

The Adventure of a Negation: Literature and the History of Ideas

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Vere tu es Deus absconditus
Pascal

The time has come to rehabilitate the history of ideas in French literary studies, primarily because we should retreat from the disrepute attached to all universalising approaches to the real in the name of an ever-increasing subdivision of knowledge which proves on occasion to be shortsighted or stultifying.

Such is sometimes the case with literary criticism, entangled in all kinds of structures, symbols and the effects of the real. Certainly the effect of linguistics, sociology and psychoanalysis has been to remove all transparency from literary texts, turning them into settings for the investigation of problematics which stimulate research. But the horizons of a text which exists only in and for itself are often limited, and we feel it would be useful to integrate literature into a general history of ideas while remaining well aware of the risks inherent in this type of project: approximations, omissions, caricaturising deformations, all kinds of reductionism.

The history of ideas simply as an autonomous field of research does not exist in Europe, more specifically in France. In Germany the application of the *Geistesgeschichte* developed by Dilthey has long been dominant, while in France the history of '*mentalités*', of mental habits, attitudes and outlook, created by the *Ecole des Annales*, has generally won the day.

The United States has a '*history of ideas*': Arthur Orcken Lovejoy attempts to define its elements and methods in the introduction to his book *The Great Chain of Being*,¹ and gave it an arena for academic research when in 1940 he founded the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.

There are of course publications in France which illustrate fully research into the history of ideas: the fine books of Jean Starobinski, Paul Bénichou and René Girard,² and also the significant theses of Robert Mauzi, Jean Ehrard and Michel Delon on the eighteenth century. We feel, however, that the history of ideas remains marginal, a province isolated from senior academics.

To break out of this marginality we should perhaps do away with the French suspicion of any approach that tends towards universality. In other words we must outflank Michel Foucault's criticisms – not by denying them but by taking them into account – of a history of ideas tending to draw in 'phenomena round a single point' instead of expanding 'the extent of dispersal'.³

In order to overcome these weaknesses which we will attempt to list in the first part of this article, the history of ideas should combine a global approach to a particular concept with the application of a logic of the dispersal and dissymmetry of intellectual phenomena; it should offer consistencies which are of an 'adventurous' nature,⁴ both because they run diagonally and cross separate areas of knowledge and because they place the disturbing movement of negation at the heart of the evolution of concepts, in place of the heavy dialectic of identity.

It is in fact very much a matter of making an adventure of the history of ideas, the adventure of a negation – and an adventure into the negative – of the political, social and economic history of mankind.

We must however pose the question at the end of this article whether the intellectual act does not also touch on the transcendental, whether negation is not the actual principle of Christian religiousness, and whether we cannot also learn something from the history of ideas about 'matters hidden since the creation of the world'. If that were the case we could, in company with Hegel, Marx and Rousseau, cease to be 'dwarfs who have forgotten to climb on giants' shoulders',⁵ we could make History the stage for an unveiling.

I. History on the Margins

Genealogy of a Verdict

In an article in 1960 Alphonse Dupront published a savage indictment of the history of ideas:

The history of ideas – which is after all ill-defined and, rather like a capacious hold-all, open to everything which traditional history has largely ignored – leans too heavily towards pure intellectuality, the abstract existence of the idea, often moreover in total isolation from the social settings in which it takes root and which express it in various ways [. . .]. What matters as much as the idea, or perhaps more, is the incarnation of the idea, its significations and the use to which it is put.⁶

This is comprehensive: the history of ideas is abstract and idealistic, it ignores social acts – in other words, the social functioning of intellectual propositions. This is no new criticism: Lucien Febvre developed it in the 1930s, inveighing against the historians of philosophy on this account. And when, for example, he offers high praise to Etienne Gilson's great book, *La Philosophie au Moyen Âge*, he hastens to define more precisely:

It is not a question of underestimating the role of ideas in History, still less of subordinating it to the operation of interests. It is a matter of demonstrating that a Gothic cathedral or the great hall in Ypres [. . .] and one of these great temples of ideas, such as those described by Etienne Gilson in his book, are all the offspring of a single epoch: sisters who have grown up in the same home.⁷

That the idea is part of a cultural process and universal material seems obvious, but should there be emphasis on the extent to which the criticisms of pure intellectuality brought against the history of ideas have been justified?

A second and perhaps more radical form of objection appears in Michel Foucault's book *L'Archéologie du Savoir*, in which he suggests that the history of ideas throws out any concept of discontinuity. In this way it neglects the epistemological decentralising practised by Marx, Freud and Nietzsche in the history of thought,⁸ preventing thought of Otherness, like someone insane, in western culture. This is a teleological and global history, hence not operational, because it prefers the thread of a logical continuity to the disorder of a future made uncertain by the divergence of series and the irregularities of epistemological breaks.

