

'Decentring' God

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In the good old days of the Christian-Marxist dialogue, it was comforting to think that, whatever the divergences between the two camps, they were at least united by their profoundly *humanistic* dimension. It is a wry historical irony that the humanistic plank which once bridged the Christian-Marxist gap has now become the blunt instrument with which Marxism belabours Christianity about the head. For the most important developments in European Marxism centre on a decisive rejection of the 'Marxist-humanist' interpretation of historical materialism. 'Marxism', announces Louis Althusser in a polemical, programmatic chapter-heading, 'is not a Humanism'; and Michel Foucault takes comfort in the thought that 'man is but a recent invention, a figure not two centuries old, a simple fold in our knowledge, and will disappear when the latter has found a new form'.¹ Man-centred Marxism—that heretical deviation from historical materialism which pivots all on the 'collective subject' and its 'praxis'—is merely a displacement of the *inherently* bourgeois ideology of 'humanism'. History as the expression of the generic subject Man, *en route* to reappropriating his alienated being: we cannot escape this Hegelian form of Marxism merely by substituting 'men' for Man. For the subjects of history are not 'men', not even 'social classes', but, as Althusser comments, social formations; Marxism is the science of the laws of these social formations, of these structures of which individual men are merely the *bearers*. It is 'humanism', with its corrosive insistence on rooting all in the 'living concrete individuals' of history, which forestalls us from thinking through society as structure—a structure which, like the unconscious, has its reasons of which 'living individuals' know nothing.

The 'de-centring' of the human subject: this is the scandalous, pervasive theme of European Marxism and structuralism. 'Man' or 'men', installed by bourgeois ideology at the heart of history and the universe, the source of all discourse and creation, is impudently dethroned. It is not Man or men who 'speak' history, as though we could decipher history's cryptic pronouncements by decoding them back to the muffled living voice of their human creators. On the contrary, it is history—grasped as a structured set of discourses—which 'speaks' man, which constitutes the human subject. The study of history is the science of these rule-bound discourses in whose interplay 'men' are produced; its aim is to disengage those laws (of the Unconscious, of

¹*Les Mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966).

material production, of ideological forms) which are situated on a terrain quite other than 'human experience'. It is this science which 'humanism' must suppress, seducing us as it does into its fetishism of the 'living subject', nuclear or collective.

None of this is likely to give much comfort to Christians, or to offer a point of entry into dialogue with Marxism. It is not accidental, for example, that those Marxists most assiduously concerned to de-centre Man are also the most aggressively atheistic. 'Marxist humanism' could afford to shelve the question of God in its common front with Christians on the centrality of Man; traditional Marxism, by contrast, recognises that the 'centrality of Man' is merely a displacement of the supremacy of God, a reinstalling of God at the heart of history in disguised anthropological form. Christian theology and atheistic humanism seem to share a belief in some ultimate essence or origin of meaning, some transcendental font of significance which, could we but rid our meanings of their opacity and recalcitrance, would shine translucently through them. But it is precisely this trust in some single enshrined essence of meaning which atheistic Marxism attacks as a fetish. Such is the programme of Jacques Derrida,² and of the militant group of Marxist semioticians gathered around the review *Tel Quel*.³ It is the claim of these writers that class-society, unable to consent freely to that ceaseless, originless, endless self-production of meaning which is history, projects instead some tyrannical donor of all significance, some lynchpin or transcendental baseline of all sense. God, the Father, the monarch, gold, the phallus: the function of these fetishes is to repress the recognition that we are always already in the midst of meaning, traversed by the multiple codes which 'speak' us, and erect instead some sublimely privileged authority from which all else flows. Atheism—for long a kind of mere free-wheeling supplement to historical materialism—has suddenly, once more, a *political* relevance: it signifies a rejection of that process whereby, out of the pluralistic play of our signs, a single one (God, the gold-standard, paternal authority) is abstracted and enthroned as a standard by which all the others must be ranked. It is a refusal of consent to all we ever have—the material process of the production of signs (meanings, products, values)—for a mystified assent to the Sign of signs, the fetish which protects us from the terror of being liberated into the unfounded, decentred process of our history.

