

## INITIATION RITES AND PAGAN RELIGION IN THE 19TH CENTURY: THE CASE OF CAGLIOSTRO OF *LES ILLUMINÉS* DE Nerval

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### Abstract

Our analysis is dedicated to the portraits of the eccentric enlightened Cagliostro. The hatching of the eccentric illuminisme, as fanciful opinion, of this character cannot abandon the historic period in which the visionaries reproduce their ideas concerning the religion, aimed at the Christianity and the Paganism. Nerval finds a good opportunity to center himself on spiritual e(x)centricities of the other one. This paper aims to show how Nerval, at the same time fascinated and critical with regard to the systems of his character, look himself through this one for his own religious way with all the more fervor and concern as he knows that he is not able to be connected with what that dogma whether it is.

**Keywords:** *antique superstition, dogma, illuminisme, lights, pagan religion, rites, spiritual e(x)centricities*

The analysis of the text dedicated to Cagliostro allows us to show, on one hand, how much the lights arise from fancies, on the other hand, how much the mystic fancies stop, paradoxically, being imperious and harmful by themselves in the evolution of an individual or collective mentality. This part will also allow us to reveal the body degraded by the Christianity and the counterfeit of its evangelic dogma, once secularized in the speeches and in the creeds of the utopian Socialists – the moralizing apostles of a natural religion which we call the mystic socialism or the socialist Christianity.

The religion, converted in a shape of the Christianized socialism, is not than a profane ritual with a performative character, the sacred rites change in initiation rites, the Christian symbols lose their senses and are emptied of their referentiality, the Christian principles and the words slide towards revolutionary messages of freedom and equality, the liturgy of the Lord's Supper is replaced by the Bacchic and Dionysian banquet, the church, the holy place, is replaced by the temple, the divine light is converted in an artificial light (which is not any more the place

of a revelation, but of fantasy, of parody and of theatricality), God does not have a place anymore being replaced by "the genius of the truth, the famous, the immortal and the divine Cagliostro" (Nerval, 1984: 1130). The lights, the darkness and the twilights appear and disappear as on the scene of a theater the actors of which are the women, the shepherdesses and the lovers. The illusions and the fancies increase; the reality is hidden under veils and masks, as if the spirituality was only a simulacrum and an illusion: "[...] we could imagine that spiritual human beings are far above the rough human beings" (*Idem*: 1131).

Mrs de Cagliostro's initiation rites, the mistress of the *Egyptian lodge*, are not based on the real masonic or religious tradition, but they are rather of political inspiration. She wants to impose a new social order: the woman has to become emancipated of the supervision of the man and "to break the shameful yoke" which make them obey the "cruel gods". That the man kills the woman, it comes of Platonic love: the women succumb to the seduction of the lovers losing the "palm of the victory" as the feminine character of the story had promised to them if they triumph against temptation of the carnal pleasure. Initiation rites fail, Mrs de Cagliostro's commands (the verb to order returns several times in the text) are poorly respected:

Les génies se mirent à souper. Vingt fois la mousse pétillante du vin de Sillery jaillit au plafond. La gaieté redouble, les épigrammes arrivent, les bons mots se succèdent, la folie se mêle aux propos, l'ivresse du bonheur est peinte dans tous les yeux, les chansons ingénues en sont l'interprète, d'innocentes caresses sont permises; il se glisse un peu de désordre

dans les toilettes; on propose la danse, on valse plus qu'on ne saute; l'Amour exilé depuis quelque temps, secoue son flambeau; on oublie les serments, le génie de la vérité, les torts des hommes, on abjure l'erreur de l'imagination (*Ibidem*).

The wife of Cagliostro establishes "silk links" between the women, as if these links were already social connection, solidarity and "invincible union", as says it Cagliostro, but always she divides them in a group, each in her apartment, and encourages them to break with the dependence of the man, the romantic relationships and to proclaim so their freedom. It is as the break with the romantic relationship send back to the break of the former social relationships. Tsujikawa considers this test being derisory and trivial with regard to the Masonic test, but also herald of a very revolutionary message (Tsujikawa, 2010: 204). In theory, she wants all the women to be identical, equal and emancipated, but practically these are solitary in this essay of standardization or homogenization of the human condition. Léonore, the only girl of the light is herself reluctant to the Mrs Cagliostro's initiatory program. As says it Tsujikawa, "she (Léonore) embodies the silent refusal against a tyrannical and totalitarian law, paradoxically established in the name of the freedom and for well being of the women" (*Idem*: 205).

