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***Moi la Révolution* — revolutionary poetics in the storm of counter-revolutionary times**

Sophie wahnich, Pacte CNRS Grenoble,

Moi la révolution is a strange text. It portrays a female figure, rather like a song by Moustaki entitled *without naming her*, in which the “living girl” is none other than the “Permanent Revolution”.

But here, the Revolution speaks of “I”, “me, I” — and the subtitle speaks of “remembrances of an unworthy bicentenary”, much as René Allio had told the story of *The Unworthy Old Lady* on the cinema screen back in 1965. In this movie, upon becoming a widow, an old lady discovered her love of life — raising the hackles of those who would have liked to see her plunge into sadness.

In *Moi la Révolution*¹ there is a dialectic of the dead and the living-dead, of spectres and bodies, of joy and pain. It is a whirlwind. Time is off its hinges and the reader moves between past and present, memories and afterthoughts, lived history and a history that is represented and recounted.

It is about remembrances — an out-of-fashion word that Daniel Bensaïd prefers to “recollection” or “memory” or “commemoration”. Literally, “remembrance” means giving back limbs, a body — so, to an old lady. It means to give back “human flesh”, as Marc Bloch might have said. It means to give back body to the Revolution, to re-embody it, unlike a bicentenary in the masculine — and thus contemporary society and its rituals — that instead made her, the Revolution, disappear. It means to bring out living memories, as against the abusive embalming of the Revolution by the official, state-orchestrated commemoration. The word “remembrance” itself takes a stand against such embalming.

By giving body to the Revolution, we give it voice. We also bring out the things that make a person and make a dialogue: emotions, anger, joy, sadness, disappointment, pride, and thus — in the spectrum of all these colours of thought² — the lived contradictions, where the simple story of a magnificent 1789 and a 1793 to make us blush leaves Daniel Bensaïd with doubts. But it is also a question of restoring the feminine, that is to say, perhaps the “limitless”. So, we head back to the Permanent Revolution.

The text portrays the political interpellation of the man who orchestrated the bicentenary event — and did so as Socialist president of the French Republic — by she (the Revolution) who cannot intervene, except in this fictional form. A reified revolution has become something mute. It is necessary to play Michelet’s role and awaken the dead.

The book thus sets two historical situations face-to-face and confronts them: the situation of the actors in the Revolution, and that of the heirs to the Revolution. The latter can do what they like with the heritage, but that does not mean that they can destroy every trace of what once was. Ideas leave behind something of a pratico-inertia, as my friend Sartre would have said,³ and sometimes it is fundamentally active. Perhaps that was Saint-Just’s intuition, as quoted in Daniel Bensaïd’s book: “I despise the dust that makes me up, and that speaks to you, one could persecute this dust and kill it off; but I defy anyone to tear away this independent life that I have given myself in the centuries and in the heavens...”⁴. But what the reader is

¹ Daniel Bensaïd, *Moi, la Révolution, Remembrances d'une bicentenaire indigne*, Gallimard, 1989.

² *Raisons pratiques*, no. 6/1995 - *La couleur des pensées - Sentiments, émotions, intentions*, Collectif, Paris, éditions de l'EHESS.

³ Jean Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Paris Gallimard, 1960 and Sophie Wahnich, *La Révolution française n'est pas un mythe*, Paris, Klincksieck, 2017.

⁴ Saint-Just, *Fragments d'institutions républicaines, œuvres complètes*, edited and introduced by Miguel Abensour, Paris, Folio-Gallimard, 2004.

reading is also a woman's challenge to a man. In French, the word "revolution" is feminine and the word "president" or "king" masculine, and in the shadow-theatres staged at the time of the event, the Nation makes a scene — a domestic — with the King, because he has betrayed her. This is a theme taken up by Renoir in his *La Marseillaise* (1938). This is doubtless also what makes intelligible the graffiti from the Revolution in which a mocking woman calls out to a simpleton king — often misrepresented as a couple of sans-culottes.⁵ In *Moi la Révolution* it is no longer the nation-woman and the king-man who are sizing each other up, but the Revolution-woman and the Socialist-president-man. One has the privilege of a speech that surpasses mere time, the other the privilege of acts and discourses in the present, a president who is no longer a simpleton-king. That is, another couple, to stage an analogous interpellation. How can you betray me to this degree?

