

The Gods Of The Underworld, Umberto Eco

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The Sacred Is Not Just a Fashion

In 1938, coming from the pleasant town of Smallville, there arrived in the city of Metropolis Clark Kent, alias Superman; and by now everybody knows everything about him. But even in those far-off days of neotechnological capitalism, when in Chicago they were compiling the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science and considered the propositions of the metaphysical philosophers meaningless, there was nothing mysterious about Superman. The boy's ability to fly like a plane and lift ocean liners as if they were twigs could be scientifically explained. He came from Krypton, where, as is well known, gravity is different, and so it was normal for him to have superpowers. Even his extraordinary memory derived from the fact that, again thanks to gravity, he developed better than other boys his age a talent for speed reading, which for that matter was already being taught in the universities.

There was nothing mystical about the Superman of history.

As we enter the 1980's, the movie Superman is quite a different matter. First of all, it is no accident that he should have an onerous father like Marlon Brando, whose story takes up almost half the film, or that his father should impart to the child about to leave for Earth a knowledge of which we know nothing, concretized in stalagmites of diamond, a material about as symbolic as anything imaginable. Or that he should give his son a highly trinitarian viaticum, put him in a spacecraft in the form of a cradle, which navigates through space like the comet of the Magi. Or that the adult Superman, possessed by ill-tempered voices like a Joan of Arc in skirts, should have problems worthy of the Mount of Olives and Tabor-like visions. He is the Son of Man.

So Clark Kent would arrive on Earth to fulfill the hopes of a generation that enjoys Tolkien's Silmarillion and deciphers a theogony that obliges them to memorize the children of Ilúvatar and the Quendi and the Atani and the flowery meadows of Valinor and the wounds of Melkor: all things that, if they had had to be studied in school, would have driven the same generation to occupy the university or high school in protest against notionism.

So the reincarnation of Superman would seem to be the pop version of a series of more complex and profound phenomena that apparently reveal a trend: the return to religious thought. All Islamic countries are returning to a theocratic view of social and political life, masses of American lemmings rush towards suicide in the name of an unearthly happiness, neomillenarian and glossolalic movements invade the Italian provinces, Catholic Action is on the rise, the prestige of the papal throne is renewed.

And along with these manifestations of "positive" religiosity there is the new religiosity of the ex-atheists, disappointed revolutionaries who fall on the traditional classics, astrologers, mystics, macrobioticians,

visionary poets, the neo-fantastic (sociological science fiction no more, but new Arthurian cycles), and finally not the texts of Marx and Lenin but dark works by the unfashionable great, dejected Mitteleuropeans perhaps, suicides unquestionably, who never published anything in their lifetime, who managed to concoct only one manuscript and that not complete, long misunderstood because they wrote in the language of some minority, all a hand-to-hand struggle with the mystery of death and of evil, writers who felt only profound contempt for human efforts and the modern world.

On the basis of these elements, these undeniable trends, the mass media, however, seem to concoct a scenario that repeats the pattern suggested by Feuerbach to explain the birth of religion. Man somehow feels he is infinite, or rather that he is capable of desiring in an unlimited fashion; he desires everything, we might say. But he realizes that he is incapable of achieving what he desires, and therefore he must prefigure an Other (who possesses to an optimum degree what he most desires), to whom he delegates the job of bridging the gap between what is desired and what can be done.

In other words, the mass media indicate the symptoms of a crisis in the optimistic ideologies of progress: both the positivistic technological, which wanted to build a better world with the help of science, and the materialistic-historical, which wanted to build a perfect society through revolution. On the other hand, the media tend to mythicize the fact that these two crises (which in many ways are the same) are translated into politico-social, economic terms, such as reassertion of law and order, or in other words, conservative restraint (compare Fellini's parable of the orchestra conductor). The mass media expound the same problem through other allegories and underline the phenomena of the return to religiosity. In this sense, while they seem to act as thermometer, reporting a rise in temperature, they are actually part of the fuel that keeps the furnace going.

In fact, it is a bit ingenuous to speak of a return of institutional religious forms. They had never disappeared. Take certain young Catholics' associations: In a climate of public opinion where everyone was talking about the complete Marxification of the young, it was most difficult for non Marxists to assert themselves as an organized force with a certain appeal. Similarly the success of the new Pope's paternal image looks more like the spontaneous process of reinforcement of images of authority at a time of institutional crisis than like a new religious phenomenon. After all, believers continue to believe, and nonbelievers adapt and become Christian Democrats if the Christian Democrats offer a steady job in Town Hall, but flirt with the "historic compromise" if it looks like the Communist Party can get them a job in the regional government.

But in discussing these phenomena it is important to distinguish between institutional religion and the sense of the sacred. A recent book edited by Franco Ferrarrotti, *Forme del sacro in un'epoca di crisi* (Forms of the Sacred in a Period of Crisis), again brings up this important distinction: the fact that frequenting the sacraments was becoming less popular never meant that the sense of the sacred was threatened. The forms of personal religiosity, which became concrete in the post-Vatican II movements, marked the very decade in which the newspapers were making people believe that society had become entirely secular.

And the neomillennarian movements have grown steadily in both Americas and develop strikingly today in Italy for reasons involving the clash between

advanced industrial society and disadvantaged proletariat. Finally, a role is played in this story of the sacred also by atheist neomillennarianism, that is to say terrorism, which repeats in violent forms a mystical scenario, requiring suffering testimony, martyrdom, purifying bloodbath. In a word, all these phenomena are real, but they are not part of the script, now fashionable, of the new post-68' traditionalism. At most they cover, when they are made picturesquely evident, the truly new facts that concern instead conservative political action.

The theme of the recourse to the sacred becomes interesting, in my view, when it refers to a certain atheist sacrality not presented as the answer of traditional religious thought (to the disappointment of the left), but rather as the autonomous product of a crisis in secular thinking. This phenomenon also, however, is not something recent, and its roots must be sought in the past. The interesting thing is that it follows, in atheistic forms, the modes that typified religious thought.

The fact is that the ideas of God that have peopled human history belong to two types. On the one hand there is a personal God who is the fullness of being ("I am he who is") and therefore sums up in himself all the virtues mankind does not have, and he is the God of omnipotence and victory, the Lord of Hosts. But this same God is often shown in an opposite way: as he who is not. Not because he cannot be named, not because he cannot be described with any of the categories we use to designate the things that are. This God who is not passes through the very history of Christianity: He hides himself, is ineffable, can be drawn upon only through negative theology, is the sum of what cannot be said of him; in speaking of him we celebrate our ignorance and he is named at most as vortex, abyss, desert, solitude, silence, absence.

This is the God that the sense of the sacred feeds upon, ignoring the institutionalized churches, as Rudolf Otto described it more than fifty years ago in his famous *Das Heilige* (The Idea of the Holy). The sacred appears to us as "numen," as "tremendum," it is the sense that there is something not produced by man and towards which the human being feels at once attraction and repulsion. It produces a sense of terror, an irresistible fascination, a feeling of inferiority and a desire for expiation and suffering. In the historical religions this confused sentiment has taken the form, in turn, of divinities more or less terrifying. But in the secular universe it has assumed, for at least a hundred years, other forms. The awesome and the fascinating no longer wear the anthropomorphic guise of the most perfect being but take on that of a Void in whose regard our aspirations are doomed to defeat.

A religiosity of the Unconscious, of the Vortex, of the Lack of Center, of Difference, of the béance has spread through modern thought as the subterranean counterpoint to the uncertainty of the nineteenth-century ideology of progress and the cyclic play of economic crisis. This secularized and infinitely absent God has accompanied contemporary thought under various names, and burst forth in the renaissance of psychoanalysis, in the rediscovery of Nietzsche and Heidegger, in the new antimetaphysics of Absence and Difference. During the period of political optimism a sharp break was created between these ways of conceiving the sacred, that is to say the unknowable, and the ideologies of political omnipotence: With the crisis both of Marxist optimism and that of liberal optimism this religiosity of the void in which we are steeped has invaded even the thought of the so-called Left.

