

Vilém Flusser

Unto the Third and Fourth Generation¹

**(I shall visit the transgressions up to the third and fourth generation of those
who annoy me.)**

And yet it moves!

Galileo Galilei, 1663

¹ Edited and translated by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, 2017.

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Introduction

The Lord's messengers worship the softness of His day. We, the third and fourth generation, fear the thunder of His wrath. This deafening sound vibrates in the air and in our ears. It presages the *dies irae*. The world will crumble into ashes. What shall we, poor wretches, do? This book will not attempt to formulate answers to this question. It will try to articulate the question. This book will try to make this unspeakable terror articulable. Because once articulated, the unspeakable stops frightening us. Rational discourse drives away fear. The fear of fear is the reason for all rationalizing effort, and also for the present effort. This will be an effort to build a tripod (more or less rational) to serve as support for a point of view. From this tripod we will try to observe the smoke and vapours that the throat of the past exhales. We will allow these poisonous perfumes to envelop us, but not to numb us. We will try to keep our heads high above the exhalations from the abyss. Thus, this articulation will not be, we hope, a mere babbling without nexus. With a little good will, some meaning can be discovered in it. And that meaning will concern the question, "How did we get here, and whose fault is that?" These are, in effect, two questions. The first asks of the situation we are in: "from where?", the other "why?" A chiliastic climate involves both questions. They vibrate with the trumpet and thunder of the last judgment. The duty of this introduction is to introduce the reader to this climate. To make the reader feel, like the author, this ultimate threat and promise.

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

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

In this climate, the existential question emerges: "Why is there something?" The multiple intellectual responses to this question are not interesting, if compared with the experiential answers that our generation is giving, which are two: One can be described as an act of devouring, the other as a shrug. If we try to articulate the two attitudes, the first one would be "*carpe diem*", and the other "I do not care". This is how mankind reacts to the signs in the prediction. For some the rockets are a means of travelling quickly and comfortably, for others they are an unpleasant noise that interrupts for an instant their daily idleness. Both attitudes are false, both the "progressive" and the "not committed" attitudes are poses. They are both escapes. The question "Why is there something?" cannot be evaded in this manner. We have to accept the rocket as a challenge. But this acceptance would have as consequence the acceptance of the world. And this is intolerable. It is better that the world ends.

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

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

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

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

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

We live in an already exhausted and impoverished world. We oscillate between devouring and refusing. Instruments rush, transparent and hollow, toward the emptiness of our Self to be consumed. In this fall they collide with other instruments that are being expelled from our Self by

boredom and nausea. The things that surround us are so transparent and hollow that we can glimpse nothingness through them. They are nebulous rags, things, which barely conceal the nakedness of our Self. We live in a world already almost emptied of reality. We still rarely catch a last remainder of reality, a sad vestige of a lost world. But this reality is too compact for us to bear it. We cannot hold on to it. We are a tired generation. Will we still be able to change our attitude?

I cannot answer that question. But I am looking for an answer. This book is the articulation of this demand. I want to understand the situation that gave rise to this question. Maybe I can find an answer by understanding the situation. I believe that the situation can be understood historically. It is in history that we find the explanation of the situation in which we are. It must, therefore, be in history that an escape from our situation is hidden. I will visit the generations that preceded us, so that they may answer: "Where are we going?" I do so with all the humility we owe to our elders, but not without recrimination. These generations, after all, are the ones to blame for the situation we are in. I want to learn from the past, not so much as to imitate it, but to learn how to avoid its mistakes. This is the purpose of this book.

