

## REGNUM HOMINIS

### SOME OBSERVATIONS ON MODERN SUBJECTIVISM

The medieval view of the universe as entirely theophany, manifestation of God; and hierarchy, the ordered participation of all beings to God, could not conceive of an opposition between subject and object. *Aut lux hic nata est aut capta hic libera regnat*, "here the light is born, or here, captive, it freely reigns," may be read in the vestibule of a chapel at Ravenna: that not yet created golden light enclosing heaven and earth in the self-same unity where everything became perceptible at a single glance. From an infinite distance descended the Word, filling the void and becoming the universe; while from below, the rising wave of adoration gradually divested created beings of their terrestrial weight, introducing finiteness and multiplicity into the realm of immutable crystalline eternity. Light as the most efficacious means of sanctification, as the surest way of negating the restrictive power of thingness: this was the basis on which Robert Grosseteste formulated an entire light-cosmogony. The

Translated by Sidney Alexander.

stained glass masters of the cathedrals of the West, and the Byzantine mosaicists held the same view. The description of Saint Sophia, made in the 6th century by Paul the Silentiare, leads us right into the heart of this magical world of light:

The apse is like a peacock, whose plumage has a hundred eyes. One's sight is blinded by the brilliant light emanating from the golden immensity of the vault. It is a Latin and barbaric display at the same time. The altar is of gold; it rests on golden columns and golden supports; other than gold there are only sparkling gems. In the evening so much light is reflected from the temple that you would think it to be a nocturnal sun. Resplendent night laughs like dawn; it too seems to have rosy feet. The navigator needs no other lighthouse; he need only gaze at the radiant temple.<sup>1</sup>

Such a mode of thinking was not concerned with awareness of matter, or evidence of its opacity. Objects hid too many transcendent meanings for one to be able to dwell on their surfaces; and correlatively, the mind was too subject to the appeal of the Invisible to be able to search for self-certainty in its connections with things. *Per fidem enim ambulamus, et non per speciem*; we make our way, we dwell in the world of faith with its promises of felicity and transfiguration, and not in the world of visible presences (οὐ διὰ εἰδους): this magnificent declaration of war made by the Apostle (II Cor. v, 7) against the ancient worship of an ever-present cosmos had not yet lost any of its strength. But when the world no longer appeared in the form of a sphere having its center and origin in God, and man found that he was part of an infinite cosmos, the universe of objects was discovered with a feeling of matutinal joy and reclaimed as man's property and celebrated as the only dimension of the Real. From the moment man, instead of God, became the measure of things the physical world reasserted its rights and relegated itself as the sole field of action and mirror of human experience.

Nature, in the sense in which it has been understood since the Renaissance, was no longer the hearth and flame of universal love such as it had periodically been conceived of from Lascaux

<sup>1</sup> Georges Duthuit, *Le feu des signes*, 1962.

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up to the *Fioretti*. It was no longer a matter of searching, as in Pompeian art, or for the contemporaries of Marcus Aurelius (IV, 3), in ephemeral dream landscapes for a meaningful supplementation to a life which had become too meager, or a refuge for those "too-tiny" souls about whom Horace speaks:

Quid aeternis minorem  
Consiliis animum fatigas?  
Cur non sub alta vel platano vel hac  
Pinu jacentes<sup>2</sup> ...

Beyond the Anacreon-like landscapes which began to emerge in the shadow of the "Ancients," from now on it became a question of restoring reality to nature, that reality of which Christianity had deprived it. In the 13th century one was carefully taught to no longer oppose nature and grace; thenceforth, nature could appear as a "living Bible" (*liber vivus*) alongside Revelation (*liber scriptus*). It was precisely this new reading of the world and of the spirit, which had at last become a real possibility, which Shakespeare celebrates in the Forest of Arden scene:

And this our life...  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

Everything speaks to man; everything converges toward informing him and forming him; the object is in no way extraneous to the soul. On the basis of this redemption of nature going far beyond all previous conciliations, on this rehabilitation of the object stripped of its symbolic garb, looked at from the point of view of its exact relationship to man—on this basis—a humanism was built which liked to think of itself as continuing Greek humanism, but which was its exact opposite. For the Greeks, Nature was the norm and knowledge resulted in virtue. But from now on, Nature was to be the object and knowledge gave power.

<sup>2</sup> "Why do you torment your too-tiny soul with Eternity's design? Why don't you go stretch out under the lofty plane tree or pine?"

## KNOWLEDGE AND THE WILL TO POWER

To the Greeks the beauty and rationality of the universe were the loftiest manifestations of the salutary Good. Knowledge was "virtue" because its objects, the cosmos, was the ethical model par excellence. Did Callicles teach the will to power? That is because, replies Plato, "he neglected geometry," forgetting that "geometrical uniformity is as all-powerful among men as among the gods."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, when the West re-discovered "geometrical uniformity," Roger Bacon's first definition of the natural sciences, *scientia experimentalis*, resulted in setting up a universe where nature ceased to be a value and became, instead, an object of domination, deprived of ethical significance. Similarly, knowledge, *scientia activa et operativa*, as Grossatesta had already put it, was ceasing to be a "virtue," a passive contemplation of the cosmos and an affirmation of our affinity with it; instead knowledge became power; a promulgation of the "reign of Man," a violent interrogation of nature; an affirmation of the utter sovereignty of the subject who apprehends it in order to subjugate it.

Francis Bacon's contemporary, Marlowe, has expressed this reversal of values with explosive force:

Nature that framed us of four elements,  
Warring within our breasts for regiment,  
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:  
Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend  
The wondrous architecture of the world,  
And measure every wandering planet's course,  
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,  
And always moving as the restless spheres,  
Will us to war ourselves, and never rest,  
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,  
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,  
The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.<sup>4</sup>

Each word Marlowe employs in this extraordinary "discours de la méthode" is the most complete negation of everything that

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 508a.

