THE DRAMA
of
ATHEIST HUMANISM

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CHAPTER I

FEUERBACH AND NIETZSCHE

1. A Tragic Misunderstanding

A WONDROUS piece of sculpture adorning the cathedral of Chartres represents Adam, head and shoulders barely roughed out, emerging from the earth from which he was made and being moulded by the hands of God. The face of the first man reproduces the features of his modeller. This parable in stone translates for the eyes the mysterious words of Genesis: “God made man in his own image and likeness.”

From its earliest beginnings Christian tradition has not ceased to annotate this verse, recognising in it our first title of nobility and the foundation of our greatness. Reason, liberty, immortality and dominion over nature are so many prerogatives of divine origin which God has imparted to his creatures. Establishing man from the outset in God’s likeness, each of these prerogatives is meant to grow and unfold until the divine resemblance is brought to perfection. Thus they are the key to the highest of destinies.

“Man, know thyself!” Taking up, after Epictetus, the Socratic gnôthi seauton, the Church transformed and deepened it, so that what had been chiefly a piece of moral advice became an exhortation to form a metaphysical judgment. Know yourself, said the Church, that is to say, know your nobility and your dignity, understand the greatness of your being and your vocation, of that vocation which constitutes your being. Learn how to see in yourself the spirit, which is a reflection of God, made for God. “O man, scorn not that which is admirable in you! You are a poor thing in your own eyes, but I would teach you that in reality you are a great thing! . . . Realise what you are! Consider your royal dignity! The heavens have not been made in God’s image as you have, nor the moon, nor the sun, nor anything to be seen in creation. . . . Behold, of all that exists there is
nothing that can contain your greatness." 1 Philosophers have told man that he is a "microcosm", a little world made of the same elements, given the same structure, subject to the same rhythms as the great universe; they have reminded him that he is made in its image and is subject to its laws; they have made him into part of the mechanism or, at most, into an epitome of the cosmic machine. Nor were they completely mistaken. Of man's body, it is true. But if man digs deeper, he will be amazed at the depths opening up within him. Unaccountable space extends before his gaze. In a sort of infinitude he overflows this great world on all sides, and in reality it is that world, "macrocosm", which is contained in this apparent "microcosm" . . . in paro magnus. That looks like a paradox borrowed from one of our great modern idealists. Far from it. First formulated by Origen, then by Saint Gregory Nazianzen, it was later repeated by many others. Saint Thomas Aquinas was to give much the same translation of it when he said that the soul is in the world continens magis quam contenta—containing it rather than contained by it—and it found fresh utterance through the lips of Bossuet.

Man, to be sure, is made of dust and clay; or, as we should say nowadays, he is of animal origin—which comes to the same thing. The Church is not unmindful of this, finding a warrant for it in the same passage of Genesis. Man, to be sure, is also a sinner. The Church does not cease to remind him of that fact. The self-esteem which she endeavours to instil into him is not the outcome of a superficial and ingenuous view of the matter. Like Christ, she knows "what there is in man." But she also knows that the lowliness of his origin in the flesh cannot detract from the sublimity of his vocation, and that, despite all the blemishes which sin may bring, that vocation is an abiding source of inalienable greatness. The Church thinks that this greatness must reveal itself even in the conditions of present-day life, as a fruit of liberty and a principle of progress, the necessary retaliation upon the forces of evil. And she recognises in the mystery of God-made-man the guarantee of our vocation and the final consecration of our greatness. Thus in her liturgy she can celebrate each day "the dignity of the human substance" 2 even before rising to the contemplation of our rebirth.

1 Gregory of Nyssa, In caritate, Homily 2; De mortuis; Pseudo-Nyssa, First homily on the creation of man; Basil, In psalmum xxviii, 8.
2 Roman Catholic Mass, Oblation: Deus, qui humanae substantiae dignitatem mirabiliter condidisti . . .

These elementary truths of our faith seem commonplace today—though we neglect their implications all too often. It is difficult for us to imagine the disturbance they created in the soul of man in the ancient world. At the first tidings of them humanity was lifted on a wave of hope. It was stirred by vague premonitions which, at the recoil, sharpened its awareness of its state of misery. It became conscious of deliverance. To begin with, needless to say, it was not an external deliverance—not that social liberation which was to come, for instance, with the abolition of slavery. That liberation, which presupposed a large number of technical and economic conditions, was brought about slowly but surely under the influence of the Christian idea of man. "God," says Origen, in his commentary on Saint John, "made all men in his own image, he moulded them one by one." But from the outset that idea had produced a more profound effect. Through it, man was freed, in his own eyes, from the ontological slavery with which Fate burdened him. The stars, in their unalterable courses, did not, after all, implacably control our destinies. Man, every man, no matter who, had a direct link with the Creator, the Ruler of the stars themselves. And lo, the countless Powers—gods, spirits, demons—who pinned human life in the net of their tyrannical wills, weighing upon the soul with all their terrors, now crumbled into dust, and the sacred principle which had gone astray in them was rediscovered unified, purified and sublimated in God the deliverer! It was no longer a small and select company which, thanks to some secret means of escape, could break the charmed circle: it was mankind as a whole which found its night suddenly illumined and took cognizance of its royal liberty. No more circle! No more blind hazard! No more Fate! Transcendent God, God the friend of men, revealed in Jesus, opened for all a way which nothing would ever bar again. Hence that intense feeling of gladness and of radiant newness to be found everywhere in early Christian writings. It is much to be regretted that this literature should be so remote from us today. What wealth and force our faith is forfeiting by its ignorance of, for instance, the hymns of triumph and the stirring appeals that echo in the Protrepticus of Clement of Alexandria!

But if we look down the course of the ages to the dawn of modern times we make a strange discovery. That same Christian idea of man which had been welcomed as a deliverance was now beginning to be felt as a yoke. And that same God in whom
man had learnt to see the seal of his own greatness began to seem to him like an antagonist, the enemy of his dignity. Through what misunderstanding and distortions, what mutilations and infidelities, what blinding pride and impatience this came about, would take too long to consider. The historical causes are numerous and complex. But the fact remains, simple and solid. No less than the Early Fathers, the great medieval scholars had exalted man by setting forth what the Church had always taught of his relation to God: "In this is man's greatness, in this is man's worth, in this he excels every creature." But the time came when man was no longer moved by it. On the contrary, he began to think that henceforward he would forfeit his self-esteem and be unable to develop in freedom unless he broke first with the Church and then with the Transcendent Being upon whom, according to Christian tradition, he was dependent. At first assuming the aspect of a reversion to paganism, this urge to cut loose increased in scope and momentum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until, after many phases and many vicissitudes, it came to a head in the most daring and destructive form of modern atheism: absolute humanism, which claims to be the only genuine kind and inevitably regards a Christian humanism as absurd.

This atheist humanism is not to be confused with a hedonist and coarsely materialist atheism—a commonplace phenomenon to be found in many periods of history. It is also quite contrary in principle—if not in its results—to an atheism of despair. But it would be dangerous to call it a critical atheism and let it go at that. It does not profess to be the simple answer to a speculative problem and certainly not a purely negative solution: as if the understanding, having, on the attainment of maturity, set itself to reconsider the problem of God, had at last been obliged to see that its efforts could lead to nothing. The phenomenon which has dominated the history of the mind during the last few centuries seems both more profound and more arbitrary. It is not the intelligence alone that is involved. The problem posed was a human problem—it was the human problem—and the solution which is being given to it is one that claims to be positive. Man is getting rid of God in order to regain possession of the human greatness which, it seems to him, is being unwarrantably withheld by another. In God he is overthrowing an obstacle in order to gain his freedom.

