

"UNE TRADUCTION ANGLAISE DE L'ESSAI SUR LES SIGNES"

(suite et fin)

La revue bimestrielle new-yorkaise de l'Ordre du lys et de l'aigle, imprimée à Paris et intitulée *The Force of Truth* (La Force de la vérité), a connu trois numéros, en 1939, respectivement janvier-février, mars-avril, mai-juin; puis la guerre en interrompit la publication.

Or, Saint-Martin figure au panthéon de l'OLA et, dès son premier numéro, *The Force of Truth* commença la publication d'une traduction anglaise d'un opuscule du Philosophe inconnu. Et quel opuscule ? *L'Essai sur les signes et sur les idées* ! De ce mémoire trop négligé par les martinistes, la rédaction eut la perspicacité et le courage d'avertir, en liminaire, qu'il constitue en lui-même un des ouvrages les plus importants du point de vue initiatique et qu'il contribuera sans aucun doute à donner au lecteur une vue rapide mais différente de l'art de se connaître soi-même. Puisse le lecteur d'aujourd'hui entendre cet avis inattendu pour sa gouverne ! Le texte français est depuis peu disponible en librairie.

La dernière "Chronique saint-martinienne" (XVIII, *EdC*, n° 13 & 14) donne de premières indications sur l'*Essai* et le rapport de l'OLA au martinisme, ainsi qu'une livraison de la traduction anglaise en question. L'intérêt suscité nous a persuadé de publier les deux autres livraisons de ce texte. Il n'était pas prévu jadis qu'il fût intégral, mais les circonstances l'ont encore raccourci. Voilà donc maintenant le tout de ce qui a paru, dans le n° 1 (ci-après), le n° 2 ("Chronique saint martinienne" XVIII) et le n° 3 (ci-après).

Treatise of the Signs

by Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin . The Unknown Philosopher.

The treatise, of which we give the translation hereafter, is taken from the last work of Claude de Saint Martin, entitled "The Crocodile" or the War of the Good and the Evil.

It was printed in the year VII of the French Republic, that is to say, in 1800 at Paris. It has never been printed again, and consequently is extremely rare.

We cannot give the entire work here, but the Treatise of the Signs constitutes, by itself, one of the most important works, from the initiatic point of view, and will contribute, without doubt, to give to the reader a different and rapid view of the art of knowing oneself.

We shall have the occasion of presenting in this Review some documents concerning Martinism, which was, in the past, one of the most exalted forms of the traditional Initiation.

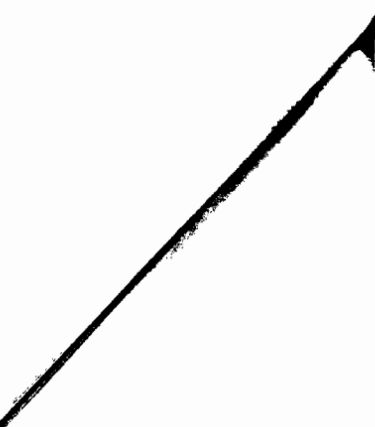
The treatise of the signs is given under the form of an answer to a question brought forth by the Institute, and thus conceived:

"What is the influence of the signs upon the formation of ideas?"

TREATISE OF THE SIGNS

OF THE NATURE OF THE SIGNS.

If natural objects have external properties, such as colours, odours, forms, dimensions, they also have internal properties which we can enjoy only at the expense of their envelopes and only by disclosing what is hidden in them, such as the sulphurs of minerals, the savours, the essential salts and the vegetal juices which we cannot reach without this condition.



All that is external in creatures, we can consider as being the sign and the clue of their internal properties, and the thing signified will be its internal properties;

Every day, the wise nature bestows upon us in profusion, in the external properties of the creatures, its diverse signs which accompany all its productions, in order to enable us to have an apprehension and foreknowledge of what may be useful for us and of what may be detrimental.

It may be said, therefore, that a sign in general is the representation or the indication of a thing separated or concealed for us, whether this thing be naturally inherent to the sign, as the juice is to the fruit which appears to me; or whether this thing is only bound accidentally, as the idea that one wants to impart to me is to any sign whatever. It may be said also that is susceptible to cause us a sensation or an idea, may be looked upon as a sign, since nothing can be communicated to our senses and to our intelligence, but by external properties that we are obliged to penetrate or to analyse to arrive at the internal properties which are enclosed therein.

