

7

From the visible heaven to the unsealed Word

IN the three preceding lectures I have tried carefully to follow the main argument of Marx's dissertation and of the preparatory studies. It has not always been a simple matter to understand his intentions, sometimes because of the extreme conciseness of his style and sometimes owing to the abstruseness of his style of thought. There is, however, a more profound reason for the difficulty one has with Marx's first scholarly writing. He is wrestling with a fascinating and puzzling dilemma.

This dilemma is most explicitly formulated in two passages closely related in content.

The first passage contains an attempt to understand the ambivalent attitude of the seventeenth-century scholar, Peter Gassendi, who on the one hand admired Epicurus and presented his philosophy as an example of modern Enlightenment, but on the other hand rejected those Epicurean doctrines which he could not square with his Christian faith. Marx does more than cavil at this half-heartedness and vent his irritation at the incapacity of a modern scholar radically to free himself from obsolete Christian doctrines. He recognizes Gassendi's indecision as a characteristic symptom of the dilemma lying at the very foundations of modern philosophy.

The heart of the matter is to be found in the peculiar relationship between ancient and modern philosophy: the decay of the former has emerged from the very principles out of which the latter has been brought to birth. Modern philosophy starts

with Descartes' principle of universal doubt, whereas, conversely, the Sceptics sound the death-knell of Greek philosophy. Whilst it is the rational concept of nature that serves to deliver modern philosophy into the world, conversely, it is Epicurus who gives the *coup de grâce* to ancient philosophy, more thoroughly and decisively, even, than the Sceptics themselves. Antiquity was rooted in nature, in substantial reality. Its degradation, its profanation, entails a radical break with substantial, native life; the modern world is rooted in spirit, which has the required freedom to dispense with what is distinct from it, that is, nature, and to separate it from itself. But the opposite is also true; what for antiquity entailed the profanation of nature is for modern times a liberation from the shackles of servitude to the tyranny of faith; and the primeval intuition that in nature the divine, the idea, is immanent—the very intuition which inspired the birth of ancient Ionian philosophy—is still in advance of the modern rational apperception of nature.

The second passage, which is to be understood in close connection with the first one, is a comment on Epicurus' theory of the meteors. It draws a parallel with the modern world. For the ancient philosophers were the meteors, the *visible heaven*, the symbol and demonstration of their substantial constraint, so that even a philosopher like Aristotle envisages the stars as gods or, at least, associates them directly with the supreme energy. Analogously, the *written heaven*, the *sealed Word* of the God who has revealed himself in the course of world history, is the battle-cry of Christian philosophy. The presupposition of the ancients is the action of nature, for the moderns it is the action of the spirit. The battle of the ancients could not be concluded until the visible heaven, the substantial bond of life, the gravitation of political and religious existence, had been pulverized; for the spirit to become united with itself, nature has to be cleft in two. The Greek broke nature to pieces with the artistic hammer of Hephaestus, beating it into statues; the Roman dipped his sword in nature's heart, and the peoples died. But modern philosophy unseals the Word, causes it to vanish, consumed in the holy fire of the spirit; and not like some individual apostate who has fallen away from the gravitational field of nature, but as a warrior of the spirit contending with the spirit, modern philosophy works universally,

melting down the forms which prevent the universal from making its appearance.

These passages, read together in a common perspective, afford a synopsis of Marx's three-dimensional thinking. More clearly than any other part of the dissertation or the preparatory studies, these pages reveal that Marx's historical discussion with the tradition of classical philosophy is at the same time a continuous struggle to clarify his own situation *vis-à-vis* his own time and his own world. It is especially clear that throughout his confrontation with the Greek past he is invariably puzzled by the problem of his relationship to the Christian tradition which had succeeded to the Greek and had left such a dominant mark on the civilization in which he himself had been born and was destined to live.

Indeed, what Marx calls Christian philosophy occupies a key position in his notion of world history. This strategic position is essentially ambiguous, being at once positive and negative. It represents the middle factor in a tripartite scheme that is dominated by the contrasting duality of nature and spirit. As far as antiquity is concerned, its character seems simple and unambiguous: antiquity was rooted in nature, in the substantial. But what does it mean when the modern world is said to be rooted in spirit? On the one hand, it is crystal clear that Marx's idea of modern philosophy is diametrically opposed to his conception of Christian philosophy. The modern world begins with the struggle for liberation from the tyranny of the Christian faith. Modern philosophy, embodied in Descartes' method of axiomatic doubt and in the rise of a rational approach to nature, is inspired by an urge to freedom from Christian tutelage, whether medieval or ancient. But this would seem to be only one side of the coin. The contradistinction between the ancients and the moderns, on the other hand, is identical with the contrast between ancient philosophy and Christian philosophy. The foundation of the ancients was the visible heaven, the symbol of their being imprisoned within the limits of nature. Conversely, the "*written heaven*", the sealed Word, is the creed of Christian philosophy, which stands on the side of the spirit over against nature. Obviously, within the framework of the contrast between nature and spirit, Christian philosophy stands for spirit.

