularly evocative and paves the way for a fresh understanding of the poem's subject.

In *Amers* the abandonment of language by the poet constitutes the means by which he attains the culmination of his quest. This passage from "Chœur" clearly refers to a mystical experience. The urge driving the poet to write, the eagerness that emerges from these lines may remind one of Pascal's *Memorial*, a short text in which he reports the impressions and thoughts he had during a particularly intense religious experience.[17] The two texts reflect a deep sense of unity between the individual and the divinity, to such an extent that the former diffuses his consciousness of himself into the latter. Moreover, the interesting point in the case of Saint-John Perse is that his invocation takes place outside the conventional scope of the poem. Words have ceased to be signs but have undergone a kind of transubstantiation with the very thing they refer to. In a way – rejecting, at least in the poems, the concept of arbitrariness of the link between the signified and the signifier – the poet reconciles the heterogeneous natures of the word and that of the thing. It appears that the poem has exhausted the possibilities of language and must now seek a proper spiritual or even religious path. The poet deliberately steps

[17] See Pascal, *Pensées*, Classiques Garnier, Bordas 1991, p. 546.

out of the poem and enters a new area that exists beyond the words. But if the sea defines itself as a "récit" that recites itself, it cannot assert, as God does, that "I am that I am"[18] and therefore it cannot justify its own essence by itself. For all its divine appendices, the sea fail to comply with the ultimate requirement of the divinity, namely that of being through its own name. In the Bible, God *is* because for him it is the same thing to *be* and to *say* "I am". Analogously, the sea performs a fusion of its reality into the text (or speech) that signifies it. As a consequence, the poet tackles the final issue, namely the question of "Being" in the sea.

[18] Exodus 3.14.

CHAPTER III: PAGAN THEURGY IN THE LATER POEMS

I-The hidden God

1-God's silence

In *Chronique*, the spiritual thirst expressed by the poet is still very much alive. In fact, the "commerce de l'âme" that the poet had initiated in *Anabase* remains his main preoccupation.[1] Not only did his search not wane, it seems to have increased and become a burning desire to meet God: "La face ardente et l'âme haute, à quelle outrance encore courons-nous là? [...] Pour nous la turbulence divine à son dernier remous..." (*Chronique*, II, p. 391). Clearly, this quest is not related in any way to a tranquil and serene mystical interrogation. Saint-John Perse never assumed the meditative approach of the monk; on the contrary, he always adopted the dynamic figures of conquerors, sailors or Princes. Hence the "turbulence" associated with the divinity. In *Chronique*, this spiritual quest is still defined by the concept of "outrance" because it is still a question of going beyond human limits, by force and violence if necessary, in order to reach the "Wholly Other". The interesting point is the fact that the poet still wonders about the aim of his course. He has embarked on a movement of the soul whose goal remains afar and even dubious. The quest appears all the more exhilarating and consuming a process because it is quintessentially a frustrating one. Addressing the mysterious forces that drove him all along his quest, he asks:

> Ô vous qui nous meniez à tout ce vif de l'âme, fortune errante sur les eaux, nous direz-vous un soir sur terre quelle main nous vêt de cette tunique ardente de la fable, et de quels fonds

> d'abîme nous vint à bien, nous vint à mal, toute cette montée d'aube rougissante, et cette part en nous divine qui fut notre part de ténèbres? (*Chronique*, III, p. 395).

At this point, the poet explicitly acknowledges an essential link between the divine element in human nature and what he calls "the night of man". This constitutes a crucial step forward: the poet establishes an equivalence between the mystery inherent to human condition and God's silence. The verse states the impatience of the poet confronted with a tantalising presence that he can neither dismiss nor discover. He presents himself as kept in an ambiguous state of mind that torments him like Tantalus who could not reach the water and fruit for which he was longing.

In the case of Saint-John Perse, the longing concerns communication with God. This point is made very clearly in a sharp image developed by the poet: " (Nous faudra-t-il – car l'Océan des choses nous assiège – nous en couvrir le front et le visage, comme l'on voit, au plus haut cap, l'homme de grand songe sous l'orage s'enfouir la tête dans un sac pour converser avec son dieu?)" (*Chronique*, VII, p. 401). The use of parentheses to delimit the question shows that the image is given special status. This sentence is not to be read on the same level as the others. It would appear that the poet interrupts momentarily the course of his inspiration in order to make a comment on the way his poetry could evolve. In fact the parentheses contain a meta-textual component of the poem. The poet seems to reflect on the implications of his own poetry in the course of poetry itself. Saint-John Perse introduces a metalanguage in his poetic language in order to account for the metaphysics expressed in the poem. The parentheses, therefore, set aside a part of the text that does not constitute the poetic text proper, although it plays an essential part in its strategy to approach the sacred. This metalanguage isolated by parentheses forms a part of the various voices endorsed by the poet. It echoes the critic's voice that is embedded in the poet's voice. Like the man with his head in a bag who wants to absent

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[1] See *Anabase*, I, p. 93: "...Or je hantais la ville de vos songes et j'arrêtais sur les marchés déserts ce pur commerce de mon âme parmi vous [...]."

himself from the world, the poet considers retiring into the sacred world of his poetry in order to have the possibility of communicating with the divine being. He now wants to exclude himself from "l'Océan des choses" and to be more than ever a man of "grand songe" – which implies entering a new level of consciousness that does not relate to the physical world. Once again the pattern of the sacred is used to interpret the spiritual experience of the poet; however this time, it marks the poet's desire to be secluded from the world so that he may dedicate himself completely to the divine message. This is the way in which Saint-John Perse reacts to the divine element he can sense in himself. He acknowledges without reservation that man proceeds from God; this is a new element in his attitude towards the night of man. From an agnostic perspective, he has moved to a more advanced mode of thinking about God by resolutely promoting the divine element in man and by trying to make it a starting point for a fresh search about him. Nonetheless, the tragedy of Saint-John Perse is God's silence which he regards as a contemptuous rebuff.

Chronique is the poem of the impossible communication between man and God. They belong to separate worlds that cannot be related to each other. This is what the poet acknowledges when he declares: "La voix de l'homme est sur la terre, la main de l'homme est dans la pierre et tire un aigle de sa nuit. Mais Dieu se tait dans le quantième; et notre lit n'est point tiré dans l'étendue ni la durée" (*Chronique*, II, p. 391). Out of his own night, man creates a symbol of power and nobility. However, this is not enough to reach a silent God who remains sternly distant. In spite of man's efforts to try and tear himself apart from his immanent condition by creating a sacred object (the eagle statue), God does not condescend to look down and acknowledge man's attempts to go beyond his limits in order to meet Him. The absolute gap between the two beings is encapsulated by the fact that they exist in different and incompatible levels of reality. Neither in space or time can they meet. As opposed to the strictly contingent earth and night of man, God's abstract "existence" is to be found in "l'étendue" and "la durée". Their fields of existence do

not meet at all, and there is no place or moment where God's word might be heard ("Dieu se tait dans le quantième ").

However, the poet can still feel the tantalising presence of God through his sacred vision of immanence. Prolonging the metaphor of the human longing for God through the symbol of the stone eagle that cannot fly out of the night of man, Saint-John Perse develops his general conception of God: "Et Dieu l'aveugle luit dans le sel et dans la pierre noire, obsidienne ou granit. Et la roue tourne entre nos mains, comme au tambour de pierre de l'Aztèque" (*Chronique*, II, p. 392). His sacred approach to the world enables him to sense God's potential presence in the material thickness of the stone. The black stone reflects the night of man in which the poet fails to delineate God's shape, although he can nonetheless behold a blurred contour in it. Thus, the sacred statue of an eagle that cannot soar to its spiritual goal accurately represents the poet's soul. God is said to be blind because in fact the poet remains blind himself to God and seems to be condemned to wander in the darkness. God's blindness constitutes a major theme in Saint-John Perse's poetry. Indeed, it may be described as the emblem around which the poet's quest crystallizes: God is incapable of perceiving the poet's longing for truth and absoluteness. Indeed, the theme of blindness is important throughout the poet's works (and especially in *Anabase*): it is regarded as a sign of impurity and therefore as an impediment to efficient spirituality. This impurity is often washed away by means of water and salt (only one element of which is present here). The biblical implications point to the same interpretation: blindness in a man is an indication of his sin. This time, the symbol is clear: God is made responsible for the spiritual failure experienced through the poetry of sacredness. The poet has therefore to turn back to the pagan sacredness of stone – which is back in his hands (an indication of its contingency) and situated in an exotic and pagan mythology. God's silence condemns the poet to a contingent experience of the sacred, in other words to an incomplete, man-made transcendence. Therefore, the poet is faced with an overwhelming doubt about the human condition.

As a consequence of this discovery, the poet is plunged into doubt about the value of the terrestrial life since he cannot find the presence of an omnipotent creator in it. God's absence casts a profound and essential doubt on the enjoyment and meaning of life: "Et qu'est-ce ce mets, sur toutes tables offert, qui nous fut très suspect en l'absence de l'Hôte? Nous passons, et, de nul engendrés, connaît-on bien l'espèce où nous avançons? Que savons-nous de l'homme, notre spectre, sous sa cape de laine et son grand feutre d'étranger?" (*Chronique*, III, p. 394). Man is relegated to the status of ghost, a distant and hidden figure – like God. Therefore, the poet seems to lose the hope of attaining his goal. The mission attributed to the poetry of the sacred has not been accomplished because the focal point of the quest remains out of reach. Suddenly, the entire attempt to unveil the mystery surrounding man's condition appears to collapse when, in the end, the poet has to recognize that he might not, in fact, be closer to a solution. Furthermore, it seems that man remains a stranger for and to himself; this retrospectively ruins the poet's ambition to illuminate the night of man. Therefore, it becomes clear that the sacred quest was a gamble that has left the poet in a position where his whole project appears to crumble. Indeed, the quest for the sacred has not kept its promise and has proved unable to meet the great expectations that the poet had conceived.

From this point of view, it may be said that *Chronique* is a poem that contains the avowal of failure as far as the hopes raised by the quest for the sacred are concerned. Consequently, the poet will embark on an attempt to identify the possible causes of this situation and to find out what aspect of his creation might be responsible for the failure of his quest. In that respect, *Oiseaux* provides a few clues as to how the poet analyses his work and finds a major flaw in his own interpretation of the sacred.

2-Rejection of symbol

As far as the sacred is concerned, Saint-John Perse identifies a possible source of inaccuracy in his theory. His conception of the sacred could not answer his spiritual questions because, being based upon the power of symbol, it is consequently marked by its main characteristics. The initial assumption was that, through symbols, a comprehensible image could be given to the mysterious truths engendered by the "Wholly Other". Symbolism was regarded as the tool that could recreate practical transcendence, in spite of the apparent inadequacy of the "other" world in the perceptible one, hence the great variety of figures and tropes used to activate an exchange between the two worlds through the channel of the sacred. In *Oiseaux*, the poet becomes aware that the symbol, as a logical way of mastering the communication between the immanent and transcendent worlds, has failed, and he categorically dismisses it. Braque's birds encapsulate this revelation because, in the poet's eyes, they represent nothing but themselves; they stand for no concept such as peace or freedom, and therefore they exist in their own right with the exclusive justification of being themselves.

> Ils n'ont point fréquenté le mythe ni la légende; et, répugnant de tout leur être à cette carence qu'est le symbole, ils ne relèvent d'aucune Bible ni Rituel. / Ils n'ont pas joué aux dieux d'Égypte ou de Susiane. Ils n'étaient pas avec la colombe de Noé, ni le vautour de Prométhée; non plus qu'avec ces oiseaux Ababils dont il est fait mention au livre de Mahomet. (*Oiseaux*, XII, p. 424)

This verse may be regarded as the turning point in Saint-John Perse's thought about the sacred. Braque's birds are not born out of a pre-existing concept. They have no link with mythology or religion and they cannot be mistaken for "pictures" illustrating a moral or philosophical value. In sacred books or in mythologies, birds always stand for something else: they represent a new life on earth after the Flood ("la colombe de Noé"), eternal vengeance from the gods ("le vautour de

Prométhée ") or gods themselves ("dieux d'Égypte"). In a sense, they are nothing more than cliché images whose raison d'être is given by a need for visualising a concept linked to the sacred. However, in Braque's vision, they become sacred in themselves because they now are fully fledged entities in themselves and no longer empty cases in which man can place various heterogeneous concepts. This is why the poet uses such expressions as "cette carence qu'est le symbole". So long as birds are symbols, they are only void images of interchangeable concepts, whereas in Braque's paintings they "are" in themselves rather than as images of something else.

Symbols – including religious symbols – are empty notions for Saint-John Perse because they can receive various, indeed contradictory, functions according to an intention that pre-exists. Their justification is not in themselves and they exist simply because they happen to hint at something else. In Braque's birds, Saint-John Perse discovers the purity of "being" without "representing" anything else. It is significant that the poet should sharply contrast "tout leur être" and "le symbole" in the first part of the verse. It seems that, from *Anabase* to *Vents*, the symbol was used as the vector of a spiritual aspiration towards the world "beyond" perception. Sacrifice, for instance, is but a symbol of spiritual energy consumed by man in order to approach the "Wholly Other" through the surface of the visible world. Both the Christian and the pagan religious backgrounds are condemned in the same movement because for Saint-John Perse religions necessarily manipulate symbols. Free from both the Bible and any kind of ritual in the poet's view, the birds escape the determinism of the symbol and reject any symbolical approach to the sacred. In connection with this disillusion about the sacred, two fundamental points should be made. First, Christianity and paganism are equally rejected, which means that the alternative option chosen by the poet was pointless. Secondly, it is not only Christianity that is condemned but also Islam – as the reference to the "livre de Mahomet" suggests – and therefore monotheism as a whole.[2] For the poet, Braque

[2] The reference to the Koran – along with the Bible – may be held as a metaphor for any sacred scripture emanating from a monotheistic religion. It should be noted, though, that

has succeeded in his artistic approach to birds because his birds entertain no link with their religious or mythological counterparts. The latter, therefore, present themselves as divine figures, as mere fictional characters. "Ils n'ont pas joué aux dieux d'Égypte ou de Susiane", notes the poet. These birds do not play a role, nor do they act on behalf of another being – especially a divine one. For Saint-John Perse the divine world turns out to be a mere and vain theatre of moving images. Beyond the sacred, there would appear to be nothing more than a puppet theatre. The birds reveal the other face of the mystery – and it is solely a world of shadows. Mythology, paganism, Christianity or any other religion, none could fulfil the poet's expectations as far as the sacred quest is concerned. The entire spiritual enterprise seems to be shattered – yet this is the very moment when Saint-John Perse drops the concept of sacred to replace it with that of "sanctity".

Having recognized the pointlessness of the sacred as such, the poet does not, however, abandon his spiritual quest: it is still valid in its own right. Once again, Braque's birds suggest a solution by exchanging the concept of sacred for that of "sanctity". In a direct address to his fellow artist, the poet exclaims: "Braque, vous ensemencez d'espèces saintes l'espace occidental" (*Oiseaux*, XI, p. 423). It may very well be that Saint-John Perse attributes concepts or notions to Braque that the painter did not mean to convey in his paintings. However, this is of no consequence since what matters is the meaning that the observer constructs from the artistic object. In this respect, it is probable that the poem *Oiseaux* reflects Saint-John Perse's topics more than those of Braque. At any rate, it is evident that the latter provided the former with a crucial element of reflection regarding the quest for the sacred. Sainthood is now replacing sacredness. The bird itself seems to proclaim this new era: "Et son cri dans la nuit est cri de l'aube elle-même: cri de guerre

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the reference to Judaism is totally and curiously absent from the poet's works. However, one can find allusions to other religious traditions in his poems, such as Buddhism for instance. It is most probably a recollection of the multi-confessional West Indies of his childhood. An example of it can be found in a verse of *Pour fêter une enfance*, VI, p. 29: "...Car au matin, sur les champs pâles de l'Eau nue, au long de l'Ouest, j'ai vu marcher des Princes et leurs Gendres, des hommes d'un haut rang, tous bien vêtus et se

sainte à l'arme blanche" (*Oiseaux*, I, p. 409). An important evolution takes place in Saint-John Perse's vocabulary. Whereas "sacredness" can be described as a state of affairs mainly determined and managed by man, "sainthood" stands as the quality of something or somebody touched by divine grace. The former could be regarded as a humanly designed frame in which man explores his metaphysical quandaries from a humanist point of view, whereas the latter is the result of God's intervention in order to bring transcendence within human scope.

It can be argued, therefore, that the introduction of "sainthood" in the poem constitutes a paradigm shift as far as the quest of the sacred is concerned. It may represent a first step toward acknowledging the necessity of faith in order to experience God's reality. Although Saint-John Perse does not endorse it completely at this stage, it is nonetheless an important evolution because it implies a different type of receptivity to the divine on the part of the poet. In "sainthood", the numinous is actively – if mysteriously – involved in human reality through a type of intervention unaccountable to rationality by human standards, whereas in "sacredness" the poet's inquisitive soul purposely seeks to build an interpretative structure of the world in order to account for the awe-inspiring experience of the numinous. The concept of sainthood as a substitute for sacredness is particularly important with respect to the spiritual quest because it refers the poet to the initial, problematic question of God's presence and above all to the question of God's name. Thus far in the poet's works, God has never been mentioned by name, in fact His name has been carefully avoided as a taboo word. The metamorphosis of the sacredness into sainthood opens up the possibility of naming God for the first time. But what sainthood entails exactly is not clear. Perhaps it essentially means that God may be named and that a contact with the divinity is possible without involving transgression. Nevertheless, it remains surprising that Saint-John Perse should have recourse to a religious – and notably Christian – concept. In many ways, it is possible to assert that the poet is brought back to his initial dilemma.

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taisant, parce que la mer avant midi est un Dimanche où le sommeil a pris le corps d'un Dieu, pliant ses jambes".

This is why in the next poem he puts the question of God into perspective so as to confront the elementary forces tamed by the pattern of the sacred and God's power.

3-Unity and diversity

The introduction of the concept of sainthood as a substitute for that of sacredness enables the poet to reach a certain degree of communication with the divinity. Although he still cannot gain access to full knowledge of the "Wholly Other", he seems to have a somewhat clearer understanding of God's presence. For the first time, he evokes an answer that is not invalidated by divine elusiveness. *Chant pour un équinoxe* marks a fundamental turn in the poet's acknowledgement of God's involvement in the night of man: "L'autre soir il tonnait, et sur la terre aux tombes j'écoutais retentir / cette réponse à l'homme, qui fut brève, et ne fut que fracas. / Amie, l'averse du ciel fut avec nous, la nuit de Dieu fut notre intempérie, / et l'amour, en tous lieux, remontait vers ses sources" (*Chant pour un équinoxe*, p. 437). In the middle of a storm, the poet realizes that the mystery of the night of man lies in that of the night of God. He thus endeavours to establish a mediation between the two ("l'amour, en tous lieux, remontait vers ses sources"). But the storm is a metaphor for the spiritual maelstrom that overwhelms the poet's soul. For the first time in Saint-John Perse's poetry, God is explicitly named and situated in the poem. However, the only answer that the poet perceives is an unintelligible noise carrying no message from God. God's intervention in the night of man does not change since no communication happens between the two entities. Even the terrible thunder (Zeus's messenger) fails to convey any kind of meaning sent from the divine sphere. The gap between God and man appears to be unbridgeable. Although the poet still finds himself stranded in "la nuit de Dieu" – which might indicate that God is now part of "la nuit de l'homme" – he receives a message through the storm and the rain that pours from the sky. The equinox is a remarkable time in the calendar since it marks the

moment when day and night are of equal length twice a year. It is therefore a time of perfect equilibrium between light and darkness, a time when contradictory forces coexist as equals. This in turn may account for the fact that the poet is now in a position to perceive the meaning of the message encapsulated by the expression "l'amour, en tous lieux, remontait vers ses sources". Here Saint-John Perse adopts the Christian vision of humanity as blessed by God's love. His vision of the human condition is now marked by God's intervention. However, God's presence remains pointless: for the poet God's presence – which can be conceived only as a whole and indivisible essence – becomes necessarily fragmented when entering the material world. "Je sais, j'ai vu: la vie remonte vers ses sources, la foudre ramasse ses outils dans les carrières désertées, le pollen jaune des pins s'assemble aux angles des terrasses, / et la semence de Dieu s'en va rejoindre en mer les nappes mauves du plancton. / Dieu l'épars nous rejoint dans la diversité" (*Chant pour un équinoxe*, p. 437). God's semen is wasted at sea but in fact it produces life by dividing itself amongst all forms of life. This is how God may join with his creation: every single form of life constitutes a part of God's wholeness. For the first time, Saint-John Perse affirms that divine transcendence is possible. Indeed, a meeting takes place: "Dieu l'épars nous rejoint dans la diversité". There is no need for transgression any more since God makes Himself perceptible in the fragmented reality of His Creation. At this stage, God is presented as an active God and indeed as the fertile source of all life. This image alludes to Genesis where God creates the world by fertilising the waters and the earth after having separated light from darkness – hence the equinox.

It would be tempting to assume that in the end Saint-John Perse accepts the Christian vision of God and that, to a certain extent, the reader witnesses a poetic conversion. However, nothing could be farther from the truth. Saint-John Perse is not a new convert. Since God needs to divide Himself in order to enter the space and time of His Creation, His transcendence becomes null and void at the very moment when it reaches man's conscience precisely because it is fragmented in space and time. By entering space and time (quintessential conditions of man as a

sentient being), God renounces His absolute predicates – and renders His transcendence an empty category in the poet's thought. Man is condemned to remain only a fraction of God's absoluteness without any chance of understanding it because he is only one element of the grand design of the creation. Therefore, even this brief encounter with God is pointless since Saint-John Perse cannot establish a one-to-one dialogue with God, not as a creature addressing its genitor, but as a subject trying to comprehend the entire scheme of the universe.

As a consequence the poet goes back to a more mundane and pagan approach to Mother Earth. He chooses to revert to the Earth as a comprehensible – albeit fragmented – compound deity. For the poet Mother Earth, considered in its infinite variety and wonderful fertility, is God's Creation and constitutes the nearest comprehensible reality linked to God. Mother Earth is the best fathomable substitute for the absent divine father and crucially for his unity.

Since transcendence has been established, Saint-John Perse's poem becomes more explicitly an invocation and may even be regarded as a kind of prayer addressed to an earth-divinity: "Sire, Maître du sol, voyez qu'il neige, et le ciel est sans heurt, la terre franche de tout bât: / terre de Seth et de Saül, de Che Houang-ti et de Cheops" (*Chant pour un équinoxe*, p. 437). The divinity that is evoked here assumes different shapes and appearances. It is represented by a variety of figures, both historical and mythological, all linked to a sacred context. Here, God seems to be the master of an intricate patchwork of anthropomorphic gods and human characters. The image developed by the poet at this stage is that of a truly syncretic approach to the sacred. Indeed, pagan and biblical figures are associated in a somewhat confusing religious and historic cast. However, one can trace a truly coherent structure of the sacred in this apparently heterogeneous group of characters. Apart from Seth, they all are great political rulers of their time and two of them are even founders of an empire and a kingdom.[3] The three of them are sovereigns of terrestrial areas as opposed to maritime empires.

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[3] Saul is the first king of Israel (*c.*1030 BC-*c.*1010 BC). Che Houang-Ti (also Shi Huangdi or Qin Shi Huangdi or Ts'in Che Houang-Ti) is the first emperor of China

In fact, the idea of God is so devoid of its actual substance that the earth itself is taken as the receiver of a new invocation: "Ô Terre, notre Mère, n'ayez souci de cette engeance: le siècle est prompt, le siècle est foule, et la vie va son cours. / Un chant se lève en nous qui n'a connu sa source et qui n'aura d'estuaire dans la mort: / équinoxe d'une heure entre la Terre et l'homme" (*Chant pour un équinoxe*, p. 438). The poem's title is now fully explained: the equinox is indeed a meeting between man and a superior being in which the part of the divinity is played by the earth. This is probably due to the fact that, in the poet's thought, the earth is a material sphere that contains all material objects that have already been regarded as tokens of the sacred. Henceforth, transcendence consists in unifying all partial or potential vectors of the sacred in a single and exhaustive ensemble – the divinity Earth.

Poetic language is the medium invented by man in order to relate to the earth. For Saint-John Perse poetic language alone can encompass man's reality because it concerns itself with both the material and the spiritual dimensions of man's existence on earth. Neither purely materialistic nor merely religious, poetic language has the power to hold together the sacred and the profane forces that coexist in the poet's vision. However, Saint-John Perse does not go beyond the tautological communication between man and "the same" – the earthly reality of which he is made and within which he is totally defined. As a human being, the poet remains essentially an earth being engaged in the process of allowing sense to emerge within his earth bound space. Therefore it can be asserted that the poet fails to meet the "Wholly Other" despite the fact that his inspiration cannot be accounted for by a merely aesthetic approach to the world. As a consequence, his poem remains a mystery even to himself. The "équinoxe d'une heure entre la Terre et l'homme" may represent a rich spiritual experience (a total sense of harmony between the poet's soul and the forces of nature, for instance), but it does not go as far as to envisage the spirituality of the "otherness" of the

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(+210 BC). Kheops or Khufu (*c.*2551- 2528BC) commissioned the building of the great pyramid at Giza. Seth, having lost his kingdom to his brother Osiris who therefore

sacred. In that respect, it is essential to note that the chant arising "inside" the poet keeps all of its mystery concerning both its source and its aim. The only thing that can be asserted by the poet is that this song will not die ("Un chant se lève en nous qui n'a connu sa source et qui n'aura d'estuaire dans la mort"), probably because it was not actually "born". The intuition of eternity appears clearly, and this enables the poet to understand better the sacred dimension of his poetry.

II- Revelation

1-Earthly divine

Sécheresse is the poem by which the poet reaches the final step of his spiritual quest for the sacred. The general theme is that of desiccation as a means to get closer to the reality and purity of things. The image of the desiccation encapsulates both the physical result of the ageing process at work in nature and the metaphorical asceticism observed by people engaged in meditative spirituality. First, the poet establishes the cornerstone of his sacred vision upon the world: "Ô terre du sacre et du prodige – terre prodigue encore à l'homme jusqu'en ses sources sous-marines honorées des Césars, que de merveilles encore montent vers nous de l'abîme de tes nuits!" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1398). The earth is presented as the transcendent source from which the poet receives awesome new images made visible through his poetic metaphors and reflected in his poems. Interestingly, the earth encompasses both terrestrial and maritime spaces, the poet thus completes the fusion of the terrestrial theme of *Anabase* and the maritime theme of *Amers*. Saint-John Perse's poetic work therefore approaches its culminating point thanks to an integrated vision of the world in which coherent correlation between the terrestrial and maritime spaces enables the poet to build a

becomes the first king of a unified Egypt, becomes the god of deserts and of foreign countries.

viable structure of the sacred. Although now seen as integrated, the earth is still characterized by an abyssal darkness which echoes that of man without deciphering it. Nevertheless, the earth produces a night full of aesthetic sources and beautiful images. One might extrapolate from this that there exists symmetry between them. The night in the poem is a mirror image of that reigning in the poet's soul. This is how transcendental communication is made possible between the poet and the mysterious night that surrounds him. A divine message can thus be perceived from the earth: "Vous qui parlez l'ossète sur quelque pente caucasienne, par temps de grande sécheresse et d'effritement rocheux, savez combien proche du sol, au fil de l'herbe et de la brise, se fait sentir à l'homme l'haleine du divin. Sécheresse, ô faveur! Midi l'aveugle nous éclaire: fascination au sol du signe et de l'objet" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1399). Drought seems to be a condition for divine breath to be experienced as a process of purification. This is why the dryness is hailed as a "faveur" – an extremely positive and pregnant term in Saint-John Perse's lexicon. It would appear that the poet has found a way out of the night of man. But even at its highest the sun is of no use: "Midi l'aveugle nous éclaire".[4] As previously noted in Saint-John Perse's poetry, the theme of blindness is a recurrent impediment to spiritual access to the sacred. Even in full daylight the poet is still metaphysically blind as if incapable of grasping the essence of things through their materiality. The poet is henceforth prompted to look at the appearance of things and to develop a "fascination au sol du signe et de l'objet". Only the object or the sign – in other words the "ex-istent" (i.e. standing in the world exteriorly and therefore fully explainable) reality of the world – is knowable. The essence remains beyond the reach of the poetic means. Being unfolds itself as the goal to attain in an attempt to find a true transcendence: "Ô mouvement vers l'Être et renaissance à l'Être! Nomades tous les sables!...et le temps siffle au ras du sol...Le vent qui déplace pour nous l'inclination des dunes nous montrera peut-être au jour la place où fut moulée de nuit la face du dieu qui couchait là..." (*Sécheresse*, p. 1398).

[4] This image of the sun echoes that of P.Valery ("Midi le juste...") in "Le Cimetière marin".