<sup>4</sup> Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great* 1, II, 7.

philosophy and wisdom had taught until then. The will to power becomes the essence of being! Nature speaks the language of Machiavelli! The cosmos ceases to be the Word of a creative and legislating whole, and becomes instead a mirror reflecting the terror, desires, and, that special kind of disillusionment experienced by men savagely freed of everything, the disenchantment of feeling themselves absolutely alone in the midst of all that exists. Nature has certainly re-established its autonomy, but Nature no longer teaches man moderation, a salutary fear of his own powers. On the contrary, it imposes the will to power, the "will to will:" *to have aspiring minds*. And the man capable of understanding the "wondrous architecture of the world" is no longer the man who becomes *kosmios* by yielding to the beauty and perfection of the world; rather, he already envisages himself in fantasy swept off to that peak where the Devil has promised him total power on earth. To Plato, the life of the soul and the movement of the stars are the loftiest revelations of the divine order of the world: "once that is known, a man cannot either be led astray by the common life of the city, or remain unaware of the divine."<sup>5</sup> To Marlowe, the contemplation of the universe can only spur man to exercise to the utmost his will to power, and the life of the soul is the chosen place for this struggle for power (*for regiment*)—a struggle which ends in the negation of what constituted up to then the very basis of the world: God.

Come, let us march against the powers of heaven  
And set black streamers in the firmament,  
To signify the slaughter of the gods.<sup>6</sup>

This Nietzschean theme of the slaughter of the gods leads us to the very core of the new tragic vision of the world. In fact, to the degree that the new "pagan" image of Nature relegated the former theophanic conception into the shadows, another reality regained status: the entire reality of Evil—of that Evil in whose existence the Age of Faith discerned less a being than an absence of being.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 966e.

<sup>6</sup> Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*, II, v, 3.

## THE NEW COSMOLOGY OF THE TRAGIC

In fact, a world which is only the manifestation of God, and which, from its very beginning, fell as a result of an error of judgment; and later, correcting this error, thanks to the new revelation of Christ, progressively reascends, through knowledge and love toward its source,—in such a world, Evil could only be non-being. *Omne ens est bonum*; everything which is, is good. According to this ontology of trust, Evil deceives us in the strictest sense of the term, for it is without substance and without reality. Hence it is possible to understand why there could be no authentic Christian tragedy. For, in the world which Christ redeemed by his sacrifice, every human defeat finds, at once, its prototype and extension in the Passion, since Christ's sacrifice made Redemption possible.<sup>7</sup> And at the same time, one may understand why the world ushered in by Marlowe was the only one which was to know tragedy on the same high level as ancient tragedy.

In fact, at the same time as the ancient worship of the cosmos, there disappeared the very basis of tragic wisdom: terror at the sight of man's measureless power, fear (which alone can arouse pity) of seeing the world threatened by human *hubris*.<sup>8</sup> Henceforth, the proper sphere of tragedy was no longer constituted by the acceptance of a law whose sovereignty crushed man in order to save humanity; it was rather, the spectacle of all the energy possible being let loose in an infinite, unstructured universe, subject to the fundamental lawlessness.

Here is how the leader of the Ciompi formulates this *esperienza delle cose moderne*:

You see the whole city full of complaint and indignation against us; ... you may be sure they are contriving something against us; they are arranging some new plan to subdue us. We ought therefore to keep two things in view, and have two points to consider; the one is, to escape with impunity for what has been done during the last few days, and the other, to live in greater comfort and security for the time to

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Karl Jaspers' penetrating observations: *Über das Tragische*, 1952.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. our essay "Nature and History in the Greek Conception of the Cosmos," in *Diogenes*, No. 25.

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come. We must, therefore, I think, in order to be pardoned for our old faults, commit new ones; redoubling the mischief, and multiplying fires and robberies; and in doing this, endeavor to have as many companions as we can; for when many are in fault, few are punished; small crimes are chastised, but great and serious ones rewarded. When many suffer, few seek vengeance;... To increase the number of misdeeds will, therefore, make forgiveness more easily attainable.

It grieves me much to think that some of you are sorry inwardly for what is done, and resolve to abstain from anything more of the kind; because neither shame nor conscience ought to have any influence with you... We have no business to think about conscience; for when, like us, men have to fear hunger, and imprisonment, or death, the fear of hell neither can nor ought to have any influence upon them... nor do any ever escape from servitude but the bold and faithless, or from poverty, but the rapacious and fraudulent. God and nature have thrown all human fortunes into the midst of mankind; and they are thus attainable rather by rapine than by industry, by wicked actions rather than by good. Hence it is that men feed upon each other, and those who cannot defend themselves must be worried.<sup>9</sup>

Here, the world of the dialogue between Athenians and Melians has been resuscitated—freed now of all the taboos which concealed its face from Medusa; set forth positively as the only world where man could know himself and forge his destiny. Man is no longer revitalized by a flux of transcendent certitudes; no longer sheltered by an immutable celestial roof. Confronting a world without rules, almost formless, where everything is a dangerous dice game, he can rest only on his own restlessness. From now on, it will be a question of driving personal mobility as far as it can go.