1 Saint Thomas, De Malo, q. 5, a. I.

Modern humanism, then, is built upon resentment and begins with a choice. It is, in Proudhon's word, an "antitheism". In Proudhon, this antitheism operated first of all in the social field, where it was chiefly a struggle against a false idea of Providence. It was a refusal to be resigned to the "economic contradictions", productive of poverty, for which a more or less conscious conspiracy on the part of economists and property-owners claimed the sanction of heaven and which they sometimes even went so far as to extol as "harmonies". Thus Proudhon laid the blame not so much upon God himself as upon a certain form of recourse to his authority. Subsequently extending his conception to the metaphysical field, he still thought that God was "inexhaustible": the struggle in which man necessarily wrestled with God was an "eternal struggle"; "the hypothesis of a God" was reborn every time "from its resolution in human reality"; always, after the denials and exclusions, there was a resurgence of something beyond man—Proudhon for the most part called it Justice—which imposed itself upon man and prevented him from ever taking himself for God.

Thus Proudhon, even when undergoing the influence and appropriating the language of those whom he calls "the humanists" or "the new atheists"—expressly refuses to follow them. Antitheism, as conceived by them, is something more radical. They go further in opposition and denial because they set out from a more complete refusal. The story is a dramatic one. At its maximum point of concentration, it is the great crisis of modern times, that same crisis in which we are involved today and which takes its outward course in disorder, begets tyrannies and collective crimes, and finds its expression in blood, fire and ruin.

2. Feuerbach and the Religious Illusion

Let us now take a look at the two men who may be regarded as the protagonists of the drama, whether we consider their actual achievement or take them as symbols. They were two German thinkers of the last century, Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzsche.

The greatness of the second is no longer contested. After having been neglected by professional philosophers, and some-
times brushed aside by them with irritation, he finished by compelling universal recognition. The time has gone by when he could be described as "little more than a nerve-ridden and over-excitile Goethe". The first of these two men, on the other hand, if considered solely in himself, would hardly deserve more than an honourable place, which has never been denied him, in a good history of philosophy. But his importance is chiefly due to the fact that he was the stepping-stone between the great current of speculation known as German idealism and the great current of revolutionary thought and action which were to be its principal, if not its most legitimate, heir. Feuerbach pulled down the Hegelian structure and he did not find the communist movement. Between Hegel and Marx he is a rather shadowy figure—"as Engels wrote in his study of him, he was, of all the immediate descendants of Hegel, "the only one who amounted to anything as a philosopher". For all that, he is the link connecting Marx with Hegel, and the "transformer", thanks to whom Hegel finds his continuation in Marx, though with a change of direction.

In the years that followed Hegel's death in 1831, the focus of philosophical debates was the problem of God, and it was on this subject, and not primarily on political or social matters, that the split occurred between the right and left wings of Hegelianism. Feuerbach soon assumed the leadership of the left. His purpose ran parallel to that of his friend Friedrich David Strauss, historian of the origins of Christianity. As Strauss tried to account historically for the Christian illusion, Feuerbach tried to account psychologically for the religious illusion in general, or, as he himself put it, to find in anthropology the secret of theology. The substance of what Strauss said, in his Life of Jesus (1835), was that the gospels are myths expressing the aspirations of the Jewish people. In Religion Feuerbach was to make the parallel assertion that God is only a myth in which the aspirations of the human consciousness are expressed. "Those who have no desires have no gods either. . . . Gods are men's wishes in corporeal form."

To explain the mechanism of this theogony, Feuerbach had recourse to the Hegelian concept of "alienation". But, whereas Hegel applied it to absolute Spirit, Feuerbach, reversing the relation of the idea to the real, applied it in Das Wesen des

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1 Emile Faguet, En fiant Nietzsche, p. 33.

Christentums (The Essence of Christianity) to man in his flesh and blood. Alienation, according to him, is for man the fact of finding himself "dispossessed of something essentially belonging to him for the benefit of an illusive reality".1 Wisdom, will, justice and love, says Feuerbach, are so many infinite attributes which constitute man's own being and which nevertheless affect him "as if it were another being". Thus he spontaneously projects them beyond himself and objectifies them in a fantastic form, the pure product of his imagination, to which he gives the name of God. In this way he defrauds his own self. "It is one and the same act which strips the world of its content and transfers that content to God. The poor man possesses a rich God" or, to be more accurate, he impoverishes himself by enriching his God, in filling whom he empties himself. He "affirms in God what he denies in himself". "Religion is thus transformed into a vampire which feeds upon the substance of mankind, its flesh and its blood."2

Such action on the part of man was, moreover, inevitable and therefore justified in occurring when it did. In the Hegelian rhythm it represents the second movement of the dialectic, the phase of denial or antithesis which necessarily precedes the synthesis in which man is to regain possession of his essence, now enriched. Feuerbach knew that this stage could not be skipped. Thus he does not execrate religion in the past but recognises in it "an essential aspect of the human spirit". Without religion, without the worship of an external God, man would never have had more than a dim and muffled consciousness like that of an animal, for, "strictly speaking, consciousness exists only in beings which can make their essence and their species the object of their thought". It was first necessary to realise one's duality, as it were—which amounts to losing oneself in order to find oneself. But one day the alienation must come to an end. After the movement of religious systole, by which man rejected himself, he must now, by a movement of diastole, "take back into his heart that nature which he had rejected". The hour has at last struck when he must exorcise the phantom. Reflection carries on the work begun by a spontaneous impulse. The kingdom of man has come.

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1 Jean Daniélou, La Foi en l'homme chez Marx, in the Chronique sociale de France, 1938, p. 163 et seq.
2 Jean-Édouard Spenlé, La pensée allemande de Luther à Nietzsche, p. 122.
For Feuerbach, then, God is only the sum of the attributes which make up the greatness of man. The Christian God carries this to perfection (and that is why man has never been more alienated than in Christianity, the worst of religions because the highest). He is "the mirror of man", he is "the great book in which man expressed his loftiest thoughts, his purest feelings". In a maxim closely reminiscent of Auguste Comte's law of the three states, Feuerbach wrote in Religion: "God was my first thought, reason my second, and man my third and last." Elsewhere¹ he says, "It is the essence of man that is the supreme being. . . . If the divinity of nature is the basis of all religions, including Christianity, the divinity of man is its final aim. . . . The turning-point of history will be the moment when man becomes aware that the only God of man is man himself. Homo homini Deus!"

Be it noted, however, that Feuerbach does not say, as Max Stirner was soon to say, Ego mihi deus. He believes that the human essence, with its prerogatives which call for worship, is not inherent in the individual considered in isolation, but only in the community, in the generic being (Gattungswesen); indeed, by substituting for that generic being the illusion of an external God, it is the mistaken religion which is responsible for disintegrating mankind into a dust of individuals, thus leaving each of them to himself and turning him into a being naturally isolated and thrown back upon himself; for "man spontaneously conceives his own essence as individual in himself and generic in God; as limited in himself and infinite in God". But when, abandoning that chimerical view, man comes actually to participate in the common essence, to that extent he really assumes divinity. Thus the principle which sums up real religion is a principle of practical action: it is a law of love, which takes the individual out of himself and obliges him to find himself in fellowship with those of his own species. It is the principle of an altruist morality. For, in the last analysis, "the distinction between human and divine is neither more nor less than the distinction between the individual and mankind".² Thus Feuerbach clears himself of the charge of preaching egoism.

