

The Holy See

An Extract from *The Last Judgment: Generations*

Translation and Introduction by Rodrigo Maltez-Novae



Vilém Flusser

FlugSchriften ▲

THE HOLY SEE. AN EXTRACT FROM THE LAST JUDGMENT: GENERATIONS

© 1965-1966 Vilém Flusser

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¹ The four original chapters are "Guilt," "Curse," "Punishment," and "Penitence." This edition excises a significant portion of chapter one of the original manuscript.

Translator's Introduction

“Irony is a rhetorical method, it is a way of talking about things. (In Greek it means “to talk in a veiled manner.”) There is “cheap” irony. This is when I speak in a veiled manner without need, or to deceive those who listen to me. “Cheap” irony is a method dear to demagogy, but there is also an irony that is so dear that it can cost an arm and a leg. It is not easy to distinguish between the two types. It requires careful listening.”¹

Vilém Flusser started writing *The Last Judgment: Generations* in 1965, after having translated, rewritten and published his book *The History of the Devil*, originally written in German in 1958. Flusser, who wrote his works in German and Portuguese, always self-translated, but he wrote *The Last Judgment: Generations* only in Portuguese, translating just a few chapters into German. This, his largest monograph, with 336 typed pages, remained unpublished as a book for fifty-two years. Two of its chapters were partially published in the magazine *Cavalo Azul* in 1965, under the editorship of Dora Ferreira da Sil-

1 Flusser, V. “Irony” *Posto Zero*, Folha de São Paulo, February 26, 1972.

va, Flusser's great poet-friend and interlocutor for many years. This current book, which features the first chapter of *The Last Judgment: Generations*, is therefore the first extended glimpse in English of the author's masterpiece.²

The original working title of the book was *Unto the Third and Fourth Generations*,³ inspired by a verse from the Bible and with the subtitle: *I will visit the transgressions unto the third and fourth generation of those who annoy me.* The verse that inspired it is from the book Exodus in the Old Testament: *Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them [images]: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.*

This phrase is repeated three times in the Old Testament, in the books of Exodus 34:7, Numbers 14:18, and Deuteronomy 5:9. A quick and superficial exegesis of the verse suggests the image of a hereditary curse, which follows those who venerate false images, or false ideas, for generations. And with his ironic subtitle Flusser suggests a reverse image, a journey to the past, visiting those who weigh upon us to this day through inherited ideals and values. In other words, the present doesn't exist in a vacuum; there is a reason for why things are the way they are.

In his own introduction, Flusser presents the two central hypotheses of the book: (a) that a study of the past could teach us something about our cur-

2 This translator's introduction was first written for the first edition of *The Last Judgment: Generations* (2017), published by É Realizações in São Paulo as part of the complete works series, *Biblioteca Vilém Flusser*, that I am editing.

3 The title was changed for the first edition because in the 1960s Flusser had expressed his dissatisfaction with the working title.

rent situation and (b) that our present situation is one of transition, of the end of an era and of renewal. In short, that today we are going through a period of transvaluation, just as Nietzsche had foreseen, and that it is only by analyzing the past that we may come to a better understanding of this transitional situation, and with that, to a better vision of a possible way forward.

Although it was written in the mid-1960s, this work remains current in its view of the present. In the introduction to the work, Flusser clearly and objectively presents us with the central argument of the book – the need to overcome technology through a process of transformation of both technology and ourselves:

Instruments are things already manipulated. Because they are manipulated, they seem to ask of us to assume attitudes of either consumption or refusal. They seem to demand their own annihilation. And this, in my view, is the ontological reason for the current desire for the end of the world. [...] The attitude I am describing lies in accepting the instruments as problems. This attitude is the consequence of a moment of choice; it means the existential choice of not accepting the instruments passively. And this resides in the experiential opening toward the world of technology, which means the existential decision to overcome the world of technology. Not by ever increasing consumption, not by angry and bored refusal, but by the manipulation and transformation of technology. Technology, to be overcome, needs to be transformed into something else.

The question of technology remains central today, and, as Flusser cautions, the important thing is how we choose to overcome our technology, which should be through manipulation and transformation. In other words, we must avoid both technophilia and technophobia, not technology itself. Extremist attitudes will not serve us in this moment of transition. It is only through an



existential dive into the programmatic dimension of the apparatus that we can save ourselves. Hence arises the prophetic element of Flusser's book, the allegory of the apparatus as Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, or as the Messiah who has come to provide us with a technical paradise. This technical paradise is what Flusser calls post-history. However, Flusser's post-history differs significantly from postmodernism. In his book, *Les Mots et Les Choses*, Foucault presents his concept of episteme and J.G. Merquior describes this structure succinctly in his critique *Foucault, or The Study of Nihilism*:

The story that Foucault narrates about the episteme – and that should not be confused, he warns, with the history of science or even with a more general history of ideas – constantly underlines the discontinuities between its historical blocks. [...] All we get are “enigmatic discontinuities” (Chapter VII, 1) between four epistemes: the “pre-classical,” up to the mid-seventeenth century; the “classical,” up to the end of the eighteenth century; the “modern;” and a truly contemporary era, which only took shape around 1950.

Foucault's last episteme would be precisely the postmodern one. But the fundamental difference between what Flusser calls generation and what Foucault calls episteme is in the way in which the passages between the historical blocks are given. As Merquior writes, Foucault doesn't account for the puzzling epistemological discontinuities between the blocks. For Flusser, however, there is no epistemological discontinuity from generation to generation because, as the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset describes in his book *What is philosophy?*, all generations are contemporaries but not coevals. Only those individuals of the same generation are coeval and, at every historical moment, there are always three distinct generations coexisting contemporaneously. According to Ortega y Gasset, it is because of this historical anachronism that the

wheels of history turn. The tensions between the epistemological models of each coexistent generation propel the movement of the wheels of history. For this reason there are no discontinuities in the historical blocks within Flusser's generational model inspired by Ortega y Gasset.

Ortega y Gasset was one of the great influences on Flusser's thought and style. The concept of technical apparatus, for example, in Ortega y Gasset's *The Rebellion of Masses* (1930), is central to Flusser's entire work. In *The Last Judgment: Generations*, Flusser already states in the epigraph the importance of Galileo Galilei for the work, no doubt influenced by Ortega y Gasset's book *About Galileo* (1933), whose chapter titles are suggestive indications of how Flusser may have been influenced, at least partially, by this work: 1. Galileo and his effect on history, 2. The structure of life, the substance of history, 3. The idea of the generation, 4. The method of the generations in history, 5. Again the concept of the generation, 6. Change and crisis, 7. Truth as man in harmony with himself, 8. In transition from Christianity to Rationalism, 9. On extremism as a form of life, 10. Milestones of Christian thought, 11. Fifteenth-century man, 12. Renaissance and return.

Another possible influence for *The Last Judgment: Generations* is the thought of David Flusser, Vilém Flusser's first-degree cousin. David Flusser is considered to be one of the great experts in the history of early Christianity and the period of the second temple of Solomon. He was a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and wrote several books on the sect of the Essenes of the Dead Sea. Vilém and David exchanged letters from the 1950s, when they reestablished contact after emigrating from Europe. Two frequent themes in David's books on the Essenes – the phenomena of the apocalypse and messian-

ism – often echo in the work and thought of Vilém Flusser. Although it is not possible to say with certainty the extent of the influence of David's thought on Vilém's work and thought, the parallels are tempting. And it is undeniable that human religiosity and the theme of influence and partial origin of Western thought from the religions of the Middle East are fundamental and constant elements in the thought and work of Vilém Flusser.

Lastly, a curiosity: If the reader carefully observes the summary of the chapters of *The Last Judgment: Generations*, he or she will quickly notice its geometric and symmetrical structure divided into 48 sub-chapters, 12 chapters and 4 parts, with these 4 parts being divided into 2 “books” (at the end of the second part, entitled “Curse,” Flusser makes a clear division and for that reason the book has been divided into two volumes for publication). This geometric symmetry, in addition to referring loosely to the Baroque's *more geometrico* of Descartes or Spinoza, also suggests a hidden geometry, possibly linked to the Kabbalah. I do not suggest that Kabbalistic thinking directly influenced Flusser, but the ludic element of Flusser's work should never be ignored. For example, $48 + 12 + 4 = 64/2 = 32$. The number 32 represents the 32 paths of wisdom, which manifest through the 4 worlds. Therefore, $4 \times 32 = 128$. The number 128 is 2 to 7th power and the numbers 2 and 7 are important numbers in the Kabbalah.

Finally, as Flusser has already said, in order to distinguish between the different facets of irony, one must have attentive ears.

Author's Introduction

The Lord's messengers worship the softness of His day. We, the third and fourth generations, fear the thunder of His wrath. This deafening sound vibrates in the air and in our ears. It presages the *dies irae*. The world will crumble into ashes. What shall we, poor wretches, do? This book will not attempt to formulate answers to this question.⁴ It will try to articulate the question. This book will try to make this unspeakable terror articulable. Because once articulated, the unspeakable is no longer frightening. Rational discourse drives away fear. The fear of fear is the reason for all rationalizing efforts, and also for the present effort. This will be an effort to build a tripod (more or less rational) to serve as support for a point of view. From this tripod, we will try to observe the smoke and vapors that the throat of the past exhales. We will allow these poisonous perfumes to envelop us, but not to numb us. We will try to keep our heads high above the exhalations from the abyss. Thus, this articulation will

⁴ The book Flusser is referring to here, and below, is the full manuscript, as yet unpublished in English, entitled *The Last Judgment: Generations*, completed in 1966. The current volume is an extract from this larger project.

not be, we hope, a mere babbling without nexus. With a little good will, some meaning can be discovered in it. And that meaning will concern the question, “How did we get here, and whose fault is that?” These are, in effect, two questions. The first asks of the situation we are in: “from where?,” the other, “why?” A chiliastic climate involves both questions. They vibrate with the thunder and the trumpet of the last judgment. The duty of this introduction is to introduce the reader to this climate. To make the reader feel, like the author, this ultimate threat and promise.

Every epoch has its prophets of doom. There is nothing simpler, nothing more comfortable, essentially, there is nothing more optimistic than to predict the ultimate catastrophe. This is a type of attitude that exonerates responsibility and exalts the exonerated, but this optimistic faith in a violent catastrophe is not the case in this book. This book does not fear the explosion, but the ashes. The “visions” here are not of the splendid mushroom, but of the desert. This work does not anticipate a heroic death in the flames, but a death with the quotidian taste of the ink-blotter. It does not believe in the catharsis of a purifying fire but believes that the third and fourth generations will be followed by the fifth and sixth. Divine wrath, this book fears, does not mean the explosion, but the stagnation of the world. The last day will be so imperceptible, that we shall not notice its dawn or its twilight, nor the last night. Perhaps the last day has passed, unnoticed? Maybe we live in the twenty-fifth hour? Perhaps the news of the last judgment will come late, as Nietzsche insinuates? Is the world around us, perhaps, a sad epilogue to reality? Is this world the entrance gate into nothingness? And perhaps we cannot see that we did not rush into nothingness, but are sliding within it? And that we are on an inclined plane whose slope we call “progress”? And that the geometric acceleration of progress was

our condemnation *in contumaciam*, on the day of the final judgment, to which we did not attend?

These are some of the questions that motivate this book. This is the kind of chiliasm that is inspiring, and against which this work is willing to fight the best it can. This book invites the readers to the fight. The climate I sought to evoke explains the appearance of the prophets of doom. Their desire is the father of their thinking. The world must end because it is intolerable. The prophets proclaim the end of the world so as to cause it. And desolate humanity, lost in the boredom of daily life and hungry for sensations, auscultates the ground to discover signs of imminent catastrophe. And the signs do appear – comets with tails, swords in flames, flying saucers, and creatures from Mars. A complex and luxuriant flora of apocalyptic literature thrives beneath this sky. It describes the end of bourgeois society, and of the West, and of humanity, and of life on Earth, and proclaims the death of God and the devil. Everyone agrees on one point: this world cannot continue as it is because this would be intolerable. What should not be, cannot be, is the motto that unites all. The very admission of the possibility of continuity is refused because to continue would be too horrible.

