JOURNALISM J8040

Proseminar in Communications

COURSE PACK

Professor Michael Schudson
Columbia University
Fall 2007

Journalism J8040
Proseminar in Communications
Professor Michael Schudson
Columbia University
Fall 2007

Table of Contents **Page**

The Counter-Enlightenment

I

OPPOSITION to the central ideas of the French Enlightenment, and of its allies and disciples in other European countries, is as old as the movement itself. The proclamation of the autonomy of reason and the methods of the natural sciences, based on observation as the sole reliable method of knowledge, and the consequent rejection of the authority of revelation, sacred writings and their accepted interpreters, tradition, prescription, and every form of non-rational and transcendent source of knowledge, was naturally opposed by the churches and religious thinkers of many persuasions. But such opposition, largely because of the absence of common ground between them and the philosophers of the Enlightenment, made relatively little headway, save by stimulating repressive steps against the spreading of ideas regarded as dangerous to the authority of church or state. More formidable was the relativist and sceptical tradition that went back to the ancient world. The central doctrines of the progressive French thinkers, whatever their disagreements among themselves, rested on the belief, rooted in the ancient doctrine of natural law, that human nature was fundamentally the same in all times and places; that local and historical variations were unimportant compared with the constant central core in terms of which human beings could be defined as a species, like animals, or plants, or minerals; that there were universal human goals; that a logically connected structure of laws and generalisations susceptible of demonstration and verification could be constructed and replace the chaotic amalgam of ignorance, mental laziness, guesswork, superstition, prejudice, dogma, fantasy, and, above all, the 'interested error' maintained by the rulers of mankind and largely responsible for the blunders, vices and misfortunes of humanity.

It was further believed that methods similar to those of Newtonian physics, which had achieved such triumphs in the realm of inanimate nature, could be applied with equal success to the fields of ethics politics and human relationships in general, in which little progres

had been made; with the corollary that once this had been effected, it would sweep away irrational and oppressive legal systems and economic policies the replacement of which by the rule of reason would rescue men from political and moral injustice and misery and set them on the path of wisdom, happiness and virtue. Against this, there persisted the doctrine that went back to the Greek sophists, Protagoras, Antiphon and Critias, that beliefs involving value-judgements, and the institutions founded upon them, rested not on discoveries of objective and unalterable natural facts, but on human opinion, which was variable and differed between different societies and at different times; that moral and political values, and in particular justice and social arrangements in general, rested on fluctuating human convention. This was summed up by the sophist quoted by Aristotle who declared that whereas fire burned both here and in Persia, human institutions change under our very eyes. It seemed to follow that no universal truths, established by scientific methods, that is, truths that anyone could verify by the use of proper methods, anywhere, at any time, could in principle be established in human affairs.

This tradition reasserted itself strongly in the writings of such sixteenth-century sceptics as Cornelius Agrippa, Montaigne, and Charron, whose influence is discernible in the sentiments of thinkers and poets in the Elizabethan and Jacobean age. Such scepticism came to the aid of those who denied the claims of the natural sciences or of other universal rational schemas and advocated salvation in pure faith, like the great Protestant reformers and their followers, and the Jansenist wing of the Roman church. The rationalist belief in a single coherent body of logically deduced conclusions, arrived at by universally valid principles of thought and founded upon carefully sifted data of observation or experiment, was further shaken by sociologically minded thinkers from Bodin to Montesquieu. These writers, using the evidence of both history and the new literature of travel and exploration in newly discovered lands, Asia and the Americas, emphasised the variety of human customs and especially the influence of dissimilar natural factors, particularly geographical ones, upon the development of different human societies, leading to differences of institutions and outlook, which in their turn generated wide differences of belief and behaviour. This was powerfully reinforced by the revolutionary doctrines of David Hume, especially by his demonstration that no logical links existed between truths of fact and such *a priori* truths as those of logic or mathematics, which tended to weaken or

dissolve the hopes of those who, under the influence of Descartes and his followers, thought that a single system of knowledge, embracing all provinces and answering all questions, could be established by unbreakable chains of logical argument from universally valid axioms, not subject to refutation or modification by any experience of an empirical kind.