- Ce n'est pas vous que je hais, répondit-elle, c'est votre sexe; ce sont vos lois tyranniques, cruelles!
- Hélas! de ce sexe proscrit aujourd'hui, vous n'avez encore connu que moi. Où donc est mon despotisme; quand ai-je eu le malheur d'affliger ce que j'aime? [...] Léonore soupirait et ne savait pas accuser celui qu'elle adorait (Nerval, 1984: 1129).

Even if Nerval stays behind the scenes of this text, its echo can be listened from time to time. The fact that he chosen to tear away and to work certain passages of their object source to the detriment of the other passages, to sweeten certain scenes or to plagiarize such already marks the presence of its critical voice which, it is necessary to say it remains always contradictory.

The failures of initiation rites proposed by Mrs de Cagliostro show in a way the skepticism of the author to the sectarian or marginal forms of the illuminisme and its distrust towards the power of regeneration of the Revolution or the application of the mystic ideas in politics (see the chapter concerning the heathen of the Republic). However, let us not forget what Nerval says in its foreword: "far from me the thought, writes Nerval about its eccentric of the philosophy, to attack those of their successors who suffer today to have tried too crazily or too early the realization of their dreams" (Nerval, 1984: 890). Nerval makes part certainly of these successors.

The author opens the text on Cagliostro to say that the paganism, in spite of the triumph of the Christianity, always existed under the layer of the latter:

Lorsque le catholicisme triompha décidément du paganisme dans toute l'Europe, et construisit dès lors l'édifice féodal qui subsista jusqu'au XVe siècle, - c'est-à-dire pendant l'espace de mille ans, - il ne put comprimer et détruire partout l'esprit des coutumes anciennes, ni les idées philosophiques qui avaient transformé le principe païen à l'époque de la réaction polythéiste opérée par l'empereur Julien (*Idem*: 1119).

The pagan temple destroyed of Saint-Denis, the "broken graves", the "offended bones", the "fragments of statues" and popular beliefs still stay, underlines Nerval, as testimony under the foundations of churches, such as deconstructed text survives by his "remains", under the layer of a reconstructed text through rewriting. The palimpsest gives to discover it. Jean Nicolas Illouz says that the "[...] palimpsest is also a figure of the text - a double text, in two, from which the writing, as shaded by another writing, simultaneously lets come back in her its old plans and erases them in its own trail" (Illouz, 1997: 222). The cults of "god Jou", the former goddess of the Parisians, Isis, or of the Mothers continue to exist, tells us Gérard de Nerval, even if they were replaced by the modern cults. So much would be worth saying that the cultural and religious palimpsests become commemorative

sites and a place of reinvention of the “old customs”, of the “rites” and of the “antique superstitions”. Ruins are not simple objects, but the “presence of what is absent” (Toma, 2009: 5). As for the abolished gods, they survive in celestial bodies under forms of “elementary spirits”. It is in contexts, historic and religious, unstable and moved away from the center where the values deteriorate, the moral principles ruin themselves, and where reference frames do not resist any more the degradation, where the proliferation of eccentric is possible. Bruno Tritsmans offers us a synthesis in this direction:

Le roi de Bicêtre parle d’une « époque de guerres et de ruines qui frappaient toutes les hautes maisons de France », et l’ « Histoire de l’abbé de Bucquoy » commence par dire que « le grand siècle n’était plus », et présente l’époque où se déroule l’action comme une période d’ «abus ». Restif de la Bretonne [...] était animé par une « profonde antipathie pour ces institutions féodales, survivant encore dans la société tolérante du XVIIIe siècle », et son action est inscrite dans « cette étrange dépravation de la société du dix-huitième siècle ». Le milieu de Jacques Cazotte est comparé à celui de *L’Ane d’or* d’Apulée, où l’on cherche « sous les débris des mythologies qui s’écroulent les traces des superstitions antérieures ou persistantes » (NPIII, 1082). Au début de « Cagliostro », la destruction des dieux anciens par l’Eglise est stigmatisée, et c’est sur cette ruine que se développe « une école moitié religieuse, moitié philosophique », nécessaire aux « imaginations rêveuses et délicates. Quintus Aucler me la destruction opérée par la Révolution française, qui a balayé les « débris » (NPIII, 1137) de l’ordre ancien : « l’objet détruit, il reste la place » (NPIII, 1138). Les « idées » d’Aucler, qui prône un retour un culte des dieux antiques, sont à comprendre, nous dit le narrateur, « à défaut de religion positive » (NPIII, 1160). D’une façon ou d’une autre, les « illuminés » essaient de résoudre ou du moins de réagir à cette crise historique diffuse mais omniprésente (Tritsman, 1993: 31).

