

HISTORY AND THEODICY

For Raymond Aron

No other culture, no other epoch has portrayed nature with as much nostalgia, has projected, discovered and venerated in nature so rich a complex of meaning as the one which, gradually and paradoxically, ended by sanctifying history. Around the time of the French Revolution the frontiers of the universe suddenly seemed to melt away into infinity: the emancipation which the Enlightenment had worked in the domain of religion, philosophy, morality, education was a prelude to the inauguration of a new world which, with the effervescence of a spring wine, flooded the carefully delineated and organized landscape of traditional humanism. The powerful wind of *Sturm und Drang* now blew across the world, closed and arranged like a garden, in which man had hitherto seen the *theater* of his actions and his sentiments. From Rousseau on nature is no longer the enemy of the spirit, but the life-giving force of a world fulfilled in and for itself. No longer does nature draw its movement and meaning from man, but on the contrary it obliges him to strain his limited forces and pushes him out of himself and toward the great Whole, the ἔν και πᾶν from which he had painfully torn himself.

Translated by Nora McKeon.

THE APPEAL TO NATURE

In a negative sense, nature was henceforth seen as the source of all energy in revolt against the deformations imposed by society: against the rule of order and its artificial conventions, now denounced as contrary to nature and to the riotous play of the creative forces; against the narrowness of reason, contrasted with the fecundity of passion, the profundity of faith and the unconscious spirituality of myth; against utilitarian morality, viewed as an oppression of the heroic instincts of struggle, adventure, love and sacrifice. In a positive sense, nature was deemed the real stuff of all man's great achievements, of all the works of individual and collective genius, which, for the first time, were granted equality with the eponymous heroes of the spirit. In the name of this redeemed nature, man was exhorted to shatter the strait barriers whose erection was blamed no longer on the irrational forces, but on reason and intelligence.

The appeal to nature against the existing order, the awakening of the nocturnal powers which the Enlightenment had exiled from the soul and from language: all of this is the European heritage of Rousseau, passed on to the *Sturm und Drang* by Herder, symbolized by Shakespeare, personified by Faust, given world-wide dimensions with the Revolution and Napoleonism. We are indebted to this new redemption of nature for—among other things—the intensification of poetic language, freed from classical rules and allegories, restored to its primitive magic and promoted to the rank of “maternal language of humanity” (Hamann). We owe it as well the revolutionary enlargement of the domain of art and culture which, cut loose from humanist interdictions, spread to englobe the popular songs of all nations by the same token as Pindar, the Nordic or Hindu epic alongside of the Homeric epic, Gothic art as well as Classical art. This extraordinary widening of the horizon can be measured in the rehabilitation of the art of the Middle Ages, previously denounced as the era of obscurantism and barbarism. But it is most strikingly summarized in the rediscovery of Shakespeare, issuing victorious from the double assault of puritanism and classicism.

“All was new to me, unknown, and this unexpected flood of light hurt my eyes... I ran outside, into the free air, and sensed

for the first time that I had hands and feet..." This is how the young Goethe portrayed his first encounter with the future God of romanticism. In the same Discourse-Program *For the Birthday of Shakespeare* (1771) we find a sentence which shows all the symptoms of the new tremors which were transforming the world. "The works of Shakespeare," Goethe writes, "revolve around the mysterious point where the distinctive character of our 'me,' our alledged free will, enters into conflict with the necessary course of things..." Twenty years after this confession of Spinozan faith, an entire nation was to discover, like Goethe, that it had "hands and feet." The People, sanctified from Herder through Michelet, became a concrete reality; liberty was not a dream or an ideal formulated by reason, but something existing in flesh and blood, in hot pursuit of the "mysterious point." "Liberty should not be contained in a book, it should exist in the people and be put into practice," says Saint-Just. And further, "We have met the sword with the sword, and liberty has been established; it has come forth from the tempest's midst: this origin it shares with the world, fashioned out of chaos, and with man, who is born crying."¹ This was the new language of the revolutionary *Sturm und Drang*: Shakespearian tempests, Napoleonic artillery, Beethovenian drums. This was the world in which historical consciousness was to become the modern form of destiny.

NATURE AND SPIRIT

What the discovery of Shakespeare did for romantic art and sensibilities, the discovery of Spinoza did for speculative philosophy. In another humor, Dryden had claimed to amend and purify Shakespeare, and Ducis, his French translator, had wished to "wipe the horror" from his works. Now he became the label and the program of the new humanism. And if Shakespeare was extolled as the anointed of the God-Nature, so Spinoza, whom Moses Mendelssohn had termed a "dead dog," became the hero of the new philosophy of Nature. But the Spinoza of Herder, Goethe and Schelling is no longer the heir of Descartes, the visionary of efficient causes. The Spinoza whom Schelling was to

¹ Saint-Just, *Œuvres* (Works), 1946, pp. 157 and 241.

compare “with those very ancient images of God which are rendered all the more mysterious by their traits devoid of individual life”² has already become a *Stürmer* who regards nature as the life-giving source of universal energy rather than a dead sequence of causes and effects. For Spinoza, spirit and matter formed an indissoluble whole, while thought and space were simply modifications of a single and identical substance. Reinterpreted in the light of the new concepts of “the history of nature,” of “evolution,” of “organism” that had become current coin since Buffon and Maupertuis, the *natura naturans* of Spinoza received a biological basis and engendered an entirely new conception of the universe. Herder’s work, *God* (1787), already expounds the idea of an evolutionary process according to which that which reigns obscurely and unconsciously in nature gradually becomes self-conscious in feeling, desiring and thinking organisms. Nature, where all takes place in accordance with a goal (implying a conscious act) but not with a goal in view (implying a lack of consciousness), teaches the original identity of the conscious and the unconscious. In Nature the specifically modern contrast between subject and object loses its sustenance and its meaning. Reason is not a solely human faculty: its reign is not limited to the domain of subjectivity; in the same way, the world is not pure objectivity, alien to thought and distinct from subjectivity. Thus the Soul of the World which had its place in the ancient cosmology and in Renaissance pantheism took on a new meaning and became Universal Reason in the system of romantic idealism.

