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Le Rétif

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“Humanity marches enveloped in a veil of illusions,” a thinker — Marc Guyau — said. In fact, it seems that without this veil men aren’t capable of marching. Barely has reality torn a blindfold from them than they hasten to put on another, as if their too-weak eyes were afraid to see things as they are. Their intelligence requires the prism of falsehood.

The scandals of Panama, Dreyfus, Syveton, Steinhell, etc; the turpitudes and incapacities of politicians, and the rifle blows of Narbonne, Draveil, and Villeneuve have, for a considerable minority, torn away the veil of the parliamentary illusion.

We hoped for everything from the ballot. We had faith in the good faith and power of the nation’s representatives. And that hope, that faith prevented us from seeing the fundamental idiocy of the system, which consists in delegating one to look after the needs of all. But the ballot revealed itself to be a paper rag. Parliamentarians showed themselves to be ambitious, greedy, corrupt, and most of all, mediocre. . . . Men appeared who were angered by the electoral farce, the comedy of reforms, the reign of republican clowns. A minority was born, which necessarily grows every day and upon which the old illusion has no hold.

Nevertheless, in order to inspire men used to being led, in order to stimulate their activity, images are needed. . . . and so, replacing the defunct parliamentary illusion the other illusion was forged and was encrusted onto brains: the revolutionary illusion.

Yes, laws are powerless to transform society, parliamentary assemblies are pitiful, and there is nothing to expect from governments. But what legislation can’t do demonstrations and strikes will do; and union assemblies will keep the promises of their pitiful predecessors: the Chambers. Finally, we can expect everything from the conscious proletariat which. . . . and which. . . . and that. . . .

Once the good suckers thought that sonorous speeches, official texts written and placarded with solemnity were capable of favorably modifying social life. This time has passed. At present it is thought that on order to do this it suffices to demolish street lamps, burn kiosks, to “knock off” a cop from time to time (on very serious occasions.)

Once, popular hopes were concentrated on deputies. These paunchy messieurs were capable of some morning decreeing marvelous things. Alas! Now that we've seen them slog through the mud the ideal type of the transformer appears a bit differently. It's the "comrade secretary," influential member of the CGT, whose voice during meetings unleashes waves of enthusiasm. It's Pataud, — his malicious and jovial face, his imperative speech. . . and it's also the long-haired revolutionary, with his belligerent hat, and who (his neighbors affirm) never goes out without his two automatic pistols. . .

Once the brave voters trusted in parliament — incarnation of the Welfare State — to organize their happiness. Only the "backward masses" today still maintain so foolish a confidence in their representatives. The "advanced," the "conscious," in short: the revolutionaries know what the state and parliament are worth. So they announce to us that after the general strike it will be the CGT that will organize universal felicity and the union committees will deliberate on the measures to be taken for the common welfare. As you can see, this in no way resembles the old parliamentary regime.

Like all errors, it was harmful to be made drunk by the parliamentary illusion. And it earned for the good citizens of this country the admirable democratic regime, so well illustrated by the Russian alliance — O! Most advantageous of alliances, the great and small affairs, and, finally the reign of Clemenceau and Briand. . . while waiting for that of Jaures. M. Viviani — today His Excellency — once said a propos of I don't know which legislature: "There was the Lost Chamber, and there is the Infamous Chamber," and this could equally be said of all the legislatures that have followed, vainly striving to surpass each other in buffooneries. Illusions cost dearly.

And yet, though it's been costly to the poor buggers who have benevolently had their heads shaved, been whipped and shot down, the parliamentary illusion has not done half as much harm as the other illusion can do.

Oh, don't worry. We'll get over this. We'll end up by seeing that the little game of shake-ups doesn't help at all. And we won't see the bloody dawn rise that M. Meric announces to us. Illusions don't last forever. But men will have died for the Cause, died stupidly, uselessly.

In order to act fruitfully — in whatever way — it is indispensable to know how to reflect, calculate, appreciate an action, to know how to accomplish it with a vigorous hand. The actor — the individual whose revolt, violent or not, is a factor in progress — must be a strong personality, conscious, clear-headed and proud, not clouded with hatred or illusions.

To think that impulsive, defective, ignorant crowds will have done with the morbid illogic of capitalist society is a vulgar illusion. It is precisely the defects of these crowds that must be destroyed so that life can be ample and good for all. Bestial violence, hatred, the sheep-like spirit of leaders, the credulity of the crowds, these are what must be annihilated in order to transform society. Improving individuals, purifying them, making them strong, making them ardently love and desire life, making them capable of salutary revolts: these are the sole results. There is no salvation outside the renewal of man!

But one or two generations will have wasted their strength in foolish efforts. We would have wasted life — that's all.

We'll get over this. The great day isn't ready to shine, and probably never will shine, except in the feverish imaginings of its prophets.