But if this is the case, then the return to the sacred long preceded the orphan syndrome of the disillusioned, who were becoming paranoid because they discovered that the Chinese were neither infallible nor totally good. The "betrayal" by the Chinese, if anything, gave the final (very exterior) blow to those who for some time had been feeling that beneath the world of rational truths proposed by science (both capitalist and proletarian) there were hidden rifts, black holes. But these same people lacked the strength to conduct a lucid, skeptical criticism, with a sense of humor and irreverence towards the authorities.

In the coming years it will be worthwhile to ponder these new negative theologies, the liturgies they inspire, their effect on revolutionary thought. And to see to what extent they, too, remain susceptible to the criticism of Feuerbach, for one thing. In other words, to see if through these cultural phenomena a new Middle Ages is to take shape, a time of secular mystics, more inclined to monastic withdrawal than to civic participation. We should see how much, as antidote or as antistrophe, the old techniques of reason may apply, the arts of the Trivium, logic, dialectic, rhetoric. As we suspect that anyone who goes on stubbornly practicing them will be accused of impiety.

1979

The Suicides of the Temple

The strangest thing about the story of the People's Temple suicides is the media reaction, both in America and in Europe. Their reaction is: "Inconceivable, an inconceivable event." In other words, it seems inconceivable that a person long considered respectable, like Jim Jones (all those who knew him over these past years, who contributed to his charitable activities or exploited him for garnering votes, have unanimously defined him as an altruistic preacher, a fascinating personality, a convinced integrationist, a good democrat, or as we Italians would say, an "antifascist"), could then go mad, turn into a bloodthirsty autocrat, a kind of Bokassa who stole the savings of his faithful followers, used drugs, indulged in the most promiscuous sex, hetero and homo, and commended the slaughter of those who attempted to escape his rule.

It seems incredible that so many nice people followed him blindly, and to the point of suicide. It seems incredible that a neo-Christian sect, gentle, mysticalcommunist in its inspiration, should end up transformed into a gang of killers, driving its escapees to seek police protection against the menace of murder. It seems incredible that respectable pensioners, students, blacks eager for social integration, should abandon beautiful, pleasant California, all green lawns and spring breezes, to go and bury themselves in the equatorial jungle, teeming with piranhas and poisonous snakes. It is incredible that the families of the brainwashed young could not make the government intervene strongly, and that only at the end poor Congressman Ryan started an inquiry, which cost him his life. All, all incredible, in other words, unheard of, what's the world coming to, what next?

We remain stunned not by Jim Jones but by the unconscious hypocrisy of "normal" people. Normal people try desperately to repress a reality that has been before their eyes for at least two thousand years. For the story of the People's Temple is old, a matter of flux and reflux, of eternal returns. Refusal to remember these things leads us then to see in terrorist phenomena the hand of the CIA or the Czechs. If only evil really did come always from across the border. The trouble is that it

comes not from horizontal distances but from vertical. Certain answers, that is, must be sought from Freud and Lacan, not from the secret services.

What's more, American politicians and journalists didn't even have to go and read the sacred texts on the history of millenarian sects or the classics of psychoanalysis. The story of the People's Temple is told in one of the latest books of that sly operator Harold Robbins (sly because he always concocts his novels with bits of reality, whether it's the story of Hefner or Porfirio Rubirosa or some Arab magnate). The book in question is *Dreams Die First*. There is the Reverend Sam (who happens to bear a very close resemblance to the Reverend Sun Myung Moon), who has founded a laboratory to which the young initiates bring all their money; he then invests it in shrewd financial speculations. Sam preaches peace and harmony, introduces his young people to the most complete sexual promiscuity, sets up a mystical retreat in the jungle, where he imposes rigid discipline, initiation through drugs, with torture and persecution for those attempting escape, until finally the borderlines between worship, criminality, and rites à la Manson family become very faint. This is the Robbins novel. But Robbins invents nothing, not even at the level of fictional translation of real-life events.

Some decades ahead of him, in *The Dain Curse*, the great Dashiell

Hammett portrays a Holy Grail cult, naturally set in California—where else?—which begins by enrolling rich members and taking their money: The cult is not at all violent, even if the initiations (here, too) involve drugs and sleight of hand (among other things, the staging recalls that of the Eleusinian mysteries). The prophet, according to Hammett, was an impressive man: When he looked at you, you felt all confused. Then he went crazy and believed he could do and achieve anything. . . . He dreamed of convincing the whole world of his divinity. . . . He was a madman who would see no limit to his power.

You can almost think you are hearing the interviews published during the past few days in the *New York Times*: He was a wonderfully sweet and kind person, a magnetic personality, he made you feel you belonged to a community. And the lawyer Mark Lane tries to clarify how Jones was seized with paranoia, by thirst for absolute power. And if we now reread the book, *The Family*, that Ed Sanders wrote about Charles Manson's California cult and its degeneration, we find everything already there.

So why do these things happen, and why in California? The second half of the question is fairly ingenuous. There are certain reasons why California is specially fertile in producing cults, but the basic scenario is far older. In brief, Jones's cult, the People's Temple, had all the characteristics of the millenarian movements throughout Western history from the first centuries of Christianity down to the present. (And I speak only of these because there would be no room to talk about Jewish millenarianism or analagous cults in the Orient, or various corybantisms in the classical age, or similar manifestations on the African continent, found, unchanged, today in Brazil.)

The Christian series probably begins in the third century A.D. with the extreme wing of the Donatists, the Circoncellions, who went around armed with clubs, attacking the imperial troops, assassinating their sworn enemies, those loyal to the Church of Rome. They blinded their theological adversaries with mixtures of lime and vinegar; thirsting for martyrdom, they would stop wayfarers and threaten death if they refused to martyr them; they organized sumptuous funeral banquets and then killed

themselves by jumping off cliffs. In the wake of the various interpretations of the Apocalypse, tense with expectation of the millennium, the various medieval movements arose, the fraticelli and the apostolics of Gherardo Segarelli, from which was born the revolt of Fra Dolcino, the brothers of the free spirit, the swindlers suspected of satanism, the various Catharist groups who sometimes committed suicide by starving themselves (the "endura").

In the twelfth century, Tanchelm, endowed with impressive charisma, had his followers give him all their wealth and he scoured Flanders; Eudes de l'Etoile dragged his followers through the forests of Brittany until they all ended on the pyre; during the Crusades the bands of Tafurs, all hairy and dirty, took to sacking, cannibalism, the massacre of the Jews; insuperable in battle, these Tafurs were feared by the Saracens; later the sixteenth century Revolutionary of the Upper Rhine fiercely pursued the massacre of ecclesiastics; in the thirteenth century flagellant movements spread (the Crucifers, Brothers of the Cross, the secret Flagellants of Thuringia), moving from one village to another, lashing themselves until they bled. The Reformation period witnessed the mystical communism of the city of Munster, where followers of Thomas Münzer, under John of Leyden, set up a theocratic state, sustained by violence and persecution.

Believers had to renounce all worldly goods, were forced into sexual promiscuity, while the leader increasingly assumed divine and imperial attributes, and any recalcitrants were locked in church for days and days until they were all prostrate, bowing before the will of the prophet; then finally everything was purified in an immense massacre in which all the faithful lost their lives.