*Pleonexia*, "wanting more:" that is what frightened the Greek most. He turned toward the world not to achieve conquest over it, but in order to counterpose his trust, strengthened by a sense of the primary order of things, against what he felt threatened him. These men "*that much do want*", of whom Shakespeare speaks in *Timon of Athens*,<sup>10</sup>—the very existence of such a man would have been considered by a Greek as an attack against harmony and for that reason alone, the universe

<sup>9</sup> Machiavelli, *History of Florence*, Book III, Chap. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Act IV, Scene 3.

would have inevitably wiped him out. Instead, here, he becomes the ultimate measure of things. Or rather, he is the image of a world given over to disorder which henceforth lies at the base of the new assertion of self:

The sun is a thief, and with his great attraction  
Robs the vast sea; the moon is an errant thief,  
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;  
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves  
The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief  
That feeds and breeds by a composture stolen  
from general excrement: each thing's a thief.

Individual and secret will as freedom's inner motive force, and correlatively, the sense of intimacy, drama, and mystery arising out of basic personal experiences—all this remained an almost forbidden realm to the Greeks. Like St. Augustine, one might say about Shakespeare and his characters: *immo omnes nihil aliud quam voluntates sunt*. Shakespeare's world is no longer the world of implacable Law, drawing by sword and flame, a line of destruction between Being which "saves," and the instinct toward disorder and annihilation, whose ever-reshuffled mixture makes up human existence. This world provides the immense scene where Shakespeare can set his titans, an almost stifling emanation of sovereign will in whose presence there is no longer any legitimate order, security, individual human dignity. To view the world not as the expression of God's external creative forces and as an immutable hierarchy of undiscussable and undiscussed values, but rather as the receptacle for man's superabundant energies—men eager for challenges, men depending on nothing except their own demons; to experience the world no longer as the norm, but as the ever-receding horizon of an ever-freer power of action; and, finally, to discern in this clash of wills, legitimized only by themselves, the mass of humanity on whom the world no longer imposes any sense of recognition or direction to be followed: a mass extending its limits further and further, manifesting and venerating its independence even to the point of crime and folly, defeat and collapse: all this is really not so much catharsis as liberation, a Copernican reversal of values.

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Now, at the same time as these values of Will sprang forth, and the world was emptied of all other forces, an idea (as inconceivable for classical Greece as for medieval Christianity) began disturbingly to manifest itself. This was a sense of the radical contingency of human existence, henceforth unable to draw strength from the feeling of perfect harmony which in previous times had been aroused by the objective cosmic flow or the certainty of a theophanic universe. The universe which once had bestowed supreme certitudes (terrifying or alleviating didn't matter!)—this universe now seemed to have become mute.

### NATURE AND EXISTENCE

Greek man and Medieval man had to struggle constantly to make the raw material of life conform to the harmonious image which they bore within themselves—and also to guard this image against the perturbations of *hubris*, or defend it against the Devil's attacks which they were frighteningly aware of in the background of the luminous world. It is not simply by chance that Thomism knew so well how to adopt "Gothic" world-feeling to Aristotelian philosophy. Nor is it by chance that the Devil was defined as the adversary of the cosmos: ἀντιπράττον τοῖς κοσμικοῖς. In fact, this world of a spiritual order would have been inconceivable without its inseparable pendant which was to appear in the hellish images of destructive or deceitful powers which thronged everyone's imagination. These images were themes constantly suggested by experience; without them it is impossible to understand the tragic art of "Apollonian" Greece or the monstrous fauna of medieval art from Moissac to Grünewald.

The breakdown of the theophanic universe stirred up basic doubts. Not only man's place *in* the world, but also the very notion of the universe had become problematical. This is the new feeling which Dürer tried to express in the mournful careworn figure of his *Melancholy* (1514): the compass and measuring instruments surrounding her, the scale and arithmetical table on the wall—all these things appear there like concretizations of the anguish felt by a being profoundly isolated at the heart of an infinitely open universe which debarbs any sympathetic vibration between the thinking "I" and things.

The mind no longer felt connected with any comprehensive order; with any presence emanating from without and rediscovered at the very heart of existence. The idea of an infinity of worlds, of the presence of an endless multitude of things "which do not in any way constitute a single Whole" was already familiar to John Mair toward the end of the 15th century. But "when John Mair spoke of this infinite multitude of things *non facientia unum*, he did not seem to suspect that in a pure aggregate, man's own position is dangerously threatened."<sup>11</sup> And it is this threat which John Donne expresses in a poem bearing the characteristic title, *Anatomy of the World*:

And new philosophy calls all in doubt;  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and the earth...  
And freely men confess that this world's spent,  
When in the planets and the firmament  
They seek so many new; they see that this  
Is crumbled out again to his atomies;  
'tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,...  
This is the world's condition now.

Pascal's *Pensées* are still expressing this grievous loss of totality. Also for him, the armature of the world has flown to bits. If the world is reduced to a dust of "atoms," it is because "we beget these atoms at the price of the reality of things."<sup>12</sup> Man feels like a stranger in this universe constructed by the calculating and measuring mind, a universe which man can no longer conceive of as a whole: "no idea even comes near it." It is a world whose meaning is ever precarious and fragmentary, no longer in rapport with the soul's profound longings. As the sun is "lost" so "great Pan is dead."<sup>13</sup> That "geometrical uniformity" which once reigned in Nature was considered up to then as evidence of God, as the most adequate sign of Reality's ordering

<sup>11</sup> Maurice de Gandillac, *Pascal et le silence du monde*. In *Pascal, l'homme et son œuvre* (éd. Cahiers de Royaumont) pp. 345-6.

<sup>12</sup> Pascal, *Pensées* (éd. Brunschvicg, 1913) frag. 72 (p. 348).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* frag. 695 (p. 647).