Saint-John Perse has now embarked on a new quest: his poetry of the sacred becomes an ontological examination of the world in the hope that it will lead him to the revelation of the "other" side of perceptible reality. The "sign" and the "object" presented as two separate entities embody the two faces of the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry. In the same way that an arbitrary sign is associated with an existing object in ordinary human language, Saint-John Perse's poetry seeks to harmonize the arbitrary of the world with the divine transcendence. Yet, they remain far apart from each other and the poet cannot break the mystery of a possible meaning of the world: the objectivity of immanence remains deprived of its transcendental sign. Consequently, the poet turns to the notion of Being in an attempt to make the two faces of the sacred meet. Interpreting the dynamism of the terrestrial elements as the manifestation of divine will, the poet hopes to bridge the gap between the two faces of the sacred. To illustrate his point, he uses the image of sand dunes, seen as a gigantic mould for the face of a god. The wind that gives shape to the desert dunes (a well known natural phenomenon) is in fact perceived by the poet as a supernatural force that sculpts the world according to a divine pattern. In this way, transcendence is achieved through a primitive vision of the world. In this approach to the mystery of existence, any cultural and indeed cultic mediation between man and the world has been eliminated. This approach derives directly from Saint-John Perse's self-proclaimed inability to endorse any religious faith – in spite of his consistent quest in the spiritual domain. Moreover, it seems that Saint-John Perse's poetry could be elevated to the status of "religion", at least in one of the two etymological meanings proposed for this word.[5] As shown by the image of the god's face imprinted on the sand, and indeed by many analogous images in Saint-John Perse's work, poetry is regarded as a true means of communication between the divine and the human sphere. However, poetry is a one-way medium for Saint-John Perse: transcendence goes from man to the gods without any explicit

[5] Latin "religare" (to link, to join together): through religion, heaven and earth are linked and put in a position of communication. See Chapter I, "Sacred and religion", p. 13.

response. In fact, it could be argued that the quest for Being is a vain attempt since the god lets himself be recognized through terrestrial shapes and forms – in other words by human standards – whereas he belongs to another world – indeed to the "Wholly Other". Saint-John Perse endeavours to find a divinity which reflects human experience and categories. But as the image of the dunes suggests, the geological shaping of the earth is variable and so is the presence of Being. The poet is unsure that the place where the god allegedly imprinted his face might ever come to be known ("peut-être"). Nowhere can a divine presence make itself be felt through an authentic experience of Being. Therefore, Saint-John Perse is brought to distance himself from a failed worldly paganism.

As a result of the unbridgeable gap between the earth and God, the poet develops a series of images whose aim is to illustrate the three main consequences of the failure of paganism. First of all, the earth becomes an awesome and even menacing place although God's spirit looms in the distance. "Sur la terre insolite aux confins désertiques, où l'éclair vire au noir, l'esprit de Dieu tenait son hâle de clarté, et la terre vénéneuse s'enfiévrait comme un massif de corail tropical..." (*Sécheresse*, p. 1397). Possibly for the first time Saint-John Perse presents the reader with the disturbing avowal of failure in the sense that he seems to accept that God's light is in actual fact the night of man. This ironic paradox is encapsulated by the sharp and striking oxymoron that conveys an image of God's spirit: "l'éclair vire au noir". No other image could express so much awe and drama about the sudden revelation that the poet experiences. In an instant, the poet understands that he has indeed reached his goal, God's light is in sight – but it turns out to be more darkness cast upon the earth. This verse depicts the very moment when God's spirit seems tantalisingly close – and yet vanishes through an unexpected transubstantiation of light into darkness. Therefore, earth is turned into a barren, eerie creation.

Indeed, the recurrent theme of heat ("désertiques", "s'enfiévrait", "tropical") suggests a morbid world in which "Sécheresse" actually means "Revelation" in the biblical sense. The apocalyptic atmosphere of *Sécheresse* is perceptible through the entire poem. Moreover, the text

may be compared with the Revelation of Saint John in the New Testament not only because of its position in Saint-John Perse's work (it stands as the ultimate testament of a prophetic voice and a conclusion to an entire spiritual journey), but above all because of its content and general meaning. Both *Sécheresse* and Revelation depict a dried out earth, submitted to total destruction and annihilation by the will of God, in order to "reveal" the true substance of things and beings on earth. As in the scriptural text, *Sécheresse* condemns the gods as mere idols that the poet rejects categorically as worthless.

The whole construction of the sacred crumbles and a sense of rebellion and blasphemy begins to arise in the poem: "Nos actes nous devancent, et l'effronterie nous mène: dieux et faquins sous même étrille, emmêlés à jamais à la même famille" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1399). The gods are associated with rogues and dealt with in a rough manner. In fact, the image suggests that they have regressed toward the state of animal. The poem states without ambiguity that the gods must be groomed like horses, "étrille" being the special brush used for that purpose. In this sense, it is clear that they have to regress to their primitive status of totems and idols. They might be sacred animals, but to Saint-John Perse they now embody his failure since, although he has rejected Christianity, he cannot be satisfied with a situation in which the sacred is reduced to mere idolatry. A feeling of disrespect and even revolt towards the deceptive gods now drives the disappointed poet. In *Sécheresse* the truth is revealed about the gods: they are nothing but fakes. In this sense *Sécheresse* is truly a "Revelation" for everything is now presented in its bare reality, and illusions are dispelled. This "Revelation" is a sudden epiphany for the poet. In his last work he realizes that the object of his quest is but a vanishing horizon that he will never reach. It eludes any attempt to grasp its sacred – and indeed cryptic – meaning. Eventually, the divinity gradually elaborated through many poems and through many different figures of gods disappears. The kaleidoscopic image of God that Saint-John Perse has been trying to build through poetry remains blurred and incoherent. Indeed, it completely falls apart because his poetics, considered from the point of view of a spiritual quest, has failed to

structure a consistent and intelligible image of God. The transcendence designed to reach out to Him remains an aesthetic approach of the world. As a consequence, Saint-John Perse is left with an unquenchable spiritual thirst.

Although in the Revelation of the Bible, fire destroys every creature and form of life on earth, Saint-John Perse's *Sécheresse* enhances the spiritual vitality of the poet and renders this vitality even more powerful by raising the question of God – with capital letter for the first time in Saint-John Perse's works. Indeed, for the very first time he addresses God directly through an invocation, even a prayer calling for God's presence. The crucial point here is that the need for God intervenes as a direct and unequivocal consequence of the spiritual drought left by the failure of the gods: "Nulle oraison sur terre n'égale notre soif; nulle affluence en nous n'étanche la source du désir. La sécheresse nous incite et la soif nous aiguise. Nos actes sont partiels, nos œuvres parcellaires! Ô temps de Dieu, nous seras-tu enfin complice?" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1399). Confronted with the limits of terrestrial transcendence, the poet embraces a slightly different kind of poetry, perhaps more religious than sacred. The verses of *Sécheresse* echo more than any other by Saint-John Perse some verses by Claudel which in turn echo some Psalms.[6] Crucially the sentence in which the word "Dieu" is mentioned is an interrogative one. This is all the more striking in that Saint-John Perse seldom uses this kind of sentence. God's presence therefore immediately appears suspicious. At this point the poet acknowledges the radical dichotomy between his spiritual aspirations on the one hand, and the elusive and even perhaps deceptive transcendence that man can find on earth on the other hand. Ironically, the more desperate his attempt appears to the poet, the more compelling it becomes. Perhaps this is when the poet's ambition turns into a tragic attempt to effect the mystical purpose of a genuine encounter with God.

[6] One thinks of "Cinq grandes Odes" for instance, where a similar biblical tone and spiritual fervour can be found.

2-God's land

The poet is now plunged into a dilemma never encountered before. Having recognized the failure of the upward transcendence (in other words a man made divinity), he suddenly acknowledges God's power. This awareness of God is made possible through four quintessential attributes identified by the poet. He calls them respectively "God's Earth", "God's Spirit", "God's Time" and "God's Dream". At this stage, it must be stated that this does not suggest that conversion to a monotheist faith has taken place in the poet's consciousness. On the contrary, the poet is more eager than ever to find an answer to his spiritual thirst – which clearly points to an unsolved quandary. However, the poet's quest can now focus on a single entity rather than on a mosaic of divine characters fragmented into the complex picture of the sacred. A veritable paradigm shift takes place at this point in Saint-John Perse's works. God's reality is approached through four quintessential traits in an attempt to bring Him into existence. The poet endeavours to shape what is still an intuitive insight into Being, into a divine form that could become perceptible by sentient beings.

Firstly, the poet reorganizes the sacred space by calling it "land of God": "Et Midi l'Aboyeur cherche ses morts dans les tranchées comblées d'insectes migrateurs. Mais nos routes sont ailleurs, nos heures démentielles, et, rongés de lucidité, ivres d'intempérie, voici, nous avançons un soir en terre de Dieu comme un peuple d'affamés qui a dévoré ses semences..." (*Sécheresse*, p. 1400). The allusion to the Promised Land is patent.[7] In the last verses of *Sécheresse*, the poet identifies with the Hebrews, who, fleeing Pharaoh symbolically reject the temptation of the pagan idols and the false gods of Egypt. Consequently, they make a covenant with God and reach the Promised Land. In the same way, Saint-John Perse has now rejected his own elaborated vision

[7] One thinks of the locusts (Revelation 9.3 and Exodus 10. 1-20) and the image of the Hebrews starving in the desert after eating all their grain (Exodus 16. 1-36). But driven by God's pledge to lead them to the Promised Land, they continue their journey (Exodus 3. 8-17, 6. 8, Genesis 50. 24).

of the divinity – yet he finds himself still longing for manna. For Saint-John Perse, this metaphorical manna could be the revelation of a living God to whom he could pray and from whom he could receive light so as to illuminate the night of man. However, this manna should be received without reference to a determined faith or religion. In particular, there should be no reference to Christianity: "God's Earth" is not the Kingdom announced by the Gospel. The interesting point, however, is the fact that the poet depicts himself walking the land of God, which represents a major step towards the recognition of God's transcendence. "Midi l'Aboyeur" powerfully suggests the figure of an Egyptian god: one may recall that the god Seth in particular is usually represented "as having the head of an animal with a long pointed snout".[8] The link between this god and a dog is self-evident. Moreover, the image of a solitary god barking in the desert must have caught the poet's mind as a picture encapsulating the theme of the "twilight of the gods" in a Nietzschean vision of the world. The fact that the following sentence in the verse begins with the conjunction "mais" confirms the poet's decision to depart from a mythological, magical and supernatural vision of the world associated with the era of the gods. As a solar figure, "Midi l'Aboyeur" also evokes Pharaoh standing on his own among the dead in the aftermath of the eighth plague of Egypt, while the poet – emulating the Hebrews – already proceeds into the land of God in a state of spiritual starvation at the end of his quest. Like Moses, the poet encounters God's spirit.

In the desert – spiritually the most fertile place on earth – the poet experiences God's presence. He evokes this through a particularly vivid image: "Sur la terre insolite aux confins désertiques, où l'éclair vire au noir, l'esprit de Dieu tenait son hâle de clarté, et la terre vénéneuse s'enfiévrait comme un massif de corail tropical..." (*Sécheresse*, p. 1397). The first element to be noted is that earth has become an eerie place; "insolite" suggests that the landscape seems different, alien perhaps. Therefore, it is clear that the space is especially propitious to an awesome experience – such as the one associated with the "Mysterium

[8] *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, p. 1764.

Tremendum". The fact that in a striking paradox light is turned into darkness ("l'éclair vire au noir") illustrates the fact that God's illumination has joined the night of man and is now compatible with the dark night of the soul. God's presence is visible. This is confirmed by the image that encapsulates the essence of the poet's vision: "l'esprit de Dieu tenait son hâle de clarté". Once again, the poet follows biblical imagery: this light cannot but remind the Christian reader of the Pentecostal fire by which the Holy Ghost makes Itself visible to disciples. Despite the fact that Saint-John Perse adopts biblical symbolism, it is worth remembering that this does not in any way imply a religious conversion of the poet. The development of the sacred in *Sécheresse* can be better described as mystical since they tell the adventure of the poet's soul striving to reach God in a direct and exclusive relationship. Interestingly, the earth has now become totally hostile to life in this verse ("la terre vénéneuse"): it is poisonous and harmful – as, indeed, it would be in the eyes of a mystic. Yet, ironically, at the very time when the poet approaches the ultimate source of light, he is confronted with death and the finitude of human temporality. As a consequence, he invokes God's time.

Sécheresse is a poem haunted by death. At the time he writes *Sécheresse*, the poet certainly knows that his end is near.[9] The poem echoes his poignant yet sharp vision of impending death: "Brève la vie, brève la course, et la mort nous rançonne! L'offrande au temps n'est plus la même. Ô temps de Dieu, sois-nous comptable" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1399). In an attempt to escape his mortal condition, the poet invokes God's time – possibly an entirely different dimension, perhaps eternity. It is to be noted that God's time is personified twice. First it is declared "comptable", then "propice": "Ô temps de Dieu, sois-nous propice" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1400). These attributes could be those of God Himself, especially in the perspective of the Last Judgement. The poet invokes a merciful God from whom he expects a favourable intervention. Moreover, the vocative tone ("Ô...") suggests strongly that the poem is now evolving into the prayer of a man on the verge of passing away.

[9] The poem was first published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* dated 1 June 1974, the year before he died.

However, the poet does not revert to God – least of all to Christ – in order to find redemption. True to his initial rejection of Christianity, Saint-John Perse does not place himself under the redeeming power of God in a religious perspective, that is to say, in a humble position. On the contrary, he continues to use the imperative mode ("sois") as though he was still trying to impose his own will rather than God's. Finally, he summons God's dream into his poem.

The spiritual experience can be summarized in the image of a battle of wills with God: "Par les sept os soudés du front et de la face, que l'homme en Dieu s'entête et s'use jusqu'à l'os, ah! jusqu'à l'éclatement de l'os!...Songe de Dieu sois-nous complice..." (*Sécheresse*, p. 1400). In his most transgressive attitude, the poet stands up to God and relentlessly demands that his requirements be addressed. This defiant attitude is a logical conclusion to, and is perfectly consistent with, the current quest. This quest rested on the principle that the poet had to construct a comprehensive and autonomous spirituality if he was to achieve an upward transcendence. The encounter with God is thus regarded as the result of a Promethean process. There is a strong paradox here in the poet's attitude: on the one hand he seeks God and identifies Him as the true aim of his quest; on the other hand, he opposes Him vigorously and he intends to find Him through a fierce resistance to His will. This is why the poet's quest can be regarded as a Promethean endeavour: although the poet situates himself in a Christian perspective in his quest of God, he nonetheless rejects it as a revealed religion. Although the Christian symbols appeal to him, he does not accept their redeeming function. Christianity provides Saint-John Perse with images but, for lack of faith, these images remain deprived of sacramental power. Saint-John Perse's spiritual power comes from the tension between the Christian imagery that he adopts and the "pagan" dynamism that he does not relinquish. As a consequence, the metaphor of "God's Dream" is not easily interpreted – if at all possible. "God's Dream" is an image that may stand for a variety of concepts, feelings or intuitions. Having reached the climax of his quest, the poet nonetheless discovers that God's dream remains as elusive as ever, and that his own prayers,

genuine and desperate as they might be, are echoed only by silence. This is interpreted by the poet as a denial and as a refusal of his spiritual demands – hence the obstinate confrontation with God. This confrontation presents the poet with the opportunity to face God and to identify the cause for the failed quest.

In the last poems, Saint-John Perse accomplishes the major steps that complete his quest for the sacred. He pushes the concept of the sacred to the limits and discovers the joy of those rare creators who met the pure inspiration of the sacred. " « Et moi, dit l'Appelé, je m'enfiévrais de cette fiévre. Et l'avanie du ciel fut notre chance. » Sécheresse, ô passion! délice et fête d'une élite" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1399). This experience takes place only through transgression of the boundaries of the profane. "Transgression! transgression! Tranchante notre marche, impudente notre quête" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1400). The way to the sacred is a demanding one since the poet must accept to play the part of an outlaw rebelling against the religious commandments of reverence to God. His attitude is one of defiance so as to reach out for the understanding and the illumination of the enigmas that darken the night of man. This truly Promethean task makes the poet a sacred figure in the etymological sense since he belongs to the jurisdiction of the gods and does not answer to the legality of men. This is why he can now invoke the divinity directly: "Sistre de Dieu, sois-nous complice" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1396). The poet has attained an essential goal in his quest. The reality of God is at last recognized and is approached through a variety of attributes that contribute to delineate a clearer picture of what can be his presence for men. More precisely, the poet can outline the contours of his absence.

3-Face to face with God

The quest of the sacred leads the poet to a head-on confrontation with God. However, it would be misleading to conclude that this quest has been fruitless. In fact, it is rather the opposite, since the quest has fulfilled its mission. Saint-John Perse presents the reader with an account

of a true mystical experience and emotion. The fact that this experience is quintessentially impregnated with violence neither invalidates it nor diminishes its intrinsic value. Indeed, it proves that this meeting with God takes place within the domain of the sacred. The most powerful vector of the sacred, namely violence, constitutes an indispensable element of any manifestation of the sacred. It is thus perfectly logical to find it operating here and carrying out its function of communication between man and God. In this sense, Saint-John Perse's enterprise may be regarded as a success since it reaches its goal. The poet has explored the sacred as far as he possibly could and has now exhausted the transcendence of transgression. Nevertheless this final development of the sacred patently fails to meet the poet's expectations. Typically, and in spite of his disappointment, Saint-John Perse makes a point of identifying the cause of his failure. The encounter with God provides the poet with the opportunity of reviewing the entire endeavour. This leads him to enunciate first the cause and then the consequence of his failed attempt. Eventually, the poet concludes his work in such a way as to recapture the essence of his poetics.

Saint-John Perse's last words show profound lucidity about the tragedy that they contain. The poet acknowledges the limits of his poetics by establishing a logical link between the confrontation with God and the problematic contribution of words to language. "Dieu s'use contre l'homme, l'homme s'use contre Dieu. Et les mots au langage refusent leur tribut: mots sans office et sans alliance, et qui dévorent, à même, la feuille vaste du langage comme feuille verte de mûrier, avec une voracité d'insectes, de chenilles...Sécheresse, ô faveur, dis-nous le choix de tes élus" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1399). This verse illuminates Saint-John Perse's last discovery on his piigrimage into the intangible space of the sacred. Being "sans office et sans alliance", words no longer have any specific function or reliable link to the reality to which they refer. This is why Saint-John Perse's language does not satisfactorily elucidate the night of man. The poetics he has been gradually elaborating in each new poem suddenly crumbles because it relied on what was perceived as a safe covenant between human words on the one hand and the world of perceptible or

conceivable objects on the other hand. In linguistic terms, this translates as the rupture of the relationship between signifier and signified. Even though his poetics fundamentally consists in transgressing this relationship in order to give a voice to the ineffable reality of the sacred, it nonetheless works on the assumption that the transgressed entity is secure and dependable, since otherwise the transgression would be jeopardized in its effects and consequences. The poet cannot bank on the power of words to reflect or account for the "other" side of the world (namely the domain of the sacred), unless he is absolutely sure that they contribute to building a meaningful language by mapping the world in a coherent and consistent way. Instead, the poet discovers that words "eat away" language and therefore dissolve its power to create an understanding of the sacred. The image chosen by the poet accurately depicts the core of the problem and can be linked to Heidegger's analysis of language.[10] If words refuse to constitute the meaning of language and to fulfil its demands, this implies that they are used as mere tools of expression and are therefore submitted to a pre-existent meaning, which embraces and controls them. In this case they function like tags assigned to objects or concepts in order to identify them. However, words fail to bring the transcendence of the Word into language. As Saint-John Perse puts it, "les mots au langage refusent leur tribut". The metaphor suggests that the poetics of the sacred failed because of its attempt to exert a tight control over the power of words, which in the end turned against language itself in an irresolvable aporia. The elaborate process by which the poet tried to gain access to the "other" world is no longer at work. The cause of the failure is clearly identified: it lies in the poet's claim to use language, perhaps even to fabricate it – albeit in an aesthetic way – in order to obtain a convenient instrument enabling the exploration of the night of man. Yet words rebel and refuse to "signify" a meaning beyond the scope of language itself. At this stage Saint-John Perse's poetry engages in its most dramatic development as far as the sacred goes. Interestingly, his poetics exemplifies the philosophical thinking on

[10] See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. By Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper Collins, 1971).

language of Heidegger, who affirms: "In order to be who we are, we human beings remain commited to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else. Thus we always see the nature of language only to the extent to which language itself has us in view, has appropriated us to itself."[11]

Saint-John Perse's language thus becomes self-destructive in the ultimate epiphany of the poem. The poet's ambition to create a language capable of summoning transcendence into this world through sheer human will reveals itself to be an endeavour that paradoxically reduces the potential of language. This anomaly accounts for the fact that in Saint-John Perse's poetry, Being never actually makes itself fully present although it pervades the entire poem. This is also consistent with the fact that the poet's consciousness finds itself engaged in a fight against God: it is the consequence of a frustrating search for transcendence driven by the need for Being. This deadlock may be interpreted as the result of the poet's approach to transcendence: for him, it exists as the outcome of a self-conscious process of the mind. Indeed, he sees it as the product of man's will exerted on the world and on words. His poetics may be regarded as a response to the mystery of the night of man and to the "call" of language within him. However, Saint-John Perse never allows language to get hold of him unless he keeps a tight control on the creative process. The call might originate from an awesome "Other", yet the answer is very much one of this world which is given in a purely aesthetic language. Saint-John Perse's poetics might be described as a response of the human will to the challenge of the "Wholly Other". To a large extent this poetics consists in the representation of the world – including its two faces, profane and sacred – as an image of man's will, in other words an image of his desire to understand logically the significance of "ex-isting". The aesthetic language does not contradict the phenomenal description of the material world. Indeed, Saint-John Perse is keen on selecting very carefully his vocabulary from specialized

[11] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. By Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper Collins, 1971), p. 134.

or rare lexicons in order to achieve the most accurate depiction of the reality. However, this attention to detail and exactitude in poetry is not simply a matter of technical precision through words. The poet cannot be satisfied with a simple descriptive approach. He concerns himself with the "way" in which words can interact in order to produce an aesthetic reality (namely the poem) that will eventually reveal its mysterious connection with the aesthetics of the world. The artist's task is to interpret accurately the existing world, which can be done by synthesizing both the phenomenal and aesthetic worlds into the poem. In Saint-John Perse, this endeavour involves designing a holistic approach to language in order to let Being emerge gradually from the night of man thanks to the aesthetic power of words. However, what Saint-John Perse realizes is that, in aiming at the status of "medium" for Being, the poem should let language speak in its own right and allow words to challenge grammar, in other words their human logic. The poetry of the sacred is perhaps more about defiance than about transgression. This is why the poet is finally left with but one option: blasphemy.

In *Sécheresse*, blasphemy appears as the last stage of the poet's approach to language. It may be described as the revolt of language against itself. It is an upheaval of a still powerful language that nonetheless cannot enlighten the mystery of the sacred in spite – or perhaps more precisely *because* - of all its efforts. The poet acknowledges that there might be a way out of this deadlock in which he finds himself trapped – but this liberation is not possible in the course of the poem. It has to be renounced, for the poet's time has run out. "Oui, tout cela sera. Oui, les temps reviendront, qui lèvent l'interdit sur la face de la terre. Mais pour un temps encore c'est l'anathème, et l'heure encore est au blasphème: la terre sous bandelettes, la source sous scellés..." (*Sécheresse*, p. 1398-1399). Only the future presents itself as the open temporality in which the poet may stand a chance of unleashing the full power of words. Of course, "the poet" no longer means Saint-John Perse as an individual poet. Instead of referring to a particular persona, finite in space and time, the poet, brought to his quintessence, might represent the "speech of language" that keeps speaking through man, in the form of

both a spiritual call and an artistic inspiration. In Saint-John Perse's experience, this "speech of language" has been a constant driving force, as many verses attest throughout the poems.[12] He is very aware that being a poet actually implies becoming partially the instrument of language and "translating" for his fellow human beings what the "speech of language" inspires in him.[13] However, the translation remains ambiguous and entails an interpretative work by the poet. At the end of *Sécheresse* the earth is "sous bandelettes" like the dead in ancient Egypt, and the source of meaning remains "sous scellés" like the message of the gods whose seal is still intact. This is why "l'heure encore est au blasphème" and the poem is anathema: language turns against Being for failing to comprehend it in its "logos", in the logic of its own speech. The curse against language appears as a splendid yet desperate revolt against the "Wholly Other" that exceeds and exhausts the possibilities of language. It might be argued that a Luciferian dimension is introduced into the poem at this stage: the poet turns against his creator – namely language itself – because he has been denied control over its mysterious source. More than ever before, transgression appears as the very essence of Saint-John Perse's poetics, which aims to reject God's rule over humanity. Once again the poet uses an expressive image drawn from the Bible in order to explicate his link to language: he compares language to a tree, alluding to the Tree of Knowledge.[14] The "meaning" of language stands as the forbidden fruit that the poet wants to taste on behalf of all of humanity. But it is not only Christian imagery that supplies the poet with a clearer picture of his position *vis-à-vis* language. He reverts to the sea to find confirmation of the anathema that curses his poetics.

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[12] See in particular *Exil* III, p. 127: "Que voulez-vous encore de moi, ô souffle originel? Et vous, que pensez-vous encore tirer de ma lèvre vivante, / Ô force errante sur mon seuil, ô Mendiante dans nos voies et sur le traces du Prodigue?".

[13] Many verses illustrate this point. Amongst them, one can think of the following: "Et vous pouvez me dire: Où avez-vous pris cela? – Textes reçus en langage clair! versions données sur deux versants!...Toi-même stèle et pierre d'angle!...Et pour des fourvoiements nouveaux, je t'appelle en litige sur ta chaise dièdre, / Ô Poète, ô bilingue, entre toutes choses bisaiguës, et toi-même litige entre toutes choses litigieuses – homme assailli du dieu! homme parlant dans l'équivoque!" (*Vents* II, 6, p. 213); "Et le Poète aussi est avec nous, sur la chaussée des hommes de son temps. / Allant le train de notre temps, allant le train de ce grand vent. / Son occupation parmi nous: mise en clair des messages. Et la réponse en lui donnée par illumination du cœur." (*Vents* III, 6, p. 229).

Even the sea – the highest possible sacred entity in Saint-John Perse's vision of the world – suggests a spiritual upheaval: "La mer elle-même nous rejette ses navettes d'os de seiche et ses rubans d'algues flétries: éclipse et manque en toute chair, ô temps venu des grandes hérésies!" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1396). The "os de seiche" and the "rubans d'algues flétries" evoke the decay of the inner world of the sea and with it the disintegration of the theory of the sacred which is no longer a valid tool for the investigation of the night of man. Consequently, the time has come for the "grandes hérésies" which in Saint-John Perse's poetry can only mean the abandonment of any hope to find divine transcendence through a theory of the sacred. Nevertheless, this theory is not fruitless since it allows the poet to lay down the foundations of a new approach of transcendence. It involves the recognition of the absence of Being felt by human beings as the first step towards an ontological experience.[15] The feeling of dereliction could not be translated more accurately than by the image of the "éclipse et manque en toute chair" which not only expresses God's absence from the world, but also implies that a space is left vacant for Him. It is not as though the idea of God can be altogether dismissed. On the contrary, Saint-John Perse insists on the obvious "missing element", for an eclipse not only supposes the presence of the sun – albeit in an obliterated mode – but also it proves it. This eclipse is a carefully chosen metaphor that implicitly reverts to the series of images containing a solar theme, all of them containing an evident allusion to God's absence.[16]

In *Sécheresse* this absence is still resented by the poet, but for the first time it is also seen as a condition for God's presence in the world. The vacant place left by God that prompted the poetics of the sacred by

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[14] See *Vents*, I, 1, p. 180.

[15] This idea is instrumental in Levinas's thought for instance and it will be dealt with more lengthily later in this work.

[16] This can be noted in a verse from *Anabase*: "Et le soleil n'est point nommé, mais sa puissance est parmi nous / et la mer au matin comme une présomption de l'esprit" (*Anabase*, p. 93; see also p. 204). An identical theme is developed in the major poems *Vents* and *Amers*: "Nous reviendrons, un soir d'Automne, sur les derniers roulements d'orage, quand le trias épais des golfes survolés ouvre au Soleil des morts ses fosses de goudron bleu [...]" 666(*Vents*, IV, 4, p. 240); "Et le Soleil du pâtre, à son déclin, sous les huées d'abeilles, beau comme un forcené dans les débris du temple, descendit aux chantiers vers les bassins de carénage" (*Amers*, strophe, 4, p. 276).

