

THE PROSE OF THE WORLD

It has been over two centuries since resemblance ceased to play in our culture a stable, adequate and autonomous role at the wellspring of knowledge. The classical age broke away from it. First Bacon,¹ then Descartes² established within our time a system of knowledge in which similitude no longer occupied more than a precarious and temporary place, on the border of illusion: “when we discover some resemblances between two things we ordinarily attribute what we have recognized as true of one only to the other as well, even aspects in which in reality they differ.” Since the 17th century the *similar* has offered no more to knowledge than an unstable countenance, ready to give way to knowledge, and it is the province of knowledge to determine immediately the identical and the different so that they appear one beside the other and are scrupulously distinguished.

Dismissed by rational thought, resemblance conserves only its powers of enchantment, such as it possessed in that period which

Translated by Victor A. Velen.

¹ Bacon, *Novum Organon*, Book 1, p. 45 and 55.

² Descartes, *Regulae* I.

rightly or wrongly is called the baroque. Then its attractiveness was enhanced by the free rein and wide place suddenly accorded it. This was the period that favored the *trompe l'œil*, comic illusion, theatre within theatre; it was the time of the *quid pro quo*, of dreams and visions, of deceiving senses; it was the period in which metaphors and allegories defined the poetic space of language. But *ratio* itself enters a space in which there is no longer any question of the Same—defined by the identity of the elements or by their relationships—and the Other, with its laws and its criteria of discrimination. In this space the measure of the quantitative, the formalization of what cannot be numerically attributed, the general methods of analytical thought, the philosophies of the obvious and of the *a priori*, as well as of identity and of alienation, and finally the experience of repetition or of return will be deployed. It is as though all modern Western thought—that, is, our thought since the beginning of the classical age—were lodged in the void that was opened up when it became mandatory, if not to dismiss resemblance, at least to dissociate it from the design which had become too precarious in a rational tableau of identities and differences.

The similar is by now so foreign to our knowledge, so associated with the interplay of perception and language that we easily forget that at one time it could have been a form of positive knowledge. An autonomous configuration, it did not have to acknowledge of what bits and pieces it was secretly made; it could account, by the strength of its own powers, for the way in which the world was bound to it: knowledge introduced resemblance and resemblance made knowledge possible. It led in large part to the exegesis and interpretation of texts; it organized the interplay of symbols; it authorized the understanding of the visible through the invisible; it guided the art of representing itself. The world was enfolded in itself: the earth repeated the heavens, faces were mirrored in the stars; the herb contained in its stem the secrets that served man. Painting imitated space. And representation—whether it was for entertainment or knowledge—was given over to repetition: “the theatre of life” or “the mirror of the world” was the claim of all language, its way of announcing itself and of formulating its right to speak.

I. THE FOUR SIMILITUDES

The semantic thread of resemblance is quite rich—*amicitia, aequalitas, (contractus, consensus, matrimonium societas, pax et similia), consonantia, concertus, continuum, paritas, proportio, similitudo, conjunctio, copula*.³ And there are still many other concepts which intersect, overlap, reinforce or limit each other on the surface of thought. It should be sufficient for the time being to indicate the main forms whose articulations are dictated by the knowledge of resemblance. There are four surely essential ones.

The first one is *convenientia*. In reality the nearness of places is more strongly implied by this word than similitude. Things are “in concordance” which, approaching each other, are juxtaposed; they touch at the borders, their edges overlap; the limits of one designate the beginning of the other. By this means movement is communicated, influences and passions, and also properties. So that in this joining of things a resemblance appears. As soon as one tries to disentangle it, it becomes double: resemblance of place, of the site where nature has placed two things, hence a similitude of properties. For in this natural container which the world is, vicinity is not an exterior relationship between things, but the sign of a relatedness, however obscure. Then through exchange new resemblances are born from this contact; a common order is imposed; a resemblance which is the visible effect of proximity is superimposed on similitude, as the dumb reason of vicinity. The body and the soul are, for example, doubly in accord: it was necessary for sin to make the soul thick and heavy, and earthly, so that God could place it in the mould of matter. But through this vicinity the soul receives the movements of the body, and is assimilated to it, while “the body debases itself and is corrupted by the passions of the soul.”⁴ In the vast syntax of the world different beings adjust to one another; the plant communicates with the animal, the land with the sea, man with all that surrounds him. Resemblance imposes contiguities which in their turn assure resemblances. The place and the similitude become inter-

³ P. Gregoire, *Syntaxeon artis mirabilis*, Cologne, 1610, p. 28.