In this climate, the existential question emerges: “Why is there something?” The multiple intellectual responses to this question are not interesting if compared with the experiential answers that our generation is giving, which are two: One can be described as an act of devouring, the other as a shrug. If we try to articulate the two attitudes, the first one would be “*carpe diem*,” and the other “I don’t care.” This is how mankind reacts to the signs in the predictions. For some, the rockets are a means of travelling quickly and comfortably,

for others they are an unpleasant noise that briefly interrupts their daily idleness. Both attitudes are false, both the “progressive” and the “not committed” attitudes are poses. They are both escapes. The question “Why is there something?” cannot be evaded in this manner. We have to accept the rocket as a challenge. But this acceptance would have as consequence the acceptance of the world. And this is intolerable. It would be better if the world ends.

What is this world? The world is a collection of beings that constitutes reality; an ill-defined collection, compact in the middle, and diffused on the edges. The world is a ball whose surface evaporates. We are at the center of this ball, and we are the nuclei of reality. The multitude of other beings is jostled in our immediate surroundings. Each one of these other beings tries to reach us in order to become realized. Each one tries to break the barrier formed by the others, so as to be perceived by us. Each one wants to be known and recognized. On the whole, these beings form the circumstance within which we exist. Behind this disordered mob floats the amorphous mass of imperceptible beings, which forms the territory of virtuality, from which perceptible and realizable beings condensed. And this nebulous mass is lost in the abysses of nothingness. The ball of reality spins in the vault of nothingness propelled by the past into the future. How can this world end?

Not by external catastrophe, as the prophets believe. This world ends as it begins: with us. We are anchored in the center of reality. We are responsible for the metabolism of the ball. If we open ourselves toward other beings through a devouring attitude, we open a vortex in the center of the world, into which all beings rush.



In this centripetal movement, the world annihilates itself in the emptiness of our Self. If we close ourselves against other beings through the attitude of “I don’t care,” if we repel these beings that precipitate upon us, then a centrifugal movement emerges in the ball. In this movement, the world dissolves out of the nothingness that surrounds it. The two attitudes that characterize our generation are therefore responsible for the apocalyptic climate within which we exist. Therefore, the very prophets of the catastrophe are the ones who cause it.

A third attitude is possible. It consists of not accepting things as a challenge. In this attitude, things turn into problems. As they rush upon us, they bar our way. If we want to keep our way open, we should not seek to annihilate things or ignore them. We must seek to overcome them. Things are overcome by being transformed. This means neither consumption nor refusal to change these things. It is by manipulating these things that we will overcome them. Most of the things that surround the current generation consist of instruments. Instruments are things already manipulated. Because they are manipulated, they seem to ask of us to assume attitudes of either consumption or refusal. They seem to demand their own annihilation. And this, in my view, is the ontological reason for the current desire for the end of the world. The world of instruments (the world around us) seems destined, by its very structure of things already manipulated, to annihilation. The attitude I am describing lies in accepting the instruments as problems. This attitude is the consequence of a moment of choice; it means the existential choice of not accepting the instruments passively. And this resides in the experiential opening toward the world of technology, which means the existential decision to overcome the world of technology. Not by ever increasing consumption, not by angry and bored re-

fusal, but by the manipulation and transformation of technology. Technology, to be overcome, needs to be transformed into something else.

In this existential decision, in this choice of attitude, a different movement begins in the world around us. The things that rush upon us become realized through our manipulating attitude. The world becomes compact. The world becomes consolidated. Far from plunging into the abyss of annihilation, the world emerges from this abyss as we realize it. This is a climate in which there is no place for the chiasm that characterizes our time. Is this attitude feasible, will it be possible to establish this climate?

We live in an already exhausted and impoverished world. We oscillate between devouring and refusing. Instruments rush, transparent and hollow, toward the emptiness of our Self to be consumed. In this fall they collide with other instruments that are being expelled from our Self by boredom and nausea. The things that surround us are so transparent and hollow that we can glimpse nothingness through them. These things are nebulous rags that barely conceal the nakedness of our Self. We live in a world already almost emptied of reality. We still rarely catch a last remnant of reality, a sad vestige of a lost world. But this reality is too compact for us to bear it. We cannot hold on to it. We are a tired generation. Will we still be able to change our attitude?

I cannot answer that question. But I am looking for an answer. This book is the articulation of this demand. I want to understand the situation that gave rise to this question. Maybe I can find an answer by understanding the situation. I believe that the situation can be understood historically. It is in history that we find the explanation of the situation in which we are. It must, therefore, be in history that an escape from our situation is hidden. I will visit the gener-

ations that preceded us, so that they may answer: “Where are we going?” I do so with all the humility we owe to our elders, but not without recrimination. These generations, after all, are the ones to blame for the situation we are in. I want to learn from the past, not so much to imitate it, but to learn how to avoid its mistakes.



I. Guilt



Adapted from: "Prague." 2010. Image by Miguel Virkkunen Carvalho.

1.1. Holy See

The medieval city will be the point at which I will stop in the course of this trip towards our ancestors. Our generation can observe this city from a transcendent point of view. Our airplanes fly over it. In despondent pursuit of our business and leisure, we cross the air at violent speeds. But these speeds are not experienced. The furious arrow of the airplane seems to be standing still by those strapped onto it with a seat belt. Indeed, the airplane is one of the few remaining places for meditation. Flight does not give us the feeling of movement. This is a typical phenomenon of the unreal world that surrounds us. The speed of flight is experienced only after the trip or in a disaster. During the flight, we are still, and it is the landscape that unfolds in a slow and inviting way for meditations accompanied by the monotonous and numbing noise of the engines. If this landscape is Europe, we will notice curious formations: clusters of houses and small cottages, with labyrinthine streets and alleys; a narrow and anguished clustering. These cities are more like organisms than constructions. They seem to have sprouted from their landscape and to be

sheltered therein. They are not scattered on the landscape, nor do they oppress the landscape like our cities. They look like flocks of sheep that cluster, fearful, around the shepherd's staff; around the cathedral's tower. They fear the wolf that surrounds the city. This wolf has disappeared in the mists of ancient legends. The shepherd, too, has retired to pious, and perhaps not entirely sincere, stories and songs. What remains are only the sheep and the shepherd's abandoned staff. They are empty shells of a once burning hope. They are the petrified waste of glorious terror. They are coral reefs of the faith that crystallized as beauty. Thus are these cities hidden in their valleys, or leaning upon their hills. They extend in vain their pleading towers toward the sky and the airplane that flies over them. They are symbols of our subconscious. They attest to the past not only of our society but also of our minds. Our ancestors once inhabited these now empty capsules. They suffered in them, prayed in them, and created spells and masterpieces in them. But we, in our childhood, also go through a stage that corresponds to this climate of life. We were also Gothic once. Inside our mind, we shelter coral reefs that resemble this carcass. They are copies or models of these materialized phenomena. Medieval cities are parts of our own mind. To want to understand the spirit that created them and that was created by them is to want to understand oneself. This means we attempt to find our ancestors within our own minds.

The attempt to restore flesh to these stone skeletons is a multivalent activity. It has something of paleontology, poetry, and autobiography. This attempt will most likely reconstruct, with these dead stones, a creature as grotesque as a gigantosaur rebuilt with dead bones. This gesture will sculpt a figure of ourselves from the ruins, just like the statue the sculptor models out of stone, of himself. There will emerge, before our mental vision, a fantasy world that

will be, in essence, a dream and a nightmare from our childhood, projected on the backdrop of the history of society. This amalgam of grotesque reconstruction, artistic creation, and a dream will be the spirit that we will raise from the cities. We shall call this ghost the “Middle Ages.”

Science, art, and introspection were the agents that provoked this soft and terrible specter. How is this specter related to that “real” spirit that reigned in Europe five hundred years ago? I suspect the question is meaningless. For us, the reality of the spirit of the Middle Ages lies precisely in the specter we invoke. It is as such that this specter acts upon our minds. Let us invoke, then, with appropriate gestures and with solemn festivity, the specter of the Middle Ages, and let it materialize from its Aladdin’s lamp, from the cathedral, in order to serve us. Its pale light will illuminate the situation in which we find ourselves.

Worthy is the receptacle in which the ghost was encapsulated. It rises from the chiseled tips, from the crenels of the cathedral, from that flame of petrified faith. The cathedral, the Holy See, rises in flames towards the sky. The devil lies hidden, in a thousand forms, in its songs and among its protuberances. At its highest point, the cross of the God made flesh shines. In its nave, the crowd gathers, kneeling, on the journey in search of eternal life. The cathedral is the flame of the act-of-faith, which consumes the body to free the soul. This flame devours the flesh, for the flesh shelters the senses, and the senses belong to the devil. It enlightens the soul, and it rises to join God. The Holy See is the bridge between the city of men (threatened by hell) and the *Civitas Dei*.

It is necessary to ask how and with what material that flame was lit. The wood that constituted the fire came from the forests of Palestine and Greece, and from the dark jungles of ancient Germany. But the spark that caused this

firewood to catch fire, which kept burning for a thousand years, came from unfamiliar regions. Throughout western and central Europe this fire of faith burned, warmed, and illuminated the darkness of human solitude. What remains of warmth in our chilled minds is the almost extinct embers of the now charred wood. In the burning and hot fires of the Middle Ages, it was not possible to distinguish the various elements in the firewood: But we, to whom the clarity of the flame no longer obfuscates, can discover the Jewish, Greek, Latin, and Germanic elements in medieval faith, and smell their aroma. We can distinguish, in the medieval blaze of the bonfire, the various tendencies from which the flame was composed. We can discover, in all the Middle Ages, moments of predominance now of this, or of that element.

There are so many “rebirths.” The Middle Ages themselves were not clearly aware of their wavering because they were not interested in it. The Middle Ages had no “historical” interest in our meaning of the term. The breath that propelled the fire of faith pointed away from history. It did not allow a turning of thought toward its roots. The interest in eternity is the essence of the Gothic period; hence its disinterest for history as an autonomous process, and not as a process of salvation of souls. Our purpose in these considerations is the invocation of the medieval spirit, and this requires us to be obedient to it. Let us forget, then, our historical inclination, and let us give up the temptation to explain the Gothic period historically. Let us turn our backs to the fluid world of time, and let us look at eternity.

And, indeed, the position we recommend is that which the cathedral assumes. It stands out from the city. It solemnly pushes away the multitude of houses. The magic circle of the Cathedral Square keeps, at a distance, the sec-

ular and worldly bustling of the streets. The cathedral faces the silent peace of heaven. Outside its walls lie the chaos of the city, the gaudy colors of lascivious dresses, the obscene shouting of maids and servants, and the disgusting smell of yesterday and today's fair. Inside is the repressed ardor of ruby and emerald stained glass, the soft and charming voices of Gregorian chanting, and the acrid-sweet scent of incense. Outside, in the city, everything is confusion, everything is suffering. Inside, in the cathedral, everything means order, everything means beauty. But the organized beauty of the cathedral is the sublimated consequence of the city's chaos. The cathedral is chaos disciplined, chaste, and punished. It is the severe and logical form, into which chaos was poured to be saved. So vivid and opulent is this chaos that it threatens to burst the severe form of the cathedral on all seams. The yellow and red trousers of the squire are shown in gold and ruby stained glass. The rattles of the Jester's cap resonate in the ringing of the bells. In the ogival arch that points to the sky hides the bosom of the harlot, thus the whole building of the cathedral becomes sublimated flesh.