Saint-John Perse is also the sign of an impossible achievement. Blasphemy is the last resort for the poet who feels that he has by now exhausted the means of human language in the quest of the sacred. The poet's speech – as opposed to God's – cannot achieve pure creation. It cannot produce material reality out of its own abstract capacity to produce meaning. Saint-John Perse realizes that his language can produce infinite sense through words, which enables him to participate in God's creation by introducing harmony and sense into the chaos of matter. However, he cannot elucidate the ultimate "reason" for creation. The poet discovers that his powers are part of God's scheme in His Creation. Nonetheless, as a human creator and artist who works toward God's Creation through the gift of poetic inspiration, he is not allowed to share God's transcendence, nor can he create one of his own. Blasphemy might be regarded as a call to God, even a prayer and an avowal by the poet that his theurgy cannot be satisfactorily completed. His language, however creative on an aesthetic level, is an instrument thanks to which he can make sense out of the world as a creation, in other words as something already given. However, it does not befall within its attributes to create transcendence out of its own contingency. Hence the poet is tempted to deride his poetry and to regard himself as a fool of God, a puppet reduced to resorting to mere tricks in order to approach his Creator. Through blasphemy the individual cries out for God, recognising that his poetics is a fabrication that has failed to bring itself to a theurgical status. For in the end, the poet does not describe himself as the "instrument" of God, but rather as "God's monkey".

The very last verse written by Saint-John Perse consists of seven words put between quotation marks and in italics. It stands alone, as a kind of post-scriptum not only to *Sécheresse* but also to all the previous poems. Its essential characteristic consists in ultimately turning upside down the supposed meaning of the poem in a sensational fashion which has hitherto been hardly noticed. The poet terminates his writings by what could be at first sight taken for yet another blasphemy. Having just invoked the "Songe de Dieu", the poet phonetically derives his last words from this, exclaiming: " « *Singe de Dieu, trêve à tes ruses!* »"

(*Sécheresse*, p. 1400). It would be completely erroneous to see in this metaphor a gratuitous play on words. Interpreted as a genitive metaphor it is indeed a blasphemy (God is an ape). But as a subjective image it is also a humorous self-portrait in which the poet is not afraid to depict himself in his own works as a comic and rather farcical figure.[17] In this metaphor the poet appears as a degraded avatar of God – at least the speaking God in Genesis – inasmuch as he too endeavours to create an entire world through the powers of his speech (only to find that he has been fooled by his own pretence). The poet is now something of a fool, he is God's clown: even his blasphemies are harmless since they play a part in the accomplishment of God's will. Depicting himself as God's monkey, the poet creates a powerful image that functions as a reminder that all men were created by God. Moreover, they were created in God's likeness according to the biblical tradition, even though sin came to degrade this likeness. The poet, therefore, stands out of the normal world of humans in order to play an essential part in the vital balance of the sacred. Like the jester for the king, the poet is allowed a derisive attitude that serves only to enhance and prove the majesty of God by reminding human beings that nothing pertaining to humans can compare to God's powers – particularly as far as language goes. In this perspective, the poet puts an end to what seems to have been ruses, jokes, word games. Poetry thus functions as a kind of white magic used to tame the awesome forces of the sacred.

It must be stressed that there are only two other significant occurrences of images involving monkeys to be found in Saint-John Perse's works.[18] The first leaves no doubt about the close link the poet establishes between monkey and man by comparing death in the two species: "(Un enfant triste comme la mort des singes – sœur aînée d'une grande beauté – nous offrait une caille dans un soulier de satin rose)"

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[17] One is reminded of Rembrandt's self-portraits in which he does not hesitate to paint an unflattering image of himself, to the point of caricature.

[18] A few exceptions can be noted, essentially in *Amers* ("le singe et l'iguane", "le singe bleu" p. 317; also "Le singe a emporté vos perles..." p. 356, and " « Assis à tes confins de pierre comme des chiens à tête des singes, dieux métissés d"argile et de tristesse, / [...] Nous te rêvions, Session dernière![...]"p. 366). All these images belong to the same paradigm developed here through two essential images of the monkey.

(*Anabase*, IV, p. 99). The second occurrence is in fact a literary reference to one of La Fontaine's fables: "Et le Poète lui-même sort de ses chambres millénaires: / Avec la guêpe terrière et l'Hôte occulte de ses nuits, / Avec son peuple de servants, avec son peuple de suivants – / [...] / Le Savetier, le Financier, les Animaux malades de la peste, / L'Alouette et ses petits et le Maître du champ, et le Lion amoureux, et le Singe montreur de lanterne magique" (*Vents*, III, 4, p. 224). What appears here is that early in his work the poet associates monkey and man on the grounds that they both die in a way that is recognisable, perhaps even "familiar" to each other. The death of a monkey is a "sœur aînée d'une grande beauté" because of the fact that monkeys and men belong to close species, a view largely accepted since Darwin. Yet, this does not constitute a sufficient explanation of such a complex image. Here the monkey is presented as an important, even grave and serious figure that is the depository of a fascinating secret about death. The monkey's death relates to man's death ("sœur aînée d'une grande beauté") in virtue of a close kinship between the two species. The poet regards the monkey's death as a reminder of his own. This event constitutes a prophecy for the poet whose last words in the poem – his poetic death – are presented as those of a monkey. In *Anabase*, the monkey was already a tutelary figure, perhaps a totem animal for the poet who finds in him an elder "brother" in death, as though man could learn something about his own mystery from monkeys. It is absolutely essential to keep in mind that the monkey is thus an important figure of the sacred. One may even be tempted to regard it as a "commanding" figure since the monkey's first role is to show man the way into death, as a kind of initiator in the exploration of the night of man.

As for the second image, it is based upon characters who accompany the poet. Most of them come from fables by La Fontaine except one: "le Singe montreur de lanterne magique" appears in a famous fable by Fabian.[19] The monkey is certainly by anticipation a mirror

[19] The "lanterne magique" is an apparatus used at the end of the seventeenth century to project images painted on a glass panel onto a large screen thanks to the light of a candle. In the fable by Florian "le singe qui montre la lanterne" the spectators cannot

image, a revealing portrait of the poet. He appears as his clownish double who fails to enlighten his picture, as a poet failing to make his metaphors visible and understandable to his readers. This simian anti-hero performs a cathartic function for the poet inasmuch as the former exemplifies in a derisory fashion what the latter dreads most. The monkey who forgets to bring light to the images of his lantern is the brother of the poet who cannot make visible the pictures trapped in the night of man. The monkey plays a key part in the sacred since he is the only character in Saint-John Perse's poetry responsible for the balance between sacred and profane. He is instrumental in introducing a key element, which will guarantee the equilibrium of the sacred.

The sudden irruption of this animal – with a capital letter – at the end of the poems and directly associated with God makes it all the more important. The fact that it reappears at a very special place in the poem makes him stand like a sort of tutelary animal guarding the text on behalf of the poet who will now have to remain silent. Perhaps in a self-deprecatory way the poet identifies with it and invites the reader to go back to the text and reinterpret it in a different light. Like his double, he has forgotten to light his lantern in the night of man. This might be seen as a rather contemptuous way to treat the reader. But it is in fact a profound insight by the poet, which allows him retrospectively to recapture the essence of his entire enterprise. Although he seems to dissolve the entire project of the sacred and to turn it into ridicule, "God's monkey" actually brings the missing element. This makes it possible to read the poems retrospectively as true sacred texts inasmuch

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see anything because the monkey "N'avait oublié qu'un point: c'était d'éclairer sa lanterne". The expression has remained in the French language to this day as a proverb meaning to forget the essential point in something. Incidentally, the modern reader might recall another comic situation in which a monkey is involved with an image-making device. In the film by Lawrence Weingarten "The Cameraman" (1928, MGM) one comic scene shows the cameraman's pet, a little monkey, shooting the cameraman himself rescuing his sweetheart from the sea. This will later prove his genuine courage and confute his enemy who unduly boasts to be the lady's saviour. This association between a monkey and a camera allows Weingarten to express a self-derisive and yet meaningful interpretation of his work as director of the film. For the conclusion to which the spectator is invited to draw is that the monkey, in mimicking his master, is as good a cameraman as he is. Indeed, he is perhaps even smarter inasmuch as he shoots the key scene of the film while the human cameraman misses it altogether. Whether

as they contain the key to the human condition. From his commanding position God's monkey points to a symbolic absence of light. This absence, far from representing an impediment in the revelation of Being, constitutes its prerequisite.

Saint-John Perse saw the film or not is debatable. However, the farcical situation in Florian's fable cannot have failed to strike his imagination.

PART THREE: DECONSTRUCTING THE SACRED

CHAPTER I: BEING AND TIME

I-In exile from Being

1-The essence of things

The fundamental element in the problematic of being for Saint-John Perse is based on the perception of a discrepancy between existing objects in the world and their essence. The poet acknowledges a gap between the being of things and their actual manifestation. This gap, in turn, is associated with the irreversible rupture between the world of childhood and that of adulthood. To Saint-John Perse, this is inevitably illustrated by the memory of his beloved West Indies that he left as a child when his father decided to go back to mainland France. A clear sense of loss is expressed in the first poems concerning his bygone childhood in the West Indies: "- Sinon l'enfance, qu'y avait-il alors qu'il n'y a plus? / Plaines! Pentes! Il y / avait plus d'ordre! Et tout n'était que règnes et confins de lueurs. Et l'ombre et la lumière alors étaient plus près d'être une même chose..." (*Pour fêter une enfance*, p. 25). Here the nostalgia for the lost paradise of an exotic childhood is clearly perceptible. However, the poet's aim is not merely to express his sadness. What is at stake here is the recognition that the transparency of the world is now blurred and the immediacy between consciousness and existence broken. This joyful awareness of the world reflected by the "there is" of the child are no longer possible. The "there is" is now split into two separate entities and temporalities as the audacious enjambment ("Il y /

avait") suggests. There exists a gap between the "there" and the "is" by which the child used to account for the world. But more importantly, this gap reflects the loss of a unique and unifying essence of the world that sprang out spontaneously from the child's comprehension of his universe. The restrictive phrase "Tout n'était que..." implies that everything that exists can be accounted for by a single essence, a single being that guarantees the clarity and visibility of the world. But as the past tense clearly states, this unique essence of the world was to be found only in the magical time of childhood and has now disappeared. This is why the sentence concludes with the term "lueurs", for the child's existential experience is truly an "enlightenment". Indeed this universal essence encompasses opposites: light and shade almost belong to the same reality. The contraries, although distinguishable, share a common essence in the boy's perceptiveness and therefore the world appears whole and in order ("Il y / avait plus d'ordre!"). This perception of being can be linked to the Heraclitean belief that reality is the result of a struggle that unifies the contraries. Saint-John Perse admired the pre-Socratic philosophers who undoubtedly influenced his thinking. Like Heraclitus, Saint-John Perse believes that a law of change is at work in the world. The underlying unity of phenomena is the result of the constant process of opposites conflicting, yet secretly harmonising with each other. But although the world contains *more* order and opposites are *more* close to each other, the fact remains that even in the lost paradise of the West Indies the essence of things does not allow the elaboration of an absolute ontology. Being exists only in degrees and cannot be apprehended as a whole. To this extent the poet's early ontological experience of the world is one of the incompleteness of being.

The nostalgia for childhood reflects an aspiration to a better understanding of the world that becomes more and more opaque. The existential sadness hereby generated is tackled in striking terms by the poet: "Et le doute s'élève sur la réalité des choses. Mais si un homme tient pour agréable sa tristesse, qu'on le produise dans le jour! et mon avis est qu'on le tue, sinon / il y aura une sédition" (*Anabase*, p. 96). The poet associates the lack of substance of the world with man's sadness –

an echo of the previously expressed nostalgia – and he refuses to accept the loss of reality about things. To him there is a moral duty involved in poetic creation, and he feels that he must produce a strong message. The interrogation of the reality of the beings cannot be regarded as gratuitous speculation for idle philosophers. The moral aspect of this intellectual restlessness is underlined by the shocking image of the death penalty endorsed by the poet. It has to be noted that for Saint-John Perse a moral question is always very concrete in its implications. The death penalty constitutes a striking example of this. For the poet, ethics is about practical decision-making – and potentially with the most dramatic consequences – rather than about abstract thought for thought's sake. This allusion to the death penalty is the only one in all of Saint-John Perse's works; its uniqueness thus makes it all the more striking. For the poet, acceptance of existential sadness or anguish is like committing a punishable crime against life itself since in his view it symbolically entails the death penalty. This verse certainly echoes the poet's consistent condemnation of the existentialist philosophies that were being developed from Husserl's phenomenology in the second quarter of the twentieth century and even after World War II. Yet, the ontological experience is undoubtedly one of deception and disappointment: "Soleil de l'être, trahison! / [...] « Soleil de l'être, couvre-moi! » - parole du transfuge. [...] Soleil de l'être, Prince et Maître! nos œuvres sont éparses, nos tâches sans honneur et nos blés sans moisson: la lieuse de gerbes attend au bas du soir" (*Nocturne*, p. 1395). At the very end of his oeuvre, the poet acknowledges the inescapable fact that the light that could solve the mystery of the night of man has not fulfilled his expectations. Symbolically, this light originates from the sun that could not be named in *Anabase*[1] – exactly in the same way that God cannot be named in the Old Testament – which could account for the fact that its power remains ineffective. At the end of his life, the poet could find no meaning, no unity in his works, and is unable to read a coherent design in his poems – which is a clear avowal of sterility as far as his poetics goes. Death looms

[1]See *Anabase* I. p. 93.

in the background and threatens to overtake everything – including an elusive light of Being. Yet this gloomy picture does not reflect the true achievement of Saint-John Perse's poetry. For although he remains fully aware of the elusiveness of Being, he nevertheless recounts a veritable exploration of Being accomplished through his poetic adventure. In order to grasp the exact mesure of his contribution to modern poetry, it is essential to revert to the fundamental notion of the "sacred" and to explore its metaphysical foundations. It is proposed to "deconstruct" the sacred not to destroy a work of art, but with a view to understanding the general conceptual framework of the sacred described so far in Saint-John Perse's poetic works. The aim will be to try and link a particular work of art to a global thinking of modernity emerging concomitantly during the twentieth century. Although unrivalled and inimitable, Saint-John Perse's poetry is not isolated. In fact, the structure of the sacred that will emerge gradually through its "deconstruction" will reveal a striking resemblance with the most influential and seminal theories put forward in modern thinking. Although the poet produced his works in an entirely independent way, the sacred in his poetry echoes many contemporary philosophical innovations. By "deconstructing" the sacred I shall try to demonstrate the poet's crucial contribution in elaborating an innovative conceptual framework which matches the intellectual and spiritual challenges of man confronted with the modern developments of science and philosophy. Thanks to the theme of the sacred, the poet assumes fully his role in attempting to decipher the mysteries of the human condition. The poet's contribution appears particularly rich in the questioning of Being and his poetry of the sacred offers many illuminating insights with regards to a modern ontology.

2-The eeriness of being

Early on in his works, the poet reflects on a vivid memory of his childhood that struck him as a poignant experience of the surrounding world: "Je me souviens des pleurs / d'un jour trop beau dans trop

d'effroi, dans trop d'effroi!..." (*Pour fêter une enfance*, p. 26). The fright kindled by a "too" beautiful day is the result of an intense existential experience undergone by the boy. It could be the consequence of a sudden and profound realisation of him being "thrown" in the world, of him "existing" here and now. This early spontaneous enlightenment of the child makes him become conscious of his own "being-thrown-in-the-world" – what Heidegger calls "Dasein". It may be argued that the poet was born in this unexpected epiphany of his being thrown in the world and that from then on this revelation will constitute the line which will be followed in his investigation of the sacred. The "effroi" marks the instant when consciousness becomes consciousness of itself, thus opening up a limitless abyssal space of possibilities for "Dasein". It is the fundamental and indeed frightening acknowledgement of total freedom that is presented here by the poet in terms that echo very precisely Heidegger's description of the ontological investigation of the world. Moreover, and crucially, the fright sensed by the young poet matches perfectly the feeling sparked by the encounter with the "Wholly Other" and "Mysterium Tremendum" by Otto.[2] The confluence of three distinct – indeed sometimes incompatible – approaches with such a conformity of results is quite remarkable and can hardly be seen as a mere coincidence. The awe that is found as the basis of all sacred interpretations of the world is also the starting point of modern ontological investigation, It may be regarded as the cornerstone of the appearance of language and of the very idea of civilisation. Indeed Freud's idea is that the starting point of civilisation is the murder of the father (or the Totem, or God...), which leaves humanity without gods. The frightening freedom and awe created thereafter share some similarities with Otto's Mysterium Tremendum, Saint-John Perse's "effroi" and even Heidegger's *care*. Precisely because these different approaches are quite separate from each other, both in their origins and their conclusions, it is worth underlining their

[2] See R. Otto, *The idea of the sacred*. Saint-John Perse does not seem to have read R. Otto. He does not quote him nor does he refer to him in any way. To a certain extent, it may even be argued that the poet could never endorse the theologian's approach of the sacred. In particular, it is obvious that the underlying concept of divinity that one finds

confluence at this crucial meeting point where the foundations of both civilisation and the individual seem to lie. Primeval awe originates in the recognition by man that his finitude is met with an entity of absoluteness. The absoluteness of Being and the matching absoluteness in the lack of Being after the death of God thus appear as universal categories of mankind.

Whatever the approach (anthropological, philosophical, psychological or even poetic), the phenomenon described here appears to be a single human experience that transcends the multiplicity of approaches. Indeed the "effroi" is a true form of "awe", since it supposes that an undefined power strikes man's imagination in a sudden and overwhelming manner with the effect of paralysing the mind and the body. In the religious domain, this can be described as a mystical experience. In any case, it would appear that the awesome emotional state associated with the revelation of a superior entity that presents itself either as omnipotent, or as being in the mode of absoluteness, results from a universal and a priori aptitude of man. However, it is interesting to note that both the philosophical and the poetic investigations of the phenomenon come to similar conclusions albeit by different ways. Such is the case for the link between Being and time for instance. Like Heidegger, Saint-John Perse links the reality of being to that of time, the dimension in which being is believed to come to self-awareness through Dasein. The poet remembers: "Il fait si calme et puis si tiède, / il fait si continuel aussi, / qu'il est étrange d'être là, mêlé des mains à la facilité du jour..." *(Pour fêter une enfance*, p. 37). Because of the influence of light under the tropics, time is experienced as duration rather than as a succession of instants. Time is felt as a continuum in which the notion of instants is dissolved. The torpid atmosphere of the isles enhances the strangeness for the boy of "being there", thrown in the world, yet easily assimilated to all that constitutes his universe. This first ontological experience is characterized by the simultaneity of the radical strangeness and the inescapable familiarity of the existing world that the poet cannot

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in the sacred is totally different for each author. However the concept of "Mysterium Tremendum" and that of "Wholly Other" do apply to the poet's approach of the sacred.

reconcile. This results in doubts being cast on the reality of the beings of the world from what could be called an ontic perspective as already seen before ("Et le doute s'élève sur la réalité des choses").

But above all, it results in Dasein being seized in an unavoidable anguish or *care* as Heidegger puts it. This is inherent to Dasein – understood as man being conscious of himself and more particularly of his "being-thrown" in the world. The origin of anxiety is man's confrontation with the frailty of his own being within an ontological perspective: "Sommes-nous, ah, sommes-nous bien? – ou fûmes-nous jamais – dans tout cela?" (*Chronique*, VII, p. 401). In one of the last poems, Saint-John Perse continues to need to formulate the fundamental question of his quest. His aim is not to offer an answer but rather to underline that the quintessential raison d'être of his poetics lies precisely in the asking. Once again in a similar way to that of the philosopher Heidegger, Saint-John Perse puts the questioning of Being at the core of his enterprise because this questioning constitutes the sine qua non of the sacred. Fundamentally it consists in appealing to the "Other", the entity that, at this point, may be defined as the "One that can be without existing", or perhaps as the "One that can be without being in time" – since it is time itself. The questioning of Being is the final step on the path of the sacred followed by Saint-John Perse inasmuch as it is the final gate opening onto the radical ellusiveness of the "Wholly Other". Being may be regarded as the total strangeness that breaks into the genuine familiarity of the world experienced by the poet. Yet it is actively sought at the same time.

3-Being and the sea

At first the contact with Being seems to be so tenuous that it looks as though it takes place in a dream and the poet chooses to reflect this, along with the awesome aura that accompanies it by the verb "to haunt": "Hanter l'Être, et si prompt!" "Hanter l'Être est d'un mime" (*Amers*, p. 338). The encounter with Being is presented as a mere theatrical

performance. Being is no more real than a mime. For the poet, Being is perhaps as fragile and elusive as an actor's craftsmanship. There is no more substance to it than to the art of entertaining an audience. It is a deceitful appearance or re-enactment of what already exists. But the crucial element is that in *Amers* this encounter with Being is made exclusively through the erotic dimension of love. Sexual pleasure is the medium by which transcendence is attained by both partners. Love allows them to break the barriers of conventional moral customs and to reach out for the absoluteness of Being. Eroticism liberates them from the ordinary laws that govern humankind, including their mortal destiny; thanks to this absolute freedom Being becomes accessible to them. Here again the experience of Being derives directly from the premises of the sacred in general. It is generally accepted – and actually observed through many rituals – that eroticism is a key component of the sacred.[3] However, neither is admitted in the normal sphere of ordinary life. Like the sacred, the erotic urge manifests itself as a negation of the law and disregards both social and moral imperatives. Yet, they both participate in the balance of life and death in a human perspective. This is exactly what the stories of all great lovers, real or fictional, have told humankind. Their tragic endings are always the result of two irrepressible forces: the revenge of social morality and the return of law and order (e.g. Romeo and Juliet, Heloise and Abelard...). In *Amers*, the lovers do not abide by any law: they reject what they see as the normative and deadly law of the earth, and sail away on the free sea. Of course this somewhat idyllic and arguably utopian conception of love could lead to the view that the experience of Being derived from it could thus be somewhat invalidated. Indeed, this is suggested by the term "mime" whose connotations include the idea of representing or forging the appearance of an object without presenting the object itself. But the poet does not leave any doubt about the veracity of the experience he evokes: "Hanter l'Être n'est point leurre" (*Amers*, p. 340). The transcendence of love guarantees that no deception corrupts the ontological revelation. The poet refutes any

[3] See Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

critical doubt that might arise regarding the veracity of his experience by showing in a series of images how closely related Being is to the phenomenological perception of the world. In fact there is a clear correlation between the inward feeling of Being on the one hand and the outward communication with beings on the other hand. "Et la félicité de l'être répond à la félicité des eaux..." (*Amers*, p. 311). Indeed an exact parallelism establishes itself between the vital element for Saint-John Perse, namely the sea, and Being itself: "[...] toute la mer en vain foulée, et qui s'abaisse et qui s'élève, lactation très lente, au sein meme de l'Être, sa constance..." (*Amers*, p. 349). The image leaves no doubt about the reality of Being for Saint-John Perse. The harmony between the sea and Being is so perfect that the poet draws the conclusion that they are indeed a single entity. This is a reminder that for the poet, Being is a very concrete essence and can be approached through physical and empirical involvement in the cosmic forces that govern the universe. The similitude of the sea and Being is confirmed by the equivalence of their immensities; in this perspective, the sea is called by the poet "Très haut regard porté sur l'étendue des choses et sur le cours de l'Être, sa mesure!..." (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 365).

In Saint-John Perse's phenomenology of the sacred, the sea constitutes the ideal substance of Being, for the former shares with the latter a multiplicity of attributes that no other reality can boast. Essentially they both are perceptible yet unfathomable; real yet impossible to circumscribe; infinitely variable yet perfect. Above all, the analogy that struck the poet is their common cyclical rhythm. Like the sea, Being comes to the poet in successive tides and periodical pulses. Therefore every living being that manages to harmonize itself with the recurrent movement of the sea participates ipso facto in the emergence of Being in the world. Sea birds epitomize this particularly well since, without being included in the sea itself, their flight mirrors the eternal and cosmic dynamics of the sea. "À mi-hauteur entre ciel et mer, entre un amont et un aval d'éternité, se frayant route d'éternité, ils sont nos médiateurs, et tendent de tout l'être à l'étendue de l'être..." (*Oiseaux*, X, p. 421). Birds not only mimic the fluxes of the ocean, they also serve as

mediums between the poet and Being. They have become so acquainted with Being that their flight is no longer a mere airborne movement but rather a true ontological act: "Plus qu'ils ne volent, ils viennent à part entière au délice de l'être" (*Oiseaux*, X, p. 420). At this stage it becomes quite apparent that the very idea of movement is a fundamental concept in Saint-John Perse's ontology. The movement is at the core of the phenomenological perception of the world because the true nature of Being is a dynamic one. If Being is time for Heidegger, arguably Being is primarily movement for Saint-John Perse; this is the reason why his whole poetics develops a comprehensive theory of movement.

II-Being as Movement

1-A phenomenology of movement

The first existential investigation of the world by the poet concerns movement. Indeed the unique reality that manifests itself in the world to the poet's eyes is movement: "Que m'a donné le monde que ce mouvement d'herbes?..." (*Anabase*, p. 107). What the poet suggests is that nothing is knowable about the world except its movement because its very nature is movement. The Being of the world has nothing in common with the idea of substance, or matter, or even with that of a pure concept that would endow the world with its light, however distorted or blurred. Saint-John Perse's ontology is truly refreshing inasmuch as it offers a modern alternative to the idea of Being. In an age when the theory of relativity was born, it is only logical that ontology could no longer live on the premises received at a time when the concepts of matter, energy and speed were still three separate entities. Indeed Saint-John Perse's theory of movement is particularly consistent with the scientific revolution of his time and, as he advocated himself in his Stockholm Nobel Prize acceptance speech, poetry proceeds to its own investigation of the real life and, through very different paths, joins science in new and

similar discoveries. Movement presented as the "nature" of Being certainly encapsulates the three key elements of the Theory of Relativity (matter, energy, speed of light), and reconciles poetic intuitions with scientific calculations. Moreover Being as movement becomes quite relative itself and can only be defined from a certain view point. Moving in accordance with the movement of Being therefore signifies becoming still. This paradox, although not new in itself, is at the core of modern thought, since for the first time it is used in equal measure in both the scientific and the poetic fields. The result of this modern development of both science and poetry could be described as an endangered truth, since both the science of Being and that of beings can come up with relative or temporary knowledge. "Et au delà sont les grands lés du songe, et tout ce bien fongible où l'être engage sa fortune..." (*Neiges*, p. 163). The existing reality is "tout ce bien fongible" in which Being is at risk. Yet through man whose role is to be aware of this engagement in the world, Being keeps emerging in what exists. Indeed it is the poet's function to allow the epiphany of Being by all possible means that facilitate the reflection of the dynamics of Being into that of the phenomenological experiment. "Ainsi du même mouvement le nageur, au revers de sa nage, quêtant la double nouveauté du ciel, soudain tâte du pied l'ourlet des sables immobiles, / Et le mouvement encore l'habite et le propage, qui n'est plus que mémoire – murmure et souffle de grandeur à l'hélice de l'être [...]" (*Vents*, IV, p. 249). Like the bird the movement of Being inhabits the swimmer because he has made it possible for the movement of the sea to live again from the still trace that it left on the surface of the sand. Through the sensation of the wavy sand under his feet the swimmer lets the movement of the sea be revived in him. His body as well as his mind connects both with the bottom of the sea where a still imprint of movement is perceptible and with the surface of the sea where movement actually happens. In doing so, he harmoniously reconciles the stillness and the movement of the sea that are but the two faces of a single relative reality – namely Being. Therefore the swimmer participates corporeally in the advent of Being in the world. There is no doubt that this experience is a genuine one. Saint-John Perse, a keen sportsman, most certainly

made this discovery very early on, during his childhood in the West Indies, and he probably renewed it later in his adult life. Moreover he knows that this relatively commonplace event is likely to appeal to people who share his interest in the sea and have an experience of swimming in the sea. The objective is to show that the ontological understanding of movement is one that is accessible to any person through a leisure activity – indeed the very opposite of the straining and arduous exercise of the mind reserved for highly specialized metaphysicians.

To this extent Saint-John Perse's ontology may be regarded as a true modern humanism, since it offers any man a straightforward means of gaining access to Being which basically consists in letting Being gain access to man through even his most trivial activities. Here again the link with Heidegger's thinking is easily traceable. Movement, so far understood as a physical displacement of something perceivable by man, provides Being with the energy that it needs to reveal itself in the temporal dimension in which man himself is being thrown. In Saint-John Perse's thinking, the sea, and more generally the natural forces, produce this movement. But it is not only the natural forces that generate movement in Saint-John Perse's poetry. The movement created by man is also very important. Modern technology is evoked and participates in its own right in the energising of the writing.

> Les grands rapides sont passés, courant aux fosses d'un autre âge avec leur provision de glace pour cinq jours. [...] Et tant d'avions les prirent en chasse, sur leurs cris!... / [...] Et la fusée des routes vers l'amont nous tienne hors de souffle!... [...] / Et c'est messages sur tous fils, et c'est merveilles sur toutes ondes. Et c'est d'un même mouvement à tout ce mouvement lié, que mon poème encore dans le vent, de ville en ville et de fleuve en fleuve, court aux plus vastes houles de la terre, épouses elles-mêmes et filles d'autres houles... (*Vents*, II, p. 201)

Here, in a few sentences, the poet praises almost all the transport and information technologies of his time. The poem as a whole seeks to connect to the general movement of humanity in a truly concrete manner.

