The Smith of the Gods

37 - « After DADA, Situationism! »

370-The « Dada » movement was first represented by Tristan Tzara, George Grosz, Marcel Duchamp, then came Surrealism: André Breton, Jean Arp. Next, the birth of the imaginist Bauhaus with the Cobra movement represented by Asger Jorn and the Lettrist International with Jacques Prévert and Georges Perec, then the London Psychogeographical Committee and finally the Situationist International with Isidore Isou, Ralph Rumney, Guy Debord, Michèle Bernstein, Asger Jorn, Yves Klein, Mustapha Khayati, Attila Kotanyi and René Riesel. Situationism designates a philosophical, aesthetic and political protest movement embodied by the Situationist International, a « collective platform », founded by eight artists in 1957, at the conference of Cosio d'Arroscia. Subsequently, it would be made up of 70 members including 7 women and 63 men, of 16 different nationalities. It was an organization of revolutionary theorists, strategists and activists operating in the cultural, artistic, political and social fields and desiring to put an end to class society and the « dictatorship of the commodity ». Its founders defined themselves as those « who employ themselves in constructing situations », a « constructed situation » being a « moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a play of events in which the relations of Fraternity intervene ». In his founding document, « Report on the Construction of Situations... », Guy Debord (1931-1994) expresses the demand to « change the world » and envisages the surpassing of all artistic forms by « a unitary employment of all the means of upheaval of everyday life ». The situationist project rests upon council communism, in an egalitarian society rid of commercial relations, and upon the revolution of everyday life, generalized self-management, on egalitarian bases, the suppression of commercial relations, the abolition of the spectacle as a social relation, the participation of individuals, the realization and the flourishing of the individual, the abolition of labor as alienation and as an activity separated from life. The movement of May 68 proves, in many respects, to be a confirmation of the theses and of the action of the Situationist International, which dissolved itself in 1972.

371-At the beginning, situationism intends to be an attempt to surpass the revolutionary avant-garde artistic movements of the 20th century like Dadaism, Surrealism and Lettrism. But the situationist movement, heir of Marxism and of Surrealism, rapidly orients itself toward a critique of the society of the spectacle, qualified as « spectacular-mercantile », associated with a desire for social revolution. In 1962, a split between « artists » and « revolutionaries » led to the exclusion of the former. Now that the situationists already have a history, and that it appears that their activity has carved out a very particular but surely central role in the cultural debate of these very last years, as much on the European continent as on the transatlantic continent, some reproach the Situationist International with having succeeded, and others reproach it with having failed. To understand the real signification of these terms, as well as almost all the judgments of the seated intelligentsia concerning the Situationist International, one must first reverse them. The part of failure of the Situationist International is what is commonly considered as success: the artistic value that one begins to appreciate among them, the first sociological or urbanistic fashion that some of their theses come to inaugurate, or quite simply the personal success, practically guaranteed to any

situationist from the day after his exclusion, which constitutes the specter of recuperation. The great anguish of the situationist is « recuperation », the first mode of absorption by the system of everything that may represent any value whatsoever. « The part of our success, deeper, is having resisted the compromising arrangements which offered themselves in crowds; it is not having remained with our first summary program, but having proven that its principal avant-garde character, in spite of a few others more apparent, was in the fact that it had to lead further; and thus, it is not being yet considered by anyone, within the established frameworks of the present. »

372-Their errors were no doubt numerous enough. They often corrected them or abandoned them, whereas there were precisely the elements which were succeeding, or to which the maximum of help came to propose itself in order to lead them to success. It is easy to note in their first publications the deficiencies, the chatter, the fantasies issuing from the old artistic world, the approximations of the old politics; and it is moreover in the light of the later conclusions of the Situationist International that they are most easily criticizable. An inverse factor has naturally left fewer traces in their writings, but has weighed very heavily: a nihilistic abstentionism, a grave incapacity, among many of them, to think and to act beyond the first stammerings of a positive dialogue. This goes along, almost always, with the most abstract and most mendacious exigency of a disembodied radicalism developing like an anti-theory. But Theory, above all, is Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. In 1949, Jacques Derrida settled in Paris and enrolled in première supérieure at the lycée Louis-le-Grand, where he formed a friendship with Pierre Bourdieu, Lucien Bianco, Michel Deguy and Louis Marin. They link deconstruction to the « Hyper-critique of phenomenology, of metaphysics and of semiology in a pan-semiotic and pan-narrative context ». In rereading Derrida, one is immediately struck by two things: 1/ each of the « literary critics » perfectly confirms the vague idea one may have formed of the contribution, the posture, even the political tendency of Derrida's thought. 2/ these are difficult texts, along which the author follows an argumentative progression at once circular and progressive, which crosses textual and conceptual data which are themselves difficult, borrowed from quite « technical » corpora of knowledge.

If, therefore, we have regard to that in which Derrida's success consists, we must recognize that it is not a summary ideological success, translating into the takeover of a few simplistic slogans, and the event of a style in « worldly » conversation; rather, this philosophy inspires in extremely diverse people in the world the desire to write in their turn difficult texts, knotted to subtle or arduous sources.