Nevertheless, no matter how deeply relativity about human values or the interpretation of social, including historical, facts entered the thought of social thinkers of this type, they too retained a common core of conviction that the ultimate ends of all men at all times were, in effect, identical: all men sought the satisfaction of basic physical and biological needs, such as food, shelter, security, and also peace, happiness, justice, the harmonious development of their natural faculties, truth, and, somewhat more vaguely, virtue, moral perfection, and what the Romans had called *humanitas*. Means might differ in cold and hot climates, mountainous countries and flat plains, and no universal formula could fit all cases without Procrustean results, but the ultimate ends were fundamentally similar. Such influential writers as Voltaire, d'Alembert and Condorcet believed that the development of the arts and sciences was the most powerful human weapon in attaining these ends, and the sharpest weapon in the fight against ignorance, superstition, fanaticism, oppression and barbarism, which crippled human effort and frustrated men's search for truth and rational self-direction. Rousseau and Mably believed, on the contrary, that the institutions of civilisation were themselves a major factor in the corruption of men and their alienation from nature, from simplicity, purity of heart and the life of natural justice, social equality, and spontaneous human feeling; artificial man had imprisoned, enslaved and ruined natural man. Nevertheless, despite profound differences of outlook, there was a wide area of agreement about fundamental points: the reality of natural law (no longer formulated in the language of orthodox Catholic or Protestant doctrine), of eternal principles by following which alone men could become wise, happy, virtuous, and free. One set of universal and unalterable principles governed the world for theists, deists and atheists, for optimists and pessimists, puritans, primitivists and believers in progress and the richest fruits of science and culture; these laws governed inanimate and animate nature, facts and events, means and ends, private life and public, all societies, epochs and civilisations; it was solely by departing from them that men fell into crime, vice, misery. Thinkers might differ

about what these laws were, or how to discover them, or who were qualified to expound them; that these laws were real, and could be known, whether with certainty, or only probability, remained the central dogma of the entire Enlightenment. It was the attack upon this that constitutes the most formidable reaction against this dominant body of belief.

II

A thinker who might have had a decisive role in this counter-movement, if anyone outside his native country had read him, was the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico. With extraordinary originality Vico maintained, especially in the last work of his life, the *Scienza nuova*, that the Cartesians were profoundly mistaken about the role of mathematics as the science of sciences; that mathematics was certain only because it was a human invention. It did not, as they supposed, correspond to an objective structure of reality; it was a method and not a body of truths; with its help we could plot regularities – the occurrence of phenomena in the external world – but not discover why they occurred as they did, or to what end. This could be known only to God, for only those who make things can truly know what they are and for what purpose they have been made. Hence we do not, in this sense, know the external world – nature – for we have not made it; only God, who created it, knows it in this fashion. But since men are directly acquainted with human motives, purposes, hopes, fears, which are their own, they can know human affairs as they cannot know nature.

According to Vico, our lives and activities collectively and individually are expressions of our attempts to survive, satisfy our desires, understand each other and the past out of which we emerge. A utilitarian interpretation of the most essential human activities is misleading. They are, in the first place, purely expressive; to sing, to dance, to worship, to speak, to fight, and the institutions which embody these activities, comprise a vision of the world. Language, religious rites, myths, laws, social, religious, juridical institutions, are forms of self-expression, of wishing to convey what one is and strives for; they obey intelligible patterns, and for that reason it is possible to reconstruct the life of other societies, even those remote in time and place and utterly primitive, by asking oneself what kind of framework of human

ideas, feelings, acts could have generated the poetry, the monuments, the mythology which were their natural expression. Men grow individually and socially; the world of men who composed the Homeric poems was plainly very different from that of the Hebrews to whom God had spoken through their sacred books, or that of the Roman Republic, or medieval Christianity, or Naples under the Bourbons. Patterns of growth are traceable.