1. Guilt

1.1. Holy See

The medieval city will be the point at which I will stop in the course of this trip towards our ancestors. Our generation can observe this city from a transcendent point of view. Our airplanes fly over it. In despondent pursuit of our business and leisure, we cross the air at violent speeds. However, these speeds are not experienced. The furious arrow of the airplane seems to be standing still by those strapped onto it with a seat belt. Indeed, the airplane is one of the few remaining places for meditation. Flight does not give us the feeling of movement. This is a typical phenomenon of the unreal world that surrounds us. The speed of the flight is experienced only after the trip, or in a disaster. During the flight, we are still, and it is the landscape that unfolds in a slow and inviting way for meditations accompanied by the monotonous and numbing noise of the engines. If this landscape is Europe, we will notice in it curious formations: clusters of houses and small cottages, with labyrinthine streets and alleys; a narrow and anguished clustering. These cities are more like organisms than constructions. They seem to have sprouted from their landscape and to be sheltered therein. They are not scattered on the landscape, nor do they oppress the landscape like our cities. They look like flocks of sheep that cluster, fearful, around the shepherd's staff; around the cathedral's tower. They fear the wolf that surrounds the city. This wolf has disappeared in the mists of ancient legends. The shepherd, too, has retired to pious, and perhaps not entirely sincere, stories and songs. What remained are only the sheep and the shepherd's abandoned staff. They are empty shells of a once burning hope. They are the petrified waste of glorious terror. They are coral reefs of the faith that crystallized in beauty. Thus are these cities hidden in their valleys, or leaning upon their hills. They extend in vain their pleading towers toward the sky and the airplane that flies over them. They are symbols of our subconscious. They attest not only to the past of our society, but also of our minds. Our ancestors once inhabited these now empty capsules. They suffered in them, prayed in them, and created spells and masterpieces in them. But we, in our childhood, also go through a stage that corresponds to this climate of life. We were also Gothic once. Inside our mind we shelter coral reefs that resemble this carcass. They are copies or models of these materialized phenomena. Medieval cities are parts of our own mind. To want to understand the spirit that created them and that was created by them is to want to understand oneself. This means we attempt to find our ancestors within our own minds.

The attempt to restore flesh to these stone skeletons is a multivalent activity. It has something of palaeontology, poetry, and autobiography. This attempt will most likely reconstruct, with

these dead stones, a creature as grotesque as a gigantosaur rebuilt with dead bones. This gesture will sculpt a figure of ourselves from the ruins, just like the statue of itself that the sculptor models out of stone. There will emerge, before our mental vision, a fantastic world that will be, in essence, a dream and a nightmare from our childhood, projected on the backdrop of the history of society. This amalgam of grotesque reconstruction, artistic creation, and dream will be the spirit that we will raise from the cities. We shall call this ghost "The Middle Ages".

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

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

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

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

And, indeed, the position we recommend is that which the cathedral assumes. It stands out from the city. It solemnly pushes away the multitude of houses. The magic circle of the Cathedral Square keeps, at a distance, the secular and worldly bustling of the streets. The cathedral faces the silent peace of heaven. Outside its walls lie the chaos of the city, the gaudy colours of lascivious dresses, the obscene shouting of maids and servants, and the disgusting smell of the fair of yesterday and today. Inside is the repressed ardour of ruby and emerald stained glass, the soft and charming voices of Gregorian chanting, and the acrid-sweet scent of incense. Outside, in the city, everything is confusion, everything is suffering. Inside, in the cathedral, everything is order, everything is beauty. But the organized beauty of the cathedral is the sublimated consequence of the chaos in the city. The cathedral is chaos disciplined, chaste, and punished. It is the severe and logical form, into which chaos was poured to be saved. So vivid and opulent is this chaos that it threatens to break the severe form of the cathedral on all seams. The yellow and red trousers of the squire are rendered in gold and ruby stained glass. The rattles of the Jester's cap resonate in the ringing of the bells. In the ogival arch that points to the sky hides the bosom of the harlot, thus the whole building of the cathedral becomes sublimated flesh.

Herein lies the meaning of the cathedral, and this is how it overcomes the city: the cathedral sublimates the city in order to elevate it. The cathedral transforms the colours of silk and velvet into the shine of halos. It causes the jester's rattles to become an invitation to prayer. It purifies the flesh. This is how the cathedral becomes the focus of the city. All the rays of the Middle Ages focus upon the cathedral, to be purged in its fire. The cathedral is the centripetal goal of the activity of the streets. It gives direction, therefore meaning, to all this activity. Thanks to the cathedral all this mundane activity is meaningful. The most unbridled gluttony, the most abominable drunkenness, the most impudent fornication, the most bestial torment of people and animals, all have a sacral meaning that gives the act a goal: it ends in the cathedral, in order to be encompassed by its disciplined and purifying beauty. Even the witch who spends her dirty nights with the billy goat finds her niche in the saving cathedral. The whole cacophony of the city, both the

monk's monotonous praying and the shouting song of the lansquenet, both the whispering of the maiden and the shouting of the harlot, will be part of the polyphony of Gregorian chanting. It is in this sense that the city is Catholic. Everyone participates in the same reality, and everyone tends toward the same goal. No one doubts the foundation. The nave of the cathedral is this foundation. Heresy, atheism, and doubt, in the medieval sense of these terms, are grounded by the cathedral.