One of Schelling’s poems, dating from 1790, points up this new myth of Nature:

A gigantic Spirit does lie in hiding there,
 But all its senses are petrified;
 It cannot break out of its tight shell
 Nor shatter its prison of stone,
 Though it often flutters its wings,
 Stretches itself and shifts about powerfully
 And, in inert or living things,
 Vigorously aspires to become conscious.

² Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (*Researches on Human Liberty*), 1809, SW. VII, 345. The image is already representative of the “Imaginary Museum” of romanticism.

History and Theodicy

Closed in a dungeon which language calls being human,
The giant Spirit discovers itself.
Awakening from this long sleep, from this long dream,
It barely recognizes itself.
And at once, with all its senses, it desires
To dissolve itself once more in boundless nature.³

Thus the barriers which separate matter, life and spirit evaporate: in the phenomenon of Life the passage from object to subject takes place, and the two orders are joined. "The system of nature," says Schelling, "is the same as the system of our spirit"⁴—which does not mean that it is constructed "with our concepts." The unifying power of the concept is not an exclusively human faculty, but is nature's mode of being and operating as it is manifested at the level of Life. Here the mechanical link between cause and effect loses its validity: each organic being carries within itself the reason of its existence; it is its own cause and its own effect; none of its parts can be detached from the whole, and the whole consist in the reciprocal actions of the parts. At the foundation of each organic being lies a *concept*, for, says Schelling, in anticipation of Hegel, "a concept exists whenever there is a necessary relation between the whole and the parts, between the parts and the whole." The concept which establishes the unity of the organism is not the product of a foreign understanding (divine or human), but is immanent in the organic being as the soul is in the body. Even if the organism is unconscious of it, it nonetheless prefigures the concept as it operates in the human being. Considered from the point of view of the organism, in which ideality and reality unite in an internal finality, nature loses its inanimate appearance and proves its identity with spirit: "nature is visible spirit, spirit is invisible nature." Subject and object are no longer opposites, but simply gradations within one and the same substance. At one extreme of nature, "in so-called inanimate nature," the objective still predominates; in living, animal nature the objective already takes a subordinate position; and in man it becomes completely latent,

³ Cited by Dilthey, *Die geistige Welt*.

⁴ Schelling, *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur (Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature)*, 1797, SW. II, 40 sq.

“simply a prop for the subjective.” The idea of the whole seemed to become conceivable once more; the universe, which the modern spirit had fragmented into innumerable pieces and sundered with the opposition of subject and object, seemed to be reconstituted. In our world, where, as Schelling says, “there is no longer anything which could unite men by a common intuition,”⁵ this new Spinozism which returned to nature the soul that Christianity had wrested from it offered, at the same time, the possibility of a new reconciliation “which would once more unite men in a common religion.”

FROM NATURE TO HISTORY

These same themes and accents are present in the works of the young Hegel. He too felt that modern rationalism, whose watchword was “to conceive is to dominate,”⁶ had shattered the unity of the cosmos and had reduced nature to the state of a “corpse,” to “dead matter” under the sway of the “concept.” He too thought the final cause of this “misfortune” was the Judeo-Christian anti-naturalism, which had imposed the idea of a God “who, like the Medusa’s head, turned everything to stone.”⁷ He too seemed to live in expectation of a “new religion:” thus, in an unedited text written around 1802, he declares that the time is ripe for “a *new religion* in which the infinite suffering and all the severity of Christian anguish will be both encompassed and serenely abolished.”⁸

But here the denial of transcendence, the nostalgia for nature, the call for a “new religion” are seen in a entirely different perspective. Nature is not the Spinoza substance which *in se est et per se concipitur*. It is an element saturated through and through with history, conditioned by history, subordinated to history, and history, the very history of the Judeo-Christian

⁵ Schelling, *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur (Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature)*, in *fine*.

⁶ Hegel, *Theologische Jugendschriften*, ed. Nohl 1907 (cited hereafter as Nohl), p. 376.

⁷ Nohl, p. 249.

⁸ *Dokumente zu Hegels Entwicklung*, 1936, pp. 324-5.

world, is the source in which Hegel will seek the explanation of the “misfortune” and the “alienation” of modern man.

In stripping nature of its spiritual and divine character, in reducing it to a mass of inanimate objects which man seeks solely to dominate, Christianity had simply perfected the Hebraic idea of the transcendence of God, in which the relation between Creator and creature is that of master to slave. How was such a God, who “bars all free union and sanctions only domination or servitude,”⁹ able to dominate man’s spirit and transform all relations into relations between master and slave? Hegel finds the answer in the traumatic memory of the flood, which sundered man’s links with nature and gave rise to the idea of a “detached” and “estranged” God who crushes nature and reduces man to the role of a passive and unhappy slave. If “the effect of the flood must have been a sentiment of profound anguish, an immense disbelief with regard to nature,” nomadism did the rest: “Wandering with their troops over a limitless land which they had never made their own by cultivating or beautifying the slightest parcel, the Jewish people ended by destroying their last ties with nature and with the world.”¹⁰

In fact, only within Free Cities is man able to adjust to the world and respond to the beauty and sanctity of nature. As long as they were free, the Greeks lived in harmony with the whole, never experiencing the misfortune of self-withdrawal or escape into the empty hereafter. In Hegel’s hands, the sacred Hellas which Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin sought “with the eyes of the spirit” takes on the aspect of a Jacobin Arcady, a “lost political paradise”¹¹ where the City-State figures as the *societas diis hominibusque communis* and where the active participation of the citizen in the commonwealth (Reality itself, says Hegel) is praised as the sole source of terrestrial happiness. The religion of the hereafter was able to supplant a religion as profoundly adapted to the needs of human fulfillment as paganism only because the despotism of the Caesars had clouded men’s sight and shrouded nature in

⁹ Nohl, p. 374.