Herein lies the meaning of the cathedral, and this is how it overcomes the city: the cathedral sublimates the city in order to elevate it. The cathedral transforms the colors of silk and velvet into the shine of halos. It causes the jester's rattles to become an invitation to prayer. It purifies the flesh. This is how the cathedral becomes the focus of the city. All the rays of the Middle Ages focus upon the cathedral, to be purged in its fire. The cathedral is the centripetal goal of the activity of the streets. It gives direction, therefore meaning, to all this activity. Thanks to the cathedral all this mundane activity is meaningful. The most unbridled gluttony, the most abominable drunkenness, the most impudent fornication, the most bestial torment of people and animals, all have

a sacral meaning that gives the act a goal: it ends in the cathedral, in order to be encompassed by its disciplined and purifying beauty. Even the witch who spends her dirty nights with the billy goat finds her niche in the saving cathedral. The whole cacophony of the city, both the monk's monotonous praying and the shouting song of the lansquenet, both the whispering of the maiden and the shouting of the harlot, will be part of the polyphony of Gregorian chanting. It is in this sense that the city is Catholic. Everyone participates in the same reality, and everyone tends toward the same goal. No one doubts the foundation. The nave of the cathedral is this foundation. Heresy, atheism, and doubt, in the medieval sense of these terms, are grounded by the cathedral.

The cathedral imprints its structure on the city. The order and organization of the cathedral is the straitjacket within which the life of the Middle Ages takes place: a crazy life and a madman's life. The straitjacket suppresses and emphasizes, thus repressing the gestures of madness. This is the folly of divine salvation. Let us observe these gestures. We see the involuntarily and madly detailed ornaments on the house roofs, the complex and madly clever illuminations of the palimpsests, and the fantastic animals and the grotesque plants that appear in gobelins and tapestries. The whole town is a single crazy arabesque. This is, from our point of view, a singular alienated gesture. But this is an organic type of alienation, a natural madness, namely, the madness of human nature. All these grotesque forms are the authentic fauna and flora of the human mind. The fantastic creepers that form the fountains' fences are plants that sprouted spontaneously. The unicorns and the omnipresent dragons are real animals. These plants and animals are much more real than our cars and refrigerators. Their pointed shoes and absurdly heavy armor are far



more authentic than our “blue jeans” which try, in vain, to evoke a wholly fictitious and dishonest “Wild West.”

Nevertheless, from our point of view, we have the right to speak of their madness. An age that denies reality to the world of the senses, but that surrenders so violently to the senses, is a crazy time. An age that tends with so much faith toward the world of pure spirit, but is always ready to enter into agreements and covenants with the impure world of magic, is a crazy time. Such a deep faith in the reality of the soul, married with such a lascivious engagement in the reality of the body, means this is a distorted faith. We do not know who was the craziest: whether the witch who slept with the devil, or the bishop who had her burned. Who was the most possessed: whether the alchemist who sought wisdom in the precipitations, the astrologer who sought it in the constellations, or the scholar who sought it in syllogistic reason. Who was the most dangerous madman: whether the clockmaker who built a clock that marked the hours, the days, the months, and the epicenter of the planets, represented by figurines of the rich, death, the apostles, and cockerels, accompanying the celestial evolutions, or the emperor, who ordered the clockmaker to be blinded, and then thrown to the beasts. This is all madness, but it was a madness that worked. From a pragmatic point of view, therefore, these mad judgments were “true” judgments. Witchcraft, alchemy, and scholasticism were, pragmatically, sources of knowledge. The mad clock was a functional instrument, therefore pragmatically useful. But above all, the clock represented the madness of the whole Middle Ages, just as the age represents itself through beauty. The whole Middle Ages, as it comes to us, therefore, as something past, or, perfected and realized, can be regarded as a single gigantic work of art.

The sensation of the grotesque is the result of contemplating a phase in isolation. If we contemplate the Middle Ages in its totality, this sensation evaporates. An isolated statue, an isolated book, an isolated episode causes in us the impression of the grotesque. But our own act of detachment is the one responsible for the impression we have. The act of isolating, of individualizing, and emphasizing, is a modern attitude. This is a consequence of clear and distinct Cartesian perception. The Modern Age consists, indeed, of isolatable phases. A modern statue, a modern book, or an episode of modern history, can be contemplated individually because modern society consists, in theory, of detachable individuals. The statue, the book, and the episode have, in the Modern Age, responsible authors. But the Middle Ages is a time of different structure. It is a chain whose links tend to merge and confuse in anonymity. Highlighting a link means breaking the chain. It means transforming and deforming the Middle Ages into a modern imaginary museum. Hence our sense of the grotesque. The chain, in its entirety, is a complete work of art. Generations of anonymous masters and apprentices have forged it. The artistic design of the chain did not result from planning. The aura of organicity and authenticity that surrounds every medieval phenomenon is proof of spontaneity. The forging masters were no more than the articulating instruments of a supreme artist. All this activity obeyed an impalpable artistic project. This project informed and permeated every detail. It meant everything. It made the Middle Ages, as a whole, the articulation of sanity.

The goal of medieval life was the progressive realization of this project. It was the search for the modeling finger of the supreme artist. Everything pointed to His finger: the pointed towers, the pointed ceilings, the pointed windows, the pointy writing, even the pointed spears. Everything pointed to His finger,

but nothing reached Him. In this sense, the Middle Ages is the frustrated era. It had an unattainable goal. And, after hundreds of years of frustrated effort, the Middle Ages abandoned the attempt. The Modern Age is, as a whole, a single escape route from an overly difficult task. The Middle Ages failed in its task. The cathedrals are the pathetic and empty monuments of this unfulfilled task.

In the context of the Modern Age cathedrals are monuments to frustration. They are so, because they are perfect and finished. But this tragic aspect is precisely its modern aspect. At the time of their construction cathedrals were, on the contrary, monuments to optimism. The building process took hundreds of years. Masons, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, glaziers, and all the Catholic mass of the city, the castle, and the monastery converged on the Holy See to collaborate on the construction of the cathedral and its masterpieces. All the labyrinthine paths, and all the tortuous streets led to the square. The Holy See was the dam of all the streams. At some distance from the square the river system of feudalism was concentrated in three major rivers: the three states. Thus gathered, they flowed majestically into the ocean in which the cathedral nave sailed. This ship had two captains: the Holy Roman Emperor and the Bishop of Rome. The tension between them made the trip a risky endeavor. But it is not this global aspect that I intend to illustrate in the following considerations. My method will be different. I have chosen three of the many paths that the square demands, and I will try to follow them. I chose the path of the school, the path of magic, and the path of the sword. In these three contributions to the construction of the cathedral, I shall try to discover the explanation of its failure. My method will be modern. It will be the discursive method and will have clear distinction as a goal. Nevertheless, if it is successful, this method should be able to convey to the reader something of the medieval experience of reality.



Adapted from: "Labyrinth." 2013. Photograph by Steve Durbin.

I.I.I. School



The belief that thought is a noble activity, the belief in “pure reason,” is a modern superstition. The Middle Ages ignored the concept of man as a thinking thing. The scholars of the school were therefore unaware of our meaning of the term “theory.”

They did not live theoretically, and in this sense they did not love wisdom. They were not philosophers in our meaning of the term. If philosophy is defined as love of detached thought, a thought therefore pursuing a course which ignores the goal, then the medieval school is anti-philosophical at its very foundation. The school has a clear, precise, and defined goal. The goal of the school is to teach the technique of eternal life. The school is the foundation of life, and we study for life and not for the school. And it is obvious to the scholastics, so obvious as to admit no doubt, that this life for which we study is the life after the death of the body. In fact, the world of the senses, that phenomenal world that surrounds us and in which we participate by virtue of our body, is nothing more than a gigantic pedagogical institute. Its sole purpose is to educate us to eter-

nal life. The worldview of the scholars is that of the world as a school of souls, and man as a student of the course for the candidates for eternal life. All human activity is preparation for the entrance exam called “death.” Life in the body is an initiation to the “*ars moriendi*.”

Life is, strictly speaking, a teaching in the technique of death. And the school, in the strict meaning of the term, that is, the low and ill-lit room in which the scholars teach, is the polytechnique of eternal life. Scholasticism is, therefore, an eminently technical and pragmatic discipline with didactic purposes, and “*toto coelo*” different from philosophy in the old or modern sense of the term. Scholars are not “pure” thinkers, but highly specialized instructors. Scholasticism is the applied science of the salvation of souls.

The romantic sentimentality that characterized modern universities until the beginning of our century is a climate quite foreign to the scholars. It is, from their point of view, a symptom of our teachers’ inauthenticity. The scholastics are all profoundly realistic even when they are technically called nominalists. They are planted with both feet firmly on the ground of reality. Namely, on the ground of that reality that faith provides. The speculations to which they are devoted have for us an air of unreality, of the whimsical and of the abstract. But this is a sign of our alienation, not theirs. The fact is that we, as essentially Romantic, cannot follow their rational and empirical argument, that is, the argument based on the type of reason and immediate experience that faith offers. Alienated, we are victims of a curious schizophrenia. There is an abyss for us between reason and immediate experience. We oscillate between rationalism and empiricism. And we lost touch with reality, which rushed into the abyss between them. But the arguments of scholasticism refer precisely to this realm

of the real that is located, for us, between reason and immediate experience. Scholastics do not feel, as well integrated as they are, our antinomy. Reason and experience are not two opposing capacities to grasp reality, but are two complementary capacities. They are the two graces we have at our disposal. Our antinomy is the result of a displacement of experience that lies at the bottom of our madness. We shifted experience to the senses. And the experience the senses provide is illusory and deceptive. That is why it contradicts reason and opposes it. For the scholastics it is not the senses, but faith that provides immediate experience. Between this type of experience and reason there is, in theory, no antinomy.

There is no antinomy, but there is a problematic relation between faith and reason. Faith brings us into contact with reality in two different ways. The first is public and objective. The second is intimate and subjective. The first has as its source the Divine revelation, and the sacred writings as its depository. The second is the source of our consciousness, and manifests itself sporadically. The function of reason is to unite these two forms of faith in our minds. The role of reason is, therefore, logically and psychologically posterior to faith, and reason exists because of faith and is subordinated to it. Scholasticism is reason conscious of its function, and is, therefore, disciplined reason. Scholasticism is reason illuminated by faith, as the scholars would say. Or, it is reason as apologia of faith, as we, the moderns, would say. Our modern formulation of scholasticism bars our way toward an understanding of the principle which informed it. The scholastics are, for us, by virtue of this formulation, sometimes irrational mystics, and sometimes extreme rationalists. Or, they are both things, and therefore, inauthentic.

They are conjurors of words that manipulate concepts for the apparent purpose of producing knowledge, which they already hide in their sleeves. Scholastics are rationalist playwrights of faith, from our point of view. Their preconceived game vitiates, for us, the taste of the spontaneity of knowledge.

The contradiction and inauthenticity of scholasticism dissolves, however, if we abandon our modern point of view. This point of view is the result of our contradictory tendency to deify and despise reason as a revelation of reality. If we deify reason, scholasticism presents itself as an absurd abuse of rational faculties, and as a degradation of reason and capitulation to faith, and thus to irrationality. If we despise reason, scholasticism presents itself to us as a discipline entirely removed from reality, which is lost in fortuitous discussions such as that which has as its theme the sex of angels. But the problem with scholasticism was not this. Their problem with the sources and character of knowledge was not entirely theoretical. Scholasticism is not a theory of knowledge. It is, on the contrary, an eminently practical discipline, and its problems are others. They are ethical problems, and it is in the climate of ethics that scholasticism must be framed. For example, the assertion of the modern empiricists that nothing is in the intellect that has not been in the senses would be, for the scholastics, the affirmation of the diabolic origin of all knowledge. Our science, as a systematic processing of sense data, would therefore be a form of black magic. The point of view of scholasticism is as deforming of modern thought as is our point of view of the thinking of their scholars.

