

AN ESSAY ON POLITICAL MYTHS:  
ANARCHIST MYTHS OF REVOLT

When, under the tutelage of the "Fathers" Enfantin and Saint-Amand Bazard, the disciples of Saint-Simon were initiated into the exemplary "proletarian" life, they were re-enacting the ways of the first Christians. Styling themselves as "apostles," by way of justifying their doctrines, they invoked the authority of myth. The "City of God" referred to in their vows was no utopian invention, but the "New Jerusalem," the recreation of the original city; the *New Book* summarizing the ideology of a radical *renovatio*, was the sacred text of a *New Christianity*. To the avowed Saint-Simonians, the Golden Age was not the source of some irrepressible nostalgia, but rather the promise of a social perfection that must be realized upon Earth in the more or less immediate future. The pilgrims of Ménilmontant were not unfamiliar with the myth of the Three Ages: did not one of them translate into French Lessing's "incendiary" essay on *The Education of the Human Race*?<sup>1</sup> (Even while that new interpretation of millennial prophecy by the Calabrian abbot was,

<sup>1</sup> Joachim de Fiore (1130-1202) was perhaps Europe's first "futurologist." His prophecies are characterized by a scheme of predictions which is also to be found both in Schelling's essay, and in those philosophies of history which prolong the period of messianic expectation. Humanity has reached the end

Translated by Paul Rowland

through Hegel, Schelling, and Fichte, infiltrating into libertarian socialism and Marxism.)

The nascent philosophies of history mirror the tripartite structure of the future such as is discernible from a twin, historical and mythological, study of *The Bible of Joachim*. And, to the myth of Progress, which constitutes their apparent theme, is added the more subtly destructive myth of the decline of civilizations: that both fascinating and disturbing reversal which, since the Age of Enlightenment, has gone with every innovative effort.

When, in 1750, Turgot proclaimed the *doctrine* of Progress before the Masters of the Sorbonne, he was only endorsing or officially recognizing the *myth* of man's boundless Perfectibility that had already been seized upon by the scientific imagination... The necessity of this myth was soon to render illusory the concept of untrammelled liberty.

The myth of the decadence of Europe also seemed to be both myth and rational observation. Standing before the ruins of Nineveh, Babylon, and Jerusalem, and pondering upon the mortality of civilizations, the Comte de Volney was being a kind of historian. He was not looking for the Noble Savage or the Chinese Sage: he was, nonetheless, the first of a long line of historians who were, with a superabundance of facts, to contribute the evidence supporting the myth of the Decline, to which *The Decline of the West* is the ultimate monument. The cultural pessimism of Europe was born out of the explosive mixture of historical reflection and the myth of decadence, the acute distress of which is hardly ameliorated by the hope of a hypothetical renewal (or of the eternal cycle).

The myth, which allows the philosophy of history to venture out into the territory of the future, is, in its essential aspects and its functioning, a constituent of modern political thought. Yet if, as we have seen in referring to the mythic socialism of Saint-Simon and his disciples, its radiance was undimmed at the beginning of the 19th century, it became dissipated and fragmented on contact with the utopian rationalism dominating the

of the second age, and the onset of the third age — The Revolution and socialism — is announced by a period of cataclysmic troubles. Traces of this are also evident both in Marx's dialectical materialism and in Moeller van den Bruck's *Germany's Third Empire*, (via *The Christianity of the Third Testament*, by the Russian Merejkovski).

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institution of projects for social reconstruction. Even though secularised and camouflaged, however, the existence of the political myth was perpetuated. How could it have been otherwise? Whoever spoke of the future—the ideologue, the party theorist—made it a strict rule to talk of history, and this history was necessarily based upon the authority of the myth, in order to root itself in the soil of revolutionary thought.

In the imagination of the rebellious mind, the Genesis myth was clearly predominant. From the first decades of the 19th century, eschatological myths constituted an inexhaustible basis for social cosmogenies. In its myths, the French Revolution set itself the task of restoring the republican virtues of Sparta and Rome: the innovatory achievement of the ideologues and instigators of the first modern revolution manifested itself in the form of a return to an original. Yet this original was to be found in historical times. Under the Restoration, revolutionary myths were inspired by the era of the Creation... and by the primordial era of the first Revolt: that of Satan, against the order of the Creation.

