René Galand, Saint-John Perse, poet of the universal

Saint-John Perse was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1960. Most of the French writers who have won this prize wrote in prose: Romain Rolland, Anatole France, Bergson, Roger Martin du Gard, Gide, Mauriac, Camus, Sartre, Claude Simon. Sartre declined the award: accepting it would have against all his principles. It would have meant condoning the use of literature to give legitimacy to capitalistic institutions. One must recall, however that the first Nobel Prize ever given to a French writer went to a poet: Sully-Prudhomme, who is remembered mostly for a sonnet which appeals mostly to sentimental young persons: “Le Vase brisé” [The broken vase]. From Sully-Prudhomme to Saint-John Perse: in the span of half a century, the literary taste of members of the Nobel Academy has remarkably advanced. Saint-John Perse, as is well know, is the pen-name of Alexis Saint-Leger Leger. From the moment when he reached a high rank in the diplomatic service, he felt he had to make a complete separation between his official personality and his literary activity. But why did he choose such an Anglo-Saxon sounding pseudonym? Different explanations have been suggested. It is possible that Alexis Leger, who believes in the prophetic power of poets, was thinking of Saint-John the Baptist whose voice was heard in the desert. Others have indicated that “Saint-John” might come from the American writer of French descent Saint-Jean de Crèvecoeur. Others still, considering the West Indian origins of the poet, have thought that it might allude to the Caribbean island of Saint-John, or that perhaps it could be the English translation of the name of San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico. It could also be the French translation of the name of another American island, “l’île Saint-Jean”, the name given to Prince Edward Island by the first French settlers. “Perse” could also be the French form of the name of the Latin poet Persius, or the French form of “Persia”. Another intriguing hypothesis has been advanced: in the Supplément au Grand Larousse illustré du XIXe siècle, the name “Saint-Leger” is immediately preceded by the name of the English writer “Saint-John”, whose first name is “Percy”. In dictionaries and encyclopedias, of course, the last name precedes the first, so that the name appears as “Saint-John, Percy”, which sounds very much like “Saint-John Perse”.

Alexis Leger was born in 1887 on the island of Guadeloupe, in the French West Indies. He died in his villa on the Giens peninsula, in the South of France, in 1975, having traveled all over the world, in his native island at first, then in France, but he also made extensive stays in England, in Germany, in Spain and in Italy. He spent several years in China, where he was attached to the French Embassy, visited Mongolia, Japan, and the islands of the Pacific, Hawai, Fiji. During World War II, he sought refuge in America: he did not go back to France until many years later, in 1957. He had married an American, and America plays a major part in the works which he wrote during his American stay, from 1940 to 1960. From 1957 on, he divided his time between America and France, spending seven months of the year in Washington (winter and spring), and five months in France (summer and fall), in his villa on the Mediterranean shore. America is the scene of the major poems written over this pan of twenty years: a New Jersey beach in the full heat of the summer for Exil, New York under the snow in Neiges, Washington in Poème à l’Étrangère, the South in Pluies, the West in Vents.

Saint-John Perse knew America far better than most Americans: he had made prolonged stays in New England, in the Berkshires, on the coast of Maine; he traveled through Florida,
Texas, Arizona, California and Oregon; he sailed near Newfoundland and in the Caribbean. After being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1960, he went on traveling, quite a distance at times since he went as far as Patagonia, but mostly in the Mediterranean, when he went on a yearly cruise, and in the Caribbean. His love of traveling reveal one essential side of his work, its universality. Geographically, it embraces the totality of the universe. Everything interests him: flora and fauna, climate, geology, economy, lifestyle, folklore, everything which, in one way or another, manifests the creative energy at work throughout the cosmos, be it found in the power of natural forces or in human activity. As a child, he was as fascinated by the men and women who worked on his family’s sugar and coffee plantations (they were people who belonged to different ethnic groups, Caribs, Blacks, and Asians) as he was by hurricanes or earthquakes. Riding a horse or sailing a boat held as much interest for him as more purely intellectual or artistic pursuits, and these pursuits were equally eclectic. At the University of Bordeaux, he read law, which was a necessary preparation for the competitive exams which led to a career in the diplomatic service, but he also attended courses on Alexandrine philosophy and such ancient Greek philosophers or poets as Empedocles and Pindar, whose Épinicies he translated. In point of fact, he attended courses in all kinds of subjects: geology, mineralogy, psychiatry, ethnology, anthropology. He read Spinoza and Hegel, but he also went mountain-climbing and horse-riding. In the course of a study trip in Spain about the development of industry and mining, he took time off to search in Saragoza for an unpublished score by Monteverdi and a manuscript by Philo the Jew. During a stay in London, in 1912, where he went to study the large mining and industrial centers, he became a member of the John Donne Club, and he became acquainted with the Australian composer Percy Granger. During another study trip in Germany, he visited the sea ports looking for the last French sailing ships which went round Cape Horn. These tall ships had been sold abroad when the French government had discontinued the subsidies which were given to sailing ships. It was thus that, in the Hamburg harbor, he met an old sailor whose only companion was a pet monkey. The monkey was dying, and Saint-John Perse spent the night comforting the old sailor and his monkey. The next day, the people with whom he was staying, noticing his tired look, joked about it, accusing him of having spent the night with the girls of the red light Sankt Pauli district. He did not correct them: he realized, he said later, that they would not have been able to understand that an incident apparently insignificant was in reality a manifestation of what might be called “the human quality”. He was thinking of this old sailor when he ranks him, in Vents, among “les hommes de douceur”, “les hommes de sourire sur les chemins de la mort”, “les berceurs de singes moribonds”, to whom he adds “les radiologues casqués de plomb au bord des lits de fiançailles”.¹ Such men represent an essential part, however small it may be considered to be, of the universal totality of human action, and it is this human action which fascinates Saint-John Perse, in its temporal dimension as well as in its spatial dimension. This is why this incident deserved a place in his poetry.