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

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

was a functional instrument, therefore pragmatically useful. But above all, the clock represented the madness of the whole Middle Ages, just as the age represents itself through beauty. The whole Middle Ages, as it comes to us, therefore, as something past, or, perfected and realized, can be regarded as a single gigantic work of art.

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

The goal of medieval life was the progressive realization of this project. It was the search for the modelling finger of the supreme artist. Everything pointed to His finger: the pointed towers, the pointed ceilings, the pointed windows, the pointy writing, even the pointed spears. Everything pointed to His finger, but nothing reached Him. In this sense, the Middle Ages is the frustrated era. It had an unattainable goal. And, after hundreds of years of frustrated effort, the Middle Ages abandoned the attempt. The Modern Age is, as a whole, a single escape route from an overly difficult task. The Middle Ages failed in its task. The cathedrals are the pathetic and empty monuments of this unfulfilled task.

In the context of the Modern Age cathedrals are monuments to frustration. They are so, because they are perfect and finished. But this tragic aspect is precisely its modern aspect. At the time of their construction cathedrals were, on the contrary, monuments to optimism. The building process took hundreds of years. Masons, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, glaziers, and all the Catholic mass of the city, the castle, and the monastery converged on the Holy See to collaborate on

the construction of the cathedral and its masterpieces. All the labyrinthine paths, and all the tortuous streets led to the square. The Holy See was the dam of all the streams. At some distance from the square the river system of feudalism was concentrated in three major rivers: the three states. Thus gathered, they flowed majestically into the ocean in which the cathedral nave sailed. This ship had two captains: the Holy Roman Emperor and the Bishop of Rome. The tension between them made the trip a risky endeavour. But it is not this global aspect that I intend to illustrate in the following considerations. My method will be different. I have chosen three of the many paths that the square demands, and I will try to follow them. I chose the path of the school, the path of magic, and the path of the sword. In these three contributions to the construction of the cathedral, I shall try to discover the explanation of its failure. My method will be modern. It will be the discursive method and will have clear distinction as a goal. Nevertheless, if it is successful, this method should be able to convey to the reader something of the medieval experience of reality.

1.1.1. School

The belief that thought is a noble activity, the belief in "pure reason," is a modern superstition. The Middle Ages ignored the concept of Man as a thinking thing. The scholars of the school were therefore unaware of our meaning of the term "theory." They did not live theoretically, and in this sense they did not love wisdom. They were not philosophers in our meaning of the term. If philosophy is defined as love of detached thought, a thought therefore pursuing a course which ignores the goal, then the medieval school is anti philosophical at its very foundation. The school has a clear, precise, and defined goal. The goal of the school is to teach the technique of eternal life. The school is the foundation of life, and we study for life and not for the school. And it is obvious to the scholastics, so obvious as to admit no doubt, that this life for which we study is the life after the death of the body. In fact, the world of the senses, that phenomenal world that surrounds us and in which we participate by virtue of our body, is nothing more than a gigantic pedagogical institute. Its sole purpose is to educate us to eternal life. The worldview of the scholars is of the world as a school of souls, and man as a student of the course for the candidates to eternal life. All human activity is preparation for the entrance exam called "death". Life in the body is an initiation to the "*ars moriendi*".

Life is, strictly speaking, a teaching in the technique of death. And the school, in the strict meaning of the term, that is, the low and ill-lit room in which the scholars teach, is the polytechnic of eternal life. Scholasticism is, therefore, an eminently technical and pragmatic discipline with

didactic purposes, and "*toto coelo*" different from philosophy in the old or modern sense of the term. Scholars are not "pure" thinkers, but highly specialized instructors. Scholasticism is the applied science of the salvation of souls.