Even when discredited, myths of history nevertheless did not lose their importance. But if the heroes of historical revolt have a place in the vast genealogy of Revolt, they owe it solely to the fever, the apocalyptic vertigo by which they were possessed. Ancestors of anarchistic or Marxist communism such as Jean de Leyde or Thomas Münzer belong to history only by virtue of the setbacks to the millenarian myth that they represent. Sometimes the myth corrects, or tones down the details of historical narrative: on other occasions history contributes its exactitude to support the myth. The charismatic leader takes up again for himself the unaccomplished heroic task once historical events provide the substance of the seminal myths of the age.<sup>2</sup>

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Our analysis of modern myths of revolt will be based upon anarchistic myths. By way of argument, we shall refer to the romantic myths of Satan, Cain, and Prometheus: hallmarks of that other secular wonder, revolutionary romanticism.

<sup>2</sup> As, for instance, was the case with the battleship *Potemkin*, the storming of the Winter Palace, or the stages of The Long March.

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Anarchist mythology encapsulated the creative power of rejection in the form of narrative models. As the champions of negation its heroes were the heretics of the Creation; yet far from being content to oppose the magic rituals of destruction to the sanctity of order, it also took up arms against the nascent myths of organized socialism. In effect, it encompassed the myths of the State (of centralized power), of Science, and the Machine, in one comprehensive outburst of malediction. At the same time, it reformulated, in the terms of the mythic reality, those historical conditions in which it recognized its perfect models: the *polis* of ancient Greece and the free city of the Middle Ages, (i.e. the myths of the creative people: the people of the agora and the cathedrals).

In passing from history into the realms of myth, the creator of libertarian myths reinterpreted the Judeo-Christian eschatological myths which, with respect to the genealogy of historical revolt, formed a part of the common store of revolutionary mythology. (Thus it was that Thomas Münzer became the patron saint of Kropotkin and the communistic anarchists). He based his hopes upon the imminence of an apocalyptic destruction which would be "directed" above all against "things." Like Marxist mythology, it radicalized its corpus of images with an eye to a violent redemptive action. But while Marx tied his vision of the future to a restoration of the age of Genesis, the anarchist recreated the age of the *Rupture*: the myth of Satan revolting against the one-sidedness of the creative Spirit.

Leaving now the anarchist-romantic myth of Satan, I shall present a survey of some of the myths that give anarchist activity its fundamental character: its roots in the dream of a world that is both very old and very ancient. I shall complete my study with an analysis of the anarchist philosophy of history, with respect to the mythic theory of the eternal cycle.

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"The feeling of revolt, that Satanic pride which rejects the domination of any master, divine or human, and which alone creates in man the love of independence and liberty..."

Bakunin: *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*.

## *Anarchist Myths of Revolt*

### THE MYTH OF THE DEVIL

*The Devil on the Long Bridge*: the very title of Riccardo Bacchelli's historical novel underlines the mephistophelian temptation that such an adversary of God as Bakunin must have undergone.<sup>3</sup> In Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, the caricature of the "great exile" is surrounded by a faintly mephistophelian halo; but Peter Ivanovitch bears no more than a tentative likeness to the infinitely more complex, fascinating, and abject figure of Stavrogin, whose character Dostoyevsky conceived during the Nechayev trial (*The Devils*).

Did Bakunin become the founder of the *Satanic school* of libertarian socialism? The fundamental myth which he cited as the legitimation for his subversive activity sinks its roots deep into the prehistory of revolt—the mythical epoch of the Original Sin—the *myth of Satan*. By turning the primordial gesture of defiance into a reality, Bakunin was siding with those same romantic poets that he qualified as representatives of literary reaction in France. He placed the anarchist revolt beneath the banner of Satan's revolt against the Creation, the perfect model for the affirmation of mankind in the face of God, and for his Promethean inclination. In his great posthumous text, *God and the State*, Bakunin reinterpreted the myth of Original Sin within a romantic perspective. Jehovah, a vain, despotic, and blood-thirsty God, created Adam and Eve; was he acting on whim or did he wish to provide himself with new slaves? Bakunin allows some doubt to hang over his motives. Deceptively generous, he puts the whole Earth at their disposal, with all its fruits and all its animals: but he forbids them to touch the fruits of the tree of knowledge, the very symbol of that which forearms man against Evil, i.e. God. "Thus he wished mankind, bereft of all consciousness of himself, to remain an eternal beast, for ever on all fours before the 'living' God, his creator and his master."<sup>4</sup> He acted under a misconception of the characteristics that constitute the humanity of mankind: the "faculty of thought" and

<sup>3</sup> *Il Diavolo al Pontelungo*. First published in 1926, Bacchelli's novel was published in French as *La folie Bakounine* (Paris, Juillard, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Bakunin, *God and the State*, in *From the War to the Commune*. Texts of 1870-71, drawn up from original manuscripts and presented by Fernand Rude. Paris, Anthropos, 1972, p. 286.