Scholasticism is not a theory of knowledge. It is a technique for the salvation of souls. Their problems are pedagogical and didactic, and as such they must be addressed. I want to discuss three of these problems. These problems

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have names. These names are: “tradition,” “universals,” and “truth.” We must take care that the modern meanings of these three terms do not invade our discussion so as not to deform them. The effort we must make is therefore negative. We must forget all the modern developments that have manipulated the three terms proposed, in order to give them new content.

The concept of tradition must be purged of all meanings that relate it to the modern concept of progress. One must forget that Hegelianism, Marxism, Darwinism, and modern technology exist. Only in this way can we begin to understand the meaning of the term “tradition” in its context. This is a difficult endeavor. At the bottom of our thinking we nurture an image of the world that resembles a plant. This plant grows and develops. The development of the plant is what we call “progress.” We must pull this plant out of the depths of our thinking. It must be replaced by the medieval image of the world, which resembles a waterfall. The world rushes toward the last judgment. In its fall the world drags our souls with it. But there is a second movement in this waterfall: the teachings of the Church. They are an extramundane and transcendent influence that modifies the course of the fall. They are a current in the waterfall, which has its source beyond the world. The source is the Divine revelation, and the current that flows from it in order to influence the world, is the tradition of the Church.

The problem of tradition lies in the following circumstance: its source is the revelation as received by the Jewish prophets and incarnated in the figure of Christ. It lies deposited in the sacred books of the Old and New Testaments. But the current of tradition has been infiltrated by elements that have a completely different origin. These elements are deposited in the books of

Aristotle and Plato, and although they are part of the tradition, they do not fit into it organically. Tradition is problematic and requires clarification. In fact, tradition is a movement in search of clarification. It is the search for the synthesis between the visions of the Jewish prophets and the speculations of the Greek philosophers. It may be likened to a screw, whose threads seek to penetrate in expanding spirals the mystery of the salvation of souls. Scholasticism is the screwdriver that twists the screw, and in this sense scholasticism is the key to paradise. Scholasticism as a technique for the propagation of tradition finds itself faced with secondary problems that hinder its advancement. The sacred books of the Jews are written in dense, poetic, and mysterious language: the Divine language. They need to be translated into the strict language of syllogisms, that is, into the language of human reason. The books of the Greek philosophers, and especially those of Aristotle, the philosopher “tout court,” contain dangerous passages, since they are not illuminated by divine revelation. These passages need to be purified. In addition, the sacred books are written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, languages whose knowledge has become inaccessible. The scholastics depend on translations made by Arabs and Jews, therefore, on infidels that infiltrate tradition with their errors. These mistakes need to be eradicated. In short, the duty of scholasticism lies in the clarification of the revelation, in the assimilation of Greek philosophy to this revelation, and in the purification of errors which have arisen from deceptive assimilations. In this sense scholasticism is the very core of tradition, and as such it is the ladder to heaven. The concept of tradition occupies, therefore, a place in medieval thought, which resembles the place occupied by the concept of progress in modern thought.

Conceived in this way, scholasticism is a paradoxically frustrated effort. It seeks to clarify the revelation, and adds to it in this attempt a multitude of comments which call for clarification. It tries to assimilate Greek thought to the revelation, and only succeeds in this effort to demonstrate the abyss that separates these two worlds. Scholasticism seeks to become a filter of tradition, whereby holy water is passed from truth to the crystalline well of God. In effect, scholasticism became a labyrinthine branching of contradictory theses, therefore, a marsh in which this holy water stagnates. The more the screw of tradition advanced, the fact that it took thought away from its sources became clearer. Scholasticism, far from being a stairway to heaven, led the soul into dangerous regions. Its search for the simplicity of truth has resulted in the sophisticated cleverness of the multiplicity of theses. A tragic sense of deep disenchantment involves the last stages of this gigantic effort. Scholasticism is one of the pillars on which the cathedral is based. The failure of scholasticism proved in fact a profound error in the plan for building the cathedral, a mistake that made the Middle Ages despair. The famous quarrel of universals is an early symptom of this despair. One must locate this quarrel in this context. To a mind informed by modern thought this seems to be a wholly abstract problem. It seems to be about the relation between particular names (which we would call “proper names”), and universal names (which we would call “class names”). This is a purely formal matter from the modern point of view. The fact that it assumes now a capital importance in philosophy, is proof of how we began to overcome the Modern Age. It is necessary to put the modern point of view in brackets if we are to grasp the spirit that propelled this argument. For the scholastics this is an existential decision between two alternatives, a decision that entails two different life projects. Are “universal” concepts such as gender, species, and



property “*ante res*,” “*in rebus*,” or “*post res*” (prior to things, within things, or after things)? This concerns the decision of where reality lies. This is the typically scholastic form of seeking God. Those who have decided in favor of the judgment that “universals come before things,” resolved to deny, in this decision, the autonomy of the world of things. Reality is prior to things. Reality is in God who is prior to things. The human mind participates in this reality because it houses universal names, which are messengers of reality. Those who have decided to work in favor of these messengers are therefore the realists.

But will not that decision be a sign of pride? How can we, minds imprisoned in bodies, glimpse that which is prior to things by virtue of mere names? No, this reality before things is unnamable, and universal names do not concern it. They are mere empty sounds, mere articulations of the mind, after things. Thus argue the humble Franciscans. For them it is impermissible, sinful, to want to penetrate the “metaphysical” realm through enlightened reason, as the realists want to do. It is sinful, and beyond that, a mistake of logic, an error. Thus it is necessary to make the courageous and humble decision of limiting the human mind. It is necessary to accept the terrible fact, the consequence of original sin, that reality appears in our minds only in the particular, and that the rest is “*flatus vocis*.” This limitation of ours cannot be broken intellectually. Only through naive and inarticulate faith in Christ can we free ourselves from original sin and enter into the realm of reality. This is, in short, the position of the nominalists.

The history books of philosophy teach that the nominalist position was victorious, and that the Modern Age is nominalist. Thus these books prove how modern they are. They perceive only the formal similarity that unites nomi-

nominalism and the modern position. They do not perceive the abyss that separates nominalism from the Modern Age, and do not perceive the foundation that joins nominalism and realism. The Modern Age is nominalist, in the sense of transferring faith to particular things. And this transfer results in the pulverization of faith, since things are only nominally real. It is in this sense that the Modern Age is nominalist. Faced with this position, the Franciscans are realists. They believe in a reality prior to things, and differ from Dominicans only in the question of the articulation of this reality. They live, as much as the realists, anchored in this reality. They are Christians, they are not “humanists.”

Nevertheless, the divergence between Franciscans and Dominicans is an open wound in medieval thought, which presages its death. It irreparably divides tradition, which is the method of salvation. Realism and nominalism are two irreconcilable ways of living. If life in the body is a school, how to go through it with two masters who contradict each other? Attempts to unify the two tendencies, however cunning, are desperate attempts.

From this point of view, Thomism and all the attempts to say that “universals are in things” are ultimately nothing but efforts to save the condemned. After all, the quarrel of universals is nothing more than the sign of a more fundamental illness: the failure of scholasticism to establish a saving tradition. By suppressing the symptom one does not cure the disease. Because they have to ask: which of the two is true? And the truth must be one, and only one, if the cathedral wants to continue pointing the way to heaven.

What is truth? In the context of medieval thought this question means: what is the way of salvation, and what is the technique to follow it? The question of truth is, therefore, eminently pragmatic. But it is again necessary to elimi-

nate from our mind the modern meanings of the terms “truth” and “praxis.” For the modern mind truth is a treasure that must be sought to be discovered.⁵ This resides in the progressive adequation of the intellect to the thing (this thing which is, for the moderns, the nominal seat of reality). Every step of this progressive adequation provides a partial truth, a sought-after treasure coin. Every currency is tested for validity because every currency is dubious. This test is what we call “praxis.” An important aspect of the concept of progress in the modern sense is precisely this accumulation of tested coins. But the tests are not definitive. Despite the test, every coin remains dubious. As dubious as the thing to which the currency is adequated is dubious. The inflation of the truth currency is a feature of the Modern Age. This Age has a huge and ever-increasing treasure of truths, which are devalued in a rampant way.

The situation of the Middle Ages is totally different. The treasury of truth is fully deposited in the cathedral, and the Church is the guardian of the key. The truth has been entrusted to the cathedral by God, and there is therefore no doubt as to its validity. The Church, guardian of the key, was in charge of the distribution of the treasure. The distribution of undoubted truth, is the medieval meaning of the term “praxis.” The problem is this: The treasure of truth, while deposited in the vault of the cathedral, had undoubted value. But, once put into circulation, it became doubtful, because many false coins circulated that imitated it. Scholasticism is, from this point of view, the institute charged

5 To adequate is to make equal, to equalize. Flusser uses the term “adequation” in reference to Saint Thomas Aquinas’s epistemological statement: “*veritas adequatio intellectus ad rem*” (truth is the equalization of intellect and thing), which Flusser expands upon throughout the book, and in his work as a whole, as the basis for contemporary epistemology. Therefore, I have chosen to use the English verb “to adequate” and its variations in order to keep a close resonance with Aquinas’ and Flusser’s use of the term. [T.N.]

with distinguishing between true and false coins. Its duty is to collect and destroy the counterfeit coins and discipline the circulation of the real coins.

The quarrel of the universals was existential proof of the institute's incompetence. In desperation, the nominalists proposed an emergency exit: the double truth. They argued as follows. There are three types of coins: gold, silver, and fake. Scholasticism is entirely capable of distinguishing between true coins and false ones. In this sense scholasticism works perfectly and is therefore pragmatically useful. But the realists confuse the silver coins with the gold coins. They believe that universals are gold coins, and believe that they are pure truth. But it is obvious, say the nominalists, that the realists are wrong. God granted the treasure of truth in double coinage: the gold coins of faith, and the silver coins of discursive reason. The gold coins buy eternal salvation. Silver coins are only to be exchanged for gold coins. A huge number of reason coins buys a tiny coin of faith. In this lies the value of silver coins. A smaller number of silver coins is worthless, since you cannot buy any gold coin. In this sense silver coins are a waste of time. The value of silver coins is proven at the time of their exchange for gold coins. The mistake of the realists is to waste their time on these lower coins. Theirs is a terrible mistake, because the time we have in the body is our only hope for an eternal life. Realists are sinful, not by accumulating falsehood, but by accumulating inferior truths. But this is not a less serious mistake. The concept of the double truth cannot, therefore, save an already lost situation.

All of this illustrates well the existential climate that reigned in the school, which was the pragmatic mood of wanting to force the salvation of the soul at all costs. This means the constant awareness of the danger of the soul's annihilation.

lation if the technique that the school teaches fails. And this technique fails, if it loses contact with the cathedral, which is its focus. The school is dominated by the constant fear of heresy. This fear explains why scholars are confined, intellectually, to a few postulates, and physically, to their dark and dusty classrooms. They seek to shelter themselves within the narrow walls of faith, and they know why they do it. They fear the wrath of the cathedral, though not in the unworthy sense that the modern spirit imputes to them. Many of them bravely faced the ray of anathema and the flames of the fire. What they fear, however, is the eternal fire of hell. It is in this sense that scholasticism is nothing more than apologia and a servant of the Church.

Scholasticism defends the Church, but not so much before men, as before God. And it serves the Church, not so much by intellectual and moral submission, but as a guide serves the guided. The school is a pragmatic activity, an experiential commitment, and is entirely authentic in this endeavor. Everything that presents itself to us as inauthentic, the arrogance of the arguments, the weaving of thoughts, the apparent submission, is framed in this supreme authenticity. The school is an authentic endeavor, but a failed endeavor. It is responsible, in part, for the ruin of the cathedral and its debris. In this sense the school is responsible, in part, for the Modern Age.