So, yes — there is hysteria in the air, anger, brawling, "a woman with a history to her" because she is "righting wrongs".⁶

Bensaïd's text is, then, out of time and very much situated in the year 1989, the bicentenary year. What is offered for us to read is very much about the quarrels of the present. Now, more than thirty years later, can we still read this text — and why, and how, should we do so?

What does the fictional uncertainty of the subject — of the narrator and of the speaking body — allow us to say, but also stop us from saying? What needs explaining here is a genuine poetics of knowledge. Under the stage of the *commedia dell'arte*, where a dog is donning a Phrygian cap and the revolution choking in front of the TV as it prepares its garlic salad, we must untangle the threads of a complex and polyphonic poetics of knowledge. And we must think about who hears — or else remains deaf to — the poetics engaged in here by the author Bensaïd, both in 1989 and still today. The present-day relevance of a poetics, or its lack of such relevance, lies in both its capacity to cross through time, to maintain its actuality, but also to keep alive the meaning of its address. To whom is this text addressed?

Is the porosity of the fields today enough for such a poetics to be able to influence both flanks — activists, and also scholars — on the model of that which characterised Daniel Bensaïd's own life? How can science fiction still find its place in the contemporary institution of reading?

I. Embodying the revolution, a dream of carnivalesque omnipotence

Daniel Bensaïd, fiction writer

1.1. Fiction as a theoretical position

In 1989, experiments in combining fiction and history were still few and far between. They had not been trivialised by their depoliticising generalisation like they have been today. Régine Robin published *Le cheval blanc de Lénine ou l'histoire autre*⁷ in 1979, and theorised these broad questions of fiction in a book titled *le Roman mémoriel*.⁸ This latter reflected on the contemporary finality of history, in its so-called dangerous liaisons with memory and the Freudian novel. It sought to show that separating memory and history is no simple matter, and that history is a specific aspect of social memory. But it also sought to reject the fabrication of well-defined identities, the weight of the symbolic, legitimations and convenient identifications. Jacques Rancière had not yet published *Les noms de l'histoire*,⁹ in which he

⁵ Sophie Wahnich, *La Révolution française expliquée en images*, Paris, Seuil, 2019.

⁶ MLR, p. 227.

⁷ Régine Robin, *Le cheval blanc de Lénine ou l'histoire autre*, Complexe 1979, republished in *Le naufrage du siècle*, Berg international, 1998.

⁸ Régine Robin, *Le Roman mémoriel*, Montreal, Le Préambule, 1989.

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Les noms de l'histoire*, Le seuil, 1992.

made the case for a new poetics of historical knowledge, upholding a triple poetic, scientific and political contract. But without doubt something of this question was already circulating in the corridors of the Paris-VIII university's philosophy department.

In writing history, we are playing with the very impossibility of history. Because, whatever we may do, reality resists all interpretation. The past is never what we thought it was; to write history is to artificially put things in order retrospectively, and thus always to betray the truth, which is unknowable by definition. The attempt to work with fiction is always to conceptualise anew the division that sets regimes of meaning in opposition to regimes of scientificity, in favour of a questioning of the order of narratives, whether they are capable of giving a glimpse of this inaccessible reality or otherwise. Régine Robin called for an "imaginative shift by the historian" that would allow them to leave behind History with a capital H, its material, its archives, and would allow them to openly embrace its incompleteness, saying this without refusing to maintain a clear position that distinguishes between the referent found in the archive and what the scholar, the historian, the writer does with it. Historians ought to acknowledge that they are capable of asking good questions, but not always of answering them. Régine Robin called for work against what she called a "brazen positivism" and in the direction of a certain deconstruction of the historian's complete (or completely absent) subject. In this respect, fiction can be more rigorous than history. Working in this way does not mean abandoning the rationality of knowledge, but rather changing the historian's approach to reading the archive, building up corpuses, the methodologies and analyses to be put to work, and the textual products that result from them. Once the historian has paid this price, thanks to this reflection on writing, they become a critical and committed intellectual. Daniel Bensaïd seems to respond to this way of doing, with regard to the history of the Revolution, the commemoration-event, and the fiction of this dialogue. Indeed, Régine Robin had been hoping for an ironical, tormented historian. Such a historian would give the critical function a real social existence, without thereby confusing themselves for a spokesman for the social. By accepting discomfort, uncertainty and even intellectual torment, the historian would be confronted with their own ethics without being able to allow themselves any pre-determined compass. They would be "out-of-place" and would have to build up their bearings with what I today call "sensitive reason". This reflexivity — similar to that of the revolutionaries — is tied to a sensitive experience of the world, to a position in the world.

