



RONSARD AND SAINT-AMANT ON THE THEME OF WINTER: TWO APPROACHES TO THE HUMANISTIC SPIRIT

Jacques F. Malet
California State University at Sacramento

The extent and quality of Saint-Amant's knowledge of classical languages and literature remains one of the many puzzles surrounding his personality and his work. He belongs to a generation which was severely split by a schism to which French scholarship refers as the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns. Among the Moderns thorough mastery of the classics was no longer a requirement, it seems, to make a name for oneself as a poet, and Saint-Amant's case is a good illustration of this. In his poetry one finds the constant influence of the vivid experiences that made in that time for a most active life. There are mentions of his far-off journeys on the sea as he crossed the Atlantic several times. He made overland trips from his native France to Italy, Poland, Sweden and England visiting either as a soldier or as a diplomat. There are many allusions to his close friendships with famous and powerful personages, to his fine musicianship on the lute and the guitar, and to his activities considered libertine by many: smoking and immoderate feasting and drinking with loud companions in taverns. These varied and spontaneous activities do not give us the portrait of a scholar-poet.¹

There is another side to Saint-Amant to which attention must be paid. Even if he belonged on the side of the "Moderns" and boasted sometimes of his ignorance of Greek and Latin, he nevertheless demonstrates great awareness and sensitivity in his use of references to Greek and Latin mythology. This is already evident in a very early and poignant poem called "Solitude." Moreover, there is proof that Saint-Amant deeply admired a literary predecessor who, among Frenchmen of his time, stood out as the best representative of the "Ancients." Ronsard is everywhere regarded as a model among Renaissance scholar-poets for, having endowed himself with the finest possible training in Latin and, above all, Greek, he devoted his life to scholarly efforts. He is legendary for spurning bodily fatigue throughout long nights spent meditating and writing in constant furtherance of his classical erudition and poetic skill.² The quality of Saint-

Amant's admiration for Ronsard is real but has had little attention from scholars.

"Winter in the Alps" belongs to a volume of Saint-Amant's poems published in Paris in 1643.³ It is believed that Saint-Amant wrote this piece initially in 1629 or 1630 during one of two successive French military incursions into Piedmont. The same sonnet appears again in an edition of 1649 but this time it contains an important variant. In fact, the whole last stanza has been rewritten to accommodate an allusion to "the Olympian," Jupiter. Variants are often sources of precious information and this seems to be the case here for, in this new edition of 1649, there appears also an "Epistle to Winter . . ." from which the extract below is worthy of note:

..... you [Winter] ought to be revered
 As the only one
 Who makes the air healthy and cleans the ploughed fields

 The great Ronsard's Hymn will be sung
 And, maybe, some lines of mine will be read;
 Lines which yore, being in a strange passage,
 My dear Muse composed in praise of you [Winter].

Two suggestions can be made concerning this passage. On the one hand it seems to establish a link between Ronsard's "Hymn of Winter" and Saint-Amant's "Winter in the Alps." On the other hand it invites us to consider whether the variant introduced in this sonnet has its source in Ronsard's hymn. An examination of the two poems will, indeed, show some influence of Ronsard on Saint-Amant but, at the same time, it will reveal a most interesting aspect of the latter's work: a certain humanistic approach to the physical world.

Ronsard's "Hymn of Winter" is too long to reproduce here and it displays a typically playful but complex argument which it is difficult to summarize. Nevertheless, this much can be safely said: the poet is disdainful of garden-grown laurels. He much prefers to climb atop some height scratching his hands to ribbons and suffering in order to bring back the twigs that will crown him. Through hardship, therefore, he acquires courage and becomes a daring philosopher. His philosophy is of two kinds: the high-flown sort which is good for those who feel at home in the heavenly and ethereal regions of spirituality, and the earthly sort concerned with the practical world of property, justice, urban peace, production of goods, technological knowledge, and, alas, war. The first type of philosophic reach have impressed the French and continue to do so, he has whereas the latter kind is careful to protect beauty from vulgar scorn by

THE THEME OF WINTER

interposing on its surface "a subtle veil like those achieved by painters on well-painted tableaux." It is a veil which easily could make access to beauty a yearning Neo-Platonic affair. The poet tells of choosing this second way to "draw" his hymn of winter after the fashion of Hesiod and Homer. He then proceeds to relate the lengthy mythological legend of Winter's introduction to the Olympian court, his brutal rejection by haughty Jupiter, the subsequent war between the two deities and all the details of the alliances in the conflict. He continues with the account of Jupiter's ruse and of his young enemy's capture, of Juno's intercession and of Winter's final promotion to ruler during three months of the year following a merry banquet that puts everyone in a good mood. In short, Winter obtained some concrete recognition in the form of lordly power in exchange for venturing himself into the dangers and sufferings of war.

