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Movement and Montage in André Chénier's "Ode à Versailles" (1793)

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The poet and journalist André Chénier moved from Paris to Versailles at the beginning of April 1793 (Chénier 2005, 66). Louis XVI had been executed in the January of that year; Britain, the Netherlands and Spain had joined the first European coalition at war with the revolutionary republic in February; in March civil war had broken out in the Vendée and Midi and the capital was hit by serious food shortages and food riots; General Charles François Dumouriez defected to the Austrians in early April just after the revolutionary leader Georges-Jacques Danton had called for the creation of both the Comité de Salut Public and the Tribunal révolutionnaire, that is, the political instruments of future Terror. On a more personal level, André Chénier's father had recently had his 'patriotisme' called into question by his revolutionary section (Walter 272). This suggested strongly that he could no longer protect his son who was known as the author of a number of virulent, public attacks on the Jacobins in the Journal de Paris, and who also had known correspondence with friends in England, now a declared enemy of the revolutionary regime.

Versailles was a suitable safe haven for Chénier for several reasons. It was relatively distant from the capital and it was also the administrative centre of his younger brother, Marie-Joseph's, constituency as a Jacobin deputy for the Seine-et-Oise. So the poet moved into 37 rue de Satory on the outskirts of the town, a stone's throw from the 'Jeu de Paume' tennis court where the famous revolutionary oath of that name had been taken on 20 June 1789. His lodgings in Versailles had the added advantage of being only two kilometres from his friends, the Lecouteulx family, who lived in the direction of Louveciennes; thus he could be in weekly, if not daily, contact with his platonic love-interest, Françoise Lecouteulx, known to friends and family as 'Fanny'. To reach his friends' residence, Chénier avoided the city streets and frequently walked through the woods and grounds of the largely deserted Chateau of Versailles. However, by early November 1793, when it is generally thought that Chénier composed his "Ode à Versailles," a sense of retrenchment and anxiety prevailed (Chénier, *Œuvres poétiques* 68-69). Both Fanny's husband and father were under house arrest and would be sent to prison in early December. News had also just reached the city of the show-trial and serial execution of the twenty-one Girondin deputies arrested in the June of that year. In other words, all the contextual elements of Chénier's poem were in place.

Here I would ask the reader to read the poem and/or its English translation in order to appreciate more fully the analysis that follows.

The "Ode à Versailles" is clearly articulated around a series of movements: it depicts an initial flight from Paris to find refuge and peace in Versailles and its bucolic surroundings; yet the Chateau's past glories contrast with the poet's idleness and despondency there; these feelings are redeemed only by sharing walks in the palace grounds with his beloved, his sole remaining poetic inspiration. Nonetheless, the Revolution crashes back into his lover's reverie, with the spectre of its innocent victims haunting and destroying this idyll. Motion in the poem is ultimately circular: it appears as a striking-out away from Paris into the open Versaillais countryside ("Paris me semble un autre empire"), but Paris returns abruptly and brutally in the last stanza, as though the poet carried with him terrible visions of revolutionary violence which were visited upon his new environment. Consequently, the movement to Versailles is less about motion than emotion. It is an ode 'à Versailles' not as a physical journey but as an affective cry. It opens with this very apostrophe "O Versaille" and continues in irregular verse form. Its lines of 8, 8, 12, 8, 12, 8 syllables offset a rhyme scheme of aa, b, cc, b, with the dissonant counterpoint of metre and rhyme designed to convey emotional mobility and instability (what we might call 'com-motion').

Moreover, the poem constitutes a dramatization of both the poet's situation and poetic utterance itself, for instance in lines 44-46, "Pour elle seule encore abonde/ Cette source […] qui coulait de ma bouche." It is what Agnès Fontvieille-Cordani has called in relation to Chénier's earlier elegies "la mise en scène de l'énonciation poétique" (119). Yet in the "Ode à Versailles," this staging of the poetic speech-act [scène d'énonciation] is doubled with the staging of an act of vision [scène de visualisation], most notably in the echoing homonyms "voix" (voice) and "vois" (I see). There is then a simultaneous embodying of emotion in both language and the senses in Chénier's poem, which is also in keeping with eighteenth-century empirical philosophy, as in Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's 'sensualisme' according to which sensation and thought are coterminous. So Chénier's verse is seen as arising organically from the emotions inspiring it. Poetry is at one with its corporeal production, feeling directly generating language, conflating the sensual (kisses) and the verbal (words) in an eroticization of their shared site, the 'bouche/lèvres' (lines 45-46). Yet these emotions are themselves part of an already initiated flow of affects and words between Chénier and his

beloved, part of a reciprocal and ceaseless circulation that is also relayed by their physical environment. Thus line 33, "Quand un regard nous trouble et le cœur et la voix," is echoed quite literally in line 39, "Son nom, qu'à tes forêts j'ose apprendre le soir," addressing the Versaillais woods which have already been invoked as a privileged interlocutor, "Dès que chez toi je vois sourire/ Mes pénates secrets couronnés de rameaux" (lines 8-9). The natural world participates in the lovers' exchange of emotional energy because it too is a manifestation of a philosophical and poetic pantheism already discernible in Chénier's writing well before the Revolution (McCallam 304-306).