¹⁰ Nohl, pp. 243, 246, 368.

¹¹ To use the expression of Cassirer: *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, III, 292.

¹² Nohl, p. 230.

a veil of ugliness and insignificance: "The misery which despotism spread through the world forced the spirit to seek, to await happiness in the heavens."¹² As long as freedom existed, man could be the measure of all things and could view the world as the living complement of his being. But as soon as he lost confidence in himself, the cosmos crumbled into a dust of dead and foreign objects. The dehumanization of man was responsible for the inanimation of nature: "Under the domination of the Roman State, which revoked the freedom of all the world, nature was forced to submit to a law foreign to man and severed from itself... nature ceased to be divine, to be free, and to be beautiful."¹³ Thus the ground was prepared for the implantation of the religion of "anguish" whose stigma was to mark all of Western history, from the "unhappy consciousness" of Medieval Christianity to the "alienated culture" of the *ancien régime*.

It is true that, having plumbed the utmost depths of his "misfortune," Western man finally turned his back on the "sepulchre of the truth." From the Renaissance on he no longer aspires to save himself "at the expense of the world," but seeks to find himself within the world. He sees it "as if he saw it for the first time" and throws himself frantically into the conquest of matter. Reason "flies the banner of its sovereignty from all the summits and in all the chasms;" it "now takes a universal interest in the world, since it is certain that it exists in the world, since it is convinced that all that exists is rational." Yet the conquest of the world with the aid of science has taught the modern consciousness that this victory is not the "supreme interest" of reason. True satisfaction, it learned, can be found only in collective realization accomplished in history, and only in this way can man find his roots. The Greek did not seek "his satisfaction" outside of his own being, but found it within himself, for he himself was in harmony with the whole." As long as modern man fails to reestablish this equilibrium with the whole, science, which "roots around in the bowels of things," will be of no help and man "will not attain this felicity." In nature, reason discovers the "mirror of itself:" its reflection, but not its reality. Reason is not the supra-celestial or transcendental world of

¹³ *Dokumente etc.*, p. 265.

Plato or Kant: "In reality, reason is effectively actualized in a free people; it is the presence of living spirit."¹⁴

Thus nature is a *function* of history. Moreover, the "supreme interest" of Reason consists not in union with nature as such, but in the free realization "of all and of each." In the same way, the "new religion" whose advent Hegel desired has nothing in common with the romantic myth of nature. Hegel's hopes that "the Spirit will *dare* to restore its primitive (i.e. Hellenic) unity with itself in a new religion" are sanctioned rather by the proximity of this "free people" promoted to the rank of the sole true vehicle of living Spirit. This hope, he says, is not utopian in the slightest, "since a *free people* does in fact exist and since Reason has recovered its reality in the form of a concrete community (*sittliche Geist*) and since this community will manage to be *bold* (sic) enough to *fashion its own religious form* on its own ground and on the strength of its own majesty..."¹⁵

We are familiar with this "free people" who, "on the strength of its own majesty," was to seize the consecrated crown and the holy ampulla. But what could this "new religion" be if not the Hegelian pandemonium of history? The "free people," identified with the Goddess Reason, was to receive the holy oil from the hands of philosophy, for only philosophy was capable, says Hegel, of pronouncing the "magic words" which would unveil the "great necessity" of history in which the masses were "blindly" embarked. Only philosophy could teach "the knowledge of the absolute necessity which models the world" because only philosophy is able to "take upon itself, and at the same time rise above, the power of pain and of opposition which has dominated the world for two thousand years..."

THE NECESSITY OF ALIENATION

In order for the consecration of the people to appear in its true light and denote the "reconstitution of the primitive unity of Spirit," philosophy must prove the "absolute necessity" of Christian misfortune and modern alienation. All the philosophy

¹⁴ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Meiner, 1949, pp. 176, 183, 329, 258.

¹⁵ *Dokumente etc.*, pp. 324-5.

of history which Hegel sets forth in the *Phenomenology* is a development of this proposition. In this work the evolution of the spirit is pictured as a circular movement divided into three stages: the first stage—Greece—is that of immediate truth, of substantiality which must be denied; the second stage—the “two thousand years” of “opposition”—is that of tragedy, of misfortune and of the loss of substance; the third stage is that of reconciliation, of return to the primitive unity enriched by all the conquests made along the way, the stage of happiness regained. The French Revolution is to be interpreted as the beginning of this return to self; thus the tormented consciousness of the 18th century should be defined as the consciousness “which has departed from the happy condition” of the Greek spirit and “has not yet attained this felicity:” in the perspective of Hegel’s circular dialectic “these two propositions amount to the same thing.”¹⁶

Reason was obliged to “lose” the felicity which characterized Greece, where it was embodied “in the life of a free people;” the Spirit was obliged to “destroy the noble community life” (*sittlich*) of the Greek *Polis* because the *Polis* had no notion of subjectivity, the individual and his infinite value. In the Apollonian order of equal citizens united in collective realization, the person, the Self, had not yet emerged: the individual was only an “unsubstantial shadow.” Thus the “noble whole” fell a victim to its own immaturity. Man lost happiness and the spirit lost its truth. “But now the Self has emerged from its irreality.” Its progressive realization will henceforth be the sole content of history, but since the Self has lost its substantial link with others, history will be a recital of the unhappiness of the individual and the alienation of all. All of history since the demise of the ancient democracies is an account of the realization and the alienation of man. In all the domains of life and of the spirit man has taken up a position outside of himself, has objectified himself and has made himself a stranger to his own being. Thus the centralized State and the capitalist economy—the two poles of modernity—were indeed the “results” of the “work and action of all.” But since they are the product of the alienation of all, they seem to be independent realities. Thus in the functioning of the State “the fact that it owes its origin to

¹⁶ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 258.