He is equally on the defensive against the charge of preaching atheism. In so far as the term is a negative one, he rejects the title of atheist. In his view this name should rather be applied to the idolater, who mistakenly regards himself as a true believer. Such a man, without faith in the divinity of qualities, feels the need to attach himself to an imaginary subject, which he takes as the object of his worship:

The true atheist is not the man who denies God, the subject; it is the man for whom the attributes of divinity, such as love, wisdom and justice, are nothing. And denial of the subject is by no means necessarily denial of the attributes. The attributes have an independent significance of their own; by their value they force men to recognize them; they impose themselves upon him; they immediately convince his understanding that they are true in themselves; they are their own warrant, their own guarantee. . . . A quality is not divine because God possesses it; God must possess it because without it he would be an imperfect being. . . . When God, as subject, is the thing determined, and the attribute is the determinant, it is not to the subject but to the attribute that the rank of supreme being, of divinity, really belongs.

The inference is that, in order not to sacrifice love to "God", we must sacrifice "God" to love. In so doing, moreover, we shall be accomplishing the secret purpose of religion. For, rightly understood, religion "ceremoniously unveils the hidden treasures of man's nature; it is the avowal of his inmost thoughts, it is the public revelation of the secrets, the mysteries of his love".

Thus, far from being unfaithful to the spirit of Christianity, which is the perfect religion, we shall at last explain its mystery.

Feuerbach had at first intended to give a different title to Das Wesen des Christentums, the first of the works in which he expressed his essential idea. It was to be called Gnôthi seauton—a truly symbolic point. His atheistic humanism thus took as its banner the old precept which the Fathers of the Church had taken over, long before. To reveal to mankind its own essence in order to give it faith in itself—that was his sole aim. But in order to attain it he thought it necessary to overthrow the God of the Christian conscience. Towards the end of his life he wrote: "The only thing I am anxious to leave in the memory of man after my death is my fundamental thought. I will let everything else go . . .
All that I want is to have introduced one single idea into the speech of conscious humanity.” It must be recognised that he succeeded only too well.

He had an immediate following. Engels mentions the extraordinary “impression of deliverance” felt by many young men of his generation in November 1841, on reading Das Wesen des Christentums. Hegel’s disciples were at that time laboriously threshing about in the toils of contradiction. “At one blow it was demolished.” This was a potent stimulus. “There was widespread enthusiasm,” Engels adds. “We all straightway became Feuerbachians.” He is scarcely exaggerating. The impression made on people was of something final; of a perfectly clear revelation, as if the scales had at last fallen from all eyes; of a full stop put to discussions that had been going on for a thousand years and had suddenly become pointless; of an end to the illusion of religious faith and the adventures of idealist speculation. The solution to the human problem had been found; there was nothing left to look for.

What had happened in Germany very soon happened in Russia also. We learn from Dostoevsky’s Journal of an Author that Bielinsky, until then the uncontested master of the younger generation, revered Feuerbach and Strauss. Later, Herzen was to recount how Feuerbach, read at Novgorod, was responsible for his innermost transformation, so that he turned “from mysticism to the most ruthless realism”.

1 From 1843 we find Bakunin, then a refugee in Switzerland, explaining that communism is only Feuerbach’s humanism carried into the social field; he extolled Feuerbach for having made the great pronouncement on religion that Hegel had failed to arrive at, and for having thereby put an end to “the mirage of God”, thus giving back to the earth what heaven had stolen from it. Bakunin adopted Feuerbach’s doctrine in its entirety and forty years later he was still trying to popularise it. Comparing Feuerbach with Auguste Comte, he marvelled at the agreement between these “two great minds”, though “they had never heard of each other”; and in his tract on Dieu et l’État he wrote:

The heaven of religion is nothing but a mirage in which man, uplifted by ignorance and faith, rediscovering his own image, but magnified and transposed—in other words, deified... Christianity is the religion of religions because, in its fulness, it lays bare and reveals the nature, the peculiar essence, of every religious system; that is to say, the impoverishment, the enslavement and the annihilation of mankind for the benefit of the deity... God appears, man is extinguished, and the greater the godhead, the more wretched man becomes. That is the history of all religions; that is the effect of all divine inspiration and divine lawgiving. In history the name of God is the terrible club with which men of manifold inspiration, the great geniuses, have struck down the liberty, dignity, reason and prosperity of men...

From the outset, too, Karl Grün had become a missionary of the same doctrine in Paris, where he lived as a refugee. As Ruge had sought to convince Louis Blanc, so he tried to convince Pierre Leroux. It was no good; but, in the fever of his zeal, he fancied that, to make up for it, he had achieved a more important conversion, namely that of Proudhon—which was true only to a very limited extent. In England Engels was an active propagandist; he championed the cause of his master in atheism with Carlyle, while George Eliot translated Das Wesen des Christentums. Among those of a later generation, Chernichevsky, the chief forerunner of Russian communism, went through the same school and recognised in Feuerbach the first of his great Western masters. But the disciple who eclipsed all others was Karl Marx.

In Die heilige Familie (The Holy Family), written in collaboration with his friend Engels and published in 1845, Marx warmly praises his master for having dispelled “the old quibbles” and set up man in their place. Feuerbach, to be sure, never went deeply into economic problems. While clearly indicating the social import of his doctrine, he left it to others to make it explicit. To the young men who brought him their reforming patience and wanted him to join them in the fight, he replied in the Introduction to his collected works in 1846: “The only ills I cure are those that come from the head or from the heart; it is from the stomach that men suffer chiefly, I know, and anything that does not help to eradicate that fundamental ill

1 Almost immediately after their conversation Proudhon set about refuting Feuerbach, whose importance he did not deny, but whose philosophy had hardly more effect upon him than Strauss’s exegesis. From its first page La Philosophie de la misère adopts a standpoint very definitely opposed to Feuerbach’s humanism.

2 Temporary theses for the reform of philosophy, in the Anekdata, March 1842.
is mere useless rubbish. Must my complete works be considered as among such rubbish, then? I’m afraid so. But are there not many ailments, even of the stomach, which come from the head? I have set out, once for all, to attack the maladies of humanity’s head and heart. But what you have set out to do you should carry out conscientiously, keeping faith with yourself.” Thus Feuerbach cannot be regarded as the founder of Marxism in all but name. But its “spiritual father” he certainly is.

It is true that Marx very soon broke with his friends, the “young Hegelians”, who contented themselves with daring speculations and political radicalism; it is true that he broke with his own past and bade the philosophy of his youth and all speculation a farewell which was at the same time a declaration of war, and that he even, to some extent, renounced his first works, including, maybe, the articles Feuerbach had inspired. But for all that he did not go back upon the conclusions he owed to Das Wesen des Christentums. They always remained for him something final. Not that he did not criticise Feuerbach’s doctrine: but when he did so it was not to call it in question in the slightest degree; it was only to pronounce it incomplete and still too abstract and vague. He reproached it with making religious alienation in some sort a metaphysical act, instead of explaining it more positively as a sociological fact. He endeavoured to go beyond what Engels irreverently called Feuerbach’s “banalities” by substituting, as Otto Ruhle said, the “materialism of social situations” for the “materialism of the objective data of nature”.