It could be observed that suicide is not the rule in all these movements, but violent death—bloodbath, destruction on the pyre—certainly is. And it is easy to understand why the theme of suicide (for that matter present among the Circoncellions) seems to become popular only today; the reason is that for those past movements the desire for martyrdom, death, and purification was satisfied by the authorities in power. You have only to read a masterpiece of our Italian medieval literature, the story of Fra Michele the Minorite, to see how the promise of the stake had a sure, uplifting fascination for the martyr, who could moreover hold others responsible for that death which he nevertheless so ardently desired. Naturally in today's California, where even a mass murderer like Manson lives quietly in prison and applies for parole, where, in other words, authority refuses to administer death, the desire for martyrdom must take on more active forms:

Do it yourself, in short.

The historical parallels are endless (the eighteenth-century camisards, for example, the Cevenne prophets in the seventeenth, the Convulsionarians of San Medardo, down to the various Shakers, Pentecostals, and Glossolalics now invading Italy and in many places absorbed into the Catholic Church). But if you simply compare the characteristics of the Jim Jones cult with a synthetic model of the various millenarian cults (overlooking the various differences) you will find some constant elements. The cult is born in a moment of crisis (spiritual, social, economic), attracting on the one hand the truly poor and on the other some "rich" with a self-punishing syndrome; it announces the end of the world and the coming of the Antichrist (Jones expected a fascist coup d'état and nuclear holocaust). It starts with a program of common ownership of property and convinces the initiates that they are the elect.

As such they become more at home with their bodies, and after a strict phase they progress to practices of extreme sexual freedom. The leader, endowed with charisma, subjects everyone to his own psychological power and, for the common good, exploits both the material donations and the willingness of the faithful to be mystically possessed. Not infrequently drugs or forms of self-hypnosis are employed to create a psychological cohesion for the group. The leader proceeds through successive stages of divinization. The group goes from self-flagellation to violence against the unfaithful and then to violence against themselves, in their desire for martyrdom. On the one hand, a persecution delirium rages, and on the other the group's oddness actually unleashes genuine persecution, which accuses the group of crimes it hasn't even committed.

In Jones's case, the liberal attitude of American society drove him to invent a plot (the congressman coming to destroy them) and then the self-destructive occasion. Obviously, the theme of the flight through the forest is also present. In other words the church of the People's Temple is only one of many examples of a revival of the millenarian cults in which at the end (after a start justified by situations of social crisis, pauperism, injustice, protest against authority and the immorality of the times), the elect are overwhelmed by the temptation, gnostic in origin, which asserts that to free themselves from the rule of the angels, lords of the cosmos, they have to pass through all the forms of perversion and cross the swamp of evil.

So then, why today? Why in the United States to such an extent, why in California? If millenarianism is born out of social insecurity and explodes in moments of historical crisis, in other countries it can take on socially positive forms (revolution, conquest, struggle against the tyrant, even nonviolent pursuit of martyrdom, as for the early Christians; and in all these cases it is supported by solid theory, which allows the social justification of one's own sacrifice); or it can imitate the historically positive forms, while rejecting social justification (as happens with the Red Brigades).

In America, where there is now no central object against which to join battle as there was during the war in Vietnam, where the society allows even aliens to receive unemployment compensation, but where loneliness and the mechanization of life drive people to drugs or to talking to themselves in the street, the search for the alternative cult becomes frantic. California is a paradise cut off from the world, where all is allowed and all is inspired by an obligatory model of "happiness" (there isn't even the filth of New York or Detroit; you are condemned to be happy). Any promise of community life, of a "new deal," of regeneration is therefore good.

It can come through jogging, satanic cults, new Christianities. The threat of the "fault" which will one day tear California from the mainland and cast her adrift exerts a mythical pressure on minds made unstable by all the artificiality. Why not Jones and the good death he promises?

The truth is that, in this sense, there is no difference between the destructive madness of the Khmers, who wipe out the populations of cities and create a mystical republic of revolutionaries dedicated to death, and the destructive madness of someone who contributes a hundred thousand dollars to the prophet. America takes a negative view of Chinese austerity, of the sense of permanent campaign among the Cubans, the sinister madness of the Cambodians. But then when it finds itself facing

the appearance of the same desire for millenarian renewal, and sees it distorted in the asocial form of mass suicide, it cannot understand that the promise to reach Saturn one day is not enough. And so it says something "inconceivable" has happened.

1978

Whose Side Are the Orixà On?

This evening, in São Paulo, some friends are taking me to the city's extreme outskirts, in the direction of the international airport. About an hour by car, to the Afro-Brazilian rites. We come to a big building rather high up above an expanse of poor houses, not quite a favela: The favela is farther on, you can glimpse the faint lights in the distance. The building is wellmade, it looks like a parish hall. It's a terreiro, or house, or tent of Candomble. A tourist, or even a Brazilian who has never visited it (and there are many, the majority, at least from the middle class upwards), would start talking excitedly of macumba. We introduce ourselves; an old black man purifies us with some incense. On entering, I expect to find a hall like certain Umbanda tents I have already visited, a triumph of religious kitsch, complicated by syncretistic forbearance: altars crammed with statues of the Sacred Heart, the Madonna, native Indian gods, red devils of the sort seen only in the productions of Lindsay Kemp. Instead, this hall has an almost Protestant severity, with few decorations.

At the end, the benches for the noninitiate worshipers; to the side, beside the drummers; platform, the sumptuous seats for the Ogà. The Ogà are people of some social standing, often intellectuals, who are not necessarily believers, but in any case respect the cult; they are assigned the honorary function of advisers and guarantors of the house, and they are selected on the indication of a higher divinity. The great novelist Jorge Amado occupies such a position in a terreiro of Bahia, selected by Iansà, a Nigerian deity, mistress of war and of the winds. The French ethnologist Roger Bastide, who studied these cults, was chosen by decree of Oxossi, a Yoruban deity, patron of hunters. On the side opposite the drums are the seats for guests, where we are shown by the pai-desanto, the Babalorixà, the equivalent (more or less) of the pastor of this church. An impressive, white-haired mestizo, of great dignity. He knows who his guests are; he makes some shrewd remarks about the risk that these rationalist intellectuals may commit the sin of disbelief.

But in this church that can welcome so generously the African gods and the Christian pantheon, tolerance is the rule; this place is the very essence of syncretism. In fact, on the rear wall I see three images that amaze me: the polychrome statue of a naked Indio wearing a feather crown, and another statue of an old black slave dressed in white, seated, smoking a pipe. I recognize them: They are a caboclo and a preto velho, spirits of those who have crossed over, who play an important role in the Umbanda rites, but not in the Candomblé, which establishes relations only with the higher divinities, the Orixà of African mythology. What are these two doing here, on either side of the great Crucifix?

The pai-de-santo explains to me that it is a tribute: The Candomblé doesn't "use" them, but would never think of denying their presence and their power.

It is the same thing with the Exù. In the Umbanda he is often seen as a devil (they sell little metal statues of him, with very long horns and tail, and the trident; or statues of wood or colored terra-cotta,

enormous, repulsively kitsch, like the lascivious devil in a Folies Bergère spectacle); the Candomblé doesn't consider him a devil, but a sort of median spirit, a degenerate Mercury, messenger of higher spirits, in good as in evil. It doesn't honor him, doesn't await his possession, but at the beginning of the rite the pai-de-santo will hasten to purify the room with an enormous cigar (waved rather like a thurible), asking the Exu politely, in fact, to keep out and not to disturb the ceremony. As if to say: Jesus and the devil aren't our thing, but it's best to maintain a good-neighborly relationship.

What does the Candomblé honor? The Orixá, the higher divinities of the African religions, the Nago-Yoruba of Sudan, or the Bantu Angolan and Congolese, those that came with the first slaves to Brazil and never afterwards abandoned them. The great Olo-gun, father of all the gods, who is not depicted, and also Oxalá, whom popular syncretism identifies with Jesus Christ and, in particular, with Our Lord of Bonfim, worshiped in Bahia. And then the others, of whom more below.