their activity is lost from sight.” The same is true of wealth: the subject sees himself as “outside of himself” in a world of objects demoniacally endowed with “their own will:” “he sees his Self in the power of a foreign will.” In short, man had to shatter the “noble whole,” to lose himself “in the empty night of the hereafter,” to experience the anguish of Christianity, to alienate himself in wealth and the State, to wander to the extreme limits of individualism in order to realize his potentialities, to endow the Collective Realization with a maximum of reality and consistence, and to dream once more of constituting “a Me which is an Us, an Us which is a Me:” the “universal Self.”¹⁷

In the Greek Polis the community was all that counted, and the individual was an “unsubstantial shadow.” Now, after two thousand years of “misfortune” and “alienation,” the individual has become the essential: like Faust he has sought himself and has realized himself in all directions. This is why the “Reality itself,” the Collective Realization that he will reconstitute, will be the true Realization, the “Absolute Reality,” total immanence and transparency. Although Christianity sliced the world in two, depreciated the here-and-now to the profit of the hereafter, even rendered man miserable, in the very process it incited the Spirit to explore its infinite subjectivity more profoundly and revealed the “identity of divine nature and human nature,” thus fulfilling two of the major prerequisites of a final reconciliation. With the Revolution, “truth, presence and reality are reunited; the two worlds are reconciled; the heavens have come down to earth.” In the “spiritual day of the present” the transcendent God of Christianity is at last understood to be the God of History, and history culminates in a veritable epiphany: God himself becomes *praesens*, θεός ἐπιφανής, and “appears among those who know themselves to be pure knowledge.”¹⁸ History, the genesis and construction of man by himself and for himself, is at the same time theogony, theophany and theodicy.

¹⁷ Hegel, *op. cit.*, pp. 315, 331, 343, 355, 368, 415, 140.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 529, 413, 472.

Herder had conceived of history as the creation of a Shakespearian God. In the Hegelian “speculative Good Friday,” history figures rather as the mystery of *Χριστός πάσχων*. The Apostle says that Christ “being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation (*ἐξένωσεν; exinanivit*), and took upon himself the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of man.”¹⁹ As the Son of God was thrown “into time, submitted to judgment, dying in the pain of negativity” in order to rise up as the Spirit “living and present in the world,”²⁰ in the same way the Infinite, the Eternal must “sacrifice itself” to the finite and the ephemeral so that the Spirit can win “the actuality, the truth and the certainty of its throne.” This world of torment and privation does not exist outside of God, as though it were independent of him; nor can it be imputed to man and to his limitations, as if man were a separate entity, or could be anything independently of God’s will. Man is *der daseiende Begriff*, the Logos incarnated. His limitations, his discords are the limitations and discords of God, and only by taking them upon itself can the Spirit enjoy peace and attain its perfection. “It must be said of the Absolute that it is essentially Result.” God is the result of his work on earth, and his eternity is entirely contained in the work he accomplishes in time: time is his “destiny” and the “necessity” which charges him to “actualize that which at first is only interior and to reveal it”—the necessity of historical experience.²¹

Up until then, time had been considered the enemy *par excellence*, the absolutely tragic, the inexorable symbol of defect, error, decay. Thus men had always sought to shelter their gods in an undefiled eternity to give themselves some fixed point to clutch at, shielded from the pervasive grasp of time. The ancients had their incorruptible cosmos, the Moderns their Reason with its *veritates aeternae*. All of Hegel’s efforts were to be aimed at, to use Pascal’s image, persuading Reason to “house its enemy

¹⁹ *Epistle to the Philippians*, II, 6, 7.

²⁰ Hegel, *Encyclopädie* (Jubiläumsausgabe), III, 456.

²¹ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, pp. 564, 21, 558.

with itself:” like Durer’s knight, the Absolute will have to take to the road between the Devil and Death.

In order to become itself, the Absolute must alienate itself in the world which human passions, illusions and faults make and unmake. This apparently superficial play of accidental aspirations and passions—supposedly *only* human—constitutes the “tragedy which the Absolute eternally plays with itself: it concretizes itself eternally in the objective world, surrenders itself to passion and death, and raises itself from its ashes to majesty.” History is the “valley of bones” where we see the most noble goals “stunted and destroyed by human passions,” the altar where “the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed.” History is tragic, but tragedy expresses the true reality, the “absolute situation:” as the tragic hero cannot escape his destiny, so the Infinite must become incarnate and bear the cross of finiteness and irrationality. Without the “calvary of history” the Absolute would be merely “lifeless solitude.”²²

History is the only world in which man can find himself, come to know himself and recognize God as “living Spirit,” but to achieve this he must first rise above “human—too human” perspectives of day to day existence and reject ordinary conceptions of happiness and unhappiness, of good and evil. History “is not the place for felicity. The periods of happiness are its blank pages.” Nor is it the place for virtue: an abstraction “as empty as good for the love of good does not exist in living reality.” “All the virtues vanish here:” if virtuous men do exist, “it is a matter of a few isolated individuals who appear insignificant in relation to the mass of mankind, and the area in which their virtues operate is relatively limited.” History is beyond good and evil: “justice and virtue, culpability and innocence, violence, vice, happiness and unhappiness” are concepts whose validity is limited to private life. “But history remains outside of these points of view.” And even the judgments of moralists who try to stem the fullness of action with their strictness and their powerless protests prove, on closer examination, to be only an expression of envy and resentment: “the meaning and the content” of their

²² Cf. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, 343; *Schriften zur Politik*, pp. 380 and 384; *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* (ed. Meiner, 1955), p. 80; *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 564.