Myths are not, as enlightened thinkers believe, false statements about reality corrected by later rational criticism, nor is poetry mere embellishment of what could equally well be stated in ordinary prose. The myths and poetry of antiquity embody a vision of the world as authentic as that of Greek philosophy, or Roman law, or the poetry and culture of our own enlightened age – earlier, cruder, remote from us, but with its own voice, as we hear it in the *Iliad* or the Twelve Tables, belonging uniquely to its own culture, and with a sublimity which cannot be reproduced by a later, more sophisticated culture. Each culture expresses its own collective experience, each step on the ladder of human development has its own equally authentic means of expression.

Vico's theory of cycles of cultural development became celebrated, but it is not his most original contribution to the understanding of society or history. His revolutionary move is to have denied the doctrine of a timeless natural law the truths of which could have been known in principle to any man, at any time, anywhere. Vico boldly denied this doctrine, which has formed the heart of the western tradition from Aristotle to our own day. He preached the notion of the uniqueness of cultures, however they might resemble each other in their relationship to their antecedents and successors, and the notion of a single style that pervades all the activities and manifestations of societies of human beings at a particular stage of development. Thereby he laid the foundations at once of comparative cultural anthropology and of comparative historical linguistics, aesthetics, jurisprudence; language, ritual, monuments, and especially mythology, were the sole reliable keys to what later scholars and critics conceived as altering forms of collective consciousness. Such historicism was plainly not compatible with the view that there was only one standard of truth or beauty or goodness, which some cultures or individuals approached more closely than others, and which it was the business of thinkers to establish and men of action to realise. The Homeric poems were an unsurpassable masterpiece, but they could only spring from a brutal,

stern, oligarchical, 'heroic' society, and later civilisations, however superior in other respects, did not and could not produce an art necessarily superior to Homer. This doctrine struck a powerful blow at the notion of timeless truths and steady progress, interrupted by occasional periods of retrogression into barbarism, and drew a sharp line between the natural sciences, which dealt with the relatively unaltering nature of the physical world viewed from 'outside', and humane studies, which viewed social evolution from 'inside' by a species of empathetic insight, for which the establishment of texts or dates by scientific criticism was a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition.

Vico's unsystematic works dealt with many other matters, but his importance in the history of the Enlightenment consists in his insistence on the plurality of cultures and on the consequently fallacious character of the idea that there is one and only one structure of reality which the enlightened philosopher can see as it truly is, and which he can (at least in principle) describe in logically perfect language – a vision that has obsessed thinkers from Plato to Leibniz, Condillac, Russell and his more faithful followers. For Vico, men ask different questions of the universe, and their answers are shaped accordingly: such questions, and the symbols or acts that express them, alter or become obsolete in the course of cultural development; to understand the answers one must understand the questions that preoccupy an age or a culture; they are not constant nor necessarily more profound because they resemble our own more than others that are less familiar to us. Vico's relativity went further than Montesquieu's. If his view was correct, it was subversive of the very notion of absolute truths and of a perfect society founded on them, not merely in practice but in principle. However, Vico was little read, and the question of how much influence he had had before his *New Science* was revived by Michelet a century after it was written is still uncertain.

If Vico wished to shake the pillars on which the Enlightenment of his times rested, the Königsberg theologian and philosopher, J. G. Hamann, wished to smash them. Hamann was brought up as a pietist, a member of the most introspective and self-absorbed of all the Lutheran sects, intent upon the direct communion of the individual soul with God, bitterly anti-rationalist, liable to emotional excess, preoccupied with the stern demands of moral obligation and the need for severe self-discipline. The attempt of Frederick the Great in the middle years of the eighteenth century to introduce French culture and a degree of rationalisation, economic and social as well as military, into