Foucault's criticism is significant and should be taken into consideration in any attempt to re-think the history of ideas. However, it does not on its own explain marginality in France. We feel, on the contrary, that it is a result of the success of the history of mental habits and the *Ecole des Annales*. The history of mental

attitudes overrides the idealism of the history of ideas, articulating the human psyche and the social element through the slant of general understanding of mental habits: 'In ideas, the conscious construction of an individuated mind confronts the unfailingly collective mentality that rules the representation and judgements of social topics'.⁹ In effect, Lucien Febvre's defence of the concept of 'mental equipment'¹⁰ opened the way in the 1960s to the history of mental habits focussed on the mental, social and historical collective, encompassing the intellectual and the emotional without differentiation.

Moreover the importance of reading Camille Blondel (*Introduction à la psychologie historique*, 1919), Henri Wallon (*Principes de psychologie appliquée*, 1930) and Ignace Meyerson (*Les Fonctions psychologiques et les oeuvres*, 1948) for Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet in their work on Greek historical psychology is acknowledged.

However, we must return to the history of ideas and establish it as a research discipline along with the history of philosophy, literature or ways of thinking: operating primarily to combine its global aims with recognition of the archaeological labour of the Other in discourse. This may be difficult, but demands at least a minimum of examination. Here indeed may lie the real marginality of the history of ideas – the original approach to literary and cultural phenomena.

History of Ideas and Archaeology of Knowledge

The history of ideas may consist of those writings that identify the negations placing the real and discourse off-centre, investigating interpretations and turning them inside-out, yet without abandoning the overall aim of establishing a perspective. It may lie in the writing exposing the fault-lines which overturn established cultural significations and thus offer fragments of a tectonics of meaning – in other words, of an archaeology of chaos.

If the history of ideas is archaeological it is because it does not also ignore the fact that there are deeper layers of significance, therefore older and more fundamental than others. Foucault, specifically, appears to deploy his archaeology within well-defined limits: between political events on the surface and the facts of material civilisation beneath, i.e. in line with the Braudel

school. But could not the archaeology of knowledge also be an archaeology of religious fact? The history of ideas should promote development beyond the primacy of economics in interpreting the real; why should we doubt that the ties woven by religion between man and the Beyond determine material activity? That religious symbolism forms the foundation of culture – and why not of economics? The revolution of Copernicus and Galileo provoked a scientific and religious upheaval, removing God to the infinity of the Heavens and introducing or vastly increasing modern capitalism by offering mastery of Nature to man. Modern capitalism, in our view, cannot exist without this *scientia activa* which Copernican religious decentralisation offers the West. And perhaps the birth of modern times should be seen as a true Genesis, the birth of modern man, the contemptuous rival of God.¹¹

As for the modern view of literature, it too appears to be dependent on a religious interpretation: the romantic and modern claim to make of writing an 'absolute' which occasionally comes close to madness, from Nerval to Rimbaud, from Hölderlin to Nietzsche, can be understood as the all-too-human wish to construct a form of speech, a speech-world, which would compete symmetrically with the Word, the divine world-speech.

Above all, a religious archaeology of ideas can speak of the fault-lines and discontinuities of Thought in a manner which would be described as consubstantial. Religion is a link with the Beyond: that is, it refutes appearance and immanence: without God, man and the world are fragments.

Specifically, archaeology existed as a science from the moment when the world, losing its illusions beneath the weight of a human season, became – from Thomas Whately (*Observations on modern gardening*) to Diderot (*Salon de 1767*),¹² from the Athenaeum romantics to Troxler¹³ or Joachim Ritter¹⁴ – a field of ruins, a chaos of remains where the destructive entropy of becoming operates on man and on things. When Winckelmann wrote his great foundational works on modern (Greek) archaeology, he perhaps also expressed the truth about western civilisation – that it is the product of a religion, of Christianity, which is the religion of the breaking of the religious tie, in which man ends by breaking down into individuality, the world into ruins, and significance into dust, while modern culture sets itself up as archaeologically hermeneutic.