Saint-John Perse was a precocious poet. He was only seventeen when he wrote the poems of Images à Crusoé, which were published in 1909 in the Nouvelle Revue Française. Other collections written in his youth, Pour fêter une enfance, Récitation à l’éloge d’une reine, Histoire du Régent and Éloges, appeared between 1909 and 1911. It is not surprising, therefore,

¹. Unless otherwise indicated, all of the quotations from Saint-John Perse are to be found in his Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1972)
that Saint-John Perse, at an early age, attracted the attention of writers who were already quite famous, Claudel, Gide, Valery Larbaud, Léon-Paul Fargue, Jacques Riviè re, or Paul Valéry. What is more unusual, and this is another mark of his universality as well as of his total lack of the contempt which so many French intellectuals show for anything which is not French, in literature and the arts as well as in cuisine, *haute couture*, wine-making, or, more generally, in the art of living, is the fact that Saint-John Perse also made friends with foreign writers, writers whose medium was English, like Conrad, Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Arnold Bennett, and Rabindranath Tagore, with the German poet Richard Dehmel, with the Spanish writer Eugenio d'Ors, with the Catalan architect Gaudi, and with the Russian composer Stravinsky. The friendship of writers, painters and composers from all parts of the world will always be an important part of Saint-John Perse's life: Archibald MacLeish, Robert Penn Warren, Mina Curtiss, Victoria Ocampo, Borges, Biyo Casarès, Octavio Paz, Paulhan, Malraux, René Char, Braque, who illustrated his poem *Oiseaux*, Soulages, Edgar Varese, Pierre Boulez, *et al.*

Another indication of the universal value of Saint-John Perse's poetry is illustrated by the fact that his works have been translated and published in nearly every country in the world, and that they have sparked the admiration of critics of every kind, Catholics like Claudel or Marxists like Garaudy, conservatives like T.S. Eliot or anti-establishment types like Breton and the Surrealists. It is also rather strange that this man, whose forefathers were white slave holders and plantation owners, people who are called "békés" by West Indian Creole speakers, should be admired by such black writers as the Senegalese prophet of *négritude* Léopold Sedar Senghor and the West Indian activist Glissant. People who have seen the film *Rue Cases-Nègres* (*Sugar Cane Alley*) will have a good idea of the strained relationship between Blacks and Whites in the French Antilles at the beginning of the century, and will sense how exceptional Saint-John Perse must have been in this respect.

Saint-John Perse has left a considerable body of work, and it would be still far more impressive if, after the defeat of France in 1940, the Gestapo had not caused the loss or destruction of seven manuscripts which he had left in his Paris apartment. There were five long poetic works, one drama, and one philosophical essay, all of his production begun in China after 1916 and continued in France between his return in 1921 and his voluntary exile in 1940. The surviving body of work, which extends over more than two thirds of a century, is marked by a strong sense of continuity, both in the conceptual content and in the poetic form. This continuity has its source in the original impression made upon him, from his earliest childhood, by tropical nature. In it, he saw manifestations of a hidden energy, of a cosmic power which revealed itself in the ascension of stars, in the violence of earthquakes and hurricanes. Saint-John Perse was later to admit that Pointe-à-Pitre, at that time, was only a miserable shanty-town, but everything, in this place, was for him a "splendeur", even a fish head lying between the teats of a dead cat, even a skinny little girl with hands white from leprosy, or the harbor waters covered with grease and urine. In his eyes, the splendor of vegetal or animal life and the cosmic force at work in the violence of earthquakes and hurricanes were identical with the divine. Not that he saw in it a mark of the Creator's power left by the hand of God in his Creation. Saint-John Perse did not believe in a personal God as do Christians. He was very clear on this point. When Claudine Chonez, a critic who interviewed writers for French television, asked him directly: "Êtes-vous, croyant?", he answered: "Non, si vous entendez par là l'appartenance à une religion précise; mais je suis spiritualiste. Je ne crois pas qu'on puisse nier un principe premier que, si vous
voulez, j'appelle Dieu.” This interview took place on July 25, 1971\textsuperscript{2}. Twenty years earlier, in a letter addressed to the Catholic poet Claudel, he had written just about the same thing: “La recherche en toute chose du ‘divin’, qui a été la tension secrète de toute ma vie païenne, et cette intolérance, en toute chose, de la limite humaine, qui continue de croître en moi comme un cancer, ne sauraient m’habiliter à rien de plus qu’à mon aspiration.” Saint-John Perse was still quite young when he developed such an individual notion of the divine. He was only thirteen when Claudel, who was a family friend, attempted to convert him to the Christian conception of God through a philosophical demonstration based on the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas. Claudel, according to Saint-John Perse, was a “catholique cartésien, raisonner et polémiste en diable”.