It is easy to see that in writing this hymn Ronsard told the same story twice setting the poet's career in a position parallel to the personification of the theme of winter. The object turns out to be that recognition in the non-spiritual world entails first going through a phase of hardship of which nature offers an example in the season of winter. Winter also symbolizes old age which, barring senility, is the philosophical season in a human life. In short, the poem suggests that the growth of awareness and wisdom entails a rising struggle with the forces of chaos and oblivion. The human involved in this struggle lives a life which culminates in an epic drama which calls for youthful vitality but which seeks to achieve beyond the level of mere vitality.

Certainly this is a subject that deserves grand treatment and Ronsard goes to the best sources for such treatment. Homer's *Iliad* provides the framework for the conflict between Jupiter and Winter while Hesiod's *Theogony* supplies the numerous combatants. Form, color, motion and speech are rendered in a style that blends masterfully the qualities of both Homer and Hesiod. In a word, Ronsard achieves one more of his splendid adaptations of ancient Greek literature.

It should be no surprise, therefore, if the relevance of his narrative to human affairs is of quite the same order as that of the *Iliad* and the *Theogony*. "Hymn of Winter" provides material for exegesis primarily of the classical philosophical kind. Basically, Ronsard's poem is a speculative object to be approached in the very same manner as one would ponder the meaning of Greco-Latin mythological beings in literary context such as the more finished works of Homer and Hesiod.

It would be well to note that this type of literary endeavor so manifest in much of Ronsard's work is typical of the conception of poetry common to the Pleiades and their adaptation and emulation of the classics.⁴ It is certainly not a mere translation of classical forms and content into 16th

century French. Indeed, Ronsard's poetry reveals him to be an innovator in continuity with the speculations of the classical Greeks and Romans. It is true that he has not been well enough recognized for this aspect of his work. His impact on French thought has been decidedly less than was that of Homer, for example, on Greek thought. Although his grand manner, his philosophic reach have impressed the French and continues to do so, he has been subjected to strong criticism even before his own century was finished. By the beginning of the 17th century his poetry was decried by many as old-fashioned, obscure, pompous, imitative and anything but choice material for philosophical exegesis.⁵ His scholarly, classical approach to nature was seen as archaic until the second quarter of the 19th century when the Romantic revival sought him out attracted by his splendid diction, rich metrical faculty and his combination of classical and medieval peculiarities. It was the critical appreciation of Sainte-Beuve, however, which led the way in showing us his magnificence of language bound up with his philosophic dimension. The spirit of tragedy was reawakened in the work of Ronsard and his "Hymn to Winter" is one of its finest moments.

Turning to Saint-Amant's final version of "Winter in the Alps," we can see at once that there is hardly anything of a literal sort carried over from Ronsard's hymn. The Homeric and Hesiodic assemblies have been left out. The sonnet form in which it is cast is severely limited in length. Only Jupiter comes to intervene in the last new stanza in front of the initial character Winter. The conflict between the two is but an abstract memory only faintly alluded to, and this conflict means something very different to Saint-Amant. Moreover, if Jupiter still has an anthropomorphic aspect for Saint-Amant, Winter materializes through a descriptive process which bears not the slightest resemblance either to Homer or to Hesiod. Much less visually imitative of man's aspect, the description of Winter is more diffuse, more metaphorical than allegorical. As a matter of fact, the painting of Winter is extremely vague in its contours and is perhaps but a tool in another order of description. The conventional visual sketch of the personified season is dominated by the impression of vitality and well-being felt by the poet. In other words, the sketching technique is immediately prolonged into a more diffuse, less mimetic, more metaphorical description, an idea. But this idea is still very much materially embodied as can be inferred from the effect on the poet's eyes. In a sense, the beauty of winter in Saint-Amant's sonnet is indeed hidden by the "subtle veil, like those achieved by painters on well-painted tableaux" which, as one may recall from Ronsard's hymn, is the precaution taken by the earthly philosophy to protect beauty from vulgar scorn.