II. The History of Ideas or the Negative in History

Ambiguity of the Idea

The elements which primarily seem to characterise and condemn the history of ideas are its lack of precision and its ambiguity. For Foucault, 'it is not easy to characterise a discipline such as the history of ideas: uncertain in its purpose, vague in its boundaries, its methods adopted from all sides, a procedure without rectitude or steadiness.'¹⁵

It is specifically a matter not only of admitting that if this history is ill-defined it is because it 'represents an area of exchanges and confrontations'¹⁶ and has the capacity to follow 'an idea in its various formal recordings and unexpected changes',¹⁷ but also of attaching to it a disturbing logic of negation. Thus, with the history of ideas always moving off-centre in relation to its object, it may genuinely be an archaeology of cultural signification. The idea is essentially imprecise. In A.O. Lovejoy's definition:

Of what sort, then, are the elements, the primary and persistent or recurrent dynamic units of the history of thought? There are, first, implicit or incompletely explicit assumptions, or more or less unconscious mental habits, operating in the thought of an individual or a generation.¹⁸

An idea does not necessarily consist of a precise formulation, it is thought, more or less expressed: it lies short of the word and phrase, i.e. on the margin and in negation. The idea is ambiguous because it is individual or collective, and because it may by nature be intellectual and/or psycho-pathological, more or less emotional (and may or may not be conceptualised):

Another type of factors in the history of ideas may be described as susceptibilities to diverse kinds of metaphysical pathos [. . .] Metaphysical pathos is exemplified in any description of the nature of things, any characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which, like the words of a poem, awaken through their associations, and through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial mood or tone of feeling on the part of the philosopher or his readers.¹⁹

One may consider the eighteenth-century idea of happiness studied by Robert Mauzi in his great book,²⁰ which is as much a

concept philosophically defined as a strenuous expectation of the soul.

Correspondingly, an idea may be literary, expressed in a literary manner, or simply in a philosophical manner: evil, happiness – these two concepts preoccupy Leibniz in his *Theodicy* as much as they did Voltaire the story-teller and author of *Candide*.

Moreover, ambiguity is inherent in the concept which at any one time or over a period of centuries may return to its earlier significance or move away. One example is the concept of truth, of which it is well known that it takes on different – if not opposite – signification for pre-Socratic thinkers, for Plato, Descartes, or Auguste Comte. Another example is madness, which was shown by Foucault to have modified its meaning with the shifting divisions between sanity and insanity from the Middle Ages to the classical age.

In other words, because the conceptual categories of truth are not static, a history of ideas is the more complex and involves at least a semantic history of the concepts studied; this is also advocated by Lovejoy:

Another part of the business, if he means to take cognizance of the genuinely operative factors in the larger movements of thought, is an inquiry which may be called philosophical semantics – a study of the sacred words and phrases of a period or a movement, with a view to a clearing up of their ambiguities, a listing of their various shades of meaning, and an examination of the way in which confused associations of ideas arising from these ambiguities have influenced the development of doctrines, or accelerated the insensible transformation of one fashion of thought into another.²¹

This semantic study should additionally take into account analysis of the formal conditions of the idea's expression, its place of formulation and its syntax.²²

The history of ideas is a thoroughly ambiguous history and hence subject to controversy: one may none the less question whether the idea does not derive its power specifically from its ambiguity, i.e. from the negation which incessantly reexamines and shifts the earlier meaning of a word. The history of ideas may in fact be a history which seizes on negativity, the discourse revealing the labour of negation which attacks concepts, puts them in opposition (sanity/madness, true/false, barbarity/civilisation . . .), breaks down the established divisions of knowledge;

it is perhaps an adventurous history, defying our certainties and reformulating, recreating consistencies and thus revealing the genesis of another reality – chaotic, dissymmetric:

Negativity is the liquefacient, the solvent, which does not destroy but which launches new patterns and in this sense affirms: the logical time of passage (*Übergang*) is the mix, in the choreographic sense of the word, the necessary link and the immanent genesis of differences.²³

Reality as Shadow Theatre

The history of ideas poses what Roger Caillois called 'adventurous consistencies',²⁴ for it is necessarily oblique, slanting across several fields of knowledge. The idea lies not only at the intersection of literature and philosophy, it is also of History, the history of sciences, of religions, or of art, of anthropology, epistemology. Here we should perhaps quote Lovejoy again:

Any unit-idea which the historian thus isolates, he next seeks to trace through more than one – ultimately indeed, through all – of the provinces of history in which it figures in any important degree whether those provinces are called philosophy, science, literature, art, religion or politics.²⁵

This, as we know, is the path chosen by a critic such as Jean Starobinski when he looks at body language or at Montaigne's writing on melancholy, or more generally at the links between medicine and literature.

In its obliqueness the history of ideas blurs certainties and established boundaries – in other words it obscures in order to see more clearly, it un-veils. And obliqueness too is never more than the work of negation.