But there seems hardly to be room for a frank and explicit recognition of the rights of Christian philosophy. At the very moment the dual scheme of nature over against spirit is about to work in favour of the Christian spirit, it is already intersected by the tripartite scheme. The "*written heaven*" may, in itself, be very much a novelty as compared with the visible heaven which represented the ultimate horizon of antiquity; yet it is still a closed horizon. Visible nature has been replaced by audible Word; but this Word remains imprisoned in a written text which can be possessed, manipulated, a text which has, in fact, become an instrument of tyranny and suppression of spiritual freedom. The Word, as distinguished from nature, may bear testimony to the spirit; it still remains sealed. The true work of the spirit still lies ahead, therefore; but the intensity of its activity now appears to have assumed a new and higher quality. Whereas within the world of antiquity the struggle was directed against the ascendancy of natural bondage, now the front is directed against the powers of spiritual bondage. It is the sealed Word, the "*written heaven*", which this time has become the antagonist. The arena in which the battle is to be fought is no longer the realm of nature but the realm of the spirit itself. The sealed Word has to be unsealed, the "*written heaven*" has to be "*pulverized*" the palpable, reified text of a canonized Bible, a frozen creed, a congealed tradition, has to be reduced to ashes, to be melted down and transformed in the devouring fire of the spirit.

This Utopian vision breaks through, it is true, in one or two passages where Marx's deepest inspiration shows through the husk of his philosophical analysis. It remains, however, a marginal aspect, which has not determined the main lines of his approach. To be sure, if it had become the dominant feature, Marx's dissertation might have looked like the polemical broadside of an Anabaptist prophet rather than an historical treatise. The tripartite scheme, in fact, turns out to be composed of two dual schemes which intersect one another. The battle between spirit and nature which, had Christian philosophy really lived up to its calling, would have become the indelible mark of the Christian era, has, owing to the failings of Christianity, assumed a contradictory character. The dominance of heaven has continued, albeit in a new guise. The visible

CRITIQUE OF HEAVEN

heaven of antiquity has survived in the “written heaven” of the Christian era. The seals of bondage to the powers of nature have not really been broken, but have become seals of bondage to the domination of the written Word, in which the spirit remains sealed. Thus in a new form and in the realm of the spirit, the battle that started with the birth of ancient Ionian philosophy continues still.

This historical ambiguity has made its effects felt in two areas. On the one hand, the contradictions of the Christian era have certain features analogous to those which ran through the tradition of antiquity. In this respect, it is quite possible to project the problem underlying the Christian era into the period of antiquity itself. Marx’s interest in the questions that dominated Greek philosophy is, in essence, a transposed version of his confrontation with Christian philosophy, because the battle of antiquity has continued through the Christian era. The end of classical philosophy is the prototype of the end of Christian philosophy. Within the tripartite scheme of history, divided into antiquity, Christendom and the modern world, the transition of the first into the second period is closely parallel to the transition of the second period into the third.

From this point of view, the reason for Marx’s apparently negative approach to the beginnings of the Christian era becomes obvious. That era has failed of its purpose; the fulfilment of its task still lies ahead, it has still to be enacted by modern philosophy. The end of the Christian era is imminent—and is imminent by reason of its inner contradictions. This situation can be examined—and splendidly illustrated—by a scrutiny of the closing period of antiquity and of the philosophical systems which marked the end of classical philosophy. When we study its essential features, we see, as in a mirror, an image of ourselves.

But the contradictions which were concealed in the Christian period and are beginning to be discovered now by the spirit of modern thinking, should also be evaluated from the opposite point of view. If the bonds of nature have continued to hold sway in the tyranny of Christian logolatry, the worship of the written Word, then, conversely, the urge to freedom of the spirit was anticipated in the struggle that marked classical philosophy. The end of classical philosophy was more than a

final chord of the ancient symphony. In retrospect, viewed from the bridge which leads from the Christian era towards the modern age, the death of antiquity bore the seeds of modernity. The rise of modern philosophy from its roots in Cartesian doubt and modern physics was prepared and foreshadowed in the fundamental questions raised by the school of Scepticism and, more radically, in the radical demythologization effected by Epicurean philosophy. The struggle of antiquity for the liberation of the spirit from nature's tutelage can, in retrospect, be observed in the mirror of the modern era. We are now in a better position to interpret the potentialities concealed in classical philosophy than was possible in the ancient period itself. The death of the hero can only be contemplated, and its meaning is only to be understood, by his successor on the stage of history.

Apart from these two viewpoints—one retrospective and the other prospective—which allow us to view the successive periods of history in a common perspective, it seems that lying in the background of Marx's interpretation there is yet another notion, which concerns the final destiny of nature. The battle of classical philosophy was prompted by the urge to freedom over against the pressure of nature. For spirit to become unified it is necessary to cleave nature asunder. It is this freedom which characterizes the modern world: the capacity of spirit to loose itself from nature and claim its own independent rights. Yet is it really the ultimate destiny of spirit to become totally autonomous, completely to separate itself from nature, in other words, to become natureless? Obviously, this is not Marx's deepest intention; for he seems to allude to an ultimate synthesis wherein nature and spirit will be reconciled. There is a noteworthy parallel between the way the dominance of a closed nature is terminated at the end of the classical period and the way the tyranny of the sealed Word is to be destroyed by the victory of modern philosophy, which will substitute the freedom of the spirit for the bondage of the Christian era. Of the end of the first period it is said that for spirit to be unified, nature has to be cleft into two. The end of the second era is marked by a conflict of the spirit with the spirit, that is, a fight of the free spirit against faith in a sealed Word. The spirit appears divided in itself, or, to put it more adequately, the seals of the spirit must be broken by the free spirit.