“the need to revolt.” “But here Satan steps in, the eternal rebel, the first freethinker and the emancipator of worlds. He makes man ashamed of his ignorance and his animalistic obedience; he emancipates him, and stamps his brow with the seal of liberty and humanity by urging him to disobey and eat the fruit of knowledge.” History begins with Satan’s example of revolt, and henceforth it remains the paragon of all actions aimed at restoring human liberty and dignity. In order to bring events to the desired positive conclusion, the rebel must “*be possessed*.” Is the devil awake in mankind, or does he lie silent? It was in this spirit that Bakunin wrote to his friends who were ready to rush to Paris in April of 1871: “I see only too clearly that it is a lost cause... Inasmuch as the devil will not be seriously roused, we have nothing to do there.”<sup>5</sup> In a paradigmatic gesture, Satan’s revolt fixed forever the goal of revolutionary strife; and it reveals the mythological depths of all ostensibly political activity: “Evil is the revolt of Satan against divine authority, a revolt in which we, on the contrary, perceive the fertile seed of every human emancipation. Like the Fraticellis of Bohemia in the XIVth century, revolutionary socialists today identify themselves by these words: “In the name of him to whom a great wrong has been done”.”<sup>6</sup>

At the time that Bakunin recognized in Satan the archetype of rebellion, Proudhon’s famous call was still alive in every memory: “Come, Satan, come, slandered by priests and kings; let me embrace you, and let me hold you to my breast!” (1860). The “most-beloved of my heart,” Satan is the “indefatigable” spirit of the revolution. The ancestor of a long line of rebels, he is the first to undertake the task of the regeneration of humanity through negation, a task twenty times shouldered and twenty times abandoned, and thus always there to be shouldered again. But if it was the author of *The General Idea of Revolution in the XIXth Century* who introduced the rehabilitated figure of Satan into the libertarian iconography, Bakunin was probably inspired by a novel by George Sand, *Consuelo*, which he read avidly and discussed personally with the author at the time

<sup>5</sup> Michael, Bakunin. *God and the State*, in *From the War to the Commune*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Albert Camus, in *The Rebel*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951, p. 192.

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of his first visit to Europe.<sup>7</sup> In this novel, Satan is not the Outcast, the unspeakable monster, but the “archangel of legitimate revolt.” George Sand exonerates Satan of the charges of sedition brought against him; Consuelo explains that in the eyes of the people Satan has become the “symbol and patron of its desire for liberty, equality, and happiness,” while through a symbolic inversion, St Michael is no more than the “representative of the pontiffs and princes of the Church, of those who suppressed the religion of equality and the principle of happiness for the family of man, with the fiction of hell.” Consuelo equally reconciled Jesus and Satan, those two brothers united by their compassion for humanity, but following two different paths. While Jesus preached resignation, Satan was the apostle of unconditional rebellion. (Did Proudhon read *Consuelo*? If he really knew of Sand’s work, he certainly took care to say nothing about it. The image of Jesus as the brother of Satan would necessarily, however, have appealed to his feelings by its integration of the figure of Christ into the genealogy of revolt. Christ was, in fact, Satan’s brother in revolt, but being an inconsequential reformer, he refused to give a hearing to the teachings of the First Rebel. Thus he came to grief, and died on the cross.<sup>8</sup>)

### AN ANARCHIST PROMETHEUS?

The preface to Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* is the first manifesto of the romantic revolt against the principle of authority in literature and politics. Prometheus is the first hero of revolt; for in romanticism he was the brother of Satan and Cain, and the archetype of titanism devoted to the idea of

<sup>7</sup> It was the poet Herwegh who introduced him to George Sand. Bakunin always alluded to her social work with admiration. Cf. E.H. Carr *Michael Bakunin*. New York, Vintage, no date, p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> Proudhon held Sand in low esteem. “On her own account, she has done more harm to the morals of our country than all the bohemianism denounced by Morin. If there is a prime culprit, it is that woman.” (Letter to G. Chaudey dated 7th April 1861). She personified the danger represented by a literature that had been politicized and drawn towards pernicious political ideas. In *Pornocracy* he noted: “The feminine influence in 1848 was one of the disasters of the Republic. With G. Sand, a woman and artist, composing the famous bulletin with J. Favre, another artist, the republic had fallen to the distaff” (p. 166).