As can be seen from its etymology, the Idea, in Greek, is what can be seen, but only by means of diversion from the obvious appearance, a negation of the immediately real set in the shadowy realm of the make-believe.²⁶

The historian of ideas, following the example of the Platonic philosopher, undoubtedly separates out the real, both to identify the ambiguities of a concept and to draw them out – in fact he attempts to divide truth from appearance. There is more, however: in unravelling the chaos of appearances the historian of ideas, like the writer, shares in the western adventure

of enlightenment. He seeks the transparency of the idea in the world, of man and of being, the diaphanous light of the true which dazzles us because it shimmers with presence: *eidos* and *idéa* are both in fact derived from the verb *eidénai*, 'to have seen', thus to know:

And we, following later, can no longer measure the range of Plato's action in daring the use the word *eidos* for he who shows his being in all things. For in everyday, language *eidos* signifies the aspect offered by something to our physical eye. Plato demands of this word something very unexpected: he requires it to indicate precisely what is not, what is never visible to the physical eye.²⁷

The historian of ideas seeks to identify and overcome the fault-line between appearance and idea,²⁸ while simultaneously integrating into his discourse the negation which, on the principle of the idea, turns the history of western culture into the writing of a metaphysics.²⁹ He seeks to lift the veil of enveloping the idea and obscuring the real, like the veil of Poppeia which, for Starobinski, is genuinely emblematic of the writer's work:

The hidden fascinates. 'Why did Poppeia mask the beauties of her face, if not to increase their attraction for her lovers?' (Montaigne). Within dissimulation and absence there lies a strange force, forcing the mind towards the inaccessible, sacrificing everything it owns in order to conquer it.³⁰

The history of ideas may well be the adventure of transparency and the barrier,³¹ of day and night, of light and shade, of looking and the world.

The idea denies (denies itself): it only stands out from the real in order to indicate more clearly the original darkness: in the Beginning 'darkness was upon the face of the deep.' Night emerging from chaos gives birth to Light,³² the cave is peopled with shadows. In fact the idea, fundamentally reflexive, can never make anything of our understanding except a shadow-theatre. Thus too it is embodied in literature: it raises language to novel, drama or poetry, presenting itself as symbol or metaphor. The literary idea is the metaphorical and symbolic effect of the text, the realisation of a figure and a form which may be called setting, character, action, text itself: the genesis of a meaning beyond the symbolic negation, all the more obvious because the form is complete.

The history of ideas is very similar to looking, the archaeologist's looking as he lists fault-lines and remains, the upheaval of negation: also the looking of the spectator watching history unfolding like a drama: the looking of the metaphysical thinker, unveiling the real as the negative of the idea, and the idea itself as the negative of the luminous and fundamental evidence of the True.

III. Dissymmetric Logic of the Idea

Paradigm and Dissymmetry

We have noted that the history of ideas is a diagonal: this also means that it should seek to correct one of the weaknesses in the history of mental habits. It should both raise questions on the nature of the link between representations of the world, technologies and the developmental state of different bodies of knowledge, and also consider how to move from one intellectual system to another. Is there a break, an epistemological cutting-off, or not? In other words, how does negation operate? According to Alexandre Koyré, the move from one system of scientific representation to another is both radical and enduring. The Copernican revolution achieves the shift from a closed world to an infinite universe, thereby implying a radical epistemological upheaval with numerous intellectual consequences: the appearance of the modern concept of the individual and separation from God, the replacement of a *scientia contemplativa* by a *scientia activa*, the birth of the modern concept of literature and politics. This revolution, however, stretches out over four hundred years, apparently covering the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: 'The spiritual transformation which I envisage has not – of course – been a sudden change. Revolutions too have their history.'³³ It is this complex movement, combining the radical nature of discovery – the negation of the old order – with the faltering steps along the intellectual path that lead there, which T. S. Kuhn was to propound through the concept of the 'paradigm'. He felt, in effect, that the development of scientific ideas is non-cumulative and the shift from one system of representation to another, from one paradigm to another, occurs through crises.³⁴

The paradigm, a concept which can be extended to the whole

history of ideas, is the intellectual labour of negation, the introduction of a dissymmetry scooping out a pattern of geological fault-lines in the representation that destroys the old order and yet still implies it:

Dissymmetry, the state which follows the break-up of a balance or a symmetry while still letting the rejected order offer conjecture or induction, i.e. appearing clearly as a later intervention, a subversion become necessary or a premeditated modification.³⁵

The history of ideas may lie in that writing which in effect outlines (un-veils) dissymmetric complexes of ideas, splits and fault lines along which concepts range themselves, fractal consequences³⁶ of representations – in short this ‘pattern of deep discontinuities’ that Foucault prayed for,³⁷ and which the metaphysics of the idea produced definitively, if not, as we shall see, the dissymmetry of Christian religiousness.