⁴ G. Porta, *La Physionomie humaine* (French translation, 1655), p. 1.

twined: moss may be seen growing on the backs of shells, plants between the antlers of deer, species of herbs on the face of man; and the strange zoophyte juxtaposes, by mixing them, the properties which make them resemble equally well the plant and the animal.⁵ They are just that many signs of concordance.

Convenientia is a resemblance linked to space “by degrees.” It is in the nature of conjunction and adjustment. That is why it belongs less to things themselves than to the world in which they occur. The world is the universal “concordance” of things; there are as many fish in the sea as there are animals on earth or objects produced by nature or men (aren’t there fish that are called *Episcopus*, others, *Catena*, and still others, *Priapus*?). In the water and on the surface of the earth there are as many beings as there are in heaven to which they correspond. Finally all that is created is as much as could eminently be found in God, “Husbandman of Existence, of Power, of Knowledge and of Love.”⁶ Thus through the concatenation of resemblance and space, through the force of this concordance which adjoins the similar and assimilates the near, the world forms a chain with itself. At each point of contact begins and ends a link which resembles the one preceding, as well as the one that follows; and from circle to circle similitudes succeed each other, holding the extremes (God and matter) at their distance, connecting them in such a way that the will of the All-Powerful penetrates into the most dormant corners. It is this immense chain, extended and vibrant, this chord of harmony that Porta evokes in a passage of his *Magie naturelle*: “So far as its vegetation is concerned, the plant corresponds to the brute animal, and through feeling, the beast with man, who by his intelligence concords moreover with the stars; this connection occurs so naturally that it is like a cord stretched from the first cause to the lowest and minutest things in a reciprocal and continuous linkage; in the same way superior virtue, extending its rays, arrives at a point where if one of its extremities is touched, it will tremble and set the rest in motion.”⁷

The second form of similitude is *aemulatio*, a type of concor-

⁵ U. Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia*, Bologna, 1647, p. 663.

⁶ T. Campanella, *Realis Philosophia*, Frankfurt, 1623, p. 98.

⁷ G. Porta, *Magie naturelle* (French translation, Rouen, 1650), p. 22.

dance but one that is free of the law of place and that is effective, immobile, in the distance, somewhat as thought spatial connivance had been broken and the links of the chain, detached, reproduced their circles, far from each other, according to a resemblance without contact. There is something of reflection and the mirror in emulation; through it things dispersed throughout the world respond to each other. From a distance the face emulates the heavens, and, as human intellect, it reflects, imperfectly, the wisdom of God, just as two eyes, with their limited clarity, reflect the great illumination diffused across the sky by the sun and the moon. The mouth is Venus, since through it pass kisses and words of love; the nose is a minuscule image of the scepter of Jupiter and Mercury's wand.⁸ By this relationship of emulation, things can imitate each other from one end of the universe to the other without being joined together or near one another. Through its reduplication in the mirror, the world abolishes its own distance; it thus triumphs over the place given to each thing. Which are the primary reflections that travel through space? Where is reality, where is the projected image? It is frequently not possible to say, for emulation is a sort of natural germination of things; it is caused by the overlapping of the two sides of a being that directly face each other. Paracelsus compares this fundamental redoubling of the world to a tourney between "two equally ferocious and angry soldiers," and also to the image of twins "who are identical, without anyone being able to tell who reflects his likeness in the other."⁹

However, emulation does not leave the two facing, mirrored forms inert. It may happen that one is weaker and that it receives the other's more powerful influence, which is reflected in its passive mirror. Don't the stars outshine the herbs of the earth, for which they are the unchanging model, the unalterable form, whose task is to infuse secretly into herbs the entire realm of their influences? The somber earth is the mirror of the overcast sky, but in this tourney neither of the two rivals are of equal value or equal dignity. The clearness of the herb reproduces peaceably

⁸ U. Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia*, p. 3.

⁹ Paracelsus, *Liber Paramirum* (translated by Grillot de Givry, Paris, 1913), p. 3.

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the clear form of the heavens: “The stars,” Crolius said, “are the matrix of all herbs, and each star of the heavens is but the spiritual prefiguration of an herb, to the extent that it represents it, and just as each herb or plant is an earthly star looking at the heavens, so every star is a celestial plant in spiritual form, which differs from earthly forms only in matter... The celestial plants and herbs are turned toward the earth and look directly at the herbs they have procreated, imbuing them with some special virtue.”¹⁰