While Claudel was talking, a storm broke out, and the young boy was paying more attention to the stormy weather, to the trees shaken by the wind, to the lightning and the thunder than to Claudel’s argumentation. And Saint-John Perse concluded, as he was recounting this incident: “Le feu divin m’apparaisait déjà dans l’immédiat du monde. Je n’avais besoin d’aucun intercesseur, sinon des éléments mêmes dont notre univers se constitue ici-bas. C’est pourquoi je n’ai jamais pu me sentir tout à fait chrétien: comme les vais enfants des Îles, je suis sauvé de naissance.” These words were said in the spring of 1959.\textsuperscript{3} On the human plane as well as on the plane of physical nature, beauty is found in the manifestation of the “grandes forces qui nous créent, qui nous empruntent ou qui nous lient”. This sentence comes from his letter on the thematic content of the poem Amers. What can these forces be? One of them might be identified, for instance, with the impulse which caused the great human migrations, with the conquering energy which drove the Celts, the Germans or the Mongols from the frontiers of Asia towards the West. Conversely, ugliness is the sign that this primal force is missing. This is the case of the “Villes plus absentes qu’un désir de morte” mentioned in the early poem Des Villes sur trois modes, or of the decadent city described in Images à Crusoé, the city which “coule à la mer comme un abcès”. It is also the case of the Library of Vents, with its “livres tristes, innombrables, sur leur tranche de craie pâle”, those books which are only “cendres et squarnes de l’esprit”, the sad debris of a civilization no longer fed by the flow of the creative energy which had brought it to life. Hence the importance, in Saint-John Perse’s poetry, of all the things which are manifestations of energy, both in man and in nature. Robbe-Grillet has pointed out that in Mallarmé’s sonnet Salut, the first line reads: “Rien, cette écume, vierge vers”, and that one of the meanings of the word “vers” is that of a preposition denoting movement, direction. The theme of Salut is a sea expedition, and this is a theme which, for Mallarmé, also refers to a poetic or a spiritual quest. This is also a major theme in the works of Saint-John Perse. The energy which creates all forms of movement appears under various shapes: the current of a river, the emergence of a spring, the progression of a wave, the approach of a storm, a volcanic eruption, or, on the human plane, a great migration, a conquering expedition, a war, a riot, a revolution, poetic or artistic creation. For Saint-John Perse, esthetic and ethical values spring from these manifestations of the energy present in the universal Being. It is not by mere chance that he was interested in the “big bang” theory of the expanding universe: “Toute poétique est une ontologie”,