However, Saint-Amant's "veil" seems to be closely applied to the very

THE THEME OF WINTER

objects of his tableau whereas Ronsard's "veil" appears to be a complex allegorical argument requiring a previous initiation into classical sources. We seem, therefore, to be facing two different forms of poetic aesthetics, for both the hymn and the sonnet amount to critical statements on the beauty of an object, the quality of its perception and meaning. In rewriting the last stanza of "Winter in the Alps" Saint-Amant might have been sensitive to Ronsard's aesthetics and tried to emulate his predecessor. However, the added element of classical mythology does not necessarily point to a fundamental influence. Saint-Amant seems to have relied much more on what he saw and conceptualized spontaneously than on, or through, his knowledge of the classics and their strands of meaning. Furthermore, in the initial version of the sonnet, Winter is embodied in a metaphor, a vague and somewhat conventional personification. This becomes jelled into an allegory when the new mythological last stanza is substituted. This seems to be the extent of Ronsard's influence. In short, Saint-Amant shows himself less eager to talk abstractly about poetical theory than Ronsard with the result that his Winter is much less an imitation of a distant classical mythological figure than a present object of strong speculative interest.

This speculation is very much in the humanistic spirit. Going back to the imperfection of the visual sketch of personified Winter and to the prolongation of this diffuse form into a non-visual description of a human-like presence, it appears that the metaphor used by the poet is the traditional one of the spirit as breath. This metaphor does not, by the way, necessarily carry a religious meaning. Winter breathes out clean and healthy air propitious to life. There is no ambiguity here regarding the physiological quality of this phenomenon. It is immediately felt as a definitely physical sensation by the poet. Next we may discover an exciting display of poetic virtuosity. The eyes, which are the proper organs for perceiving the purity of the air through the sharpness and richness of colors, are also a most sensitive part of the body when it comes to the chemical quality of the atmosphere. Saint-Amant was a notorious smoker we might recall! Indeed, the last line of the second quatrain is to be understood as proclaiming the delightful harmony of perception through both the senses of vision and touch. Healthy winter emerges also, here, as a matter of agreement between both physical and mental well-being, an agreement through which the life of body and the life of mind are invigorated by a new clarity concerning man and nature.

The tercets of the sonnet then transform what had been sheer sprightliness and only rising consciousness of something special into a meditation:

"This season appeals to me indeed; I like the cold of it."

EXPLORATIONS IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE

There is joy and enthusiasm in this line, but it is not at all merely a subjective assertion. Excitement and cheerfulness are perhaps the only relevant reactions to the discovery that the cold mineral world which is usually so awesome to man does in fact open for him new perspectives both of physiological and aesthetic interest. In the same way, the optimism displayed in the next two lines concerning the matter of crimes on the earth is far from naive. The sight of winter in the Alps is capable of strongly influencing the poet's mood, of lifting it out of the atmosphere of war in which he often was living throughout the military campaign:

"Its frock of innocence and of such pure splendor,
Somehow covers and hides the crimes committed on the Earth."

The word "somehow" translates a bending of the poet's mind in the direction of a more constructive preoccupation, a bending or approval altogether similar to the one expressed by "I like the cold of it." Saint-Amant's companions must have been complaining bitterly all the way about ice and snow. Yet, inasmuch as the cold season, unlike the war, was not posing a dire threat to the body, it was a source of enjoyment rather than of gloom.

Further, this condition in nature as a source of enjoyment paves the way for the observation of other natural relations, also components of the humanistic spirit. Humanism does not only turn to the classical past for inspiration and for knowledge though great inspiration and much valuable knowledge are to be found there. In the comparison between Ronsard's and Saint-Amant's respective approaches to the theme of winter, it becomes evident that Ronsard's classical mythological sources serve him well as humanist poet, and Saint-Amant turns to quasi-scientific observation in achieving the same object.