The fluidity of emotion is expressed most clearly by the verb 'couler' (to flow, to run) which describes at once the calming effect of the Versailles grounds (line 6) and the flow of the poet's words (line 45). Both vision and language are in flux, yet ultimately like the celebrated fountains in the Chateau gardens, they do not lead out of Paris or away from the Revolution, but spout and fall on the spot. In other words, there is no escape. The poet is caught between the soft 'ombres' of the shaded walkways and the livid 'ombres' of the butchered dead; between dilapidated royal splendour and bloody revolutionary violence; between an Absolutism-that-was and a Terror-that-is-to-be. Despite the poem's apparent movement, the poet (and the reader) remains suspended between two states in both an ontological and a political sense. Politically, at least, the missing articulation here is the constitutional monarchy that Chénier hoped would result from the upheavals of 1789. Yet a constitutional monarchy is precisely the political settlement that never was, and especially never was in Versailles. The 'journées d'octobre' of 1789 displaced the royal family from their seat of power in Versailles to the Tuileries in Paris from where the disastrous 'Fuite à Varennes', or failed royal attempt to flee the Revolution of June 1791, invalidated the monarchical constitution of that year before it was even voted. Versailles, then, is doubly haunted, doubly evacuated of ideal, moderate government.[1] In this sense, the 'Ode' might be read as a direct address to place, to Versailles itself – both site of a deserted palace and metonym of lost kingship – in order to re-establish a sense of middle-ground legitimacy, to resist at once the contradictory ideological movements pulling the poet in different directions, between the Sun King and Robespierre, so to speak. Ontologically, the poem's evocation of place is studded with the topographical markers of a lover's refuge, its "berceaux" "pénates secrets," and "bosquets," representing so many "frais asiles" which are meant to protect from the hostile world beyond. Yet it becomes apparent that the Versailles of late 1793 is a place where neither blissful forgetting ("un peu de calme et d'oubli") nor remembered love ("douces chimères d'amours") can conjure away the political present; that private relations – be they of study or love – are impossible to maintain under an oppressive and unjust regime. As the last stanza makes clear, the Revolution has politicized all space so that even the poet's private fantasies of secluded study or bucolic love are spoilt and sacked by its public acts of violence. The poem nonetheless voices a defiance against its own dénouement. From the opening apostrophe onwards, it constitutes an address, an appeal to all that resonates in the name 'Versailles', thereby wresting the power of the nominative speech-act from the Jacobins for whom it had become a favoured discursive weapon. Indeed, at a time when the revolutionary committees, sections and représentants-en-mission were busy renaming Parisian streets or southern cities where revolt had been crushed, Georges Buisson and Édouard Guitton claim that a further spur to Chénier writing the "Ode à Versailles" was his indignation on hearing in early November 1793 that the Convention had grandiosely voted to rename the town of Montmorency as 'Émile' in homage to Rousseau's work of that name (Chénier, *Œuvres poétiques* 68-69).

Yet the poem grapples with a lot more than the Revolution's brutal rejection of monarchy, its forcible trespassing into private space or its crude renaming of the public domain. It is just as preoccupied with interrogating the Jacobin's rhetorical manipulations of temporality, specifically the discourses of history. In fact, at some point in the decade before the Revolution, André Chénier had already drafted an unpublished Essai sur les causes et les effets de la perfection et de la décadence des lettres et des arts (Chénier, *Œuvres complètes* 621-693). Its very title stands as a summary of the dual eighteenth-century obsession with causality and teleology; that is, with seeking the cause and effect of historical events and ascertaining more generally whether their succession implied irresistible progress or irremediable decline. In a sense, the Revolution accentuated this latter tension between progressive and decadent tendencies of historiographical interpretation, drawing ambivalently on both to assert its own unique historical significance. Was the Revolution not a salutary return to the Ancients (a repudiation of a degenerate present, identified and rejected in the designation 'Ancien Régime') and at the same time the inevitable advance towards a new Jerusalem (the hallowed Republic of Virtue, the glorious dawn that would make sense of so much Terror)? In other words, it sought a double exit from the temporality of history in aspiring at once to the eternal present of Arcadian and millenarian visions of society.