\textsuperscript{2} Personal letter from Claudine Chonez
\textsuperscript{3} Interview with Claude Vigée, in Honneur à Saint-John Perse (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 345-346
he said in his *Pour Dante*. Ontology, the knowledge of Being. This is why Saint-John Perse showed so little interest in literary theories. In his *Lettre à Archibald MacLeish*, he stated: "En fait de doctrine littéraire, je n’ai rien à dire: je n’ai jamais eu de goût pour la cuisine des chimistes". Beauty has nothing to do with literary cuisine: it is the expression of life itself. This does not mean that Saint-John Perse had no personal opinion about the technique of writing. It simply means that for him the essential part of writing lies in the way in which man experiences the energy of Being rather than in the development of specific writing techniques. If every poetics is an ontology, this is because poetry, more than any other form of knowledge, seeks absolute reality. As he put it in his *Discours de Stockholm*, “L’imagination poétique est le vrai terrain de germination scientifique.” Speaking of Léon-Paul Fargue, Saint-John Perse paid homage to the poet whose intuition went further than the boldest speculations of modern science. And, in his *Pour Dante*, he said again:"Le seuil métaphysique n’est là franchi que par la connaissance poétique". Still in the same vein, he took note of Heidegger’s interest in poetry: this was a clear proof that, for modern philosophy, the poet takes over for the metaphysician or the theologian. Speaking of Dante, Saint-John Perse showed that the *Divine Comedy* rises “de cercle en cercle, jusqu’à cette abstraction finale d’une effusion de gloire an sein de la divinité”. At a time when religions often hold no meaning for most people, poetry is the last refuge of the spiritual. More than a way to knowledge, poetry is for Saint-John Perse “un mode de vie, et de vie intégrale”. As he asserts in the *Discours de Stockholm*, “Le poète présente à l’humanité la vision d’un humanisme nouveau, d’universalité réelle et d’intégralité psychique.” And he adds:"C’est d’une même étreinte, comme une seule grande strophe vivante, qu’elle embrasse au présent tout le passé et l’avenir, l’humain avec le surhumain, et tout l’espace planétaire avec l’espace universel”. Poetic vision illuminates Being in all of its dimensions: past and future, human and divine, temporal and eternal, real and imaginary. Another quotation illustrates his conception of the part which the poet has to play in the course of human history: "... par son adhésion totale à ce qui est, le poète tient pour nous liaison avec la permanence et l’unité de l’Être. Et son message est d’optimisme. Une même loi d’harmonie régit pour lui le monde entier des choses. Rien n’y peut advenir qui par nature excède la mesure de l’homme. Les pires bouleversements de l’histoire ne sont que rythmes saisonniers dans un plus vaste cycle d’enchaînements et de renouvellements. Et les Furies qui traversent la scène, torche haute, n’éclairent qu’un instant du très long thème en cours. Les civilisations mûrissantes ne meurent point des affres d’un autonome, elles ne font que muer”. This vision of Being as Becoming is obviously modeled on the order of Nature, on the cycle of seasons, on the rhythm of tides, on the rhythm of menstruation, of the periodical succession of death and birth, for the stars as well as for animals and plants. Saint-John Perse placed himself squarely in the Pre-Socratic tradition of Heraclitus. In a letter to his critic Roger Caillois, he declared: "La philosophie même du 'poète' me semble pouvoir se ramener, essentiellement, au vieux 'rhéisme' élémentaire de la pensée antique -- comme celle, en Occident, de nos Pré-Socratiques". But Heraclitus is not simply the philosopher of “rheism”. “Rhéisme”: the word derives from the Greek verb “rheo”, “to flow”, whose root is also found in the nouns “*to rheos*” [stream], and “*to rheuma*” [river, torrent]. The word refers to the perpetual flux of cosmic and human Becoming. Heraclitus is also the philosopher for whom “everything comes from war”, for whom everything is brought about by a perpetual conflict, by a tension never to be resolved between opposite poles. If, however,
for Heraclitus, everything is war, he also states that “war is justice”, since the conflict respects the boundaries of cosmic order: “The sun shall not go beyond the allowed limits.” Saint-John Perse placed himself withing another tradition, which he learned as a child from the woman servant whom he mentioned in a letter to his mother: “Je n’ai jamais pu m’empêcher d’aimer, en toute époque et en tout lieu, ces jeux des grandes forces naturelles: inondations, typhons, séismes, éruptions volcaniques, grandes épidémies et soulèvements divers - toutes ruptures d’équilibre tendant à renouveler l’élan vital du grand mouvement en cours par le monde. (Il ne fallait pas, Mère très chrétienne, confier mon enfance antillaise aux mains païennes d’une trop belle servante hindoue, disciple secrète du dieu Çiva).” This servant would take the child, unbeknownst to his parents, to ceremonies in honor of the Hindu god. In the Discours de Stockholm, Çiva, god of death and rebirth, is thus invoked: “Ne crains pas, dit l’histoire, levant un jour son masque de violence - et de sa main levée elle fait ce geste conciliant de la Divinité asiatique au plus fort de sa danse destructrice. Ne crains pas, ni ne doute - car le doute est stérile et la crainte est servile. Écoute plutôt ce battement rythmique que ma main haute imprime, novatrice, à la grande phrase humane en voie toujours de création. Il n’est pas vrai que la vie puisse se nier elle-même. Il n’est rien de vivant qui de néant procède, ni de néant s’éprenne. Mais rien non plus qui garde forme et mesure sous l’incessant afflux de l’Être.”

According to this vision of History, the forces of destruction and regeneration obey a law of harmony in which opposite poles are balanced. Saint-John Perse thus rediscovers an attitude similar to Greek tragedy. Man is the protagonist of a struggle in which he faces the powers of Fate, but the anguish of man crushed by Fate is exorcised by the admiration for the hero who, in his very defeat, bears witness for the human greatness. According to Saint-John Perse’s vision of the historical process, this dramatic structure is repeated indefinitely. This does not mean that History is only a series of identical cycles. For Saint-John Perse, the Nietzschean structure of the Eternal Return is combined with a teleological vision of History. The evolution of life on earth appears as a march toward a higher condition, although the goal of this ascent, of this anabasis to use the title which he gave to his most famous work, remains a mystery. Anabasis is a title borrowed from Greek antiquity. It is the title of two historical works, one by Xenophon, which refers to the retreat of the Ten Thousand through Persia, the other by Arrian, which relates the Egyptian and Asian conquests of Alexander. The Greek word “anabasis” has also the more immediate meaning of getting up on a horse, and, by extension, of ascent. These two meanings appear in Saint-John Perse’s poem, which deals with cavalry expeditions, with the conquest of new territories, with the foundation of new cities, and with the establishment of new empires. The horse appears as a symbolic representation of the unconscious energy which drives man further and further, higher and higher, toward the mysterious goal represented in the poem by the “étoile femelle”, the star also mentioned in the poem, “chose pure et dégagée dans les hauteurs du ciel.” In the poem Amers, it is the entrance of the ritual procession into the sea which symbolizes the fusion of man with the divine. In other poem, Chronique, the gesture of the speaker who raises toward the night the offering of his human heart takes on a similar meaning through its analogy with the action of the tree mentioned in the same poem, that tree in the forest which opens itself to the night, “élèvant à son dieu l’ample charge ouvragee de ses roses géantes”. It thus appears that the force which drives man to progress ever further and higher, that his constant yearning for a higher condition, toward a goal which Saint-John Perse termed “divin”, is an aspiration which man shares with every form of life. One certainly could point out
affinities with Hegel, or, without going back quite as far, one could recall the philosophy of history which is presented in the writings of Victor Cousin and Ernest Renan, or, on another plane, in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard, a celebrated paleontologist, revised Darwin’s theory of evolution in the light of his religious beliefs, and saw in the figure of Christ the image of the goal toward which mankind strives to attain. For Teilhard, the Incarnation, the mystery of God made Man, is a prefiguration of the destiny promised by Christ, the Omega point in which Man, the highest form of life on earth, merges with God. Before Teilhard, Rimbaud, probably influenced by the words in which God defines himself as Alpha and Omega, had seen Omega as the final point of the human adventure, as the supreme goal of the Seer’s quest, when he announces the end of the world in the last stanza of the sonnet Voyelles:”O, suprême clairon plein de strideurs étranges, / Silences traversés des Mondes et des Anges, / O l’Oméga, rayon violet de Ses Yeux.” These are only affinities: I am convinced that there were no direct influences. Saint-John Perse’s vision is without any possible doubt the result of a strictly personal experience. This vision is already clearly apparent in his very first texts, in Images à Crusoé, for instance.