To quote Engels’ book on Feuerbach once more, Marx wanted to replace “the cult of abstract man”, which was the centre of Feuerbach’s new religion, “by the science of real men and their historical development”. Thus he stripped from the human essence the mystic halo with which Feuerbach had kept it surrounded. Soon everything else seemed to pale, in his thought, before the technique of economics and the tactics of class warfare. No other philosophical or religious influence, however, made any profound change in the thesis of humanist metaphysics which he had taken over from his master. If he hardly ever referred to it again after reaching his maturity, this was because it seemed to him a thing settled once for all, a starting-point at which there was no further need to linger. Thus it remains true that “Marx traces his spiritual descent from the humanist religion of Feuerbach.”

He cannot be accounted for in any other way. And that spiritual fact is fraught with the gravest consequences; it is among those which dominate the history of our times.

Nor did Marx content himself with admiring what he called the “inspired demonstration” by which the mystification of men’s minds was at last brought to an end, or with extolling Feuerbach as a second Luther in the history of human emancipation. He stated that Feuerbach went “as far as a theorist can go without ceasing to be a theologian and philosopher”,¹ and that after him “the criticism of religion is substantially complete”;² in 1844 he took Feuerbach’s work under his protection, in Die heilige Familie, where he instituted a complete defence of it against Bruno Bauer, improving upon the dithyrambic eulogy he had already bestowed upon it two years earlier, in his short anonymous article on “Luther as umpire between Strauss and Feuerbach”. He not only copied his master’s religious criticism in his own social criticism, analysing the “secular form” of alienation to arrive at the conclusion that humanity must abolish the State as it had abolished religion; he adapted the Feuerbachian conception of religion to social life.

For him, too, as he states in his Kritik of Hegel’s philosophy, “man makes religion, it is not religion that makes man; religion is in reality man’s own consciousness and feeling which has not yet found itself or has lost itself again”. Such is “the foundation of religious criticism”. Only:

Man is not an abstract being outside the real world. Man is the world of men, the State, society. This State and this society produce religion, a mistaken attitude to the world, because they themselves constitute a false world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its popular logic, its spiritual point of honour, its inspiration, its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its general consoling and justifying reason... It is the imaginative realisation of the human essence, because that essence has no true reality. The misery of religion is, on the one hand, the expression of real misery and, on the other, a protest against real misery. Religion is the sigh of the creature overwhelmed by unhappiness, the soul of a world that has no

¹ Die deutsche Ideologie (German Ideology), 1845–6, in collaboration with Engels and Hess.
² Beitrag zu der Kritik von Hegels Philosophie (Contribution to the Criticism of Hegel’s Philosophy).
heart, as it is the mind of an era that has no mind. It is the opium of the people.

Thus, at the rebound, the fight which must be put up against religion will be a “fight against this world”, against “this perverted world whose spiritual aroma is religion”. “Atheism is humanism mediatised to itself through the suppression of religion” to a thoroughly Feuerbachian way of putting it. But, in order that man may one day be freed from the mystical illusion and all the evils it brings with it, Marx thinks it is necessary to transform society, since it is bad social organisation which is the true cause of human belief and consequently of human alienation. Or, rather, its two forms, social alienation and spiritual alienation, help to produce each other and it is impossible to overcome one without attacking the other. And this results in a combined struggle, the two parts of which serve each other as means to an end. “The only point on which I do not agree with Feuerbach,” Marx wrote to Ruge on 13 March 1843, “is that, to my mind, he attaches too much importance to nature and not enough to politics.” And again in Die deutsche Ideologie he says that Feuerbach “does not see that the perceptible world surrounding him is not a direct datum, from all eternity and always the same, but is the product of industry and of the state of society, and is so in the sense that, in every period of history, it is the result and product of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each of which lifted itself on the shoulders of the one before, whose social order it changed in accordance with changing needs. . . . He never arrives at active man, really existing, but always stops short at an abstract idea. . . . He offers no criticism of the conditions of actual existence. . . .”

Thus, in preaching practical means of emancipating man, Marx may be said to have shown himself “more Feuerbachian than Feuerbach himself”. In that way he ensured his own success in revolutionary circles and, right to the end, he remained faith-

ful to his inspiration, thanks to the addition which he thus made to it in point of method. Marx’s doctrine, never plain naturalism, always paid as much attention to man’s spiritual life as to his material existence. His communism offered itself as the only concrete realisation of humanism; it quite deliberately claimed to be a total solution for the whole human problem; moving to the plane of reality, it did not propose to figure there only as a social phenomenon but as a spiritual phenomenon also. This is what gives it greatness but this is also the radical flaw in it; it is this that bathes even its sound elements in a baneful atmosphere and it is this that chiefly arouses Christian opposition. “The religion of the workers has no God,” Marx wrote in a letter to Hardmann, “because it seeks to restore the divinity of man.”

The combination of French socialism, English economics and German metaphysics might have produced something quite different from Marxism, if Marx had not found a master in Feuerbach. It was through Feuerbach that his feet were firmly planted on one of the slopes of the Hegelian system. It has been said that, before being the right-wing Hegelian who sees in dogmas the symbols of his philosophy, Hegel had been for a short time the left-wing Hegelian who wants to destroy dogmas in order to make way for truth. In one of his earliest writings, noting man’s need, first of all, to think his way “out of his own consciousness”, he made this short but lucid observation which seems to forecast the double programme of Feuerbach and Marx: “It was one of the merits of our age that, at least in theory, it claimed as man’s property the treasures that had been squandered on the heavens; but what age will have the strength to take practical advantage of that right and secure that property?”

The second part of the prophecy presupposed the realisation of the first. Feuerbach was indispensable to Marx. Arnold Ruge’s note, repeated by Karl Grün and by Marx himself, offers the historian a suggestive symbol: on the threshold of the Marxist paradise there is the purgatory of Feuerbach.

1 Quoted by G. Fossard, Le dialogue catholique-communiste, p. 233.
2 Bakunin, for instance, interpreted Feuerbach via Marx and found in that interpretation a fresh theme for his militant atheism. Dieu et l’Etat, pp. 78-9: “Once the supernatural world, the divine world, had been firmly established in the imagination of the peoples, the development of the different religious systems took its natural and logical course, conforming, moreover, to the continuous development of economic and political relations, of which, in the world of religious fancy, it has always been the faithful echo and the divine sanction.”

3 Feuerbach — stream of fire, burning brook. Letter to Feuerbach, 14 October 1840.
3. Nietzsche and the “Death of God”

Nietzsche published his first work in the year of Feuerbach's death. He showed no esteem for that philosopher. Nevertheless, he had received from Feuerbach more than he admitted—more, I dare say, than he thought—through his two masters, Schopenhauer and Wagner. Written between 1844 and 1850, Schopenhauer's Parerga bear incontestable witness to the deep impression which Das Wesen des Christentums had made upon their author. As for Wagner, before being "initiated into the profound and tragic meaning of the world and the vanity of its appearances" by reading Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung (The World as Will and Idea), he too had been fascinated by Feuerbach. At the time when he was at work on his Memoirs—those memoirs of which Nietzsche himself corrected the proofs—Wagner still considered Feuerbach the "only real philosopher of modern times" and "the representative of the radical and categorical liberation of the individual". Before he broke away, he had not only found in Feuerbach's doctrine the idea for a play called Jesus of Nazareth (which he never finished), and dedicated to the philosopher his work on Religion und Kunst (Religion and Art), but it was from Feuerbach that he had received the inspiration for his Siegfried, described by M. René Berthelot as "a wonderful incarnation of the hero as conceived by Nietzsche". Thus it is not surprising to find that, even in the last phase before madness overtook him, Nietzsche's notes for the great synthesis on Der Wille zur Macht (The Will to Power)—a project he was continually postponing—included an explanation of belief in God which comes close to Feuerbach's, but with an added element of passion.