It endeavours actually to match the modern velocity of the world whose meaning is twofold. First it corresponds to an acceleration of daily life due to the mechanisation of transport and production. The poet genuinely wants to write a poem for the men and women of his era, a poem with which readers will connect, and he knows that movement and speed are of the essence in his contemporaries' every day life. Modern machinery has transformed the perception of movement and therefore the poet must adapt and produce a poetry that incorporates this development.[4] Secondly, and as a result of this historical change, movement is also an image of the notion of *élan vital* that pervades the twentieth century. Arguing against both Lamarck and Darwin, Bergson exposed this concept in his seminal book *L'Évolution créatrice* of 1907, which was to have a decisive influence thereafter. The *élan vital* is certainly an essential feature of contemporaneous thinking. Saint-John Perse fully acknowledges it in his poetry by presenting the concept of movement as a spiritual momentum.

2-Movement as spirituality

A spiritual movement matches the phenomenal movement kindled by man's openness to Being. This correspondence corroborates the fact that the physical movement of Being is already in itself a sacred act (it establishes communication between this world and a superior reality), and logically unfolds unto a spiritual impulse. "Les revendications de l'âme sur la chair sont extrêmes. Qu'elles nous tiennent en haleine! Et qu'un mouvement très fort nous porte à nos limites, et au delà de nos limites!" (*Vents*, I, p. 193). The movement is not simply the result of an objective force that seizes the body in order to meet the powerful drive of Being. More precisely, the ontological corporeal revelation finds its origin in an immaterial movement triggered by the

[4] From this perspective Saint-John Perse emulates Walt Whitman who in *Leaves of Grass* endeavoured to design a poetry that matched the modern urge and energy in all aspects of life. It is therefore not surprising to find in both poets the same belief in the importance of the *élan vital*.

soul's demands; but it is essential to underline that the poet does not distinguish between the corporeal and the spiritual aspirations towards Being. The soul's demands, for instance, are capable of maintaining the poet out of breath, which strictly speaking is exclusively a reaction of the body to a sustained effort. There is no distinction made between body and soul since man is a single entity for the poet. Once again this spiritual movement testifies to its deep implication in the problematic of the sacred since the poet uses it as a means to cross the boundaries of the ordinary world. The aim is to break the limits imposed on man's desire to unveil the secret of his origins and destiny. The movement (the simultaneous motion of the body and soul) presents itself as a kinetic energy that mobilizes the entire human person. It also entails a demanding moral science that expects man to push his will and action to the very limits to inscribe his life in the movement of the most powerful forces on earth. "Si vivre est tel, qu'on s'en saisisse! Ah! qu'on en pousse à sa limite, / D'une seule et même traite dans le vent, d'une seule et même vague sur sa course, / Le mouvement!...' (*Vents*, IV, p. 233). The poet presents poetic life as an uncompromising experience into which man must throw himself totally. He is expected to derive his spiritual energy from the motion of the world. By emulating the dynamics of the earth the poet believes that the movement of Being can permeate man's consciousness.

The structure of a mirror image appears all the more striking in that this time it is a "moving image". Spiritual movement defines itself as a replica of the awesome (in other words provoking a sacred response) cosmic forces of the world. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that this sacred vision of the world, although metaphorical, has no magical or wonderful implication. It does not concern itself with the mysteries of the dreams. The poet describes his ontology as a concrete exploration of the reality. "Hors des légendes du sommeil toute cette immensité de l'être et ce foisonnement de l'être, toute cette passion d'être et tout ce pouvoir d'être, ah! tout ce très grand souffle voyageur qu'à ses talons soulève, [...] le passage à grands pas de la Vierge nocturne" (*Chronique*, I, p. 397). The manifestation of Being does not occur through dreams but

rather through the awesome and fascinating observation of a cosmic phenomenon: he experiences the movement of Being by associating himself with the course of a constellation in the nocturnal sky.[5] He passionately "feels" the movement and therefore feels associated with the totality of the universe. The rhythm of the poem adapts itself to its object in order to translate the actual feeling that it kindles in the poet. With regard to the theme of movement, the poem tends to be a mimesis of the dynamics of the world rather than of the world as an object. What matters to the poet is the emulation of the vivacity and energy of the world. The poem mimics the main natural dynamic patterns such as that of the wind, that of the sea or even that of the stars in the nocturnal sky. He achieves his goal through a variety of linguistic resources: long articulated sentences containing numerous sibilant phonemes to evoke the wind; identical or very similar phrases that recur regularly like the waves on the shore; verses in which complicated themes revolve, matching the cosmic revolutions of the earth. The poet's goal is to express an analogy between a physical motion and a poetic emotion, by enhancing the homology of the world and his poem. In this synchronisation of the world and the poem, Being arises because language and the world are brought together in phase thanks to man's mediation. From an ontological point of view, only poetry – unlike science, for instance – can achieve such a process of dynamic harmonisation between man as a being of the world and Being. Up to the last poems the poet develops the same poetic intuition that Being is movement. "Ô mouvement vers l'Être et renaissance à l'Être!" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1398), he exclaims in a poem written many years after *Vents*. If movement is the medium leading to Being, it implies that Being is intrinsically made of time too and the poet also explores the temporalities of Being through an extremely rich variety of concepts and images.

[5] It is to be noted that "la Vierge nocturne" is also an allusion to the "Black Virgin", to whom a special devotion is given by some Catholics.

III-Poetry and ontology

1-The three temporalities

At first, the temporal nature of Being is deployed in three different directions. The poet's approach first follows a common-sense definition of time that distinguishes between three representations. In the first one, time is experienced as duration, as a flux that passes like a river. This conception supposes that time is a one-way-only tunnel through which man travels from birth to death. It is a current against which man can do little except perhaps try and comprehend the nature of time as a length of time. This is what the young poet does in the contemplation of the family home and its reassuring everyday routine: "...Or les oncles parlaient bas à ma mère. Ils avaient attaché leur cheval à la porte. Et la maison durait, sous les arbres à plumes" (*Pour fêter une enfance*, p. 30). In this conception of time duration is an action. The house is because it continues to *be*, it perpetuates itself in the continuance of time. This probably constitutes the first recognition of time made by the child's perceptiveness and it arises as a primeval mode of being in time. The continuity of time corresponds to a spontaneous representation as is witnessed by the numerous metaphors that link time to running water in poetry and even in popular culture. This is due to the fact that in many civilisations the first attempts made to quantify time – apart from the observation of the sun – were based on the invention of a device able to measure the flow of a certain quantity of a given fluid element through a conduit, for example, the clepsydra with water or the sandglass with sand.

Similarly the poet links time to the slow process of sedimentation, including "sedimentation" in the highly cultural context of a library. Saint-John Perse had to accept a position as literary adviser at the Library of Congress in Washington during the difficult years of exile in the

United States, and for him books accumulate like successive layers of knowledge on top of each other, the yearly lengthening of the library's shelves being a good reminder of the uninterrupted monotony of time: "[...] les livres tristes, innombrables, par hautes couches crétacées portant créance et sédiment dans la montée du temps..." (*Vents*, I, p. 186). The geological lexicon helps the poet in his attempt to give a more concrete image of time. The idea is that time, although an abstract concept, leaves clear evidence of its passage in the way it shapes the earth or even man's thought on a prehistoric as well as historic scale. However, too many pejorative connotations accumulate around this notion of time, especially in the poem *Vents*, and it is clearly not one to which the poet subscribes. Instead the poet expresses a preference for the reality of the instant because it can better describe the experience of the sacred in which the intensity of the spiritual moment is condensed in a single spark. The instant is undoubtedly the true temporality of the poet, and is not given to him a priori. It is constructed as a moment of perfect and ultimate concentration in the experience of the sacred. In order to translate this experience of the true instant the poet chooses to repeat twice an image that encapsulates the fragility and therefore the invaluable moment during which he can feel his inspiration waning away. "Et le Poète encore est parmi nous...Cette heure peut-être la dernière, cette minute même, cet instant!...Et nous avons si peu de temps pour naître à cet instant! [...] / Poète encore parmi nous...Cette heure peut-être la dernière...cette minute même!... cet instant! / - « Le cri! le cri perçant du dieu sur nous! »" (*Vents*, III, p. 230). This is immediately followed by suspension points that materially signify the end of the third canto – i.e. the end of the poet's inspiration. All that remains is the subsequent silence that retrospectively confirms that this inspiration – which is linked to the sacred world – has concentrated in a magical instant before disappearing altogether.

The instant when the poet can hear the "god's shriek" encapsulates the very essence of sacred time. A single instant can contain more truth than any duration of ordinary time. Yet it is clear from the image that the instant is nothing more than a certain measurable duration

(an hour, a minute...) concentrated in order to extract its veritable truthfulness. By nature it does not consist of a completely different time. It is duration transmuted into an extremely short and meaningful duration by the poet in order to seize the quintessence of being. However, each instant cannot be identified with the veritable temporality of Being. It remains intrinsically a human and contingent time – not a necessary or transcendent time.

The reason for the rejection of both lasting and dotted time is to be found in the immediate implication of such a perception of time. It is clear that if time "runs out" like water it inevitably leads to death. It has to be noted that in the geological image that the poet uses, the various layers of soil that attest to, and are the result of, the flow of time are constituted by the debris and remnants of once living organisms. Death is the necessary horizon of time if the latter is defined as a continuous eternity that mortal creatures cannot match. The alternative is cyclical time accompanying the sacred vision of the world. Sacred time is a regenerating one. Regeneration or reincarnation of the dead into a new form of life inevitably follows destruction. Various rituals ensure that death is not an end but merely a gateway into a new and constant reshaping of life. All religious calendars presuppose this belief and therefore organize time as a revolving series of events whose sequence symbolically represents the cycles of life and death. Holy days punctuate this time as important and recurrent landmarks in the regenerative process. But in Saint-John Perse's poetry the religious festivals (and therefore the cyclical temporality that sustains them) are forgotten, perhaps as old fashioned customs that can provide no valid information concerning the actual time of his own experience of the sacred. "Qui se souvient encore des fêtes chez les hommes? – les Pâlilies, les Panonies, / Christmas et Pâques et la Chandeleur, et le Thanksgiving Day..." (*Vents*, I, p. 188). For Saint-John Perse these religious celebrations – interestingly chosen from both pagan and Christian festivals – are of no value or more precisely of no relevance to his personal interpretation of the sacred. Here a very sharp divide emerges between the common meaning of the sacred and what it actually means for Saint-John Perse.

The essential discrepancy between the general meaning of the term and the positive behaviour that it induces on the one hand, and its manipulation by the poet on the other hand can be more precisely defined. It comes from the fact that the former perpetuates itself through social interactions whereas the latter is fundamentally an individualistic pose that does not require collective manifestations. In fact the poet recoils from the idea of the sacred (at least his vision of the sacred) lying in the public domain. Opposing the partnership that his fellow human beings enjoy when practising the rituals of their religions, the poet retreats into a narrower conception of the sacred in which the individual is the centre. As opposed to the mutualism of religious sacredness he advocates an egotistic, or, rather, a more intellectual approach. However, for all the inherent limits of the cyclical time dictated by the recurrent movement of the universe, the poet escapes the worldly determinism of time by breaking both its continuity and its repetitiveness. He refuses the hindrance of chronological time and proposes to liberate man from this tyranny through the memory of the future.

2-Memory of the future

The notion of time is crucial to Saint-John Perse's sacred. But the traditional approach that distinguishes between three structures of time does not provide the poet with an adequate operational concept. He resorts to his imagination to distort the laws of chronology and he establishes a communication between past and present. To do this, he imagines a logical shortcut between memory and future with the objective of underlining their compatibility: "Et toujours, ô mémoire, vous nous devancerez, en toutes terres nouvelles où nous n'avions encore vécu" (*Vents*, IV, p. 237). Indeed memory and future coincide. Although usually exclusive of each other, past and future meet in the poet's consciousness, which is the sine qua non of the experience of Being. Poetic memory allows the poet to experience a sort of preview of what is to come. This should not be mistaken for an aptitude to divine the future.

No prophetic power is involved here, but rather the possibility of a premonition, which enables the poet to have the knowledge of what has always "been" since it belongs to Being. Contemplating the sea from their palace, the Patricians make the same discovery: "Et comme d'un pays futur on peut aussi se souvenir, / « Il nous est souvenu du lieu natal où nous n'avons naissance [...]" (*Amers*, p. 300). The logical impossibility of recalling a "future land" constitutes the gateway to Utopia – a place that does not exist that matches a virtual temporality. This memory of the future echoes Heidegger's insights when, in the introduction of Being and Time, he intimates that

> in its factical Being, any Dasein is as it already was, and it is 'what' it already was. It *is* its past, whether explicitely or not. And this is not only in that its past is, as it were, pushing itself along 'behind' it, and that Dasein possesses what is past as a property which is still present-at-hand and which sometimes has after-effects upon it: Dasein 'is' its past in the way of *its* own Being, which, to put it roughly, 'historizes' out of its future on each occasion.[6]

The connection between the poet and the philosopher, although difficult to systematize, is indisputable on this particular point. They both share the view that the question of time is capital in relation to the Being of man. The temporal symmetry – which in fact defies the very idea of symmetry understood in a geometrical way – is of the essence for it establishes an incontestable link between the philosophical and the poetic approaches. Both develop the same intuition that time progresses towards its end, namely death, from man's point of view. Through poetry or philosophy man anticipates his past: death mirrors birth in a reverberation that allows Being to occur in the human beings. In fact this fascinating optical illusion can also evoke the technique of optical art in this symmetrical reflection between future and past from man's point of view. During the twentieth century, a mysterious yet real convergence of views emerges concerning the interpretation of time that fundamentally

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[6] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. By John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 41.

argues against the classical theory.[7] As opposed to a homogeneous and constant time that flows unambiguously from past to present, the moderns depict a time that is susceptible to acceleration, regression, contraction and many other variations.

As a thinker "parmi les hommes de son temps" – as he describes himself – the poet is not isolated from the trends of his time. Indeed he partakes in the global improvement of human theorisation of the world, and this translates into the interconnection of contemporaneous discoveries made in different fields of knowledge. The "memory of the future" is the poet's contribution to the enhancement of man's awareness of his temporality. The poetic concept captures the modern disquietude caused by the dismantling of the traditional imagery of the world. The poet on behalf of his fellow contemporary human beings deals with the disturbing revelation of a distorted time in order to propose a new picture of the world so as to produce a new meaning based on the recent developments of science. The poet does not compete with science, as is too often naively believed. Rather he complements and even takes over from the scientist when the latter fails to carry on his search beyond the metaphysical threshold.[8] The memory of the future therefore constitutes a poetic response to the scientific notions of time-dilatation and time-reversal in order to facilitate a better understanding of the world thus created. In his quest for Being, the poet becomes a time traveller whose principal task consists in retrieving what Heidegger calls "the meaning of Being" by exploring new possibilities of being in time. The notion of travel for instance is captured by the paradox of immobility thanks to poetry. The motion of things on earth, for instance, captures this paradox: "Et la terre en ses graines ailées, comme un poète en ses propos, voyage..." (*Anabase*, p. 101). The poet sows his words and by doing so lets his message be perceived far beyond the distances he could himself travel. Furthermore, he is able to liberate himself from the time limits and reach his fellow human beings across eras in the future. Without actually

[7] One might think of Einstein's Theory of Relativity that introduced the concepts of relativity of space and time and of the reversibility of matter and energy.

moving from a spatial location, he enjoys the possibility of travelling across space and time through the sheer power of his words. This victory over the limits assigned to the existence of man allows him to envisage the essence of being that transcends the contingencies of human existence.

3-The essence of Being

To discover an adequate ontology for his era was undoubtedly the poet's aim. He proclaims: "Dans la nuit claire de midi, nous avançons plus d'une proposition / Nouvelle, sur l'essence de l'être..." (*Pluies*, p. 142). The sacred quest enters a new phase that is notably more concerned with the meaning of "being". The poet focuses on a definition of "being" and interestingly he proceeds in his reasoning by a succession of "propositions". This evokes the scientific methodology whose first step consists in formulating a hypothesis about a certain phenomenon that one wants to explain. A proposition is put forward and then analysed. The poet takes the view that he too, in his own domain, has to research into the nature of Being using a clear methodical approach. To a certain extent, poetry may now be defined as the science of Being: it explores Being through a series of propositions, or hypotheses, that can take the form of metaphors or other tropes. Even though there is no such thing as "proof" or "demonstration" of Being, poetry lucidly investigates the meaning of Being through using its specific linguistic means in order to forward the question of what Being actually means. This question embraces the entire previous quest of the sacred insofar as it relates explicitly to the night of man. Furthermore the oxymoron "nuit claire de midi" suggests that the investigation into the meaning of Being is a paradoxical one, since it deals with a sphere in which darkness and light can coexist, and indeed seem to be tightly entangled. The ambiguity is the same as that found in the sacred and corroborates the fact that the

[8] See "Poésie", Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in which he develops his vision of the poet's mission.

quest for the sacred and the investigation of the meaning of Being belong to the same problematic. In fact the latter presents itself as the acme of the former. Saint-John Perse's poetic ontology stands as the culminating point or the sharpest edge of the metaphysical endeavour. Ultimately, this ontology finds its perfect accomplishment through the transcendental principle of the sea.

> Unité retrouvée, présence recouvrée! Ô Mer instance lumineuse et chair de grande lunaison. C'est la clarté pour nous faite substance, et le plus clair de l'Être mis à jour, comme au glissement du glaive hors de sa gaine de soie rouge: l'Être surpris dans son essence, et le dieu même consommé dans ses espèces les plus saintes, au fond des palmeraies sacrées... (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 368).

Five terms contain the sememe of light in this verse, which is enough to indicate that this is the primordial element here. The sea embodies Being and identifies with it: the sea is even called "parité de l'Être" (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 371). Together they constitute the "espèces les plus saintes" in a clear allusion to the Eucharist and the mystery of incarnation. This confers on the verse a clear religious value. To prolong the parallelism, one could even interpret this light as the Pentecostal fire that strikes the Apostles. The expression "la clarté pour nous faite substance" strongly suggests the idea of an abstract sacred entity (the Holy Ghost) embodied in a substance (Christ) for the sake of mankind ("pour nous"). If the night of man were to be illuminated at all, the poet describes this momentous event here. In the revelation of Being ("l'Être mis à jour"), light spreads through the night of man which enables the poet to experience a sort of mystical instant. Suddenly everything seems to be bathed in light and to make sense. It should be noted that this moment is not any moment: it is the climax in a scene of lovemaking lengthily evoked by the poet in a canto that has often been compared with the Song of Solomon – mainly because they both consist of a dialogue between two lovers. For the poet, love and sex are two urges entwined in human beings. In *Chœur* he gives a graphic account of the intimate moment between the lovers, and the poem contains many evocative images of the intercourse. In this verse, for instance, the "glissement du glaive hors de sa gaine de soie rouge"

refers to the contact between a symbolically phallic object ("glaive") and an etymologically charged term ("gaine"/ "vagina"). The erotic content of the verse is obvious – even more so in the context of the canto – and is presented as a unique moment of truth experienced by two human beings in a strictly corporeal existential revelation. This connection between erotic and ontological epiphany is not surprising in the context of the sacred. The link has already be noted not only in other parts of Saint-John Perse's works, but also in anthropological studies conducted in different civilisations. It may thus be asserted that Saint-John Perse's ontology is a humanist philosophy because it situates the most distinctively human behaviour and a quintessentially human characteristic at the core of his thinking about Being. What is more puzzling however is the connection with Christianity.

So far the poet has boasted an unashamedly pagan approach to the sacred and has clearly rejected Christian symbolism and philosophy. He reasserts this point in *Neiges* by situating the main feature of the poem outside Christianity: "Il neige, hors chrétienté, sur les plus jeunes ronces et sur les bêtes les plus neuves" (*Neiges*, p. 159). Nevertheless, in the text that perhaps constitutes his masterpiece, the mature poet modifies his heathen views and embarks on an appropriation of Christian themes. The poet certainly reassesses his initial predicament and rebuilds the framework of the sacred in what would appear to be a vast and audacious syncretism. "Unity" and "presence" are concepts emerging from the sea. They defy the fragmentation of the material and finite world experienced in everyday life. Although this is not explicitly stated in the poem, unity and presence refer to nothing less than God's unity and presence. The proof of this comes from the reference to the Eucharist, the most revered of all the sacraments in the Christian liturgy. At this point it is necessary to analyse the love-hate relationship that the poet conducts with Christianity. Although he would deny it, the basic architecture of the sacred in his poetry matches that of Christianity. When he finally experiences a fully satisfying spiritual enlightenment through the fertile association of the sea and Being, the first metaphor that comes to the poet's mind in order to translate the perfection of his achievement is the

most holy of the Christian mysteries. What Saint-John Perse actually confesses is that his experience of the sacred closely resembles the transubstantiation that the priest operates through the sacrament of the Eucharist. This is indeed a paradigm shift in the poet's construction of the sacred. He endorses the key tenet of Christian revelation and by doing so he suddenly unveils a long-standing, if dissimulated, connection with Christianity. In retrospect this casts new light on the entire enterprise undertaken by the poet. Perhaps his attempt to investigate the sphere of the sacred never actually allowed escape from the Christian psyche and remained under a concealed influence. Consequently, the notion of sacredness calls for a new interpretation: after having been defined largely against Christianity, it is now envisaged in terms compatible with it. This points to a new meaning of sacred. Since the "espèces les plus saintes" are consumed in the "palmeraies sacrées", the latter presents itself as the place where Christian transcendence occurs along with a more poetic and immanent divination. The questions that arise are manifold. Does the poet merely orchestrate syncretism between heterogeneous elements that relate to the metaphysical quest? Or does he on the contrary achieve an elaborate synthesis between philosophical and religious insights? Or does he lose himself altogether in a great confusion? The answer must come from an analysis of language in Saint-John Perse's poetry, since language, and more precisely its power of creation, is the key element here. Christianity and Saint-John Perse's poetic ontology are built around the same cornerstone, and both assert an identical predicate with regard to language's creative powers, yet from two opposite directions. For the former, words create the world by conveying sense to it, whereas for the latter, the world is created by the omnipotent Word. Saint-John Perse tries to synthesize these antagonistic theories by developing a coherent theory of language.

CHAPTER II: LANGUAGE

I-The nature of language

1-The obscure birth of language

The poet investigates the way language comes to man. He endeavours to examine in detail the process by which he can actually utter his poetic word and above all he concerns himself with the source of language. The aim of the poetic quest is not only to scrutinize the internal logic and resources of language, but also to research its origin. The poet is aware of himself as a poet when he realizes that on the one hand language is given to him both as a gift and as an object on which he can work, and on the other hand language should not be taken for granted. The fact is that, although it is inherent to man as a species, it does not belong to him in the sense that he cannot decide to alienate it nor can he decide to renounce it. No other being in the world is endowed with such a characteristic as articulated language; only the human being can survey the world through the powers of language. In fact language does not simply provide man with an opportunity to study the surrounding world. It compels him to do so and urges him to review the reality that he perceives in order to make explicit the coherence of the world according to that of language itself. The poet in particular is the locale where two realities alien to each other – the world and language – meet to produce sense. For him, language is not a convenient tool among others. It is not a technique of expression or a disposable instrument that brings order to the world by mapping it between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. Instead he views it as speech, in other words as something that expresses the Being of the beings by focusing on their quality rather than on their quantity. Therefore the question of the origin of language arises as a

crucial one for the poet: straightaway he identifies its source as being God.

> Et quelle plainte alors sur la bouche de l'âtre; un soir de longues pluies en marche vers la ville, remuait dans ton cœur l'obscure naissance du langage: / « ...D'un exil lumineux – et plus loin déjà que l'orage qui roule – comment garder les voies, ô mon Seigneur! que vous m'aviez livrées?/ « ...Ne me laisserez-vous que cette confusion du soir – après que vous m'ayez, un si long jour, nourri du sel de votre solitude, / « témoin de vos silences, de votre ombre et de vos grands éclats de voix? »" ("Le Livre", *Images à Crusoë*, p. 20).

The title of the poem ("Le Livre" with a capital letter) refers explicitly to the Bible. This is the only verse in all of his poetic works in which Saint-John Perse directly gives details of his experience of reading the Bible: it is presented as a meditation on the Scripture that can be related to the Jewish and Christian tradition of interpretating the Word. Furthermore the verse can be regarded as a prayer from a believer to God ("ô mon Seigneur ") in which the former calls on the latter for help. This is made possible after an effective divine intervention towards the poet. He acknowledges "les voies [...] que vous m'aviez livrées " and is grateful "après que vous m'ayez, un si long jour, nourri du sel de votre solitude" which prompts him to describe himself as "témoin". The vocabulary, the style and the images directly reflect the poet's reading of the Bible. He almost paraphrases the Scripture by indirect allusions to key expressions such as "les *voies* du Seigneur", "le *sel* de la terre" (used by Christ in some parables) and also "*livré*" (about Christ who is betrayed and sacrificed for humanity's sake). It looks as though a genuine – albeit unorthodox – conversion is taking place through poetic writing. Crucially, the verse contains the idea of an interaction with God that unambiguously evokes a Judeo-Christian approach. Once again, in the early stages of his quest, the poet seems to endorse Christian sacrality. This probably reflects Claudel's influence on the young poet, and to a lesser degree that of Jammes. Yet, this can certainly be seen as a genuine

attempt to solve the deep spiritual interrogations that cause the poet disquiet at an age when he must make choices regarding his adult life.

Two questions addressed to God, however, reflect the poet's essential spiritual quandary: how to keep the faith originated in the mind by the reading of the Scripture ("comment garder les voies, [...] que vous m'aviez livrées? "), while God's failure to actually reveal his presence to the soul creates only darkness and confusion ("Ne me laisserez-vous que cette confusion du soir [...]?"). This question is certainly at the core of the young poet's moral and religious dilemma. Alluding to God's interventions in the Old Testament, he fails to reconcile the "silences" and "ombres" on the one hand, and the "grands éclats de voix" on the other. The unattainable nature of a God who is at once absent and present baffles the poet. God's elusive reality does not fulfil his need for a genuine and almost factual revelation. Saint-John Perse's spirituality calls for a tangible epiphany and, were it possible to imagine him as a disciple at all, he would have more in common with Saint Thomas than with Saint John. Although all the components of a true religious attitude are there, the poet does not accede to the status of believer, for he fails to connect the concrete (ritualistic and moral) aspect of religion and its abstract side (spiritual and mystical). Saint-John Perse's mind can fathom God, but his soul cannot. At this point it is essential to observe that the poet establishes a link between the question of God and that of language. The interrogation of the birth of language translates into the questioning of God's presence through reading the Bible. This is underlined by the quotation marks that separate the "prayer" from the rest of the poem yet thereby also highlight its special contents. The poet thus introduces two voices in his poem: one produces the poetic speech proper, while the other spells out the religious dimension of poetry. Furthermore, by placing a colon between the two parts of the verse, the poet manages to draw attention to the fact that the latter is like a development and a prolongation of the former. In the poet's mind, questioning God's presence through the Scripture, on the one hand, and investigating the birth of language, on the other hand, are two faces of the same quest. Therefore they may be regarded as equivalent, and the verse clearly

states equality between the two questions. This is due to the fact that they both participate in the same mystery: both capture man's soul as an urge to make sense of his existence. Moreover, they connect explicitly in the Biblical tradition: God is the one who can assert "I AM THAT I AM", thereby defining himself in human terms at once as Being and as language. The osmosis between the two entities is the cornerstone of Saint-John Perse's poetry.

Henceforth, he pursues his quest of the sacred by investigating the origin of both Being and language – which, he hopes, will lead him to the knowledge of God. The poet's aim is to attain this knowledge by way of going upstream towards the source of language. In that sense, his poetry is truly – etymologically – an anabasis of language. To do this, he lets inspiration come freely to him – he lets language "speak" in him as if he was intoxicated by its power. While engaging in a trance, he carefully examines how language produces its own "speech" in him.

> Et l'homme enthousiasmé d'un vin [...] se prend à dire de ces choses: « ...Roses, pourpre délice: la terre vaste à mon désir, et qui en posera les limites ce soir?... » Et un tel, fils d'un tel, homme pauvre, / vient au pouvoir des signes et des songes (*Anabase*, p. 97).

It seems that language takes over from the poet's own will and produces its own message – here clearly enclosed between quotation marks, in the same manner as previously described. A mysterious voice intrudes into the "normal" course of the poem, which far from representing a threat to its coherence actually gives it its strength and its true matter. Indeed, the voice is a divine one for the poet is said to be "enthousiasmé" which etymologically indicates that he is inhabited by a god. By letting language speaks in himself, "un tel, fils d'un tel" (in other words any body, any human being) truly becomes a poet and is initiated in the power of the "signes" (or signifier and signified of signs in Saussure's terms). The fact that the poet is called "un tel, fils d'un tel" – the most anonymous name of all – proves that his or her identity is of no importance in the matter. The poet's name, filiation or civil state is absolutely irrelevant to his or her poetic ability to let language be born

through his or her person. To a certain extent he is reduced to the role of mouthpiece or "spokesman" and for this reason any human being is potentially a poet. But opening up to another voice than his own means becoming alien to himself and to his own poem: " « Ô vestiges, ô prémisses », / Dit l'Étranger parmi les sables, « toute chose au monde m'est nouvelle!... » Et la naissance de son chant ne lui est pas moins étrangère" (Exil, p. 125). From the ontological point of view, the goal is attained as soon as the experience of being is renewed: this is the case here. The poet enjoys a new way of being as though he has discovered the world for the first time. Interestingly, this experience is evoked by the "inward" voice delimited as usual by quotation marks. The poet accepts seeing his poem symbolically pervaded by a foreign yet revealing voice that allows him to refresh his ontological experience. The invasion of the poem remains a mystery to the poet himself. But this does not mean that this text is no longer under his control. Rather it is the speech, the impetus to express the meaning of the world that originates from a superior entity that can impose its will on that of the poet to the point of making him appear out of his mind or drunk. This alludes to God's power to inspire the disciples through the Holy Ghost and to make them speak "in tongues".