Intelligence, and source of all value. Pascal was to be the first to show that the "abstract sciences" of Nature "are not proper to Man."<sup>14</sup> Henceforth, the universe is "mute:"<sup>15</sup> it no longer speaks to the "heart;" the world no longer emanates any ontological certainty. "What is man within Nature?" This cry of Pascal,<sup>16</sup> in the face of the glacial solitudes which no longer organize the cosmos, expresses an experience which no other epoch up to that time had considered possible: the exact sciences giving rise to a feeling of ontological or "existential" ignorance whose intensity was to become more evident in proportion to the increase of knowledge.

*All coherence is gone.* Confronted with the disappearance of this necessary order of beings, even Kant's sense of calm broke down:

Absolute necessity for which we have so indispensable a need, as the ultimate foundation of everything, is the veritable abyss of human reason. Eternity itself (...) does not make so great an impression on the mind, nor so vertiginously frighten the spirit for it only measures the duration of things; it does not underlie them. Such a thought can be waived aside or tolerated only by a being, whom we conceive of as the highest among all possible beings, saying in some way to himself; "I am, from all Eternity; outside of myself nothing exists except through my will; *but from where, therefore, do I come?* At this point, everything collapses below us and the highest perfection, like the smallest, floats without support before the speculative reason, which finds it easy to make one or the other disappear without the least difficulty."<sup>17</sup>

Confronting this world which "floats without support" under the *siccum lumen* of speculative negativity, subjectivity for the first time, could set itself forth as the only bed-rock which doubt would not be able to shake.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* frag. 144 (p. 399).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* frag. 693 (p. 646).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* frag. 72 (p. 350).

<sup>17</sup> Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 641-42.

## SUBJECT AND OBJECT

"I will now close my eyes, I will stop up my ears, I will ward off all my senses... and thus, communing only with myself, I will endeavor..."<sup>18</sup> In Plato one finds the same description of the first steps of Cartesian philosophy. But neither Plato, nor any other ancient philosopher had ever thought of recognizing the subject as the center of an autonomous activity, indeed, as the activity which sets up the object. On the contrary, one might say that all Greek theory about the Logos was only a stubborn defense against the temptations of solipsism and a passionate affirmation of the intentionality of thought.

For classical philosophy, priority did not belong to thinking. Being occupied the first rank, thinking came only afterward. As Aristotle said: "the principle of the Logos is not the Logos, but something which is more than the Logos."<sup>19</sup>

But no one insisted more than Plato on the essential *inferiority* of man in comparison with the being which surrounds him. All the elements and all the principles constituting our being and our thinking, says Plato in the *Philebus* (29b-30c), are found to a greater degree and in a more perfect state of beauty and purity in the universe; while man "possesses only a tiny part, mediocre, always impure, and never endowed with all the power of nature; everything which is in us "is there in tiny, weak, and poor quantities, while in the universe, it is admirable both for its quantity and for its beauty." As may be noted, it is not a question of Plato disengaging the subject from the world; but, on the contrary, of leading it to deepen and perfect its always precarious participation in the lovely superabundant rationality of the universe.

According to Hegel's profound remark, "For the Greeks terrestrial things did not take on the abstract form of objects; they presented themselves not entirely as terrestrial, contingent and finite things, but in their empirico-concrete form."<sup>20</sup> Hence,

<sup>18</sup> Descartes, *3rd Meditation*.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Eth. Eudem.* VII, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Hegel, *SW (Jubiläumsausgabe)*, XVI, 429.

the so deeply-rooted idea of a universal Soul animating the body of the world conceived of as a "joyous god."

The modern spirit is resolutely compelled in the opposite direction. It is true that Giordano Bruno saw the earth and stars as living their own lives, animated by a soul as sensitive and intellectual "as ours, perhaps more than ours". But these themes were incompatible with the deepest aspirations of the new man. In the background of all modern naturalism may be heard always the sarcasm of the interlocutor of the *Cena de le Ceneri*: "If the earth is animated, it seems to me, it mustn't take very much pleasure in having grottoes and caverns scooped out of its back!"... This was always the response—the response of the activist and technician—which made itself heard whenever a recognition of an inner life, a spiritual side to nature was demanded. Nature had to be reduced to an exteriority deprived of all inwardness, to a simple juxtaposition of things; and it was in the presence of this thingified nature that man's place had to be found: man who was the king of creation and henceforth the unique and exclusive depository of the spirit. The astonishing Charles de Bouelles (Bovillus) gave the most extreme formulation to this new and revolutionary polarity between subject and object: *mundus vero rerum plenus, inanis rationum*.<sup>21</sup>

One is at the antipodes of the ancient cosmos: for Bovillus, the being of nature is a being outside itself, incapable of manifesting the divine thought of which it is the unconscious exteriorization; reason is an exclusively human property; without man, the world could not even exist. The "cosmic" man of antiquity had to be always "aware of the Totality"<sup>22</sup> because man must transcend his tiny place, go beyond himself toward the universe not in order to carve out a primary role for himself but to strengthen his being by connecting it again with a salutary order. But Christianity made man the focal point of the entire sublunary universe; thus, Saint Augustine could attribute to plants the desire to *be seen* by man, the fact of being seen being equivalent to the fact of being freed of their materiality, as if their entering into man's optical and cognitive field was analogous

<sup>21</sup> Carolus Bovillus, *De Sapiente*, 1509, Chap. XIX.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 903 b-d; Marcus Aurelius, XII, 8, 10; Plotinus, II, 9, 9.

to the redemption of men in Christ. But with Bovillus the reversal of perspectives becomes complete: it is the entire universe which turns toward man promoted to the rank of universal center, *omnium centrum*,<sup>23</sup> and asks to be saved by him. The juxtaposition in Nature of dead things, and things shrouded under appearances cannot subsist in itself but must become "for itself:" that is, must be thought by man: if man does not think it, the world would no longer exist, it would become lifeless, like a body abandoned by the soul.<sup>24</sup>