As I find myself talking with an obviously cultured pai-de-santo, I immediately ask him some awkward questions, making it clear that my curiosity is of a theological and philosophical nature. Are these Orixá persons, for example, or forces? Natural forces, the priest explains, cosmic vibrations, water, wind, leaves, rainbow. Then why are their statues seen everywhere, and why are they identified with Saint George or Saint Sebastian? The pai-de-santo smiles, then goes on to speak to me of the deep roots of this cult, to be discerned also in Judaism, and in even more ancient religions; he tells me that the Candomblé accepts the Mosaic law, and he smiles again when I mention the rites of black magic, the notorious macumba, which is, in fact, the maleficent variation of the Candomblé and in the Umbanda rite becomes the Quimbanda, where the Exu and his mate, the lascivious Pomba-Gira, possess human bodies in trance—the rites, in other words, that are performed also before soccer games, where roosters are killed so that the members of the opposing team will fall ill or die.

He smiles like a theologian of the Gregorian University asked to express an opinion about the miracle of San Gennaro or weeping statues of the Madonna. He will say nothing against popular belief, but nothing in its favor, either. He smiles; the populace is what it is. But what about the Umbanda then? A recent cult, born in the 1930's, combining African religions, Catholicism, occultism, and Allan Kardec spiritualism: a product of French positivism. People who believe in reincarnation, where the initiates in trance are possessed by spirits (and by pretos velhos and caboclos) and then start prophesying and giving advice to the faithful. The Umbanda is the conservative, spiritualist version of the Afro-Brazilian rite, and has firmly asserted that it respects with absolute devotion the established order. Whereas the Candomblé (the pai-de-santo doesn't tell me this, but I know it) originated in the black slaves' search for their own cultural identity; it is an act of revolt, or rather of proud, voluntary ghettoization, religious and cultural, and in fact it was long persecuted; in Pernambuco they tell of a police chief who as late as the '30's collected the severed ears and hands of those damned fetishists he arrested.

The story of the development of the various cults is confused (there is a library of hundreds of volumes); I am not trying here to clear up an obscure chapter of Brazilian ethnology: I am only listing some suspicions. The Rui Barbosa law of 1888 (a law considered golden) abolishes slavery but does not confer a "regenerated" social status on the slave. Indeed, in 1890, in a weak attempt to abolish slavery as a

stigma, all the archives of the slave trade are ordered burned. A hypocritical move, because it prevents the slaves from ever reconstructing their history, their origin; they become formally free, but with no past.

So it is easy to understand why, towards the end of the last century, the cults become official, intensify, emerge into the open; in the absence of family "roots," the blacks try to regain their cultural identity by means of religion. And yet it is curious that in a period of positivism, inflamed by European spiritualistic theories, it is the white intellectuals who influence the black people's cults, causing them gradually to absorb the principles of nineteenth-century spiritualism. These phenomena occurred also in European history; when forms of revolutionary millenarianism existed, the action of the official churches tended always to transform them into phenomena of more learned millenarianism, based on hope and not on violence. Thus we might think that the Candomblé rites remain as nuclei of "hard" millenarianism in the midst of the more edulcorated Umbanda rites. But I cannot talk about this with the pai-desanto.

I will receive my answer, an ambiguous one, when I come out into the garden to visit the houses of the divinities.

While a swarm of girls, most of them black, in ritual Bahian dress, comes gaily crowding in for the final preparations, a gentleman all in white, from cap to shoes, because it is the month of Oxalá, symbolized by this color, welcomes us and shows us around, speaking Italian. By now he speaks it badly; he came here from Italy after the war (always regard with suspicion those who arrived here immediately after the war; in fact he speaks about his adventures as a soldier in East Africa and about Marshal Graziani).

He's had many ups and downs, tried all the religions, and now found peace: "If they were to tell me that the world is going to end right here [he points his finger in front of himself], I would shift only a bit in the other direction." The Orixá's houses, arranged around the vast garden like the chapels of some Holy Mountain in Italy, display on the outside the image of the Catholic saint syncretized with his Orixá counterpart. The interiors are a symphony of crude and violent colors, provided by the flowers, the statues, by the hues of the recently cooked foods offered to the gods: white for Oxalá, blue and pink for Yemanjá, red and white for Xangó, yellow and gold for Ogùn, and so on.

Only the initiated can enter; otherwise you kneel, kiss the threshold, touching your forehead and the back of your ear with one hand. But then, I ask, is Yemanjá, goddess of waters and/or procreation, Our Lady of the Conception or not? And is or is not Xangó Saint Jerome? And why did I see Ogùn syncretized as Saint Anthony in Bahia and as Saint George in Rio, whereas here Saint George appears, radiant in his blue and green cloak, ready to spear the dragon, in the house of Oxossi? I think I know the answer, because it was given to me years ago by the sacristan of a Catholic church in Bahia: You know how ingenuous the poor are, he said; to make them pray to Saint George you have to tell them he's the same as Oxossi. But now my guide gives me the opposite reply: You know how the poor are; to make them acknowledge the reality and power of Oxossi you have to let them believe he's Saint George. No doubt about it: The Candomblé is an old and wise religion.

But now the rite is beginning. The pai-de-santo performs his propitiatory fumigations, the drums begin their obsessive rhythm, while a

cantor intones the pontos, ritual strophes which are sung in chorus by the initiated. The initiated are mostly women; the filha-de-santo is the trained medium who during the dance will be visited by an Orixà. For some time there have been also male initiates, but the medium's gift seems a privilege reserved for women. A few weeks later, in Bahia, I visited a terreiro four hundred years old, where I was received by the mae-de-santo or Ialorixà, venerable and grave as an abbess; women of this land have always dominated the cultural and social life of Salvador, capital of Bahia; and writers like Jorge Amado speak of them with affection and deference.

Here some of the women are white. They point out a blonde to me: a German psychologist; she dances rhythmically, her blank eyes staring into space. Slowly she begins to sweat, in the eager hope of going into a trance. She does not succeed, to the very end; she is not yet ripe for the embrace of the gods. When all the other daughters of the saint are off in ecstasy, I see her still wriggling at the back, almost weeping, distraught, trying to lose control, following the music of the atabaques, the sacred drums that have the power to summon the Orixà. And meanwhile, one by one, many of the initiated make the physical and mystical leap; you see them suddenly stiffen, their eyes glazed, their movements automatic. Depending on which Orixà visits them, their movements celebrate his nature and powers: soft gestures of the hands, waved, palms down, at the sides, as if swimming, for those possessed by Yemanjá; slow bent movements, those of Oxalà, and so on (in the Umbanda, when the Exu arrives, the possessed move in nervous, evil jerks). Those who have received Oxalà will be covered with special veils, because their fortune has been great and exceptional.

In our party there is a fifteen-year-old European girl with her parents. They told her beforehand that if she wanted to come she would have to follow everything with close attention and respect, but with detachment, exchanging opinions with the others, not allowing herself to become involved. For if Pythagoras was right, music can make us do what it wants; on other occasions I have seen visiting nonbelievers, particularly susceptible, fall into a trance like ripe fruit. Now the girl is sweating; she feels nausea, wants to go outside. There she is immediately joined by the Italian in white, who speaks to her parents and says to leave her in the house for a few weeks; the girl clearly has mediumistic qualities, she has reacted positively to Ogùn, she must be cultivated. The girl wants to leave; her parents are frightened. She has grazed the mystery of the strange relationships between the body, the forces of nature, and the techniques of casting spells. Now she is embarrassed, believes she was the victim of a fraud: When she goes back to school she will learn about Dionysiac rites and perhaps never realize that for a moment she, too, was a maenad.