373-It is manifest that giving to a very great number of people the desire for a veritable intellectual and scriptural activity, engaging time, effort, mobilizing tasks of subsidiary comprehension, is not something anodyne. It is, quite on the contrary, something that happens very rarely, and which is the index of a breakthrough, of a singular and strong moment of animation and renewal in the sometimes monotonous life of the objective spirit. At the origin of the origin (before even the origin, in an inaccessible place, pre-originary), a trace has disappeared. It is this disappearance which renders possible the originary enigma, the first alterity, the first exteriority; Jacques Derrida names it the arche-trace or arche-writing. It opens, in time and in speech, intervals and spacings. Every trace can always efface itself, be forgotten, be lost. This loss belongs to its structure. But the arche-trace is

already effaced. On the one hand, it has already disappeared into forgetting, the forgetting itself no longer exists. It has never existed or more exactly it only arrives at effacing itself (if it arrives, it is only in effacement). Its inscription has become unthinkable. But on the other hand, no one can guarantee that a trace can be definitively and radically effaced. It can always make a return as symptom, as specter or otherwise (in an unexpected, unforeseeable, monstrous or unimaginable manner). We are always haunted by the trace. Of this singular « moment » without place, without sense, without referent, where the trace has become ash, one cannot even speak. Even negative theology can say nothing of it. The work communicates with it only in its effacement. And yet one speaks of it, it will have been necessary to speak of it, even while saying nothing of it. Even disappeared, it is at work. It remains heterogeneous, irreducible, inexpugnable, sealed, unnamable. It confronts us with the anguish of the effacement of self, with the loss of all presence.

374-As soon as there is experience, as soon as there is the living, as soon as there is reference to the other, there is trace; it is the unlimited ground upon which writing, the stroke, the gift, the archive, etc., are inscribed. From the first trace (in the unity of a double movement of protention and retention), the text is double. In repeating itself, reiterating itself, the mark (or the trace) reiterates the event, the first time. Invention, as it is defined in the modern world, systematizes this movement. Five years after his introduction-translation of Husserl's The Origin of Geometry, Jacques Derrida publishes, in 1967, three strangely different books, paradoxically close. To the apparent classicism of « Voice and Phenomenon », an ample and fecund meditation upon the problem of the sign in Husserl's phenomenology, seems to answer a certain wind of madness which, in 1967, makes of « Writing and Difference » the book of modernity on the march. They question literary writing (Artaud, Bataille, Jabès) or the structuralist motif, Freud or Levinas; the eleven studies which compose the book translate a profoundly innovative way of writing and living philosophy, of writing in order to live philosophy.

375-The linguistic turn, more often designated by the English expression linguistic turn, is originally an expression by which Gustav Bergmann designated in 1953 a way of doing philosophy initiated by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Generally, it is a methodological and substantial change, affirming that the conceptual work of philosophy cannot take place without a prior analysis of language. The linguistic turn has in particular known applications in history. The linguistic turn is a historiographical approach which considers that all historical research must necessarily take an interest in language or discourse, which thereby become objects of study. This is justified epistemologically: given that he works upon texts, that the reality which he analyzes is accessible only through the mediation of language, the historian in fact apprehends only the discursive representation of reality. In this vision, history would no longer be a scientific discipline, but would become a literary genre, which must be apprehended by privileging textual criticism and consecrating the Pan-Narrative dimension of the World. The partisans of this method rest principally upon the post-structuralist philosophy of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. « In pronouncing a word I raise myself to the level of its ideal content, which can be indefinitely repeated, so that speech then appears as the means by which I can surmount my own facticity and my own mortality », « ideality » being, in Derrida's own terms, « the salvation or the mastery of presence in repetition ».

376-For Derrida, who radically opposes life and death, presence and absence, we have been since always and forever exiled in the labyrinth of representation without hope of ever being able to leave it in order to accede to the « sun of presence »; this is why, according to him, we speak only « to supplement the brilliance of presence ». According to him, life must constantly come to terms with death and is, as such, nothing other than this « economy of death » which implies that « every grapheme is of testamentary essence ». But the relation to death can have another sense, which can lead to another attitude with regard to absence than the one which attempts to « supplement » it. For it is possible to see in death, as Heidegger did, the jewel-case of nothingness at the same time as the shelter of being. This means that as mortals, we are open to the coming into presence of the world only because we have a relation to this radical absence which is death. We have to sustain it, not to supplement it – we even have to bear witness to it by existing our mortality.

377-For Heidegger, death is this limit which grants us our temporal presence in the world; for Derrida, death is that which unhinges time and dislocates presence. In the text he devotes in 2004 to Ricoeur, Derrida recalls with emotion and approval the judgment which Ricoeur passed upon his « White Mythology » in « The Metaphor of the Living », where one can read this: « The master stroke, here, is to enter metaphysics not by the door of birth, but, if I dare say so, by the door of death. » What has perhaps remained forever unthought for Derrida himself is the fact that the door of birth and that of death are one and the same, the faceless face of Dionysus. The translator of « Of Grammatology » is a young American teacher of Bengali origin, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who is also a left-wing feminist with unquestionable charisma. As a result, the student public throws itself upon this book as if it were a text engaged in favor of the cause of women. A somewhat extreme reading, but not altogether illegitimate insofar as Derrida, at the start of the 1970s, no longer denounces only logocentrism but also phallocentrism – to the point of making of it a single portmanteau word: phallogocentrism. This denunciation was even, at the time, the only political position he allowed himself to display publicly. It goes without saying that it immediately rallies numerous partisans to him.