This vision of human destiny, individual and collective, inevitably conditioned Saint-John Perse’s notion of poetry. In a letter addressed to the editor of the Berkeley Review, Saint-John Perse contrasts English and French poetry. It must be understood, however, that the adjectives “French” and “English” are only convenient markers to distinguish between two types of poetry. “English” poetry is discursive, it is a “poésie d’idée, donc de définition et d’élucidation, toujours explicite et logique, parce que de source rationnelle, et par là même portée aux enchaînements formels d’une dialectique intellectuelle et morale.” It is “exotérique”, “analytique”, “commentaire et paraphrase”. It “semble toujours naître d’une méditation, non d’une transe”. It is “articulée très fortement pour l’intellect”. In fact, Saint-John Perse is talking of a poetry which is very much like prose, a poetry which might be the work of Pope or Johnson rather than the work of Coleridge, for instance. That which characterizes modern French poetry, according to him, is the fact that it “a dû faire sa révolution pour échapper au dessèchement d’un excessif rationalisme”. It is “synthétique” rather than “analytique”, “ésotérique” rather than “exotérique”, “incantation” rather than “définition et élucidation”, proceeding from the “subconscient” rather than from a “source rationnelle”. It “ne se croit poésie qu’à condition de s’intégrer elle-même, vivante à son objet vivant; de s’y incorporer pleinement et s’y confondre même substantiellement, jusqu’à l’identité parfaite et l’unité entre le sujet et l’objet, entre le poète et le poème. Faisant plus que témoigner ou figurer, elle devient la chose même qu’elle 'appréhende', qu’elle évoque ou suscite, faisant plus que mimer, elle est, finalement, cette chose elle-même, dans son mouvement et sa durée; elle la vit et l’agit, unanimement, et se doit donc, fidèlement, de la suivre, avec diversité, dans sa mesure propre et dans son rythme propre: largement et longuement, s’il s’agit de la mer et du vent; étroitement et promptement s’il s’agit de l’éclair.”

Poetry thus is for Saint-John Perse the human activity which best enables man to become one with the creative energy of life, to let himself be carried by what he calls, in Vents, “l’hélice de l’Être”, or, in Amers, by the wave which “depuis Troie roule sa hanche jusqu’A nous”. In Western culture, Troy is an obvious symbol for the mythical origin of history. The exceptional position which Saint-John Perse claims for the poet is justified by the fact that poetry, more than any other human enterprise, pursues “la pleine intégration de l’homme” (Discours de Stockholm). His psychological integration, first, which means that it unites conscious and
unconscious. In a letter to Claudel, Saint-John Perse explained that “le Poète, pendant des siècles, n’a été qu’un cavalier sans monture; il a voulu un jour n’être que la bête sans cavalier. Il serait temps de concilier irrationnel et rationnel.” The “bête sans cavalier”, as Saint-John Perse explained to me in a conversation I had with him, is Surrealism. This is why he stated, in his “Discours de Stockholm”, that “il n’est rien de pythique dans une telle poésie”. “Pythique”, the adjective comes from “Pythie”, the priestess of Apollo who pronounced, in a state of trance, the oracles inspired by the god. True poetry does not come solely from a state of trance. It does not abandon itself totally to the unconscious, and especially not with the help of hallucinogenic drugs of the kind Saint-John Perse mentions in Vents: cannabis, belladonna, nightshade, “la graine ronde d’Ologhi mangée par l’homme d’Amazonie”, “Yaghé, liane du pauvre, qui fait surgir l’envers des choses - ou la plante Pi-lu”. Conversely, poetry must not be subjected to a mutilating logic, and Saint-John Perse reminds the reader that Dante invoked “l’assistance païenne de la divinité delphique, ravisseuse d’âme et d’esprit au-delà des provinces d’intellect” (Pour Dante). Apollo, the god of poetry, is not to be confused here with the symbol of one of the two opposite poles which Nietzsche, observed in Greek drama in his work on The Birth of Tragedy, the Apollinian and the Dionysian. Rather than the god of light, Apollo, for Saint-John Perse, is the god of mantic possession, the god who was consulted through the Pythia in her trance. As Archibald MacLeish explained in his 1942 “Note on Alexis Saint-Leger Leger”, for Saint-John Perse, “there is no true poetry ... without complete reliance on the subconscious. But by the same sign the subconscious must be treated rigorously, must be treated by reason”. True poetry results from the tension between conscious and unconscious. Saint-John Perse did however confess to me: “Seule m’intéresse la création vive, celle qui vient la nuit sans être sollicitée.” He had already told Claudine Chonez: “Les copies à la machine, les histoires d'imprimerie et d'éditeurs, ça m’ennuie. Je suis à l'opposé de Valéry, qui revoiyait sans cesse ce qu'il écrivait C’était un grand esprit, un artiste, mais pas un poète”. On the other hand, he praised Léon-Paul Fargue who was, he wrote, “... assez intelligent pour tenir l’intellect à la porte du poème”. In Vents, however, he shows the poet “attentif à sa lucidité, jaloux de son autorité, et tenant clair an vent le plein midi de sa vision”, and, in the Discours de Stockholm, the poet appears again exploring and illuminating “la nuit de l’âme elle-même et du mystère où baigne l’être humain”.