Religion is conceived as the result of a kind of psychological duplication. God, according to Nietzsche, is nothing more than the mirror of man, who, in certain intense, exceptional states, becomes aware of the power that is in him, or of the love that exalts him. But, as these sensations take him more or less by surprise and he does not seem to be accountable for them, man, not daring to ascribe such power or love to himself, makes them the attributes of a superhuman being who is a stranger to him. He accordingly divides the two aspects of his own nature between two spheres, the ordinary weak and pitiable aspect appertaining to the sphere which he calls "man", while the rare, strong and surprising aspect belongs to the sphere which he calls "God". Thus by his own action he is defrauded of what is best in him. "Religion is a matter of adulteration of the personality." It is a process by which man is debased. The whole essence of the human problem will therefore consist in remounting that fatal slope so as "gradually to regain possession of those lofty and proud states of the soul" of which we have wrongfully despoiled ourselves.

In Christianity this process of self-despoilment and self-debasement is carried to extremes. There is nothing good, great and true that is not solely bestowed by grace. "It is a deplorable story: man seeks a principle in the name of which he can despise man: he invents another world in order to be able to slander and besmirch this one; in actual fact he never grasps anything but nothingness and makes of that nothingness a 'God', a 'Truth', called upon to judge and condemn this present existence..."

Moreover, Nietzsche's aversion for Christianity and for all faith in God did not date only from the end of his career. It showed itself very early, and from the beginning it was a spontaneous, quite instinctive feeling, as he himself explained in his Ecce Homo: "Atheism," he said at that time, "is not, for me, the consequence of something else; still less is it a thing which has befallen me; in my case it is something that goes without saying, a matter of instinct." For some time he dreamed of an organisation of the forces of atheism. Thus, in this new protagonist of the great drama, even more plainly than in Feuerbach and his disciples, atheism is, at the very root of it, an anti-theism.

Nietzsche takes it as an accepted fact that God cannot "live" anywhere but in the human mind. But he is an undesirable guest there: he is, according to Zarathustra, "a thought which bends everything that is straight". The way to get rid of him is not so much to refute the proofs of his existence as to show how such an idea came to be formed and how it succeeded in establishing itself in the human mind and in "gaining weight" there. This "historical refutation" is "the only one that will carry finality". It will make any counter-proof unavailing, whereas without it a doubt will always subsist; for, in spite of themselves, men will always keep on wondering whether there is not perhaps some

1 Morgenröte (The Dawn of Day), No. 96: "There are now perhaps ten to twenty million men among the different peoples of Europe who 'no longer believe in God'. Is it asking too much that they should get in touch with one another?"
better proof than the one that has just been refuted. That being so, belief will not have been destroyed at the root and it will not fail to put forth new shoots at the first opportunity. Is not Kant a case in point? Although his first *Kritik* seemed to have broken "the bars of the cage" in which faith in God keeps us shut up, Kant of his own accord, through the postulates on which he based his ethics, went into captivity again. He had, however, given evidence of a force and skill hitherto unknown! For the rest, his criticism was bound to be incomplete because it remained wholly speculative and did not proceed from a decision. Kant was only an intellectual, a journeyman of philosophy: it is man who has to free himself, by an act of will. He must dare. Faith in God, especially as inculcated by Christianity, has served to tame man (zähmen): what is necessary is to raise (zichten) him (in the sense of improving the breed) by rooting out that faith, so as to enable him in the end to raise himself. Come then: let "the death of God" be boldly proclaimed.

This expression "the death of God" had its place in the most traditional theology as signifying what happened on Calvary. Nietzsche had doubtless, on various occasions, heard Luther's chorale "God himself is dead"; he may even have joined in the singing of it. Nor was he unaware of the use that Hegel had made of it. "That hard saying is at the same time just the opposite," Hegel had said; and he had taken it and turned it into one of the essential categories of his own thought, applying it both to the Christ who dies and comes to life again and to human reason, which must pass through the moment of negation in order to join the universal spirit: "the Good Friday of speculation", the death of the "abstract God", necessary for the life of the concrete God. In this connection Hegel had quoted Pascal, who had said "in a quite empirical way" but in a sense not so far removed from Nietzsche's, though with a completely different intention: "Nature bears traces of a lost God everywhere, both in man and outside him." The same expression also occurred in the mystics, such as Jakob Boehm aed Angelus Silesius: through love, the latter sang, "God is led into dying", "God dies in order to live in thee". But this is obviously not the sense in which Nietzsche understands it. Wagner came closer to him when recounting, in his *Nibelungen* trilogy, the death of a race of gods.

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1 *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (The Joyful Wisdom), No. 335.
2 To be found in Hegel's early works and in the *Phänomenologie.*
ATHEIST HUMANISM

"Don't you hear the bell? Down on your knees! The sacrament is being carried to a dying God."1

Whatever its antecedents may have been, the meaning which Nietzsche attaches to this phrase, "the death of God," is new. On his lips it is not a mere statement of fact. Nor is it a lament or a piece of sarcasm. It expresses a choice. "Now," says Nietzsche, "it is our preference that decides against Christianity—not arguments." It is an act. An act as definite and brutal as that of a murderer. For him "the death of God is not merely a terrible fact, it is something willed by him."2 If God is dead, he expresses, "it is we who have killed him." "We are the assassins of God."3

A great many men, the vast majority, are unaware of it; and, if someone comes to tell them the news, they take him for a madman. They fall into two huge categories: believers and common atheists. The first, failing to understand what it is all about, are not even disturbed. Their faith makes them blind and deaf, so to speak. They go on with their dream in the midst of a world that is waking. The second, who have never believed in anything, laugh heartily at the news. They have never suspected the existence of anything living beyond the life of sense perception. Nietzsche wants to shake these scoffers out of their complacency; he wants to make them perceive the void which has been hallowed out within them, and he accosts them in violent terms. Towards believers, on the other hand, if he feels that they are sincere and simple, his manner is circumspect, as if he feared to cause them suffering by making himself too well understood.4 His attitude

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1 De l'Allemagne depuis Luther, in the Revue des Deux-Mondes, 1834, Vol. 4, p. 408. This light, quizzical tone is the very opposite of Nietzsche's habitual manner, though the two pieces of storytelling are so much alike that the hypothesis of direct imitation can hardly be ruled out. Cf. Auser Dienst (Without a Master) in Zarathustra:

"When he was young, this God from the East, he was hard and vindictive and fashioned a Hell, for the diversion of his favourites."

"But as time went on he became old and soft and flabby and compassionate, more like a grandfather than a father, but still more like a shabby old grandmother."

"There he sat, shrivelled up, in the chimney-corner, fretting over the weakness of his legs, world-weary and weary-willed, until one day he was suffocated by his own excess of pity."


3 Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, No. 125.