recriminations is simply “envy which wraps itself in the cloak of morality.”²³

Thus history is sheltered from the criticism of “psychological lackeys” and moralizing “school masters.” Although history presents us with a panorama of “evil and iniquity,” the triumph of irrationality over “good intentions and legitimate goals,” we should nonetheless regard it as the “divine work of Reason” and our sole system of reference. Reason is the demiurge of history, but reasonable men are not the authors of history. No irrationalist has ever exalted the force of the irrational as vigorously as Hegel. Ordinary reason distrusts passion “as something which is not good, which is more or less bad; man, it is said, should not have passions.” But in reality passions and interests are the only really active forces, the true vehicles of Spirit. The creators of history have lived not for the sake of good or of happiness, but to realize their passion, which is interest heated to the point of incandescence. “Nothing is carried out without interest,” “no great achievement has ever taken place without passion, no great achievement can be accomplished without it.” History is the epiphany of Reason, the “revelation of profundity,” but the men who enable the Universal to come to life are simply following “finite goals and particular interests” and dwell in the shadowy zone of evil and passion: they enter into history as none other than *unconscious* agents of Reason. In the very act of realizing their passion, men show themselves to be “the tools, the means of something more elevated, more vast, of which they are not aware, which they accomplish in an unconscious fashion.” This is the “ruse of Reason,” which uses irrationality to concretize itself in the world: “The action of men always has a result beyond that which they plan and accomplish, that which they know and want immediately; they realize their interests, but in the process something else takes place, something which was hidden within, which their consciousness did not notice, and which was not comprised in their views.” It is not the goodness of men’s intentions nor the lucidity of their consciousness that saves them before the “tribunal of history.” It is the unconscious effect of their actions, the unconscious *necessity* which orchestrates the

²³ *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, pp. 92, 79; *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, p. 345; *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 440.

“noisy clamor of universal history” and transforms the reign of chance and the arbitrary into the progressive realization of freedom.²⁴

NECESSITY AND FREEDOM

Schelling had already remarked this paradox: history can be perceived as the realization of freedom only through the mediation of necessity. For history to have a meaning, freedom must be “guaranteed by an order as manifest and as immutable as that of nature.” History can be freed from its arbitrary and contingent appearance only by positing the immanence in freedom of a necessity as rigorous as that which reigns in nature: “necessity must exist in freedom, that is to say, through my liberty, and while I think that I am acting freely, something that I do not foresee must take place unconsciously. In other terms, an unconscious act must be set over against conscious and free activity in such a way that the most limitless exterior manifestation of freedom is complemented, without the knowledge of the action’s author, without his desiring it in the slightest and perhaps even against his will, by a result that he would never have been able to realize had he willed it.”²⁵

On the basis of this unconscious necessity Hegel was to construct his theodicy, the “justification of God which Leibniz had attempted metaphysically in his own way and with categories which were still undetermined and abstract.” Having dismissed the encroachments of morality and the revindications of happiness and having found in history the genealogical tree of God and the “place and formula” of man, Hegel accepts everything with his invincible faith in the necessity of the event. In the innocence of divine development, Evil—the apparent architect of history—“is reduced to a subordinate position, is outstripped and fades away.” In the face of the necessary march of Spirit as it progressively realizes Freedom, reason “cannot linger forever over the wounds inflicted on individuals” but is elevated to the “knowledge of the affirmative” in whose sight the negative, evil,

²⁴ *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, pp. 102-4, 85-99, 109.

²⁵ Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, SW, III, 593 and 594.

“can no longer subsist and loses all its own validity.” Thus the pre-Columbian empires “whose civilization was entirely natural” (sic) were obliged to fall “as soon as Spirit approached them...” Serfdom, as well, was necessary in order to train the barbarians, conquer savagery and fashion “that knotty heart of oak which was the German soul:” it must be recognized that humanity was freed “less *from* servitude than *by* servitude...” In the same way, the Church had to combat barbarism “in a barbarian and terroristic manner:” for the terror of the hereafter was necessary in order to “blunt the unchained spirit and hold it down until it became calm.”

The composure with which Spinoza regarded the accidents of substance develops into an *amor fati* which precludes all possibility of dispute and of revolt. All judgment estranged from action “fades away like a shapeless vapor which dissolves into the air.” This is the destiny of pure morality, which remains pure only “because it lacks the force to bear being.” This is the destiny of the “lofty soul” which does not want to engage itself “because it lives in anguished fear of being soiled by action and existence.” But judgment cannot be separated from action. In the *siccum lumen* of “absolute knowledge,” judges and fighters unite in the “Yes of conciliation.” The philosophy of history appropriates (or usurps) the most mysterious power of the Redeemer: the remission of sins. The tragedy of action is overcome, for “the wounds of the Spirit heal without leaving scars,” and man reconciles himself to destiny by recognizing “the rose of Reason on the cross of the present.”²⁶

Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze...

This is where the rose is,
this is where you must dance.

Thus Hegel interpreted the *hic Rhodus, hic saltus* of the ancient fable. The image, which calls to mind the dance of a Siva becomes a providential God, but which could also suggest that of

²⁶ Hegel, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, pp. 48 and 200; *Philosophie der Geschichte* (ed. Reclam), pp. 509 and 563; *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, pp. 462-472; *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Preface.

History and Theodicy

a chained beast, reappears in the work of Marx.²⁷ It is true that in the Marxian content it serves no longer to illustrate the Hegelian acquiescence, but rather to glorify the subterranean work of the Revolution and the “infinite immensity of its goals.” But if the symbols are inverted, the spirit in which they are used remains the same: in both cases the author is attempting to found an ethical system on historical necessity and to substitute the exigences of time for the allegedly abstract norms of so-called formal reason.

FROM THEODICY TO REVOLUTION

Hegel was able to praise both the “work of the negative” and the “patience of history.” For history as he lived it, history conceived as a crucifixion of Reason, sanctioned on the one hand a profoundly revolutionary attitude which takes restlessness to be the motor of development and, in addition, postpones the moment of satisfaction to the end of time; yet, on the other hand, it sanctioned an attitude of deep-rootedness in the present which prohibits all prospects of the future. Of these two, the latter won out in the end, to such a degree that, while using categories and concepts originally devised to “fluidify” and mobilize all that tradition and understanding held as fixed and solid, Hegel ends by stopping his watch at the very moment in which the triple revolution, industrial, democratic and social, got under way.

