3. Gnostic Fragments

We cannot grant […] that the universe had an evil origin because there are many unpleasant things in it: this is the judgment of people who rate it too highly, if they claim that it ought to be the same as the intelligible world and not only an image.

Plotinus, *Against the Gnostics*[1]

In this world there is good and bad: its good is not good and its bad is not bad. But after this world, there exists something truly evil, and this is the realm of the middle. It is the realm of death.

The Gnostic Gospel of Philip[2]

Gnosticism was a beginning in the discursive direction.

Apostles of chaos are not individualists. They do not speak in behalf of or for the egotistical benefit of man; they indeed speak in behalf of disorder, of an impersonal principle of dissolution. On the other hand, lone misanthropes, who share their bitterness and spleen only with themselves, retain a tinge of decency and nobility —a nobility that the preachers of dissolution, instead, forever lose from the moment they open their mouths to lecture others about the ways of the world. The thick-skinned, careless drifter, if he so wishes, hates, destroys, and self-destroys, or desecrates in the silence of his solitude. It is his affair, one that he settles alone with the divinity whom he so deeply despises, or whose absence he so deeply resents. Diogenes the Cynic comes to mind; he is an all-time hero of the French pessimists[3] and of Foucault as well. Diogenes, who spurned the powerful, masturbated in public squares, lived in a tub, and spat in the face of the rich, exposing their hypocrisy and self-righteousness, was the nihilist with an individualist's ethic. True to himself, to his irreverence, he was a novelist by day of life's absurdity, who wished for no school and disciples, or the vanities of prestige.

But when corruption becomes discourse, theory, or "tradition," as it seemed to do in some segments of the Gnostic production, the distaste of something altogether surreptitious is savored at once. A reasoned invitation to despise the world, as that of Gnosis, framed in philosophical form, is a "project," *an attempt at religious conversion.* Apostles of chaos, such as the Gnostics or Bataille, live to deprecate order, coercion,

sanctimony, discipline, and especially religious militancy, yet they always find themselves leading their assault, by speech and prose, against the constituted order with a religious fervor that is no less virulent, militant, or intolerant than that of their opponents. Apparently, the Gnostics too desire converts.

But what for, one may doubt, if the world is, as they say, hopeless and senseless? Clearly, the apostles of chaos are torn. Bataille would repeatedly grapple with this dilemma; a few years before his death, he conceded: "I should have given up talking. I should have recognized my impotence and held my tongue";[4] and yet he didn't. Nor do the apostles of chaos ever do.

And so, they write.

They write since the early Christian era to lament, in the words of a modern commentator, that we humans "are exploited on a cosmic scale," that we are the "proletariat" of a second-tier god (a "demiurge-executioner"), who exiled us, "slaves," "into a world that is viscerally subjected to violence. We are the dregs and sediment of a lost heaven, strangers on our own planet."[5] "The order of evil," is recognized through the incessant "necessity of destroying and devouring. A necessity so widespread, so planetary, that it places war and nutrition on an identical plane. Seen in this perspective, wars are nothing but an inescapable means by which communities feed themselves and survive. Nutrition has another natural consequence: defecation, the logical conclusion of corporal corruption."[6]

This and much else is true of Gnosis. It appears to be a tradition in its own right, pre-Christian, which, after the

drafting of the Gospels, joined the religious fray assuming the heretical color that is its trademark. As said in the introduction, its corpus is not at all homogeneous: it is for the most part a list of opinions of various schools reported by the Fathers of the Church, who were bent on confuting them. Often, the reports of ideas issuing from the same school vary egregiously from one another, and, in many instances, the Gnostic cosmogonies and mythologies —a blend of Mysteriosophy, biblical syncretism, and a welter of Eastern religious traditions— are so complex and esoterically foreign to the modern reader as to be literally impenetrable.

Nonetheless, a certain number of elements may be pertinently related to our discussion. First of all, as Gnosis, this tradition was passed on as "divine revelation communicated only to a few elect, morally and intellectually prepared, in contraposition to the common faith of the Christian masses."[7] It was an elitist discourse. Second, there runs through the various sects the claim that the human soul is a *spark* trapped in heavy matter, yearning for liberation— "The body is a prison," said the Gnostic Carpocrates.[8] Therefore, emancipation can only be attained by way of separation, alienation, withdrawal from the world —a withdrawal that may take the form of asceticism, or, more interestingly, of a sovereign disregard for all human law, something describable as a self-satisfied sentiment of "perfection" immune to the scruples of ordinary, pious men. In other words, all sorts of "infamies"* are permissible to the "perfects" so that they may

* The Christian theologian Ireneus mentions in this respect the school of the Gnostic Basilides; his followers referred to themselves as "the

free themselves from the enslaving cycles of reincarnation and join a superior realm of the Spirit variously defined.[9] Third, many Gnostics, such as the young Epiphanes, advocated in the name of Justice "a community of equality" and unrestrained *communism* of possessions and sexual mates. They invited to *transgress* all those man-made laws that have been imposed to delimit property.[10]

All such beliefs thus built on a deep sense of comradeship that united the adepts, by cementing the bond born out of misery and suffering in this world —a world depicted as acold, often inhospitable realm. In this sense, it may be seen as "counterculture."