So, the first work performed in *Moi, la Révolution* is a work on what makes it possible, through fiction, to know and hear this impossible knowledge. The first research, the singular one, is there in Daniel Bensaïd's writing where he gives his body and his voice to the Revolution and puts himself in the shoes of an old woman who still has something — her word — to say, with vivid emotions and persistent sadnesses. She is an old-aged, or ageless, woman. A figure who comes to haunt us like the dead haunt the living in Madagascar to demand that their silk lamba be changed. In Daniel Bensaïd's text, the Revolution turns over in her grave, and stands up from it.

1.2 The fictional operation: a permanent transmutation

There is constant transmutation in this text, which begins with a first untimely address from the Revolution to Mitterrand. But among people who know each other well, who see each other in the sans-culotte tradition, they are going to be on familiar terms.

But the Revolution also becomes a narrator. Under the name Revolution — as a concept and as an event — is a woman who refuses the role people seem to want her to play in the commemoration — the "role of a good girl who is a bit clumsy".¹⁰ The Revolution, if she is

¹⁰ MLR, p.10

indeed a woman, is histrionic, quarrelsome, dissident. Casting this female figure allows us to play with this histrionics and to let an unlimited freedom develop according to the fantasy of the author's wit, for underneath the woman/Revolution is Daniel Bensaïd in drag. There is carnival in the literary choices that at work, here. There will be irony. And this is how it starts politically, for this histrionics brings back conflict where there had been consensus. In his poem *Colchiques*, Apollinaire describes ruminants being poisoned in toxic meadows. "The cows grazing there slowly are poisoned"¹¹ he said. Here, it is the guests of the President's garden party who "together chew the soft caramels"¹² of consensus.

The tone is set; the text, and thought, will be unleashed by fiction.

Daniel Bensaïd has slipped into the ghostly body of a mythical character. He could appear as a Leviathan who encompasses all the actors and actresses of the Revolution, manufacturing from this multiplicity a unified figure with — and this would be a dramatic choice, for the purists of formalism — a strong psychological thrust. But more than Leviathan, this figure reminds me of Claude Ponti's *Pétronille et ses 120 petits*,¹³ the mouse who is proud to have so many children, but also of the mother's character, who appears as "the mother of all mothers" to save from distress a Pétronille drowning in history. And if I think about it, it is because this unifying move has nothing to do with an overbearing, statist fusion, but rather a tender, maternal one. Georg Buchner¹⁴ had Danton speak as a ventriloquist, criticising the revolution for having devoured its children, Saturn-like. Here, the paternal function gives way to the maternal one, and it is no longer a matter of devouring them but of bringing them up, of telling them where they have failed, of leaving the project unfinished, for example on the equality of men and women, on the question of slavery or even on property. Everything remained unfinished. The Revolution would have liked its children to have gone further, to be stronger, more virtuous, more consistent. The Revolution as a character is so not an ambivalent figure where there is good and bad. No, this figure is a complete and maximalist one, and as such she has some similarities with a concept, but a concept that takes into account the inconceivable of feelings. Adorno made his plea for a philosophy that could no longer do without the inconceivable, and thus without pain — and, I would add, joy. Well, this Revolution is a concept endowed with joy and pain, a somehow Brechtian mother of courage.

The Revolution feels what is going on. It is her desire for truth, her grievances, her experiences, her way of thinking, of pushing back, and also her sadness, that give this character such powers of interpellation.

So, the French Revolution is at the same time a living ghost, a concept, a mother, a feeling body, a character, which is to say, Daniel Bensaïd's mask. No doubt this means "learning to live at last" — the opening assertion of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*.¹⁵ In this, we can almost see Renée Allio's "unworthy old lady" enjoying a Chantilly-covered ice cream as if it were the first time she had ever tasted one. But no — it is not the first time, and it is a reunion with life that settles in with a disconcerting simplicity, in everyday life where the TV is on in the dining room and people in their underwear remark on what's going on in the world. The simplicity of this figure makes us forget the megalomaniacal character of this embodiment. For it means learning to live, of course, but above all "teaching a lesson in living at last" to one's children, whom one loves with one's favourites, but also to us, the men and women of the late twentieth century, who, as a recomposed sibling, must recognise that we are sons and daughters of the revolution.