But it also happens that the contest remains open and that the calm mirror reflects nothing but the “two angry soldiers.” Similitude then becomes a form of combat between one form and another—or rather of the same form separated from itself by the weight of matter or the distance of places. Paracelsus’ man is, like the firmament, “star-spangled;” but he is not bound to it as “the thief to the galley, the murderer to the wheel, the fish to the fisherman, the deer to the hunter.” It is in the nature of man’s firmament that he be “free and powerful,” “obey no order,” and “not be ruled by any other creature.” His inner heaven can be autonomous and rest only on itself; but on condition that through his wisdom, which is also knowledge, he becomes similar to the order of the world, he re-assumes it in himself and thus makes the heaven in which the visible stars shine tumble into his own inner firmament. Then this wisdom of the mirror will encompass in return the world in which it was placed; its great arc will return to the depth of heaven and beyond; man will discover that he contains “the stars within himself...,” and that he thus bears the firmament with all its influences.”¹¹

Emulation first appears in the form of a simple reflection, furtive and remote; it travels silently through the world’s space. But the distance that it covers is not nullified by its subtle metaphor; it remains evident to sight. And in this duel the two figures confronting each other possess each other. Like envelopes like, which in turn encircles it, and it will perhaps be enveloped again by a redoubling which has the power of continuing to the infinite. The circles of emulation do not form a chain as the

¹⁰ Crolius, *Traité des signatures* (French translation, Lyon, 1624), p. 18.

¹¹ Paracelsus, *loc. cit.*

elements of concordance, but rather concentric circles, reflected and competitive.

The third form of similitude is *analogy*. It is an old concept, familiar to Greek science and medieval thought, but one whose usage has probably been altered. *Convenientia* and *aemulatio* are superimposed in analogy. Like the former it assures the marvelous confrontation of resemblance throughout space; but, as the latter, it entails adjustments, links and joints. Its power is immense, for the similitudes it involves are not the visible, massive ones of things themselves; it is sufficient that they be the most subtle resemblances of relationships. Thus unburdened, it may lead, departing from the same point, to an indefinite number of kindred relationships. The relationship, for example, of the stars to the heavens in which they shine may also be found, of the herb to the earth, of the living to the globe they inhabit, of minerals and diamonds to the rocks in which they are buried, of the sensory organs to the face that they animate, of the blemishes of the skin to the body that they secretly mark. An analogy may also turn upon itself without being contested. The old analogy of the plant to the animal (a vegetable is an animal that stands with its head down, with its mouth—or roots—stuck in the ground). Cesalpinus neither criticizes nor denies this analogy; on the contrary, he reinforces it, he multiplies it by itself, when he discovers that the plant is an animal standing upright, whose nutritive principles rise from below toward the summit, along the length of a stem which stretches out like a body and is crowned by a head,—a bouquet, flowers, leaves: an inverse relationship but not contradictory to the first analogy, which places “the root at the lower part of the plant, the stem at the upper, since with animals the network of veins also begins at the lower part of the abdomen, and the main artery rises toward the heart and the head.”¹²

This reversibility, just as this polyvalence, gives analogy a universal field of application. As a result of it, all the forms of the world can approach each other. However, in this space furrowed in all directions there is a privileged point: it is saturated with analogies (each can find there its fulcrum), and in passing through

¹² Cesalpinus, *De plantis libri XVI*, 1583.

this point the relationships are reversed without being changed. This point is man; he is in proportion with the heavens, as well as with animals and plants, with the earth, metals, stalactites or storms. Standing erect among the aspects of the world, he relates to the firmament (his face is to his body as the face of heaven is to ether; his pulse beats in his veins as the stars circulate in accordance with their natural routes; the seven apertures of his face correspond to the seven planets in heaven). But he turns all these relationships about, and they occur again in similar fashion in the analogy of the human animal with the earth that it inhabits: his flesh is the sod; his bones, the rocks; his veins, the great rivers; his bladder, the sea; and his seven main limbs are the seven metals hidden in the depth of mines.¹³ The body of man is always a possible half of a universal atlas. We know how Pierre Belon traced to the last detail the first comparative design of a human skeleton and the skeleton of a bird. Here we see “the pinion, called appendix, which is in proportion with the wing, in place of the thumb in the hand; the tip of the pinion is comparable to our fingers...; the bones of birds’ legs correspond to our heel; just as we have four small toes, so birds have four claws with one in the rear of the foot that corresponds to our big toe.”¹⁴ Such precision, however, is only comparative anatomy from the standpoint of 19th century knowledge. It happens that the grid through which we perceive the forms of resemblance tallies at this point (and almost alone at this point) with what was known about things in the 16th century.

But Belon’s description, in fact, only points up the positivity which in his period made such a formulation possible. It is no more rational, no more scientific than Aldrovandi’s observation, in which he compares the lower parts of man to the base areas of the world, to hell, to its darkness, to the damned who are the excrements of the universe.¹⁵ It belongs to the same analogical cosmography as Crollius’ comparison, which was classic at the time, between apoplexy and a storm: a storm begins when the atmosphere becomes oppressive and disturbed; a crisis when

¹³ Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, p. 88.