East Prussia, the most backward part of his provinces, provoked a peculiarly violent reaction in this pious, semi-feudal, traditional Protestant society (which also gave birth to Herder and Kant). Hamann began as a disciple of the Enlightenment, but, after a profound spiritual crisis, turned against it, and published a series of polemical attacks written in a highly idiosyncratic, perversely allusive, contorted, deliberately obscure style, as remote as he could make it from the, to him, detestable elegance, clarity, and smooth superficiality of the bland and arrogant French dictators of taste and thought. Hamann's theses rested on the conviction that all truth is particular, never general: that reason is impotent to demonstrate the existence of anything and is an instrument only for conveniently classifying and arranging data in patterns to which nothing in reality corresponds; that to understand is to be communicated with, by men or by God. The universe for him, as for the older German mystical tradition, is itself a kind of language. Things and plants and animals are themselves symbols with which God communicates with his creatures. Everything rests on faith; faith is as basic an organ of acquaintance with reality as the senses. To read the Bible is to hear the voice of God, who speaks in a language which he has given man the grace to understand. Some men are endowed with the gift of understanding his ways, of looking at the universe, which is his book no less than the revelations of the Bible and the fathers and saints of the church. Only love – for a person or an object – can reveal the true nature of anything. It is not possible to love formulas, general propositions, laws, the abstractions of science, the vast system of concepts and categories – symbols too general to be close to reality – with which the French *lumières* have blinded themselves to concrete reality, to the real experience which only direct acquaintance, especially by the senses, provides.

Hamann glories in the fact that Hume had successfully destroyed the rationalist claim that there is an *a priori* route to reality, insisting that all knowledge and belief ultimately rest on acquaintance with the data of direct perception. Hume rightly supposes that he could not eat an egg or drink a glass of water if he did not believe in their existence; the data of belief – what Hamann prefers to call faith – rest on grounds and require evidence as little as taste or any other sensation. True knowledge is direct perception of individual entities, and concepts are never, no matter how specific they may be, wholly adequate to the fullness of the individual experience. 'Individuum est ineffabile', wrote Goethe to Lavater in the spirit of Hamann, whom

Goethe profoundly admired. The sciences may be of use in practical matters; but no concatenation of concepts will give one an understanding of a man, of a work of art, of what is conveyed by gestures, symbols, verbal and non-verbal, of the style, the spiritual essence, of a human being, a movement, a culture; nor for that matter of the Deity, which speaks to one everywhere if only one has ears to hear and eyes to see. What is real is individual, that is, is what it is in virtue of its uniqueness, its differences from other things, events, thoughts, and not in virtue of what it has in common with them, which is all that the generalising sciences seek to record. 'Feeling alone', said Hamann, 'gives to abstractions and hypotheses hands, feet, wings'; and again 'God speaks to us in poetical words, addressed to the senses, not in abstractions for the learned', and so must anyone who has something to say that matters, who speaks to another person.

Hamann took little interest in theories or speculations about the external world; he cared only for the inner personal life of the individual, and therefore only for art, religious experience, the senses, personal relationships, which the analytic truths of scientific reason seemed to him to reduce to meaningless ciphers. 'God is a poet, not a mathematician', and it is men who, like Kant, suffer from a 'gnostic hatred of matter' that provide us with endless verbal constructions – words that are taken for concepts, and worse still, concepts that are taken for real things. Scientists invent systems, philosophers rearrange reality into artificial patterns, shut their eyes to reality, and build castles in the air. 'When *data* are given you, why do you seek for *ficta*?' Systems are mere prisons of the spirit, and they lead not only to distortion in the sphere of knowledge, but to the erection of monstrous bureaucratic machines, built in accordance with the rules that ignore the teeming variety of the living world, the untidy and asymmetrical inner lives of men, and crush them into conformity for the sake of some ideological chimera unrelated to the union of spirit and flesh that constitutes the real world. 'What is this much lauded reason with its universality, infallibility . . . certainty, over-weening claims, but an *ens rationis*, a stuffed dummy . . . endowed with divine attributes?' History alone yields concrete truth, and in particular the poets describe their world in the language of passion and inspired imagination. 'The entire treasure of human knowledge and happiness lies in images'; that is why the language of primitive man, sensuous and imaginative, is poetical and irrational. 'Poetry is the native language of mankind, and gardening is more ancient than agriculture, painting than writing,

song than recitation, proverbs than rational conclusions, barter than trade.' Originality, genius, direct expression, the Bible or Shakespeare fashion the colour, shape, living flesh of the world, which analytical science, revealing only the skeleton, cannot begin to do.