As the title of the "Ode à Versailles" suggests, André Chénier sought specifically here to challenge the narrative of a positivist historiography that presented the march of time as an inexorable process of human perfection, ironically most stridently expressed in Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, written while its Girondin author was in hiding from the same forces of persecution that Chénier was escaping in Versailles. In keeping with the general tenor of his earlier Essai, Chénier's poem of late 1793 evokes instead a seemingly irreversible decline, the passing of a

civilization epitomized by the Versailles of its title. In this recasting of history, the Revolution does not prefigure a dazzlingly radiant future, but the advent of ultimate tyranny and the triumph of its barbarian masses, in other words the inevitable end-point of eighteenth-century 'decline and fall' narratives from Montesquieu to Volney via Rousseau and Gibbon.[2] The "Ode à Versailles" is therefore meant as a rebuttal at once of revolutionary historiography and Jacobin discourse. It is written to arrest the flow of words coming from the Convention and the Parisian streets and to reclaim meaning for an alternative history so that a private space might once again be opened up in which "l'homme juste et magnanime" (line 50) might enjoy private study and bucolic love. In this much, poetry is its necessary medium, since journalism – even Chénier's own articulate, anti-Jacobin journalism – was part of a celebration of the present, of the topical and 'actuel'. However inadvertently, journalism only served to reinforce the revolutionary regime's self-aggrandizing projection of itself as a unique historical actor, the political corollary of what Michel Foucault has called the Enlightenment's very modern "heroicization of the present" (569).

The paradox is that the "Ode à Versailles" uses poetic movement to arrest prevailing political and historiographical discourse. But the question then arises: how exactly does it do this? At this point, my analysis of the poem necessarily becomes more speculative and tentative and reaches beyond existing studies on Chénier and eighteenth-century poetics to attempt an answer. Specifically, I draw on a critical-theoretical understanding of the practice of montage, as defined in a short essay by the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, on the experimental cinema of the French situationist Guy Debord. Here 'montage' means a process of creative editing to produce a series of successive, often superimposed, images which give the illusion of movement while, crucially, at the same time resisting that same movement by breaking it down into clearly static, constituent frames or stills. Agamben claims that the two transcendental conditions allowing for this "image-movement" (314), as he calls it, are repetition and stoppage. Repetition is not to be understood simplistically as the recurrence of the identical but as "return as the possibility of what was" (Agamben 315-316). That is, there is a temporal supplement to repetition which connotes the possible restoration of a past which, by its very definition as 'past', cannot return or be restored. As such repetition at once suggests and checks temporal or historical flows. Insofar as this relates to Chénier's poem, we find this form of repetition in the subtle echoes set up between recurrent, though inflected, terms: place names (Versaille/s), proper nouns (Dieux), verbs (coule/coulait), adjectives (sombre/s) and tellingly the adverb 'jadis' which itself means 'formerly', 'once'. The key to the poem might then lie in this last word insofar as it designates a past state which returns yet which can never be fully restored to the present. As for stoppage, in both Debord's films and in Chénier's poem, this refers to the way in which montage allows for the interruption of flows of words, the checking of "flux of meaning" (Agamben 317). Indeed, according to Agamben, it is a function inherent in poetry itself, since poetry uses its caesurae and enjambements to make interruption and disjunction manifest both on the page and in utterance (Agamben 317). It is the very opposite of the 'discours-fleuve' or the Jacobin orator or the Revolution's triumphant historical metanarratives.

The figures of repetition and stoppage in the "Ode à Versailles" mean that the poem as medium refuses to disappear, to efface itself in its act of expression. On the contrary, the insistent presence of its emotions and its language offers the poet a means at once of political resistance and historical testimony outside of the apparently ceaseless circuits of language and affect deployed by the Jacobin powers that be. Less the expression of a thwarted flight from revolutionary Paris, the "Ode à Versailles" might then be seen as a sort of poetic last stand against the Revolution and the looming Terror, as the poetic embodiment of what Jean Marie Goulemot and Jean-Jacques Tatin-Gourier call André Chénier's "halte et refuge intimes" (Goulemot and Tatin-Gourier 78) in Versailles in 1793.

Notes

[1] The feminization of the Versailles grounds in their association with Fanny Lecouteulx might also allow for a political reading with reference to the 'ghost' of Marie-Antoinette, specifically in line 38 "Tu conserves sa noble image." The Queen's recent execution (16 October 1793) might also have encouraged such an allusion. I am indebted to Nathalie Solomon, Université de Perpignan, for this argument.

[2] Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence (1734), Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1754), Edward Gibbon, History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776-1789), Constantin François de Volney, Les Ruines, ou méditation sur les révolutions des empires (1791).

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