¹¹ Apollinaire, *Alcools, Colchiques*, 1920, Folio-Gallimard 2013.

¹² MLR, p.10

¹³ Claude Ponti, *Pétronille et ses 120 petits*, L'école des Loisirs, 1990.

¹⁴ Georg Buchner, *La mort de Danton*, 1835.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*,

In fact, our narrator knows that she is fallible, devoid of certainties, that her most crucial questions still lay unanswered. But she knows that they must be asked seriously and rigorously, and she says as much: “I have not only had virtues, I am neither a woman of marble nor a woman of iron. I am simply a woman. Humanly a woman, humanly flawed ... I have my doubts and uncertainties”.¹⁶

But she has learned something at least, if only the value of her questions. She wants to pass them on, to share her thoughts with us. So that the reader is not put off, if there is a lesson to be learned, it is to be taught to the commemorator-state — even if Daniel Bensaïd balks at doing so — and to all its figures, Mitterrand’s figure being the one who orchestrates the whole. So, there are two mythical bodies: a masculine Leviathan, and a feminine mythical mother.

If François Mitterrand was delighted to be president at the time of the bicentenary, Daniel Bensaïd was positively jubilant about his position as author. He, *The Revolution!* And this jubilation was communicative. It meant getting by, as the working class do: life is too short to let it to be lost in sadness. We have to laugh about it, we have to cry about it, but we must remain alive, lively, vivifying.

The transmutation is, then, that of the ventriloquist — but hidden under the table like the automaton described by Walter Benjamin in his theses on the concept of history.¹⁷ The ventriloquist plays all the roles, that of the Revolution, that of Mitterrand, and he has followed this history so closely in real-life that it is almost natural to play the chameleon as a marrano. Yes, Daniel Bensaïd enjoyed playing all the roles, even though taking the side of the revolution so dear to him.

A cannibal carnival? Some of the Revolution’s children are clearly the object of a vote to purge them; the Revolution is a mother who judges and condemns, a highly demanding mother, who even risks appearing impossible to satisfy or console. A Revolution that remains intimidating.

II. A self-justifying anachronism, discontinuities against teleology; Daniel Bensaïd as historian

2.1. To render justice

This work of the historian “who judges and condemns” is that of Nietzsche’s critical history.¹⁸ And here it is the Revolution that seems to do justice to itself with the fictional operation, the stacking-together of the matryoshka. This justice is not one which seeks to judge the Revolution as such with today’s arguments, but rather to judge the bicentenary commemorations. Thus, Bensaïd does battle against the hypothesis which casts the Revolution as the matrix of totalitarianisms — one that had already been disseminated among the right-wing public by François Furet. But Bensaïd also takes care to speak of this adversary-historian without citing him too much. Here, he was doing battle against a new common sense that allowed an “investment advisor”¹⁹ to compare the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 and the autobahns of the 1930s, and — based on this absurd comparison — the Revolution and fascist and Nazi totalitarianism. It says it all

¹⁶ MLR, p.26.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Concept of History*.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, réédition de la *deuxième considération intempestive de l'utilité et de l'inconvénient de l'histoire pour la vie*, Les mille et une nuits, 2000.

that such a ridiculous comparison is made between, on the one hand, a tool of material and technical life and, on the other, the symbolic tool par excellence, an emancipatory, contentious text, which has sometimes stood for hope, sometimes as an alibi. This is why it is necessary to fight on two fronts: against the denigration of the Revolution, but also against its falsifying embalming. It is the Revolution's emotions, and her scruples, that alert her to what is happening in the present; and it is from this present that she looks back to the past to revisit all that could shed a different light on this present. So, we have a dialectic of times. The Revolution's vivid memories then have the value of arguments — even if it is necessary to consider the uncertainty of the revolutionary event itself, and of its actors, in order to judge this bicentenary.

Several questions, indeed ones of great present relevance, draw our historian's attention: property and the question of natural right, the colonies, the question of women, the questions of slaves and foreigners. On all these fronts, the revolutionary actors needed to have had more constancy or more courage. This is why the Revolution speaks of "its unfinished rights"²⁰. Was property a natural right or a social right? What right did the propertied have to starve the poor? There is, then, a connivance with Robespierre, who speaks of the right to existence as the first among all rights.²¹ But this same Robespierre disappointed her when he seemed to reject her abolitionist impulses. There will be no idols, only fragile favourites. Daniel Bensaïd probably listened too much to Michelet, whom he often takes at face-value.