The world presents a series of gradations by means of which whatever exists obscurely as pure being finally attains self-consciousness: that is, arrives at the "concept." *Esse, vivere, sentire, intelligere* are the four degrees of the cosmic process whereby, to employ Hegelian terminology, "substance" becomes "subject." Nature's supreme end is to cease to be appearance and fragmentation and to rediscover its truth and unity. Now, nature will achieve this end only by its reflection in human reason, for reason, says Bovillus (anticipating at the same time Schelling and Hegel) is the force by which "mother nature" definitely returns to itself, achieves its evolution and is restored to itself: *rationem quoque eam vim diffinimus, qua mater natura in seipsam redit, qua totius naturae circulus absolvitur quae natura sibi ipsi restituitur.*<sup>25</sup>

Man's task is to repeat the act of creation in an inverse direction, leading the world back to the crystalline transparency of its origin. The world must become the interior landscape of the soul. This world of things, whose inflexible hardness man was experiencing and coping with for the first time, must enter into us, be resuscitated in us: this was the exegency on which that "subjective idealism" was built whose great merit, according to Marx, *its most extreme representative*, was to have reversed the passivity and fatalism of "ancient materialism," developing, instead, the "active side" of being.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Bovillus, *op. cit.* Chap. XXVI.

<sup>24</sup> Bovillus, *De Sensu*, fol. 22.

<sup>25</sup> Bovillus, *De Sapiente*, Chap. v.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, No. 1.

THE SOVEREIGN SUBJECT

In truth, this modern "subjectivism" must be thought of as the continuance of Christian "anthropocentrism." On the one hand, Christianity has so thoroughly freed us of the world that we no longer conceive of it as a being but as a transitory "figure," and already for Saint Augustine as a "*phenomenon of the consciousness*." On the other hand, the entire theology of the Church Fathers is a panegyric of man: one may find the origin and model of all the Renaissance dissertations *de hominis dignitate* in Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, or Nemesius. Also Cardinal of Cues, the first modern philosopher, began by establishing a unity of dynamic action between the divine *conceptio* and the human *conceptio*: the *second God* about which neo-Platonic and hermetic tradition speaks is not the Demiurge, but man because only man is capable of giving order to and re-connecting what has been separated in the phenomenal world.

The ancient thinker "imitates" a God who is essentially a contemplator, like the divinity of the *Phaedrus*—henceforth, the problem will be that of "assimilating" the constructive thought, the *vis entificativa* which God the maker, the creator *ex nihilo*, has exteriorized, materialized, objectivized in the universe. For the difference between man and God no longer resides in the capacity for *theoria*, which the Gods always possess and man momentarily, but results essentially from the difference between thinking and doing: *Inter divinam mentem et nostram id interest, quod inter facere et videre. Divina mens concipiendo creat, nostra concipiendo assimilat notiones seu intellectuales faciendo visiones. Divina mens est vis entificativa; nostra mens est vis assimilativa.*<sup>27</sup> The modern thinker also, who wants to rule the world according to his will, will "imitate" a God who is essentially a maker or, as Marsilio Ficino puts it, stressing the kinship between "human power" and "divine nature," *ergo tot concipit mens in se ipsa intelligendo, quot deus intelligendo facit in mundo.*<sup>28</sup> In brief, it is by his creative steps that man truly sets

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas of Cues, *Idiota*, III, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, pp. 298, 378.

himself in God's tracks; it is *in artibus et gubernationibus* that the soul is revealed as the *aemula dei*, whereby man is affirmed as a veritable *deus in terris*, and becomes, according to Descartes' pragmatic declaration, "master and possessor of nature."<sup>29</sup>

Kantian philosophy, because of its subjectivism and anti-ontological tendencies, brings the classical philosophical treatment of this problem to a focal point: the *Ego* has freed itself of any concern about being integrated into an already constituted universe, a concern still imperious in Descartes; it has also been freed of a theodicy from which has disappeared the notion of a hierarchy given once and for all outside of all creative being. "The Cosmotheoros, remarks Kant in one of his final writings, "creates by itself *a priori* the elements of world-consciousness, and in the Idea constructs the vision of this Universe which it also inhabits."<sup>30</sup>

Thus the "*donné*" effaces itself for the benefit of the constructive activity of consciousness liberated of all ontological support by the critique, liberated, that is, of all subjection with regard to being.

This sovereignty of the theoretical subject is accompanied by a depreciation of nature which in post-Kantian thought will become total and radical negation. If already in Kant's last philosophical thinking, matter appeared as the product of a spiritual act, the Universe really being only that by means of which the "I" becomes an object for itself, Fichte's thesis will be precisely the complete heteronomy of nature, reduced to a simple object of representation having no other end than that of serving as a prop for the self-constructive activity of the subject.

This subjective idealism indicates the disappearance of objectivity and its absorption into the infinite activity (both theoretical and practical) of the subject. Furthermore, just as Malebranche could treat Aristotle as a "pagan" so Fichte sensed betrayal in the neo-paganism which Schelling had wanted to establish in his Philosophy of Nature. Schelling longed for an "intellectual intuition" that would abolish the barriers separating matter, life and spirit into watertight compartments. But for Fichte, nature

<sup>29</sup> Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, vi.

<sup>30</sup> Kant, *Opus postumum* (after Adickes, C 333).