Marx retained the Hegelian unity of freedom and necessity, but instead of speaking in terms of Reason and its ruses, he felt he could “put the dialectic back on its feet” by installing it at the heart of men’s struggle among themselves and against nature. Nonetheless, he too saw history as unfolding according to a “necessary order,” “independent of men’s will” in a series of progressive stages which correspond to the four epochs of the Hegelian *Weltgeist*. The system of reference, of course, is no longer the same. The ancient city, the Hegelian paradise lost, cannot suit Marxism, for it presupposed private property and was founded on exploitation and slavery. Like the baron de La Hontan, Marx and Engels were to seek the mirage of anarchy

²⁷ Marx, *Le 18 Brumaire etc.*, *Werke*, ed. Dietz 1960, VIII, 118.

and the beatitude of wholeness in the Caribbean Eldorado of Jean-Jacques or the Iroquoian paradise of Lewis Morgan—world “without soldiers, without kings, governors, prefects or judges, without prisons, without trials” where “everything follows its regular course,” where “there cannot be poor or needy” and where “all are free and equal.”²⁸ But the implacable law of development is the same: as the Hegelian Spirit was obliged to shatter the Hellenic “noble whole” and suffer the law of alienation, so the Marxist productive forces were destined to destroy the “admirable constitution” of primitive communism. “The power of this primitive community had to be broken, it was broken.” After this necessary “original fall from the heights of simplicity and morality” of primitive society, progress becomes real—but brings with it the exploitation and the degradation of the majority of men: “each forward step in production is at the same time a backward step for the situation of the oppressed class, that is of the great majority. Each boon for the one is necessarily an evil for the other; each new liberation of one of the classes is a new oppression for another.”

Faithful to Hegel, Marxism wishes to keep history “beyond good and evil.” Thus Engels praises Hegel for having portrayed evil as “the form in which the moving force of history presents itself.” Not the idea of eternal justice, but rather “the evil passions of men, covetousness and the wish to dominate are the levers of historical development” and have been from the beginning of universal history. Man was incited to break the ties of primitive, undifferentiated society not by an “innate propensity for happiness” nor by a greater need for individualization and freedom: it was “the worst vile interest—base cupidity, brutal pursuit of pleasure, sordid avarice, egoistic robbery of the common property—it was the most shameful means—robbery, violence, perfidy, treason—which in reality inaugurated the new civilized society.” If civilization has accomplished things which the ancient society was far from being able to accomplish, it has done so “by putting in motion man’s vilest instincts and passions, by developing them at the expense of all his other aptitudes.” As in

²⁸ Engels, *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats*, Werke, XXI, 95, 96, 97, 171-2.

the work of Hegel, history is the recital of the progressive realization of freedom, but this *historical* freedom is essentially foreign to personal freedom and signifies neither happiness nor lucidity. If “base cupidity” has been “the driving soul of civilization from its first days up to the present,” if history is the “battlefield” where only “the most brutal, the most petty and detestable passions, all the furies of private interest” are to be seen, it is also the setting of the unconscious. History would flounder irremediably in the chaos of unleashed chance if the truly active forces in each occurrence were not radically *different* from those which the mystified consciousness of their authors conceive: “the innumerable individual wills which operate in history bring about, for the most part, results completely different from and often directly opposed to those which they intended, and their motives have only a secondary influence on the final result...”²⁹

Still faithful to Hegel, Marx maintained a strict separation between the sphere of moral judgment and that of historical appreciation. Although he spent his lifetime denouncing capitalism, he did not miss a single occasion to emphasize the unescapable fatality of the bourgeois era and to praise its “miracles.” And inversely, to the contrary of modern worshippers of rates of growth, he never thought that the fact, glorified in *Misère de la philosophie*, that the English bourgeoisie had raised production by 2,700% in seventy years could serve as a justification for child labor or could give the directors of workhouses an easy conscience. With Hegelian repugnance he compares the God of history to the “horrible pagan God who would drink nectar only from the skulls of his victims,” and he uses the very terms of Hegel when he describes the creators of history—the ruling classes—as “unconscious and passive agents of progress” or when he declares that the British colonization of India was “the unconscious instrument of history.” While it would be absurd and unjust to see in these remarks a shadow of moral approbation, it is nonetheless true that his vision of the cataclysmic movement of the productive forces which carries beings and things along with it *ὡς ἅπερ φύλλων γενεή* sanctioned an *amor fati* which could preclude all morality. An unacknowledged echo of the Hegelian

²⁹ Cf. Engels, *op. cit.*, XXI, 287, 97, 171, 286-8.

theurgy of the “remission of sins” sounds in his prophetic proclamation of the “revolutionary movement” which convulses modern industry and which “cares about the human lives it sacrifices as little as an earthquake worries about the houses it destroys.”³⁰ As he says in the Preface to *Capital* “My point of view, according to which the development of the economic formation of society can be likened to the course of nature and its evolution, is less able than any other to hold the individual responsible for relationships by which he is controlled in the context of society, despite whatever efforts he makes to free himself...”

Marx believed he had definitively corrected the ambivalence of Hegelian theodicy and purified the “critical and revolutionary soul” of dialectic. For he believed he had irrefutably cast the determinism of the productive forces and revolution through class struggle in the role of “moving forces of history.” Yet it is precisely on this capital point that his synthesis is touched by the same ambiguity as that which plagued Hegel.

DETERMINISM OR CLASS STRUGGLE?