For Saint-John Perse, this phenomenon is already the source of a potential confrontation with God since two wills confront each other and struggle to take control of speech: "...n'ai-je pas vu, / Ivre d'éthyle et de résine dans la mêlée des feuilles de tout âge – comme au rucher de sa parole, parmi le peuple de ses mots, l'homme de langage aux prises avec l'embûche de son dieu – n'ai-je pas vu le Voyageur d'antan chanceler et tituber sur la chaussée de mangues roses et vertes [...]" (*Vents*, II, p. 208). The image of the conflict with God that constitutes one of the major themes of the final poems is already there. Perhaps the poet finds it difficult to relinquish his own command over language and he proudly refuses to abandon it. He therefore chooses to live the experience to the full, accepting the invasion of this strange discourse bursting in his own poetic speech in order to capture the complexity of his existential link to the world: "Un chant se lève en nous qui n'a connu sa source et qui

n'aura d'estuaire dans la mort: / équinoxe d'une heure entre la Terre et l'homme" (*Chant pour un équinoxe*, p. 438). The crucial point is that in spite of feeling besieged by a supernatural power that can intervene in his own speech, the poet does not renounce his prerogative of imprinting his mark on his poetry. On the contrary, probably challenged by the "other" voice, he embarks on the invention of his own language and endeavours to create less a personal style than a radically new approach to language. Faced with the disturbing empowerment of the divine speech that befalls him, the poet reacts by reinforcing his own grasp on language. A false definition of poetry is rejected here. Poetry is not a purely divine empowerment that, in the end, deprives man of his own speech. It is not automatic writing – whatever its source – that could be produced against the poet's creativeness. This is why Saint-John Perse designs his own language.

2-Invention of language

The poet's creativity is focused on the coinage of new words. During his childhood in the West Indies, he was in contact with the local Creole language and was probably struck by its ability to endlessly produce new compounds from existing words. From his childhood an image comes back to memory: "Et un nuage [...] appelait-par-leur-nom, du fond des cases, / les servantes!" (*Pour fêter une enfance*, p. 25). The compound verb is rather surprising since, from a linguistic point of view, there is no need for the hyphens to be used here. Were they removed the meaning would be the same. But for the poet it would not be quite the same. The compound has been designed to fill a gap in the lexicon. It means *more* than what its components mean separately; rather, it means *differently* and therefore it conveys a totally new meaning: it reflects an otherwise ineffable reality, a special connection between the clouds and the maids, that no other term could appropriately describe. The triple hyphenation – a very unusual technique in French – is not to be mistaken for an aesthetic affectation. It is a genuine attempt to put into language a

hardly fathomable reality that is nonetheless lived most spontaneously by the poet. The poet's inventiveness concerns itself with the gaps or inadequacies found in language when it comes to designate not merely the objectivity of the beings, but rather the subjectivity involved in their perception by human beings. Again remembering his childhood, he sees "...ces fleurs jaunes-tachées-de-noir-pourpre-à-la-base que l'on emploie dans la diarrhée des bêtes à cornes..." (*Éloges*, p. 36). The quintuple hyphenation now seems slightly exaggerated and almost caricatural. But the poet never abuses the technique. His purpose is to remind one that ordinary language is insufficient to express all aspects of human experience. The poet's task essentially consists in breaking the obviousness of usual language in order to show how it fails to account for the richness of the existential experience. Considered separately, all the elements of the compound adjective manage to depict a clear picture of the flower. But this is not the point for the poet. The true colour – the one experienced and remembered by the self and the uniqueness of the feelings associated with it – can only be described by the compound because it reflects the wholeness of the experience. The compound is used in an attempt to give an image rather than a picture of the world, thanks to its ability to represent the totality and immediacy of the existential experience.

The expressiveness of synthetic language captures the uniqueness of the human being acknowledging his being in the world. The descriptiveness of the analytical language fails to do the same because it is practically orientated. To this extent the poet is right to say that he invents a language that is not to be used: "Et de toute chose ailée dont vous n'avez usage, me composant un pur langage sans office, / Voici que j'ai dessein encore d'un grand poème délébile..." (*Exil*, p. 129). Poetry defines itself as language that is no longer a tool designed to geometrically seize the world. Therefore poetic language is "sans office" and "pur" because it is liberated from the constraints of logic. It speaks of the human being as "being" and, as the nature of this experience is both elusive and daunted by death, the ideal poem consequently becomes an erasable text made to match the frailty of existence. However it is

essential to note that the poetics emerging here does not seek to emancipate itself from all linguistic logic. On the contrary, the poet is keen to refer to existing linguistic and scientific usage in the process of creating new words. To signify that Braque's birds belong to a "species" of their own of which they are the paradigm, he coins a neologism for them: "Ils porteraient, en bonne nomenclature, cette répétition du nom dont les naturalistes se plaisent à honorer le type élu comme archétype: *Bracchus Avis Avis* ..." (*Oiseaux*, XII, p. 424). The interesting point is that the poet does not reject the usage of nomenclature. He simply refreshes it to follow his own purpose and his own logic. His language is the contrary of a glossolalia. It is lucidly composed and although it is inseminated by an alien speech it leaves nothing to chance with regard to the wording of the poem. The poet's power over words seems at its highest because he creates new terms and, although he has to accept that the origin of language is not within his grasp, he nonetheless "engineers" language. Without him language would have no reality. Yet, somehow words fail to compete with the signs provided by the world itself. Articulated human language seems to fade away because words cannot keep up with the demands of the world. Existential experience is too complex and intricate for the limited parts of speech and the poet has to recognize a certain devaluation of his art. His powers of invention have reached their limits.

3-Language at the limit of the words

In spite of all his creative efforts, the poet has to acknowledge early on in his works that the reality with which he is involved, namely human language, is no match for the reality of the world. Words and the world do not coincide. Whereas the former should be the means by which the poet investigates the latter (which imply a certain degree of compatibility) words do not match the reality of the world but rather seem to develop a reality of their own. "Ainsi l'homme mi-nu sur l'Océan des neiges, rompant soudain l'immense libration, poursuit un

singulier dessein où les mots n'ont plus prise" (*Neiges*, p. 162). The "singulier dessein" clearly echoes the "dessein encore d'un grand poème délébile..." (*Exil*, p. 129). But this time the great project can no longer be served by words. In his attempt to reflect poetically on the experience of exile – both political and metaphysical – Saint-John Perse discovers that words are no longer suitable for the task. The linguistic means are exhausted and the poet turns to the signs that the natural phenomena produce. Equally, in *Amers* the poet remarks: "(Et, là! que voulions-nous dire, que nous n'avons su dire?)" (*Amers*, p. 312). Suddenly, he is struck by the discrepancy between what he had originally in mind and what his words actually say. The comment formulated in brackets somehow undermines the entire poetic enterprise. The gap between the intention and the reality of the expression encapsulates the tragic fate of the poet: like Sisyphus, he is given the same task over and over again knowing in advance that it is useless and doomed to failure. Intellectual as well as spiritual frustration threatens to overwhelm the poet's mind. But he finds a substitute to articulated language: "J'épie au cirque le plus vaste l'élancement des signes les plus fastes. / Et le matin pour nous mène son doigt d'augure parmi des saintes écritures" (*Exil*, p. 125). At dawn, contemplating the sunrise, the poet can read the signs that correspond to his quest – the "holy writings". Whereas his words had revealed their limits, he now discovers a "natural language" that conveys a clear sense of sacredness. Through the signs of nature, he resumes his quest for the sacred and invokes the gods: "Veuillent nos phrases, dans le chant, par le mouvement des lèvres graciées, signifier plus, ô dieux! qu'il n'est permis au songe de mimer" (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 368). For a time, the cosmic phenomena – promoted to the status of "signs" by the poet – seem to regenerate the poetic language. But the hope is short-lived, for human expression cannot liberate itself from the frame of the words. Words are like windows opening onto the world and allowing the poet to "see" the world, but their meaning is necessarily confined within a framework that does not flexibly adapt to the ever-changing realities explored in the sacred.

When the poet's imagination embarks upon the recreation of the world, words fail actually to "name" what he fathoms. He confesses to the sea: "Et nous pourrions encore te rêver, mais pour si peu de temps encore, te nommer..." (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 368). Indeed words refuse their concourse to language and fail to serve the desire for language that emerges powerfully from the sea. At the limit of the dream, human words are lost. The dichotomy between poetic reality and words underlines the inadequacy of the latter. This is a constant feature in Saint-John Perse's poetry, and doubts will be consistently cast upon the actual powers of language, until the "[...] soir de grand erg, et très grand orbe, où les premières élisions du jour nous furent telles que défaillance du langage" (*Chronique*, I, p. 389). At this point the failure of language has become a patent fact. The frustration is almost palpable when the poet finally exclaims: "Fange écarlate du langage, assez de ton infatuation!" (*Sécheresse*, p. 1396). The poet concludes with the conviction that language has not fulfilled his expectations. This is truly paradoxical and indeed leaves the poet exposed to the accusation of inconsistency. On the one hand, he expresses very early on his misgivings about language, and, on the other hand, he dedicates his efforts to it. Cynics could argue that, by his own admision, Saint-John Perse was essentially a musician who, as a boy, developed a passion for the violin – to the point where his father had to put an end to it for fear of an uncontrolled effect on his son. The poet could thus be seen as a failed violinist who tried to make up for his missed musical career by writing poems. Although musicality is certainly an essential feature of his writing, this is too simplistic a view to account satisfactorily for the failure of language expressed by the poet. This point has to be situated in the general context of post-modern thinking on language. Language fails only inasmuch as it is expected to perfectly match the existential reality of man. Textual reality is self-sufficient, although it is also a self-contradicting one. Ambiguity is the essence of language in its textual form. A particular text can reveal meanings that contradict the author's intentions or even that contradict one another. This is simply a development of post-modern linguistics.

Within his own problematic of the sacred, Saint-John Perse reflects on this as well.

II-Language and the world

1-Readable world

If language – understood as the articulated and intentional production of meaning by man – cannot meet the reality of the world, the poet has to turn to the world and let it produce its own sense. The question is no longer whether language and the world fit together, it is simply to know how the poet can create the conditions in which the world can unveil its own meaning. Indeed, the beings of the world tell their own story to the attentive poet: "La voile dit un mot sec, et retombe. [...]...Tout l'intime de l'eau se resonge en silence aux contrées de la toile. / Allez, c'est une belle histoire qui s'organise là / - ô spondée du silence étiré sur ses longues!" (*Éloges*, p. 41). In a simple flapping of the sail, the poet detects the birth of a language of the world entangled in the silence of things. What the poet hints at is that language is probably not the apanage of one living being, nor is it exclusively associated with living beings at all. Language pervades the world and can spring up from any being. For the poet, everything is virtually under the spell of language and it is his task to make man aware of this by "translating" in articulated form the overwhelming presence of language in all beings. The world is impregnated by language in such a way that it exudes meaning through all the objects that dwell in it. The sail, for instance, produces its own poetry even though it is principally made of silence. Silence constitutes the essential background of utterance and fully participates in the appearance of meaning. To a certain extent Saint-John Perse anticipates by many years later developments made by the philosopher Heidegger in his essay on language. In *On the Way to Language* (1959) he writes: "Saying will not let itself be captured in any

statement. It demands of us that we achieve by silence the appropriating, initiating movement within the being of language – and do so without talking about silence."[1] In this interpretation of language, silence is not the absence of language, nor is it the blank surface on which meaning comes to superpose itself. In Saint-John Perse's image, the sail is the blank surface that should be regarded as silent because it is only an inanimate object. In actual fact, it is the source of language. It produces a meaning beyond human speech in its telling silence. To the poet's delight, the world fabricates in the most concrete manner its own language that supersedes the articulated human utterances because its signs and structure are directly connected to the existence of the beings. The world designs a language superior to that of man inasmuch as it encapsulates the telling silence of beings, but also their intrinsic night.

Pursuing his task of exposing the readability of the world, the poet deciphers the signs sculpted on the sand by the sea during the night: "Et de la paume du pied nu sur ces macérations nocturnes – comme d'une main d'aveugle parmi la nuit des signes enneigés – nous suivons là ce pur langage modelé: relief d'empreintes méningées, proéminences saintes aux lobes de l'enfance embryonnaire..." (*Amers*, p. 312). Not only does the poet finds a striking familiarity in these signs because of their resemblance with the external shape of the brain, but these signs are treated as a Braille which constitutes a recognisable language called "pur langage". This obviously echoes the "pur langage sans office" (*Exil*, p. 129) that the poet wanted to create himself. He could not do this by his own resources, but he found it created for him by the sea. The world therefore provides him the set of signs that he needs to "read" it and make sense out of an otherwise incomprehensible reality. In *Exil*, the sea is already the entity that generates the signs by which the world produces its speech. The sea is the matrix from which all signs originate. It is the paradigm of language in the world because, for the poet, it gives birth to the signs that will reveal the sacredness of the world. "Toute licence, toute naissance et toute résipiscence, la Mer! la Mer! à son afflux de mer,

[1] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. By Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper Collins, 1971), pp. 134-135.

/ Dans l'affluence de ses bulles et la sagesse infuse de son lait, ah! dans l'ébullition sacrée de ses voyelles [...]" (*Amers*, p. 261). The sea is metaphorically assimilated to a maternal entity that gives birth to language in the world in a sacred act ("l'ébullition sacrée") of producing the signs that will make the world readable. The alphabet of the world is therefore introduced and the poet is now enabled to decipher the sacrality to which he takes part. Thanks to his careful openness to the signs of the world, the poet discovers that language pervades the world and gives it its shape and general architecture. What gradually appears in Saint-John Perse's poetry is the textuality of the world and its intrinsically linguistic coherence. The poet now endeavours to write within the framework granted to him by language through the revelation of the readability of the world. The world makes sense and although it remains dark it nonetheless becomes decipherable. Thanks to the Braille written on the objects of the world, the poet hopes to peep through the night of man. In this perspective, it is meaningless to seek a personally designed aesthetics that could be expressed in a particular style through a theorized rhetoric. This is of no relevance to Saint-John Perse's project. At best, it would be superfluous; at worst, it could hinder the emergence of language itself. This can account for the fact that all his commentators have always agreed on the impossibility of linking Saint-John Perse to any given school of poetics – either past or present. He cannot in any way be related to a master or disciple. His poems stand majestically unique and unparalleled in the field of poetry. He is a poet who deliberately configured his writing to the patterns of the world in order to make human language coincide with the world. To him, the world "writes" its own poetry, and human language, if it is ever to get to a truth about its being or indeed about Being, must inscribe itself in the language of the world and its grammar which is movement.

2-Language of the world

Although the poetic inspiration is lived from "within" consciousness at first – as a "personal" gift or ability – the poet discovers that the strongest inspiration probably comes from "outside", from what is initially felt as the outer world. The poem turns itself into a verbally articulated image of the language that pervades the world and the poetics thereby implemented is a mimeograph of the dynamics operating in the world. " « Toujours, il y eut cette clameur, toujours il y eut cette grandeur, / « Cette chose errante par le monde, cette haute transe par le monde, et sur toutes grèves de ce monde, du même souffle proférée, la même vague proférant / « Une seule et longue phrase sans césure à jamais inintelligible..." (*Exil*, p. 126). Imitating the amplitude of the winds and the waves that roam the surface of the earth, the poet lengthens the rhythm of his phrase to match that of the world. The same impetus commands the moving elements on the earth and the poet's words. The poetic text does not simply celebrate the awesome cosmic forces. It actually endeavours to emulate them, albeit on a reduced scale. The poem becomes a replica of the dynamic pattern that shapes the world. It aims at mimicking the natural motion of the world in order to encapsulate its life. To a certain extent, the poem can be regarded as a moving image of the world, inasmuch as it is essentially energized by it. Although the phrase reproduced by the poem is said to be " à jamais inintelligible", it does not affect the "meaning" of the poem, which is less about signifying than about "signaling" or to making visible the language of the world by adopting its movement. Here again Saint-John Perse's poetry is matched by Heidegger's thinking about language. For both, the essential function of language is to find the highest possible sense or truth in human experience of the world by showing or pointing at what comes to existence in beings, rather than by imposing a meaning elaborated by human language. In *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger explains: "*The essential being of language is Saying as Showing.* Its showing character is not based on signs of any kind; rather, all signs arise

from a showing within whose realm and for whose purposes they can be signs."[2] Signs and therefore meaning follow the act of "showing" which in Saint-John Perse's poetry translates into the act of "mirroring". As a poet, he does not point at the world, but he shows it in a condensed image composed by his personal vision. His way of dealing with language is to concentrate on its ability to model itself on the dynamics of the world so as to make language visible in human language. This does imply a choice of perspective and perhaps even a distortion of reality such as it appears in everyday life. But this is precisely the object of poetry. By this distortion the poet extracts the true picture of the world. Signs and significance can arise in the poem as a consequence of its showing the world in its essence (the movement) and not as a prerequisite. Therefore the poet can identify the language of the world through the movements of the earth: "[...] la terre mouvante dans son âge et son très haut langage – plissements en cours et charriages, déportements en Ouest et dévoiements sans fin [...]" (*Chronique*, VII, p. 402). The phenomenon that geology describes as diastrophism constitutes in the poet's eyes a story by which the earth lets its language emerge. This tectonic dynamics is for the poet "son très haut langage" and he is not less interested in it than the geologist can be. His viewpoint might be very different, but the poet is, along with scientists, a decipherer of the world. He explains the way language comes to be in the world through the interaction between what *is* in the world and the being that *consciously is* in the world. For Saint-John Perse poetry is the language in which their languages meet to produce meaningful speech.

The sea in its dynamic fluidity provides the poet with the paradigm of language. The sea comes to the poet "par grands soulèvements d'humeur et grandes intumescences du langage" (*Amers*, p. 266). In *Amers*, the fusion between the poetic text and the movement of the sea is accomplished. The verses emulate the swinging and breaking waves on the shore. The poet's writing oscillates according to the rhythm

[2] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. By Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper Collins, 1971), p. 123.

of the sea and its tides. In the poem, the inarticulate language of the world has found its way in human language. Although words were rejected by the poet because of their discrepancy from the reality of the world, human language is redeemed by its ability to let the world speak through its movement. It is not the least of the paradoxes for a poet to reject words as inadequate to his purpose. Yet the poet focuses on expressing more than what words can actually convey. He claims to regenerate human speech by opening it up to the moving world. Grammar and style become subordinated to the patterns provided by the living earth. As a result, the poem becomes the locale for the language of the world. To a certain extent, it could be compared to a seismograph. The poet himself suggests the image: he too observes the earth and endeavours to keep a record of its movements. The poem is a graph that records and gives an image of the moving earth as perceived by the poet, or perhaps even the kinetoscope that artificially recreates the movement spontaneously lived by the poet. But if the poet presents himself as an impressionist of movement, he does not seek movement for its own sake. Through the language of movement that generates a movement of language, the poet approaches the connection between language and being.

3-Language and being

The notion of "clameur" that represents the language of the world in *Exil* cannot be distinguished from that of silence which necessarily underlines it. Therefore the poet coins the phrase "clameur muette" – an oxymoron that allows the contradictory nature of language to unveils itself: " « ...Plus haute, chaque nuit, cette clameur muette sur mon seuil, plus haute, chaque nuit, cette levée de siècles sous l'écaille, / « Et, sur toutes grèves de ce monde, un ïambe plus farouche à nourrir de mon être!..." (*Exil*, p. 127). The "clameur muette" calls the poet and summons him to serve as medium and interpreter in order to come into existence. This is why in a first instance the poet has to give substance to this highly

abstract notion that would not be understood without him. The "clameur muette" becomes a poetic reality when the poet feeds it with his own being or shares a part of his being with it. The language of the world is silence that aspires to speech and that uses the poet's creativeness to resolve its own dichotomy. Like the poet himself, language is in exile in its own silence and needs the poet to gain access the stage of utterance. This is consistent with the poet's claim that language gets hold of him and that he is constantly puzzled by the speech that actually springs up from his writing and that, according to him, bears no resemblance with what he intended to write. The simple fact that he nonetheless lets this major discrepancy appear in his text proves that this bewildering speech truly belongs to his poem and could not be removed from it. The "clameur muette", the speech of language within the poet's speech, asserts itself as an essential component of the poetics underlying the actual poem. In *Pluies* the clamour has grown into a new language that no longer needs the poet's being, but on the contrary reveals to him the essence of being.

> Une langue nouvelle de toutes parts offerte! une fraîcheur d'haleine par le monde / Comme le souffle même de l'esprit, comme la chose même proférée, / À même l'être, son essence; à même la source, sa naissance: / Ha! toute l'affusion du dieu salubre sur nos faces, et telle brise en fleur / Au fil de l'herbe bleuissante, qui devance le pas des plus lointaines dissidences! (*Pluies*, p. 144).

The same "spirit" roams the world, but this time it allows the poet to accomplish his "anabasis" into language, back to the source of being. Furthermore, this verse confirms that for the poet the discovery of the source of being is of a sacred nature since it ultimately leads to the experience of the divine. The trilogy language/Being/divinity is now established as the foundation of the sacred for Saint-John Perse. Indeed, the analogy with the Christian theology is perceptible: "langue nouvelle de toutes parts offerte ", "le souffle même de l'esprit", "toute l'affusion du dieu salubre" are expressions that clearly allude respectively to Christ (Word given to the world), to the Holy Ghost (blowing and inspiring) and

to God (healer and redeemer). The last image of the verse concludes on a mundane and pagan note. But this does conceal the overwhelming impression that Saint-John Perse's thinking is guided by a veritable Christian vision of the world. Although he does not explicitly acknowledge his affiliations with Christianity (indeed he consistently and sharply rejected any suggestion that his poetry could be linked to Christian themes), his impregnation with Christian images is now irrefutable. His poems are certainly imbued with Christianity and his efforts to cast a pagan veil over many images in his poems serve only to confirm this. The notions of language, Being and divinity are entwined in his poetry so as to evoke irresistibly the Christian Holy Trinity. They remain three distinct entities, yet they cannot operate separately and together account for all the truths of the Scripture. In the same manner, Saint-John Perse's trinity accounts for all the aspects of his poetics.

The insights about language therefore appear interwoven with those concerning ontology and religion. Consequently, Saint-John Perse's poetry might be regarded as a religion of language inasmuch as the poet treats language as the one medium through which transcendence might occur in the world. For him spirituality does not imply a set of ethical tenets. In fact spirituality and morals must be absolutely separated, for they do not pursue the same goals with regard to the development of human beings. Saint-John Perse's assumption is that the latter is a hindrance to the full accomplishment of the former. An echo of this can be found in a verse of *Anabase*: "un grand principe de violence commandait à nos mœurs" confesses the poet. This credo is obviously incompatible with Christian moral teaching. Yet it is essential to the spiritual quest of the poet, because violence opens the gates of the sacred for him. As Christianity does not provide him with a satisfying religious methodology (that is to say, one that would clearly dissociate spirituality and ethics), he turns to language whose advantage is to allow him to find transcendence by way of ontology, but free from moral constraints. Language is not "ethical" and that is what fascinates the poet. Interestingly, he does not envisage turning to other religions or sets of belief. This confirms that it is not Christianity per se that does not suit

him. It is the religious fact as a whole, as an anthropological feature that accompanies man in all times and all civilisations. Were religion an option for the poet, there is no doubt that he would in fact choose Christianity. He thinks and explores his spirituality in terms that echo the Christian theology. But it will always remain for him an appealing yet impossible path. His spiritual accomplishment calls for a different approach and the poet dedicates all his art to inventing a pure language of the sacred.

III-Language of language

1-Pure language

The pure language that the poet seeks is not a creation ex nihilo based solely on the theoretical view of what a perfect language should be, were such a thing conceivable. Rather, it is built on the empirical experience of language as lived by the poet. This experience begins with the source of his inspiration. Language is first of all a call for language, the poem is suffused by a primeval theopneust breath that summons the poet: "Que voulez-vous encore de moi, ô souffle originel? / Et vous, que pensez-vous encore tirer de ma lèvre vivante, / Ô force errante sur mon seuil, ô Mendiante dans nos voies et sur les traces du Prodigue?" (*Exil*, p. 127). The "Mendiante" symbolizes the force that begs the poet for more poems. It is presented in a derogatory way, as though the poet meant to despise and perhaps to dismiss his own poetic inspiration. The poet poses as a victim, a chosen man on whom an unsolicited mission falls. The "Mendiante" might embody poetry itself trying to beg for poems from the poet's mind. The "Prodigue " represents the object of this mission: is it the Prodigal Son of the New Testament?[3] Or, as the etymology suggests, is this the One that provides everything in abundance? Either way the religious connotation is there and refers precisely to the figure of

the father from whom all riches proceed and to whom all return. Once again an important Christian theme underlies the poetic image and gives it its coherence. It looks as though the poet is forced into accepting a language that is not his but that nonetheless corresponds exactly to his poetics. In *Exil* he finds the appropriate language for his leading theme in a sudden burst of inspiration: " « ...Syntaxe de l'éclair! ô pur langage de l'exil! Lointaine est l'autre rive où le message s'illumine [...]" (*Exil*, p. 136). The "pur langage" does not contain or build a meaning within its own boundaries.[4] Rather it hints at a meaning beyond itself, on the other side of the limit delineated in the world by the sacred. The message acquires meaning only by referring to its source that lies beyond articulated language. It encapsulates a metaphysical revelation thanks to its "lightning syntax" which bypasses the analytical logic of the words while still proceeding through them in the poem. This is essentially what Saint-John Perse's pure language consists of. It is a language since it manifests itself by way of words and it is pure inasmuch as an intuitive syntax transcends its analytical form. It looks as though the poet has found a way to express the ineffable by using the words of one language but according to the grammar of another. The "lightning syntax" is thus an enlightening syntax, able dissolve the metaphysical darkness otherwise perpetuated by the night of man.

In marked contrast to pure or sacred language, the social and political use of language causes impurity. As a consequence, the poet engages in a permanent crusade against the degradation that public or political expression causes to language. He implores the rains of his poem to second him: "Lavez [...] la souillure du langage sur les lèvres publiques" (*Pluies*, p. 150). The poet fights against the trivia that pollute language and prevent man from being enlightened through poetry. Poetry appears therefore as a sacred quest because it resists any attitude that would result in the debasement of language. Everyday speech is certainly an example of this. But the poet develops his theory even further. He

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[3] See Luke 15:11-32.

[4] Saint-John Perse shares this concept of "pure language" with philosophers such as Heidegger and Walter Benjamin.

claims paradoxically that even a deliberate poetic approach to language is to be rejected and that poetry has to renounce all beautiful literary productions past and present. In a radical approach, he rejects literature as art for art's sake. And the poet insists on rejecting the aesthetic approach to language as a mere degradation which mars its true meaning and beauty.

> « Ô Pluies! lavez au cœur de l'homme les plus beaux dits de l'homme: les plus belles sentences, les plus belles séquences; les phrases les mieux faites, les pages les mieux nées. Lavez, lavez, au cœur des hommes, leur goût de cantilènes, d'élégies; leur goût de villanelles et de rondeaux; leurs grands bonheurs d'expression; lavez le sel de l'atticisme et le miel de l'euphuisme [...]" (Pluies, p. 151).

The poet's pure language implies putting an end to all aesthetic forms of human language in order to let language speaks for itself. This can only happen if the norms established by man are discarded. To Saint-John Perse such norms are empty shells which degrade the poet to the point where he is no more than a skilled craftsman, a scribe who knows his trade and has learned to master his technique. In Saint-John Perse's view, literature is nothing more than a production of text by learned people who claim to force language into predefined categories judged as beautiful according to social and historical criteria. What Saint-John Perse thoroughly rejects is the writer's pretence of commanding language and of pre-setting the form it will take. On the contrary, he advocates a totally different role for himself as a poet: "Et comme celui qui a morigéné les Rois, j'écouterai monter en moi l'autorité du songe" (*Vents*, I, p. 185). By accepting the truth of the "songe" the poet can actually listen to the speech of language of which his poetry is a mirror image. A pure language is revealed to him. But the poet's role is not merely passive. The poem in its materiality is not given to him. The poet remains a creator in his own right. And the task of translating into words – however transcended by the "enlightening syntax" – remains the poet's absolute prerogative. Indeed he is expected to respond to this by devising a new poetics. The paradox of a poet who is freed from literary

preoccupations is intended to be polemical and provocative. The poet does not ignore the necessity for humans to work on and with the articulated language that is quintessential to their speech. Therefore, the irruption of a pure language in turn demands the invention of a "higher" poetic language.