Thus there is nothing of what is sensible that is not, with regard to us, in the order of the signs, since there is nothing of what is sensible that could not occasion us a sensation or an idea, according as we are more or less open to the sensibility and to the intelligence, and since there is nothing either among the sensible things of which we could not use as signs, to transmit our ideas to our fellowmen.

The law of the accidental or conventional signs, must be the same as that of the natural signs, although the essence and the form which are variable in the first, be determined and fixed in the second. Therefore these conventional signs must include two distinct things, as it is observed in the natural signs. Of these two things, one is the sense or idea of which we want the sign to be the organ; the other is the sign itself whatever it may be; for it only depends on us to take even a natural object to avail ourselves of a conventional sign, as we see it in the symbolic and hieroglyphical writing; only then this natural object takes a new character in our hands. It is no longer

the particular properties which it enjoyed that we want to make known, it is those that we lend to it.

This power that we have to impose at our liking a sense and an idea to whatever objects, is one of the eminent rights of man; it is exercised especially from man to man. For if there is also a commerce of signs among several classes of animals, it is an interchange of signs servile and limited; as their cries of appeal, their manner of warning each other in case of danger, their ruses and their precautions which are always the same, etc.. and they have not, as man, the faculty to create signs for themselves, nor the ability to vary the signification of them.

We cannot either exercise this right completely but towards beings endowed with intelligence; for the portion that we make use of with a few species of animals is very much limited: and as the animals that we train remain always passive with regard to us, they do nothing but answer to the little that we ask of them. They never would have provoked us of themselves in this restricted order where we confine ourselves with them; and still would provoke us in the kind of this distinguished dealing in which we can alternately stimulate our likes, and be stimulated by them by means of our signs.

Because when some very famous men wanted to plead the cause of the animals, and have claimed that their deprivation in this manner depended on their organization only, and that if they were otherwise formed they would show no difference with us, all they have said by that is in the last analysis, that if man were a beast, he would not be a man; and that if a beast were a man, it would not be a beast.

After all, this commerce of signs is indispensable for us, seeing that our individuality keeping us all apart the one from the other, we would remain always strangers, although in the presence of each other, and we would have no communication together, unless it was in the order of things which would proceed simply from our animality; and to be sure the languages are included in the ranks of these indispensable signs.

But if this sublime right that we have to create signs for ourselves and to vary the form and the sense of them, shows us how high our privileges may

rise, it does not go as far as to blind us upon what they are lacking. We all yearn after perfect ideas and we likewise long after perfect signs which represent them. Would this desire be an indication that these perfect ideas and would these perfect signs be possible; that even, unless it is wanted to make us run after a chimera, we could not deny their existence though we do not have them at our disposal; that thus our conventional and imperfect signs would be only like means, subsidiary and of industry, with which we would try our best to dispense with more real and more positive signs of which we would be deprived? Questions which I do not want to resolve alone, and upon which I invoke the reflection of the reader.

The institute itself presents nothing contrary to the affirmative, by the observations that accompany its programme. Thus I shall admit, without reluctance, with it that a man, separated from his fellows would still need some signs to combine his ideas, and that according to a certain sense, the existence of primary ideas, and the most sensible supposed the existence of the signs.

But before considering this avowal as a triumph, the institute should scrutinize the whole series of possible signs, for although sensations are signs, it might happen that all signs may not be sensations, especially in taking this word in the sense of our gross notions, as we shall observe further.

(To be continued)

TREATISE OF THE SIGNS

by L.C. of Saint- Martin.

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That is why the study of the sensible class requires more attention than that of the precedent classes; that is why also we are so little advanced in the knowledge of the sensations and of sensible impressions, that we want too much to assimilate with the simple mutual commerce of the non-organized objects, since these are without desire and do not use signs the ones to the others.

It is in these sensible impressions that are composed and bound, the passive effects that we receive and the active reactions with which either instinct or our faculty of thinking is aroused. There, they become a kind of very fecund signs, because they reach a region less vast and more monotonous than the external region; very numerous because they can multiply their combinations infinitely; and very liberated, because they are the quintessence of a thousand causes, more or less imperceptible, the one than the others; and it is for not having known how to fix with care the nature of these new signs, that we have committed so many errors regarding this subject.