In fact, whether the real be cultural or physical, it appears essentially dissymmetric or, it may be preferred, chaotic.³⁸

An Archaeology of Chaos

It is very much a matter of writing an archaeology of epistemological breaks, conceptual aggregation and cultural fractals; an archaeology of faults and turbulence, of shaken-up ideas and multiple folds, whether known as art, literature, science or politics; an archaeology of the genesis of ideas (and of ideas as the genesis of forms), of the bursting disorder of cultural negation and fluctuation.

This is because the history of ideas must also leave behind the unconscious myth borne of the nineteenth century’s archaeological paradigm; there no longer exists a foundation on which the individual cut off from God can steady himself and discover an immanent origin³⁹ even by exploring the geological depths and discontinuities of his interiority.

There is room today only for an archaeology of the chaos which assigns to the historian the duty of truly thinking the negative, i.e. the blossoming of ideas and the cultural as the genesis of phenomena, an irregular aggregate, a ‘fractal’ of ideological or conceptual fragments. Indeed, the negative logic of the idea leads less to disowning than to splintering, breaking down

cultural order into disorder and overturning the metaphysical pedestal of our civilisation into a fluctuating archipelago of values and truths. There is no *arkhê* except chaos: beneath our skin of certainties, behind the formalisation of concepts, all round our islands of belief, roars the tumultuous genesis of that primitive whirlwind, whether it is called the Big Bang or the 'winds of Heaven'.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

*Genesis I, 2.*⁴⁰

The history of ideas should therefore attempt to show that the western intellectual adventure consists of a succession of *geneses* since the Creation.

Thus we should understand the disillusionment of the world as a true *genesis*: the *genesis* of modernity where Enlightenment divides, where truths burst forth, where the closed world breaks down into an infinite universe, the human community into individuals, eternity into instants, the totality of palpable presence into multiple geometric surfaces . . .

Consider John Donne's famous poem, effectively emphasising this original explosion represented by the flooding of the Copernican cosmos over the remains of the Aristotelian cosmological order:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt
The Element of fire is quite put out,
The Sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.
And freely men confess that this world's spent,
When in the Planets and the Firmament,
They seek so many new, then they see that this
Is crumbled out again his Atomies
'T is all in pieces, all coherence gone.

Anatomy of the World 1611

From the storms of the world with wandering ships of fools and Rabelais' characters travelling to the 'Islands of Tohu and Bohu' to the ruins where the sensitivity of the eighteenth century and of romanticism takes its pleasure, there is the reality of a shared origin: the gap of a new meaning,⁴¹ the combined flux and reflux

of man and modern society in the same swirling aspiration.

The history of ideas should thus study not so much what Heidegger called the decline and end of metaphysics but rather the ceaseless maelstrom of successive geneses or, if preferred, the fractal adventures of cultural negation.

One may however also wonder if the very dynamics of this fractal negation could not be explained by the specific dynamics of the Christian faith, 'the religion of the exit from religion', to quote Marcel Gauchet.⁴²

IV. A Transcendental History of the Idea

Negation, Logic of the Believer

The negative logic of the cultural really lies, perhaps, in the mythic text which is the foundation of western civilisation – the Gospels.

The good news 'of matters hidden since the creation of the world' may mean, among other things, the revelation of a religious and epistemological truth (the religion underlying the epistemological): negation is the transcendental logic and Christian dynamics, defying all human logic of identity (dialectics, for example) and bearing a cultural order marked by the dissymmetric adventure of man and God.

Europe may perhaps combine two negations, fully operative but on two different levels, human and divine.

The (Platonic) metaphysical negation of the idea confirms the real on earth as appearance and make-believe, and imposes a discourse negating false opinions (which are based on appearances): the Socratic maieutics. Negation is thus dependent on an ultimate logic of affirmation and identity which, according to Hegel and Marx, will end as a system, in hypostasis.

The logic of judgement (which from Plato to Heidegger is a logic of the Logos (the word), thus criticises the term denied by appropriating it (by 'raising' it) through the logical (Logos) operation of negation understood as *Aufhebung*. It is in this form that the logic of the word in its most refined late elaborations (in Hegel's dialectic) will recognise negation, so that it is a step serving to articulate the affirmation of an identity.⁴³

At the source of the idea, negation (*Aufhebung*).⁴⁴ It is undoubtedly along these lines that the history of ideas could be approached

– by bringing in the formidable support of Christianity which upsets, destabilises, raises (*aufheben*) meaning, but by relentlessly breaking down the human and solidifying logic of identity into which Hegelian dialectic finally plunges.

According to Gottlob Frege, negation still remains a ‘chimerical entity’, because ultimately it is not possible to deny through judgement the being who offers it and because negation cannot be conceived except as exterior to the conscience of the subject.⁴⁵ An exterior which for Frege does not exist but which Freud, via the theory of the unconscious, was to apply to existence showing that the latter postulates the functioning of a de-negation (*Verneinung*) that is not internal to the judgement and is productive of meaning because it ‘raises’ the meaning of human conscience.