The rite is over, we take our leave of the pai-de-santo. I ask him which Orixà's son I am. He looks into my eyes, examines the palms of my hands, and says: "Oxalà." I tease one of my friends, who is the son merely of Xangô.

Two days later, in Rio, other friends take me to another Candomble terreiro. This is in a poorer neighborhood, the faith is on a more popular level. The house in São Paulo seemed a Protestant church, but this one seems a Mediterranean shrine. The costumes are more African. Those visited by Oxalà will receive at the end some splendid masks that I thought existed only in the comics of Tim Tyler; they are great trappings of straw, which sheath the whole body. It is a procession of vegetal ghosts, whom the celebrants lead by the hand,

like blind men, groping in their catatonic movements, dictated by the god.

Here the comida dos santos, the ritual foods offered to the Orixà, are excellent Bahian cuisine, displayed outdoors on great leaves, like immense corbeilles of tribal delicacies; and at the end of the rite we, too, are to eat them. The pai-de-santo is an odd sort, dressed like Orson Welles as Cagliostro, with a young face of a rather flaccid beauty (he is white and blond); he smiles with priestly affection at the faithful, who kiss his hands. With few movements, a suburban John Travolta, he signals the start of the various phases of the dancing. Later he will abandon his vestments and reappear in jeans, to suggest a faster pace for the drums, a freer movement for the initiate about to go into trance. He allows us to witness only the beginning and the end; he apparently doesn't want us present when the initiates go into trance, which is always the most violent moment. Is it out of respect for us, or for the faithful? He takes us into his house, offers us a supper of fejoada.

On the wall there are strange, brightly colored pictures, somewhere between Indian and Chinese, with surreal subjects, like those seen in America in the magazines of pseudo-Oriental underground groups. The pictures are his; he is a painter. We talk about ethics and theology. He doesn't have the theological severity of the other evening's pai-de-santo; his religiosity is more indulgent, pragmatic. He denies that good and evil exist: All is good. I say to him: "But if he [I nod towards my friend] wants to kill me and comes to ask your advice, you surely must tell him that it is evil to kill me!" "I don't know," he replies, with a vague smile, "maybe for him it's a good thing, I don't know. I will explain to him only that it is better not to kill you." He displays a tender pride in his charisma. He tells of the love he feels for his people, the serenity that comes from contact with the Orixà. He won't commit himself as to their cosmic nature, their relation to the saints. There are no differences; it is enough to be serene. The Candomble theology changes from one terreiro to another. I ask him who my Orixà is.

Again he fights shy, these things are hard to say, they can change with the circumstances; he doesn't believe in this ability to judge; if I really insist, just looking at me like this, offhand, he would say I'm a son of Oxalà. I don't tell him I received the same answer two nights ago. I still want to catch him out.

My friend, the one supposed to kill me, plays the politically concerned Brazilian. He speaks to the pai-de-santo of the contradictions of the country, the injustices, asks him if his religion could also drive men to revolt. The Babalorixà says evasively that these are problems he doesn't want to discuss, then he smiles again with excessive sweetness, as when he assured me my friend wouldn't kill me, and he murmurs something like:

"But if it were necessary, it could . . ."

What does he mean? That for the present it isn't necessary? That the Candomble is still a religion of the oppressed, and would be ready to inspire them to revolt? Doesn't he trust us? He dismisses us at four in the morning, as the trance is fading in the contorted limbs of the sons and daughters of the saint. Dawn is breaking. He presents us with some of his works of art. He looks like the manager of a dance hall in a working-class neighborhood. He has asked nothing of us; he has only given us presents and invited us to a supper.

I still have one question, which I didn't ask even his São Paulo colleague. I have realized, and not only in these two cases, that the

Candomble (not to mention the Umbanda) is attracting more and more whites. I've encountered a doctor, a lawyer, and many proletarians and subproletarians. Originally, an ancient assertion of racial autonomy, establishing for blacks a space impenetrable by the religion of the Europeans, these rites are becoming more and more a generalized offer of hope, consolation, communal life. They are dangerously close to the practices of carnival and soccer, even if more faithful to ancient traditions, less consumeristic, able to reach more deeply the personality of the adepts—wiser, I would say, truer, bound more to elementary pulsations, to the mysteries of the body and of nature. But still they represent one of the many ways the disinherited masses are kept on their reservation, while at their expense the generals industrialize the country, offering it to the exploitation of foreign capital. The question I didn't ask the two pai-de-santos is this: Whose side are the Orixà on? As a son of Oxalà, would I have been entitled to ask it?

1979

Striking at the Heart of the State

The anxious waiting for another communiqué from the Red Brigades about the fate of Aldo Moro and the heated debates about how to behave when it comes have led the press to contradictory reactions. Some papers refused to print the first communiqué, but they couldn't avoid publicizing it with banner headlines; others did print it, but in type so small that only those with 20-20 vision could read it (unacceptable discrimination). As for its content, here again the reaction was embarrassed, because all were unconsciously awaiting a text full of "Ach so!"s or words with five consonants in a row, thus immediately betraying the hand of the German terrorist or the Czechoslovakian agent; instead they were confronted with a long, political argument. For argument it was, and this fact eluded no one; and the more alert also realized that the argument was addressed not to the "enemy" but to potential friends, to demonstrate that the Red Brigades are not a bunch of desperados lashing out at random, but must be seen as the vanguard of a movement justified in the context of the international situation.

If this is how things stand, you cannot react by simply declaring that the communiqué is raving, delirious, vain, mad. It must be analyzed calmly, attentively; that is the only way to ascertain where the communiqué, which commences from fairly lucid premises, reveals the fatal theoretical and practical weakness of the Red Brigades.

We must have the courage to say that the "raving" message contains a highly acceptable premise and translates, even if in a fairly sketchy way, a thesis that all European and American culture, from the students of '68 to the theoreticians of the Monthly Review, as well as the left-wing parties, has constantly repeated. So if there is "paranoia," it lies not in the premises but, as we shall see, in the practical conclusions drawn from them.

I don't think it's a good idea to smile at the bogey of the so-called SIM or Stato Imperialistico delle Multinazionali (the Imperialist State of the Multinationals). The way it is depicted here may have a B-film quality; still no one can refuse to see that international planetary policy is no longer determined by individual governments but, in fact, by a network of productive interests (it could also be called the network of the multinationals), which decides local politics, wars and peaces, and—again—establishes the relations between the capitalistic world and China, Russia, and the Third World.

If anything, what's interesting is that the Red Brigades have abandoned their Disney-like mythology, in which on one side there was a wicked individual capitalist named Uncle Scrooge and on the other the Beagle Boys, a cheating rabble, true, but with a certain charge of crazy amiability because they stole, to the tunes of proletarian confiscation, from the stingy, egotistical capitalist.

The Beagle game had previously been played by the Tupamaros of Uruguay, who were convinced that the Brazilian and Argentinian Scrooges would become irritated and would turn Uruguay into a second Vietnam, while the citizens, impelled to sympathize with the Beagles, would become so many Vietcong. The game didn't work, because Brazil didn't make a move and the multinationals, which had to produce and sell in the Cono Sur, fostered Perón's return to Argentina, divided the revolutionary or guerrilla forces, allowed Perón and his descendants to sink into the shit up to their necks, and at that point the more quick-witted Montoneros fled to Spain and the more idealistic paid with their lives.

It is precisely because the power of the multinationals exists (have we forgotten about Chile?) that the idea of a Che Guevaratype revolution has become impossible. The Russians had their revolution while all the European states were engaged in a world war; the long march was organized in China while the rest of the world had other things on its mind. . . . But when you live in a universe where a system of productive interests exploits the atomic stalemate to impose a peace useful to all sides and to send through the heavens satellites that spy on one another in turn, at this point national revolution can no longer be waged; everything is decided elsewhere.