Progress. He is the “type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noblest ends.”<sup>9</sup> He has all Satan’s virtues, without sharing any of his faults: the feeling of envy, of revenge, and, above all, personal ambition. As the regenerator of a humanity that he could not lead back to the state of original innocence, he sought a second state of innocence: one that is won through knowledge (while the first had been due to ignorance). As a *committed* poet, Shelly included in his dramatic poem the Godwinian image of purity regained through libertarian rejection:

“The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains  
Sceptreles, free, uncircumscribed, but man  
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,  
Exemp from awe, worship, degree, the king  
Over himself; just, gentle, wise...”<sup>10</sup>

“Ah, how I would like to be the Antichrist...” exclaimed the adolescent Shelley, who thought he was witnessing the great upheavals that announce the Third Age. According to him, the task of the poet, “the companion and harbinger of social change beyond the imagination,” was to hasten the arrival of the Golden Age where there was no God or master.

Under the influence of industrial and centralized socialism, Prometheus came more and more to represent the ideal of Progress through the advance of science and industry. For Ballanche and the Saint-Simonians, Prometheus, the inventor of crafts and trades, became the terrestrial agent of the “Law of Progress;” he it was who endowed mankind with the “power to tame blind nature,” and who made him lord of the land, the sea, and the skies.<sup>11</sup> In the preface to his doctoral thesis, Marx, who was closer to Shelley than to the Saint-Simonians, hailed the Titan as the “first martyr of the philosophical calendar,” and the enemy of all “gods of heaven and Earth who do not recognize the human consciousness as the supreme

<sup>9</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poetical Works*, Ed. Thomas Hutchinson, London, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 205.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 253.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. The excellent analysis by Pierre Albouy, in *Mythes et mythologies dans la littérature française*. Paris, Libr. Armand Colin, 1969, pp. 160-2.



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divinity.” It is not surprising that the Prometheus myth faded from the libertarian imagination, preoccupied with its instinct for revolt and its taste for the romantic. The myth of Satan took over from that of Prometheus—while the Ahasuerus legend admirably expressed the restlessness and touchy insubordination of the *outlaw*. (In his adolescence, Shelley was haunted by the mysterious figure of the *Wandering Jew*, who preferred the “liberty” of hell to the slavery of heaven; but he abandoned him in favor of Prometheus: a more immaculate and positive hero).

Two heroes took their place on either side of Ahasuerus: the anonymous figure of the *victim*, and the *new man*, or anarchist. The victim expresses the hopeless opposition of the oppressed and persecuted man against the established order. Crushed beneath the powers-that-be, he feels obscurely that, bereft of all support in the face of the State, the judge, and the police, it is he who is in the right. In the eternal confrontation between Good and Evil, he is clearly on the side of the Good, but it is only within the eschatological dichotomy that he wins his privileged status. The *new man*, or *future man*, achieves the redemption of a lost humanity which is denied to both the victim and the “rebel.” Bakunin clearly indicated the rift separating the rebel, irremediably stamped by the society against which he struggles, and the anarchist of tomorrow: “Our mission is to destroy, not to build; there will be other men to build, better than we, more intelligent, and more vigorous.”<sup>12</sup> The *new man* is Siegfried, Wagner’s hero of libertarian youth, the “child hero” (*kindliches Held*), that *noble savage* who asserted his authority over the domain of German mythology in the 19th century.

### THE MYTH OF THE WANDERING JEW

From Bakunin to Sorel he expresses the quest of the Wanderer, the principle of change and its ineffable obverse, the Idyll. (The *Flying Dutchman* is the “Ahasuerus of the seas”). He was a notable perennial among the rural anarchists of Spain where

<sup>12</sup> Michael Bakunin. *Confession*, p. 126.

the *idea* was carried from village to village by the *itinerant apostles* of anarchy. It was this myth which appeared in the epistolary pathos of the anarchist Ascaso when he was deported with Durruti in 1932: "We are going away... To go away, according to the poet, is to die a little. However, for us who are not poets, departure has always been a symbol of life. Constantly on the march, for ever on the road like the homeless wandering Jews, outside the society in which we cannot live, members of an exploited class, not finding our place in the world, travelling is for us always a sign of vitality."<sup>13</sup> The image of the Jew overlaps that of the wandering Jew, confusing it with the figure of the victim: the rebel who, to the judge and the hangman, can only say *No*.