Thus, one of the pillars of the cathedral has been outlined, a pillar that for hundreds of years supported its nave and made its towers point to the sky. The fundamental error in its construction explains, in part, the fateful event that the Modern Age calls, with unjustified optimism, "Renaissance." It is necessary to contemplate a second pillar if we want to deepen our understanding of this event.



1.1.2. Alchemy



The street of the alchemists, like all the streets of the city, also ends at the Cathedral Square, but its traffic is ambivalent. There is a secret underground corridor, closed by hermetically sealed gates, and this corridor connects the street of the alchemists with the forest, beyond the walls of the city. This forest is inhabited by witches and the banished Greek and German gods. Only the initiate can dare to break the seal and penetrate the forest. This is an obscure world in which the Church collides with the temple and in which scholasticism embraces Orphism. This shock and this embrace, which has the pale light of the moon as a witness, is a struggle and a loving act. Even the alchemist himself cannot say who presides over this ambivalent and mysterious union, whether God or the Other. This libidinous encounter twists and turns, and in this retort, pure gold and the stone of wisdom are precipitated. In this no-man's land between faith and superstition, between organization and chaos, will arise the magical and danger-

ous power of modern science. The Church, as if inspired by prophetic premonition, protects the entrance to this land with the sword, and the exit with fire. The Church seems decidedly contrary to all these dubious and potentially sinful experiences. But this appearance deceives. The Church feels a strong attraction for these attempts to master the first element spiritually. The transmutation of vile metal into a precious and constant metal is but another aspect of the salvation of the soul imprisoned in the body. Both attempts are the result of the same mentality. The relationship between Church and magic is intimate and difficult to interpret. For the Church, magic is nothing but a borderline situation.

What takes place on the edge of the abyss is an extreme case of Christian life. But for magic, the Church is nothing more than a surface phenomenon, supported and nourished by the immemorial subterranean currents of magic. Magic is, therefore, from the point of view of the cathedral, the external and richly ornamented system of supports that sustains the nave. And from the point of view of magic, the cathedral is the central product, beautiful and admirable, but possibly fragile and ephemeral, of an age-old game of parallelisms of secret forces.

The formulas, the incantations, and the invocative gestures of the alchemists are, for scholasticism, confusing syllogisms. The syllogisms of scholasticism are, for the alchemists, dry, superficial, and inefficient formulas. But it is obvious that both these disciplines articulate the same spirit and pursue the same goal. Scholasticism has a narrower base because it distrusts alchemy's confused amplitude. It limits tradition to sacred books and to Greek philosophers. It seeks to continue and develop this tradition through clear and precise

comments. Alchemy springs from the millennial tradition of the East, whispered from ear to ear. It seeks to continue and develop this tradition through patient experience. But the tradition of scholasticism, the sacred books of the Jews, and the Greek thinkers are no more than a crystallized form of the tradition of alchemy. Scholasticism is the visible part of the tradition's iceberg, of which alchemy is the invisible part. The school halls and the monks' cells order, structure, and codify this tradition in a disciplined manner. The vaults and basements of the alchemists keep alive and booming the tradition, so that it may erupt in the explosive way we call the "Modern Age."

The origin of this secret tradition is lost in the penumbra of the times. It springs perhaps directly from the first element, from that breath that pervades every being, and which the magicians seek. This first element is asleep in the essence of all things. The alchemists are the princes who wake up this sleeping beauty. All things are the deceptive surface of this united and immutable first element. There is a fundamental union that connects all things. Things are nothing but ephemeral phenomena of this raw material. The magicians are radically materialistic, but they are as such more in the Democritical meaning of the term, than in the meaning that the eighteenth century ascribed. The matter of the alchemists is condensed spirit; spirit is rarefied matter. To speak with medieval nomenclature, the alchemists are the most radical realists, because they try to precipitate the "universals" experimentally. They try to demonstrate with their experiments that the "*universalia sunt ante rebus.*" It is, therefore, in this medieval context that the efforts of alchemy must be placed.

The attempt to experimentally demonstrate the "universals," to distill them and to precipitate them from things, and to penetrate the realm of con-

stancy and immortality, is the definition of alchemy. The “universal” which is designated by the term “metal,” for example, will not be found in the game of syllogisms to which the scholastics devote their time. But it will be found within “particular” metals, if it is sought with patience and with appropriate technique. Particular metals are metals because they participate in *metallicity*. And they are particular, because in them metallicity is repressed and suffocated. Particular metals are real as metals, and illusory as particular things. Reality lies in *metallicity*; illusion lies in particularity. There are highly illusory metals, for example, mercury and lead. They are illusory because *metallicity* is repressed in them. As a consequence, they are highly mutable and corruptible because they oxidize and are corroded by acids and bases. These metals are vile, and their villainy makes them especially apt to be subjected to the experiments of the alchemists. Vile and corrupt substances are most amenable to transmutative efforts. They can be purified. Lead and mercury can be transmuted into gold and silver. These are also particular metals. But metallicity prevails in them over particularity. These metals are full of *metallicity* and are therefore in proximity to reality. They are almost constant, and almost incorruptible. In this sense they are precious metals. The transmutation of lead into gold and mercury into silver is entirely possible because lead and mercury are no more than gold and silver disguised. You simply have to unmask them. We need to tear out the mask of particularity. It is necessary to free them from the illusion of mutability. In this liberating act, lead will be transmuted into gold. Gold is lead saved. The transmutation of lead into gold is the liberation of the “universal;” and is the destruction of the illusion of particularity. It is the overcoming of the corruption of the world. Alchemy is a saving discipline.



The concept of freedom is closely linked to that of reality. For the modern mind, which has lost touch with reality, this concept has become ambiguous. The American and French revolutions shifted this concept from its context, which is ontology. For alchemy, freedom (“power”) lies in the universal foundation prior to things. By stating that knowledge is power, Bacon reveals himself to be an immediate descendant of alchemy. He still nourishes the medieval concept of freedom, though already with a taste for modernity. The universal foundation which precedes things, and of which things are only superficial and mutable phenomena, is the destiny of things. This is their destiny in the triple meaning of the term. Destiny as in “goal,” because it is toward this foundation that things are directed. Destiny as in “necessity,” because destiny governs and informs the movements of things. And destiny as in “luck,” because happiness lies in destiny and the salvation of things. The experiential discovery of the foundation of things means the discovery of destiny. The discovery of destiny means, in a mysterious way, destiny subjugated: destiny as the instrument of the Will. The discovery of destiny means, therefore, paradoxically, freedom. Alchemists are the discoverers of destiny in search of freedom. It is in this liberating sense that they predict the future.

The universal foundation that precedes things pervades all things. Destiny can be discovered in all things. The transmutation of lead into gold is the discovery of the destiny of lead and is, in this sense, the liberation of lead. But given this universal foundation, this transmutation is, also, in a certain sense, the liberation of the human soul. Having discovered the destiny of lead, alchemy discovered an aspect of human destiny. Human destiny lies in all things, and it can be discovered within them. The study of things is the search for human destiny, and in this sense, the attempt to free the soul. This is not, therefore,

a humanist type of research. Man is not in a situation opposite to things. Man permeates things, man is within them, and they are within man. Things are not the object of man, but are his siblings, since they are united by the same destiny. By discovering this destiny man does not free himself from things, but frees himself in things and with things. He does not break free from lead, but frees himself in lead by liberating lead. Modern science is an opposing of man to things, and it is in this opposition that modern man manipulates things. Man is the “other” of things; he is alienated from them.

This is not the case with alchemy. For alchemy, things are filled by man, just as man is filled by things. Both are manifestations of the same foundation, of the same raw material. Both mean the same universality. They are symbols of the same reality. The world of alchemy is symbolic, and each particular thing symbolizes wholeness. To say that a thing is a symbol of wholeness is to say that the particular thing participates in universality. It is to say that a particular thing contains a portion of reality. That is why every thing is an enigma. Deciphering the puzzle is the duty of alchemy. This is the same as saying that its duty is to discover destiny, or to transmute vile matter into precious matter. This is why alchemy can be considered definitely overcome only at the end of the Modern Age, in the terrible Wittgensteinian phrase: “there is no enigma.” This is in some ways also the end of modern science.

All things are symbols of wholeness. All things can be deciphered and reveal destiny. It is by virtue of this symbolic character of things that the world is significant. Because it has lost its symbolic character, the world of today is absurd. Where there is no enigma, there is no meaning, and every activity becomes absurd. When the enigma disappeared, and destiny disappeared, free-

dom disappeared. But in a symbolic world all activity is significant. And every activity, if conducted by proper technique, will result in freedom. Alchemists are the activists of the Middle Ages, and their technique is the technique of freedom. Their study of things must be thus interpreted. It is in this spirit that they investigate the future. They do this with anything: the constellations, the palm of the hand, the bowels of animals, a crystal ball, and a deck of cards. All things symbolize wholeness, and, if deciphered, reveal the destiny of everything, including man. But it is obvious that the constellations, by their size and constancy, reside closer to reality. They are, therefore, the easiest phenomena to interpret. The stars represent the most comfortable field of penetration, and astrology is thus the most well developed discipline of alchemy. So developed, in effect, that it has become almost independent. But astrology never lost contact with the whole discipline. Metals “are” planets, planets “are” organs of the body, and the horoscope is a view of wholeness.

To see wholeness means to subjugate destiny to the human Will. It means, in the medieval sense, “to avoid destiny.” Herein lies the profound problem of alchemy. “Avoiding destiny,” what is this, other than to oppose the divine plan? What is freedom, therefore, if not sin “*tout court*”? The answer to this question divides alchemy into “white” and “black” magic. We must deeply grasp this terrible doubt that divides the whole Middle Ages. This is what explains the Church’s ambivalence about alchemy. The Church does not doubt the epistemological validity, but the ethical validity of this attempt. The Church does not doubt that, in theory, the judgments of alchemy are true, but it fears that they are, in theory, sinful. They are sinful precisely because they are true. And the alchemists themselves share the fears of the Church. They fear eternal fire. That is why they keep their technique a secret. That is why they keep

their books behind seven seals. They know how dangerous their knowledge is. This knowledge of the danger is common to all alchemists. Even those who have consciously resolved themselves in favor of total liberty, even the sorcerers dedicated to black magic, know the danger. Sorcerers are also Christians in this sense, and surround their know-how, their spell, with prohibitive rites. This is why a sorcerer's training is so arduous. This existential climate, the fruit of the fear of sin, is foreign to the modern mind. Our scientists, the late grandchildren of the alchemists, act with impunity and impudence in the light of the floodlights and at the mouths of ravenous microphones. Or at least they acted like this until very recently. They seem (or seemed) to ignore the feeling of sin. The alchemist hides himself, timid and fearful, in the dark corner of his attic, and in the magic circle of his rites. He knows the danger and is therefore the bravest. In this corner and in this circle he struggles to decide in favor of "white" magic or "black" magic.

This problem concerns the devil. To understand the problem, one must frame the devil in the context of alchemy. Ontologically, the devil is that side of things by which they do not participate in the universality of the raw material. The devil is the illusory and deceptive aspect of things. The devil is therefore responsible for the mutability and lability of things. In a few words: the devil is the particularity of things, or (speaking with Schopenhauer), he is the "*principium individuationis*." Historically, the devil is the set of all gods defeated and banished, but not destroyed, by Christianity. There is a relation between the ontological aspect and the historical aspect of the devil. Christianity is the revelation of "truth," in the sense of being the revelation of the foundation of things. Pre-Christian gods are immanent to things, and do not transcend the world of things. They were thus revealed, by Christianity, as the devil. The

devil is, therefore, what makes things “vile” in the alchemist meaning of the term. Lead, when transmuted into gold, from “vile metal” to “precious metal,” becomes “*eo ipso*” liberated from the clutches of the devil. And herein lies the problem.