Hamann is first in the line of thinkers who accuse rationalism and scientism of using analysis to distort reality: he is followed by Herder, Jacobi, Möser, who were influenced by Shaftesbury, Young, and Burke's anti-intellectualist diatribes, and they, in their turn, were echoed by romantic writers in many lands. The most eloquent spokesman of this attitude is Schelling, whose thought was reproduced vividly by Bergson at the beginning of this century. He is the father of those anti-rationalist thinkers for whom the seamless whole of reality in its unanalysable flow is misrepresented by the static, spatial metaphors of mathematics and the natural sciences. That to dissect is to murder is a romantic pronouncement which is the motto of an entire nineteenth-century movement of which Hamann was a most passionate and implacable forerunner. Scientific dissection leads to cold political dehumanisation, to the straitjacket of lifeless French rules in which the living body of passionate and poetical Germans is to be held fast by the Solomon of Prussia, Frederick the Great, who knows so much and understands so little. The arch-enemy is Voltaire, whom Herder called a 'senile child' with a corrosive wit in place of human feeling.

The influence of Rousseau, particularly of his early writings, on this movement in Germany, which came to be called *Sturm und Drang*, was profound. Rousseau's impassioned pleas for direct vision and natural feeling, his denunciation of the artificial social roles which civilisation forces men to play against the true ends and needs of their natures, his idealisation of more primitive, spontaneous human societies, his contrast between natural self-expression and the crippling artificiality of social divisions and conventions which rob men of dignity and freedom, and promote privilege, power and arbitrary bullying at one end of the human scale, and humiliating obsequiousness at the other, and so distort all human relations, appealed to Hamann and his followers.

But even Rousseau did not seem to them to go far enough. Despite everything, Rousseau believed in a timeless set of truths which all men could read, for they were engraved on their hearts in letters more durable than bronze, thereby conceding the authority of natural law, a vast, cold, empty abstraction. To Hamann and his followers all rules or precepts are deadly; they may be necessary for the conduct

of day-to-day life, but nothing great was ever achieved by following them. English critics were right in supposing that originality entailed breaking rules, that every creative act, every illuminating insight, is obtained by ignoring the rules of despotic legislators. Rules, he declared, are vestal virgins: unless they are violated there will be no issue. Nature is capable of wild fantasy, and it is mere childish presumption to seek to imprison her in the narrow rationalist categories of 'puny' and desiccated philosophers. Nature is a wild dance, and so-called practical men are like sleep-walkers who are secure and successful because they are blind to reality; if they saw reality as it truly is, they might go out of their minds.

Language is the direct expression of the historical life of societies and peoples: 'every court, every school, every profession, every corporation, every sect has its own language'; we penetrate the meaning of this language by the 'passion' of 'a lover, a friend, an intimate', not by rules, imaginary universal keys which open nothing. The French *philosophes* and their English followers tell us that men seek only to obtain pleasure and avoid pain, but this is absurd. Men seek to live, create, love, hate, eat, drink, worship, sacrifice, understand, and they seek this because they cannot help it. Life is action. It is knowable only by those who look within themselves and perform the 'hell-ride [*Höllenfahrt*] of self-knowledge', as the great founders of pietism – Spener, Francke, Bengel – have taught us. Before a man has liberated himself from the deathly embrace of impersonal, scientific thought which robs all it touches of life and individuality, he cannot understand himself or others, or how or why we come to be what we are.

While Hamann spoke in irregular, isolated flashes of insight, his disciple Herder attempted to construct a coherent system to explain the nature of man and his experience in history. While profoundly interested in the natural sciences and eagerly profiting by their findings, particularly in biology and physiology, and conceding a good deal more to the French than the fanatical Hamann was willing to do, Herder in that part of his doctrine which entered into the texture of the thought of the movements that he inspired deliberately aimed against the sociological assumptions of the French Enlightenment. He believed that to understand anything was to understand it in its individuality and development, and that this required a capacity which he called *Einfühlung* ('feeling into') the outlook, the individual character of an artistic tradition, a literature, a social organisation, a people, a culture, a period of history. To understand the actions of individuals,