2-The quest for the highest language

At the end of their homage to the sea, the Tragedians express the frustration caused by the elusiveness of the "high language" bestowed upon them by the poet for the time of their performance: "Et nous qui mimons l'homme parmi l'épice populaire, ne pouvions-nous garder mémoire de ce plus haut langage sur les grèves?" (*Amers*, p. 287). The poet-playwright has bestowed on them the gift of a sacred language that they cannot memorize because it is not contained within the limits of the words. Instead, the Tragedians must enter a state of exaltation and trance so as to let language appear through words but not within their usual limits. The unique lived experience of this "high language" cannot be fixed by way of words only and the physical acts of reciting, playing and dancing are of equal importance. By means of these, Tragedians enable a pure language to occur on the stage but they realize that this language cannot exist as a memorable object. This language must be explored by the poet.

Seized by the necessity for a formulation for the pure language of the sacred, the poet endeavours to explore human languages in a holistic and synthetic way so as to compose not only the "high" language that he needs, but also the linguistics that will enable him to further this language indefinitely.

> [...] voici que j'ai dessein d'errer parmi les plus vieilles couches du langage, parmi les plus hautes tranches phonétiques: jusqu'à des langues très lontaines, jusqu'à des langues très entières et très parcimonieuses, / comme ces langues dravidiennes qui n'eurent pas de mots distincts pour « hier » et pour « demain ». Venez et

> nous suivez, qui n'avons mots à dire: nous remontons ce pur délice sans graphie où court l'antique phrase humaine; nous nous mouvons parmi de claires élisions, des résidus d'anciens préfixes ayant perdu leur initiale, et devançant les beaux travaux de linguistique, nous nous frayons nos voies nouvelles jusqu'à ces locutions inouïes, où l'aspiration recule au-delà des voyelles et la modulation du souffle se propage, au gré de telles labiales mi-sonores, en quête de pures finales vocaliques. (*Neiges*, pp. 162-163)

Mixing semantics and phonetics, the poet invents a new linguistics whose aim is threefold. Firstly, he seeks to retrieve the integrality of language or its capacity to express accurately and globally human experience, including non-logical thought, according to the logical pattern of a particular language. Dravidian languages give a good example of this in the poet's experience. Having no word for "yesterday" and "tomorrow", one must conclude that these languages, unlike most western languages, cannot distinguish between the three distinct categories (past, present and future) that are implied by a strict chronological conception of time. This opens up the possibility of a very different phenomenological experience of time such as the one described by the poet as "memory of the future". Consequently the ontological experience which contributes to enrich the human experience of Being is also very different. These languages studied by the poet are described as "très entières" because they offer a unified approach of time and allow the mind to navigate more freely between temporalities that, although not confused, appear nonetheless interconnected. Being, when not divided into three areas of time and therefore not "spatialized", can be more easily grasped in its entirety. An interesting correspondence may be identified between the poet's linguistic findings and those of the philosopher Heidegger who wrote *in Being and Time*:

> Time must be brought to light – and genuinely conceived – as the horizon for all understanding of Being and for any way of interpreting it.In order for us to discern this, *time* needs to be *explicated primordially as the horizon for the understanding of*

> *Being, and in terms of temporality as the Being of Dasein, which understands Being.* This task as a whole requires that the conception of time thus obtained shall be distinguished from the way in which it is ordinarily understood.[5]

The poem reflects a time without a measurable historical axis in which historicity is more complex, served by the integrality of language that does not divide time.

Secondly, the poet's linguistics evokes "ce pur délice sans graphie où court l'antique phrase humaine". The poem thus created exists beyond writing. For the poet the true poetic value of the poem is not in its "writing" but in its "reading", provided that the latter expresses the essence of poetry through the ages. The important thing here is to find beyond the actual writing of the text the enduring passion of men for language. Saint-John Perse's linguistics as defined in *Neiges* concerns itself with the limitless creativity and variety of human languages and seeks to retrieve a partial truth concealed in their structure in order to contribute to the "high language" that is the object of his poetry. The concrete and exact knowledge of many languages is an essential element in the elaboration of his particular poetic language.

Thirdly, the aim is to eventually discover a language that might proceed without words. Not that Saint-John Perse refuses to work with words, but he suggests that high language does not coincide with the words of any articulated language. He is not interested in "putting words together". His goal is to allow high language to unveil itself from behind words through his poetic work on words. When he invites his listeners ("Venez et nous suivez, qui n'avons mots à dire") to accompany him, he insists on reminding them that the point is not to utter words, but rather to let another meaning be told through their poetic arrangement.

However, it is not entirely certain that the poet consistently pursues this arduous task. In many significant passages of his poems, he does not resist the temptation to establish accurate and almost

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[5] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. By John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 39.

encyclopaedic nomenclatures. Concerning Braque's birds, he indulges in a very precise and lexical description.

> Les vieux naturalistes français, dans leur langue très sûre et très révérencieuse, après avoir fait droit aux attributs de l'aile – « hampe », « barbes », « étendard » de la plume; « rémiges » et « rectrices » des grandes pennes motrices; et toutes « mailles » et « macules » de la livrée d'adulte – s'attachaient de plus près au corps [...]. (*Oiseaux*, II, p. 410)

This does not impair the poetic value of the poem in the least. But here, the poet becomes lexicographer and focuses on words as meaningful, beautiful and accurate signs of the reality that they describe. The simple fact that each name referring to a part of the bird is put in quotation marks clearly indicates that the important components of the poem are indeed words – and more precisely nouns. They are treated as poetic objects in their own right – and rightly so. The rich connotations that they convey, the melody of their phonemes make them essentially poetic elements of language. In the light of this my earlier theory calls for some additional nuances. There is no escaping the fact that words compose language and are a part of its poetic function. The poet acknowledges this by exploring to its limits the unbreakable – yet problematic – link between signifier and signified in the poetic sign.

3-The tree of language: words and their things

In the two major poems, *Vents* and *Amers*, the poet succeeds in solving the quandary that threatens his poetry. Namely the inconsistency about the exact function of words in language that weakens the entire architecture of his poetic language. The poet is certainly aware of this since in later texts he returns to the problem and endeavours to find a satisfactory answer to it. Firstly, he chooses an image to represent his vision of language that would otherwise remain too abstract. Since language appears to him as a series of ramifications and intricate

connections between its different branches (as on a different scale various languages are connected to a common trunk), the image of a tree occurs to him quite naturally. Moreover it is a living being, that grows and eventually dies and it plunges its roots deep into the soil from the mystery of which it draws its nutrients whose origin remains unknown to man – unless, that is, it is investigated by a scientist or a poet. The metaphor matches Saint-John Perse's theory of language perfectly: "Ha! très grand arbre du langage peuplé d'oracles, de maximes et murmurant murmure d'aveugle-né dans les quinconces du savoir..." (*Vents*, I, p. 180). The ability of a tree to create new branches and its power to regenerate itself every year symbolize the complexities of language. Despite its "blindness" the tree's branches grow ever higher skywards, as language always explores further into the labyrinth of knowledge. Thanks to this image, the poet regains a comprehensive and organized theory of language in which words no longer pose a problem since they no longer stand as objects in themselves, but rather are perceived as temporary, growing and dying appendices of a living organism that transcends them. Words might appear as imperfect images of reality – which they are – but this no longer poses a threat to poetic expression for they are now viewed as seasonal products of language. As such, they participate in the emergence of language in the world and they connect the poet – albeit from a distance – to the mysterious roots of language. Like leaves, words appear, then evolve and die. Yet however mortal and inadequate, they still serve the purpose of language which is to grow and expand through poetry. Henceforth, words do not prevent the poet from attaining a "pure language" that perfectly matches his poetic requirements. Words, however necessary to the poem, no longer mask language itself. This discovery is implemented and lived to the full in *Amers*, thanks to the powerful presence of the sea that transcends words.

> Nous t'invoquons enfin toi-même, hors de la strophe du Poète. Qu'il n'y ait plus pour nous, entre la foule et toi, l'éclat insoutenable du langage: / « ...Ah! nous avions des mots pour toi et nous n'avions assez de mots, / « Et voici que l'amour nous confond à l'objet même de ces mots, / « Et mots pour nous ils ne

> sont plus, n'étant plus signes ni parures, / « Mais la chose même qu'ils figurent et la chose même qu'ils paraient; / « Ou mieux, te récitant toi-même, le récit, voici que nous te devenons toi-même, le récit, / « Et toi-même sommes nous, qui nous étais l'Inconciliable: le texte même et sa substance et son mouvement de mer, / « Et la grande robe prosodique dont nous nous revêtons... (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 378)

Words no longer exist as such. They no longer "represent" a given reality. As signs, the poet perceives them as masks of his reality. In his high language, the problematic gap between the signifier and the signified no longer exists. Therefore no darkness or ambiguity can permeate the sign, which enables the poet to note that his poem transcends itself, so as to become "hors de la strophe du Poète" – in other words beyond the actual words used by the poet – what is now called "le récit". Language speaks by itself and through the speech of language the poet experiences the fusion of the three essential elements that words previously kept distinct. The poem, the sea and the poet communicate immediately with one another: "te récitant toi-même, le récit, voici que nous te devenons toi-même, le récit". This metempsychosis accomplished by the poet symbolizes the perfect communication between the poem as a text and its object which exceeds the possibilities of the words both qualitatively and quantitatively. Later in *Oiseaux* the same theory is implemented through the birds.

> Dans la maturité d'un texte immense en voie toujours de formation, ils ont mûri comme des fruits, ou mieux comme des mots: à même la scève et la substance originelle. [...] Et procédant, comme les mots, de lointaine ascendance, ils perdent, comme les mots, leur sens à la limite de la félicité. / À l'aventure poétique ils eurent part jadis, avec l'augure et l'aruspice. Et les voici, vocables assujettis au même enchaînement, pour l'exercice au loin d'une divination nouvelle... (*Oiseaux*, VIII, p. 417)

When words lose their "meaning", they mean most to the poet because only then do they cease to break the unity of language. They drop their "useful" meaning with regard to the description of objects, and instead

receive a new meaning that connects to the reality or Being of the beings. Towards the end of his oeuvre the poet has succeeded in inventing a way out of the dilemma about words. In the context of the contemporary criticism of language that surrounded him, Saint-John Perse's answer is one of renewed trust in words but not according to a traditional view. His contribution to the debate about the problematic link between signifier and signified –sparked by Saussure in particular and explored by twentieth-century linguistics – is certainly significant and original. Moreover it enhances the theme of the sacred by putting it at the core of the questioning of language. Through the poet's words, the sacred brings about a revelation of the roots of language, and therefore contributes to its knowledge. The gap between words and their "things", between meaning and beings is transcended by language revealed as poetry.

CHAPTER III: MIRROR IMAGE

I-Symmetrical world

1-Between earth and sky

The poet declares to his Lover in *Amers*: "[...] tu m'es l'étrangeté dans la voile et le vélin du songe [...]. Ou mieux, tu m'es la voile même, son office, et de la voile, l'idée pure – spéculation très chaste de l'esprit sur la surface vélique et le plan de voilure..." (*Amers*, p. 347). This "speculation" is literally and etymologically the reflection of a mirror between two worlds. The sail is the surface of the mirror, the thin frontier between the sacred and the profane. The sail embodies the surface upon which the poet's dream can be projected in the form of poetic images. The sail is one of the many objects used by the poet to visualize the balance between the sacred and the profane in the world. The mirror is the poetic image corresponding to the spiritual experience of the "threshold" that is to be crossed in order to reach the reality of the "Wholly Other".

From an anthropological point of view, the sacred organizes the world in many different patterns that all share the concept of symmetry. It is a permanent feature of temples, churches and monuments dedicated to, or having a link with sacred manifestations. Symmetry is the symbol of the equilibrium between humans and gods, good and evil, and generally all the opposites that meet in the sacred. In particular, symmetry echoes the distinction between earth and heaven – as an image of immanence and transcendence – and the sacred arguably assembles all the rituals, beliefs and representations whose function is to regulate their dealing with each other. In keeping with this, sacred buildings very often reflect an image of the cosmos in order to establish a parallelism of balanced communication that is reassuring to humankind. As a

consequence it may be argued that the primeval object of the sacred is the mirror. It serves the purpose of the sacred particularly well in that it establishes a threshold (its surface) between reality and virtuality – as between profane and sacred – and opens a perspective of transcendence in the world. The mirror is the gateway between two antagonistic worlds and has served as a window opened onto the other world in many a story.[1] The mirror presents itself as an ideal object for the sacred because it reflects an entirely virtual picture of human reality, yet it creates a plausible perspective for the eye. It can also allow objects to be seen from one side of the glass but not from the other – a situation which captures the very essence of the human condition in relation to the gods. The gods can see men but do not allow men to peep through the mirror of appearances. The only mythological figure who dared to break this sacred law is Prometheus who gave divine light to men allowing them to see what they were not meant to see. For this reason the poet's imagery must include mirror images. Many ordinary objects suddenly become mirrors between earth and heaven in Saint-John Perse's vision of the world. In *Éloges*, he remembers seemingly trivial details that in fact define the aesthetics of the sacred: "Le pont lavé, avant le jour, d'une eau pareille en songe au mélange de l'aube, fait une belle relation du ciel" (*Éloges*, p. 37). And further, he notes another occurrence of the same optical effect: "Comme des lames de fond / on tire aux magasins de grandes feuilles souples de métal: arides, frémissantes et qui versent, capté, tout un versant du ciel" (*Éloges*, p. 43). It is worthy of note that the first man-made mirrors were polished metal, often brass, and the reflection of the light by such "feuilles souples de métal" can produce interesting effects of distortion and vibration, as is suggested by the term "frémissantes". This effect reappears in *Amers*. " Tu m'es l'approche matinale et m'es la nouveauté du jour, tu m'es fraîcheur de mer et fraîcheur d'aube sous le lait du Verseau, quand la première nuée rose se mire au miroir d'eau des sables [...]..." (*Amers*, p. 347). Interestingly,

[1] The most telling example is probably "Orphée", a film by Cocteau in which Orphée communicates with the world of the dead through a mirror. Indeed he walks across the surface of the mirror and discovers the bleak reality of the other world.

most of these images are connected with the sea: "Le pont lavé" evokes a ship, "Comme des lames de fond" evokes waves and the "miroir d'eau des sables" evokes the humid beach. It seems that the theme of the mirror is associated very early on with the presence of the sea. Objects connected to the sea play a special role in the poet's eyes. They seem to try and establish a vertical reflection towards the sky, which may be interpreted as the place of transcendence. The poet notices these initially strictly optical effects – none of which are intentional – because they carry a special meaning for him. Although he becomes aware of them by chance, he immediately attributes these phenomena with a deeper signification than they would have for other people. The light that they reflect back to the sky symbolizes the poet's attempt to direct his spiritual intentionality towards the heavens.

The fact that the "mirrors" are objects not meant to be such but are rather "constructed" empirically by the poet indicates that the transcendence they reflect is rooted in a very concrete experience. The sacredness that they introduce in the poem is not a theoretical project imposed on reality. It is a quest originating in a primeval materialistic experience of the world rather than being produced by means of purely intellectual concepts. The quest for transcendence is kindled at first by a material and factual observation of the world. It appears the poet intended the sacred not so much as a human design to answer spiritual needs as a concrete, if somewhat cryptic, organisation of the world. The symmetric patterns, and above all the one that exists between earth and heaven, is a given of the world in which man must inscribe his own manifold reality – notably his spirituality. Henceforth, the poet develops his quest using mirror images as practical metaphors of the insights gained in the experience of the sacred. The pre-eminent symbol of the sacred, the sea, becomes a mirror par excellence, whereas various other objects that could serve as mirrors give only fragmented images. The poet seeks a larger mirror that encompasses the universe, its forces, its movement and that ultimately reflects the truth about the world. The poet wants to revisit Plato's myth of the cave by "looking back" into a mirror in order to free himself from the appearances of objects, and reach back

to the source of light, to the "idea", that engenders them. The device of the mirror from the point of view of the sacred makes perfect sense and prolongs Plato's imagery in twentieth-century poetry. The mirror is the device by which the poet endeavours to bypass the appearances of the beings, and to access their essence and ultimately that of Being itself. It represents the poetic "tool" that contributes to the metaphysical investigation of the world and furthers the ontological thinking of western philosophy in a new direction.

2-The mirror-sea

The sea reflects the sky, thereby establishing reciprocity between them. The sea creates an equilibrium between itself and the sky because "elle prend reflet du ciel mobile, et qui s'oriente à son image" (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 376). The sea becomes a mirror itself. Its surface reflects light towards the sky and delineates the frontier between two worlds that for the poet are equally infinite and mobile. The interesting point here is that the mirroring is reciprocal: the sky projects itself onto the sea as much as the sea does onto the sky. This pattern matches precisely the reversibility of the sacred in which, as consistently shown in the poems, reality and virtuality – two faces of the sacred – swap their positions. But the sea is not content with mirroring itself in the sky. Its reflecting powers are also symbolic. Being the matrix of *Amers*, it can *ipso facto* mirror itself in the poem: "Et au matin déjà la Mer cérémonielle et neuve lui [the poet] sourit au-dessus des corniches. Et voici qu'en sa page se mire l'Étrangère..." (*Amers*, p. 264). The poem becomes the mirror image of the sea not in the sense of an exact copy of its model, but rather as a reducing, even distorting image that contains the very essence of the sea. This is why the sea is called "l'Étrangère": it is no longer the sea as the ocean with all its physical features. Captured by the imagery of the poem it becomes a character of the "Wholly Other", unknowable and always foreign. As an abstract entity the sea reveals its presence for the poet on the "surface" of the text. This is done in a concrete manner by the wave-

like movements of the verse for instance. Where the "grandes feuilles souples de métal " mirror the sky, the poem similarly reproduces an image of the movement and cycles of the sea. This harmonious symmetry between the sea and its text brings order to the world by making sense out of an otherwise brute reality.

The symmetry between the sea and the poem is an essential feature of the sacred, but for Saint-John Perse – as for Baudelaire – the sea can also be a mirror of man's soul. In fact for Saint-John Perse the sea mirrors the woman lover's worries concerning her lover's relation with the sea. The poet asks: "Et n'es-tu pas de celles à qui la voix de mer s'est fait entendre? 'Que nulle ne mire sa crainte au miroir de mes eaux!'" (*Amers*, p. 350). Although the poetic theme is common to the two poets, it is interpreted by each of them in a quite different way. Whereas Baudelaire contemplates his own soul in the mirror of the sea and loses himself in its vertiginous and abyssal identity in the hope of a cathartic effect, Saint-John Perse refuses this identification. In *Amers*, the sea itself condemns this temptation as a feminine weakness in which no one should indulge. The mirroring between man and the sea is not meant to reproduce the psychological complexity of the human person. Unlike Baudelaire, Saint-John Perse does not concern himself with the investigation or the contemplation of the human psyche. His aim is to invent a hermeneutic form of art in order to account for human experience as a whole, in other words from a phenomenological rather than a psychological point of view. Free from the scoria of psychology, the poet regards the sea as the means of solving the mystery of human existence: "Et de plus haut, et de plus haut déjà, n'avions-nous vu la Mer [...], la Mer plus haute et plus lointaine... inallusive et pure de tout chiffre, la tendre page lumineuse contre la nuit sans tain des choses?..." (*Amers*, p. 267). The symmetry involved in the mirroring sea is not an allusion to the human soul. It does not analogize the objects of the world and this is why it is "pure de tout chiffre". There is no such thing as proportionality or symbolisation between a given object and its image. Yet, the sea reflects a light that can beam through the opacity of the objects, or their deceptive transparency which the poet calls the "nuit

sans tain des choses ". Like some "miroirs sans tain", they hide from the observer everything that stands on the other side. Similarly, objects hide their reality – the being of beings – behind a reflective surface that simply sends back an image or a light directed to them. In Saint-John Perse's poetry, the sea is able to turn this around and enlighten what could be called "the night of things" after the metaphor "the night of man". Objects are caught in their own night and the sea, far from simply reflecting this by an allusive or allegorical image, actually reflects a light that pierces their opacity. The sea has become a metaphysical mirror. It does not simply confirm the "optical" pattern of the sacred, it also animates and energizes the ontological quest that underlies it.[2] The sea mirroring is an illumination of objects that aims at unveiling their being by a reverse reflection towards Being. Objects are the shadows in Plato's cave and the poet's ambition is to revert to their paradigms and ultimately to their Being. Through the theme of the mirror the poet pursues the ultimate goal that he assigned to poetry which is to overtake the metaphysician and to further his quest from where he left it.[3] In this perspective, the sea is once again the key element of the poetic enterprise. Its endless capacity to provide the poet with images appears invaluable for the metaphysical exploration of objects in the world. Compared to the perfection of the sea, human mirrors are discarded as deceptive instruments in the visualisation of the world. The poet wants to protect the theme of the metaphysical mirror from any devaluation by inferior image-making devices. The mirror image is an important instrument in his ontological search, but it cannot be valued by itself as an aesthetic gimmick for it would confine poetry within the limits of art for art's sake.

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[2] This is why the "one-way mirror" is more than a poetic device used for its creative powers. To this extent, the poetic mirror used by Saint-John Perse has nothing in common with that of the Surrealists. Although they both represent a window opened onto a different world, Saint-John Perse's perspective goes far beyond the exploration of the human mind from a human perspective. Whereas the surrealist mirror image remains a material kaleidoscope, Saint-John Perse's constitutes a metaphysical picture of the human condition.

[3] See "Poésie", Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

3-The deceptive mirror

Many images in Saint-John Perse's poetry convey the idea that mirrors are in fact vectors of deceptive representation. Following an ancient tradition – from the Bible to the seventeenth-century painting of the "Vanities" – they are, for instance, associated with the beauty accessories used by women or perhaps actors: "[...] Habilleuses et Coiffeuses, invisibles Gardiennes, ô vous qui preniez rang derrière nous dans les cérémonies publiques, haussant aux feux de mer vos grands miroirs emplis du spectre de la Ville [...]" (*Amers*, p. 306). The mirrors – as opposed to the unique sea-mirror – are turned towards the sea but fail to capture any image. In fact, they only reflect the antagonism between the sea and the city. The image they contain is merely that of a spectre. Mirrors send back partial and virtual images from and to the shadow theatre of reality. The same premise is implied by the poet when he endeavours to depict the experience of love. He commands: "Revois, ô Songe, ton ouvrage: non point le bouclier d'orfèvre, ni le miroir d'argent ciselé où court l'ignominie des roses" (*Amers*, p. 339), but the sea itself in its absolute power. These mirrors are rejected precisely because they are art objects in their own right, which prevents them from being accepted as effective tools in the sacred quest. Their decorations make them aesthetic objects as opposed to poetic in Saint-John Perse's understanding of the term. Unlike the sea, they do not revert to the essence of objects. For the poet, they simply participate in the shadow play of Plato's cave. They do not participate in the process of revelation of the truth, let alone the quest for Being. Therefore the Tragedians – actresses playing in front of the sea – decide to give up all their accessories and among them "nos miroirs d'argent battu comme les crotales de l'Initiée" (*Amers*, p. 291). Interestingly, their mirrors are made of silver, a shiny metal, as are almost all the mirrors mentioned in the poems. This fact gives the theme of the mirror a certain consistency throughout Saint-John Perse's oeuvre. From the "grandes feuilles souples de métal" to the silver mirrors, they invarably appear as metallic objects.

The poet never mentions a glass mirror. The probable explanation for this being that glass mirrors are produced using a sophisticated process that pursues a precise objective: making the flattest possible surface so as to get the best image. Metallic ones are almost natural and their reflective capabilities derive from their nature, not their design. This is a remainder that in the experience of the sacred the action of the mirror results from an intrinsically immanent and immediate intuition. There is initially no design, no intention in the sacred and the poet wants to stress that, like the mirrors, the sacred is first of all a concrete and unsophisticated response to being in the world. The more precise the mirror, the more deceptive it is in terms of the sacred.

The distortions and modifications made by the imperfections of the mirrors – and from this point of view the best mirror of all is still the sea – are the *sine qua non* of the revelation of the sacred. In the twisted images of the world lies the truth because the very distortion it operates "corrects" the illusion caused by the appearances of objects. The best distorting mirror is the sea because of its constant movement. It never keeps the same form or surface and can vary its reflections infinitely. The main problem with man-made mirrors is that they are paradoxically too precise to be useful in terms of the sacred. As manufactured objects, they are rejected because they do not meet the demands of the sacred. This is where Saint-John Perse's use of the mirror image is truly original. In the classical tradition of art, mirrors are the symbols of false and temporary appearances as opposed to the eternal truths revealed by religion. In painting in particular, they have been represented in the Vanities and have been associated with the biblical character of the prostitute who, touched by grace, renounces her past life.[4] A mirror is very often present at the scene. The interesting point is that the reflection it shows is systematically dark. Is this a symbol of the vanity of the world or a simple problem of vision angle for the observer? Whatever the answer

[4] One might think in particular of Mary Magdalen represented by Georges de la Tour in many paintings. In most cases, the repentent courtesan is depicted with a mirror reflecting only a dark image to symbolize the vanity of her past life based on appearances. Also, the dark mirror reflects her thoughts upon her finitude and death. The mirror is truly a picture of the soul that opens onto the sacred realm of death.

the mirrors always reflect dark night and the moral intention is clear. The mirrors of the Vanities are moral objects that serve a purpose set in advance. There is nothing of the kind with Saint-John Perse's mirrors, and the sea-mirror in particular. Although the former are rejected for practical reasons, the latter is regarded as a tool of investigation into the sacred and the images it reflects have no predictable forms – let alone moral values. Whereas the mirror used to serve as a religious symbol – a superficial and deceptive life that eventually reflects its own emptiness – it serves Saint-John Perse in a different way, indeed in quite the opposite way since, far from revealing the vanity of human existence, it provides the poet with a wealth of images showing precisely that human experience is valuable in itself. In fact Saint-John Perse's sea mirror allows transcendence to occur through it, whereas the mirrors of the Vanities consistently affirm that no divine salvation is to be found through the darkness they reflect – but only through faith which takes a totally different path. The question arises, as to how exactly the poet at this point accounts for this difference. It is interesting to ask in what way does the original vision of the sea-mirror make it possible the discovery of a positive truth, by contrast with the mirrors of the Vanities that only repeat the same negative message – that of a spiritual impasse in immanent human experience. The answer comes from the fact that the poem, emulating its model – namely the sea – becomes a mirror itself. The mirror image is no longer a theme of the poem – it *is* the poem.

4-The poem-mirror: reversion and inversion

The Janus aspect of the mirror suits perfectly the ambiguities of the sacred and consequently those of Saint-John Perse's poetry. For him the poetic mirror is endowed with metaphysical powers in relation to time. Mirrors not only reflect images of a given space in synchrony, but they also reflect images of time diachronically: "Levez un peuple de miroirs sur l'ossuaire des fleuves, qu'ils interjettent appel dans la suite des siècles!" (*Anabase*, p. 106). This ability to open spaces as well as

temporalities confirms the privileged relation between mirrors and the sacred in the poems. The poem itself as a textual object allows the poet into the future by enabling him to project himself into a temporality he could not otherwise reach. The mirroring effect of poems in time constitutes one major feature of poetry dealing with the sacred. The mirror is the instrument of the sacred par excellence insofar as it makes possible the "memory of the future". The mirror breaks the boundaries of space and time and is therefore chosen by the poet as the most significant object of the sacred. It is not only the tool that allows the poet to visualize the sacred but it is also a good metaphor for the poem itself. The poetic text is by nature a Janus-like reality for Saint-John Perse. He acknowledges the dual meaning of his poems in no uncertain terms: "Et vous pouvez me dire: Où avez-vous pris cela? – Textes reçus en langage clair! versions données sur deux versants!...Toi-même stèle et pierre d'angle!..." (*Vents*, II, p. 213). Of all written texts, poems are fundamentally dual in terms of meaning. Their significance is necessarily twofold because they mirror the physical and metaphysical world on the single surface of the text. The poet not only must accept but also make sense of this inherent ambiguity. His task is to reveal the virtual world by means of the quest for the sacred through the contingency of words that are meant to reflect only their real signified. In the poem, words transcend their materiality and become new – albeit ambiguous – signifiers. As a consequence, the poet triggers a process of reversibility of meaning since words can – and indeed must – endorse simultaneously one significance and its opposite in order to translate the elusive and contradictory nature of the sacred. For the poet, birds symbolize this in a sharp image of contrasting elements. "Nous l'avons vu, sur ce vélin d'une aube; ou comme il passait, noir – c'est-à-dire blanc – sur le miroir d'une nuit d'automne, avec les oies sauvages des vieux poètes Song, et nous laissait muets dans le bronze des gongs" (*Oiseaux*, IX, p. 419). At dawn, the sky acts as a mirror that reverses black into white, which effectively restores the bird's true colour. The distortion operated by the mirror-sky paradoxically reveals a clearer and more luminous image. The ambiguous mirror clarifies the reality of the sacred instead of blurring it.