Having rejected the Surrealists’ total submission to the unconscious, one one hand, and Valéry’s excessive dependence on intellect on the other, Saint-John Perse proceeds to other exclusions. Poetry, as he states, again in the Discours de Stockholm, “n’est point art d’embaumeur ni de décorateur. Elle n’élève point des perles de culture, ne trafique point de simulacres ni d’emblèmes, et d’aucune fête musicale ne saurait se contenter”. What is rejected here is art for art’s sake, the excessive cult of form advocated by the Parnassians, and also Verlaine’s emphasis on musicality. True poetry, for him, refuses to “dissocier l’art de la vie”. It does not seek refuge either in an ivory tower or within the closed universe of inner dreams. Thinking of the Romantics and of their progeny, Saint-John Perse reiterates, still speaking of true poetry: “Elle ne se veut jamais absence ni refus”. Mallarmé’s pursuit of a purity which has only nothingness as its end is thus also rejected. One only has to think of Mallarmé’s non-existing perfect flower, “l’absente de tous bouquets”, or of these lines of the sonnet “Toute l’âme résumée...”: “Ainsi le chœur des romances / A la lèvre vole-t-il / Exclus-en si tu commences / Le réel parce que vil”. Neither can poetry put itself at the service of any ideology: “L’amour est
son foyer, l'insoumission sa loi”. Poetry is above all the energy which breaks down the barriers of routine. It is the “novatrice toujours qui déplace les bornes”. It liberates man. It shows him higher ways:”Au poète indivis d'attester parmi nous la double vocation de l'homme”. Man has a dual essence: temporal, and spiritual. He is both within time, and outside of time. What true poetry accomplishes is this:”...c'est hausser devant l'esprit le miroir le plus sensible à ses chances spirituelles. C'est évoquer dans le siècle même une condition humaine plus digne de l'homme originel. C'est associer enfin plus hardiment l'aime collective à la circulation de l'énergie spirituelle dans, le monde”. The primary function of poetry is to make visible to man this “circulation de l'énergie spirituelle”, “cet incessant afflux de l'Être” which creates forms, destroys them, and replaces them with other forms. Every living thing is born, grows, and dies to be replaced by other beings. Animal and vegetal species appear on earth, prosper for thousands of years, and disappears to make room for others. The same thing happens for comets, planets and stars. Civilizations which occupied the scene of history have vanished without leaving any trace. Poetry is the mirror in which the movement of Being is reflected. Poetic creation is not just a reflection of the creative movement of Being, it is one of its manifestations. Poetry, as Saint-John Perse put it in a 1953 letter to his critic Caillois, is “avant tout mouvement -- dans sa naissance comme dans sa croissance et son élargissement final”. This is why, as he stated again in 1960, poetry is made “pour mieux vivre et plus loin”. It connects man to the movement of Being. This is explained still more clearly in the Discours de Stockholm:”Par la pensée analogique et symbolique, par l'illumination lointaine de l'image médiatrice, et par le jeu de ses correspondances, sur mille chaînes de réactions et d'associations étrangères, par la grâce enfin d'un langage où se transmet le mouvement même de l'Être, le poète s'investit d'une surréalité qui ne peut être celle de la science”. In all the manifestations of Being, the poet perceives the action of a single principle, of a wave of energy which propagates itself through space and time, destroying and renewing all appearances. Saint-John Perse’s entire body of work may be characterized as the apprehension of this energy in its diverse manifestations. Each poem registers the manifestation, within the poet’s individual consciousness, of the becoming of Being, which includes not only what is, but also what has been, what will be, and, what is undoubtedly more important still, what might be. It includes the universe of dream and desire as well as the universe of concrete things. The poet’s consciousness, including its unconscious levels, perceives the unfolding of Being as “une seule et longue phrase sans césure à jamais intelligible”, as “le grand récit des choses par le monde”, as “une seule grande strophe vivante”. Three metaphors which are almost identical and which come, in order, from Exil, from Amers, from the Discours de Stockholm. The totality of Being thus appears as a text, as a message which the poet receives, which he deciphers, and which he transcribes.