we must understand the 'organic' structure of the society in terms of which alone the minds and activities and habits of its members can be understood. Like Vico, he believed that to understand a religion, or a work of art, or a national character, one must 'enter into' the unique conditions of its life: those who have been storm-tossed on the waves of the North Sea (as he was during his voyage to the west) can fully understand the songs of the old Skalds as those who have never seen grim northern sailors coping with the elements never will; the Bible can truly be understood only by those who attempt to enter into the experience of primitive shepherds in the Judaean hills. To grade the merits of cultural wholes, of the legacy of entire traditions, by applying a collection of dogmatic rules claiming universal validity, enunciated by the Parisian arbiters of taste, is vanity and blindness. Every culture has its own unique *Schwerpunkt* ('centre of gravity'), and unless we grasp it we cannot understand its character or value. From this springs Herder's passionate concern with the preservation of primitive cultures which have a unique contribution to make, his love of almost every expression of the human spirit, work of the imagination, for simply being what it is. Art, morality, custom, religion, national life grow out of immemorial tradition, are created by entire societies living an integrated communal life. The frontiers and divisions drawn between and within such unitary expressions of collective imaginative response to common experience are nothing but artificial and distorting categorisations by the dull, dogmatic pedants of a later age.

Who are the authors of the songs, the epics, the myths, the temples, the *mores* of a people, the clothes they wear, the language they use? The people itself, the entire soul of which is poured out in all they are and do. Nothing is more barbarous than to ignore or trample on a cultural heritage. Hence Herder's condemnation of the Romans for crushing native civilisations, or of the church (despite the fact that he was himself a Lutheran clergyman) for forcibly baptising the Balts, and so forcing them into a Christian mould alien to their natural traditions, or of British missionaries for doing this to the Indians and other inhabitants of Asia, whose exquisite native cultures were being ruthlessly destroyed by the imposition of alien social systems, religions, forms of education that were not theirs and could only warp their natural development. Herder was no nationalist: he supposed that different cultures could and should flourish fruitfully side by side like so many peaceful flowers in the great human garden; nevertheless, the seeds of nationalism are unmistakably present in his fervid attacks

on hollow cosmopolitanism and universalism (with which he charged the French *philosophes*); they grew apace among his aggressive nineteenth-century disciples.

Herder is the greatest inspirer of cultural nationalism among the nationalities oppressed by the Austro-Hungarian, Turkish and Russian empires, and ultimately of direct political nationalism as well, much as he abhorred it, in Austria and Germany, and by infectious reaction, in other lands as well. He rejected the absolute criteria of progress then fashionable in Paris: no culture is a mere means towards another; every human achievement, every human society is to be judged by its own internal standards. In spite of the fact that in later life he attempted to construct a theory of history in which the whole of mankind, in a somewhat vague fashion, is represented as developing towards a common *Humanität* which embraces all men and all the arts and all the sciences, it is his earlier, relativistic passion for the individual essence and flavour of each culture that most profoundly influenced the European imagination. For Voltaire, Diderot, Helvétius, Holbach, Condorcet, there is only universal civilisation, of which now one nation, now another, represents the richest flowering. For Herder there is a plurality of incommensurable cultures. To belong to a given community, to be connected with its members by indissoluble and impalpable ties of common language, historical memory, habit, tradition and feeling, is a basic human need no less natural than that for food or drink or security or procreation. One nation can understand and sympathise with the institutions of another only because it knows how much its own mean to itself. Cosmopolitanism is the shedding of all that makes one most human, most oneself. Hence the attack upon what is regarded as the false mechanical model of mankind used by scientifically minded French *philosophes* (Herder makes an exception for Diderot alone, with whose writings, wayward and imaginative and full of sudden insights, he felt a genuine affinity), who understand only machine-like, causal factors, or the arbitrary will of individual kings and legislators and commanders, sometimes wise and virtuous and altruistic, at other times self-interested or corrupt or stupid or vicious. But the forces that shape men are far more complex, and differ from age to age and culture to culture and cannot be contained in these simple cut and dried formulas. 'I am always frightened when I hear a whole nation or period characterised in a few short words; for what a vast multitude of differences is embraced by the word "nation", or "the Middle Ages", or "ancient and modern times".' Germans can

be truly creative only among Germans; Jews only if they are restored to the ancient soil of Palestine. Those who are forcibly pulled up by the roots wither in a foreign environment when they survive at all: Europeans lose their virtue in America, Icelanders decay in Denmark. Imitation of models (unlike unconscious, unperceived, spontaneous influences by one society on another) leads to artificiality, feeble imitativeness, degraded art and life. Germans must be Germans and not third-rate Frenchmen; life lies in remaining steeped in one's own language, tradition, local feeling; uniformity is death. The tree of (science-dominated) knowledge kills the tree of life.