## *Regnum Hominis*

it "the shadow of a shadow;" it is only a simple object of representation "*it is here,*" he says responding to Schelling, "*it is in this tiny region of consciousness that a sensible world, a nature is found!*"<sup>31</sup>

But it remained for Hegel to carry the ontological aggressiveness of idealism to its ultimate. For him the entire universe is the reign of death, the sepulchre of God: only man manifests and realizes divine life. Even his crimes, Hegel says as if to reply to Plato, even the worst aberrations of man represent "something infinitely higher than the regular course of the stars, for it is always the spirit which errs in such a manner!" Such language had not been heard since the Gnostics of Plotinus' polemic. Hegel carries Christian anthropocentrism to its ultimate consequences, repudiating with equal vehemence both the cosmos-worship of the ancients, as well as Renaissance pantheism. The cosmos is neither the model of rationality, as Plato thought, nor the infinite which Giordano Bruno worshipped: "Yes, the entire solar system is something finite...only the spirit expresses real infinity."<sup>32</sup>

### MAN AS GOD INCARNATE

God, in Hegelian terms, *der Begriff*, the Concept, is the opposite of the *deus sive natura* of Spinozism. God is not the astronomical God of the ancients. He is no longer Newton's and Fontenelle's watchmaker-God: the harmony of the spheres is mechanical, soulless, foreign to the restless life of the divine Concept. The Hegelian God is first of all a *biologist* in the sense that the Concept makes its "first appearance" in the world via organic Life. The living God is a prisoner, "alienated" within dead matter. The Life which "fulminates" matter is God's first liberation, the beginning of his "return to self." If idealism is the affirmation of a subjective principle superior to the blind objective necessity reigning in matter, Life is already the first realization of this principle: "*The continuous action of Life is*

<sup>31</sup> Fichte, *Briefe* (ed. Plitt) II, 326.

<sup>32</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopädie*, 248, 286. *SW* (*Jubiläumsausgabe*) IX, 56 and X, 44.

*absolute idealism*"<sup>33</sup> because the living can only exist at the price of a continual "negation" of the external world which it transforms simply by means of self-satisfaction and self-affirmation. Thus, by his mobility and desires, the animal is the first idealist: he desires things; he devours them and destroys them. In this way he proves their "nullity" and his destructive action provides us with a first approximation of how God really acts within the world.

For Hegel as for Jacob Boehme the essential rapport between God and the world, the Creator and Created, the Infinite and the Finite is a rapport of "Anger". This "Anger of God" which Boehme made to weigh on matter and finiteness is called "Negativity" by Hegel. The living God is "outside of Himself" in dead nature; he returns to himself in and through the universal activity of myriads of living beings who, by desiring and consuming objects, break the hard carapace of matter in which he is imprisoned. But if animal desire already indicates God freeing himself, this striving toward liberation remains partial and superficial because the animal's negativizing activity is contained within a limited circle from which he cannot issue: only man can transform the entirety of what is given, the "*donnée*," into an object of his desire; only man can lend a deeper sense to negation than the mere destructive effects of desire.

Only man can actualize the true scope of the divine Anger because man is *der daseiende Begriff selbst*, the Concept itself existing concretely in an "empirically perceptible" manner, God himself who has achieved a carnal existence which is finally adequate to his being, God finally become really existent. Man is not *deus in terris* in the traditional meaning of the term which left one to understand that there were other Gods in *caelis*. On the contrary, the God who dies in the galaxies and who emerges—but "blindly"—in the biological world, is resuscitated in man, incarnate in him, revealing himself in him in order to turn immediately with Anger against the rest of creation. Thus, man will be the instrument *par excellence* of divine Anger. Because he is the Concept, man must by his very essence negate nature, dominate (*aufheben*) matter, fixity, and finiteness until they cease

<sup>33</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopädie*, 337; *SW*, IX, 451.

to resist the Spirit, until they enter into the turmoil of its mobile life. Because he is the Logos incarnate, man is essentially the enemy of Being: he is "the negative being who exists only insofar as he suppresses Being."<sup>34</sup>

Celebrated as the only true incarnation of the world's spirit, subjectivity thus acquires a new dimension. It no longer designates the transcendental center of the *cogito*, as it did for classical, Cartesian-Kantian philosophy; or the subject of moral action alone, as for Fichte, but includes everything which manifests the *historicity* of human *existence*. Man must transfigure, activate inert matter: beginning with such premises Hegel was led to the phenomenon of modern labor.

#### THE NEW ONTOLOGY OF LABOR

Up to then, philosophy had only touched lightly on the ontological dimension of labor. It is true that Aristotle paid homage to the *σοφία* of artisans which he placed much higher than simple moral virtue. However, the primacy of contemplative values and the ideal of *autarky* made it impossible for him as for all ancient thought—to give a deeper significance to work and to "the system of needs" which it reveals. In short, it was necessary to wait for the *qui laborat orat* of the Benedictines to find a foreshadowing of the new "faustian" dignity which the West was going to confer upon labor. For now it was not only a question of building by means of labor—and *santa masserizia*—that citadel of bourgeois existence about which Alberti had dreamed. Now, it was a question of the existential consecration of a very particular kind of men inconceivable in any other culture, men who were going to permeate the universe with their tensions and obsessions, their energy and "stubborn rigor." The Protestant sects gave divine sanction to this fever. The idea of economic progress insofar as it was an end consciously and methodically pursued, remarks Tawney, found for the first time its formulation in "the Puritan identification of work and enterprise with serving the divine."<sup>35</sup> But the problem to be

<sup>34</sup> Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (ed. Meiner, 1949) p. 236.