¹⁴ P. Belon, *Histoire de la nature des oiseaux*, Paris, 1555, p. 37.

¹⁵ U. Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia*, p. 4.

thoughts become heavy and anxious. Clouds begin to amass, the stomach inflates, there is a clap of thunder and the bladder breaks; lightning flashes as the eyes shine with a terrible brilliance; rain falls, the mouth foams, the storm breaks as the spirits burst out of the skin. But just then the weather clears, and the sick man's reason is reestablished.¹⁶ The space of analogies is *au fond* a space of radiation. From every side it concerns man; but this same man, inversely, transmits the resemblances which he receives of the world. He is the major focus of proportions—the center on which relationships depend and in which they are reflected anew.

Finally, the fourth form of resemblance is assured by the interplay of sympathies. Here no route is determined in advance, no distance is assumed, no connection prescribed. Sympathy acts freely at the center of the world. It traverses in an instant the greatest space: from the planet to man whom it rules. Sympathy strikes like lightning from afar; it may be aroused, conversely, through one contact alone,—just as those “roses of mourning, which are used for funerals,” and which, by the very nearness of death, cause anyone who breathes their perfume to feel “sad and faint.”¹⁷ But its power is such that it is not content to flow out from one contact alone and to traverse space; it gives impetus to the movement of things in the world and brings together those that are most distant. It is the principle of mobility; it attracts heavy things toward the weight of the earth, and what is light toward weightless ether; it pushes roots toward water, and it causes the great yellow sunflower to turn with the arc of the sun. Much more, in attracting things to each other, through an external and visible movement, it inspires a secret internal motion—a displacement of qualities that relieve each other. Fire, because it is warm and light, rises into the air, toward which its flames reach tirelessly; but in the process it loses its own dryness (which made it kindred with the earth) and thus acquires humidity (which ties it to water and air). It then disappears in a light vapor, in blue smoke, in a cloud; it has become air. Sympathy is an instance of the *Same*, so strong and so urgent that it

¹⁶ Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, p. 87.

¹⁷ G. Porta, *Magie naturelle*, p. 72.

is not content to be one of like forms; it has the dangerous power to *assimilate*, to render things identical with one another, to mix them up, to make them lose their individuality,—hence to make them foreign to what they were. Sympathy transforms. It changes, but toward the identical, in such a way that if its power were not equilibrated, the world would be reduced to a point, to a homogeneous mass, to a bleak form of Sameness: all its parts would be connected and would intercommunicate without a break or distance, as chains of metal suspended through sympathy in their attraction to one magnet.¹⁸

This is why sympathy is compensated for by its twin form, antipathy. The latter keeps things in isolation and prevents assimilation; it encloses each species in its stubborn individuality and its propensity to persevere in being what it is: “It is quite well known that plants have antipathies among themselves... It is said that the olive and vine hate the cabbage; that the cucumber flees the olive... Granted its growth is due the warmth of the sun and the moisture of the earth, every thick and bushy tree must be pernicious to the rest, as well as to anything else that has several roots.”¹⁹ Thus unto infinity, throughout time, the beings of the world will hate each other and, hostile to all sympathy, will maintain their insatiable appetite. “The Indian rat is noxious to the crocodile, because nature has willed it so; so that when this violent beast lolls in the sun, the rat lays a trap of deadly cunning; seeing that the crocodile is sleeping peacefully with its mouth open, it enters through it, creeps down its wide throat into its belly, where, gnawing on its entrails, it finally emerges from inside the killed animal.” But in their turn, the rat’s enemies lie in wait for him, for he is in discord with the spider and “he dies frequently fighting its venom.”²⁰

Despite this action of antipathy which separates things, attracts them to combat, makes them murderous and exposes them in their turn to death, animals and all the forms of the world nonetheless remain as they are.

The likeness of things, the fact they can resemble other things,

¹⁸ G. Porta, *Magie naturelle*, p. 72.

¹⁹ J. Cardan, *De la subtilité* (French translation, Paris, 1656), p. 154.