The Living Theatre (founded in 1952) came to represent from 1964 onwards, the date of its first European tour, the itinerant gnosticism of a community of artists and anarchist militants wishing to achieve the liberation of man's creative resources through taking the plunge of total commitment. Through "participatory" forms of political drama, activism, and finally by the creation of a "commune," which transformed the libertarian ideal into so many realized ideas, this group sought in its wandering to propagate the Gospel of a liberation, first pastoral, then violent and Bakuninite. In France, Italy and Germany, as in the United States and Latin America, they grafted the myth of the Wandering Jew onto experience of exile and Utopia. (The titles of their performances, *Paradise Now* and *The Heritage of Cain*, speak for themselves). "We are nomads, we act as revolutionaries, travelling from place to place, trying to find out what is going on, to connect different experiences, and to spread the word," states the group's co-founder, Julian Beck.<sup>14</sup>

Beck and his companions in the Living Theatre serve as a link between the rebellious spirit of a revived anarchy and the great XIXth century tradition of revolt: such as that of Hölderlin, Nietzsche, or Van Gogh, who feature for feature re-evoked the sorrowful face of the Wanderer. Without home, church or family, the Rebel vanquishes the nostalgia for an unattainable

<sup>13</sup> Cf James Joll. *Op. cit.* p. 248.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Catherine Humblot's article in *Le Monde*, 13th November, 1975.

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peace with his peregrinations. Thus Rimbaud, in the moving letters written from Aden and Harrar to his friends, refused the "sedentary life" offered him by France—by Europe. "I would be burying myself, not returning." He fears the "cold," the harshness of the winter in the Ardennes, the supreme symbol of a civilization that he rejects. "As for myself, I regret not being married and having a family. But, for the time being, *I am condemned to wander*, devoted to a remote venture, and every day I lose the taste for the climate, the lifestyle, and even the language, of Europe."<sup>15</sup> Rimbaud was the "brother" of Lautréamont and Madách, and one of a long line of rebels who in rejection—antithesis—discerned the creative principle of a new art.

In *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, Jules Verne describes, under the guise of the warlike inventor, captain Nemo, the epic of an anarchistic Ahasuerus. A sympathetic outlaw who, from the failures of his own life, creates an ideal of a rather Stirneresque anarchistic individualism, captain Nemo tirelessly travels the oceans whose wonders take the place, for him, of an ineffable Utopia.

Fleeing from the society of men, from which he is permanently excluded, is Verne's Wandering Jew primarily the victim of society? Having lost his kith and kin, he has but one family: the great community of "suffering beings" and "oppressed peoples." The only beings to whom he is tied by a feeling of kinship are the dispossessed and the oppressed. In his cabin hang the portraits of the "great men of history," whose lives were nothing but a continual sacrifice to some great human idea: Kosciusko, Botzaris, "the Leonidas of modern Greece," Washington, Lincoln, "fallen beneath the bullets of the advocates of slavery," and finally "that martyr of the emancipation of the black race, John Brown."<sup>16</sup> (A champion of the oppressed, Nemo proceeded to the support of the Cretan rebellion). He is a part of

<sup>15</sup> Letter dated 6th May 1883. My emphasis. Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951. p. 359.

<sup>16</sup> Verne, Jules. *Vingt Mille Lieues Sous Les Mers, Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. Paris, Ed. Rencontre, 1965, p. 330. - As a libertarian spirit, is Nemo a prince of anarchy, of an individualistic Icaria? Does he not act, especially with his visitors, like a "Lord"? The opposite of a liberator, is he not the domineering personality the hint of which one finds so often in Bakunin?

oppressed humanity: "This Indian lives in the land of the oppressed, and I am still, and shall be to my dying day, one of its inhabitants also."<sup>17</sup> "It is not new continents that the world needs, but new men," he states, linking the myth of the machine—of the "Nautilus," that veritable monster from the mythological deeps—to that of the new man.

The master of the Nautilus is a victorious anarchist. His eulogy to the sea links an unattainable liberty with the myth of the wanderer: "There alone lies independence! There I recognize no masters! There I am free!"<sup>18</sup> Having severed every tie with society, he declares: "I therefore obey none of its rules, and I charge you never to mention them in my presence!"<sup>19</sup> The black flag of anarchy that he hoists over an unexplored remoteness of the South Pole carries a "golden N quartered on its coarse fabric," the N of the sovereign individual, for it is in his own name that he has taken possession of a still uncharted territory.

The Wandering Jew of *Robur-le-conquérant*, published in 1886, (*Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* dates from 1866) is a "personage of unknown origins, and of no nationality." Like Nemo, his flag is a "coarse black cloth, scattered with stars and with a golden sun at its center;" but Robur is not the asocial prince of equality. "Robur represents the knowledge of the future, perhaps that of tomorrow: what the future certainly holds in store." Arrived before his time, the prophet of a technological future which takes for granted the emotional unification of the planet, Robur cruises the oceans and the skies, carrying his secret with him. In *The Master of the World*, the *Wanderer* takes off his mask. The master of "skyborn Icaria" is no longer the symbol of a humanity regenerated by technology, but the technician of a new absolute power: science, whose legend is created by the mechanical monster christened: "The Terror." It is seen as a "monster escaped from some teratological menagery, and, to give it a specific likeness, like the devil himself, Beelzebub, or Astarte, defying all human intervention, and possessing the invisible and infinite power of

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

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Satan.”<sup>20</sup> In Vernian mythology appears the shadowy presence of the legend of the Wandering Jew; Satan is no longer the prince of equality, and Ahasuerus no longer brings the hope of Salvation in his travels.