Fourth, as for the creation of the cosmos, creative and visionary narratives abound and systematic categorization appears impossible, although five themes recur in different contexts:

1. The heresiarch Simon Magus contends that the principle of all things is Infinite Power (*apérantos dúnamis*). Infinite Power bifurcates into two other seminal forces, themselves without end or beginning, which are Great Power, the

perfects." Ireneus deprecated the perfects' participation in idolatrous, pagan festivities, and libidinal indulgence, and their engrossed attendance at violent spectacles such as the sports-like killing of wild animals and mortal combat of man against man in the amphitheater. Likewise, Bataille was thoroughly enthralled by Spanish bullfighting; his morbid experience of the corrida in Seville, as recounted in his first novel, *The Story of the Eye,* affords an interesting connection to the "infamies" indulged in by the Gnostic perfects (see chapter 5 on Bataille, pp. 117-19).

masculine mind that governs all, and Great Thought (i.e., "discourse," *epínoia*), the feminine principle that generates all.[11]

2. According to a captivating myth narrated by the Ophite Justin ("a devotee of the Snake," from the Greek *ophis*), three are the principles of creation: two masculine, one feminine. The supreme Good (*o agathós*) resides in a superior sphere, while Elohim, the male, and Eden, the female, unite to fashion the cosmos. Each generates twelve archangels (eons), and man, Adam, seals their union: Eden gives him the soul, Elohim the spirit. But when Elohim ascends to the Father for a visit, and decides to remain by Him, thus forsaking Eden, the latter despairs and dispatches her angel Aphrodite (or Babel) to strike suffering and misery in the hearts of men by sowing strife and discord among them: to hurt Elohim for abandoning her, Eden torments him vicariously through man, who harbors the spirit of his father. But existence for man worsens still as another of Eden's angels, Naas ("the serpent," in Hebrew) seduces and rapes both Adam and Eve, instituting thereby adultery and pederasty. Thus, is sealed the human condition: because the Father withdrew, man is condemned to a harrowing symbiosis with demonic presence presided by feminine (motherly) vengefulness. Angels are then sent to earth from the father Elohim to teach his creatures the way of ascension and deliverance from the entrapment.[12]

3. Another tale from the same school postulates the same three principles in the symbolic form of Spirit, Darkness (*skótos*) and Light. The followers of Basilides consider only the latter two and state likewise that these have no end and no beginning. Darkness is repeatedly associated with "the Abyss"

or the element of *water* — "tenebrous, frightful, damned, wicked"— which, in its primordial vastness and intelligence, seeks to attract light in its bosom.

Over the enlightened water, a powerful wind blows, whose undulating progression resembles that of a snake; as the breath of the snake caresses the water, (earthly) generation comes into being.[13]

4. Then there is that favorite of de-constructivists, the famously obscure passage by Basilides of the "God that is not" (*o ouk on théos*), who, "without thought, sensitivity, will, intention, passion and desire," wanted to create the seed of the world. Thus, it was said that "the God that did not exist created out of nothingness the world that did not exist, casting down under the seed that bore within itself all the world's harvest."[14]

5. Finally, in the darkly intricate mythology of the Valentinians (after the name of the schoolmaster, Valentinus), we are told of the generation by higher principles of a dozen eons, the last of whom, Sophia, in an act of temerity, improvised and resolved to procreate on her own. Her yearning to meet, understand, and rejoin her Father —the One God, ensconced in the highest sphere of being— pushed her to commit, alone, this senseless act: a mocking of divine creation. She inspired thereby an unknowing sub-god, the Demiurge, who, mistaking himself for the Supreme Being, crafted the earth. The fruits of this indirect creation —the so-called passion of Sophia (*to páthos tes Sophías*)— are alternatively described as "amorphous," and the resulting humans as "stupid, weak, deformed."* From Sophia's sense of

* Eventually, moved by the supplications of the other eons, the Father

affright (*ekpléxis*), anguish, and dread for having committed this error, the *material* universe came into being, as well as its lord, the devil —the prince of this world (*o árchon tou kósmou*)— and all the elements of villainy, suffering, and evil.[15]

Fifth, most Gnostic teachers allowed, if not encouraged, the free and unrestrained indulgence of sex and intoxication, which was the obvious corollary of a system of teachings that preconized a contemptuous indifference toward the destiny of this misshapen earth.