²⁰ S. G. S., *Annotations au Grand Miroir du Monde de Duchesne*, p. 498.

approach them, and, without being absorbed by them, remain distinct, is due to the constant equilibrium maintained between sympathy and antipathy. It explains how things grow, develop, mingle, disappear and die, but are forever reborn; in short, it explains that there is a space (which, however, is not without a point of reference or repetition, or without a point of similitude) and a time (in which, however, the same forms, the same species, the same elements, reappear *ad infinitum*). “How simple in themselves are the four elements (water, air, fire, earth) with their distinct properties, and all the more so since the Creator has ordained that elementary bodies be composed of mixed elements. This is why their concordances and discordances, manifest by their properties, are so remarkable. Fire is hot and dry; hence it is in antipathy to the properties of water, which is cold and humid. Hot air is humid, the cold earth is dry—this is in antipathy. To harmonize them, air has been placed between fire and water, and water between the earth and air. And so long as the air is hot, it is a good neighbor to fire and its humidity is in accord with that of water. Again, so long as humidity is tempered, it moderates the warmth of fire and is also aided by it, as, on the other hand, its even heat warms the humid coldness of water. The humidity of water is heated by the warmth of air and alleviates the cold dryness of the earth.”²¹

The rule of the pair sympathy-antipathy, the movement and dispersion that it decrees, determine all forms of resemblance. Thus the first three similitudes can be recapitulated and explained. The entire substance of the world, all the affinities of concordance, all the echos of emulation, all the concatenations of analogy are supported, maintained and doubled by this space of sympathy and antipathy, which never ceases to bring things together at the same time that it holds them apart. Through this interplay the world remains identical; likenesses continue to be what they are, and to resemble each other. The same remains the same, locked up in itself.

²¹ S. G. S., *loc. cit.*

II. SIGNATURES

And yet the system is not closed. A way out remains: through it the entire interplay of resemblances would run the risk of escaping from itself, or of remaining in the dark, if a new form of similitude were not to close the circle—and render it at once perfect and manifest.

Convenientia, aemulatio, analogia and *sympathia* tell us how the world must fold up in itself, be redoubled, reflected, or form a chain, so that things can resemble each other. They instruct us as to the ways of similitude and where they lead; not where similitude is nor how it is seen, nor by what hallmark it is recognized. Now, perhaps we could pass through all this marvelous multiplication of resemblances, without our even suspecting that it was prepared a long time ago by the order of the world, and for our greater benefit. For us to know that aconite heals the diseases of the eyes and that nuts meshed with the essence of wine is good for headaches, we must be informed by a sign to this effect: without it the secret would remain forever dormant. Would one ever know that there is a relationship between a man and his planet, of gemellity or of conflict, if there were not on his body and in the lines of his face the signs that he is a rival of Mars or related to Saturn? Hidden similitudes should be indicated on the surface of things; a visible mark of invisible analogies is needed. Is not all resemblance at the same time what is most manifest and what is best hidden? Resemblance is not, in fact, composed of juxtaposed pieces—some identical, others different. It is in one single piece a similitude that we see and do not see. It should therefore be outside criteria, if there were not in it—above or beside it—an element of decision that transforms its doubtful glitter into a clear certainty.

There is no resemblance without a signature. The world of the similar can only be a signed world. “It is not the will of God,” says Paracelsus, “that what he creates for the benefit of man and what he has given him remain hidden... And even if he has hidden certain things, he has left nothing without exterior signs, with special marks—just as a man who has buried a treasure marks

the spot in order to be able to find it again.”²² Knowledge of similitudes is based on the reading of these signatures and on their deciphering. It is useless to stop at the cuticle of plants to understand their nature. We must go straight to their marks, “to the shadow and image of God which they bear or to the inner virtue which has been given them by heaven as a natural dowry... Virtue, I say, which we recognize rather by its signature.”²³ The system of signatures upsets the relationship of the visible to the invisible. Resemblance was the invisible form of what, at the center of the world, made things visible; but in order that this form in its turn come to light, a visible figure must draw it out of its profound invisibility. That is why the face of the world is covered with coats of arms, with “characters,” ciphers, obscure words,—with hieroglyphs, said Turner. And the space of the immediate resemblances becomes like a huge open book; it is teeming with writings; all across the page we see strange figures which intersect and are sometimes repeated. All that is required is to decipher them: “Is it not true that all herbs, plants, trees and others, coming from the bowels of the earth, are so many books and magic signs?”²⁴ The great calm mirror in whose depth things are observed and reflected, one in the other, is in reality brimming with words. The mute reflections are doubled by words which denote them. And by dint of one final form of resemblance, which envelops all the others and encloses them in a unique circle, the world may be compared to a man who speaks: “just as the secret movements of his understanding are manifested by speech, doesn’t it seem that herbs speak to the inquisitive physician by their signature, revealing to him... their inner virtues hidden under nature’s veil of silence.”²⁵

We must linger a moment on this language itself, on the signs of which it is composed, on the way in which these signs refer to what they indicate.

There is sympathy between aconite and the eyes. This unper-

²² Paracelsus, *Die 9 Bücher der Natura Rerum* (*Œuvres*, ed. Suhdorff, v. ix, p. 393).

²³ Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, p. 4.

²⁴ Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, p. 6.

