

Enchantment in Times of Disenchantment

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What will save us in the end,
Is that we are homeless.

Rilke

God — as we well know since Nietzsche — is dead. However, it is necessary to correct this sentence that was a sacrilege yesterday and has become common place today. We should be talking of the death of the “gods,” rather than of God; for what has been disappearing from the social space of modernity (I do not speak of the inner conscience of the faithful here), is not just the God who sits enthroned atop altar and dogma. What has disappeared are the “gods” more generally; by this we understand the link with the world that, certainly rooted in religion but transcending it, surrounds things and beings with an aura of wonderful significances; that places them outside of those structures that modern man understands to be the utilitarian, the rational and the functional.

The death of the gods has a threefold significance: the disappearance of the God of religion, the fading of the magical and wondrous aura that surrounds things, but also the annihilation of the intangible law of this world, the unshakable foundation of that ancient world that wanted to cement and reassure itself. What disappeared was in effect the law enunciated by dogma as well as that proclaimed by tradition.

However, if the “gods” disappeared in the modern period, they were also quickly replaced. Not, to be sure, in respect of that aura of magic and wonderment that I have mentioned. What has been replaced — and in two opposing facets — is merely the founding law of the world, what gave it meaning. Since the “gods” disappeared in modernity, we also know that progress and knowledge

have enticingly taken their place, just as the hope of the revolution has been shimmering in it.

But those two mirages have now also lost their luster. If technology and science still direct our steps, they no longer guide them toward a safe haven. Behind the redeeming hopes of socialism and revolution we have uncovered one of the most monstrous annihilation enterprises that were ever accomplished. Since, to put it differently, nothing moved into the vacuum left by the “gods,” we found ourselves confronted with a profoundly novel situation and with the burning question: Where are we going? Who are we? What is still left for us — the humans who are the most free and the loneliest at the same time?

We are left with a paradox. Since nothing takes our breath away anymore — neither that aura of marvelous meanings, nor that ancient past when the world was founded, nor the hope in a future redemption — so, in effect, only the present remains: flat and immediate, consisting of work and leisure, of objects and goods -sad and gray, without charm or rapture. We are left with those objects and products that nevertheless — and here lies the paradox — offer us the highest degree of material well-being (as well as equality) that men have ever known. Let us not forget this. Every time we point a finger at an epoch that wallows in a materialism without charm, let us not forget that without that materialism, without that technical and productive assiduousness many of us would already be dead, if we are not to assume that we would never have existed in the first place.

The “gods” have gone, and we are left with matter. Beyond a few years of longer life, what have we gained from this change? Nothing? Yes, we have gained truth — and this is a tremendous gain: the truth of reason, science and technology that has brought us not just comforts and well-being; it has also given us the assurance that no god, no genie exists to usurp the place of a reason whose laws are geared to a material efficiency through the physical universe, just as all manufactured things *exist*. The rock over which we stumble on the path is displaced solely by physical

forces. Neither divinations nor invocations and rituals have any hold over it.

It remains to say that this truth — and here is the paradox again — leads us almost imperceptibly and by itself to a lie. Although traversed by zones of shadow and opacity, so this truth affirms, only forces which can be determined by reason, which are comprehensible through understanding, which are available for action, preside over the ordering of the world — the material world, to be sure. But the slippage is easy and the entire century understands: the world order in short. It is here that everything becomes distorted if we believe that societal matters, and those of imagination, of emotion, of thought — in short, matters of the mind — are also almost exclusively subject to the laws of reason and action, otherwise said, subject to the autonomy of men.

Here it is, the lie, the illusion of the modern world. However, it is an illusion that we can comprehend since the epoch that proclaimed it, publicized it, at this point saw itself torn by an even bigger paradox, one that we shall encounter again even though we believed we had gotten rid of it. For this autonomy of men that we have put at the center of our existence and of the world is, to be sure, illusory; but it is equally true. Men do not depend on anyone, nor does the world that is constituting itself around them. No one cuts out the path, no god, no law lays down the intangible order of good and evil, of true and false, of justice and injustice. They do not depend on anyone, those men and things whose meaning is neither guaranteed by ancestors nor ordained by the “gods;” that meaning and all that makes sense — thoughts, emotions, and actions that occur inside us and only in us, we who are our sole and unique actors, the actors of this life with its sentiments, thoughts and projects that grow only here, in our mind and our heart; we whom no Aphrodite, no Apollo, no Aries will ever come to take us by the hand and inspire us with love, with rage, or with ideas each time we fall in love or get angry or have ideas. We who in effect still *fall* — and this is the right word — we who fall down, as if crushed, in the face of passion or the idea that will strike us and that is not inside us, that is elsewhere; we who

depend on nothing do not even depend on ourselves either; we who are at the mercy of words and meanings that are there and everything opening around; meanings and words of which we are neither the masters nor the creators; we who are transported by words, things, and meaning — the words and the meaning of thoughts, of projects and of passions that, while certainly playing inside us, also play with us; we who are nothing else but an ensemble of those passions, those thoughts and those projects which, being only inside us, nevertheless strike us from the outside — as if the gods infused us with them.