And yet, since this dream makes the crowd drunk let's look and see what it presages for us. Let's see what these efforts tend to, what they will manage to do if an impossible victory was to crown them.

Not too long ago a pamphlet came out that shows us what this will be. Our old friend, Citizen Meric, aka Flax, is the author. It is titled: "How We Will Make the Revolution." This pamphlet is serious, like the program of a future party. In certain places it is as enthralling as the novels of Captain Danrit. In its general appearance it recalls the writings of Mark Twain, the phlegmatic and impassible humor of the Americans.

Citizen Meric — who knows what he's about — demonstrates that when all is said and done a revolution is an easy thing. Our Russian friends can have no doubts on this subject. And then, a few words on the organized proletariat. But without a doubt the most interesting chapter is the one that shows us what will happen after the triumphant insurrection. Here it is possible to see just how far intelligences in the throes of an illusion can be led astray. For if it is possible that Citizen Meric doesn't believe a single word of what he says, it is certain that many people sincerely conceive what he has formulated.

On the day after the great day Citizen Meric announces the revolutionary dictatorship, backed by the Terror. Woe to the adversaries of the new social order (read: The Federal Committee). "Violence alone could give us our momentary victory; terror alone can preserve that victory . . . we must not fear being ferocious! We'll speak of justice, goodness and liberty afterwards." And so, dear anti-authoritarian friends, we have been warned.

From these lines we can understand the little enthusiasm among individualists inspired by M. Meric's revolution. The present order crushes us, tracks us down, kills us. The revolutionary order will crush us, will track us down, will kill us. The party can count on our collaboration.

But Citizen Meric gets better and better. On page 22 we note the existence of two committees, and a revolutionary army and police. The rebels will be executed (sic,sic, sic). Isn't this interesting?

The unions "will order everyone to get to work," or else watch out. After this a workers parliament (sic) will be named, which "will have nothing in common with the odious parliamentarism of today." Yeah, sure. Even more as we've already noted, this charming little regime will have nothing in common with the abominable bourgeois oppression.

There will also be a permanent labor council. And the comrade ends by saying forthwith: "The current CGT already gives an approximate idea of the future working class organization." Won't that be lovely!

In order to defend the new fatherland thus constructed, and which will certainly be the gentlest of fatherlands, oh ineffable Meric, militias will be formed. For war is inevitable. . .

And after talking about a "new morality imposing heavy obligations and sacrifices," after having told us of revolutionary prisons and tribunals, in short, of what he himself calls worker tyranny, Citizen Meric tranquilly concludes: "This isn't for today, or for tomorrow." Didn't I tell you he had the impassible humor of the Anglo-Saxons!

* * *

Citizen Meric is perhaps a joker or a refined humorist knowing how push a joke to an extreme. I'd like to think so. But the fact is that there are simple souls who accept these writings as gospel.

The harmful illusion is that of the belief in this redeeming revolution, when there is no other redemption than that of the human personality, when we can build nothing without having made better and stronger men.

The evil illusion is that of waiting for the revolt of the crowd, of the organized, disciplined, regimented masses. In fact, the only fertile acts are those committed by individuals knowing clearly what they want and advancing without let or hindrance, needing neither chiefs nor discipline. In fact, the only good rebellions are the immediate

rebellions of individuals refusing to wait any longer and decided to immediate grab their portion of joy.

The imbecilic illusion is that of imagining that by violence alone, by terror, by bombs and rifles we can create the new society. Violence employed by brutes will be absurd and harmful. A society founded on gibbets, maintained by the force of chains, will always be ignobly oppressive. The revolution of anger and hatred, the revolution of unionized fanatics can only make vainly flow torrents of blood and prepare the arrival of new filibusterers.

In 1789 Robespierre's dictatorship prepared the way for the Empire. The guillotines were the prelude to the Napoleonic carnage. The Terror, by decreasing the value of human life, allowed free rein to the bloody folly of the "Little Corsican." This, brutally, is history's response to revolutionary illusions.

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To be sure, society does not evolve without bumps, crises, bloody shocks. Often, angry revolts, dictated by sentimental indignation or instilled with faith in the salutary power of violence, break out and are quickly repressed in the horrors of bourgeois reaction. They have their use. They are inevitable. But we should have no illusions as to their fate. Above all, we should not fool ourselves as to the transformative value of force — of the blind force of fanaticized crowds.

In certain circumstances acts of violence can be precious: when they complete the work already accomplished by the revolution in mentalities. And it's a right, a right that sometimes becomes a duty, to rebel by force against the crushing weight of authoritarian institutions. But to deduce from this that the Terror is panacea is a lamentable error in reasoning.

To think that through disordered shake-ups and with the savage energy of worker cohorts we can abolish a power, establish a bit of harmony, is infantile.

To imagine the ideal actor in the form of an individual quick with the fist — or the gun — is naive.