So, under the lens here is all that was left unthought, and so, too, the revolutionary problems of contemporary France. Indeed, here the colonial wars from 1945 to 1989 are revisited, from the perspective of Saint-Domingue and the impossible giving-up of the colonies, from Sétif to the Ouvéa gendarmes in New Caledonia, which we hope will become Kanaky. We are still there. "The "generous", "exemplary", "glorious" Declaration of Rights fell short on the issue of slavery. "Will you admit it, when you set the light of 1789 against the shadows of 1793?"²² For the narrator, there is a long-lasting shadow that we would like to disguise by celebrating Toussaint Louverture. "I heralded a universal emancipation. Paradoxically, from my defeated victory springs the seed of a modern racism that still haunts you."²³ The "still" is unending. The reconquest of rights in the present is mediocre. Public liberties are sold to the big corporations and the right of asylum is weakened, foreigners are lured by promises that never come true. As for women, they are daughters of the Revolution, scorned by men who, with the exception of Gregoire and Saint-Just, did not want to listen to any talk of them becoming equals.

Nicole Loraux, when she speaks of this kind of haunting, of a missed opportunity trapped in the clutches of repetition, refers to "slicks of motionless time".²⁴ This could be another name for an "indissoluble past in the present".²⁵ But for Loraux, this immobility is a denial of conflict. A time suspended from classical historical temporality, the time of forgetting and repetition, but also the time that brings into play a "blocked memory" of political conflictuality and the "muted work of a plea of desire".²⁶ It is a time of the unconscious and of passions. What could not be made dialectical through the

²⁰ MLR, title of a large part, pp. 29-69.

²¹ MLR, p. 44.

²² MLR, p. 54.

²³ MLR, p. 68.

²⁴ Nicole Loraux, *Le genre humain*, no. 27, Seuil, June 1993, republished in *Les voies traversières de Nicole Loraux, Clio/Espace temps*, 2005.

²⁵ That is, Sartre's *pratico-inert* in the present, as he describes it in *Questions de méthodes dans la critique de la raison dialectique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, republished in 1984.

²⁶ Nicole Loraux, "Éloge de l'anachronisme en histoire", art. cit. p. 138.

subject or the collective remains immobile, not subjected to the labour of working through contradictions. These immobile layers of time would offer another explanation for a cold or stagnant history, without the subjects of history having to take responsibility for everything. In this respect, Loraux willingly speaks of the “Greek problems” of our democracy. By this she means not a continuous filiation of these problems, but rather the repetition of similar problems, encysted in a non-vectorised historical time.

I believe that Daniel Bensaïd has reached exactly this point when he picks up the dossier on the Revolution and rereads the texts closely — very closely even, sometimes. But if he becomes a reader of printed archives and thinks like a committed researcher, he does not enter into the space of a real dialogue with the historians of the Revolution, even if they may share the same questions. He makes his selection without sharing it with us, except for those able to read in between the lines. He thus opts against emancipating us, the readers, from the towering position of he who knows — and knows better than anyone else — how to interpret the statements of the actors.

In so doing, he skips past the contextuality and the work of production of categories, which revolutionary actors attempted to do with varying degrees of rigour, seriousness and effectiveness. Thus, the category of foreigner in Saint-Just is one that identifies foreigners with the European counter-revolutionary coalition and with French counter-revolutionaries, with traitors. It stands only partly opposed to the national question; and so, it seems to me more interesting to link it to the traitorous king who has become a stranger to the city, than to a simple national conception of political life. This stranger becomes a stranger to humanity and not to the nation, and this leads to the notion of the crime of *lèse-humanité*.²⁷ Contrary to what Bensaïd says, here we have not left behind the shores of the revolutionary universal. Saint-Just does not betray himself, at least not in this respect.

I think that these shortcomings in his argumentation and his lucidity lead to flawed judgements. We could surely list them and see in what way ideology is a barrier to the possibility of a common knowledge on these crucial questions. At least the work has been begun in this text, which remains both a scientific and political book — and indeed, politics is never purged of all ideology. Then we must remember that in the revolutionary moment itself, the actors were confronted with a folding of time that was not only revolutionary but itself aimed at an immobile time, as Loraux again indicated.