The romantic sentimentality that characterized modern universities until the beginning of our century is a climate quite foreign to the scholars. It is, from their point of view, a symptom of our teachers' inauthenticity. The scholastics are all profoundly realistic even when they are called technically nominalists. They are planted with both feet firmly on the ground of reality. Namely, on the ground of that reality that faith provides. The speculations to which they are devoted have for us an air of unreality, of the whimsy and of the abstract. But this is a sign of our alienation, not theirs. The fact is that we, as essentially romantic, cannot follow their rational and empirical argument, that is, the argument based on reason and the immediate experience that faith offers. Alienated, we are victims of a curious schizophrenia. There is an abyss for us between reason and immediate experience. We oscillate between rationalism and empiricism. And we lost touch with reality, which rushed into the abyss between them. But the arguments of scholasticism refer precisely to this realm of the real that is located, for us, between reason and immediate experience. Scholastics do not feel, as well integrated as they are, our antinomy. Reason and experience are not two opposing capacities to grasp reality, but are two complementary capacities. They are the two graces we have at our disposal. Our antinomy is the result of a displacement of experience that lies at the bottom of our madness. We shifted experience to the senses. And the experience the senses provide is illusory and deceptive. That is why it contradicts reason and opposes it. For the scholastics it is not the senses, but faith that provides immediate experience. Between this type of experience and reason there is, in theory, no antinomy.

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

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

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

Scholasticism is not a theory of knowledge. It is a technique for the salvation of souls. Their problems are pedagogical and didactic, and as such they must be addressed. I want to discuss three of these problems. These problems have names. These names are: "tradition," "universals," and "truth." We must take care that the modern meanings of these three terms do not invade our discussion so as not to deform them. The effort we must make is therefore negative. We must forget all the modern developments that manipulated the three terms proposed, in order to give them new content.

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

influence that modifies the course of the fall. They are a current in the waterfall, which has its source beyond the world. The source is the Divine revelation, and the current that flows from it in order to influence the world, is the tradition of the Church.

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

Conceived in this way, scholasticism is a paradoxically frustrated effort. It seeks to clarify the revelation, and adds to it in this attempt a multitude of comments, which call for clarification. It tries to assimilate Greek thought to the revelation, and only succeeds in this effort to demonstrate the abyss that separates these two worlds. Scholasticism seeks to become a filter of tradition, whereby holy water is passed from truth to the crystalline well of God. In effect, scholasticism became a labyrinthine branching of contradictory theses, therefore, a marsh in which this holy water stagnates. The more the screw of tradition advanced, the fact that it took thought away from its sources became clearer. Scholasticism, far from being a stairway to heaven, led the

soul into dangerous regions. Its search for the simplicity of truth has resulted in the sophisticated cleverness of the multiplicity of theses. A tragic sense of deep disenchantment involves the last stages of this gigantic effort. Scholasticism is one of the pillars on which the cathedral is based. The failure of scholasticism proved in fact a profound error in the plan for building the cathedral, a mistake that made the Middle Ages despair. The famous quarrel of universals is an early symptom of this despair. One must locate this quarrel in this context. To a mind informed by modern thought this seems to be a wholly abstract problem. It seems to be about the relation between particular names (which we would call "proper names"), and universal names (which we would call "class names"). This is a purely formal matter from the modern point of view. The fact that it assumes now a capital importance in philosophy, is proof of how we began to overcome the Modern Age. It is necessary to put the modern point of view in brackets if we are to grasp the spirit that propelled this argument. For the scholastics, this is an existential decision between two alternatives, a decision that entails two different life projects. Are "universal" concepts such as gender, species, and property "*ante res*", "*in rebus*," or "*post res*" (prior to things, within things, or after things)? This concerns the decision of where reality lies. This is the typically scholastic form of seeking God. Those who have decided in favour of the judgment that "universals come before things," resolved to deny, in this decision, the autonomy of the world of things. Reality is prior to things. Reality is in God who is prior to things. The human mind participates in this reality because it houses universal names, which are messengers of reality. Those who have decided to work in favour of these messengers are therefore the realists.

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

The history books of philosophy teach that the nominalist position was victorious, and that the Modern Age is nominalist. Thus these books prove how modern they are. They perceive only the formal similarity that unites nominalism and the modern position. They do not perceive the abyss that separates nominalism from the Modern Age, and do not perceive the foundation that

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

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

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

What is truth? In the context of medieval thought this question means: what is the way of salvation, and what is the technique to follow it? The question of truth is, therefore, eminently pragmatic. But it is again necessary to eliminate from our mind the modern meanings of the terms "truth" and "praxis". For the modern mind truth is a treasure that must be sought to be discovered. This resides in the progressive adequation² of the intellect to the thing (this thing which is, for the moderns, the nominal seat of reality). Every step of this progressive adequation provides a partial truth, a sought-after treasure coin. Every currency is tested for validity because every currency is dubious. This test is what we call "praxis." An important aspect of the concept of progress in the modern sense is precisely this accumulation of tested coins. But the tests are not definitive. Despite the test, every coin remains dubious. As dubious as the thing to which the currency is adequated is dubious. The inflation of the truth currency is a feature of the Modern Age. This Age has a huge and ever-increasing treasure of truths, which are devalued in a rampant way.