### THE MYTH OF THE BRIGAND

If, amid those marching towards the revolution, the restless forces of the “wandering and homeless church of liberty” are represented by the deracinated members of the intelligentsia, the legendary figure of the brigand personifies the ideal of Justice of the mendicant and guerrilla. Having retreated into an outlawry with no social links, he has already obliterated the extant order from within himself. “In Russian society there exists a type of men who have the courage to go out and meet the world: this is the brigand. The first rebels, the first revolutionaries in Russia, Pugachev and Stenka Razin, were brigands,” noted Bakunin;<sup>21</sup> he also invited the Russian anarchists to “join up with the world of the bandits, the only genuine revolutionaries in Russia.” In southern Italy and Andalusia, the bandits who defied the central authorities and attacked the rich in order to “redistribute” their goods to the poor, remained heroes in the anarchistic social imagination for a long time.

### THE MYTH OF THE MOUJIK

In his *Confession*, Bakunin analyzed the societies of Europe in relation to the crisis of intellectual and moral authority among their elites: “The social order and organization of the West are rotten, and are kept standing only by a painful effort...

<sup>20</sup> Jules Verne, *Maitre du monde*. Paris, Ed. Rencontres, 1965, p. 45. The exasperated prince of anarchy, Nemo, becomes, by the end of the novel, a “terrible arbiter,” a “veritable archangel of hate;” he annihilates all the passengers of a harmless ship. The arbitrariness which characterizes his relationship with the narrator is a precursor of Robur’s inhumanity.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Eugene Pyziur, *The Doctrine of Anarchism of Michael A. Bakunin*, Chicago, The Henry Regnery Co., pp. 72-73 Stenka Razin was the leader of a peasant uprising which brought a reign of terror to south-eastern Russia in 1670, and was transformed into a truly legendary hero by the popular imagination. A century later, in the reign of Catherine II, Pugachev established a kind of revolutionary rule in the Volga basin, ordering the abolition of serfdom, the execution of landowners and the confiscation of their goods. Bakunin seized upon their legends and compared them to the figure of the bandit, the solitary defender of the poor.

Wherever one turns one's gaze...one sees only decay, weakness, loss of faith, and depravity: due to this loss of faith, and beginning at the top of the social ladder. None of the privileged classes has faith either in its personal mission or its rights. Each is acting out a part in front of the others, and no one has confidence in the others or in himself. Privileges, classes, and established powers are barely maintained by egoism and custom... Culture is identified with the depravation of the spirit and the heart, and with impotence!"<sup>22</sup> But if the elites of the West could find no answer to the challenges of the age, "the people, uncouth and uneducated," to be found at the bottom of the social ladder, retained their "vitality" and "strength" intact.

The silent representative of a backward civilization, removed from the principal currents of modernity, the peasant (*moujik*) is the guardian of simple and healthy values unknown to the administrators of complex and advanced civilizations. "Because of their backward, and relatively *barbarian* civilization, (the *moujiks*) have, with all their integrity, kept the simple and robust temperament, and the energy fitting to their plebeian nature."<sup>23</sup> Endowed with a strength which is forever fresh, simple, and unconscious, the *moujik* folk will bring about the rebirth of a new culture, rising to the highest social ideal of our age: anarchy.

#### THE BARBARIANS

"There will be no further Revolution until the Cossacks come over!" proclaimed Ernest Coeurderoy in *On Revolution in Man and Society*. In *Hurrah!!!, or the Cossack Revolution* he advocates revolution by the "Overrunning of the South of Europe by the North; with a human Tidal Wave!"<sup>24</sup> Bakunin himself discerned in the proletariat and peasantry the *barbarians* of the modern age who, acting as a counterbalance to the decline of Western civilization, "now represent the faith in the human destiny and the future of civilization." Further, Georges Sorel and Edouard Berth, the theoreticians of a syndicalism that was more Proudhonian (and Marxist) than Bakuninite, declared that

<sup>22</sup> Michael Bakunin. *Confession*, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Eugene Pyziur, *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> Ernest Coeurderoy. *Pour la Révolution*, Paris, Ed. Champ Libre, 1972, p. 248.