The historic compromise on the one hand and terrorism on the other represent two answers (obviously antithetical) to this situation. The confused idea that motivates terrorism is a very modern principle and a very capitalistic one (for which classical Marxism found itself unprepared), a principle of systems theory.

The great systems are headless, they have no protagonists and they do not live on individual egoism, either. Therefore they cannot be struck by killing the king; they are struck when they are made unstable through acts of harassment, exploiting their own logic: if there exists a completely automated factory, it will not be upset by the death of the owner but rather by erroneous bits of information inserted here and there, making work hard for the computers that run the place.

Modern terrorism pretends (or believes) that it has pondered Marx; but in fact, even if indirectly, it has pondered Norbert Wiener on the one hand and science fiction on the other. The problem is that it hasn't pondered enough—nor has it studied in sufficient depth—cybernetics. The proof is that in all their previous propaganda the Red Brigades still spoke of "striking at the heart of the state," cultivating on the one hand the nineteenth-century notion of the state and, on the other, the idea that the adversary has a heart or a head, as in the battles of a bygone age, when if you could strike the king, riding at the head of his troops, the enemy army was demoralized and destroyed. In their latest pamphlet the Red Brigades abandon the idea of heart, of state, of wicked capitalist, of "murdering" cabinet minister. Now the adversary is the system of the multinationals, who use Moro as their pawn or, at least, as a recipient of information.

What is the error in the (theoretical and practical) reasoning that, at this point, the Red Brigades are committing, especially when they appeal, against multinational capital, to multinational terrorism?

First ingenuousness. Once they have grasped the idea of the great systems, they promptly mythologize it, insisting that the multinationals have "secret plans," which Moro would be one of the few to know. In reality, the great systems have no secrets, and how they operate is well known. If multinational equilibrium advises against the formation of a left-wing government in Italy, it is childish to think that they would send Moro a form letter telling him how to defeat the working class. It would suffice (this is an invention) to stir up something in South Africa, upset the diamond market in Amsterdam, influence the course of the dollar, and thus cause a lira crisis.

Second ingenuousness. Terrorism is not the enemy of the great systems; on the contrary, it is their natural counterweight, accepted, programmed.

The multinationals' system cannot live in a world war economy (and an atomic world war at that); but it also knows that it cannot reduce the natural drives of biological aggression or the impatience of peoples or groups. That is why it accepts little local wars, which are then disciplined and reduced by shrewd international interventions; and likewise it accepts terrorism. A factory here, a factory there, in upheaval because of sabotage: The system can still go ahead. A plane is hijacked from time to time: The airlines lose money for a week, but to make up for that the newspapers and TV networks make money.

Furthermore, terrorism gives police forces and armies a *raison d'être*, because if you keep them idle they start demanding fulfillment in some broader conflict. Finally, terrorism serves to justify disciplined interventions where an excess of democracy makes the situation less governable.

The "national" capitalist, on the order of Uncle Scrooge, fears rebellion, robbery, and revolution, which could steal the means of production from him. Modern capitalism, which invests in numerous countries, always has a fairly wide space for maneuver and can bear terrorist attack in one isolated point, or in two points, or three.

As it is headless and heartless, the system displays an incredible capacity for healing and stabilizing. Wherever it is struck, that place will always be peripheral. If the president of the German manufacturers association loses his life, such incidents are statistically acceptable, like highway deaths. For the rest (and this has been amply described), they proceed to medievalize their territory, with fortified castles and great residential complexes with private guards and photoelectric cells.

The only serious trouble would be a terrorist uprising spread over the entire world territory, a mass terrorism (such as the Red Brigades seem to invoke); but the multinationals' system "knows" (insofar as a system can "know") that this hypothesis is to be rejected. The multinationals system doesn't send children down in the mines: the terrorist is someone who has nothing to lose but his chains, but the system manages things in such a way that, except for the inevitable outsiders, everybody has something to lose in a situation of generalized terrorism. It knows that when terrorism, beyond some picturesque feat, begins to make the everyday life of the masses too uneasy, the masses stand firm against terrorism.

What is it that, on the contrary, the multinationals' system looks askance at, as we have seen lately? The fact that, all of a sudden, in Spain, Italy, France, and elsewhere, parties come into power that have workers' organizations behind them. No matter how "corruptible" these parties may be, the day that mass organizations stick their noses into the international management of capital, there could be trouble. It's not that the multinationals would die if Marchais took Giscard's place, but everything would become more difficult.

There is the specious concern that if the Communists came to power they would learn the secrets of NATO (open secrets, anyway): The real concern of the multinationals' system (and I say this quite coldly, having no sympathy for the historical compromise as it is proposed today) is that control by the popular parties might disturb a management of power.

Terrorism, on the contrary, is a much lesser concern, because it's a biological consequence of the multinationals, just as a day of fever is the reasonable price of an effective vaccine. If the Red Brigades are right in their analysis of a world government by the multinationals, then they must recognize that they, the Red Brigades, are the natural and programmed counterweight. They must recognize that they are acting out a script already written by their presumed enemies. Instead, after having discovered, however crudely, an important principle of the logic of systems, the Red Brigades reply with a nineteenth century feuilleton featuring avengers and executioners, good and efficient as the Count of Monte Cristo. It would be laughable, if this novel weren't written in blood.

The conflict is between great powers, not between demons and heroes. Unhappy, therefore, is the nation that finds the "heroes" underfoot, especially if they still think in religious terms and involve the population in their bloody ascent to an uninhabited paradise.

1978

Why Are They Laughing in Those Cages?

In February 1979 I sent an article to La Repubblica of Milan. Or rather, not an article but a little story, the kind that are technically called uchronias, science fiction, that is, or reverse Utopias, on the order of "what would have happened if Caesar hadn't been stabbed." Since it was fiction and not political opinion, it ended up in the culture section. Every author is more or less fond of the things he writes, and he is fonder of some than of others; I was very proud of that story, but I must say that I received no interesting reactions of the kind I have received for many other things written with less commitment. The fact is that, except for fans of the genre, few people believe that uchronias (or Utopias) are a serious way of reflecting on the present.

In that story I imagined that things in Italy, and in the world, had gone differently after World War II, and that Italy during the past decades had been at war with a Turkish fascist empire. I amused myself by imagining the various political alliances that would result, and above all, I saw the founders of the Red Brigades praised in Parliament, their officers leading commando groups, decorated with gold medals, and I pictured the heroic Red Brigades fighting off the Turkish invader, eulogized by Giorgio Amendola, while Paul VI sadly reflected on how much calmer Italy would have been if, after 1945, we had had thirty years of peace.

What was the meaning of that story? That democratic culture had too easily branded as reactionary certain theories of animal behavior according to which there exists in the species (in all species) a quotient of violence that must somehow manifest itself. Wars, which, not without reason, though with evil glee, the Futurists praised as "the world's only hygiene," are important safety valves, which serve to release and sublimate this violence. If there are no wars (and personally I would rather there be as few as possible) we have to accept the idea that a society will somehow express the quotient of violence it harbors.

But the moral of the story was something else: namely, that provided this violence is released, it is irrelevant whether its release takes the form of attacks on banks, murders for questions of honor, campaigns for the burning of heretics, acts of satanism, collective suicides as in Guyana, nationalistic outbursts, or revolutionary utopias for the salvation of the proletariat. The final moral was that, if the founders of the Red Brigades had been offered a splendid nationalist or colonialist myth, say the slaughter of the Jews, they would have fallen in behind it and not behind the dream of striking at the heart of the bourgeois state.