Mutable things are alchemy’s field of action. Alchemy works in mutability, in the movement of things. The field of alchemy is therefore the field of the devil. At the very foundation of alchemy lies the existential decision to comply with the devil. In this respect, “black” magic is not distinguishable from “white.” This distinction lies in the intent of the covenant. Theoretically, this is an easy distinction. If I make a pact with the devil with the intention of overcoming him, that is, with the intention of forcing him to collaborate with me in the salvation of the world, I make white magic. If I make a pact with the devil with the intention of dominating the world of appearances, that is, if I surrender my immortal soul in exchange for the apparent world, I make black magic. But even in formulating this theoretical distinction, difficulties arise, and all concern the authenticity of white magic. “White” magic is an inauthentic existential situation and full of preconceptions. It recommends a “make-believe” as a pact with the devil. White magic assumes the superiority of my abilities over those of the devil, to the point of presuming that I can deceive him. But this presumption is denied by the very role it attributes to the devil, namely the role of emperor of the apparent world. In the end, “white” magic claims that it seeks the power to sacrifice him. White magic seeks freedom to be able to serve God better. This is an existentially unsustainable position. It leads, almost automatically, to a usually unnoticed sliding by the magician into “black” magic. Although it is theoretically easy to distinguish between the two



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appear before you is perfect white. Pale white and made in the
The woman's head blue in gold. These shall
The man's head blue in gold. These shall
The woman's head blue in gold. These shall
The man's head blue in gold. These shall
The woman's head blue in gold. These shall
The man's head blue in gold. These shall

forms of magic, this distinction is existentially very hard, and the last one that the alchemist makes.

Let us illuminate this difficulty from another point of view. The alchemist is, as has already been said, the activist of the Middle Ages, and is therefore the one who has the obligation to confront the devil. Alchemy is the frontline between the Middle Ages and the devil. Whoever resolves in favor of alchemy, is resolved in the defense of the Church. The resolution in favor of alchemy is the resolution in favor of “white” magic. This is, initially, a valid and honest existential decision. Thus committed, the alchemist faces the devil. This confrontation results in the discovery of forces and powers hitherto unknown. This gives the alchemist the sensation of freedom. Power corrupts and freedom inebriates. Little by little, and imperceptibly, the alchemist is carried away by the diabolical forces he intended to combat, and changes, imperceptibly, to another front. He does not sell his soul in a clear and sudden gesture, but he surrenders his soul gradually, in exchange for parcels of freedom. This phenomenon of the imperceptible sliding and the gradual front-shift, we can now see in detectives, who gradually become criminals, and psychiatrists, who gradually become mad. It is obvious that the detective, when accused of crime, will deny the fact. So too the alchemist, when accused of black magic, will deny sin, though he may confess the acts that are imputed to him. But there is no doubt that the Church’s accusation is valid, because the authentic alchemist chose, without perhaps knowing it, freedom, and therefore deserves to be burned alive. This is the only possibility left to save his soul.

The surreptitious front-shift, which is the transition from “white” to “black” magic, is an ontological change, which results in a transmutation of values.

Initially alchemy is a technique of salvation that acts in the field of illusion to overcome it. The values all lie beyond this field. There is no intrinsic value to the transmutation of lead into gold, but the value of this experience lies in demonstrating the illusion of particularity. In the last stage, alchemy becomes the technique of freedom that acts in the field of appearances to govern it. All values lie now in this field. The value of the transformation from lead to gold is in the gold. Initially alchemy is the attempt to discover destiny, in the sense of discovering the Divine Will, with the purpose of better submitting to it. In its last stage alchemy is the attempt to discover destiny for the purpose of disarming it. The very manipulation and observation of things is responsible for this change. Things, when manipulated, and when observed as things, become opaque. And the more obedient they are, the more opaque they become. They absorb all existential interest, and empty the interest in the universal foundation. They trap the mind of the alchemist, and suck, with their invisible trunks, his soul. This is black magic: the transformation of the world into obedient things, which suck the soul and conceal the view of reality. This is the abyss toward which all alchemy slides inexorably. The devil, initially the “succubus” to be possessed by the alchemist, becomes the “incubus” possessing the alchemist. Possessed by the devil, alchemy rushes into the abyss of freedom, this abyss called the “Modern Age,” and drags the Middle Ages with it in its fall. Alchemy stops bearing the cathedral, and precipitates the cathedral’s ruin.

From the point of view of the cathedral, “black” magic is a terrible heresy. It means, in effect, a return to paganism. Black magic is a return to that dark age, which did not yet know the light of truth. This is why this magic is called “black.” But for us moderns, black magic is one of the few links that united the Middle Ages to the classical ages, which appear to us as having been enlight-

ened. For moderns, the Middle Ages presents itself as a barrier separating our age from classical civilizations, and “black” magic as one of the few threads that cross the barrier. But this modern view can be described in other words. The Middle Ages is the majestic mountain range that separates the classical and modern arid plains, and black magic is one of the narrow passages, or one of the secret tunnels, that allow transit between the ages.

But the sorcerers and the witches themselves agreed with the view of the Church, not with ours. They did not see themselves, in their awareness of their situation, as being the followers of the classical period, nor, much less, as precursors. They did not nourish our concept of progress. If we sympathize with sorcerers and witches, because we believe we see our ancestors in them, we commit an anachronism. They are entirely medieval existences, and their problematic and values are medieval. They climbed up to the bonfires, not because they disregarded, classically, the superstition that surrounded them, nor because they strove, modernly, for the progress of mankind: instead, they climbed the bonfires out of passion for the devil. They have nothing of an Apostate Julian, who died for the glory of Antiquity, nor of Giordano Bruno, who died for the glory of the future. They died for the glory of the devil. How can we explain this passion, and how can we feel its taste and enthusiasm? By demodernizing sorcerers and witches.

The freedom that alchemy seeks is sin. “White” magic pretends to seek sin in order to avoid it. White magic is like those ladies who read pornography books to censor them and prevent others from reading those books. “Black” magic seeks the voluptuousness of sin. It hides its secrets, not to sterilize them, but because they are love secrets. Black magic gives itself to the devil passionately,

lovingly, passively, and patiently. There is a feminine element of surrender in black magic. Death at the stake is only the last moment, the orgasmic moment of this surrender. The magician sleeps with Evil; he embraces sin. In this embrace he whispers his incantations and his formulas with a voice choked with voluptuousness; they are the secrets of love. His rites and his experiences are loving gestures. All his activity is a loving activity, and black magic is a single "*coitus ininterruptus*." Hence the seemingly monotonous repetition of experiences and gestures. Hence the apparent patience of the alchemists. Black magic is the patience of passion, and the monotony and mechanicity of the act of love. This libidinous character of "black" magic pervades a steady and intoxicating scent in every medieval environment and explains the climate of exaltation that reigns around the bonfires. This is the opposite, but corresponding, climate of the Mass. Black magic is a phenomenon of Catholicism. It is an integral part of the faith that has the cathedral as focus. Black magic is the shadow that the flames of faith project on the wall of the mind. While denying the reality of Christian faith, "black" magic affirms this faith by denying it. It participates, fundamentally, in the same reality.

One of the theses of this book will be that modern science is a mutation of "black" magic. It is, therefore, important at this stage of the argument, to point out that these two disciplines are distinguished. Magic does not represent, as science does, a distance from things. Magic has no theoretical aspect, like science, but is an applied technique. Magic does not manipulate things, like science, in order to annihilate them, but to transform them. The main difference lies in the existential climate that surrounds the two disciplines. The climate of science is methodical doubt, the climate of magic is violent passion. The color of science is gray, the color of magic is red.

The division of magic into “white” and “black” makes this discipline ambivalent. The traffic of the alchemists’ street points to the Cathedral Square, but also the extramural regions of Antiquity and the Modern Age. This dichotomy is as pernicious as the division of scholasticism into realism and nominalism. The cathedral, which relies on alchemy, cannot deal with the vibration of this column. And the orthodox prohibition on penetrating the secrets of alchemy renders the rift irreparable. The germ of death hides, throughout the Middle Ages, in this wound. This explains, in part, the Renaissance.

Modern thought harbors a negative notion of freedom as the absence of obstacles. Human freedom as the opposite of human bondage. The free man is he who ceased to be a servant. The negativity of this notion is becoming obvious as the process of liberation progresses. The total abolition of servitude by technology has already become imaginable. Absolute freedom has already become imaginable in the modern meaning of the term. It will be the total absence of obstacles. Man will be completely unimpeded. Nothing will prevent action, and nothing will be able to encourage it. Absolute freedom will be inactivity. The possibility of choice will result in the refusal to choose. The modern notion of freedom is a self-destructive notion. It results in the boredom that characterizes every total realization of modern notions. The attempt to reformulate the notion of freedom by existential thought is a symptom of the overcoming of the Modern Age. The concept of “engagement” as positively valued servitude allows a more adequate appreciation of the medieval concept of freedom.



Adapted from: "P1010555." 2008. Image by Elizabeth Oliver.

1.1.3. Accolade



The third column of the cathedral that I intend to sketch in this paragraph is, to use a medieval term, the “secular arm of the Church.” This column is the pyramid of servitudes and services that rests upon the wide base of servants that culminates in the Holy Roman Emperor. It must be understood that, for medieval thought, these servitudes and services represented active human freedom. Man is set free by serving. The modern dichotomy “freedom/servitude” is unthinkable in this context. The opposite of medieval freedom is the chaos of temptations that annihilate the soul. Human freedom lies in the possibility of refusing sin. Opting for sin, which is the other face of freedom, paradoxically results in the loss of freedom. This dramatic problem, which is hidden in the medieval notion of freedom, has already been slightly discussed when we talked about black magic. The feudal pyramid tries to solve this problematic experience. It relegates the formulation of the problem to scholasticism, and abandons the disturbing aspects of choice and decision to alchemy. It hopes to impose freedom

by the discipline of the sword. The feudal system is a violent imposition of freedom. This seems contradictory to modern thinking. However, the experience of freedom that the manifestations of medieval life evidence, denies the apparent contradiction. I chose, somewhat arbitrarily, chivalry for the attempt to evoke the feudal system. Chivalry will therefore be considered an example of imposed freedom.

The secular arm of the Church: there is, in this expression, a dialectical tension that the Middle Ages could never satisfactorily synthesize. If I say "Middle Ages," I have in mind Latin Christendom. The Orthodox East does not know the Latin division between the secular and the intemporal, between "State" and "Church." For Greek Christendom, Empire and Church are confused. The very transference of the Byzantine Empire to Moscow does not affect the intimate union between the social and the sacred. The State is the secular aspect of the Church, the Church the sacral aspect of the State. Through his participation in feudal society, the Orthodox Christian automatically takes his place in the ecclesiastical whole, in the mystical body of Christ. He is a member of Christ, by being a member of society. The layers of the feudal pyramid are the articulations of the Church. Every office is sacred, and every Christian, from the servant to the patriarch and the emperor, is an organ of the Church. There is, therefore, in orthodox society, a strict distinction between knight and monk. The Monastic Order and the Order of Chivalry are disciplined organizations of the Church in its struggle against heresy. The knight's and monk's vows of obedience are manifestations of the same commitment to freedom for service, and are distinguished only by their radicality. The monk is a maximalist knight. The knight, underneath the armor, wears an invisible sable, and the

monk, above the habit, an invisible armor. They are both the elite of Christendom, because, in choosing to serve, they have chosen freedom.