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the civilized world could hope for its salvation only from barbarism. Preoccupied with the symptoms of a profound crisis in Western culture, whose progress they analysed according to periodic *corsi* and *ricorsi*, they identified the proletariat with the "syndicalist barbarism" which alone could regenerate the "alexandrine" and "abstract" culture of an exhausted Europe. (It was through an analogous reasoning that Macaulay came to speak of the danger posed to our societies by "internal barbarism," and that Ortega y Gasset defined the common man as the "vertical invader," in *The Revolt of the Masses*; of course, neither believed in the regenerative powers of the masses).

### THE GOOD SAVAGE

The idea that man is by nature good, and was perverted only on contact with institutions, is the touchstone of all anarchist thought about man. The myth of the *good savage* was rejuvenated by being particularized in the myth of the moujik, who lives harmoniously with others in the heart of an organic community in order to defend himself against the encroachments of the State, and the influence of a corrupt civilization. Beneath the civilized man's mask, which one finally mistakes for his real face, is to be found an inalienable human nature. The Bakuninite thesis which demands that each act of destruction be at the same time one of construction, makes sense only if a primary and purely human nature survives underneath the secondary artificial nature of man. Like the myth of the good savage, the myth of the moujik expressed the anarchist theorist's nostalgia for a frugal and austere life close to Nature. It prolonged the myth of the Golden Age, buried beneath the myths of Progress and future scientific and technological Utopias.

### THE MYTH OF THE MASSES

Stemming from the myth of the moujik, this describes, in Bakunin, the inhabitant of the *mir*, and includes by extension the deracinated masses of the cities (the Lumpenproletariat) and the countryside (the bandit), and the intelligentsia. In Wagner, Tolstoy and Sorel, it describes the whole community: the inhabitants of the Greek *city* and of the free city of the Middle

Ages. This myth stresses the limitless creativity of the masses and the social character of every genuine act of creation, (the myth of the masses who built the cathedrals and the city halls).

The Russian Revolution destroyed the myth of the masses debilitated by the setbacks to populism, and replaced it with a new myth: the Marxist myth of the proletariat (and the progressivist myth of a technological Golden Age).

#### THE MYTH OF THE NEW MAN

Here I shall examine only one myth, that of Siegfried, the idea of which was conceived by the anarchist Wagner, of *The Death of Siegfried*, to preserve the hope kindled by the revolutionary epic of 1848-1849. Siegfried is "the most perfect man imaginable," the symbol of the "unconscious force forever at work in mankind," and which is revealed in the abundance of his "irresistible strength and goodness."<sup>25</sup> The creator of a real mythology of liberation and anarchistic activity, he is the "awaited" one. Free, with no bonds or constraints, "he is his own master."<sup>26</sup> Sharing Bakunin's vitalistic frenzy, his scheme of life combines a search for its origins, and a fearlessness before the dawning of the future. He personifies those characteristics of Bakunin with which Wagner was well acquainted on the eve of the Dresden insurrection of 1849, minus, it is true, any anecdotal detail. Placed within the pure dichotomy of a drama that runs, in its definitive version, from the birth to the end of the world, the anarchist hero rids himself of the present world that he carries within him, in order to follow only those paths that traverse the significant past and the future traced out by the myth.<sup>27</sup>

#### LIBERTARIAN SOCIALISM AND MYSTICAL ANARCHISM

The revolutionary designs harbored by Bakunin for Bohemia in 1849, which had been conceived for a specific historical time and place, echo the destructive imagery of the mystical and

<sup>25</sup> May be compared to Shelley's description of Prometheus, cf. p. 41 above.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Wagner, *Siegfried*. Paris Aubier-Flammarion, 1971, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> The initial plan, conceived in 1848, became transformed into a genuine cosmogony. Thus Wagner wrote to Liszt: "If you look closely at my new poetic work, you will find there both the birth and the end of the world."



## *Anarchist Myths of Revolt*

heretical anarchism of the 15th and 16th centuries, by bringing them up to date. He himself used as a model the rituals of "liberation" with which the Italian and Spanish anarchist movements would pledge themselves to revolutionary activity. "My intention was to demolish every castle, to burn, throughout Bohemia, the files of every administrative and public judicial process, the seigniorial charters and title-deeds, and to cancel all mortgages, as well as other debts below a certain sum," wrote Bakunin to the Tsar in his *Confession*.<sup>28</sup> In a few phrases he sums up the messianic dream of a social *renovatio*, those iconoclastic rites with which the popular wrath proclaims itself. In the scenario of initial destruction that he describes, the paradigm behavior of the insurgents is determined by an aesthetic of eternal annihilation. His paradigm is that passion for destruction which becomes universalized and spreads like an epidemic. Anarchist terrorism, which attacks the unchanging symbols of Power—monarchy, the statesman, the judge, or policeman—propagandizes the truth by an act which achieves its ends only in so far as it is imitated and spreads abroad.