According to Marx, history is ruled by an implacable determinism: the class distinctions which divide society become established “necessarily and independently of man’s will” and correspond “always and necessarily” to the material conditions of production which prevail in each epoch. The determining fact, the basic current is an irresistible advance of progress, a “continual growth of the productive forces.” In function of this development, society splits “necessarily” into two “fundamental” classes: on the one hand, the exploiting class, which owns the means of production, monopolizes the executive posts and accords itself the lion’s share in dividing the product, and, on the other hand, the exploited class, assigned to the work of execution. Now it appears that, in the course of their “continual” movement of expansion, the productive forces periodically enter into conflict with their institutional super-structure. The existing order becomes incompatible with the pursuit of economic growth. At this point an era of

³⁰ Cf. Marx, *Werke*, IV, p. 122; IX, p. 220; IV, p. 474; IX, p. 133; VIII, p. 544.

crisis and social revolution opens, and history reads in terms of class struggle:

“Free men and slaves, patricians and plebians, barons and serfs, guild masters and journeymen, in a word, oppressors and oppressed, in constant opposition, have waged an uninterrupted war, sometimes openly, sometimes under cover; a war which always finished either in a revolutionary transformation of all society, or in the simultaneous collapse of the two classes in conflict.”³¹

It was in function of this grandiose vision, reconciling the Apollonianism of progress with the Dionysianism of purifying revolution, that Marx recast the Hegelian dialectic. Marx and Hegel evaluated the general orientation of history in the same way: history is always the story of the liberation of man, the progressive realization of freedom. For Marx, however, the mainspring is no longer “progress in the consciousness of freedom,” but rather the “development of the productive forces” and its presumed repercussions on the class struggle. “Each time that men have freed themselves,” says Marx, “they have done so in the measure that the existing productive forces, and not their ideal of man, have ordained and permitted them to free themselves.”³² The productive forces propel history and realize freedom through the intermediary of the class struggle, which puts into power the exploited class of the preceding period: “it is always the bad side of society (the exploited class) which wins out over the lofty side.” It is the bad side which, by engaging the struggle, produces the movement which makes history.³³

Marx believed he had formulated a “monist” or unified theory of social development. In reality he presents us with two clearly distinct conceptions of the “moving forces” of history. The “objective” description of evolution as the determinism of the productive forces and the “subjective” description of the march of history as class struggle are nowhere near as compatible as Marx believed. Moreover, Marx himself knew perfectly well that none of the classes enumerated in the *Manifesto* had been capable of playing the revolutionary and demiurgic role ascribed to it.

³¹ Marx-Engels, *The Communist Manifesto, Werke*, IV, 462.

³² Marx-Engels, *Die deutsche Ideologie*, ed. Dietz, 1953, p. 456.

³³ Marx, *Misère de la Philosophie, Werke*, IV, 140.

In no case did the struggle between the masters and the slaves, the patricians and the plebians, the barons and the serfs, the masters and the journeymen result in a “revolutionary transformation” of society. Thus Marx can say (not without some exaggeration) that “slavery remained at the basis of production” during all of ancient history and that the class struggle “ended in Rome with the defeat and the ruin of the plebian debtor, who was replaced by the slave.” No where in his work does he make the slightest allusion to a “simultaneous collapse” of the classes of ancient society. With the same off-handedness he dismisses the “bad side” of medieval society. The peasant uprisings, he says, “all failed to achieve the slightest result” and the journeymen “succeeded only in fomenting small rebellions in certain corporations.”³⁴ It is obvious that the conception of the class struggle as the motor of historical change is only a projection into the past of the *anticipated* victory of the industrial proletariat.

Since the master himself had broken the accord postulated between the “objective factor” and the “subjective factor,” it became apparent that the relative weight of the two elements depended solely on the more or less arbitrary or contingent preferences of the momentary representatives of orthodoxy. It was Stalin who took the decisive step of elevating the theory which attributes the liberation of man to the “prescriptions” of production over that which explains the liberation in terms of the reaction of the exploited. Thus the class struggle disappeared completely from the new conception of the “laws of the development of societies,” set forth in the famous pamphlet on *Dialectic and Historical Materialism*. Here it is no longer the revolution which fills the role of “historical midwife,” but rather the development of the productive forces supported by the enlightened will of the dominant classes, who have been wise enough on each occasion to submit to the demands of technique and to adapt the system of exploitation to the prescriptions of progress.

The passage from slavery to feudalism, which are held to represent the second and third epochs of the development of humanity, is explained in these terms: “The new productive

³⁴ Cf. *Die deutsche Ideologie*, pp. 19 and 50; *Das Kapital*, ed. Dietz, 1951, pp. 1, 141.

forces required the worker to take a certain initiative in production and to show a certain interest in his work. This is why the feudal seigneur abandoned the slave, who shows no interest in his work and lacks all initiative, and preferred (sic) to deal with a serf, who owns his own plot, his instruments of productions and who takes some interest in his work..." The passage from feudalism to modern capitalism, the third and fourth "epochs" of universal history, is explained in the same way: "the new productive forces required more cultivated and more intelligent workers than the ignorant and sluggish serfs, workers capable of understanding the machine and of handling it correctly. The capitalists therefore preferred to deal with salaried laborers, freed from the fetters of serfdom, sufficiently cultivated to be able to handle the machine properly."³⁵

In this profoundly *legitimist* perspective, the revolution dissolves into free air like the "shapeless vapor" of which Hegel speaks. History is seen as the exclusive creation of the masters, who have been obliged, at each turning point, to "abandon" a certain form of exploitation and to "prefer" another, less tyrannical form. And this not because the exploited demanded more freedom, but because the "new productive forces" required that the slaves be less sluggish than before.