<sup>35</sup> R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (N.Y. 1956) pp. 206-7.

resolved was not the recognition of a sign of election in the will to live the most active life possible or leave oneself open to God by that implacable secular asceticism which Nicole exalts: "A life of labor always lessens love of the world, love of life, the attachment to temporal things."<sup>36</sup> It was not so much a matter of devoting one's mind to enterprise for the glory of God, as it was to incorporate work within the new dignity of man, the earthly humanist pride reechoing ever since Manetti's *nostra sunt*. Thus, in the 18th century the word labor loses its pejorative meaning and is set at the center of ethical thinking. Just as in the new image of the physical world, nature "provides" the "labor," so ever since Adam Smith the quantum of work has become the determinant of value: according to Quesnay and Turgot, a step was taken from "substance" to "subject."

Hegel was the first who philosophically took account of and thought about this event. For him, work is no longer material condition external to man unconnected with his actual destiny, but rather is the very essence of his being, the specifically human manifestation of that negativity which Hegel identified with the very life of the Absolute.

Animal desire was like the first glimmer of this negativity. But precisely because it is natural, desire remains a prisoner of matter. If satisfaction means destruction of the desired object (and in this respect, Hegel is strangely in agreement with the Marquis de Sade) the reappearance of desire perpetuates the "altérité:" only work (which is "suppressed desire") can adequately repudiate the object.<sup>37</sup> But the construction of tools, especially, permits man to manifest his negative nature more specifically. If work is simply "directed against death, the tool is essentially death itself:"<sup>38</sup> This aggression which became automatic as a result of the machine represented in Hegel's eyes that "mediation" (*die Mitte*) whereby the veritable synthesis of subject and object is effectuated. And in this world of tools and machines

<sup>36</sup> Cited by B. Grœthusen, *Origines de l'esprit bourgeois en France*, 1956, p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 149 ff.

<sup>38</sup> Hegel, *Realphilosophie*, 1804, I, 237.

the spirit is supposed to find the first faithful mirror of its being: "One is closer to reason when one constructs a tool than when one makes a child!" remarks Hegel, as if he wanted to consider "people's pride regarding their tools"<sup>39</sup> as opposed to Nature as possible.

At the same time as Saint-Simon was discerning the birth of a new world in industry, Hegel interested himself in the spiritual significance of technique. For him technique is not only the mythical force which will tear the slave away from the domination of his master, but rather what Aristotle or Antipater of Thessalonica, the Pindar of the water mill, considered it:

Stop grinding the grain, oh woman toiling at the mill  
Sleep late, even if cock-crow announces dawn,  
For Demeter has ordered the Nymphs to work for you,  
And leaning at the top of the wheel, they turn the paddles  
Which mesh with the heavy millstone  
Again we shall savor the joys of the age of gold  
On learning to take good cheer of the products of Demeter  
Without having worked...<sup>40</sup>

Hegel who had never stopped denouncing the dehumanization of the industrial worker, recognized the liberating virtues of the machine: in the *Encyclopedia* (§ 26) and in the *Philosophy of Right* (§ 98), he even envisages the possibility of total "automation" which would completely eliminate the laborer. But what fascinated him in the machine was not the *otium* in the sunshine dreamed about by the "pagans" but the higher role the machine plays in the cosmic action of negativity. For in its wires and gears (nothing in Hegel's time presaged the network of subtle forces soon to encircle the entire planet), in those wires and gears man's devouring feverishness and, what comes to the same thing, divine angry negativity are thereby acquiring an

<sup>39</sup> Hegel, *System der Sittlichkeit*, 1801-2, in *Schriften zur Politik* (ed. Lasson, 1923), pp. 431 and 428-9.

<sup>40</sup> "Ah, those pagans" Marx says ironically, *Das Kapital* (ed. Dietz, 1951), I, 428, comparing them with the barbarity of modern entrepreneurs who make use of the machine in order to prolong the working day. But those pagans would have been still more horrified by Marx' wanting to transform labor into "Man's primary need..."

autonomous objective existence. Hegel sees in the machine, above all, the "restlessness of the subjective, of the Concept, set outside of the subject."<sup>41</sup> The machine as materialized and automatized anguish: perhaps there we find the most pertinent definition which has ever been given of technique. This *malleus maleficarum* perpetually suspended over the earth, perpetually hammering the things of the earth: wasn't that what the strange Dominican, Petrus Peregrinus, was aspiring to when he dreamed of a *perpetuum mobile* which would reassemble divine omnipotence in itself.

In this materialized *meta-physic* which is technique, in the *second nature* which it constitutes, Hegel sees the sovereign force which will cause all the fixity of being to dissolve into the "corybantic" mobility of the Spirit. Thanks to the machine, negativity functions entirely alone: man can sleep—but the world will be in agony to the end of time.

#### TOWARD TECHNOCRATIC SOLIPSISM

In his theory of the "productive forces", Marx only rediscovered—but singularly impoverished and flattened—the Hegelian metaphysics of modern labor. After having rejected Hegelian spiritualism in the name of Feurbachian materialism, Marx carried negativity to an incandescent degree, reducing the subject to his activity as a technician alone. For him as for Hegel, man is defined from the start as the being which must act against nature. But while Hegel exempted art, religion and philosophy from the domain of negativity, Marx rejects the "fiction" of the Spirit as part of the "ideological superstructures," interpreting the *totality* of the human being in terms of the degree of intensity of his negative actions.

"What is life, if not activity?" Marx proclaimed before showing that "all human activity up to now has been the result of labor, therefore, of industry."<sup>42</sup> "The development of productive forces" which the so-called materialist interpretation

<sup>41</sup> Hegel, *System der Sittlichkeit*, p. 434.