This vision of the poetic process commands Saint-John Perse’s selection of themes and motifs. The elemental forces of nature, winds, rains, tides, storms, are manifestations of the cosmic energy which gives the universe its fertility, just as wars and revolutions are manifestations of the vital energy which frees man from the deadening mold of superannuated institutions. Similarly, the call of the divine, a motif which appears repeatedly, almost as an obsession, in Éloges, in Exil, in Vents, in Amers, in Chronique, is a manifestation of man’s yearning for a higher condition. This is also the case for the motif of metamorphosis. In Vents, the chrysalis which is transformed into a winged creature appears as a model for the future transformation of man predicted in Amers under the form of “l'argile humaine où perce la face


The motif of the mirror and its various forms, reflection, image, or mimicry, is equally significant. The mirror which reflects, the ritual which imitates, the drama which represents, all are, in different degrees, symbols of poetic creation and expressions of its sacred function. A ritual act is not just an imitation of a sacred reality. The various events described in Saint-John Perse’s poems, the birth of a cold in Anabase, the growth of a tree in Vents, the progress of a wave in Amers, the flow of a river in Anabase, swarming bees in Vents, are not just symbolic representations of the energy at work in the cosmos, of the forces at work in “la marche humaine” mentioned in the “Note sur la thématique d’Amers”, of the forces which drive man towards the summits, towards his “transhumance”. This word, which appears in Chronique, must be taken in its etymological sense of “trans”, beyond, and “humus”, earth. It does not refer only to its current meaning, the movement of herds which go up to their summer pasture in the mountains for the summer, and return to the valleys at the approach of winter. It refers primarily to the movement of man beyond the limits of the earth, his effort to transcend the human clay so that the latent face of the god may emerge. All these images have an essential purpose, like a ritual: their aim is to bring about the appearance of the sacred, to cause an epiphany. This is easily understood. For the believer, for instance, the consecration of the host is not a mere representation, a mere imitation: it brings about the real presence of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. Similarly, poetry claims the power to make the creative energy represented by the imagery to spring up in the world of reality. The birth of the colt, in Anabase, is the emergence of the forces which carry us to the conquest of the world. The growth of the tree, in Vents, is, as it is said in ancient Nordic mythologies, the apparition of a new world which will take the place of the old world represented by the dead tree. The wave, in Amers, is the flow of history whose origin goes back to Troy. The swarming bees, in Vents also, are the propagation of life. The function of these images is not to imitate or to mimic what is, but to give form to what must be, to anticipate and to help the apparition of the unity within which the totality of Being will merge both in its material and in its spiritual dimensions. In the “Lettre à Archibald MacLeish”, Saint-John Perse lists objects which he observed in various museums: “... un crâne de cristal de la collection précolombienne, un petit bateau d'enfant recueilli en plein Océan indien (Londres), un bracelet de femme au paturon d'un cheval empaillé sous le grossier harnachement d'un guerrier nomade (Moscou), une armure d'enfant (Madrid), une lettre princière sur feuille d'or battu (Varsovie), une lettre semblable sur peau de chèvre (Vatican), une collection historique d'images irréelles pour fonds de boîtes à cigarettes (Brême)”. Each of these objects is a relic which sums up within itself an entire civilization: Aztec, Polynesian, Asian, African, or European. Similarly, one finds in Saint-John Perse’s poems mentions of or allusions to all branches of human knowledge: astronomy, geography, geology, botany, zoology, nuclear physics, history, numismatics, anthropology, etc. At first, one does not see what an Aztec crystal skull may have to do with a child’s boat, pictures used to decorate cigar boxes, or the various actions described in Anabase: the public showing, on the morning after the wedding night, of the bed sheets stained with blood, the building of sheds for drying meat, or the killing of albino beasts. There is, however, a link between these seemingly ill-assorted objects or actions: they all proceed from the same source. There is no fundamental difference between the man who, through his computations, predicts the course of a hurricane, and the inspired poet described in Exil, or between the two women mentioned in Pluies, Dido and Malinche (Dido, abandoned by Aeneas, and Malinche, the Indian mistress later repudiated by Cortez, she whom Mexicans also call
Malinal and to whom they gave this obscene nickname: la Chingada). Neither does Saint-John Perse see any fundamental difference, in Vents, between the pre-historic man who painted the Lascaux caves and the workers whistling blues tunes in secret war plants. Under the chaos of surface appearances, all of these people reveal the deep identity of the “forces qui nous créent, qui nous empruntent ou qui nous lient” mentioned in the Note sur la thématique d’Amers. All of these actions, as he reminds us in the Discours de Stockholm, result from “l’étincelle du divin” which “vit à jamais dans le silex humain”. The poet’s vision perceives hidden analogies which will be made visible in the poem. Through images which assimilate wars and revolutions to the destructive action of winds, the poem Vents communicates a vision of history which acts as do myths for primitive societies. It presents to the reader a symbolic structure which, as has been demonstrated by Lévi-Strauss, enables him to overcome the contradictions of his life experience, and to restore a sense of order and unity in a reality which would otherwise remain absurd and fragmented.