For the more these signs, so impalpable and so complicated to our instinct and our ideas, have been found far from our gaze, the more have we desired that they would be in the open as the external signs; but we have not always had the sight and the necessary attention to grasp them under their true aspect, either in the diverse regions from where they have come or in the diverse degrees of their progressive course.

Besides, we did not have the prudence to let them grow and come out themselves from this state of concentration, from which they could have delivered themselves in time, if they had not been troubled by our blunders, as we see that all the other signs arrive in the nick of time, according to the laws of their class; and it is this which makes us commit two serious errors.

The first error, is to have desired, through inadvertence, that all the perfect signs of which we have so much need, should be found, either in the region of

the native sensations, and not yet elaborated, or in the region of the external and rough objects which can not be the original region of what we seek here, since it has but a very indirect relation with our mind, and that what it enclosed can not reach it by composite images and influences more or less removed from their origin.

The second is that, not finding there, clearly, these perfect and radical signs which we sought, we have revealed, utterly, our immaturity, in that, instead of waiting peaceably for the discovery of these signs that we did not perceive, or that we perceive but imperfectly, we have boldly taken the liberty to create them.

After that, not finding easily the relations of our apocryphal and conventional signs with the ideas, we have substituted for them some farfetched relations, instead of the natural relations that some more ripened signs would have offered us.

Finally, instead of the delightful harmony which would have existed between the ideas and really analogous signs, we have wanted to give the superiority to the signs that we establish from our own funds, and wanted to subordinate entirely the ideas to them, whereas in the regular order it is the inverse law which would have reigned, and which would have contributed, at the same time, to our satisfaction, and the advantage of truth.

It is then after having neglected the study and the regular culture of our sensible impressions; it is after having lost trace of these radical signs, which must also be essentially bound to the perfect ideas, that the natural signs are thus bound to their principle of activity; it is after having disregarded all the other species of signs, which can harmonize with our ideas in the diverse regions where they exist; it is after having created some signs to replace those that we knew no more;

finally it is after having subordinated the ideas to these factitious and fragile signs, that we have come to believe that they had no other base, and that consequently the art of these factitious signs were to be the principal object of our studies; that they were to be our sovereign rule, and that if we could succeed to perfect it, we get hold of the domain of the ideas so that we could reign supremely over them; and that their

mode, their character and their formation, would be entirely in our power, as are the substances of all kinds that we submit daily to the mechanism of our manipulations; in a word, it is what has given birth to the question of the National Institute: to determine the influence of the signs upon the formation of ideas; whereas it would have made a question at least as proper to provide some useful and concrete developments, if it has proposed to determine the influence of the ideas upon the formation of the signs.

For the source of the signs being the desire, since such is even that of the ideas, it would have been natural to presume a greater influence from the generative principle upon its production, than from that of the production upon its generative principle.

OF THE OBJECT OF THE SIGNS AND OF THE IDEAS.

In tracing things back to their origin, or in following the rule of analysis, as most of the modern observers have done, it is certain that the signs present themselves before the ideas, and hold them so much under their dependence, that without them they would have no existence; and it is one of the reasons for which the existence of the signs has seemed indispensable for the development of the ideas.

But in following things going down, or pursuing the rule of synthesis that other observers have followed also on their part, it is certain that the ideas must present themselves before the signs, since these are but the expression of the former. It is thus that in considering a plant, I see nothing but the external signs and results of its germ. But in considering its germ, I see that it is buried in the ground, that it is as unknown for me and consequently anterior to all the exterior signs which must one day compose the plant, and indicate to me in their turn what is enclosed in its germ. Thus in this example, the order proceeds by synthesis, or from the unknown to the known.

Then, when Condillac has said in his logic that the synthesis always commenced badly, he should have added: in the hands of men. Because it always commences very well in the hands of nature, which, in fact can never commence but by synthesis all its works, even to its demolition, or to its reintegration, which take place only because it has already retired and folded again the principle of life

and of activity of bodies, whereas we judge this commencement of reintegration only by analysis, or by the visible alteration of their forms and of their exterior qualities.

Yes, the synthesis is the base of all work whatever, as the desire is the base of all the signs; and the algebraical analysis itself is but an assemblage of partial syntheses and having each a particular fundamental principle, the developments of which are but the corollaries, which by their ramifications are bound to other synthetic principles.