4 "Every deep thinker is more afraid of being understood than of being misunderstood. In the latter event, his vanity suffers perhaps; in the former, what suffers is his heart, his sympathy, which keeps on saying: "Alas! Why are you so anxious that the road should be as hard for you as it is for me?"
Is not night always coming on, one night after another, more and more?"¹ At last a very few, rare spirits who carry in them the destiny of mankind resist the dizziness that assails them. They feel it at first, like the others, for they are human, and more than all the rest they are aware of the enormity of what has happened and the losses involved. But very soon they master this sensation. Their energy is equal to their perspicacity. Alone in their power to see things as they are, they bring a perfectly clear mind to bear upon the outrage they have perpetrated, and thus transform the crime into an exploit.²

It is from them that we receive Nietzsche’s message, which does not entirely reside in the confident pride of his Zarathustra. "But, friends, let me open my whole heart to you: if there were gods in existence, how could I endure not to be a god?" Nor is it merely an instance of the attitude habitual to Nietzsche, which consisted in saying "No" to everything that was dear and estimable to him, in order that he might free himself from everything. Charles du Bos, in an entry in his Journal, has hit upon one of its distinguishing traits. He observes that Nietzsche is, above all, up in arms against the great convenience which belief in God too often affords:

"God", Nietzsche might have said, "is that to which we look to make good our shortcomings and to supply an explanation where we feel the need of one." That is why in Zarathustra and elsewhere he so often repeats: "They cannot all know that God is dead..." It is here above all that the idea of God finds its champions, because of the too great advantages that it offers. Nietzsche is one who continually says to us (and on a much profounder plane than that on which we ask ourselves "How far can man go?"): "O man, to what point can you stand firm against this, and against that, and, last of all, against the fact that there is nothing left for you but absolute denudation? And more than the

¹ Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, Nos. 125 and 343.
² Cf. Jenseit von Gut und Böse (Beyond Good and Evil), No. 109: "The crime frequently fails to come up to his deed; he belittles and traduces it." Alas from Morgengabe Nietzsche had written: "I have killed the law, and my feeling for the horror of the living in the presence of a corpse; unless I am above the law, I am the greatest of all transgressors." Cf. the letter dated March 1884 to Overbeck: "Great heavens! Who has any idea of the burden that weighs upon me of the strength it takes to endure myself! I don’t know why it should fall upon me of all people—but it may be that I am the first to light upon an idea which will dwell the history of mankind in two... It requires some courage to face the thought.”

Zarathustra, indeed, says to his disciple: "The laggard demon in you, the one that likes to fold his arms and take his ease—it is this laggard demon that says to you: ‘There is a God!’" What is needed is courage to reject his promptings and "stand firm" in spite of all. But the very fact of "standing firm" means growing in stature. Nietzsche did not stop short at a new kind of stoicism. If he deliberately set out to be "godless"—the word, which later scored such a success in Soviet Russia, came from him—it was neither to clench his teeth in unspoken distress nor to give himself up to selfish enjoyment. If his first feeling was one of instinctive revolt, atheism in the end seemed to him "the result of an arduous and hazardous conquest."³ "If we do not make the death of God a splendid renunciation on our part and a continual victory over ourselves," he said in Also sprach Zarathustra, "we shall have to pay dearly for that loss." Jaspers notes that there is in Nietzsche "a universal negativity, an immeasurable lack of satisfaction with every aspect of being: and this dissatisfaction and denial are so passionate and full of the will to sacrifice that they seem to come from the same depths as the great religions and the faith of the prophets". Thus they are transformed into a positive urge, spurring us on to greatness. To quote Zarathustra once more: "What would there be left to create, if there were any gods?" Bereft of the God in whom it used to repose, to whom it used to appeal, mankind must henceforth go forward and upwards. It is forced into creating. To quote from Der Wille zur Macht: "Since there ceased to be a God, loneliness has become intolerable; the man who overtops the rest must set to work." He must produce out of himself—out of nothingness—something with which to transcend humanity. Let him trample his own head under foot and shoot forth beyond his shadow... The endurance test to which he has condemned himself will reveal to him his own divinity by bringing it into being. God is dead, long live the Superman! Remorse and despair will be overcome simultaneously, by the same effort:

³ Extrait d’un journal, pp. 177-9. Exclusively from the intellectual standpoint, it is not true that God is only too often the "verbal symbol" under which we sow away "all the difficulties we have in explaining and generalising particular facts."
... How shall we console ourselves, murderers that we are among the murderers? What was most holy and powerful in the world up to now has bled beneath our knife. ... Who will cleanse us of this blood? What expiations, what sacred charade shall we be forced to invent? The greatness of this deed is too great for us. Shall we not have to become gods ourselves simply in order to seem worthy of it? There was never a more stupendous action, and those who are born after us, whatever they may be, will, because of it, belong to a history nobler than any history ever was ere this... 1

At this prospect the "free minds" exult. Such a revelation in very truth "joyful wisdom". Before their delighted eyes the horrible twilight gives place to dawn. They have the triumphant feeling of being the "freed men" of Der Wille zur Macht, "whom nothing now is forbidden". "The greatest danger" they threatened them has been removed from their path. 2 This corpse of God in decomposition is not, for them, a sign of death: it is the sign of a gigantic change. God will find himself again in man, beyond good and evil. 3 Such is the power of a heroic decision. 4 By it the meaning of facts is reversed. Now at last "twenty centuries of flouting nature, of doing violence to humanity" are at an end for ever. The sublime adventure can begin:

... Hearing that the old god is dead, we feel ourselves illumined as by a new dawn. Our hearts overflow with gratitude, surprise, foreknowledge and suspense... Now at last the horizon, even if it is not clear, is free once more; now at last our ships can weigh anchor and sail to meet any danger; now once more the pioneer of knowledge has licence to attempt whatever he will: the whole expanse of the seas, our sea, is accessible to us once more. Never before, perhaps, was there such an open sea. 1

"I am alone and I would have it so," said Zarathustra. "Alone with a clear sky and an open sea."

4. The Dissolution of Man

Such an outburst of lyricism, coupled with such magnificent promises, was contagious. Already at work in the preceding generation, the urge to do without God now became a greater ferment than ever in souls which were not all lacking in nobility and which would have been the first to reject an atheism of the ordinary complacent type. It was this urge which inspired the ideas of men like Dietrich Heinrich Kerler, for instance, who declared in a letter to Max Scheler that, "Even if it could be proved by mathematics that God exists, I do not want him to exist, because he would set limits to my greatness." Nor was it enough for a man like Martin Heidegger to deny God: in order to rule out more completely any risk of a swing towards belief again, he had to go beyond a mere denial and refuse to allow the question of God even to be raised. And, in a study which caused a great stir in Germany not long ago, Max Scheler went so far as to speak of "postulatory atheism" as the essential characteristic of modern man.

There were many, indeed, who still more or less vaguely thought, with Feuerbach, that "the question of the existence or non-existence of God is the question of the non-existence or existence of man"; there was Nicolai Hartmann, for instance, holding the view that, if there was a God, this would be the end of man "as an ethical essence, as a person". Many, like Nietzsche in Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, said to themselves that "perhaps man would rise higher and higher from the moment when he ceased to flow into God"; there was Emil Bergmann, who proclaimed, in the language of the stud-farm, that "it is possible to breed not only animals but the man-God". Both types traced their descent from Prometheus, whom they acclaimed 1

1 Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, No. 125.
2 Also sprach Zarathustra, Part IV:
3 "Now this God is dead! You higher men, this God was your greatest danger; it is only since he lay in the grave that you have risen again. Only now the great noontide comes; only now the higher man becomes lord!
4 "Do you understand this saying, O my brothers? You are frightened; do your hearts fail you? Does the abyss yawn at your feet? Does the hound of hell himself yawn at you?
5 "What of it? Forward! Higher men! Now at last the mountain of man's future is about to give birth. God is dead; now it is our will that the Superman shall live."
6 A Nietzschean socialist wrote in his notebook, about 1908: "The Gods are dead, long live the Superman! Nietzsche predicts an early return to the idea, but to an entirely different and new ideal. To understand this ideal there will be a category of free minds, fortified by war, solitude and danger. They will know the wind, the glaciers, the Alpine snows; they will be able to plumb the deepest poles without waverings. Endowed with a kind of sublime perversity, they will desire us from loving our neighbours and from the desire of nothingness, that the earth may recover its purpose and men their hopes."