The way in which Saint-John Perse uses rhythm and sound has a similar goal. It tends to render the object in its movement and in its duration, to create a “jeu, très allusif et mystérieux, d’analogies secrètes ou de correspondances, et même d’associations multiples, à la limite du saisissable”. Here one might compare long poems like Vents and Amers, which are full sized volumes, and a very short poem on lightning, which has only four lines. The harmony of rhythm and sound is created through other means than traditional versification: symmetrical clauses, repeated or echoing sentences or fragments of sentences, recurrent cadenzas, alliterations, assonances, internal rhymes, changes limited to the substitution of single vowels or consonants, alternating syllables. Here are a few characteristic examples:

Végétales ferveurs, o clartés, o faveurs
(Pour fêter une enfance, 11)
Two rhythmic groups of six syllables; f alliteration; internal rhyme.

Les mers fautives aux Détroits n’ont point connu de juge plus étroit
(Anabase, III)
One octosyllabic rhythmic group followed by a decasyllabic rhythmic group; internal rhyme; recurrence of the vowel u

Ah! toute chose vaine au van de la mémoire, ah! toute chose insante aux fières de l’exil
(Exil, IV)
Two consecutive alexandrines; repetition of the four initial syllables in each rhythmic group; identical syntactical structure; v alliteration; recurrence of the vowel i

It would be easy to find many other examples. Here are a few, without further analysis:

Le pur nautile des eaux libres, le pur mobile de nos songes (Exil, IV)

Transfugues sans message, ô mimes sans visage (Pluies, VI)

Le vin nouveau n’est pas plus vrai, le lin nouveau n’est pas plus frais (Vents, IV, 5)
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 (Amers, Choeur, 1)

If Saint-John Perse did not want to turn poetry into a “fête musicale”, the echoing rhythms and sounds mimick the complex network of analogies and associations secretly present under the diversity of external appearances. Their harmony reflects the law of harmony which controls the cosmos. The sound becomes the accomplice of meaning.

A similar effect is created through the symmetry of structure, which reflects the symmetry of becoming. The tree motif appears at the beginning and at the end of Vents. At the beginning of the poem, there is a dead tree which the winds strip of its leaves. At the end, a new tree takes its place. The tree takes on the symbolic meaning which it has in Nordic mythologies, where it represents a world which dies only to be replaced by another.

Ambiguity is used to created the same effect. In a letter to the publisher of the Berkeley Review, Saint-John Perse notes that in French, unlike what happens in ideographic languages like Chinese, words have reached such a degree of abstraction that they retain no visible link with concrete reality. In detaching themselves from the concrete signified, words have become ambiguous, polyvalent. This makes it easier to practice the game of allusions, of secret analogies, of multiples correspondences and associations. It makes it possible to create simultaneous suggestions along parallel or divergent lines. One example: the word aubaine, in its present day meaning of windfall, or godsend, has lost all trace of its etymological root aubain (alien). Originally, the aubaine was the estate of a deceased alien. This estate went to the lord of the land on which the alien had died. The word has nothing to do, etymologically, with the word aube, which has the dual meaning of “dawn” (the sunrise) and “alb” (the white garment which priests put on to celebrate certain offices). All of these meanings, however, are combined in these lines of the Invocation, in the poem Amers: “La Mer immense et verte comme une aube à l’orient des hommes / La Mer en fête sur ses marches comme une ode de pierre: vigile et fête à nos portes, murmure et fête à hauteur d’hommes - la Mer elle-même notre veille, comme une promulgation divine” (Invocation, 1); "la Mer, en nous, portant ses bruits soyeux du large et toute sa grande fraîcheur d'aubaine par le monde" (Invocation, 3).

The poet’s vision leaps through time and space, omitting the steps required by reason to establish a logical relationship between the elements on which it concentrates. This is why, again in his letter to the publisher of the Berkeley Review, Saint-John Perse objected to the accusation that he indulged in verbal amplification, whereas in fact his “larges déroulements poétiques comportent plus de soustractions que d’additions, et ne sont encore, au total, qu’une somme de contractions, d’omissions et d’ellipses”. And we know for a fact, through an interview published in 1960 in the journal Arts, that he cut Anabase from 200 to 60 pages, Vents from 600 to 200, Amers from 700 to 200. Everything which was commentary or paraphrase was eliminated: all of the intermediary links which would have explained the logical relationship between the various elements of the poem were taken out. Hence the impression of rupture, of discontinuity, of incompleteness which is often created by Saint-John Perse’s poetry, as if his poems were the isolated relics of a work from which parts are missing, but which, like fragments from a parchment or a papyrus roll, or perhaps like inscriptions half obliterated on monuments or stones.
worn down by desert winds, can suggest a lost grandeur, provided the reader has the necessary imaginative power to recreate within himself the vision of what this grandeur may have been.

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