The situation of the Middle Ages is totally different. The treasury of truth is fully deposited in the cathedral, and the Church is the guardian of the key. The truth has been entrusted to the

² To adequate is to make equal, to equalize. Flusser uses the term "adequation" in reference to Saint Thomas Aquina's epistemological statement: "*veritas adequatio intellectus ad rem*" (truth is the equalization between intellect and thing), which Flusser expands upon throughout the book, and in his work as a whole, as the basis for contemporary epistemology. Therefore, I have chosen to use the English verb "to adequate" and its variations in order to keep a close resonance with Aquina's and Flusser's use of the term. [T.N.]

cathedral by God, and there is therefore no doubt as to its validity. The Church, guardian of the key, was in charge of the distribution of the treasure. The distribution of undoubted truth, is the medieval meaning of the term "praxis". The problem is this: The treasure of truth, while deposited in the vault of the cathedral, had undoubted value. But, once put into circulation, it became doubtful, because many false coins circulated that imitated it. Scholasticism is, from this point of view, the institute charged with distinguishing between true and false coins. Its duty is to collect and destroy the counterfeit coins and discipline the circulation of the real coins.

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

All of this illustrates well the existential climate that reigned in the school, which was the pragmatic mood of wanting to force the salvation of the soul at all costs. This means the constant awareness of the danger of the soul's annihilation if the technique that the school teaches fails. And this technique fails, if it loses contact with the cathedral, which is its focus. The school is dominated by the constant fear of heresy. This fear explains why scholars are confined, intellectually, to a few postulates, and physically, to their dark and dusty classrooms. They seek to shelter themselves within the narrow walls of faith, and they know why they do it. They fear the wrath of the cathedral, though not in the unworthy sense that the modern spirit imputes to them. Many of them bravely faced the ray of anathema and the flames of the fire. What they fear, however, is the eternal fire of hell. It is in this sense that scholasticism is nothing more than apologia and a servant of the Church.

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

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

1.1.2. Alchemy

The street of the alchemists, like all the streets of the city, also ends at the Cathedral Square, but its traffic is ambivalent. There is a secret underground corridor, closed by hermetically sealed gates, and this corridor connects the street of the alchemists with the forest, beyond the walls of the city. This forest is inhabited by witches and the banished Greek and German gods. Only the initiate can dare to break the seal and penetrate the forest. This is an obscure world in which the Church collides with the temple and in which scholasticism embraces Orphism. This shock and this embrace, which has the pale light of the moon as a witness, is a struggle and a loving act. Even the alchemist himself cannot say who presides over this ambivalent and mysterious union, whether God or the Other. This libidinous encounter twists and turns, and in this retort, pure gold and the stone of wisdom are precipitated. In this no-man's land between faith and superstition, between organization and chaos, will arise the magical and dangerous power of modern science. The Church, as if inspired by prophetic premonition, protects the entrance to this land with the sword, and the exit with fire. The Church seems decidedly contrary to all these dubious and potentially sinful experiences. But this appearance deceives. The Church feels a strong attraction for these attempts to master the first element spiritually. The transmutation of vile metal into a precious and constant metal is but another aspect of the salvation of the soul imprisoned in the body. Both attempts are the result of the same mentality. The relationship between Church and

magic is intimate and difficult to interpret. For the Church, magic is nothing but a borderline situation.

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

The formulas, the incantations, and the invocative gestures of the alchemists are, for scholasticism, confusing syllogisms. The syllogisms of scholasticism are, for the alchemists, dry, superficial, and inefficient formulas. But it is obvious that both these disciplines articulate the same spirit and pursue the same goal. Scholasticism has a narrower base because it distrusts the alchemy's confused amplitude. It limits tradition to sacred books and to Greek philosophers. It seeks to continue and develop this tradition through clear and precise comments. Alchemy springs from the millennial tradition of the East, whispered from ear to ear. It seeks to continue and develop this tradition through patient experience. But the tradition of scholasticism, the sacred books of the Jews, and the Greek thinkers are no more than a crystallized form of the tradition of alchemy. Scholasticism is the visible part of the tradition's iceberg, of which alchemy is the invisible part. The school halls and the monks' cells order, structure and codify this tradition in a disciplined manner. The vaults and basements of the alchemists keep alive and booming the tradition, so that it may erupt in the explosive way we call the "Modern Age."