‘Denegation is an *Aufhebung* of inhibition, without being thereby an acceptance of the inhibited person’,⁴⁶ Freud finds this negation in rejection (*Verwerfung*) – of the infant, for example, who essentially sees himself separated. Negation internal to judgement is to this extent only the interception, the absorption-buffer of a mobility known as rejection or, as may be preferred, ‘negativity’ (*Negativität*)

According to Hegel, in fact negativity as distinct from nothingness (*Nichts*) and from negation (*Negation*) is the concept which shapes the indissoluble relationship between an ‘ineffable’ mobility and its ‘singular determination’.⁴⁷ This is the exterior proper to belief, the aim of a theology, what the German philosopher calls in the *Science of Logic* (Volume 2) the fourth term of true dialectics, ‘in relation to which triadism is only apparent, arising from the comprehension’,⁴⁸ the absolute rising of the divine in the conscience.

In this sense perhaps the Gospels tell of man’s catchment of divine negativity, immeasurable because it proclaims the genesis of God in man and of man in God while signifying the dissymmetry of Christian belief, combining the immanence of man and the transcendence of God, whose Incarnation is the creation, Love the proof and the Cross the symbol.

The dissymmetry of Christian religion which makes the ways of God impenetrable also signifies the possibility of diverting the divine into the nothingness of forgetting,⁴⁹ i.e. the disillusionment of matter.

This dissymmetry is the definitive mystery of the cross. God builds the cross on his son: Christ redeems mankind because in

the Passion he denies himself as God, both through suffering and through death, and goes to the limit of his essence as a man. But he dies as a man in the martyrdom of the cross, to the extent that the unacceptable nature of the deliberate putting to death of innocence denies Christ as man and reveals him, even before the resurrection, as the Son of God.

Thus if Christianity is the religion of departure from religion, it is because the cross is built on the divine-and-man. Faith as the cross, is the very essence of religion and reveals itself in the modern disenchantment with things, ruins of the world and of the significance or crisis of culture, and in the Coming of Man as a being-for-death.

The cross, dialectics with four terms, destabilising permanently all logic of identity by maintaining the active power of negation, by operating as the infinity of the Mystery, perhaps also incarnates that negative dialectic which Théodor W. Adorno prayed for and which could only obey a 'logic of dislocation'.⁵⁰

The Gospels definitively proclaim incessantly the crucial logic of negation which convulses consciences⁵¹ to the extent of provoking the disciples' indignation,⁵² doubt, even the possibility of denial, by raising 'the mystery of the kingdom of Heaven' beyond human certainties; Jesus proclaims Love but dies beneath human hatred, Jesus is all-powerful but is defeated. Such is indeed the cross with which God burdens human intelligence, the mystery and dynamics of negation, the dissymmetric difference of the divine, proving the infinity of his Love:⁵³

Ye are of this world; I am not of this world
St. John, 8, 23.

Such is perhaps also the mystery revealed by the history of ideas: the labour (*tripalium*) of negation, the cross of Christian logic (of non-identity) impelling mankind to achieve through a vast and enduring disillusionment their own genesis in release from God. Genesis and Exodus perpetually recommencing.

The Light of the World

Earlier we stated that the history of ideas unveils. Ultimately it expresses the growth and decline of light, human nostalgia for primary transparency and clear dawns, anticipation of revelatory

mornings rather than great crepuscular upheavals.

Man's intellectual history expresses nostalgia for the clear divine word⁵⁴ of the Light of truth of which ideas and writings bear evidence. Negation is also a raising of light in the world's darkness and a lifting of shadows under the Light of God: an intersection of day and night which crucifies intelligence in its thinking: reason throws its gleams, i.e. it occults – here already is the Greek idea, shadowy; faith illuminates, it bears witness to the glory of Yahweh manifest, of the Christian begotten, of the world created.

The disillusionment of the world is an occultation of Light, the chiaroscuro intersection of the decline of the Light of God over the world and the rise of the gleams of reason (the 'enlightenment') in the firmament of society.

It seems indeed that the cross built on divine light by natural is also accompanied, in this new Passion of purity, by an unfolding of the darkness spreading over the whole Earth. The history of ideas can only record, unveil, this severe challenge of 'the dark night' (St John of the Cross), of the modernity which demands apophatic theologies of the believer, from Master Eckhart to Pascal, and which can be seen in literature.

Consider the black melancholia which preys ever more insistently on writers between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, from Montaigne to Flaubert or Baudelaire, or again 'the clear night of the nothingness of anguish' where Sartre – and also Céline and Malraux – kept watch with Heidegger.