As if the gods infused us with them And the gods — are they perhaps merely a metaphor, a sign?

That the “gods” are no more than a metaphor, that they exist only as a sign of alterity: this is something that could never be recognized either by the established religions or by those societies that the “gods” imbue — or imbued — with their presence. For them, the “gods” exist in themselves and in an absolute manner. To them all attributes of being appear absolute, including those of physical, material existence. But a strange material, because the divine kingdom, so we are told, is purely *spiritual, supranatural*; it is not of this world; it is elsewhere. Elsewhere, in fact, and yet somewhere since it certainly has a being and a space that are exclusively the property of that divine reality that exists in itself and for itself; it is everything else but a thought, a sentiment, a metaphor, an image.

Now everything is shaken up and the coherence of the divine disintegrates, since scientific progress — rather the notification of scientific progress in the annals of the century itself — destroys the possibility of recognizing a material dimension of any kind in the divine world. When the heavens are empty, when science only discovers astonishing and paradoxical laws that can only return to God to the extent that He signifies this same paradox, then the “gods” are still safe on earth — though devoid of any material dimension, of all physical substance; inscribed into the only register of thought, relevant only to the sphere of imagination.

Thought and imagination are to be found only where there are men. It has been concluded from this that the “gods” are merely the product of man’s imagination; and this is where everything once again gets distorted. The “gods”: nothing but images, nothing but non-realities, add that same atheistic-materialist vulgate of this age, for which being — *really* and *truly* — means *materially* and *authentically* being something tangible and always identical with itself; never torn or split — a thing is a thing, and never its opposite.

The recent disappearance of the “gods” invites us to demolish this double paradigm of being. For their material existence has gone (the “gods” have become a sign, an image); their identity is shaken (they are beholden to man’s imagination), and still the “gods” exist.

The “gods” — do they continue to exist? No, they are not here, present and acting among us. It is that over there, it is this alterity, the split that cuts across things, but what is seen less and less by man. It is there, this alterity, radiant with presence, moving across all things, causing them to be, while there is nothing. What is there is this inconsistent and present elsewhere of which the “gods” are the sign — the sign that has vanished today. What is there is that abyss of sense that the “gods” once upon a time filled — and so massively that in reality they conjured it away as well.

With what other matter can we one day fill the abyss of meaning — fill it and not spirit it away? With what can we one day fashion a sign — a sign different from gadgets, tools, and profits? And to draw a sign — a founding symbol — means henceforth to plunge into the contradiction, to welcome the paradox, to recognize the real and the imaginary nature, the fictive and the authentic of what is signified.

With what matter can one produce a sign? And with what matter can one simply be?

Something like this has existed forever. It is called art.

Subscribing to the paradox, plunging into the contradiction, transgressing the principle of non-contradiction, that is what art has always done and as if it were nothing. For art would not exist for one moment if the artist did not, at once and under the same conditions that are constitutive for the work — create all by himself what strikes him and imposes itself upon him like an external force, like a spell; as Octavio Paz has put it:

*I look toward the skies:
The stars are writing
I understand without seizing them:
I am the writing as well,
And at that same moment
Someone spells me.*

The artist creates and is being created at the same time. Here is the circle, that circle of art that would not exist anymore if its real dimensions were to count alone and if art were merely an embellished expression of empirical reality; if, in other words, the essence of art did not lie in the power of its images, in the force of its fiction; if art were not the sign of that “thing” that does not exist in the real world, but which is nevertheless everything, all that is the opposite of a phantasmagoria, an illusion, a lie; the opposite of the lies that Ulysses, Antigone, Beatrice, Don Quixote, Hamlet, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary, Leopold Bloom, Horacio Oliviera, or all the others, whether still alive or deceased, are certainly not; they, who are everything except phantoms, unreality; they, who live in our memories, nourish our thoughts, shape our sensibility; they, with whom we are in conversation, who stay here, living and immortal for centuries; those beings that do not exist materially except in the ink of the printed pages; those perfectly unreal beings who are nonetheless more real, more authentic, more true than the majority of those real beings that in fact inhabit this planet.