Quintus Aucler, as Dupont de Nemours, Fabre d’Olivet or Saint Germain, looks for the mysteries of the world outside of the Christianity, namely in the paganism, in the neo-paganism and in the indouisme. In any other text of the *Les Illuminés* we don’t find a frontal attack against Christianity as in Quintus Aucler.

Although the personal implication of Nerval is thin in this last text rather of Quintus Aucler than on seen Quintus Aucler – that we quote massively from *Thréicie* of this “the last pagan” – the brief introduction taken out of the feather of Nerval is extremely interesting. In this text where we expose the thought of Aucler, the anti-Christian convinced, it is surprising to find a passage in which Nerval regrets the disappearance of the Christian religion:

S’il était vrai, selon l’expression d’un philosophe moderne, que la religion chrétienne n’eût guère plus d’un siècle à vivre encore, -ne faudrait-il pas s’attacher avec larmes et avec prières aux pieds sanglants de ce Christ détaché de l’arbre mystique, à la robe immaculée de cette Vierge mère, -expression suprême de l’alliance antique du ciel et de la terre, -dernier baiser de l’esprit divin qui pleure et qui s’envole ! (Nerval, 1984: 1159).

Why did Nerval choose to look into the *Thréicie* of Quintus Aucler? His gesture to select and favor this text corresponds implicitly to the adherence to ideas which the pagan Quintus Aucler exposes in his work? Either Nerval finds a good opportunity to center himself on spiritual ex(-)centricities of the other one? We know well that Nerval regrets many a time in its papers the abolition of the gods of the sky and that he cries out their return, but how to explain the sentence which closes this last text?

Ainsi se termina la vie du dernier païen. Il abjura ces dieux qui, sans doute, ne lui avaient pas apporté au lit de mort les consolations attendues. Le Nazaréen triompha encore de ses ennemis ressuscités après treize siècles. La *Thréicie* n’en est pas moins un appendice curieux au *Misopogon* de l’empereur Julien (Nerval, 1984: 1162).

Is it about a lucid self-criticism of having obeyed, himself, the same illusions of Aucler? How not recover in the illusions, Nerval seems to say, as much as the Revolution did not give way to the official religion?: “Si la chute successive des croyances conduisait à un résultat, ne serait-il pas plus consolant de tomber dans l’excès contraire et d’essayer de se reprendre aux illusions du passé ?” (Nerval, 1991: 63) But, always Gérard de Nerval suggests us that the skepticism is not exclusively generated by the death of the religions, but also by the personal shift or by the lack of solid implanting on the ground of the Christian faith. Furthermore, the ruins of the institutional churches should not be the ruins of a heart filled with faith: “Ceux de nos pères qui s’étaient dévoués avec sincérité et courage à l’émancipation de la pensée humaine se virent contraints peut-être à confondre la religion elle-même avec les institutions dont elle paraît les ruines” (*Idem*: 1138).

Jacques Cazotte and Gérard de Nerval are two authors who are in a permanent state of *unstable equilibrium* between the lights and the light. Their composite illuminisme destabilizes, but satisfies at the same time their cognitive, emotional, metaphysical and esthetic needs.

In conclusion, the penultimate text of *Les Illuminés* by Nerval associates the portrait of Cagliostro to reveal the historic and religious compost which allows the hatching of the illuminisme, but also to show how the author, at the same time fascinated and critical with regard to the system of his character, look himself

through him for its own religious way with all the more fervor and concern as it knows how to not be able to be connected with what that dogma whether it is.

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