²⁵ Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, p. 6.

ceived affinity would remain undetected if there were not a signature on the plant, a mark, which, like a word, says that it is good for diseases of the eye. This sign is perfectly readable in aconite seeds. These are small dark globules, encased in white cuticle, which correspond more or less to the eyelids and the eye.²⁶ The same is true for the affinity of the nut and the head; what heals the “wounds of the skull” is the thick green rind, which covers the structure—or the shell—of the fruit. Internal headaches are cured by the kernel of the nut “which entirely resembles the brain.”²⁷ The sign of affinity, and what makes it visible, is quite simply analogy; the cipher of the sympathy is in the proportion.

But what signature will proportion itself bear so that it may be recognized? How could we know that the wrinkles of the hand or the lines of the forehead trace on the body of man what his leanings are, his accidents or setbacks in the great fabric of life? If it were not because sympathy makes the body communicate with heaven, and transmits the movement of the planets to man’s adventures. If not also because the shortness of a line is the simple image of a short life, the intersection of two lines, the meeting of an obstacle, the rise of a line, the rise of man toward success. Broadness is a sign of wealth and importance; continuity denotes fortune, discontinuity, misfortune.²⁸ The great analogy of the body and of fate is marked by the entire system of reflections and attractions. Sympathies and emulations point to analogies.

So far as emulation is concerned, we can recognize it by analogy: the eyes are stars because they diffuse light in faces, as the stars in darkness, and because the blind are like clairvoyants in the darkest night. It may also be recognized through concordance. Since the time of the Greeks it has been known that the extremities of strong and courageous animals are large and well developed. The breadth of a man’s hand may be likened to the image of his strength. But this image is a sign only to the extent to which it is upheld by the knowledge of a continuous sequence. “As with every type of species of lions—the paws are remarkable

²⁶ Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, p. 33.

²⁷ Crollius, *Traité des signatures*, pp. 33-34.

²⁸ J. Cardan, *Métoposcopie* (1658 edition), pp. iii-viii.

for their strength or size; and all other species of powerful animals, horses or bulls, or a strong man, have limbs of this sort. Consequently, those who do not have strong, large limbs are considered in effect to be weak and frail. Large limbs are therefore a sign in themselves of strength.”²⁹ Recognition of the most apparent similitudes is hence made on the basis of a discovery that there is concordance of things among themselves. And if one considers then that concordance is not always portrayed by an actual localization, but that many things that are different complement each other (such as disease and its remedy, a man and his stars, the plant and the earth that nourishes it), we must recognize another sign of concordance. But what other sign is there that two things are linked together if not their reciprocal attraction, as the sun and the sunflower and as water and the young shoot of the cucumber?³⁰ Otherwise, what affinity and sympathy exists between them?

Thus the circle is closed. Nevertheless we can see by what system of redoublings. Resemblances require a signature, for none could be observed if it were not legibly marked. But what are these signs? How do we recognize, among the many aspects of the world and so many intersecting forms, that here is a characteristic that arrests our attention because it indicates a secret and essential resemblance. What gives the sign its singular value as a sign? The sign is resemblance. It is meaningful to the extent to which it resembles what it indicates (that is, a similitude). But it is not, however, homology that it indicates; for then its separate being as a signature would disappear in the face whose sign it is. It is *another* resemblance, a near similitude, of a different type than that which serves to point out the first, and which is revealed in turn by a third similitude. Every resemblance is signed; but this signature is only a common form of resemblance. So much so that the sum total of signs makes a second circle slip within the circle of similitudes, which point for point would exactly duplicate the first if it were not for this small lag. This causes the sign of sympathy to reside in analogy, that of analogy in emulation, that of emulation in concordance,

²⁹ G. Porta, *La physionomie humaine*, p. 64.

³⁰ Bacon, *Histoire naturelle* (French translation, 1631), p. 221.

which in turn requires the sign of sympathy to be recognized... The signature and what it designates are of exactly the same nature; they merely obey different laws or distributions; they are cut from the same cloth.

The signing form and the signed form are resemblances, but secondary ones. And it is in this that Resemblance in the knowledge of the 16th century is undoubtedly most universal; at the same time it is most visible, but must however be sought to be discovered, because it is most hidden. It is what determines the form of knowledge (for one understands it only by following the ways of similitude), and what guarantees its richness of content (for, from the moment that the signs are separated and studied for their meaning, resemblance itself is revealed, sparkling in its own natural brilliance).