But the history of ideas could also show more than the erratic junction of this occultation and the human dream of reviving, of relighting through literature the light of God, the absolute, i.e. the purity of Meaning.

Such is the wish to write a 'literary absolute' swelling up in the nineteenth century with German romanticism, the wish to write a pure literature which, from Melville to Mallarmé, from Rimbaud to Proust, would reunite with the Light in the explosion of a metaphor, a poetic illumination, or an instant of plenitude.⁵⁵

The history of Western ideas remains to be written, indicating primarily that there should be no drawing back before ambitious undertakings aiming to draw out a global philosophy of the western route. We consider it possible to identify this philosophy, or rather this logic, as one of negation, whose dynamics and essence is the crucial dissymmetry between man and God and which

begets the birth and everlasting chaos of European culture.

The history of ideas, if consistent, cannot help but postulate a specific epistemology of culture, refusing to restrict itself to a simple descriptive approach to what man has managed to imagine and to write.

'My kingdom is not of this world' may surely be one of the major revelations 'of matters hidden since the creation of the world', incessantly fracturing our reality and conscience in its divine negation, throwing us into a cultural fluctuation where our logic of identity breaks down, shaping our disillusioned knowledge into an archaeology of ruins.

This is what it means to be, or wish to be, a historian of ideas: to un-veil, to express the negation (*Aufhebung*) running through western culture, to lift (*aufheben*) the veil lying over our cultural identity: the cross of the religious fact which underlies and disturbs our ideas to the extent of denying the divinity itself, to give birth to other ideas, other bodies of knowledge, forgetting God: but where, incessantly, the negative logic of the religious belief revives.

For this, it seems, is the mystery of western culture through which literature may be interpreted: the unceasing and dissymmetric intersection of man and God, the cross made by man on the Son of God, the cross made by God on the Son of Man, the crucial chiasmus of Meaning.

And the history of ideas is thus nothing but the recognition of a long calvary: the calvary of man and the world, the writer and literature.

Translated by Helen McPhail

Notes

1. A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1936 and 1964.
2. Girard is marginal where his research aims more at establishing a fundamental anthropology than at exploring literature.
3. M. Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 19 (available in English as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London, Routledge, 1990). All quotes are translated by the translator.

4. R. Caillois, *Cohérences aventureuses*, Paris, Gallimard, Idées, 1976.
5. M. Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. XXIII.
6. A. Dupront, 'Problèmes et méthodes d'une histoire de la psychologie collective', *Annales E.S.C.*, 1961, pp. 3–11.
7. L. Febvre, 'Doctrines et sociétés. Étienne Gilson et la philosophie du XIV^e siècle', *Annales E.S.C.*, 1948. (reproduced in *Combats pour l'histoire*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1953, p. 288).
8. Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, p. 22.
9. R. Chartier, 'Histoire intellectuelle et histoire des mentalités. Trajectoires et questions', in *Histoire intellectuelle et culturelle du XX^e siècle*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1988, p. 207.
10. L. Febvre, *Le Problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle. La religion de Rabelais*, 1942, reissued Albin Michel, 1968, pp. 141–2 (available in English as *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century. The Religion of Rabelais*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983).
11. We will attempt to define the epistemological assumptions of this genetic interpretation in the sequel to this article (cf. part III, *Dis-symmetric Logic of the Idea*).
12. 'The ideas the ruins awaken in me are great. Everything is reduced to nothingness, perishes, vanishes. Only the world remains. How old the world is! I am walking between two eternities.'
13. *Fragmente*, 'Human thought does not relate to the existence of objects but to their destiny in nature,' in A. Béguin, *L'Âme romantique et le rêve*, Paris, José Corti 1939, p. 89.
14. *Fragmente aus dem Nachlass eines jungen Physikers*, Heidelberg, 1810.
15. Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, p. 179.
16. M. Delon, *L'Idée d'énergie au tournant des Lumières*, Paris, P.U.F., 1988, p. 14.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
18. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 7.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
20. R. Mauzi, *L'Idée de bonheur au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1960.
21. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 14.
22. Delon, *L'Idée d'énergie*, p. 15: 'the significance of an idea varies according to whether it appears in a theoretical treatise, a verse composition or a novel . . .'
23. J. Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Paris, Seuil, 1974, p. 102 (available in English as *Revolution in Poetic Language*, New York, Columbia University Press, n.d.).
24. Caillois, *Cohérences aventureuses*.
25. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 15.
26. It is true that the myth of the cave is Greek, but the symbol also appears in the Gospels, from the nativity to the tomb. In each case,