1 Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, No. 343.
as "the first of the martyrs". They recognised themselves in that man who heroically stood up to the gods. They too wanted to "kill God" so that man could at last live a fully human, or rather "superhuman", life, and atheism seemed to them the indispensable foundation of the high ideal which they proposed for such a man: either an ideal of rationality and love or an ideal of strength and heroic life. They might subsequently differ as to every point and fight each other without mercy, but to begin with they were of one mind in their determined rejection of God.

To achieve their aim, both camps made abundant use of the resources which generations of historians and thinkers had piled up: resources of dialectic, of genetic analysis, of psychology, of the history of ideas, of the study of religion. A vast accumulation of work, most of it distorted by a mass of prejudices, supplied them with a whole arsenal. But, unlike many of those who had thus prepared the ground for them, they hardly troubled to apply the patient methods of the intellectual. They preferred a more active approach. Had not Feuerbach taught that the Hegelian synthesis marked "the end of classical philosophy"? True, Feuerbach himself, although "the real conqueror of the old philosophy", "never stopped philosophising". As Dühring observed later in his Cursus der Philosophie, Feuerbach found it "a slow and painful business to expel from his naturally generous blood the academic poison with which Hegel had infected him". Without going so far as to adopt, like Hegel, the maxim: "It is only at eventide that Minerva's bird comes forth", he put off his young disciples (who, as we have seen, pressed him to join them in more direct action) with the answer: "We have not got far enough yet to put theory into practice."¹

But soon, even "more realistic" than his master in his conception of man, Marx was to proclaim in the sixth of his Theses on Feuerbach the interdependence between man's spiritual alienation and his temporal and social alienation—that is to say what he had lost to God through religion and what he had lost to other men through their exploitation of him. Refusing to "crouch" any longer "in the speculative concept",² he declared in Die deutsche Ideologie that "the driving force of history is not criticism but revolution" and finally, in the last of the Theses, uttered his famous watchword: "So far the philosophers have done nothing but explain the world; now we have got to transform it."

Engels, too, referred to "the defunct philosophy"; in his Anti-Dühring; and since then all true Marxists, accepting, like Marx and Feuerbach, Hegel's own idea about his work¹ and acting accordingly, have contemptuously left systems to "the professors", in order to prepare direct action. As for Nietzsche, given to "philosophising with a hammer", did not he, too, smash all speculation so that life might triumph? Did not he, too, scorn all "professorial philosophy"? According to him, there was no need to be held up by what the "ruminants of the higher education", the common "journeymen of philosophy", or, as Wagner put it, the "hired porters of philosophy", called "the search for truth".

There was to be no more contemplation of the real in order to discover its essence, no more submission to any object whatsoever. Let us, said Nietzsche in Der Wille zur Macht, reject "this last bondage"; "we have abolished the world of truth"; "nothing is true". Is the very idea of truth anything more than a shadow of the dead God? "Perhaps," indeed, "falsehood is a divine thing"... perhaps there is a value, significance and purpose in the lie, the artificial introduction of a meaning?"² All events, the cult of lucidity should replace the search for truth. Let us get to the bottom of what our denial entails: let us be consistent in our choice. If God is really dead: how could that "reason", that "truth" and that "morality" which owed their existence to him be anything but idols? Here, then, is their "twilight"... "Aggressive rejection of a law of being, of an extra-human order, of a coherent universe", of an "ontological harmony prior to the 'I will'" of man; hatred of the intelligible, of final causes, of an absolute practical order: the decision to kill God entails all that. Value in itself no more exists than objective essence exists. It must not exist. Just as it is absurd to submit to a law, so "pure knowledge", "immaculate knowledge", is a false ideal, or rather it is a hypocritical ideal fashioned by impotence. One must live. But "to live is to invent". One must appraise. But "to appraise is to create". Invention and creation: these are the two words which hereafter define the task of the genuine philosopher, who

¹ Letters to Ruge, 13 March and 20 June 1843.
² Letter to Engels (against Lassalle).
is to be “the bad conscience of his age”. He will make hay of accepted values, overthrowing them and scrapping them so that something new can be got out of them, remoulded to suit his fancy. And, as we learn from Ecce Homo and Jenseit von Gut und Böse, this task, which will have to be done over and over again, is not confined to the realm of thought; the philosopher is “a terrible explosive from which nothing is safe”; he is “the man of violence, Caesarean creator of civilisation”; “it is his mission to command and lay down the law; his research is creation, his creation is legislation, his will to truth is will to power.”

Thus, like the Marxist, though after another fashion and for other ends, the Nietzschean is a revolutionary.

That being so, it was not surprising that the drama which had taken shape in human minds quickly reached the point at which it burst forth in fire and slaughter. Nietzsche, indeed, had predicted it. More than a too reasonable farsightedness could have done, the lightning flashes of a mind stalked by madness made him a prophet. “I herald the coming of a tragic era,” he said in Ecce Homo, at a time when his days of sanity were numbered. “We must be prepared for a long succession of demolitions, devastations and upheavals”; “there will be wars such as the world has never yet seen”; “Europe will soon be enveloped in darkness”; we shall watch “the rising of a black tide.”1 “Thanks to me,” he wrote in Der Wille zur Macht, “a catastrophe is at hand. A catastrophe whose name I know, whose name I shall not tell... Then all the earth will writh in convulsions.”

In a word, he adds, “it will be the coming of nihilism.”2

But all this is only the effect, the manifestation of a deeper and a purely inward crisis. For “thought comes before action as lightning before thunder”. Events take place in the reality of the mind before they make their appearance in the external reality of history, and what is happening today should not surprise those who have watched the movements of the spirit. There was something shaken and overthrown in the soul of man before his historical values were shaken and overthrown. The “death of God” was bound to have fatal repercussions. Thus we are confronted with what Nicholas Berdyaev, likewise endowed with a “prophetic” gift, but one coupled with accurate diagnosis, has rightly called “the self-destruction of humanism”. We are proving by experience that “where there is no God, there is no man either”.

What has actually become of the lofty ambitions of this humanism, not only in fact but in the very way of thought of its initiates? What has become of man as conceived by this atheist humanism? A being that can still hardly be called a “being”—a thing which has no content, a cell completely merged in a mass which is in process of becoming: “social-and-historical man”, of whom all that remains is pure abstraction, apart from the social relations and the position in time by which he is defined. There is no stability or depth left in him, and it is no good looking for any inviolable retreat there or claiming to discover any value exacting universal respect. There is nothing to prevent his being used as material or as a tool either for the preparation of some future society or for ensuring, here and now, the dominance of one privileged group. There is not even anything to prevent his being cast aside as useless. Moreover, the types of man conceivable vary even to the point of contradiction, according as, for instance, a biological or an economic system of explanation comes to the fore, or according as the history of mankind is, or is not, credited with a meaning and a purpose. But beneath these diversities there is always the same fundamental creature, or rather the same absence of any creature. For this man has literally been dissolved. Whether in the name of myth or in the name of dialectic, losing truth, he has lost himself. In reality there is no longer any man because there is no longer anything that is greater than man.