The dark sky of the night acts as the negative of the picture: it is at once its opposite and its matrix. The mirror of the night reveals that the sacred can be regarded as the opposite of the physical world – yet it is also inextricably linked to the physical world for one necessarily refers to the other. Like the picture and its negative, the sacred and the profane correspond to two states of the same image. They face each other in a perfect symmetry of opposites. Under no circumstances can they blend into each other – yet their respective patterns match perfectly. Likewise, the poem endeavours to act as a distorting – yet revealing – mirror between sacred and profane. The poem is instrumental in the revelation of the negative and positive aspects of reality: it takes as its starting point the positive image of the world, reality in the poet's eyes, and aims at retrieving the negative image that engenders the former.

In his metaphysical quest, the poet endorses fully, if implicitly, Plato's representation of the world through the image of the cave. The visible world is only the projected and deformed image of a model or negative that the metaphysician – whose task Saint-John Perse makes his own – endeavours to find on behalf of his fellow humans. Using the same logic, the poet imagines the theme of the mirror as a means of looking back to the source of the mystery. The mirror enables him to glimpse the world "behind" the appearances of the physical one. The distortions caused by the mirror of the sacred are meant to compensate for the imperfections of the physical image seen on the wall of Plato's cave. Like Plato, the poet is aware that his revelations might be misunderstood or even rejected by his fellow humans because the negative images he retrieves might appear incomprehensible or disturbing. This is acknowledged by Saint-John Perse in *Poésie*, his Nobel Prize acceptance speech made in Stockholm which he concludes with the following words: "Et c'est assez, pour le poète, d'être la mauvaise conscience de son temps."[5] The poet's mission is to prevent men from being satisfied with the appearances of their materialistic and therefore comfortable world, and make sure that they remain in contact with the true – if hidden –

[5] "Poésie", Pléiade, p. 447.

metaphysical reality that governs the images of their so-called reality. The mirror image contained in the poem reverts to the matrix, the "idea" in Platonic terms, that belongs to the sacred. Therefore, the poem becomes the mirror between the two worlds and, the poet hopes, the open window through which he might actually see the divine presence. The mirror might overcome the metaphysical blindness that has hindered his quest so far.

II-Between here and beyond

1-Image of the divinity

The poet explicitly ascribes to his poetry the task of reflecting the divine world into that of man. Referring to well-known rituals from Roman antiquity, he compares himself with a sacred priest performing divinatory art: "Jadis, l'esprit du dieu se reflétait dans les foies d'aigles entrouverts, comme aux ouvrages de fer du forgeron, et la divinité de toutes parts assiégeait l'aube des vivants. [...] Et de tels rites furent favorables. J'en userai" (*Vents*, I, p. 181). As noted above, Saint-John Perse does not hesitate to endorse the role of magician or shaman to illustrate his dealing with the sacred through his poetry. This is not to say that he indulges in superstition or white magic. Nothing could be further from his poetry. However, he does want to describe his role as that of an intermediary between the world of men and that of gods. Like the religion of the ancient times, his poetry endeavours to reflect (the choice of the verb "reflétait" is significant) the divine world. The rituals he refers to are described as "favorables" which indicates a positive influence of gods on the human world. The theme of the mirror seems to lead the poet to a kind of religiosity of poetics insofar as a sense of communication between human and divine worlds is developed.

But if Roman antiquity provides an interesting metaphor of the poet's role, his veritable aim is to reach knowledge of God in the

conditions of his time, in other words in the conditions established by both Christianity and modern science. Once again, the poetic mirror offers a way through this difficult dilemma. "Tu te révéleras! chiffre nouveau: dans les diagrammes de la pierre et les indices de l'atome; / « Aux grandes tables interdites où plus fugaces vont les signes; dans les miroirs lointains où glisse la face de l'Errant – face d'hélianthe qui ne cille" (*Vents*, III, p. 223). The capital letter of "Errant" strongly suggests that the term stands for God whose face – His name, His identity – are for ever escaping man's comprehension and grasp. God eludes any human attempt to seize Him and this is why He seems to wander and remain eternally elusive. Yet the poet manages to catch a glimpse of His fleeing silhouette in the mirror of his poem. The essential point here is that the "face d'hélianthe" refers to the flower of an helianthus. Consequently, this implies that the hidden face of the "Errant" is linked to the sun. Once again the connection between the sun, Being and the hidden God emerges as a key feature of Saint-John Perse's poetry. His aim is to encompass all human knowledge from the primitive sacred ("les diagrammes de la pierre") to the most modern developments of science ("les indices de l'atome ") so as to synthesize a global and comprehensive image of God. Indeed the mirrors represent the "grandes tables interdites" because they reflect what the poet calls "le monde d'interdit". With the mirrors, the poet is back to the quintessence of the sacred, dealing fundamentally with what is forbidden to man.

At this point mirrors open the poet's vision onto the "other" world. Mirrors allow the poet to further his quest and break – at least symbolically – the barriers of the forbidden world. Mirrors act as screens onto which virtual images from the forbidden world can nonetheless be seen. However the perspective thus created is purely imaginary and is simply the result of a geometrical construction made by the human mind. As in a sketch, perspective is merely an aesthetic or technical artefact. It is an illusion fabricated by man for his own deception. Since ancient times, man has played with this idea and has explored the various

possibilities of illusory spaces and distorted mirror images.[6] Yet nothing can hide the fact that they are all optical constructions which, however subtle and cleverly designed, fail to create a new dimension. They merely hint at a possible space that remains a pure concept. This is how divine reality is approached in Saint-John Perse's poetry. The poetry of the sacred develops a conceptual way of opening transcendence through materiality. The poet takes into account both spirituality and modern science to devise an original mode of access to the divine world. God is therefore seen as a vanishing ghost whose image endlessly rebounds between contiguous mirrors in the poem. He remains tantalisingly close and yet unattainable since in this poetic transcendence He is nothing but an image. In fact, it seems that the more God becomes visible in the poem, the more He becomes elusive. The mirrors may reflect an image of God, but nothing suggests that this picture is actually God's image. Indeed the poet may even alienate the very presence of God by insisting on making God present through His image. The figure of "l'Errant" only manages to suggest God's absence and does not come close to God's nature. At best the metaphor may indicate that a divine "vacuum" exists but it cannot stand for what should fill this empty space. The recourse to mirrors is still essential for Saint-John Perse because they allow him to fathom what the "Other" could be. To a certain extent he gets a sense of the "other" side of reality which he clearly associates with the divine world. What mirrors do show about this world is not God, not even God's image, but rather an image of God as His "negative". Instead of representing God's substance, mirrors reflect His absence and elusiveness. Therefore the poet reverts to the concept of "songe" in order to define the reality that stands as the reverse of reality. If God cannot become real in the world called real – namely the physical one – the poet proposes to reverse the notion and shift the concept of reality from physicality to "songe". Paradoxically the poet's "songe" echoes the material world but is endowed with more reality than its counterpart as far as the quest of the sacred is concerned.

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[6] See Jonathan Miller, *On Reflection*, (London: The National Gallery, 1998)

2-"Songe"

Mirrors modify the gravitas associated with the sacred and actually turn it into its opposite. The solemn attitude necessarily implied by the sacred is suddenly changed into the fantasy of the "songe". A sense of derision is thereby introduced in the poetry of the sacred. "Seigneur, Seigneur terrible de mon rire! voici l'envers du songe sur la terre, / Comme la réponse de hautes dunes à l'étagement des mers [...]" (*Pluies*, p. 141). The "envers du songe" is the material reality of the world that creates analogic shapes (here between dunes and waves) like mirrors create symmetrical pictures. The "songe" encapsulates in a paradoxical manner both divine presence (acknowledged by the religiously connoted word "Seigneur") and a sense of the comic (expressed by the poet's laugh). Sacred and profane collide in the virtual image of the "songe". This reversed image of the sacred is paradoxically the one that can at last reveal the true nature of the sacred and help the poet to see more clearly through the night of man. As a matter of course the sea, now regarded as the mirror of the sacred, allows the poet to understand fully the nature of his quest when the concept of desecration is revealed to him. He calls the sea "Miroir offert à l'Outre-songe et Mer ouverte à l'Outre-mer, comme la Cymbale impaire au loin appariée! Blessure ouverte au flanc terrestre pour l'intrusion sacrée, déchirement de notre nuit et resplendissement de l'autre – pierre du seuil lavée d'amour et lieu terrible de la désécration!" (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 372). Here the paramount trilogy – "Sea-mirror-sacred" – is clearly established. But it is also essential to note that the sea is desecration since this latter characteristic is inseparable from the Janus-faced sacred. The sea makes visible the "Outre-songe" which constitutes the core of the sacred. It can be defined as the mirror image of another mirror image. This hyperbolic sacredness leads the poet to the very limits of the concept of the sacred. He discovers that the sea is the locus of the sacred precisely because it is also that of desecration. The French term "désécration " is all the more important in that it is a neologism created by Saint-John Perse, probably

after the English word "desecration". It can therefore be safely assumed that the exact meaning of the term derives directly from its English source. The fact that the coinage is associated with the adjective "terrible" is particularly significant. This confirms that "désécration" is a quintessential part of the sacred since it causes the same reaction of "terror", the feeling that Otto described as "Mysterium Tremendum". Even more than in the sacred itself, the poet experiences the awesome feeling associated with the sacred through its very opposite. Desecration is the modality of the sacred that incorporates the sacred. It is possibly the most serious transgression of all and for this reason it exposes the very core of the sacred. The sea thus introduces the poet to the forbidden "songe": "Mer ouverture du monde d'interdit, sur l'autre face de nos songes, ah! comme l'outrepas du songe, et le songe même qu'on n'osa!..." (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 375). Through the desecration of the sea the poet can envisage the world of radical "otherness", and gain access to the sphere of the "Other".

3-Access to the forbidden world

The "Other" as a metaphorical figure of the divinity appears in *Vents* as a negative of God's traditional image. Struck by a sudden revelation, the poet exclaims: "Contribution aussi de l'autre rive! Et révérence au Soleil noir d'en bas!" (*Vents*, III, p. 228). In *Anabase*, the Sun (with capital letter) was already mentioned and acknowledged despite being absent ("Et le soleil n'est point nommé, mais sa puissance est parmi nous" *Anabase*, I, p. 93). The poet could feel its light and beneficial action. In *Vents*, on the contrary, the Sun seems present but only because of the paradoxical visibility of the "dark light". The oxymoron expresses the negativity of the Sun; here it is the exact opposite of the material sun since its light is in fact an "anti-light" and comes from "en bas". Once again the mirror image reflected by the poem creates a perfect symmetry between the two opposite worlds. Furthermore, the black Sun corresponds exactly to the nature of the night

of man. The poet has given up the idea of using light to explore the night of man, since their respective natures are incompatible and, for the poet, the light brought by religious or spiritual attitudes has no relevance. This is why he chooses the unsettling concept of negative light to explore this negative world. The black sun symbolizes the reality that should be kept away from men and that they should not be able to see. It is both light and darkness since it is at once the source of all truth and power, and yet the source of all mystery to human eyes. In *Amers*, the poet reiterates this experience of gazing at the forbidden face of reality thanks to eroticism. He describes his lover as "Celle qui s'exhale dans mon souffle et siffle à mon visage ce sifflement très pur et très puéril, m'ouvre le sillage de sa grâce, et, de sa lèvre très docile à son front de dêva, plus dévêtue que femme, livre sa face d'interdite comme l'envers des lunes satellites" (*Amers*, p. 346). The loved woman harbours a forbidden identity that is revealed only by love. For a short while, the poet can see the secret face of the woman whom he loves because only the transgression of love can reveal this face. The comparison of this face with the hidden side of moons serves as a reminder that in the sacred what is at stake is what remains hidden and forbidden from man's view. The forbidden world can be defined as the world that lies beyond human understanding and perception. The poet is keen to show that this world is not unreal: it simply exists on a level that exceeds ordinary human means. But through the powers of his poetry, the poet nonetheless achieves a complete revelation of the world beyond in an ultimate homage to the sea: "Aux clartés d'iode et de sel noir du songe médiateur, l'anneau terrible du Songeur enclôt l'instant d'un immortel effroi: l'immense cour pavée de fer des sites interdits, et la face, soudain, du monde révélé dont nous ne lirons plus l'avers..." (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 370). The poet is the "Songeur" who explores the reversed world called "songe". In doing so, he once again experiences the quintessential feeling that leaves him in no doubt as to the nature of his discovery. The corollary feeling of the sacred is clearly underlined by such expressions as "anneau terrible" and "immortel effroi": the terror that accompanies the poetic experience is in itself a sure sign of its sacred nature. The "Mysterium Tremendum"

proposed by Otto is exemplified by Saint-John Perse through a variety of images all related to the revelation of a taboo. While he enters the "sites interdits", he cannot help being seized by a sacred tremour. Furthermore, the revelation thus accomplished seems irreversible: once he has perceived the inverse of the world, he can no longer go back. Having been initiated to the mystery of the inverse, the ordinary world no longer makes sense to him. As a consequence, the poem is now explicitly assimilated to a mirror since it has revealed the forbidden truths from the night of man. In the morning, after a long night of creation, the poet addresses his sacred inspiration: "Et c'est l'heure, ô Mendiante, où sur la face close des grands miroirs de pierre exposés dans les antres / L'officiant chaussé de feutre et ganté de soie grège efface, à grand renfort de manches, l'affleurement des grands signe illicites de la nuit" (*Exil*, p. 129).[7] The mirror has allowed the poet to transgress the limits of this world and to be inspired by the illicit message of the sacred. He must now erase any trace of his nocturnal transgression. Mirrors have exposed forbidden secrets but the poet cannot disturb the equilibrium between the sacred and the profane.

[7] One recalls the "Mendiante" as the mysterious embodiment of the poetic urge resented by the poet. See p. 288.

CHAPTER IV: ABSENCE

I-Absence and nihilism

1-The human condition

The poet never uses a complement to the term "absence", except on one occasion in the very last poem. This "absence" surrounding absence evokes the void and mystery pervading the world which causes the frustrating existential state called by the poet "night of man". Immediately he refuses to accept that he is concerned by this. His initial reaction is to reject such a metaphysical concern that does not, in his view, pertain to poetry. He despises metaphysicians who try and compensate for their lack of intuition and first hand experience of life by having recourse to a cold and too abstract approach to the night of man. "Ceux-là qui en naissant n'ont point flairé de telle braise, qu'ont-ils à faire parmi nous? et se peut-il qu'ils aient commerce de vivants? « C'est votre affaire et non la mienne de régner sur l'absence... »" (*Anabase*, p. 102). Interestingly, the poet portrays himself as a conqueror and leader whose concerns are exclusively concrete and he makes a point of treating poetry as a concrete, almost materialistic activity. In *Anabase* the poet wants to appear like a governor and ruler rather than like an abstract and aloof thinker who would have cut himself off from his fellow human beings. Since he endeavours to reign over the reality of the world, there is no point for him in even acknowledging the concept of absence. Although he does concern himself with spiritual matters ("...j'arrêtais sur les marchés déserts ce pur commerce de mon âme, parmi vous / invisible et fréquente ainsi qu'un feu d'épines en plein vent." (*Anabase*, p. 93), he insists on doing so on a strictly materialistic basis as the comparison with the "feu d'épines" clearly suggests. Recalling the occasion of the Pentecostal epiphany, the spirit that touches the soul is likened to a fire;

but the poet makes sure that a materialistic likelihood is attached to it in order to avoid any misinterpretation. Once again the Christian background emerges quite clearly and indeed provides the poet with a religious framework. But he turns it into a seemingly pagan approach by making sure that all the spiritual elements or comparisons that point to Christianity are dealt with in a strictly mundane manner. Therefore "absence" is not absence *of* something nor absence *of* God. "Absence" does not refer to the concept of "lack of something". Rather it is complete in itself and although it implies a missing presence it is not to be figured as a mere hollow. Absence has its own physical substance and makes itself perceptible through natural manifestations. The poet notes: "L'orage en vain déplace les bornes de l'absence" (*Exil*, p. 137). And later: "Et puis vinrent les neiges, les premières neiges de l'absence, sur les grands lés tissés du songe et du réel [...]" (*Neiges*, p. 157). Absence is not only the negation of "presence". It is not an empty space in reality but rather it is endowed with its own substance and reality. In fact absence could be regarded as the presence of the remnant of presence. Viewed in this way it stands as the mode of being for man. Absence is the way of being in the world that permanently reminds humans that they are destined to Being. Absence is thus promoted to the concept of "title" that ennobles man.

> Et après eux s'en vinrent les grands Protestataires – objecteurs et ligueurs, dissidents et rebelles, doctrinaires de toute aile et de toute séquelle [...]: les évadés des grands séismes, les oubliés des grands naufrages et les transfuges du bonheur, laissant aux portes du légiste, comme un paquet de hardes, le statut de leur biens, et sous leur nom d'emprunt errant avec douceur dans les grands Titres de l'Absence... (*Vents*, III, p. 220)

Absence confers on humanity a nobility that derives from the very dereliction in which it finds itself imprisoned. Indeed for the poet this title is the only one worth noting because it reveals a genuine nobility inherent in the human condition. The only condition for receiving it is precisely to renounce all other titles and false distinctions that prevent men from becoming aware of their real status. Absence enhances man's

solitude in a world that presents him with an infinity of challenges both material and spiritual. This is where the sacred intervenes to organize the world and make sense of its radical strangeness for man. The crucial discovery in Saint-John Perse's oeuvre is that in the end the world remains a fundamentally foreign place to live in. Without a true "presence" that could bring sense to the existing world, a sense of uneasiness about the world prevails to the end: "Et qu'est ce mets, sur toutes tables offert, qui nous fut très suspect en l'absence de l'Hôte?" (*Chronique*, I, p. 394). Whether the "mets" envisaged by the poet is given a religious status (Eucharist) or not is irrelevant here. What the poet means is simply that any food on earth can really satisfy his longing for "l'Hôte" who called humanity into existence and should have welcomed human beings but who remains absent in the poet's eyes. For him, no transcendence descends on human food to transubstantiate it and the world remains hopelessly plain and "flat". This is why it needs the sacred to give it perspective and volume – albeit of a virtual kind created through mirrors – in order to compensate for the dullness of materiality deprived of teleological meaning. If "l'Hôte " is nowhere to be found, if absence actually reigns at the heart of matter the poet must draw the conclusion that the only conceivable truth is the fact that reality is governed by nothingness. He consequently concerns himself with the idea of nothingness.

2-Nothingness

Convinced that absence paradoxically pervades the world, the poet decides to build the space of the sacred accordingly. The centre point of the symmetry between the sacred and the profane must reflect this absence and is defined by the poet himself as the locus of nothingness: "J'élis un lieu flagrant et nul comme l'ossuaire des saisons" (*Exil*, p. 123). It is the centre of symmetry where everything becomes null, where all things and contraries annihilate themselves. But this annihilation of the world at a central point does not entail any kind of

nihilistic approach to the world by the poet. Quite the contrary. Acknowledging the nothingness of the world, the poet simultaneously feels reinvigorated and refreshed. "Et soudain tout m'est force et présence, où fume encore le thème du néant" (*Exil*, p. 127). Thanks to poetry the void left by absence is turned into a positive force for the poet. Indeed absence is turned into presence in a typical example of opposites mirroring each other through the prism of the sacred. Absence and presence are in fact the two faces of one and the same Janus-like reality. One is like the mirror image of the other, albeit reversed as always in the logic of the sacred. However the symmetry between the two is not capable of generating transcendence and even when the poet thinks that an intuition of the other world is possible he discovers only nothingness: "Et parfois c'est Dimanche, et par les tuyauteries des chambres, montant des fosses atlantides, avec ce goût de l'incréé comme une haleine d'outre-monde, / c'est un parfum d'abîme et de néant parmi les moisissures de la terre..." (*Poème à l'Étrangère*, p. 171). On the most sacred day of the week, he can only guess that the world "beyond" is made of abyssal nothingness. But this nothingness, as discovered before, is tightly contained in the "other" world. It permanently pervades it and contaminates the physical world. The "haleine d'outre-monde" can be read as a manner of transcendence since it establishes a one-way communication between the two worlds. The only message thus retrieved by the poet is that the metaphysical world is pure nothingness.

Once again in Saint-John Perse's works, poetic intuition joins the latest developments of modern science in asserting that the physical world is essentially made of nothingness. The atoms that constitute objects represent only a minute proportion of their total volume. The material world is primarily made up of the void between particles of matter like the void between the planet of the cosmos. The pattern of the knowable world is dominated by the omnipresence of "absence". Yet this absence is quintessential to reality – or the "presence" of a substance – and matter could not be known without it. This is why nothingness and Being are so closely entangled. Although one is defined by the other, each remains incompatible with the other. They are mutually exclusive,

yet both exist as inseparable images of one and the same experience like life and death. "Et les capsules encore du néant dans notre bouche de vivants" (*Vents*, IV, p. 233). Presence and absence are like the antagonistic sides of a reversible mask. Nothingness would not *be* if it was not for Being – which implies that the opposite is equally true.[1]

The poetry of the sacred can and indeed does identify, organize and make visible this dual modality at the heart of human experience. Furthermore, this poetry stands as a spiritual and moral act through which man rejects the part of nothingness that hinders his existential enlightenment. Thanks to the poet "les tambours du néant cèdent aux fifres de lumière" (*Amers*, p. 259). As a consequence, man can gain access to a richer and fuller state of being which enlightens his night. Here the connection between the night of man and nothingness is clearly implied. The poetry of the sacred enlightens the spiritual darkness of nothingness not so much by destroying or annihilating it as by turning it into its opposite. When the drums of nothingness "yield" ("cèdent") to light it does not disappear. It simply incorporates itself into its opposite – even reinforcing it in the process – through the power of poetry. Nothingness is not so much a danger or an enemy for man's enlightenment as a precondition for it. The poet explores nothingness as he does Being, he explores absence as he does presence because they are all equally constitutive of man's existential experience. Nothingness is not to be feared as long as it is understood as the indispensable antagonistic element that matches Being and that makes it perceptible in the poetry of the sacred. Nothingness is like Being's frame and

[1] "Being" and "nothingness" are two entangled and instrumental notions Saint-John Perse poetics. Moreover, it is interesting to note that, in the same period, these notions were studied in relation to eachother by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in his most famous book *Being and Nothingness* – albeit in a very different perspective. Thus, one is tempted to wonder whether an intellectual connection might have existed between the poet of the Sacred and the philosopher of "Existentialism". The answer is given by Saint-John Perse himself in a letter to Paul Claudel (Letter to Paul Claudel, Cape Cod, August 1 1949, Pléiade p. 1017): "Est-il besoin de vous dire jusqu'à quel point m'écœure toute philosophie 'existentialiste' – autant qu'en art toute esthétique 'naturaliste'?" The poet rejects in no unambiguous terms Sartre's philosophy and it is clear that the poet's philosophical beliefs have nothing in common with that of Sartre. No connection whatsoever would make sense here.

background. However, there is another element which poses a threat to the moral and spiritual development advocated by the poet.

3-The Void

If nothingness remains comprehensible and even beneficial to the spiritual quest, the concept of the void is the negation of any chance to convey by contrast meaning to the world. Whereas nothingness brought a structure suitable for Being, thus becoming an essential contributor to the sacred, the void does nothing except dissolve the substance and meaning of the world by underlining the vanity and unworthiness of the world that ultimately strikes the poet: "Mais qu'est-ce là, oh! qu'est-ce, en toute chose, qui soudain fait défaut?..." (*Exil*, p. 130). The poet is spared no feeling of despair and pessimism regarding both the world and his own work. Indeed a kind of nihilism seems to threaten his faith in life. The feeling echoes moments of discouragement in his attempt to bring sense in the night of man through the sacred. Like Job in the Old Testament, he seems to renounce success, happiness and faith. Vanity stands as the ultimate revelation of the sacred. It is the very image of unworthiness derived from the reflected image of the world in the mirror of the sacred. The virtuality of things, substance and sense are the key revelations of the sacred. As a consequence the poet is struck by devastating doubts about the reality of the world that he endeavours to comprehend. "Et vous ne nierez pas, soudain, que tout nous vienne à rien" (*Pluies*, p. 152). His own enterprise seems retrospectively rather pointless and vain. Since the world escapes his grasp he cannot claim to bring significance to it through his poetry. Even in *Amers* such a moment of total despair is mentioned: "La foule est vaine, et l'heure vaine, où vont les hommes sans vaisseaux" (*Amers*, p. 360). However, the difference between this and the previous examples is significant. Vanity only threatens men who do not have vessels – in other words men unable to sail and therefore alien to the sea and its beneficial influence and inspiration. From this point of view, Saint-John Perse's poetry makes perfect sense. The poet is

consistent in his belief that the sea is the ultimate entity that can account for all aspects of man's questioning of the world. The sea provides the poet with a vital moral *viaticum* anticipated in *Anabase*. The void makes the world empty and generates a virtual image of the human condition – but by definition it does so in a virtual manner too. All moral consequences are therefore useless and it is precisely this gratuitous thinking that the poet rejects. His message is that humanity must face absence in its crude reality and incomprehensibility. Only by doing so does understanding of absence become possible.

Absence – as the etymology of the term suggests – is linked to presence. Sharing a common root, they can be described as symmetrical to each other. This is why one can be turned into the other, whereas the void remains an outright negation of essence and meaning. Seen in this way, absence is made of the same substance and quality as presence – it is presence that does not reveal itself. Thanks to the sacred Saint-John Perse thinks that he can retrieve the spiritual truth that has left the world but that is still *in* the world in the form of absence. Indeed he infers from absence that presence – the immediate knowledge of truth – is possible. Absence acts both as proof that the world has been designed to receive presence and as an incentive to find it. The night of man is the receptacle intended to receive light. It can be asserted that for Saint-John Perse man is made in God's image inasmuch as the night in which the former dwells reflects the absence that characterizes the latter.

II-Absence as plenitude

1-The divine trace

From *Anabase* onwards, divinity is consistently alluded to in a metaphorical way and in terms of absence. "Et le soleil n'est point nommé, mais sa puissance est parmi nous / et la mer au matin comme une présomption de l'esprit" (*Anabase*, p. 93). Like the sea itself – that

will serve as a substitute for his presence – God is *presumed* to be. As He cannot be named by His true name – He whose Being is compounded with his name – He remains absent for men because He cannot fit into human language. However, His power is a trace of His reality, a reminder of His absence – which is not the same as Him being void altogether. Another reminder of Him is man's longing for spiritual satisfaction and metaphysical understanding of the world. The poet's view is that this satisfaction should be treated as a birthright since it is in the very nature of man to question his own position towards Being. He exclaims: "Qu'on nous donne, ô vivants! la plénitude de notre dû... / Je t'interroge, plénitude! – Et c'est un tel mutisme..." (*Vents*, II, p. 204). The term mutism implies a deliberate unwillingness to speak on the part of someone who could do so. God is therefore implicitly presented as a mute character who will not give an answer even though the poet begs him to utter just one word. It is interesting that from *Vents* onwards the mute divinity is referred to by the term "plenitude". Plenitude is precisely what can perfectly match the frame of absence and fill the desire felt by the poet. The poet's aim is to "... tenir à son comble la plénitude de ce chant..." (*Vents*, I, p. 195). His quest now concerns itself with the only goal that could possibly fulfil his expectation: God Himself. At the end of his quest, he recognizes the paradox of God's image. Like the mirror image on the surface of still waters God's image becomes blurred and fragmented at the very moment one attempts to reach out for it.

> L'autre soir il tonnait, et sur la terre aux tombes j'écoutais retentir/ cette réponse à l'homme, qui fut brève, et ne fut que fracas. / Amie, l'averse du ciel fut avec nous, la nuit de Dieu fut notre intempérie, / et l'amour, en tous lieux, remontait vers ses sources. / Je sais, j'ai vu: la vie remonte vers ses sources, la foudre ramasse ses outils dans les carrières désertées, le pollen jaune des pins s'assemble aux angles des terrasses, / et la semences de Dieu s'en va rejoindre en mer les nappes mauves du plancton. / Dieu l'épars nous rejoint dans la diversité. (*Chant pour un équinoxe*, p. 437)

In the last few words quoted above, the poet recognizes God in the kaleidoscope of the world. God pervades the world and inspires His creation, but in order to do so, He submits His image to the very laws that govern the world and make it opaque in the poet's eyes. Interestingly the poet reflects on an experience of God's presence among men –himself included. It is an experience of God as "Emmanuel" ("God with us"). Furthermore, the image of a fragmented God who has joined men in their imperfect reality and accepted the human condition is very much an echo, indeed a direct transposition, of Christ's life and death. This final image developed by the poet is clear: at a time of great turbulence, God joins the mortal condition, which includes death, and in the process love and life are reunites with their source. This is precisely the scene of Christ's death on Calvary.