It was a simple matter to supplement this surprising *Herrensoziologie* with the "morality of the masters" that it cries out for. It is striking to note the ardor with which the visionaries of necessary Progress set themselves to furnishing supposedly historical justifications for slavery and the exploitation of man by man. We have already mentioned the astonishing Hegelian theory of the liberation of man "by servitude." The Hegelian justification of the *act* by the simple fact that it has taken place develops, in Marxist thought, into the doctrine that the idea of a form of justice valuable for all epochs and all places is a fiction invented by metaphysicians, and that in reality the idea of good and evil is determined by the economic conditions existing in each epoch, and varies accordingly. "As long as a mode of production is in the ascendant stage of its evolution," declares Engels, "it is acclaimed even by those who stand to lose from the corresponding

³⁵ Stalin, *Les Questions du léninisme*, Paris, 1947, II, 257.

mode of repartition.” Armed with this criterion, he unleashed a chain of invective against Dühring and his “moralist” and “formalist” theses on ancient slavery: “If Mr. Dühring turns up his nose at Hellenism because it was founded on slavery, he would have just as much reason to reproach the Greeks for not having had steam engines and electric telegraphs...” Strange resurrection of Aristotle’s words: “If the shuttles of the weavers wove by themselves, the head of the atelier would no longer need assistants, nor the master slaves.” Perhaps Aristotle was correct in linking the liberation of workers to the complete automation of work, but how is it possible to deduce from this reasoning the concrete necessity of slavery as it was practiced in 4th century Greece? As for Engels, it could be objected that the medieval cities were equally unfamiliar with steam engines and the electric telegraph, yet this did not stop them from abolishing slavery and serfdom, as well as all the insuperable barriers which, in the ancient cities, separated the citizens from the freedmen and the foreigners. But, carried away with his vision of slavery as a necessary “moment” in the chain of progress, Engels denies all possibility of accident, of useless repetition, of regression: “Without slavery,” he says, “no Greek state, no Greek art and science; without slavery, no Roman Empire, no modern Europe... In this sense, we have the right to say: without ancient slavery, no modern socialism.”³⁶

Another step was to be taken by Plekhanov, the “father of Russian Marxism,” when he set out to show that the slaves themselves had not found their fate unjust in the slightest and that, on the contrary, they already used the dialectic union of freedom and necessity in forming their conception of the “progressive” character of the condition of slavery: “Among the Negroes,” he says, “the slaves feel that to escape is to commit a dishonorable and ignominious action against the master, who paid money for them. It must be added that these same slaves consider their situation more honorable than that of a salaried worker. Such a way of looking at things corresponds to this

³⁶ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow, 1946, pp. 221, 223.

phase of society, where slavery is still a progressive phenomenon...³⁷

It was Trotsky who pushed this aberrant logic to its most extreme consequences and demonstrated that the “illusion of necessity” can serve as an “ideological justification” for the pure contingency of political expedience and desire for power. Defending his reactionary and catastrophic projects for the militarization of work and totalitarian state control before the 3rd Pan-Russian Congress of Syndicates, Trotsky declared that constraint should be considered the “fundamental method” of socialist work. Having rejected all the moral objections of the “lofty souls,” he deigned to take into consideration only economic evaluations of efficacy. “Is it true,” he asked, “that obligatory labor has always been unproductive?” That free labor is more productive than obligatory labor is true, he says “in so far as the passage from feudal to bourgeois society is concerned. But only a liberal or, in our epoch, a Kautskyist, could immortalize this truth and extend it to our epoch of transition from capitalism to socialism.” The freedom of labor as a “measure” of liberty is a “miserable liberal prejudice.” Armed with his “Marxist” wisdom, Trotsky demonstrates that “the chained slaves, too, were productive” and that the labor of the serfs, as well, was a “progressive phenomenon” in its time. The economic forms of the Middle Ages, he explains, “resulted from certain economic conditions and created customs to which the peasant adapted himself. In certain epochs he regarded them as just, or at least accepted their continued existence.” For “the organization of serfdom was, in certain conditions, a progressive step and led to an augmentation of production.” In the name of these historical considerations he announced the failure of free labor and proclaimed “the right of the State to oblige any citizen to perform any job in any place that the State chooses.”³⁸

³⁷ Plekhanov, *Les Questions fondamentales du marxisme (The Fundamental Questions of Marxism)*, Paris, 1947, p. 55.

³⁸ Cf. Trotsky, *Communisme et Terrorisme (Communism and Terrorism)*, Paris, 1963, pp. 213, 215, 217. In his criticism of Trotsky, Kautsky (*Von der Demokratie zur Staats-Sklaverei*, 1921, p. 96) explains the progressiveness of slavist or feudal constraint by the fact that it “allowed an entire class of individuals to dedicate themselves to science...” These “progressivist” justifications

In the same period, taking off from completely opposed premises but filled with the same desire of proving what he called necessity to be the only foundation of the good and the just, Splengler came to singularly identical ethical conclusions. "Up to this day," he says, "man was free to place whatever hopes he wished in the future. From now on everyone will have the duty of learning from the future that which *can* occur, and therefore that which *will* occur, with the invariable necessity of a destiny and thus completely independent of our ideals, of our hopes, of our personal desires. If the equivocal term freedom must be employed, it will be understood to mean that we are no longer free to accomplish this or that, but to achieve *the necessary or nothing*. To feel that this necessity is a 'good' is the characteristic of realistic men... For the European there will no longer be any question of a great art or a great music. His architectonic possibilities have been exhausted for a hundred years. He has only extensive possibilities left... Undoubtedly the end could be tragic for some, if they waited until their decisive years brought them the certitude that there is no longer anything to conquer *for themselves* in the domain of architecture, drama, painting. These can die... If this book persuades the men of the new generation to turn to technique instead of lyrical poetry, to the sea instead of painting, to politics instead of philosophy, they will have accomplished my desire and nothing better can be wished for them."³⁹

Pushed to such a degree of secularization, the philosophy of history becomes the astrology and horoscope of nihilism. The theodicy that Hegel defined as the "reconciliation of the thinking spirit with Evil" becomes pure demonology; the "Yes of reconciliation" is transformed into totalitarian unanimity and the "tribunal of history" into a tribunal of Inquisition. The "*Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze*" of the visionaries of the Absolue could well be simply an invitation to keep in step.

of slavery and serfdom bring to mind the Nietzschean parable: "How many people, wishing to drive away their own demon, plunged into the sows themselves..."

³⁹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Introduction, Par. 14.