This orthodox reality is, for Latin Christendom, an ideal never attained. The history of the Middle Ages can be described as an attempt to unite secularity and spirituality. The Renaissance would be, from this point of view, the abandonment of the attempt. The attempt failed in many ways. The Bishop of Rome failed to impose his authority on the Holy Roman Emperor. The Emperor failed to subdue all the kings of Latin Christendom. Emperor and kings constantly influenced the business of the Church, and did so for secular reasons. The Bishop of Rome was, besides Pope, also a secular king, and, as such, theoretically subject to the Roman Emperor. Bishops and Arabs were secular feudal lords, and some among them were electors of the Roman Emperor. The division between State and Church was not clear, but neither did it tend toward a fusion of these two aspects of Christianity. On the contrary, the fragmentation of the two forces contributed to the proliferation of the struggle. The son of the sinful promiscuity between Pope and Emperor is the knight.

Freedom is a choice of commitment. The knight knelt and subjected himself to being sword-struck at the shoulders and at the neck. The vows of obedience and the humiliation of the blows made him free. The feudal lord, before whom the knight prostrated himself in the accolade, was only a representative of the order, and the latter was only a representative of God. Chivalry means humble and disciplined submission to God. The knight's life is an engagement in the service of God. Because it is a life of service, it is a free life. But as the position of the order is ambivalent, as it oscillates between the secular and the spiritual, the activity of the knight is also ambivalent. Ambivalence character-

izes all manifestations of chivalric life. I will evoke three of these manifestations, to illustrate the profound rupture that problematizes all of them. I will call the three manifestations “lady,” “journey,” and “crusade.”

“Benedicta tu in mulieribus”: if we wanted to choose a currency for the Middle Ages, it would possibly be this. The most beautiful cathedrals are dedicated to Our Lady. She represents the human ideal. She is the perfect human, because she is full of grace. The cult of Mary is the equivalent of modern humanism. The knight who serves the lady is the equivalent of the humanist of the Renaissance. The lady is the symbol of human perfection, because she is the symbol of Mary. The lady symbolically represents Mary, as the feudal lord symbolically represents God. But the lady is closer to us, precisely because she symbolizes what is human. The knight puts the colors of the lady on his shield. She is his banner in the struggle for a perfect humanity. The relationship between the knight and the humanitarian ideal is a loving relationship. The knight “loves the lady.” The lady’s love, however, is a mental manifestation entirely different from what the moderns call “love,” whose notion was widely diffused by Romanticism and later marketed by the cinema. The love for the lady, if it is a feeling, is a religious feeling. And if it is a feeling, it is a highly intellectualized feeling. We should not try to interpret this love from a modern point of view. Like the syllogisms of scholasticism, the songs of love of chivalry are intellectual and disciplined articulations of faith and born of the same mentality. If they present themselves to us as being inauthentic and deliberate, it is because we are incapable of feeling the knight’s commitment. We have a romantic notion of art. The knight is religiously engaged. His art is religiously engaged art. Love songs are engaged art. They are the artistic method for attaining grace. Through the song of love the knight seeks to reach the one

who is full of grace. The song of love is the chivalrous form of prayer. It is the equivalent of scholasticism in the field of art.

Although it is a prayer, there is in the song, however, a random moment and a ludic moment that the term "*trova*" invokes. The love song is a playful form of prayer. The multiplicity of rhymes, the richness of rhythms and accents, the multiple and dubious meanings of the terms employed, are all findings (*trovas*) of the playful intellect. They are secular elements in the sacredness of the song. The love for the lady is a standardized sacral love. The lady is a symbol of Mary, but she is also a woman of flesh and bone. And precisely because she is a woman, the lady is a foothold for the devil. Woman is temptation itself, therefore the most palpable danger to chivalrous commitment. By serving the lady, the knight is calling the flesh. The beauty of chivalric poetry lies in the desperate attempt to separate "sacred" and profane love. This is an effort parallel to that of the scholastics in separating the two truths. And in a way it is parallel to the problem of white and black magic. The unresolved dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular is at bottom a problem of ontology. The devil resorts to the illusion of the senses (the desired woman). Knightly art is an ambivalent manifestation. And consequently the chivalrous commitment is an ambivalent one.

The medieval existential project is a masculine project. Woman exists only for man, while for him, she is either the symbol of human perfection or the vessel of sin. As for herself, the woman does not exist. In Portuguese literature there is the phenomenon of "friend's songs." They are apparently sung by women. In reality, however, these songs are yet another manifestation of the ludic element in chivalric art. They are sung by men who pretend to be



women. Knightly love fixes the ambivalent position of women in Western civilization. The Modern Age modifies the climate of this region, but does not alter its structure. Romantic love, which is the standard for the relationship between the sexes in the Modern Age, and which is equally unknown in the Middle Ages as in antiquity, is a revaluation of profane love because it sacralizes the flesh according to a major trend in the Modern Age. But the woman continues to exist, even in the Modern Age, only for man. In this, the emancipation of women changes nothing. This means only a “liberation of women” in the modern meaning of the term. This only allows women to participate in civilization as a man. Emancipation does not allow the woman to be a lady for herself, it only allows her to be a knight.

Knightly art as engaged art demonstrates the ambivalence of this endeavor, and its commitment to the cathedral, but equally its commitment to the court. And the more courtly the art becomes, the more it tends toward heresy. The trend toward courtliness, of which Provençal art is a characteristic example, is interpreted by some as a sort of pre-Renaissance. This is a mistake. Courtliness is not an abandonment of the medieval project for life, because the court is not something that opposes the cathedral to destroy it. On the contrary, the court seeks to fit into the cathedral, but seeks to do so in its own way. This is why the Emperor goes to Canossa Castle. The courtly commitment of the knight is therefore also a form of religious commitment. When he courts the lady, he secularizes his commitment, but he does so within a religious whole. The ambivalence between secular and spiritual, between Emperor and Pope, between being courtly and worshipping, are the internal ambivalences of religiosity in the medieval meaning of that term. It is for being courtly that the knight is medieval, though he tends, in being courtly, toward heresy. And this

is one aspect of the tragedy of chivalry. The inherent tendency of chivalry to courtliness, “the “ghibelline” tendency, to use a medieval term,” is as responsible for its decadence as gunpowder is, or perhaps even more so.

The knight walks. This is radically different from the scholar and the alchemist. Walking and wandering (and adventure and wonder, which are the goals of wandering), represent the aspect of knighthood that the term “*cheval*” suggests. The Middle Ages as a Catholic era is the very time of travel. It is a cosmopolitan time in which intense traffic unites the cities of Latin Christendom. Roads and travelers guarantee the catholicity of cities. Apprentices and scholars, pilgrims and monks, gamblers and merchants are a continuous stream that links cities to internationalism (to use a modern term), never to be realized since. The cathedrals themselves are the product of this internationalism. They are the focus point not only of their city, but of the whole of Christendom.

These journeys that connect cities are dangerous. Cities are islands of organization in a chaotic ocean of badly conquered pagan barbarism. Bandits and robbers, wolves and dragons, evil spirits and diabolical trappings threaten travelers. This is why they travel in groups and hurried to reach the protective walls of the cities. The knight travels alone, only accompanied by the squire. He travels in search of danger. In search of adventure, of the lady who is the muse of chivalric poetry. It is precisely by seeking adventure that the knight is the “secular arm” of the Church. He looks for adventure in order to defeat it. His feat is the extension of the Christian city into paganism. His journey is the Romanization of German barbarism and Moorish infidelity through this feat. By being a Romanizer, the knight’s commitment is in favor of “romance.”

The story of the wandering knight is, at bottom, the wonderful story of the Church's struggle with the devil. The story is the secular pact of this struggle, and the field of struggle is the chaos beyond the walls of the city. Scholasticism is the intramural aspect of this struggle. Alchemy is this struggle inside the actual walls. This is why scholastics and alchemists are sedentary, and the knight a wanderer. The knight is the epic aspect of the Church, and therein lies its secularity. The two virtues of chivalry are the weapons of this kind of struggle: obedience and courage. The knight is connected to the Church through obedience, therefore, he is free. With courage, he faces the devil. The synthesis of the two virtues is the double-edged sword of the knight. This is an unattainable synthesis, and in this the ambivalence of what chivalry is reappears. "*Mut zeigt auch der Mameluck, Gehorsam ist des Christen Schmuck.*"⁶ The synthesis is unattainable because the adventure is wonderful. Let us consider wonder for a moment.

Faith is the ability to grasp reality, because faith produces miracles. The miracle is the window through which the mind glimpses reality behind the illusory world of the senses. The sacred scriptures do not, at bottom, report miracles, and this is why they are accounts of reality. Saints are *vates* of reality, because they produce miracles. The knight finds no miracles in his wanderings: he finds wonders. The wonderful beings and wonderful situations that the knight finds are not beings and situations of reality. The ontological terrain on which the wanderings of chivalry occur is the terrain of the story. To believe in wonders is not faith, but creed. This does not mean that wonders are not "true." The Middle Ages believe in them. But it is not through faith

⁶ "The mamluk also has courage, obedience is what adorns the Christian." Schiller, F. "Der Kampf mit dem Drachen," published in 1798 in *Musen Almanach für das Jahr 1799*. [T.N.]

that it believes in them. Wonders are age-old miracles. They belong to a dubious ontological layer. All chivalrous activity occurs in this dubious layer. We must, to understand the dubiousness of chivalry, free the term “doubt” from its Cartesian meaning. Medieval doubt is the method by which the intellect contemplates all that is not based on traditional and disciplined faith. Doubt is therefore synonymous with suspicion. Wonder is a suspicious miracle. The feat of the knight is a suspicious activity. Adventure is suspicious experience. Chivalry is, as a whole, from the point of view of faith, a suspicious discipline. In wonder we face, in fact, the dilemma of the “double truth” of scholasticism in its chivalrous form. The dragons that the knight kills, the maidens he “liberates” (i.e., Romanizes), and the treasures he conquers are “second truth” dragons, maidens, and treasures. Therefore, the knights are not comparable to the discoverers and conquerors of the Renaissance. These have transferred their faith to the land of wonders, and have abandoned the land of miracles. For them, adventure is the very experience of reality. And if the wondrous is doubtful, it is because everything is dubious to the modern mindset, except doubt itself. The “reality” of the Renaissance is no longer as real as medieval reality, and the Renaissance lies precisely in the emptying of reality. The knight-errant ignores Cartesian doubt. He does not doubt the miracle, but doubts the wonders he finds. He doubts them, that is, he does not know if they “really” exist. This is why Don Quixote is a modern vision of chivalry. The knight-errant is not quixotic because he doubts himself. And he doubts himself, precisely because he does not doubt the religion in which he is engaged. Don Quixote does not doubt the windmills, precisely because he doubts everything. He is “Idealist;” he participates in modern madness.



The doubt which the knight-errant feels for himself hangs, like a constant aroma, above chivalry as a whole. The sword is suspect. When he returns from his wanderings the knight leaves his sword at the door of the cathedral before confessing. The Renaissance can be conceived as the despair of the knight before the doubt that torments him. He dives into the adventure because he cannot achieve the peace of the Church. And this torture becomes unbearable, when the journey demands a goal from all the wanderings: the Holy Sepulcher.

The modern mind seeks in vain to comprehend the phenomenon of the crusades, by applying modern categories to it. Let us try to locate this phenomenon in its context. A supernatural light emanated from the Holy Land and illuminated the hearts of the knights. Chivalry is an ecclesiastical discipline, because it is dedicated to the demand of this mysterious light. And it is a secular discipline, because that light can be located within the world of the senses, namely in Palestine. Palestine, and more especially Mount Calvary near Jerusalem, is the point at which the natural world opens a rift toward the transcendent. An invisible umbilical cord unites the world of nature with the world of reality, and this umbilical cord flows into the Holy Land. It is there, therefore, that all the wanderings of the knight are directed. It is there that his soul will be saved. Having forgotten earthly possessions, severed the bonds of love and friendship, disregarded social responsibilities, the knight rides his horse to embark on the unimaginably long journey to the Holy Land. He leaves the smiling hills of France, the green meadows of Anglia, the fragrant woods of Tuscany, the shady forests of Saxony, the delightful streams of Bohemia, bound for the warm sands of Judea.