Now for what reason in fact, does the synthesis commence always badly in the hands of men? It is precisely because they reject and exclude the universal synthetic principles, whence all the lights should naturally flow, as the corollaries flow from the axiom to which they belong; it is that which they want, not to go from the known to the unknown, as they say, but to substitute the known at the place of the unknown, the sign at the place of the source, and the branches of the tree at the place of its roots which must remain in the earth.

Condillac then has abused the right to conclude, when in his zeal for the truth, he has wanted to spread out upon the synthesis a general proscription, and thus punish (blame) nature for the blunder of mortals. He might as well have condemned the architects for laying down first the foundations of the house, and for not having commenced to build it from the roof, the walls and the windows; for judging from his statue and from his method, he would expose us to the belief that such would be the spirit of his doctrine.

Let us say something stronger still, and let us ask these men who are in fact very unskilful in synthesis, I say, let us ask them, if they are much more skilful in analysis, or in proceeding as they teach it, from the known to the unknown? What would make me doubt it, is the uncertainty where they leave me to know what is truly known to them; (I speak here of the sciences which they call subject to disputes and not of exact sciences, although even on this last point there might still remain a few examinations for them to undergo.) But, if it was found that in fact there was nothing known for them, how could they contrive then to proceed to the unknown? Where, for them, would be the starting point? And what would

become of their analysis?

But to terminate here, simply, the dispute upon the priority between the signs and the ideas, one should observe if the ideas could not be considered on two different relations, as we see it by the double epoch of our infancy and our age of reason. Thus, on the one hand, the ideas would be under the dependence of the signs, and would favour the partisans of the system of analysis; and on the other, they would have the precedence, and they would reign over the signs, and would favour the system of synthesis; and it seems to me that one could hardly ever deprive himself of this accommodation, since it is evident that sometimes we receive some ideas by the help of the signs, and by and by with the help of these same signs we impart some ideas in our turn.

For one would in vain prevail upon himself that our first ideas had been transmitted to us by some signs in our infancy, and that from there they had the means of being propagated, whereas it would be necessary still to tell me where those who had transmitted to us these first ideas had themselves imbibed the sign that they had used, if there had not been another idea, which had produced these signs, and without which we could never have had any idea; and so on until we arrived at a degree where the signs in question were no longer subject to the arbitration of men; this would bring us back to the precedent notions on the necessary joining of the signs, fixed and perfect, with the corresponding ideas, and would offer us a fundamental truth which is, that if the ideas do not work without the signs, the signs work still less without the ideas.

But it is the object of these signs and of these ideas, taken in themselves, to enlighten us upon the question of knowing to which interested party belongs the priority of the ideas over the signs, or of the signs over the ideas. What is then the object of the idea? It is to manifest itself, it is to fill up with its sense and with its spirit all that is capable to receive its communication.

On the other hand, what is the object of the sign? It is to penetrate by its reaction to the very germs of the idea, and to develop it, as the juices of the earth react on the plant and develop it; it is finally

to transmit the hidden cause which has contributed it for this function, and to show it in all its light, in its regularity, in its completion, so that it may attain entirely the aim that it has in view.

But here is a new testimony which must help us further more to fix the rank of the ideas in relation to the signs, and the order of the signs in relation to the ideas.

The sign terminates at the idea; it is its end and its ne plus ultra. The idea, on the contrary, does not terminate at the sign; it is for the idea only an intermediary means, and but a subsidiary way which must help it to go farther. In short, the idea does nothing but traverse, in some way, the region of the signs, and aspires to reach the region of the ideas which is its own; it can take pleasure, as all else that exists, only in its native country, and it is satisfied only when it has arrived there, without troubling itself again about the final result which awaits it in these same regions that it needs to pass through.

From this explanation of the different object of the ideas and of the signs, we see that the ideas are as the sovereigns, and that the signs are but their ministers, that the ideas produce and trace the plan, and that the signs carry it out; in a word, that the ideas govern and that the signs obey.

The rank or the pre-eminence between the signs and the ideas, and between the ideas and the signs, is then no longer a problem; and it is certain that their respective station turns out to be determined by this simple observation, whatever may be the mistakes and abuses where the mind of man might have allowed itself to be carried away on this point by its precipitation.

(To be continued)