Though this set of creeds may not be unqualifiedly defined as "infernal" or "Satanic"—both of which attributes signify that the hierarchical principles dictated by religious orthodoxy are being turned on their head —certain of them nonetheless seem fecund enough to engender in the seduced listener a refusal to recognize the non-subsistence of a divinely benevolent principle of any kind. When that is the case, traditional religious orthodoxy denounces these conceptions as "Luciferian."[16]

Be that as it may, from this synthesis of Gnosis, one may recognize several discursive elements that appear connected to matriarchal and Dionysian forms of worship, namely, the myth of the "idle, withdrawn god"; the vengeful torment on earth inflicted by the angered or presumptuous Mother; the simultaneous appeal to equality, licentiousness, and promiscuousness; the ecstatic desire to break the bonds of

proceeded to reintegrate the sinful Sophia in the divine firmament by damming her overbearing passion and ignorance by means of the power of another force, an emanation of the Father himself, the so-called Limit (*to óron*).

matter; and the condoning of amoral behavior: the so-called sovereign disdain, which is one of Bataille's defining traits. Even more to the point for the analysis of Bataille is the incipient deification of Nothingness, the reduction of human collective and existential dynamics to the self-contained circuit of Power/Discourse (*dúnamis/epínoia*), whose casual, impersonal shocks and countershocks come to animate symbolically the gloomy and poky reign of a jealous, abysmal water furrowed by an all-seeing, powerful snake.

As will be recounted, Bataille would profess an adoring empathy for all these fragmented myths; he would eventually seek to resolve and patch them all, along with their special brand of morality, into a suggestive and vivid synthesis, which would make up his very "project." In other words, he thought of remodeling the fables of Gnosis into a quilt of visions and a political economy of sacrifice, crowned by a *theology with no God* —something which, jeering Aquinas, he would title his *summa a-theologica.*

Of the myriad deities, archons, eons, and divine emanations conjured by the Gnostics, Bataille would retain only the monstrous, aberrant ones —those which, according to myth, were conceived, born and crafted by *mistake,* and the byproducts of whose generation were sorrow and pain for the mortals. He would elect these to his *summa,* for they alone, in these semi-apocryphal, fantastic pantheons of Gnosis, *made sense* to him symbolically. Bataille felt that they indeed appealed to our sense of *"loss,"* to our sense of "being simply human," as he put it. All of which convinced him in the end that that there is no such thing as knowledge

but only "non-knowledge," and that "God" is indeed sordid matter —matter that spews out humanity *accidentally* and allows its amoral, alternate moods of birth and death to juggle such beings in a match delimited only by chance, play, and frantic squander.

The sole genuine remainder of all this inexpressible contingency, which we call existence, is the irrepressible *laughter* that the brief, rational contemplation of such a life awakens in us. God has been turned on its head and then beheaded. Of it there remains but a carcass of matter, the nasty angels of Gnosis as pictures of our nightmares, and our stupefied giggles crackling in the background. This, in a nutshell, was the nocturnal theology of Bataille.

Without wanting to give away his game, Foucault would position himself as a cross between Bataille's unconfessed acolyte and the sympathizing opportunist, not averse, that is, to enjoy fame and the frills of power which he got to enjoy from the tenure position he was eventually awarded by the Disciplinarian System he so deeply professed to detest. And, so, instead of consuming himself, like his master, with literary hallucination, Foucault would focus on the *practical* aim of condensing the hallucination into a *system* —that is, into a self-contained philosophical corpus, buttressed by a compatible jargon. A system, a "philosophy" with which one could articulate all facets of social, psychological, aesthetic, and existential reality; a system of rational discourse, yet one driven by a pseudo-religious (Gnostic and Dionysian) and vehement rejection of all notions of transcendence and benevolence; and most importantly, a philosophy that could be of service to the

political paymasters who would pay his (academic) salary.

In sum, postmodernism appears to have been set in motion by the desire to commission from an academic hack a pedagogical vademecum by which modern man, who functions mostly by reason, could reconcile himself, *cerebrally,* to his aboriginal sanguinary double. Whether Foucault succeeded in fulfilling such an ambition is arguable —we will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 6. What is certain, however, is that his admittedly ingenious construct was workable enough to attract the interest of the American intelligentsia in the late Seventies, at the time when the last fires of rebellion were dying out and there was need for an ideology that could so immobilize the bourgeoisie as to prevent new kindlings of dissent to catch fire ever again.

Notes

1. Plotinus, *Ennead II,* trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 237–39.
2. Luigi Moraldi, ed., *I vangeli gnostici, vangeli di Tomaso, Maria, Verità, Filippo* (Milano: Aldephi Edizioni, 1999), p. 60.
3. See E. M. Cioran, *Précis de décomposition* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), pp. 94–97.
4. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), vo., 12, p. 482.
5. Jacques Lacarrière, *The Gnostics* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989 [1973]), p. 29.
6. Ibid., p. 37.
7. Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Testi gnostici in lingua greca e latina* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori—Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1999), p. xi.

8. Ibid., the mention of the soul being a spark caught in matter occurs for instance in the teachings of Simon Magus (p. 16), and of the Sethians and Ophites (p. 124); for the quote by Carpocrates, see p. 194.
9. Ibid., this is related of the initiates of the Valentinian gnosis, p. 312.
10. Ibid., p. 186.
11. Ibid., this is from the teachings of Simon Magus, as confuted by Hyppolitus, pp. 19, 33.
12. Ibid., pp. 87–95.
13. Ibid., pp. 101, 124–26, 140.
14. Ibid., p. 156.
15. Ibid., pp. 288–90, 304, 308, 336, 386.
16. René Guénon, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001 [1929]), p. 30n.