When he reaches, having defeated innumerable dangers, the inhospitable and enemy mountain range, where once the Cross was raised to redeem humanity from its sins, the knight dismounts and kisses the ground, “weeping with joy.” The knight’s commitment had as its ultimate goal to feel the holy ground of the Holy Land under his feet and hooves of his horse. And this was the death, for which the chivalrous life was no more than a disciplined preparation: to die in the conquest of the Holy Land occupied by the Saracen infidels.

Crusades are the journeys of chivalry in search of reality. In search of the reality of faith, which scholasticism seeks to find through syllogisms, and alchemy through the transmutation of villainy. For chivalry, the secular arm of the Church, reality lies behind the hills of Palestine. The Saracens are the wall that obstructs the way to reality. The two edges of the knightly sword, discipline the courage, can and should gird the wall and open the secular path that calls for grace. The sword is an instrument of salvation, as is logic and as are the retorts. In effect, the sword obeys the same structural rules that also govern alchemical logic and experiments. They are the rules of the tournament. Every movement of the sword, spear, and shield, every movement of the horse, and every movement of the chivalrous army, is a sacral and festive ritual informed by disciplined rules designed to conquer reality. The tournament is an initiation feast for the conquest of the Holy Land. The wars between Christian princes, whatever their secular reasons, are, from a higher point of view, tournaments. They are governed, too, by the sacral rules of chivalry. They are pedagogical preparations for the conquest of the Holy Land. The rules that inform the sword also inform the lute. Trovas and stories mirror the rules of the tournament. Indeed, chivalric art is a form of tournament. The quarrels

among the troubadours prove it. Art, too, is a preparation for the conquest of the Holy Sepulcher. That is why it is engaged art.

The life of the knight is the demand for the transcendent. It is the search for reality by the sword. To speak scholastically: chivalry seeks to liberate the universal by encircling the particular called "Palestine" by sword. This is the true meaning of the term "free Jerusalem." The crusades are therefore realistic enterprises in the medieval meaning of the term. "*Universalis sunt realia*" is the invisible motto in the crusader's shield. The political history of the Middle Ages is a sacred history, in the sense of being the quest for the heavenly Jerusalem. The polis that the Middle Ages seeks to achieve is the *civitas Dei*. And for the knight this perfect society hangs above the earthly Jerusalem. Modernizing the terms, we can say that this prevailing political tendency is a kind of transcendent Zionism.

But the conquest of the Holy Land reveals, even before it was accomplished, the ambivalence of chivalrous commitment. It reveals that Palestine is but a piece of land.

It reveals that "*universalis sunt flatus vocis.*" The transformation of chivalry into nominalism makes the conquest of Palestine unattractive. Jerusalem is left to the Turks with an indifference that contrasts violently with the fervor of the crusades. This indifference becomes understandable in the present context. The knight doubts his sword. He does not doubt, of course, the heavenly Jerusalem, but he doubts that it can be won by the sword. The crusades did not result in the miracle of the transubstantiation of the earthly Jerusalem. They only resulted in wondrous adventures. They did not bring the salvation of the soul and the kingdom of God on Earth, but only spices and the wonderful tales

of a thousand and one night. They became lost in secularity. Let the Turks stay, therefore, with Palestine. Wondrous adventures can be found elsewhere. In the land of gold-digging ants, in the kingdom of Prester John, or in Atlantis, for example. For a time there still hangs over these pleasant places the overly transparent spectrum of the Eldorado, a sad remnant of a lost endeavor. The journeys of the early Renaissance still seek, problematically, a universal already emptied of saving faith. But these journeys are no longer chivalrous. Chivalry has died.

Chivalry died because it failed in its quest to conquer reality by the sword. And it failed because it was, at its very core, divided against itself. Chivalry sought to define the illusory world of the senses by the sword, and was swallowed up by this world. And the cathedral could not survive the death of chivalry. However dubious the relationship between the cross and the sword was, the sword was still the anchor by which the cross lay in the world of the senses. The death of chivalry turned the lady into a languidly coveted lover. It turned the wondrous adventure into doubtfully triumphant discovery. It transformed the crusade into the conquest of promising, but not promised, exotic lands. And it turned the cathedral into a phenomenon progressively pushed to the periphery of human interest. The backdrop was raised for that comedy of art called “Renaissance” that was gradually transformed into that tragedy of abstract art called “contemporary times.”

The contemplation of three of the pillars of the cathedral ruthlessly plucked us from our ironic position on the airplane that seeks the airport. This contemplation placed us, confused dwarfs and susceptible to doubt, in the gigantic nave of the abandoned cathedral. The columns around us are powerful

and force our gaze upwards. With beautiful wisdom and with the balance of mysterious forces, the pillars join their hands above our heads, and they form pointed arcs that point the way to heaven. In the forest of these disciplined giants we hold our breath, so as not to disturb the silent and precious balance. We suspect what would happen, and we know what happened, when the columns let go of their hands to close them in a fist. A slight rumble, barely noticed in the ship, foreshadows the brutal tumult of its ruin. The balance of the mysterious forces that sustain the ship is fragile. When broken, the edifice of saving faith will crumble. They will fall, just as the walls of the cathedral fell, and the stained glass windows will shatter as if they have been torn apart. The white, everyday light of distinct clarity will flood, as it flooded, the desolate ship. We will be turned, in this ontic catastrophe, as we were turned, to face the vast world that now surrounds us. We will be projected by this catastrophe, as we were projected, into the cold space of discursive doubt. This is the project of progress.



1.1.4. Cathedral



The catastrophe that marked the end of the *Middle Ages* was not experienced as such by the generations who witnessed it. It went unnoticed, and when consummated, came to be glorified as deliverance from a dark prison, a liberation already in the modern meaning of the term. The glorification of the Renaissance is a well-known reaction in psychology. This discipline calls it “overcompensation.” We are still, as moderns, victims of this glorifying overcompensation. But this is a superficial attitude that does not withstand a detached analysis. The consideration of the Renaissance scene, which is one of the programs of this work, will reveal how deceptive the surface of this apparently smiling era is. What I want to discuss in the present context is the curious fact that Latin Christendom has not perceived the deep censorship that separates the *Middle Ages* from the Modern. I say “Latin Christianity,” because the Orthodox one suffered a shock too violent to be ignored: the fall of Constantinople. How, then, can one explain that for the generations of the 15th century humanity seems imperceptibly to

slip into a new kind of consciousness? That the change, which the present work interprets as a total ontological upheaval, as the end of a reality, appears to those who have witnessed it as a gradual modification of established forms of life? So gradual, in fact, that it is difficult to distinguish, from the Renaissance point of view, between the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance? How can this blindness be explained?

The three columns of the cathedral we considered, the school, alchemy, and chivalry, vibrated during the Late Middle Ages with an inner tension which we tried to characterize with the terms “double truth,” “white and black magic,” and “Secularity of the Church.” This vibration rocked the nave of the cathedral and caused a feeling of dizziness. When the pillars collapsed and the snow fell, a dizzy humanity experienced an even more violent swaying of the shipwreck. Humanity was then thrown into the abyss of the Modern Age in a semi-conscious state. It did not realize what was happening. Humanity believed the columns still remained intact, albeit modified. The humanists’ philological studies and their moralizing essays seemed to be modified scholasticism, although these were in reality an abandonment of the task of scholasticism, which was the education for eternal life. Astronomical and mechanical research looked like modified alchemy, although in reality they meant the abandonment of the true task of alchemy, which was the discovery of the first element. The exploits of the discoverers, the conquerors, and the condottieri seemed like modified chivalry, though they were in reality the abandonment of chivalry’s task, which was the conquest of the heavenly Jerusalem. The complete change in the direction of all efforts was not noticed. It was humanity’s gaze that had strayed surreptitiously. This gaze was fixed throughout the Middle Ages upon a concentric point, symbolized by the tip of the tower of the cathedral: God. All



efforts were concentric, that is, significant. Now humanity's gaze had become vague. It wandered, curious and inquisitive at the beginning of the Modern Age, and tired and disillusioned at the end of that age, in the infinity of the third dimension that opened, suddenly, around humanity. All efforts now had an eccentric, that is, insignificant tendency. What had been lost in the unnoticed catastrophe was the center of gravity. The violent expansion that is the Modern Age, and which is called "progress," is a consequence of the loss of the center of gravity. This explosive centrifugal force now dominates. The term "centrifugal" characterizes the whole Modern Age: it is an escape from a lost center. The lost center is the place formerly occupied by the cathedral, but now vacant. The Modern Age is a time of "vacant seat," or "*Kaiserlose, Schreckliche Zeit*," a time without Emperor, a terrible time. In fact, the Modern Age is the Manichaeian epoch of nothingness.

The Renaissance still remained grouped around and in the vicinity of that lost center. The center was already vacant, but as humanity turned its back, it did not perceive this vacancy. We, the late generation of the Modern Age, far from the center and lost in the space of meaninglessness, have a different view of the decisive catastrophe. The naive enthusiasm with which the 15th century rushed toward what we know to be the abyss is, from our point of view, only the mask of ungoverned flight. The clear light of day then invigorated the minds accustomed, for centuries, to the semi-darkness of the ship. We, exposed for centuries to the inclement rays of everyday life and blinded by them, can only feel nostalgia for that lost naiveté. Leaving the mold of the school and the dampness of the alchemist kitchen, the minds of the Renaissance filled their lungs with the fresh air of open spaces. We, exposed for hundreds of years to the barrenness of this air, and dried up by the desert winds that blow in the

open spaces, can only feel longing for that lost enthusiasm. We are, from a modern point of view, decadent and tired. But, from a medieval point of view, the situation in which we stand may be judged differently. Perhaps our time, from this point of view, will be judged as a pre-Renaissance?

The cathedral collapsed, and together with it, the center of gravity. The expansion that followed was an escape from the center. This expansion is called, in its first phase, "Renaissance." What was reborn? Strictly speaking: nothing. Escape is a form of inauthenticity, and all its manifestations are marked by inauthenticity. The term "Renaissance" is also thus marked. The term "Renaissance" is a pose. Pose, mask, representation, and make believe, will be a constant theme of the new age that begins. The Renaissance pretends that with it Antiquity is born again. And Antiquity is, for the Renaissance, a short and well-defined time. It is characterized by the terms "Rome" and "Hellas," if these terms are taken with restricted meaning. The Renaissance pretends that it finds its sources within these terms. In reality, however, the modern mindset is an entirely new phenomenon. It is, in fact, a Christian phenomenon, namely, alienated Christianity. But there is a core of truth in the term "Renaissance." In its alienation, the modern mentality establishes contact with an ancient current, of which "Rome" and "Hellas" are only superficial and easy examples. In its flight from Christianity the modern mindset becomes in touch with the East.

About the Author

The philosopher Vilém Flusser was born in Prague in 1920, but emigrated to São Paulo, Brazil, at the outbreak of war in 1939. He and his wife moved back to Europe in the early 1970s, settling first in Italy, and subsequently in Robion, France, where they lived until Vilém Flusser's untimely death in a car crash in 1991. During the years he lived in Brazil, Flusser wrote for several periodicals and taught at different academic institutions, among them, the University of São Paulo, the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy, and the Institute of Technology and Aeronautics. He is best known today as a pioneer of media theory or media philosophy, having written several books on the way our tools and techniques affect our thoughts, gestures, and relationships to historical time. As a polyglot, Flusser wrote in four different languages: German, Portuguese, English, and French.



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