Let's call the sum total of knowledge and techniques which permit us to speak of signs and to discover their meaning, hermeneutics; and let's call the sum total of knowledge and techniques which permit us to distinguish what signs are, to define what establishes them as signs, to understand their ties and the laws of their concatenation, semiology. In the 16th century semiology and hermeneutics were superimposed to form similitude. To look for the meaning is to throw light on what things resemble each other. To look for the law of signs is to discover things that are alike. The grammar of beings is their exegesis. And the language that they speak reveals nothing other than the syntax that binds them. The chain that links nature, things, coexistence, and through which they communicate, is not different from their resemblance. And the latter appears only within the network of signs which traverses the world from one end to the other. "Nature" is trapped in the shallow width which holds semiology and hermeneutics one on top of the other. It is mysterious and veiled, it presents itself to understanding which it sometimes misleads only to the extent that this superimposition does not occur without a slight lag in resemblances. Suddenly the grid is not clear; the transparency is blurred from the start. A dark space appears which must be increasingly illuminated.

It is here that "nature" is and it must be made use of to achieve understanding. Everything would be immediate and obvious if the hermeneutics of resemblance and the semiology of

signatures were to coincide without the slightest oscillation. But because there is a “gap” between the similitudes that form writing and those that form speech, knowledge in its infinite work perceives from it the space proper to them. They will have to plough this distance, proceeding in a zigzag line, from the like to that which is similar to it.

III. THE LIMITS OF THE WORLD

This a very general outline of the epistemology of the 16th century. This configuration entails a certain number of consequences. First of all, it is by nature plethoric and at the same time totally insufficient. Plethoric because it has no limits. Resemblance never remains stable in itself. It is fixed only if it transmits similitude to another, which in turn designates others; in such a way that each resemblance has value only through the accumulation of all the others; that the entire world must be traversed in order that the slimmest analogies be justified and finally appear as certain. It is therefore a knowledge which must proceed from an endless piling up of confirmations, each one referring to the others. And hence, from its very foundations, this knowledge is friable. The only possible tie between its elements is addition. Hence those enormous columns; hence, too, their monotony. By proposing resemblance as the link between the sign and what it indicates (at the same time a third power and a unique power, since it is both the mark and the content), the knowledge of the 16th century was condemned forever to understand only the same thing, but to understand it only at the unattainable terminus of an indefinite journey.

And it is here that the famous category of the microcosm enters the picture. This old concept no doubt had been revived in the course of the Middle Ages and from the start of the Renaissance by a certain neo-Platonic tradition. But it ended up by playing a basic role in knowledge in the 16th century. It matters little whether it is or is not, as it once was called, a vision of the world, a *Weltanschauung*. In fact it has one or rather two very precise functions in the epistemological configuration of this period. As a *category of thought* it applies to every domain of nature the interplay of redoubled resemblances; it guarantees

the investigator that each thing will find its mirror and its macrocosmic proof on a larger scale; it affirms moreover that the visible order of the highest spheres will be mirrored in the darkest depths of the earth. But, understood as a *general configuration* of nature, it establishes real limits, that is, tangible ones, to the tireless succession of similitudes that relieve one another. It indicates that a great world exists and that its perimeter marks the limits of all things created; that at the other extremity, a privileged creature exists which reproduces, within its restricted dimensions, the immense order of the heavens, the stars, the mountains, the rivers and the storms; and that the interplay of resemblances takes place within the effective limits of this constitutive analogy. By dint of this fact alone, while the distance of the microcosm to the macrocosm may well be immense, it is not infinite; while the beings that live within it may well be numerous, they could, if need be, be counted; and consequently, the similitudes which, by the interaction of signs that they require, always rely on one another and there is no danger of their escaping indefinitely. In order to be supported and reinforced, they enjoy a perfectly enclosed domain. Nature, as well as the interplay of signs and resemblances, closes itself up in itself in accordance with the redoubled shape of the cosmos.

One should be careful not to reverse relationships. Undoubtedly, the idea of the microcosm is "important," as it was said to be in the 16th century. Among all the theories that research could check out, it would probably crop up the most frequently. But we are not concerned here with a study of opinions, which only a statistical analysis of written materials would make it possible to conduct. If, on the contrary, the knowledge of the 16th century is questioned at its archeological level—that is, in what has made it possible—the relationships of the macrocosm and the microcosm appear as a simple surface effect. It is not because such relationships were believed that research was begun on all the analogies of the world. But at the heart of knowledge there was a necessity to adjust the infinite wealth of a resemblance introduced as a third element, between signs and their meaning, and the monotony which imposed the same pattern of resemblance on the signifier and what it signified. In a science of knowledge in which signs and similitudes are intertwined in

accordance with a spiral without end, one had to think that the relationship of the microcosm to the macrocosm was a guarantee of this knowledge and the condition of its effusion.