2.2. Discontinuities: a philosophy of history

Daniel Bensaïd knows that there is no straight line of progress, but rather discontinuities. The Revolution is “irruption, interruption and parting-of-the-ways [*bifurcation*]”, terms that allow us to rediscover the question of the event, but also that of the alarm that must be sounded when progress takes on the appearance of “a train hurtling at high speed into the wall”²⁸. This is also the work he undertakes in discussion with Michael Löwy, commenting on Walter Benjamin. Michael Löwy, as a good Marxist, continues to see the French Revolution as an illusion, whereas Daniel Bensaïd takes seriously the question of the French revolutionary laboratory, which has already been appreciated anew by Walter Benjamin himself.

The fourteenth of the theses on the concept of history is the one where Benjamin exchanges this supposed illusion for a flair for the present-day. “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now. ... Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he

²⁷ This is the subject of my thesis, defended in 1994 and published in 1997, eight years after the publication of *Moi la Révolution*. Sophie Wahnich, *L'impossible citoyen, l'étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1997.

²⁸ Michael Löwy, *Avertissement d'incendie*, Paris,

blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past. This jump, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class give the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution." Historians work in the arena, but real revolutionary history is nothing other than this dialectical leap. This is why the Revolution is neither a continuum of time, nor a tabula rasa, but rather a rearrangement of times. So, for a historian of the French Revolution, their work must then grasp how this rearrangement is carried out. In this respect, Benjamin becomes a historian of the French Revolution by showing that the revolutionary calendar is not a new institution of power but a sign of this capacity for rearrangement. Thesis fifteen: "The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do."

So, here we are with a revolution that rejects the "living-room clock" and recognises "rhythm and beats", the "waves of expansion and contraction".²⁹ Against "triumphal progress" — a Thermidorian theme par excellence — it is necessary to push back against "the concealment of discontinuities" and "the dates that tick by"³⁰. There was no straight line from the Revolution to the bicentenary — and especially not that straight line which sought to use the French Revolution to vindicate all manner of renunciations, starting with the renunciation of the Revolution itself.

Indeed, historians who conceive of the line of social time as a continuous one, and the movement of this line as a largely regular and regulated movement, are opposed by those historians who emphasise the forms of discontinuity that either suspend or interrupt a given movement in a society's life, or displace, reverse or decompose it. And this question itself depends on one's attachment to the possibility of the Revolution, as a change of order, understood as the effect of deliberate action within a social fabric conceived as essentially divided. So, to salvage discontinuity means to emphasise political invention, or the possibility of it. But even without the revolutionary hypothesis, the hypothesis of deliberate action, thinking of time as discontinuous also means conceiving of the movement of time as the product of the interplay that develops in a society between the field of experience and the horizon of expectation.³¹ That is so, whether these expectations are optimistic or pessimistic, whether the experience is dramatic, tragic or exciting, or even tragic and exciting. The emphasis is on conflicts and crises as the driving force behind the movement of history — crises that are of heterogeneous kinds and as such, in a rare and erratic way, "events" in the strong sense: i.e. that which cuts through the field of experience and pierces the horizon of expectation of the people living that experience.

When applied to key historical moments such as the French Revolution, these conceptions have radically opposite effects on interpretation. On the one hand, there is the slippage; on the other, the event. On the one hand, there is a long periodisation in terms of the genesis of the contemporary world, from 1789 to 1889;³² on the other, a sequentiality with sharp angles, one

²⁹ MLR, p.16.

³⁰ MLR, p.15.

³¹ Here we draw on categories from Reinhart Koselleck, *Le futur passé, pour une sémantique du temps historique*, Paris, EHESS, 1990.

³² This is the option taken by François Furet in the volume on the French Revolution published in Hachette's major collection on the history of France. Jean Chesnaux had already pointed this out in "L'axe passé/présent/avenir" in *Cet obscur objet de l'histoire*, *Espace-Temps* 1985, p. 14.

framed by events that effectively reconfigure the revolutionary movement.³³ So, Daniel Bensaïd discusses this choice of key moments which are not those of the commemorative calendar but those of another of those histories of the vanquished which would otherwise disappear. Such is the case with the mention of the shootings at the Champs de Mars, a *tricolore* terror buried by the official genealogical history.