It cannot be said that this is only a temporary setback. Nor should the blame be laid on certain clumsy distortions which are only too real and palpable. The descendants of Marx did not all inherit his genius. The heirs of Nietzsche are even more mixed and there is no doubt that today the prophet in Zarathustra would be the first to find abundant reasons for cursing a great many of those who invoke his name.3 But these distortions are often not so much betrayals as the effects of an inevitable corruption. Atheist humanism was bound to end in bankruptcy. Man is himself only because his face is illumined by a divine ray.

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1 Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, No. 343.
2 Letters to Overbeck, 16 April 1887, and Brandes, 20 November 1888.
3 In Der Mythus des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts (The Myth of the Twentieth Century), Alfred Rosenberg, in opposition to other interpreters, claims Nietzsche as an inspirer of National Socialism. Bäumler and others as well.
"The godhead is reflected in the slime of the earth like the image in a mirror."1 If the fire disappears, the reflected gleam immediately dies out. "If, in everything that takes place in our sublunar world, the relation to eternity is destroyed, it needs no more than that to destroy, at the same time, all depth and all real content in this world."2 For man, God is not only a norm which is imposed upon him and, by guiding him, lifts him up again: God is the Absolute upon which he rests, the Magnet which draws him, the Beyond which calls him, the Eternal which provides him with the only atmosphere in which he can breathe and, in some sort, that third dimension in which man finds his depth. If man takes himself as god, he can, for a time, cherish the illusion that he has raised and freed himself. But it is a fleeting exaltation! In reality, he has merely abused God, and it is not long before he finds that in doing so he has abused himself. Soon the old forces of Fate, exorcised by Christianity, begin to weigh him down again. What though a few still dream of boundless paradise? Others, more clear-sighted, will lose no time in reminding them that this Fate cannot be conquered; that it is at the beginning as at the end of all things; and that the only resource left for man is to endeavour to transform it into an "uplifting idea", by persuading himself that he forms part of it; to endeavour to love it. Let them drink deep of a life whose sap seems to them all-powerful, the pledge of more and more exalted victories: soon one of them, having seen that, at bottom, "nothingness characterises the human being", will show them that their essence, in itself, spells defeat and that they are nothing but "beings made for death".8

"Oh, heaven above me!" cried Zarathustra, speaking for man in the days of his illusion. "Pure and lofty heaven! This is what your purity means to me now: that there is no everlasting spider and spider's web of reason; that you are a dancing-place for divine hazards; that you are a divine table for the dice of divine gamesters!" Or, in another of his dreams: "Oh, Earth ahead of us! Earth of deliverance and fellowship! Earth promised to our Prometheus exertions! This is what your beauty means to us now: that there is no heaven above you to keep us under the yoke, no everlasting precept to clip our wings! But that a day will dawn over you, a day of reconciliation, marking the end of history, in which man and Nature will celebrate their espousals!" He does not see that, in reality, the One whom he thus blasphemes and exorcises constitutes his whole strength and his whole greatness. At the goal of his dreams of complete emancipation, he does not perceive the impending menace of slavery. A tragic misconception, and one which, it may be, has not finished bringing forth its fruits of death.

Other forms of atheistic humanism than those briefly described have existed and still exist. But, in the contest now in progress in the depths of men's souls, they can (apart from positivism) be dismissed as negligible. Not that they have failed to produce effects which are still far-reaching and likely to make themselves felt for a long time to come. But in the world of today they no longer represent a creative force. Critical atheism, liberal atheism, atheism resulting from laicism, all these are marks of an age that is dying. Like deism before them, they often preserved a number of values that were Christian in origin; but, having cut off these values from their source, they were powerless to maintain them in their full strength or even in their authentic integrity. Spirit, reason, liberty, truth, brotherhood, justice: these great things, without which there is no true humanity, which ancient paganism had half perceived and Christianity had instituted, quickly became unreal when no longer seen as a radiation from God, when faith in the living God no longer provides their vital substance. Then they become empty forms. Soon they are no more than a lifeless ideal, ready to fall a prey to lurking lies and offering an even apter application for Péguy's terrible dictum: "Kantism has clean hands, only it has no hands."9 Without God, even truth is an idol, even justice is an idol. Idols too pure and pale in face of the flesh-and-blood idols that are regaining their pedestals; ideals too abstract in face of the great collective myths which are reawakening the strongest instincts—"de-germed wheat", as they have been called.8 Thus the laicism of this present-day society has, though often in its own despite, prepared

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1 Franco (†1130). De gratia Dei, I, 2.
8 "He who takes away the Word destroys speech" is a profound saying of Claudel's, Correspondence de Paul Claudel et de Jacques Rivière, p. 25.
the way for the great revolutionary systems now loosed with
the enveloping sweep of an avalanche.

These great systems are not, first and foremost, social and
political facts but systems of living. The principle which inspired
them was not devoid of nobility. Some of their intuitions have
been sound. Their ambitions are not purely Utopian. The
criticisms which served as their starting-point were often shrewd,
with a shrewdness cruel in its accuracy; and certain of their
manifestations have an imposing grandeur which, for many
fascinated eyes, masks the horrors that were their purchase price.
I have not made it my business to discuss them or even to subject
them to a primary analysis, but merely to bring out in full relief
the passionate denial which underlies them and vitiates them
beyond all hope. True, the problems—not only social but also
and predominantly spiritual—with which they grapple are only
too real, and their inability to find a human solution should
not be made a pretext for ruling out the examination of these
problems. For the world which they spew forth has often no
right to call itself Christian in any but a purely sociological sense,
and the God they reject is all too often a mere caricature of the
God we worship. It is equally certain that many of those who
feel the attraction of these revolutionary systems do not grasp
their full import; they choose to see no more in these systems
than programmes for temporal organisation, and they leave the
religious problem on one side or, in some cases, solve it for them-
seves in quite a different way. How few people see what is at the
bottom of the movements by which they are carried away! Nor
may we lightly decline to take on a task of dissociation. The
denial which we have witnessed is, for all its negativeness, a
fundamental fact—too fundamental for accidents of history
or of thought to get rid of it for a very long time yet. And as
long as this threat persists, it is man himself who is threatened.

Nicholas Berdyaev has spoken of an "end of the Renaissance"
and of a return to a kind of Middle Ages for our era. "A new
Middle Ages?" Such a hypothesis cannot be ruled out, but the
phrase may have two meanings. For two elements were mingled
in the Middle Ages of history: barbarism and the Church, which
endeavoured to educate the barbarians by converting them to
belief in God. Shall we revert to barbarism, a barbarism no doubt
very different from the old one, but surely much more horrible, a
centralised, technically efficient and inhuman barbarism? Or
shall we, in conditions themselves very different, with deeper
knowledge and lifted by a freer, more magnificent impetus,
succeed in rediscovering the God which the same Church still sets
before us, the living God who made us in His own image? That,
above all the problems which press for our attention, is the great
question today.

1 On the subject of atheistic communism, Jacques Maritain rightly observes:
"At the root of it, and chiefly through the fault of a Christian world unfaithful to
its principles, there is a deep resentment against that Christian world—and not only
against the Christian world but (and that is the tragedy of it) against Christianity
itself, which transcends the Christian world and should not be confused with it. . . .
Resentment against those who have not been able to give effect to the truth of which
they were the bearers; resentment which is rebounding against that truth itself."
*Humanisme intégral*, pp. 49 and 52.