For Christian humanism, then, it would seem that the human subject is all-privileged because he is the 'signified' of an even more privileged signifier: God himself. One 'centring' doubles another. I want to consider this notion by looking briefly at Milton's treatment of the Father in *Paradise Lost*, and to do so with the aid of an unlikely analogy: Lucien Goldmann's Marxist analysis of Pascal and Racine in *The Hidden God*. For these authors, Goldmann claims, God is an intolerable proposition because, while his authority remains absolute,

²See Fergus Kerr, 'Derrida's Wake', *New Blackfriars*, October, 1974.

³See G. D. Martin, 'Structures in Space: the *Tel Quel* Group', *New Blackfriars*, December, 1971.

he has withdrawn his presence from the world and thus relegated both himself and the world to tragic unintelligibility. Goldmann situates this ideology in its proper historical context—in the context of a deadlocked transitional phase between absolutist-monarchical and incipiently bourgeois society in France. The traditional absolute values still exert their force, yet are rendered increasingly indecipherable by the growth of bourgeois rationalism. They cannot be relinquished, but neither can they be adequately ‘lived’ as significant meaning. The theological source of this vision Goldmann locates in Jansenism—an ideology which, he argues, articulates the impossibly contradictory situation of a particular historical class (the so-called *noblesse de robe*) who were economically dependent on the monarchy but in political terms progressively superfluous. God, and the monarch, can be neither spurned nor embraced; God is at once present and absent in the world, robbing it of value because of his withdrawal, yet by the same token leaving it all there is to be known.

Milton, too, lives at a painfully contradictory juncture between traditional Christian humanism and an aggressive, bourgeois-Protestant rationalism. He does not cease to believe in God as absolute authority, the source of right reason; yet God seems to have withdrawn his presence from history, abandoning the revolutionary venture of his chosen people (the English Protestant bourgeoisie) to the reactionaries of the Restoration. God is right reason, and right reason is the source of right action; yet right action involves free will, and free will involves that strategic withdrawal of God which leaves you a ‘space’ to yourself in history. That withdrawal, however, threatens to drain history of value. Milton never really found a way out of this circle: by the time of *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained*, God is the utterly remote presence whose arbitrary decrees you obey because he is, after all, God. *Paradise Lost*, however, attempts to find a way out of this deadlock, and that way is Satan. Satan tries to de-centre, dethrone the poem’s aloof, coldly bureaucratic God and falls to hell, where he sets up a substitute kingdom centred on himself as a pompous princeling. He represents a revolutionary decentring gone awry, replacing one repressive authority with another.

The revolutionary decentring of the Father which does not go awry is of course, for the Christian, Jesus Christ. For the Christian, but not for John Milton. For Milton’s Arianism prevents him from recognising in the coming of the Son the coming of the Father; the Incarnation is grasped instead in narrowly legalistic terms. Milton cannot understand, torn as he is between the absolute authority of God and the revolutionary freedom of man, that in Christ the Father decentres himself among men. He is therefore incapable of recognising the other side of that truth: that Christ’s decentring of the Father is simultaneously a decentring of Man. In this he is at one with the militant atheism of *Tel Quel*. For it is not that Christ is the medium by which the privileged subject of the Father reduplicates itself in the privileged subject of Man. The Christian stands neither with the ‘Christian humanist’ who believes this; nor with the ‘Marxist humanist’ who

decentres God but centres Man; but with the more traditional Marxist who decentres both. He differs from that case in that he believes that it is the decentring of the Father in his Son which is the source of the decentrement of Man—the source of that process whereby history is not clinched on a static essence which shines translucently through the whole, but is a discourse whose meaning is ceaselessly exterior to itself, which (like the movement of the literary text from a semiotic standpoint) is therefore always dispersed and pluralistic, present and absent simultaneously, gliding ambiguously beyond our reach even as we become aware of it. The ceaseless decentring and deconstructing of Man by the discourses that ‘live’ him is part of that deeper movement or discourse of ceaseless decentration which is, for Christian faith, the triune God.