Evidence of Saint-Amant's "scientific aestheticism" is presented in the rewritten last stanza of his sonnet. The conflict between Jupiter and Winter, recalled from Ronsard's hymn, is re-stated as follows:

"Compared to the last hot spell, this weather is gracious to me
And, if Death caught me on this road made of glass,
I would certainly have a precious tomb."

Horace R. Byers, the great American meteorologist, when consulted in the matter suggested to the author that Ronsard had apparently made some astute observations during the season of winter in the Alps. There, as in most mountains, the isothermal line 0° C. (32° F.) is very low and close to

THE THEME OF WINTER

the ground, and therefore, no difference of electric potential can exist between the ground and the atmosphere so that no thunderstorms occur. Saint-Amant, his perceptions colored perhaps by his experience as a military officer, was not the first man to observe what has become the basis for a principle of meteorology. Neither was he the first to use mythology to talk about what later would be called science.

FOOTNOTES

¹For a prudent, scholarly biography of Antonie Girard, sieur de Saint-Amant, see Jean Lagny, *Le Poète Saint-Amant, 1594-1661, essai sur sa vie et ses oeuvres* (Paris: Nizet, 1964).

²For information on Ronsard's life and work, the English speaking reader should consult first the authoritative study by Isidore Silver, *The Intellectual Evolution of Ronsard*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Washington Univ. Press, 1969).

³I use my own translation of the French text found in Jean Lagny, ed., *Oeuvres de Saint-Amant* (Paris: Didier, 1967). Jean Lagny presents the 1643 version of "Winter in the Alps" with the 1649 version in the form of accompanying variants. However, my argument requires that I do just the opposite. The French, first, and my English translation are as follows:

L'Hiver Des Alpes

*Ces atomes de feu, qui sur la Neige brillent,
Ces estincelles d'or, d'azur et de cristal,
Dont l'Hiver, au Soleil, d'un lustre oriental
Pare ses Cheveux blancs, que les Vents esparpillent:
Ce beau Cotton du Ciel, dequoy les monts s'habillent,
Ce pavé transparant, fait du second metal,
Et cet Air net, et sain, propre à l'esprit vital,
Sont si doux à mes yeux, que d'aise ils en pétillent.
Cette Saison me plaist, j'en ayme la froideur,
Sa Robbe d'innocence, et de pure splendeur,
Couvre en quelque façon les crimes de la Terre:
Aussi l'Olympien la void d'un front humain;
Sa collere l'espargne, et jamais le Tonnerre
Pour desoler ses jours ne partit de sa main.*

Last stanza in the 1643 edition:

*Au prix du dernier chaut ce temps m'est gracieux;
Et si la Mort m'attrappe en ce chemin de verre,
Je ne scaurois avoir qu'un Tombeau precieux.*

Winter in the Alps

*These fiery atoms glittering on the snow,
These sparks of gold, of azure and of crystal*

EXPLORATIONS IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE

*With which, in the sun, Winter, with oriental luster,
Adorns its white hair dishevelled by the winds;*

*This beautiful cotton from the sky, in which mountains dress,
This transparent rock made of the second metal,
And this air, clean and healthy, propitious to the vital spirit;
All these are so sweet to my eyes; that they sparkle with well-being.*

*This season appeals to me, indeed; I like the cold of it.
Its frock of innocence and of such pure splendor,
Somehow covers and hides the crimes committed on the earth.*

*So that the Olympian looks on it with a human brow;
His wrath spares it and never, to devastate its days,
Did thunder rush out from his hand.*

Last stanza in the 1643 edition:

*Compared to the last hot spell, this weather is gracious to me;
And, if death caught me on this road made of glass,
I would certainly have a very precious tomb.*

⁴On the Pleiades, consult Henri Chamard, *Histoire de la Pléiade*, 4 vols. (Paris: Didier, 1961-63).

⁵The court poet Malherbe was probably the most vocal and effective decier of Ronsard's style. See Antoine Adam, *Histoire de la littérature française au XVII^{ème} siècle*, I (Paris: Domal, 1948, and Montchrestien, 1956), *passim*.