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

The attempt to experimentally demonstrate the "universals," to distil them and to precipitate them from things, and to penetrate the realm of constancy and immortality, is the definition of

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

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

The universal foundation that precedes things pervades all things. Destiny can be discovered in all things. The transmutation of lead into gold is the discovery of the destiny of lead and is, in this sense, the liberation of lead. But given this universal foundation, this transmutation is, also, in a certain sense, the liberation of the human soul. Having discovered the destiny of lead, alchemy discovered an aspect of human destiny. Human destiny lies in all things, and it can be discovered within them. The study of things is the search for human destiny, and in this sense, the attempt to free the soul. This is not, therefore, a humanist type of research. Man is not in a situation opposite to things. Man permeates things, man is within them, and they are within man. Things are not the object of man, but are his sisters, since they are united by the same destiny. By discovering this destiny, man does not free himself from things, but frees himself in things and with things. He does not break free from lead, but frees himself in lead by liberating lead. Modern science is an opposing of man to things, and it is in this opposition that modern man manipulates things. Man is the "Other" of things; he is alienated from them.

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

All things are symbols of wholeness. All things can be deciphered and reveal destiny. It is by virtue of this symbolic character of things that the world is significant. Because it has lost its symbolic character, the world of today is absurd. Where there is no enigma, there is no meaning, and every activity becomes absurd. When the enigma disappeared, and destiny disappeared, freedom disappeared. But in a symbolic world all activity is significant. And every activity, if conducted by proper technique, will result in freedom. Alchemists are the activists of the Middle Ages, and their technique is the technique of freedom. Their study of things must be thus interpreted. It is in this spirit that they investigate the future. They do this with anything: the constellations, the palm of the hand, the bowels of animals, a crystal ball, and a deck of cards. All things symbolize wholeness, and, if deciphered, reveal the destiny of everything, including Man. But it is obvious that the constellations, by their size and constancy, reside closer to reality. They are, therefore, the easiest phenomena to interpret. The stars represent the most comfortable field of pene-

tration, and astrology is thus the most well developed discipline of alchemy. So developed, in effect, that it has become almost independent. But astrology never lost contact with the whole discipline. Metals "are" planets, planets "are" organs of the body, and the horoscope is a view of wholeness.

To see wholeness means to subjugate destiny to the human Will. It means, in the medieval sense, "to avoid destiny". Herein lies the profound problem of alchemy. "Avoiding destiny," what is this other than to oppose the divine plan? What is freedom, therefore, if not sin "*tout court*"? The answer to this question divides alchemy into "white" and "black" magic. We must deeply grasp this terrible doubt that divides the whole Middle Ages. This is what explains the Church's ambivalence about alchemy. The Church does not doubt the epistemological validity, but the ethical validity of this attempt. The Church does not doubt that, in theory, the judgments of alchemy are true, but it fears that they are, in theory, sinful. They are sinful precisely because they are true. And the alchemists themselves share the fears of the Church. They fear eternal fire. That is why they keep their technique a secret. That is why they keep their books behind seven seals. They know how dangerous their knowledge is. This knowledge of the danger is common to all alchemists. Even those who have consciously resolved themselves in favour of total liberty, even the sorcerers dedicated to black magic, know the danger. Sorcerers are also Christians in this sense, and surround their know-how, their spell, with prohibitive rites. This is why a sorcerer's training is so arduous. This existential climate, the fruit of the fear of sin, is foreign to the modern mind. Our scientists, the late grandchildren of the alchemists, act with impunity and impudence in the light of the floodlights and at the mouths of ravenous microphones. Or at least they acted like this until very recently. They seem (or seemed) to ignore the feeling of sin. The alchemist hides himself, timid and fearful, in the dark corner of his attic, and in the magic circle of his rites. He knows the danger and is therefore the bravest. In this corner and in this circle he struggles to decide in favour of "white" magic or "black" magic.