I have just mentioned *the act of propaganda by the deed* which, in the form of a mythic model, encapsulates the universality of the anarchist's message, and which redeems the individual act of terrorism from any charge of illegitimacy.

The destructive rites depicted by Bakunin were, moreover, taken up again for the purpose of a brief anarchist crusade by his friends and disciples in 1877, i.e. the year after his death. With the aim of unleashing a general uprising in the Italian peninsula, these latter put into practice the scenario described in the *Confession*. In the first village that they besieged in the area of Benevento, to the north-east of Naples, they overthrew the monarchy, and burned the archives, those records of man's enslavement. Yet if, on their departure, the village spectators applauded the directness of the action, it was not followed by others: instead of mushrooming, it remained a unique example. (In the same way, Ravachol's "example" was "admired," but found insufficient imitators).

The same scenario instigated further initiatory manifestations in Spain between 1931 and 1936. In specially designated pilot

<sup>28</sup> Michael Bakunin. *Confession*, p. 148.

villages, the CNT abolished money, burned municipal archives, and disarmed or massacred the Guardia Civil...<sup>29</sup> Here, as in Italy half a century before, the outburst was only a signal: it had no value unless it served to detonate the destructive passions of the masses.

Did the myth transmit its secret to the broad strata of society? Or, deprived of the ability to spread, did it appeal only to those lone members of the sect who, as true initiates, made it the symbol of the bonds of solidarity uniting them?

\* \* \*

“I no longer belonged; the spirit of destruction had taken hold of me.”  
Bakunin, *Confession*.

The myth as the foundation of *an anarchist philosophy of history*: here I shall confine myself solely to Bakunin's amorphism and his historical vision, inspired by secular interpretations of the prophecy of Joachim de Fiore.

Despite his fundamental scorn for philosophical systems and static ideologies that stifle spontaneity and creative initiative, Bakunin was subject to the obsessive influence of philosophies of history. In fact, he seemed to admit that they alone gave sanction to the ideal of Progress as the incontestable aim of social development. Under the influence of Hegel and, above all, Saint-Simon, he also came to see the historical alternation of periods of construction and destruction. The idea that mankind was approaching a new period of destruction harmonized excellently with his driving destructive passion. Influenced by Joachim de Fiore's theory of the Three Ages, he distinguished three ages in the evolution of the human destiny: the age of human animality, of thought, and of revolt. In accordance with Joachim's prophecy he recommended, on the threshold of the coming age—that eternal present which “contains no trace of history”—a cataclysmic and apocalyptic period of transition.

In Bakunin's thought, the passage from one age to another takes the form of a distinct social *amorphism*. “Social revolution

<sup>29</sup> James Joll, *The Anarchists*, New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1966 p. 248.

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is a barbarity of a kind that the Western imagination, dominated by civilization, cannot even imagine." "Passionate and fundamental" destruction is, however, "salutary and beneficial" since it is only at the price of such destruction that "new worlds are born and grow."<sup>30</sup> It is a question of total negation, the annihilation of all contemporary society, during which period the "existing forms" become *amorphous*, preceding the "creation of completely new forms from this *amorphism*."

The doctrine of amorphism corresponds, in Bakunin's ideological groundplan, to the "*confusionnisme*"<sup>31</sup> of certain myths of the cosmogony. In the mythic universe, "confusionism" objectifies the chaos which precedes the creation of a new world, through the recreation of the "primordial chaos." In the "Ghost-Dance Religion" that convulsed the North American tribes towards the end of the 19th century, the dead invaded the earth, communicated with the living, and finally created an "upheaval" heralding the close of the current cosmic cycle, with the aim of "hastening the end of the world."<sup>32</sup> Revolution conceived of as a holy day is comparable to "confusionniste" ritual by way of its primary intention of precipitating the awaited regeneration. Thus ritual becomes the creator of change.

The revolutionary act as the imitation of a cosmogonic act, and the shift from the profane to the holy revolution: this is where the real meaning is to be found of the political message of Bakuninite anarchism.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Eugene Pyziur, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> A word which has no real synonym in English; it is a psychological term used to refer to the confused thinking of the child. (Translator's note).

<sup>32</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 90.