These reflections are apposite now, as, on the one hand, the trial of Moro's presumed assassins is in progress and, on the other hand, we witness the grotesque ritual of the Anglo-Argentine war.

What is so frightening about the war over the Falklands? Not the fact that General Galtieri sought an external enemy in order to allay internal tensions; that is normal dictatorial technique, and everybody must do his job, however filthy it may be. Nor the fact that Britain should react in a manner closer to Francis Drake than to postmodern, because noblesse oblige, and each is prisoner of his own history and his own national myths.

What is frightening is the fact that the Montoneros, Firmenich, the revolutionary Peronistas, all those who moved European democratic public opinion when they were languishing in the generals' prisons and who were actually excused when they engaged in small-scale terrorism (of course, people said, they live under a dictatorship), all these full-time revolutionaries are today enthusiastically on the side of the government, dazzled by the nationalistic invitation to die for the sacred borders of the fatherland.

It sounds exactly like my story: If the Argentinian generals had invented a nice war ten years ago, these heroes would never have committed acts of terrorism, but would have got themselves killed, dagger clenched in their teeth, hurling hand grenades against the white rajah James Brooke—perhaps crying out "Mompracem!"—new tiger-cubs of the pampas. Chile refuses to fall in line behind Argentina, because Pinochet is smart and needs American support, but look: Cuba agrees at once. Castro must be more familiar with Errol Flynn than with Marx.

I see many analogies between the Red Brigades snickering during the Moro trial and the Montoneros now crying "Viva Galtieri!"

Just as I see many analogies with what has happened in a country as allergic to ideologies as the United States, where violence, in order to erupt, needs other pretexts, like the worship of Satan. I understand the indignation and the horror of Giampaolo Pansa, who in yesterday's Repubblica couldn't understand how the Red Brigades could be so jolly, and how the thought of the murder victim did not weigh on them. But if we reread the reports of the investigation and trial of Charles Manson and

his "family" after the stabbing of Sharon Tate, it is the same script, the same psychology, the same lack of remorse, the same sense of having done something that gave meaning to a life that, all things considered, was too boring and peaceful. And it is the same jollity of those hundreds of poor people who drank poison and administered it to their children, to follow the mystical suicide of a preacher who, not long before, had been ready to sacrifice himself for far more acceptable causes.

This also explains the "repentant" terrorists. How is it possible to repent after arrest, and repent profoundly, turning in your companions, whereas you didn't repent at the moment when you were firing a couple of bullets into the nape of a helpless man? Why, because there was the impulse to kill and, once that was satisfied, the game was over; so why not repent? Ideology has nothing to do with it: It was a pretext.

I am fully aware that this kind of talk risks sounding reactionary. The problem is to know, to understand, that not all sacrifices, not all bloodshed, is carried out for fun. But it is a difficult matter of rational discriminations; and to articulate them, you must first of all be unrelentingly suspicious of the mystique of sacrifice and blood. I don't mean to suggest that there is no difference between those whom society recognizes as heroes and those whom society recognizes as bloodthirsty madmen, even if the difference is much less than our schoolbooks would have us believe. I don't want to suggest that all ideologies and all ideals are transitory pretexts for impulses of violence that spring from the depths of the species. Perhaps there is a distinction, a very simple one.

Real heroes, those who sacrifice themselves for the collective good, and whom society recognizes as such (maybe some time later, whereas at the time they are branded as irresponsible outlaws), are always people who act reluctantly. They die, but they would rather not die; they kill, but they would rather not kill; and in fact afterwards they refuse to boast of having killed in a condition of necessity.

Real heroes are always impelled by circumstances; they never choose because, if they could, they would choose not to be heroes. For example—Salvo D'Acquisto, or one of the many partisans who fled to the mountains, was captured and tortured, and never talked, in order to lessen the tribute of blood, not to encourage it.

The real hero is always a hero by mistake; he dreams of being an honest coward like everybody else. If it had been possible, he would have settled the matter otherwise, and without bloodshed. He doesn't boast of his own death or of others'. But he doesn't repent. He suffers and keeps his mouth shut; if anything, others then exploit him, making him a myth, while he, the man worthy of esteem, was only a poor creature who reacted with dignity and courage in an event bigger than he was.

But we know at once and without hesitation that we must be wary of those who set out, fired (and firing), moved by an ideal of purification through blood, their own and others', but more often, others'. We must not let it amaze us, or shock us too much. But we mustn't ignore the existence of these phenomena, either.

If we don't accept and recognize, bravely, the inevitability of this behavior (studying techniques to confine it, prevent it, offering other, less bloody safety valves), we run the risk of being idealists and moralists as much as those whose bloodthirsty madness we so reprove. To recognize violence as a biological force is true materialism (historical

or dialectical, it matters little) and the Left has been wrong not to study biology and ethology sufficiently.

1982

On the Crisis of the Crisis of Reason

In a weekly magazine recently I happened to read an interview with a famous novelist (I won't mention his name because, on the one hand, the phrase was only attributed to him, and on the other I am reconstructing it from memory, and I don't want to attribute to someone a thing he may not have said; but if he didn't say it, others are saying the same thing); he declared that reason can no longer explain the world in which we live and we now have to rely on other instruments.

Unfortunately, the interview failed to specify what those other instruments are, leaving the reader free to imagine: feeling, delirium, poetry, mystical silence, a sardine can opener, the high jump, sex, intravenous injections of sympathetic ink. Even more unfortunately, each of these imagined instruments could, indeed, be the opposite of reason, but each opposition would imply a different definition of reason.

For example, the book that originated this debate* seems to speak of a crisis in what is called a "classical" model of reason, as Aldo Gargani explains with great clarity in the introduction. But the alternatives that Gargani proposes in other philosophical contexts go under the name of reason or rational activity or at least reasonable activity, as he admits. Among the other essays in the book (to mention only a few), Ginzburg's opposes deductive reasoning with a hypothetical conjectural reasoning, judged valid by Hippocrates, by Aristotle, and by Peirce; Veca's essay offers a persuasive series of rules for reasonable conjecture; Viano proposes a prudent definition of rationality as justification of special beliefs, to make them understood by all.

Here are some good definitions of the nonclassical rational position, which allows us to remain within reality and not delegate the job of reason to delirium or track and field events.

The problem is not to kill reason, but to render bad reasons harmless, and to dissociate the notion of reason from that of truth. But the name for this honorable job is not "hymn to crisis." It has been called, since the time of Kant, "critique."
The recognition of limits.

Confronted by a shibboleth like that of the crisis of reason, we feel that, to start with, we must define not so much reason as the concept of crisis. And the indiscriminate use of that concept is a case of editorial cramps. Crisis sells well. During the last few decades we have witnessed the sale (on newsstands, in bookshops, by subscription, door-to-door) of the crisis of religion, of Marxism, of representation, the sign, philosophy, ethics, Freudianism, presence, the subject (I omit other crises that I don't understand professionally even if I endure them, such as that of the lira, of housing, the family, institutions, oil).

Whence the well-known quip: "God is dead, Marxism is undergoing a crisis, and I don't feel so hot myself." Let us consider something pleasant, like the crisis of representation. Even assuming that whoever speaks of it has a definition of representation (which is often not the case), if I rightly understand what they're saying—namely that we are unable to construct and exchange images of the world that are certainly apt to convey the form, if there is one, of this world—it seems to me that the

definition of this crisis began with Parmenides, continued with Gorgias, caused Descartes no small amount of concern, made things awkward for everyone thanks to Berkeley and Hume, and so on, down to phenomenology.