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

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

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

Let us illuminate this difficulty from another point of view. The alchemist is, as has already been said, the activist of the Middle Ages, and is therefore the one who has the obligation to confront the devil. Alchemy is the frontline between the Middle Ages and the devil. Whoever resolves in favour of alchemy, is resolved in the defence of the Church. The resolution in favour of alchemy is the resolution in favour of "white" magic. This is, initially, a valid and honest existential decision. Thus committed, the alchemist faces the devil. This confrontation results in the discovery of forces and powers hitherto unknown. This gives the alchemist the sensation of freedom. Power corrupts and freedom inebriates. Little by little, and imperceptibly, the alchemist is carried away by the diabolical forces he intended to combat, and changes, imperceptibly, to another front. He does not sell his soul in a clear and sudden gesture, but he surrenders his soul gradually, in exchange for parcels of freedom. This phenomenon of the imperceptible sliding and the gradual front-shift, we can now see in detectives, who gradually become criminals, and psychiatrists, who gradually become mad. It is obvious that the detective, when accused of crime, will deny the fact. So too the alchemist, when accused of black magic, will deny sin, though he

may confess the acts that are imputed to him. But there is no doubt that the Church's accusation is valid, because the authentic alchemist chose, without perhaps knowing it, freedom, and therefore deserves to be burned alive. This is the only possibility left to save his soul.

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

From the point of view of the cathedral, "black" magic is a terrible heresy. It means, in effect, a return to paganism. Black magic is a return to that dark age, which did not yet know the light of truth. This is why this magic is called "black." But for us moderns, black magic is one of the few links that united the Middle Ages to the classical ages, which appear to us as having been enlightened. For moderns, the Middle Ages presents itself as a barrier separating our age from classical civilizations, and "black" magic as one of the few threads that cross the barrier. But this modern view can be described in other words. The Middle Ages is the majestic mountain range that separates the classical and modern arid plains, and black magic is one of the narrow passages, or one of the secret tunnels, that allow transit between the ages.

But the sorcerers and the witches themselves agreed with the view of the Church, not with ours. They did not see themselves, in their awareness of their situation, as being the followers of the classical period, nor, much less, as precursors. They did not nourish our concept of progress. If we sympathize with sorcerers and witches, because we believe we see our ancestors in them,

we commit an anachronism. They are entirely medieval existences, and their problematic and values are medieval. They climbed up to the bonfires, not because they disregarded, classically, the superstition that surrounded them, nor because they strove for the progress of mankind, modernly, they climbed the bonfires out of passion for the devil. They have nothing of an Apostate Julian, who died for the glory of Antiquity, nor of Giordano Bruno, who died for the glory of the future. They died for the glory of the devil. How can we explain this passion, and how can we feel its taste and enthusiasm? By demodernizing sorcerers and witches.

The freedom that alchemy seeks is sin. "White" magic pretends to seek sin in order to avoid it. White magic is like those ladies who read pornography books to censor them and prevent others from reading those books. "Black" magic seeks the voluptuousness of sin. It hides its secrets, not to sterilize them, but because they are love secrets. Black magic gives itself to the devil passionately, lovingly, passively, and patiently. There is a feminine element of surrender in black magic. Death at the stake is only the last moment, the orgasmic moment of this surrender. The magician sleeps with Evil; he embraces sin. In this embrace he whispers his incantations and his formulas with a voice choked with voluptuousness; they are the secrets of love. His rites and his experiences are loving gestures. All his activity is a loving activity, and black magic is a single "*coitus ininterruptus*". Hence the seemingly monotonous repetition of experiences and gestures. Hence the apparent patience of the alchemists. Black magic is the patience of passion, and the monotony and mechanicity of the act of love. This libidinous character of "black" magic pervades a steady and intoxicating scent in every medieval environment and explains the climate of exaltation that reigns around the bonfires. This is the opposite, but corresponding, climate of the Mass. Black magic is a phenomenon of Catholicism. It is an integral part of the faith that has the cathedral as focus. Black magic is the shadow that the flames of faith project on the wall of the mind. While denying the reality of Christian faith, "black" magic affirms this faith by denying it. It participates, fundamentally, in the same reality.

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

The division of magic into "white" and "black" makes this discipline ambivalent. The traffic of the alchemists' street points to the Cathedral Square, but also the extramural regions of Antiquity and the Modern Age. This dichotomy is as pernicious as the division of scholasticism into

realism and nominalism. The cathedral, which relies on alchemy, cannot deal with the vibration of this column. And the orthodox prohibition of penetrating the secrets of alchemy renders the rift irreparable. The germ of death hides, throughout the Middle Ages, in this wound. This explains, in part, the Renaissance.