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- though naturally with variations, the light of truth is linked to shadows.
27. M. Heidegger, 'La doctrine de Platon sur la vérité', in *Questions III*, Paris, Gallimard, 166, pp. 102–63.
 28. J. Starobinski, *L'Œil vivant*, Paris, Gallimard, 1961, p. 23 (available in English as *The Living Eye*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989): 'If the reflexive eye can be forced to extend beyond the misfortune of reflexion, complete speech (which is poetry) seeks and finds an analogous power to surpass.'
 29. M. Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik*, Frankfurt, 1949 (quote translated from French edition *Qu'est-ce-que la métaphysique?*, Paris, Nathan, 1985, p. 65): 'At the same time, the question of Nothingness permeates the whole body of Metaphysics, for all that it restricts us to the question of the origin of negation.'
 30. Starobinski, *L'Œil vivant*, p. 9.
 31. J. Starobinski, *La Transparence et l'Obstacle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971 (available in English as *Transparency and Obstruction*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988).
 32. C. Ramnoux, *La Nuit et les enfants de la nuit*, Paris, Flammarion, 1986, cf. chap. II, 'La nuit de la cosmogonie' (a study of Hesiod's treatment of night).
 33. A. Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969 (quote translated from French edition *Du monde clos à l'univers infini*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, p. 13).
 34. T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970. Cf. by the same author *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
 35. Caillois, *Cohérences aventureuses*, p. 206.
 36. B. Mandelbrot, *Les Objets fractals*, Paris, Flammarion, 1975, reissued 1989 (available in English as *Fractal Geometry of Nature*, W. H. Freeman, 1987); cf. p. 5: 'The natural objects in question share the common factor of an irregular or broken shape. To study them I have conceived, developed and extensively employed a new geometry of nature. The key idea is designated by one of two synonymous neologisms, "fractal object" and "fractal", terms which I have just invented [...] from the Latin adjective *fractus*, meaning "irregular" or "broken" '.
 37. Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, p. 9.
 38. Cf, for example, J. Gleick, *La Théorie du chaos*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1989.
 39. This is indeed necessary in the concept of *Volksggeist* expounded by Johann Gottfried Herder in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, 1774: 'The truth, the spirit of a nation, is rooted in the land of its birth.'
 40. Cf. M. Serres, *Genèse*, Paris, Grasset, 1982, p. 175: 'In other words, our metaphysics is felt metaphorically through our physics [...] Bergson

was therefore not in error when he said that our metaphysics are metaphors of the solid.'

41. Ramnoux, *La Nuit et les enfants de la nuit*, p. 75: 'in the Greek tradition the "very first to appear" and the "first named", in the very front row chaos in the sense of "fissure" or "gap", appear and grow. They are not preceded by anything unborn, nothing in any way conceivable with a name! It is therefore correct to speak of genesis and not of creation.'
42. Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde*, p. II.
43. J. Kristeva, *Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, 1969, p. 249.
44. Negation (*Aufhebung*) takes a corresponding verb, *aufheben*, which for Hegel has the meaning of raise, suppress, preserve. Such is the dialectic which denies the preceding instant but without despatching it into nothingness and constitutes the raising which makes it possible to proceed to synthesis.
45. G. Frege, *Écrits logiques et philosophiques*, Paris, Seuil, 1971.
46. S. Freud, 'Die Verneinung', *revue française de psychanalyse*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1934. Cf. the commentary of J. Hippolyte in J. Lacan, *Écrits du D' Lacan*, Paris, Seuil, 1965, pp. 879–88: 'to present one's being on the pattern of not so being, this is really what this *Aufhebung* is about, in the repression which is not an acceptance of the repressed individual.'
47. Cf. Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, p. 101: 'Negativity is the logical impulse which can present itself under the theories of negation and of the negation of negation but which does not identify itself with them because it is something different from these theories: the logical functioning of the movement producing them.'
48. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
49. Cf. Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik*, p. 59 of French edition: 'The "not" is not the negation which engenders it but the negation is based on the "not" which has its origins in the annihilation of Nothingness'.
50. Th. W. Adorno, *Dialectique négative*, Paris, Payot, 1978, p. 118 (available in English as *Negative Dialectics*, London, Routledge, 1990).
51. One may perceive in the Gospel texts a very large number of stylistic markers of negation: coordinating conjunctions, adverbs, chiasmus, etc.
52. Cf. for example the episode of the precious ointment at Bethany (Matthew 26, 6–13).
53. This is also how one may understand the Christian parable: *Aufhebung*, the raising, the genesis of Meaning in the everyday character of discourse; the other aspect is the narrative casting into the abyss of Christ-Logos.
54. Serres, *Genèse*, p. 85: 'The Being as Being is clear, as also is the Being as Word.'
55. On this point, see Y. Vadé, *L'Enchantement littéraire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.