The same necessity obliged this knowledge to accept at the same time and on the same level magic and erudition. It easily appears to us that the learning of the 16th century was constituted of an unstable *mélange* of rational knowledge, of notions derived from the practice of magic, and of an entire cultural heritage whose authoritative powers had been multiplied by the rediscovery of ancient texts. Thus conceived, the science of this period appears endowed with a weak structure; it merely gave free rein to a confrontation between loyalty to the ancients, a taste for the marvelous, and an already awakened attention to that supreme rationality which is ours. And this period was reflected in the mirror of every work and of every gifted mind... In fact it is not from an insufficiency of structure that the 16th century suffers. We have seen, on the contrary, how meticulous the configurations are which define its space. It is this rigor which imposes the relationship to magic and to erudition—not accepted content, but required forms. The world is filled with signs which must be deciphered, and these signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves only forms of similitude. To know then is to interpret, to go from the visible sign to what is said by it, and what would remain, without it, a mute word dormant in the midst of things. “We others, we men discover all that is hidden in the mountains by signs and exterior correspondences; and it is thus that we find all the properties of herbs and all that is in rocks. There is nothing in the depths of the seas, nothing in the heights of the firmament which man would be incapable of discovering. There is no mountain vast enough to hide from man’s search for what is inside it; this is revealed to him through corresponding signs.”³¹ Divination is not a competitive form of learning; it is part of knowledge itself. For these signs that are interpreted designate the hidden only to the extent to which they resemble it; one may not act upon these signs without operating at the same time on what is secretly indicated by them. This is why plants which represent the head or the eyes, or the heart,

³¹ Paracelsus, *Archidoxis Magica* (French translation, 1909), pp. 22-23.

or the liver will be effective if used to treat an organ; this is why animals themselves perceive the signs that designate them. "Tell me then," Paracelsus asks, "why serpents in Helvetia, in Algeria, in Sweden understand the Greek words *Osy*, *Osy*, *Osy*... In which academies have they learned them, so that, as soon as they merely hear the word they turn tail, in order not to hear it again. As soon as they have heard the word, regardless of their nature and spirit, they remain immobile and poison no one with their venomous bite." And one should not attribute this merely to the effect of the sound of the words spoken: "If you write these words alone, in good weather, on vellum, parchment or paper, and if you present them to the serpent, the latter will remain no less immobile than if you had spoken them at the top of your voice."³² The practice of "natural magic," which held such an important place at the end of the 16th century, and was carried over well into the middle of the 17th, was not a residual element in the European consciousness; it had been revived—as Campanella expressly states³³—for reasons related to the period: because the basic configuration of knowledge referred signs and similitudes to each other. The magic form was inherent in the way knowledge was acquired.

And the same is true for erudition: for in the treasure that antiquity has transmitted to us language is valued as a sign of things. There is no difference between those visible marks which God set down on the surface of the earth, to reveal to us inner secrets, and the written words of the scriptures, or of the sages of antiquity who were illuminated by a divine light, set down in those books that tradition has preserved. The relationship to the texts is of the same kind as the relationship to things; here and there are signs that are set off. But God, in order to exercise our wisdom, infused nature only with figures to be deciphered and it is in this sense that knowledge must be *divinatio*), whereas the ancients provided ready interpretations, which all we have to do is garner, which we need only to collect if it were not necessary to learn their language, read their texts, and understand what they said. The heritage of antiquity is, like nature itself, a vast

³² Paracelsus, *loc. cit.*

³³ T. Campanella, *De sensu rerum et magia*, Frankfurt, 1620.

space to be interpreted; here and there signs must be observed and gradually made to speak. In other words *Divinatio* and *Eruditio* are one and the same hermeneutics. But it develops in accordance with similar forms, at two different levels: one proceeds from the mute sign to the thing itself (and it makes nature speak); the other proceeds from immobile writing to the clear word (it gives life back to dormant languages). But just as natural signs are tied to what they designate by the profound relationship of resemblance, so the speech of the ancients is in the image of what it enunciates. If for us it has the value of a precious sign, it is because, from the core of its being, and through the light that has continued to illuminate it since its birth, it is adjusted to things themselves, it forms their mirror and emulation. It is to the eternal truth what signs are to the secrets of nature (it is the sign of this word to be deciphered); it has an ageless affinity with the things it unveils. It is hence useless to demand its title of authority; it is a treasury of signs tied by similitude to what they may designate. The only difference is that it is a treasury of a secondary degree, referring to the notations of nature, which indicate obscurely the fine gold of things themselves. The truth of all these marks—whether they run through nature or whether they are catalogued on parchments and in libraries—is the same everywhere: as archaic as the institution of God.

Between the marks and the words there is no difference of observance to the accepted authority, or of the verifiable to tradition. There is everywhere only one and the same interaction, that of the sign and of the similar, and that is why nature and the word can intertwine to infinity, forming, for whoever knows how to read, a single, great text.