As he approaches his own death, the poet depicts a vision in which the God whom he has been looking for throughout his life eventually makes Himself known through the very fragmentation of the world. In this sense, He remains totally absent since no form or substance on earth could sustain His absolute presence. He is in fact as absent as ever. But on the sea and in human diversity, God suddenly reveals Himself. Absence has become host to plenitude in the manner least expected by the poet. The truly puzzling element in this process is that Saint-John Perse does in fact endorse Christian theology: by recognising that God meets men in their fragmentation and death rather than in His perfection and eternity, he reverts to Christianity. Although he does not spell it out and does not accomplish a formal conversion or confession, the poet nonetheless concludes his quest where Christ concludes his human adventure – on the Cross. This biblical image is developed at length by the poet at the end of his oeuvre and testifies to the fact that his quest concludes as a Christian one. Ultimately, the poet cannot avoid Christianity. He has been trying to escape the Christian sphere but ends up by reverting to it. Furthermore, one could argue that he never really left Christianity behind. Saint-John Perse's poetry of the sacred teems with Christian images, references and concepts, all of which suggests that he never really freed himself from Christian influences. The attempt to

build a new kind of religiosity through poetry has not proved successful – although it was motivated by a sincere spiritual thirst. This is due to the fact that in the poet's mind the only way to supercede Christianity is to design an upwards transcendence from men to God. In this undertaking, poetry is viewed as a theurgy, a white magic that could cause – indeed compel – divine intervention in human affairs. Saint-John Perse's poetics is designed to control his spiritual longing and even more to prompt an adequate response to it. The poet wants to force his way through to God and steal the sacred fire as Prometheus did. But in the end he must admit defeat and accept that God acts according to His own will – not the poet's. He does not allow man to join Him but He joins man in his human condition. This is arguably the core message of Christianity and Saint-John Perse eventually rallies to this view.

2-Princes of exile

In God's absence men are left with a feeling of dereliction and find themselves exiled from His presence. Exile is the true condition of men for the poet. He deals with the theme of men in exile at length in order to depict and understand the human condition better. In *Anabase* he marvels at the infinite variety of men and of their ways of life: "ha! toutes sortes d'hommes dans leurs voies et façons". He then embarks on the description of forty-nine different kinds of people all within the same sentence. He concludes with the fiftieth: "ah! toutes sortes d'hommes dans leurs voies et façons, et soudain! apparu dans ses vêtements du soir et tranchant à la ronde toutes questions de préséance, le Conteur qui prend place au pied du térébinthe..." (*Anabase*, p. 113). This fiftieth man, the "Conteur" is probably the poet himself. The long list of men and their ways concludes the entire poem as though the poem itself was ultimately dedicated to men in their everyday lives. But the poet does not limit himself to a descriptive role. In the next poem, *Exil*, he repeats the same process, establishing a list of fifty different individuals, all

represented by the phrase "Celui qui" and followed by the man's description or characteristic activity:

> ...Celui qui erre, à la mi-nuit, sur les galleries de pierre pour estimer les titres d'une belle comète; [...] celui à qui l'on montre, en très haut lieu, de grandes pierres lustrées par l'insistance de la flamme.../ Ceux-là sont princes de l'exil et n'ont que faire de mon chant. (*Exil*, VI, p. 132-134)

In total, one hundred different kinds of exile are distiguished by the poet. He even calls them "princes de l'exil" because their condition grants them a moral nobility.[2] They are born exiles and they accept their condition to the full, transcending it by making sense of it through a poetic attitude towards the world. These two lists totalling one hundred exiles encompass the whole exiled humanity for the poet. The "princes de l'exil", having chosen to experience metaphysical absence to its very limits, do not need his poem because their lives are already poetic in themselves. They stand as models for other men entangled in the everyday business of their mundane affairs.

Yet the poet does not turn away from the latter. On the contrary, he insists on writing his poetry for those who cannot find a way of experiencing exile by themselves, and who therefore cannot poeticize their existential condition. He stands among them and endeavours to testify to their condition on their behalf.

> ...Mais c'est de l'homme qu'il s'agit! Et de l'homme lui-même quand donc sera-t-il question? – Quelqu'un au monde élèvera-t-il la voix? / Car c'est de l'homme qu'il s'agit, dans sa présence humaine; et d'un agrandissement de l'œil aux plus hautes mers intérieures. / Se hâter! se hâter! témoignage pour l'homme!" (*Vents*, III, p. 224)

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[2] There is undoubtedly an echo here of Baudelaire's concept of exile. The two poets regard exile as the quintessence of man's condition but they also share the view that only artists fully comprehend exile. In fact, being a poet means being in exile on earth, as the poem "L'albatros" states through the use of a striking metaphor. For both poets, the poet belongs to a different world because he is simply more aware of this human exile and tries to account it in his poetry.

In doing so, the poet takes full responsibility for man, placing himself ethically in charge of man in the way Levinas suggests.[3] He is in actual fact implementing the poetry of the "other". Although Saint-John Perse's poetry cannot be read as a Christian poetry as such, it is certainly a humanist one. Levinas's thought seems to inspire him from a distance. Although he never actually refers to his work, it would appear that a mysterious echo establishes itself between the two writers. Without knowingly adopting the philosopher's theme, the poet nonetheless furthers the ethical creed that every human being is responsible for the rest of humanity. The poet feels this particularly strongly since he is the one who has given himself the task of piercing the night of man and of reporting to his fellow humans. He wants to discern the mystery of the "Wholly Other" and eventually realizes that perhaps a concrete approach to this elusive reality could be made through the figure of the "other" – the "partially" other, the brother who shares the same humanity and yet remains caught in his irreducible uniqueness and "otherness". Paradoxically, this irreducibleness causes the poet, like the philosopher, to justify ethical engagement on behalf of the other. It is a "sacred" duty for both. This responsibility is not altruistic, humanitarian or charitable. It is rather an ontological engagement of the self as self concerned with recognising its own being in the figure of the other. This ethical responsibility towards the other allows the poet to recompose his thinking about Being. This thinking becomes the gradual building of Being in a kaleidoscopic image of the objects of the world in general and of human beings in particular. Through poetry, the exile of Being into existence – what Heidegger would call "Dasein" – becomes a formidable adventure of the soul. In the other, the poet recognizes the essence of the sacred, namely the "Other", albeit in the form of absence.

The poet's humanism can be regarded as the ultimate development of his poetry of the sacred. The other is the entity in which all the problematic – and sometimes indeed mutually incompatible – components of the sacred meet. Life and death, Being and existence,

[3] See Emanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971.

presence and absence are all part of the other's reality through his speech. In the unique speech produced by the other, the poet recognizes the radical alterity that darkens the night of man not only in the existence of other human beings, but also within the poet himself. By fully accepting responsibility for the other, the poet is able to recapture the contradictory elements of his quest. The other, precisely because he is radically different from the self, is a mirror image of the self. In the intrinsically different speech uttered by the other the poet recognizes his own poetic voice, a voice from which he himself had always felt alienated. At last, he can feel at home with his own poetry because he perceives and understands the otherness of his poetic voice through the recognisable otherness of the other's speech. As a result of his ethical responsibility for the other, the poet feels compelled to offer a way through the night of man. This is in fact a real liberation for him. Responsibility for the other is described and justified by Levinas as the way forward for humanity in the face of both absence and death. The moral responsibility for man as a whole – as opposed to racial hatred and all the crimes caused by it – is modern man's freedom. It endows him with the duty of promoting man as a whole in his infinite complexity and contradictions, thus opening up for himself the sphere of the "Wholly Other". This is how Levinas fills the gap left in human life by God's absence. God is the "Wholly Absent" and, because His absence is an irreducible infinitum, He dwells in this very absence since His presence is impossible in the existing world.

At this stage, the poet is fully aware of the special status this confers on him compared to the rest of humanity. He explains his mission and status to them: "- Et vous, hommes du nombre et de la masse, ne pesez pas les hommes de ma race. Ils ont vécu plus haut que vous dans les abîmes de l'opprobre. / Ils sont l'épine à votre chair; la pointe même du glaive de l'esprit. L'abeille du langage est sur leur front" (*Vents*, p. 241). The poet stands as a prophet who speaks on the borders of humanity. This confers a sacred status on him. He asks not be judged by human standards although the term "opprobre" suggests without any doubt that he too has his faults. But because he is the instrument of language that speaks through him for the whole of humanity, he asks not

to be declared guilty for what he has done as a poet. Human laws do not apply to him and although he disturbs the moral comfort of his fellow human beings, he cannot be touched. This is precisely the definition and the origin of the sacred. In the Latin world, "sacer" is the quality of men, animals or objects that no longer pertain to the profane world. Therefore they are not subject to the ordinary law of men but to divine law. This is the true exile to which the poet finds himself condemned. He is exiled from human law and he is morally banned from dwelling within normal human boundaries.

3-The poet's name

Banned from the sphere of the profane, and unable to live in the virtual world of the sacred, the poet is a nomad. He does not settle in any particular place or state of affairs. His home is everywhere and anywhere. "« J"habiterai mon nom », fut ta réponse aux questionnaires du port" (*Exil*, p. 135). Having discovered the overwhelming significance of absence, he endeavours to absent himself. Like God, he dwells in his name, which implies that the notion of identity remains alien to him. Likewise, he has no place of his own and is everywhere. The poet truly enters this new mode of being. He wants to be absent not only from the mundane reality of the world, but also from his own poem that, as a text, appears to determine who he is. Words put limits on the capacity of language to speak of what lies beyond it and the poet must escape even from his poem if he is to know a state of absoluteness. He leaves his poem just as God left His Creation when asked to state his identity. "Et c'est l'heure, ô Poète, de décliner ton nom, ta naissance, et ta race..." (*Exil*, p. 137). Then the poem ends leaving only the absence of words. The poet discovers that, like God, he has none of the mentioned attributes – namely name, birth and race – and can only remain silent when asked to present himself according to the categories that men use to describe and define themselves. The best thing he can do is to retire from his text as an individual poet in order to be true to himself. Escaping any

determinism, even that of Saint-John Perse, the poet accesses his true status by means of absence. The poet's silence and absence at the end of his poem echo directly the silence and absence that he encountered during his quest for God. He acts exactly as God did in relation to his Creation by retiring from it when questions about Him begin to arise – in other words when man become alive to language and let language speak through him. Having gone to the farthest limits of absence, the poet embraces absence as his true mode of being and joins God in the way He relates to the world. At the conclusion of his oeuvre, Saint-John Perse affirms that no individual human being is a poet per se. The circumstantial details of the individual have no relevance when it comes to becoming a poet. All that can be said is that poetry is entrusted to an individual at random and for no particular reason: "[...] un enfant naît au monde dont nul ne sait la race ni le rang, / et le génie frappe à coups sûrs aux lobes d'un front pur" (*Chant pour un équinoxe*, p. 437). The discovery of the poet's absence in his own work is a masterstroke by Saint-John Perse. It completes the entire quest for the sacred by turning what could have appeared as a failed attempt into a masterpiece. Mirroring God's absence from His Creation, the poet's absence becomes the ultimate and most powerful statement in modern poetry. The poet does not disappear altogether, however. Rather, he is eclipsed, like the sun's name in *Anabase*. For the poet, the act of "dwelling in his name" signifies going as near to God as is possible. Paradoxically this implies retiring into absence which allows him to access Being. "Dwelling in his name" is the poetic equivalent for Saint-John Perse of the biblical "I am that I am" by which God reveals and hides His identity at once. This is how death can at last make sense. It is but an absence that leads more closely to Being. Since "God is dead", as Nietzsche put it, He has entered the sphere of absence in which man – and the poet in particular through the powers given to him – can join Him.[4]

The night of man finally makes sense too, for it is an anticipation of death: it looks terrifyingly absurd from a profane point of view, but

[4] On the death of God, see Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 125.

opens the possibility of imagining an encounter with the full presence of Being. It would seem that Saint-John Perse has captured the meaning of the human adventure in its modern phase. Synthesizing all major philosophical developments, from Nietzsche to Levinas, he manages to design a comprehensive picture of the human condition while exploring its deepest mysteries. His success comes from his ability to analyse his intuitions through poetic images taken to their very limits so as to operate a logical and comprehensive survey of the dark mysteries in the night of man. What seemed the most insurmountable quandary of all – God's absence – is finally overcome to reveal a presence in the mirror image of the sacred. This last point is arguably the most interesting feature of the sacred. Able to reverse any image into its symmetrical equivalent, the sacred in Saint-John Perse's poetry raises the concept of absence to unparalleled levels. It becomes an infinite perspective in the space of the sacred like two parallel mirrors infinitely reflecting an object into each other. Absence is thence promoted to the status of an absolute spiritual entity in the sphere of the sacred. Adopted by the poet as his true home, absence finally transcends death and gives the poet a comprehensible measure of God's reality. The poetry of the sacred has revealed the divine substance of absence. Furthermore, this poetry has enabled the poet to participate in this new modality of being. Expressing his own absence in the poems, the poet "dwells in his name", thus joining God as creator not only of an entire universe, but also of his own absence within it. This absence serves as the author's signature. Mirroring God's absence, the poet accomplishes the last step towards understanding the mystery of the human condition. He creates the possibility of fathoming a real presence – the presence of a "Wholly Other" – in the sphere of human knowledge. The poetry of the sacred operates its last wonder: turning absence into presence through a process that could be likened to the Christian transsubstantiation operated by the Eucharist.

III-Presence

1-Living presence

In spite of some misgivings about the meaning of life in a world pervaded by absence, the poet reconciles himself with earthly reality through a direct, renewed and almost childish way of relating to the world. He kindles his sense of wonder at the beauty of the living world and by doing so the world simply becomes present again. The poet rejoices at the prospect of "beaucoup de choses sur la terre à entendre et à voir, choses vivantes parmi nous!" (*Anabase*, pp. 111-112). He then depicts more than twenty different scenes that have caught his imagination such as the boy marvelling at the exotic world of the isles whom he used to be. Although contaminated by absence, the world is nonetheless "there" and makes it possible for presence to emerge through the primordial "there is". This elementary presence is not to be despised in the poet's view. It provides his sacred vision of the world with the necessary base that it needs. The "there" of the world – like the "Da-" of "Dasein" for Heidegger – is the *sine qua non* of all presence in the world. It involves a fragmentation of the "is" – Being is lost as such when projected into existence. To a certain extent it can be asserted that no presence is to be found in the "there is" of objects in the world. Yet Saint-John Perse makes it clear that the earthly world, for all the absence it harbours, is the first condition for presence. In fact, it is precisely through absence that presence emerges. The poet looks for images of pure absence in order to turn absence back into presence. He achieves this by rejecting any transcendence and religious transcendence in particular. The paradox is that in the logic of the sacred exploring absence, transcendence – managed by religions through sacrifices, prayers or sacraments – is never actually achieved and can only compromise the purity of absence. For the poet, religions in general –

and Christianity in particular – seek to establish communication between on the one hand the human world whose horizon is necessarily bound by absence, and on the other hand the source of Being, the presence beyond any condition or modality. The two poles of religious transcendence clearly exclude each other. This is why the poet uncompromisingly chooses to steer away from religion so as to find the true presence of the world: "Il neige, hors chrétienté, sur les plus jeunes ronces et sur les bêtes les plus neuves. Épouse du monde ma présence!..." (*Neiges*, p. 159). By doing so, he is as though born again to the world, but this time fully aware of the absence that pervades it. He makes a conscious decision to avoid any transcendental temptation because it is a sterile option for him. Instead he embarks on a bold exploration of absence in order to find absoluteness and purity.

This is especially noticeable in the way he deals with language when trying to communicate with his mother when in exile. The poet invents a silent language that matches his mother's absence, which paradoxically creates a pure moment of communication: "Qu'on nous laisse tous deux à ce langage sans paroles dont vous avez l'usage, ô vous toute présence, ô vous toute patience! Et comme un grand *Ave* de grâce sur nos pas chante tout bas le chant très pur de notre race" (*Neiges*, p. 160). In actual fact, he sends a silent prayer to his mother in which a wordless language is associated with the whole presence – in other words God Himself, whom he has evoked in the previous verse of the poem. In exile, the poet feels deeply his mother's absence and likens this feeling to the one caused by God's absence. For Saint-John Perse the way to deal with this terrible dereliction is to pursue absence even further. He endeavours to render it more palpable and possibly more painful by renouncing the soothing effect of human words. For the poet, human language offers scarce comfort for the absoluteness of God's absence, of which his mother's absence is an echo. By allowing absence to dictate its own language made of silence, the poet eventually discovers "toute présence" because his mother's absence has become her very essence for him and appears in the form of "toute patience". In the same way, the poet can now fathom God's presence in the contemplation of His

absolute absence from the perceptible world. Saint-John Perse's prayer to God consists of silence interwoven into his poetic language. Saint-John Perse's silence about God in all but the last poems constitutes an acknowledgement of His pure absence. Like absence, silence is an absolute that cannot be overcome. The poet does not obtain it by merely keeping quiet. As language speaks through him, he must impose a veritable ascesis on himself to escape the power of language. The poet's intuition is that God speaks through the silence created in the poem rather than through its words. Silence, as the opposite of language, contains the absoluteness that language could never achieve. This is why in Saint-John Perse's mind silence is God's language, and his poetry can be regarded as an attempt to make this absolute silence audible to men through the familiar noise of their words. In seeking to do this he invents a worldly mysticism. Not that he seeks to design another modern paganism concerned only with building its own new idols: to view his poetry in this way would be a complete misconception. On the contrary, he always makes clear that he is not interested in building a new and pointless symbolism. His mysticism aims at opening up the spontaneous human spiritual thirst onto the infinity of absence rather than deluding it into a false sense of security given by religious symbols. The inevitable feeling of awe that accompanies this enterprise is consistent with the shock caused by the sacred and called "Mysterium Tremendum" by R. Otto. The poet completes his journey through the sacred in the paradox of a pregnant absence.

2-Presence of the sea

In a world in which presence is conceivable but where God Himself remains merely a hypothesis, the poet raises the sea to the status of a substitute for the divine. The sea embodies the notion of presence and become an image of true presence in the world: "Car tu nous reviendras, présence! au premier vent du soir, / Dans ta substance et dans ta chair et dans ton poids de mer [...]" (*Amers*, p. 267). The verse is a

direct allusion to the divine presence in the Eucharist. The sea is granted a body ("substance", "chair") and also a matching spiritual dimension in a clear reference to Christian theology. Although he carefully avoids reference to Christ, the poet endorses the concept of transubstantiation, applying it to the reality of the sea. At this stage it can be asserted that the poet does not reject Christianity as a whole. In actual fact he thinks and reflects on human condition for the most part within the limits of Christian theology. However, he clearly dissociates himself from the figure of Christ. The prophecy "tu nous reviendras, présence " is itself very Christian inasmuch as it echoes the eschatological revelation brought by Christ and expounded – albeit in a metaphorical way – by the apostle Saint John. This is a long-standing paradox in Saint-John Perse's work: he seems to be at ease with most Christian theological tenets, but fails to accept the central figure of Christ as their core element. One detail among others is noteworthy: in the verse, the presence of the sea is envisaged under three different modes gradually presented from the more abstract to the more concrete ("substance", "chair", "poids"). This trilogy is underlined by the unusual insistence on each term by means of the repetition of the conjunction "et" between them. This may be interpreted as an echo of the Christian Trinity through which the divinity is believed to exist. It looks as though the poet were in a quandary about Christianity. He appears intellectually tempted by its imagery and there is no doubt that both its theological and teleological tenets appeal to him. However he seems to be at odds with the reality and function of Christ both from the point of view of history and of faith. Christ perhaps strikes the poet as an improbable shortcut to God. His humanity seems too difficult a concept to fathom: the very idea that divinity and humanity could be united in a single man who is himself part of history probably does not make sense for him. Alternatively, the poet elects the sea as the embodiment of transcendence. "Dormions-nous, et toi-même, Présence, quand fut rêvée pour nous pareille déraison?" (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 366). The word "presence" here is capitalized. It has become a transcendental principle that fulfils all spiritual expectations since it fills an "absence". Instead of Christ, it is this divine entity that Saint-John Perse recognizes.

The sea is not only the dream but also the dreamer: "C'est toi, Présence, et qui nous songes" (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 377). The image is a cascade in which first God dreams of the sea to offer it to the poet and then the sea itself dreams the poet himself. This is what constitutes the substitutive trinity for Saint-John Perse: God, the sea and the poet. In the sea, absence is turned into presence because for the poet the sea is "toute présence et toute absence, toute patience et tout refus – absence, présence; ordre et démence – licence!..." (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 371). Presence and absence revert into each other in the absolute totality of the sea. All contraries are turned into each other thanks to the mirroring effect of the sea. This verse is the only one in his entire oeuvre in which the poet identifies presence and absence as being two faces of a single reality. Provided absence is felt in its awesome infinity, it can be turned into presence. Only the sea can operate this process.

This is where the mirroring effect created by the sacred vision of the sea unfolds all its meaning and implications. The mirroring effect of the sea is not a mere aesthetic subtlety inherited from some secret baroque influence. For the poet the mirroring effect of the sea is the perfect image by which he is able to render the metaphysical concept of absence becoming presence. Once again, it is obvious that the sea operates for the poet what Christ does for Christians. By transforming absence into presence, the sea makes it possible for God's infinity to enter His finite Creation, just as Christ makes it possible for eternal life to enter the world corrupted by death. The correspondence between Christianity and Saint-John Perse's poetry now emerges clearly. From the poetic form (biblical verse) to the core message (redeeming man through lived transcendence), the entire enterprise can be read as a transposition of Christianity into a radical humanism. The question is now to try and offer a plausible explanation for such a sophisticated spiritual detour when it would appear that the religious framework was already there for the poet. The main hypothesis is that Saint-John Perse is unable to endorse the figure of Christ as the medium between men and God. The double nature of Jesus perhaps does not make sense to him. The moral dilemma comes from the fact that Christ's sacrifice for the

redemption of all humanity leaves the latter with only one way of responding to it: faith. In the Gospels, Christ Himself confirms on many occasions that faith is the true challenge when it comes to understanding Him and His mission. Only faith in Christ's mission brings redemption and even that is given as a grace. This is probably ethically unacceptable for Saint-John Perse, who regards the notion of *élan vital* as paramount as far as ethics are concerned. He is the poet whose motto is summed up in *Anabase* thus: "un grand principe de violence commandait à nos mœurs".

3-Death and the dream of reality

In *Amers* the sea is explicitly invoked against death. The poet exclaims: "« Ô Mer levée contre la mort!" (p. 336). And making his vision even clearer, he adds: "Et toi, tu nous assisteras contre la nuit des hommes, lave splendide à notre seuil [...]" (*Amers,* Chœur, p. 367). Because the sea has become far more than a mere pagan talisman, he invokes it as a true divine entity. As the embodiment of presence, the sea helps the poet to face the prospect of death and provides him with the strength of Being. But in the poet's mind the invocation to the sea is neither a way of avoiding death nor of escaping its the crude reality. Rather, he sees it as appropriate to face death because in so doing man becomes morally whole: "Gardez, disait l'homme du conte, gardez, ô Nymphe non mortelle, votre offre d'immortalité. Votre île n'est pas mienne où l'arbre ne s'effeuille; ni votre couche ne m'émeut, où l'homme n'affronte son destin." / « Plutôt la couche des humains, honorée de la mort!..." (*Amers*, p. 356). The sea has given him the moral strength that he could otherwise only derive from death itself when faced without reserve and accepted totally. The poet faces death like he faces the sea from the shore. For him it means an infinite world opening in front of him, inspiring both fright and fascination. Like the sea, death suggests a journey, involving man both in his physical and spiritual reality. Far from seeking to avoid the reality of death, the poet wants to

experience this crucial moment of his destiny to the full. Like the sea that revealed itself as being absolute absence and therefore pure presence too, the poet hopes that the total nothingness of death will turn out to contain the total essence of life. Viewed in this way, death for him is only the night of man pushed to the very limits where it becomes at last pure and absolute. Thus, his vision of human life as a sacred journey within and beyond the fathomable world allows him to infer that death can lead to life as absence led to presence. Ultimately, he can make sense out of the night of man in spite of God's silence.

> "La voix de l'homme est sur la terre, la main de l'homme est dans la pierre et tire un aigle de sa nuit. Mais Dieu se tait dans le quantième; et notre lit n'est point tiré dans l'étendue ni la durée. / Ô Mort parée du gantelet d'ivoire, tu croises en vain nos sentes bosselées d'os, car notre route tend plus loin. Le valet d'armes accoutré d'os que nous logeons, et qui nous sert à gages, désertera ce soir au tournant de la route. / Et ceci reste à dire: nous vivons d'outre-mort, et de mort même vivrons-nous" (*Chronique*, I, p. 391).

The fact that the poet describes himself as a sculptor producing an eagle out of the mineral night of man is particularly significant. The eagle was the poet's totem animal according to his lover in *Amers*. Moreover, the reference to Saint John is compelling. Not only did the poet adopt the Apostle's name, but he also adopted his symbolic animal in the Christian tradition. This constitutes yet another endorsement of Christianity by the poet who nonetheless publicly dissociates himself from any religious connection. From his own metaphysical night, the poet is able to reconcile himself almost secretly with the religion with which he felt most at odds. He does so through the apostolic figure of Saint John, in other words one of the most prominent writers of all Christianity. This strongly suggests that Saint-John Perse forges subtle – although not entirely secret – links Christianity by encrypting some Christian references. In view of this, the choice of verse as his unique poetic form is meaningful. Saint-John Perse carefully designs his verse so that it is immediately recognisable. It stands out on its own and bears no

resemblance with any other poetic verse – except perhaps that of the Bible. As noted before, the subject and the style of many biblical books such as Genesis, the Song of Solomon, and Revelations manifestly inspire the poet. Moreover, the very structure of his entire oeuvre evokes that of the Bible, more precisely that of the New Testament. Apart from a few poems written in his youth, Saint-John Perse's oeuvre mainly consists of four essential texts – namely *Anabase*, *Exil*, *Vents* and *Amers* – concluded by a final poem whose aim is chiefly to describe the condition of man as that of a prisoner of the metaphysical night, and then to enounce the teleological meaning of the night of man. This structure corresponds closely to that of the New Testament with its four gospels followed by Saint John's Revelation. But that is not all. In the same way as the New Testament includes letters written by the Apostles, Saint-John Perse's oeuvre in the Pléiade edition includes his letters to various correspondents.[5] It is now accepted that these letters are part of his oeuvre and indeed constitute a poetic creation in their own right since they can safely be regarded as palimpsests. Most of these letters were edited and censored – in some cases extensively – by the poet himself in order to turn them into publishable texts in his eyes. His goal was not to leave historically precise or authentic documents. The poet made clear by forging his letters that his objective was to create texts compatible with the reality of his oeuvre globally.[6] He did not feel that he had a duty towards the historian or the biographer, but rather towards the true self that he constructed through revisiting the truth of his life from a different angle. What really matters is the connection between these letters and the rest of his poetic oeuvre. From this point of view it has to be said that they reflect the writer's poetic identity rather than his historical

[5] It is important to note that the poet supervised this edition himself. This is very rare in the history of the publisher Gallimard. The only other case in which a writer worked on his own Pléiade is René Char. However, the latter chose to exclude correspondance from his first volume of poetry.

[6] For a fascinating study of the way Saint-John Perse revisited his correspondence for the purpose of its publication, see Joëlle Gardes-Tamines, *Saint-John Perse ou la stratégie de la seiche* (Aix-en Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1996). In some instances, he even fabricated entire letters. See also Catherine Mayaux, *Les* Lettres d'Asie *de Saint-John Perse: Les récrits d'un poète* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1994).

exactitude. This is perfectly consistent with the poet's belief in a true life that originates from the "songe" and does not concern itself with matters of biographical authenticity. " « Et ma prérogative sur les mers est de rêver pour vous ce rêve du réel...Ils m'ont appelé l'Obscur et j'habitais l'éclat »" (*Amers*, p. 282). The poet's freedom allows him to treat his texts as objects involved in a constant creative process and therefore not frozen in a given state once and for all. On the contrary, his task is to interpret the reality of events from a poetic perspective. Therefore what seems darkness is light, what looks like forgery is authenticity. Consequently, the persistent effort to elude Christianity can be interpreted as a persistent effort to grasp its true meaning and revelation by a man whose great poetic imagination and moral exigency could not be satisfied. Saint-John Perse's sacred quest is an attempt to make sense of man's spirituality in a global and uncompromising way. To him, Christianity is intrinsically a contradiction in itself because as a religion, it conveys the message of God becoming man and being within man's grasp and yet it cannot explain why God remains silent and unattainable. This dichotomy puzzles the poet to the very end of his quest. Only faith could bridge the gap between God and man. What the poet cannot fathom is the quandary about faith. It is the human response to God, yet it is given by God as a grace and cannot be constructed by man himself as an expression of his willingness to know Him. The quest of the sacred tells the story of a man whose spirituality can be described as Christian but whose ethics remain fundamentally humanist and agnostic. Therefore the contradiction between the two aspects of his religious journey cannot be reconciled. The poet expresses this discrepancy by focusing on the central issue of transcendence: he deliberately chooses an upward transcendence – from man to God – because it is morally the only suitable response to his spiritual thirst expressed through his poetics of the sacred.

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