In the first conception, the current French Republic appears as the heir of the Revolution, according to a movement of continuous transmission; in the second case, the Revolution does not produce an inheritance, but a space of possibilities which is to be revisited by restoring the specificity of each of the Revolution's sequences.

In this critique of progress, levelled against François Mitterrand, Daniel Bensaïd rediscovers the critique that Edgar Quinet levelled against the Empire in his day. In 1857, Quinet could no longer tolerate a conception of history which, he said, was "teleological" because its only aim was to present the genealogy of the parliamentary system. "Historians, convinced that the regime of parliamentary omnipotence was the consummation of French history, explained the eras that went before as a preparation for this new era. Everything in the past seemed to them to gravitate towards this present, which they considered indissoluble. This was the thread with which they journeyed through the Middle Ages and modern times ... As they held in their hands the denouement of the drama, they could easily explained the beginning and the twists and turns ... what went before is the cause of what follows, so in France, it must be absolute power that begat freedom!"³⁴ Edgar Quinet wryly remarked on the pseudo-parliamentary regime of the time of the Empire, which did not produce republicans on the model of the French revolutionaries, but moderates who could accommodate to any historical situation, convinced as they are convinced that things are the best they could be. The history of France now becomes that of a generalised rehabilitation of everything that came before and after the French Revolution, since progress has led the men of France to the point where they are now at. For Quinet, what is being erased, through this, are all the efforts to bring about freedom. The revolutionary event itself could become a kind of incident along the way, its failures as well as its successes reduced to nought. The aspect of history most inimical to freedom could be rehabilitated.

On the other hand, if we refuse this teleology, history becomes a universe of resources: laboratories for analysis, certainly, but also part of a relationship of involvement which extends beyond a simple ambition to describe, an incentive to action engaging both the present and the future. Faced with the imperative of objectification of knowledge, this would mean always grasping the measure of the subjective relationship that we also maintain with this present of potential actualisations, and finally with the past that dialogues with this feeling of dialectical leap.

Then, it will not be historians who can dialogue with the Revolution, but rather Joan of Arc and Péguy. For this philosophy of history leads to the steep paths of the mysticism of commitment, the mysticism of politics, the mysticism of freedom which looks identical to the passion of love.³⁵ "Women with historians" are not the same thing as women with a love story, and according to the Revolution, love for her is exactly what historians lack. They have "courted" her, but "few are those who have really tried to understand me, who have loved me for what I am". We might compare the judgement that historians make of the Revolution to the judgement of Joan of Arc by the bishops, and contrast faith — Edgard Quinet's famous faith in the impossible — to *raison d'état* and the rationale of the Church. For Bensaïd, the

³³ On the meaning of historiographical divisions and in particular on the question of sequentiality, see Sylvain Lazarus "Que veulent donc ceux qui ne veulent ni vertu ni terreur? A propos de la politique et de la terreur" in Catherine Kintzler, Hadi Rizk ed, *La République et la terreur*, Paris, Kimé, 1995.

³⁴ Edgar Quinet, *Philosophie de l'histoire de France*, Paris Payot, XXX p. 19)

³⁵ MLR, p. 227.

historians are on this latter side. “Too many historians are not enamoured enough with love to love me, they only love marriage.”³⁶ So, out with the historians. This demands that we propose a philosophy of the revolutionary fact as a political observer of the past as well as the present.

Daniel Bensaïd, a non-actual philosopher?

In this book, Daniel Bensaïd proposes a reflection on the tragedy of this revolution, indeed of any revolution. For the secret of its sadness lies therein, in this Terror where the fusion of law and power, of the state which begins from the people and in this people itself, the source of law. In this context, any contrary opinion becomes a crime. We must try to understand what was at stake then and what is at stake now, in this lightminded manner of putting the Terror on trial, of putting on shows in which today’s people are led to judge the people of times past by judging the king again, and thus effectively bringing the Revolution into dispute in the contemporary eye. “More than grotesque, it was unworthy!”³⁷ “Citizen president, a society that indulges in these judicial murders, in defiance of our fears and our own nerve, speaks volumes about itself and its decadence. And it claims to judge me!”³⁸ Can one judge the act of seizing, with uncertainty and the danger of doubt? This is the beginning of a reflection on responsibility, a reflection on opportunism and the decadence of political *virtue* with Thermidor. But what preoccupies Daniel Bensaïd, alias the Revolution, is the question of revolutionary time, of its non-coincidence, of its actors who come “too early in a world that is too old” or “too late in a world that is too modern”, or “too early and too late at once”. The Revolution is indeed that of a time out of its depth. But it “does not abdicate its principle of hope”.³⁹ “In a history without a last judgment or a promised land, my responsibility is complete. This is the only practical morality worthy of the name”. Ernst Bloch, and also Kant! But what is at stake here is the rejection of the scramble to separate morality from politics. “My politics is a concrete morality and my morality a politics. An aesthetic, even, if you’ll allow me, with only one base of support. Without the refusal to capitulate to the force of things, we would always be on the winning side.”⁴⁰