So, too, Herder's contemporary, Justus Möser, the first historical sociologist, who wrote about the old life of his native region of Osnabrück in western Germany, said that 'every age had its own style', every war has its own particular tone, the affairs of state have a specific colouring, dress and manner have inner connections with religion and the sciences; that *Zeitstil* and *Volksstil* are everything; that there is a 'local reason' for this or that institution that is not and cannot be universal. Möser maintained that societies and persons could be understood only by means of a 'total impression', not by isolation of element from element in the manner of analytical chemists; this, he tells us, is what Voltaire had not grasped when he mocked the fact that a law which applied in one German village was contradicted by another in a neighbouring one: it is by such rich variety, founded upon ancient, unbroken tradition, that the tyrannies of uniform systems, such as those of Louis XIV or Frederick the Great, were avoided; it is so that freedoms were preserved.

Although the influence was not direct, these are the very tones one hears in the works of Burke and many later romantic, vitalistic, intuitionist, and irrationalist writers, both conservative and socialist, who defend the value of organic forms of social life. Burke's famous onslaught on the principles of the French revolutionaries was founded upon the selfsame appeal to the 'myriad strands' that bind human beings into a historically hallowed whole, contrasted with the utilitarian model of society as a trading company held together solely by contractual obligations, the world of 'economists, sophisters and calculators' who are blind and deaf to the unanalysable relationships that make a family, a tribe, a nation, a movement, any association of human beings held together by something more than a quest for mutual advantage, or by force, or by anything that is not mutual love, loyalty, common history, emotion and outlook. This emphasis in the last half

of the eighteenth century on non-rational factors, whether connected with specific religious beliefs or not, which stresses the value of the individual, the peculiar (*das Eigentümliche*), the impalpable, and appeals to ancient historical roots and immemorial custom, to the wisdom of simple, sturdy peasants uncorrupted by the sophistries of subtle 'reasoners', has strongly conservative and, indeed, reactionary implications. Whether stated by the enthusiastic populist Herder with his acute dislike for political coercion, empires, political authority, and all forms of imposed organisation; or by Möser, moderate Hanoverian conservative; or by Lavater, altogether unconcerned with politics; or by Burke, brought up in a different tradition, respectful towards church and state and the authority of aristocracies and élites sanctified by history, these doctrines clearly constitute a resistance to attempts at a rational reorganisation of society in the name of universal moral and intellectual ideals.

At the same time abhorrence of scientific expertise inspired radical protest in the works of William Blake, of the young Schiller, and of populist writers in eastern Europe. Above all, it contributed to literary turbulence in Germany in the second third of the eighteenth century: the plays of such leaders of the *Sturm und Drang* as Lenz, Klinger, Gerstenberg and Leisewitz are outbursts against every form of organised social or political life. What provoked them may have been the asphyxiating philistinism of the German middle class, or the cruel injustices of the small and stuffy courts of stupid and arbitrary German princelings; but what they attacked with equal violence was the entire tidy ordering of life by the principles of reason and scientific knowledge advocated by the progressive thinkers of France, England and Italy. Lenz regards nature as a wild whirlpool into which a man of feeling and temperament will throw himself if he is to experience the fullness of life; for him, for Schubart and for Leisewitz art and, in particular, literature are passionate forms of self-assertion which look on all acceptance of conventional forms as but 'delayed death'. Nothing is more characteristic of the entire *Sturm und Drang* movement than Herder's cry 'I am not here to think, but to be, feel, live!', or 'heart! warmth! blood! humanity! life!' French reasoning is pale and ghostly. It is this that inspired Goethe's reaction in the 70s to Holbach's *Système de la nature* as a repulsive, 'Cimmerian, corpse-like' treatise, which had no relation to the marvellous, inexhaustibly rich vitality of the Gothic cathedral at Strasbourg, in which, under Herder's guidance, he saw one of the