We thus come to beings who inhabit art. And from there we come to beings who, living in the skies, once upon a time made their mark on earth. What ultimately is the difference between them? What difference in *nature* is there between Emma Bovary

and the Virgin Mary? There is none (or if there is one, it is not where we think it lies). Let us forget that a certain Mary, the wife of a certain Joseph, probably once lived in the land of Judaea. Let us take the Virgin as a divinity, or, if this notion offends you, let us take any other goddess. Aphrodite, for example. Let us take Aphrodite and Emma. In both cases we are dealing with imaginary beings whose reality nevertheless appears to be manifest, if only one condition is realized that is intrinsic to them, i.e., if only we immerse ourselves in the religious cult or in the pages of the novel that, if worthy of its name, makes us forget that this is not, as good sense might think, just a simple novel and pure fiction.

But good sense is a poor measure; it is deceptive. For even though we are dealing with fiction, it is also a reality, an essential reality that gives meaning. It is both — a double and contradictory face that even the person of good sense can only recognize implicitly — someone who never allows himself to be taken in by those kinds of beings and by stories that are purely and simply fabrications.

Then there are the two faces of Emma (and others) that will never be found in the Virgin (and others): in those “gods” who are taken to be exclusively real beings — or who disappear at once when their imaginary dimensions are publicly recognized as such. *Publicly*, for it is here, in the public realm of art and religion, and in the different ways in which they present themselves to the world, that Emma and the Virgin differ profoundly as regards their very nature. It is here in the public space — in this symbolic space where men recognize each other in relation to others and all of them in relations to things, that Mary was once upon a time invested with a power; and it also here that she possessed a radiance that Emma never knew. For it is this public space that the “gods” occupy and shape. They leave their imprint upon the world and men; on those men who are only amused and delighted by art, and, it goes without saying, in the most sublime fashion.

It has not always been like this. Art has not always been a distraction or a refinement. It has also marked the world, has been the sign of an epoch (think above all of those exceptional moments that Greece and in the Renaissance have experienced).

Mark of the world: certainly a mark that has never been comparable to that of “gods”, but one that left traces even where the mannered derivative reaches its heights, where it gets confused with leisure.

Emma Bovary does not merely entertain us: she also unsettles us and marks us. But we feel this mark only lightly: it is just a scratch in the smooth skin of a world in which nothing — neither the “gods” of religion nor the demons of art — overwhelms us anymore.

Having abandoned the world, the “gods” of religion and the demons of art have retreated into the souls of the faithful and into the sensibilities of the aesthete. Can they some day regain the world? Can they dislodge the depressing regime of labor, of leisure, and of gadgets?

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Let us hope that some of these “gods” will never return. For the word “god”, as I have sufficiently underlined, does not refer merely to that breath-taking marvel that evokes only slight regret. The word “god” equally refers to Him whose disappearance did not cause us to shed one tear: to Him who already has caused too many to flow; that God who is at the same time happy and gloomy and who embodies the crushing Law of the world; that God who gave us the infinite problems of the skies or the endless fear of hell.

But what about the others? ... The “gods”, the fetishes, the demons, the genies, the spirits? ... No, they will not return, those who through the rituals, the cults, the invocations, the faiths, the possessions, the processions offer a sign to the world, just a sign — but of a different nature, of course — is given by the spell-binding charm of poems, epics, tragedies, novels, paintings, retables, temples, palaces that are not coming back either. For this is not a return; it is something that *happens*; it is the arrival of something new, of a new connection with the world, of the presence of something that, displayed in public and recognized by all, gives us a sign, enchants and galvanizes us; we who remain nevertheless disenchanting; we who will always know that the sign is not a sign; that it is imaginary and yet real; that sign that tells us who

we are, that we exist, and that to exist is a bit like falling into ecstasy, stretching oneself into the beyond, going into the distance, searching somewhere else, and yet to stay here, engulfed by contradiction — the most perilous and marvelous contradiction; we who do not even know whether such a challenge can be sustained, this challenge which does not show through anywhere, this challenge of which we only see some scraps here, some hints there, as when “accommodating themselves to the din of household appliances and tourism;” thus writes Antoinette Molinié with respect to Andalusia in her contribution later on. She continues that the Gods appear “in all the splendor of the Midi during the passage of the virgins of peace and bleeding christ. But most frequently they hide in the midst of the Andalusian festival under the flanks of the fighting bull or in the taverns that are filled with raucous songs;” those gods that “choose for their appearances the blurred boundary between the world of the sacred and of the profane;” that blurred boundary on which we, too, exist — we whose life is marked by interference, an interference that is not completely without confusion; an interference that no one wants and no one embraces; we who must embrace enchantment and disenchantment, affirm the truth that is filled with imagination as well as the truth that is assured by our reason; it is a reality charmed by images and the certain efficacy of our products; we who must embrace both if we do not want to perish, choked by all our material goods and knowledge; if we want to allow ourselves to be carried away by the charm of this world that is nevertheless deprived of its charmer and that needs a rest; this world that must not give up its liberty, nor its knowledge, nor its well-being in order thus to achieve, perhaps alone its being.

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