If Lacan is interesting it's because he resumes Parmenides. Those who rediscover the crisis of representation today seem to have charmingly vague ideas about the continuity of this discussion (I am reminded of another joke, the one about the student asked to discuss the death of Caesar: "What? Dead? I didn't even know he was sick!"). But even admitting the considerable age of the crisis, I still don't understand what the hell it means. I cross the street on a red light, the cop blows his whistle, and then fines me (not someone else). How can all this happen if the idea of the subject is in a state of crisis, along with the sign and reciprocal representation? I begin to suspect this is not the point. But then what was having the crisis? Can we clear it up? Or is it the notion of crisis itself that is in critical condition? Or are you subjecting me to a series of terrorist actions? I protest.

Back to reason, that is, to the definition of. As we move through the forest of the different and age-old philosophical definitions, we can (with the crudeness of one allowed only a few hundred words) outline five basic meanings:

1. Reason is that type of natural knowledge, characteristic of man, opposed on the one hand to mere instinctive reactions, and on the other to intuitive knowledge (such as mystical illuminations, faith, subjective experiences not communicable through language, and so on). In this case we speak of reason to say that man is capable of producing abstractions and of speaking through abstractions. This notion does not seem to me to be undergoing a crisis; man is made in this way, beyond any doubt.

At most we must decide to what extent this proceeding by abstractions is good compared to other ways of thinking, because undoubtedly the person who has mystical visions also thinks. But speaking of the crisis of reason is itself formulating an abstraction, using our rational capacities to cast doubt on the goodness of a certain type of exercise of these same capacities.

2. Reason is a special faculty of knowing the Absolute by direct view; it is the self-knowledge of the idealistic ego; it is the intuition of prime principles which both the cosmos and the human mind obey, and even the divine mind. This concept is undergoing a crisis, no question about that. It has given us far too many headaches. If somebody comes and tells us he has a direct view of the Absolute and tries to impose it on us, we kick him. But don't call it crisis of reason. It's that man's crisis.

3. Reason is a system of universal principles that precede man's abstractive capacity. At most man may recognize them, perhaps with difficulty and after long reflection. This is Platonism, no matter what name it's given. It is an illustrious position, and its crisis is considerable, from Kant on (and even earlier). This is the notorious classical reason. You come across it even in mathematics or contemporary logic. Its crisis is obvious but not universally accepted. What does it mean, to say that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle must always add up to one hundred and eighty degrees because this is a necessary truth?

At most one should discuss the difference between universal truth, evident truth, and postulated truth. If I posit Euclidean geometry, it is necessary truth that the sum of the interior angles equals one hundred and eighty degrees. As a rule we aspire to the freedom to change the

postulates in special situations. If someone grants me that freedom, I grant him permission to use the notion of necessary truth. Obviously, it is over decisions of this sort that the battle for definition number 5 is waged, as we will see below.

4. Reason is a faculty of judging and discerning (good and evil, true and false). This is Cartesian common sense. If you insist on the natural origin of this faculty, you return to something close to definition number 3. This notion today is surely undergoing a crisis, but in an ambiguous way. I would call it a crisis of excess: This innocent naturalness has been shifted from reason to other "faculties," such as Desire, Need, Instinct. Instead of insisting on the crisis of this notion (surely fairly dangerous and "ideological"), I would find it more useful to create a crisis for the certainty of its surrogates. In this respect, the new Cartesianism of the irrational, so to speak, seems to me far more upsetting.

To say that these four definitions of reason are in a state of crisis is like saying, after Galileo and Copernicus, that the earth moves around the sun. It may be necessary to add that the sun is motionless only in relation to the earth, but the first affirmation is now watertight and the idea that the sun moves around the earth is surely undergoing a crisis (but why repeat it?).

5. Thus we come to the fifth definition. Which is also in a state of crisis, but a different crisis from the others. It is not so much undergoing a crisis as it is critical, because in a sense it is the only definition that allows us to recognize a "rational" or "reasonable" way of constantly creating a crisis in both reason and classical rationalism and in the anthropological notions of rationality and, in the final analysis, its own conclusions.

The fifth definition is very modern, but also very ancient. If you reread Aristotle carefully you can derive it also from his writings, with some prudence. Reread Kant (and rereading always means reading with reference to our problems, explicitly subjecting the original picture to criticisms and precautions);

Kant still works pretty well, too, in this regard.

As I was saying, in this fifth meaning, rationality is exercised through the very fact that we are expressing propositions regarding the world, and even before making sure that these propositions are "true," we have to make sure that others can understand them. So we have to work out some rules for common speech, logical rules which are also linguistic rules. Which is not to assert that when we speak we have to say always and only one thing, without ambiguity or multiple meanings. On the contrary, it is rather rational and reasonable to recognize that there exist also discourses (in dreams, in poetry, in the expression of desires and passions) that mean several things at once, contradictory among themselves.

But precisely because it is fortunately obvious that our speech is also open and has multiple meanings, every so often, and in certain matters, we have to work out agreed norms of speech, for specific situations where we all decide to adopt the same criteria for using words and for linking them in propositions which can then be debated. Can I reasonably assert that human beings love food? Yes, even if there are dyspeptics, ascetics, and anorexics.

We must simply agree and establish that, in this area of problems, statistical evidence can be held reasonable. Is stylistic evidence valid

in establishing what is the "right" meaning of the Iliad, or whether Bo Derek is more desirable than Sigourney Weaver? No, the rules change. And who doesn't agree with this criterion? I won't say it's irrational, but allow me to look at it with suspicion. If possible, I avoid it.

Don't ask me what I must do if it sneaks in; it will be reasonable to decide in what way when the situation arises. Both the laws of logic and those of rhetoric (in the sense of a technique of argument) belong to this type of reasonableness. Fields must be established in which the former are preferable to the latter.

A logical friend said to me: "I renounce all certitudes, except the first mention." What's rational about this attitude? For the layman, I will explain in a few words. The modus ponens is the rule of reasoning (and hence the rule for a comprehensible and agreed discourse) whereby if I assert if p then q , and acknowledge that p is true, then q can only follow. In other words, if I agree to define all French citizens as Europeans (and we agree on this meaning postulate), then if Monsieur Ali Hassan is a French citizen everyone must recognize that he is European.

The modus ponens does not apply in poetry, or dreams, or the language of the unconscious in general. We must only decide where it has to apply, that is, begin a discourse after deciding whether or not we accept the modus ponens. And naturally we must agree on the premise, because someone may want to define as French citizens only those born in France of French parents with white skin.

Sometimes, when it comes to the definition of premises, the meaning-postulates that we want to accept, infinite conflicts can develop. It is then reasonable not to insist on the modus ponens, until all agree on the premise. But afterwards, it seems reasonable to obey the modus ponens, if it has been assumed as valid. And it will be rational not to refer to the modus ponens in those cases where we can suspect that no result of reciprocal comprehensibility will be achieved (it is impossible to analyze according to the modus ponens the proposition of Catullus *odi et amo*, unless we redefine the notion of hatred and love—but to redefine them in a rational way we would have to reason according to the modus ponens . . .).

In any case, if someone uses the modus ponens to demonstrate to me that the modus ponens is an eternal, rational law (classical, to be sensed and accepted), I will consider it rational to call his claim irrational. However, it seems to me reasonable to reason according to the modus ponens in many instances, for example, in playing cards: If I have established that four aces beat four tens, if you then have four aces, I have to admit that you have won. The point is to establish that we can also change the game, by mutual consent.

What I continue to consider irrational is somebody's insistence that, for instance, Desire always wins out over the modus ponens (which could also be possible); but then to impose on me his own notions of Desire and to confute my confutation, he tries to catch me in contradiction by using the modus ponens. I feel a Desire to bash him one.

I attribute the spread of such irrational behavior to the great number of publications that play with metaphorical irresponsibility on the crises of reason. But let me make it clear that the problem affects us not only at the level of learned debate, but also in daily behavior and political life. And so, a qualified Viva! to the modus ponens.

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The end