<sup>42</sup> Marx, *Nationalökonomie und Philosophie* (1844. Ed. Kiepenheuer 1950), pp. 147, 192.

of history erects to the rank of a demiurge of society, does not designate a simple "objective factor" external to man, but exteriorizes the intimate depths of his being, his sole purpose on earth. "The history of modes of production" Marx strongly declares, "is the wide-open book of the basic forces of man, human *psychology* which has become empirically perceptible."<sup>43</sup> All human expression which is not written in this *liber vivus* of production; all human accomplishments not manifesting this technological "psychology" are "ideological" ("false," "illusory") and must be totally rejected; for example, religion. Or else they develop into a kind of "paratechnique" or "symbolic" industry which provides man with an imaginary sense of satisfaction, and inevitably disappears as soon as the manufactured objects are set into the natural world in order to really transform it. Thus with mythology. "All mythology," says Marx, "tames, dominates, and manipulates the forces of nature in the imagination and by means of the imagination, and then disappears when these forces are finally really controlled."<sup>44</sup>

What is important to note in this more than dubious definition of the creation of fables, is the fact that technique is here considered as the only specifically human activity with regard to nature. And here one may already measure the distance separating this pragmatism from traditional rationalism. For Turgot, for example, "the poverty of languages and the necessity for metaphors resulting from such poverty, make it necessary to employ allegories and fables to explain physical phenomena."<sup>45</sup> But technicism succeeded rationalism. For Marx, mythical representations are the result of technical poverty: they are only a fantasy-system, an over-compensation for mankind's technical underdevelopment before the industrial revolution.

Deriving from this limited notion of human "psychology" Marx imagined a refutation of materialism which would have

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192. We have analyzed this technocratic philosophy (or non-philosophy) of the young Marx in our essay "Marx y la soberanía de la industria," *Revista mexicana de literatura*, Nos. 4-6, Mexico, 1956.

<sup>44</sup> Marx, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Dietz, 1951), p. 268.

<sup>45</sup> Turgot, *Œuvres* (1808) II, 272.

been unthinkable in any other historical epoch but which nonetheless reveals the solipsistic trend of modern subjectivism. If Marx terms himself a materialist, what he repudiates in "ancient materialism" is that "history is not met with" in a purely materialistic conception of the world. Therefore, the mobile frontier between nature and *history* is effaced for the benefit of the former, and proceeds as if "man does not always have a historic nature before him," modified, reconstructed by his action. Feuerbach, for example, "does not see that the sensory world surrounding him is not something given directly from all eternity, always the same, but the *product* of the mode of production and the state of society!" Thanks to industry, man acquired the *vis entificativa* which Cusanus reserved to God, and became the demiurge of the material world. The materialist conception of history is thus doubled by a *historical conception of matter* extending the sovereignty of productive forces over all nature. Materialism is refuted because there is no longer any matter which has not already become, and from now on will not continue to be, either raw material for human activity or secondary material created by technology. If there is any truth in materialism, this truth is literally pre-historic: materialism sets up the "priority of external nature"—but such a purely objective nature, a nature extraneous to the subject *no longer exists*. Certainly, it has existed, but only for "primitive men begotten by spontaneous generation," only for men as they were they issued forth out of the earth's entrails. "Such a nature, prior to human history, no longer exists today; it exists nowhere." If it exists at all, it would be "in some Australian reefs of rather recent origin!"<sup>46</sup>

Fichte is met with again: if for Fichte the sensible world occupies a "tiny region" in the immensity of practical tasks set by the subject and fulfilled by his frenetic activity, for Marx nature as such has disappeared: nature not produced by technique represents no more than a "tiny region" of the cosmos, as small as some coral reefs "of rather recent origin."

It is difficult not to find in this "humanism" that same

<sup>46</sup> Marx, *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (ed. Dietz, 1953), pp. 40-43.

"boastful manner" which Schelling complained of in Fichte;<sup>47</sup> and Feuerbach would have been able to raise the objection that industry does not possess the cosmogenic importance attributed to it; that the "starry sky" always remains "prior to history" (at least such as Marx conceived it) just as it had been at the times of the Chaldeans; that when nature is being discussed, one should not think of coral reefs, but of that sum of several billions of solar systems. But if it is true, as Hegel thinks, that "to work is to annihilate the world or curse it,"<sup>48</sup> the only one who might have revealed the deepest springs of this titanism, could have been the chemist whom the narrator of the *Nouvelle Justine* met at the foot of Mount Etna. Here is how Sade formulated a program of universal outrage: "I abhor nature... I would like to upset its plans, thwart its progress, stop the wheeling of the stars, overthrow the globes floating in space, destroy whatever is helpful to her... Perhaps we can attack the sun, deprive the universe of it, or use it to set the world on fire"...

We now realize that this program is not as utopian as it seemed in the times of Marlowe or Sade... the universe, or at least our universe, is also mortal. Perhaps it was the thought of this possible death of matter that turned Hegel and Marx toward history to find an ultimate habitat for man. Herder was already searching for human truth and reality in the "valley of bones" of history. After him, Hegel would see history as the "Calvary of the Absolute," and Marx would compare the God of Progress "to that horrible pagan God who wanted to drink nectar only from his victim's skulls."<sup>49</sup> This barbaric God dancing with necklaces of death's heads is an old acquaintance of man. The Hindu heroes had recoiled in terror from him. Greece had designated him as the sovereign master of oblivion, the disturber of Being. But it is precisely in such lugubrious images that modern man must henceforth recognize the reflection of his being and proof of his dignity.

<sup>47</sup> Schelling, *SW*, x, p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> *Dokumente zu Hegels Entwicklung* (ed. Hoffmeister 1936), p. 360.

<sup>49</sup> Herder, *SW*, v, 574; Hegel, *SW*, II *in fine*; Marx, *SW*, IX, 226.