So, this philosophy of revolution is one of courage and responsibility, and this is why the book seeks above all to tell the story in order to educate the thymos, that skill of zeal, which prevents one from being cowardly and lazy, in thought as in action.

And this effort of thought is itself portrayed; the Revolution thinks, and thinks itself. “Without renouncing universality, without resigning myself to a society that is the random sum of fragmented particularities, I now know that there is no authentic universality, except that which proceeds through the mediation of the particular, and no effective totality, except through the mediation of its moments. I have reached these conclusions at the end of a deconstruction of my received wisdom”.⁴¹

The wry reading of the present and the humour, here, conceal a great distress in the face of a society that has allowed itself to be domesticated, and a chronicle of the end of a world, the end of a revolutionary hope as the rights of man remain an open horizon far beyond “the bourgeois horizon”.⁴²

³⁶ MLR, p. 228.

³⁷ MLR, p. 185

³⁸ MLR, p. 186

³⁹ MLR, p. 219

⁴⁰ MLR, p. 220.

⁴¹ MLR, p. 222.

⁴² MLR, p. 223.

Thirty years later, has this text aged? In fact, it has been transformed. It seems to me to have become a document on the bicentenary as much as a history of the Revolution told to those who do not love it. And today there are even more of these than in 1989, so much so that the universalism still lauded here has taken a hit with postcolonial theories. But, if this text does have some present relevance, this owes precisely to its ability to speak of incomplete rights and of the aesthetics of politics. For the particular struggles today are those of the descendants of slaves, those of the women of Me Too, those of undocumented migrants and those of asylum seekers. In this respect, this book has not aged; it is even ahead of its time, because it does not give up on what we do indeed need to rediscover, this universal which is not imperial universalism but “universally emancipated humanity”⁴³ — “The dissolution of all classes and all oppressions, when there is no longer any reason to oppose a truly good society”.⁴⁴ So yes, we can still read this text, which anticipates the need to defend the French Revolution against its enemies and all its false friends who buried it in 1989.

The fictional uncertainty of the subject makes it possible to play with anachronism — thus to make both history and philosophy, not historicist history in the manner of historians, but history that examines meaning and not just facts. Who today can be an audience for this work? Those who love the work of language, of wit in the double sense of thought and humour, those who want to know what happened in 1989. But there is no need for illusions; the ones which, at the time, drove Bensaïd to take up the fight against Mitterrand are now very far from these concerns and far from the revolutionary universal. This poetics, both political and erudite, the double aspect of a history useful for life, needs to be read in a manner as lively as its writing. Today today the academy seems to have eaten up, under a heavy system of self-fulfilling constraints, any wish of freedom of thought and action. For the moment, a brazen positivism has won out over any commitment. The poetics crosses through time, but its erudite dimension is now only addressed to the out-of-sync actors of a disastrous situation. But the text has been republished by some of these out-of-sync types;⁴⁵ they still believe that it is possible to read a work that works on the porosity of fields, knowledge and practices, a porosity that is all feminine, a porosity that has become revolutionary once again. Can science fiction, as Michel de Certeau⁴⁶ thought about it, still find its place in the contemporary institution of reading? We have to wager that much, if we want to remain alive and if we do not want to adopt the victors' camp too quickly, without a fight.

Sophie Wahnich, April 2021.

⁴³ MLR, p.223.

⁴⁴ MLR, p.223.

⁴⁵ Published by don quichotte in 2017, with a preface by Arlette Farge.

⁴⁶ Michel de Certeau, *L'histoire entre science et fiction*, folio gallimard, 1986.