noblest expressions of the German spirit in the Middle Ages, of which the critics of the Augustan age understood nothing. Heinse in his fantasy *Ardinghello und die glückseligen Inseln* leads his central characters, after a bloodstained succession of wild experiences of more than 'Gothic' intensity, to an island where there is total freedom in personal relations, all rules and conventions have finally been flung to the winds, where man in an anarchist-communist society can at last stretch himself to his full stature as a sublime creative artist. The inspiration of this work is a violent, radical individualism, which represents an early form, not unlike the contemporary erotic fantasies of the Marquis de Sade, of a craving for escape from imposed rules and laws whether of scientific reason or of political or ecclesiastical authority, royalist or republican, despotic or democratic.

By an odd paradox, it is the profoundly rational, exact, unromantic Kant, with his lifelong hatred of all forms of *Schwärmerei*, who is in part, through exaggeration and distortion of at least one of his doctrines, one of the fathers of this unbridled individualism. Kant's moral doctrines stressed the fact that determinism was not compatible with morality, since only those who are the true authors of their own acts, which they are free to perform or not perform, can be praised or blamed for what they do. Since responsibility entails power of choice, those who cannot freely choose are morally no more accountable than stocks and stones. Thereby Kant initiated a cult of moral autonomy, according to which only those who act and are not acted upon, whose actions spring from a decision of the moral will to be guided by freely adopted principles, if need be against inclination, and not from the inescapable causal pressure of factors beyond their control – physical, physiological, psychological (such as emotion, desire, habit) – can properly be considered to be free or, indeed, moral agents at all. Kant acknowledged a profound debt to Rousseau who, particularly in the 'profession of faith of the Savoyard vicar' in the fourth book of his *Émile*, spoke of man as an active being in contrast with the passivity of material nature, a possessor of a will which makes him free to resist the temptations of the senses. 'I am a slave through my vices and free through my remorse'; it is the active will, made known directly by 'conscience', which for Rousseau is 'stronger than reason [i.e. prudential argument] which fights against it', that enables man to choose the good; he acts, if need be, against 'the law of the body', and so makes himself worthy of happiness. But although this doctrine of the will as a capacity not determined by the causal stream is directed against the

sensationalist positivism of Helvétius or Condillac, and has an affinity to Kant's free moral will, it does not leave the objective framework of natural law which governs things as well as persons, and prescribes the same immutable, universal goals to all men.

This emphasis upon the will at the expense of contemplative thought and perception, which function within the predetermined grooves of the categories of the mind that man cannot escape, enters deeply into the German conception of moral freedom as entailing resistance to nature and not harmonious collusion with her, overcoming of natural inclination, and rising to Promethean resistance to coercion, whether by things or by men. This, in its turn, led to the rejection of the doctrine that to understand is to accept the view that knowledge demonstrates the rational necessity and therefore the value of what, in his irrational state, may have seemed to man mere obstacles in his path. This conception, opposed as it is to reconciliation with reality, in its later, romantic form favoured the ceaseless fight, at times ending in tragic defeat, against the forces of blind nature, which cares nothing for human ideas, and against the accumulated weight of authority and tradition – the vast incubus of the uncriticised past, made concrete in the oppressive institutions of the present. Thus, when Blake denounces Newton and Locke as the great enemies, it is because he accuses them of seeking to imprison the free human spirit in constricting, intellectual machines; when he says, 'A Robin Red breast in a Cage/Puts all Heaven in a Rage', the cage is none other than Newtonian physics, which crushes the life out of the free, spontaneous life of the untrammelled human spirit. 'Art is the Tree of Life . . . Science is the Tree of Death'; Locke, Newton, the French *raisonneurs*, the reign of cautious, pragmatic respectability and Pitt's police were all, for him, parts of the same nightmare. There is something of this, too, in Schiller's early play *Die Räuber* (written in 1781), where the violent protest of the tragic hero Karl Moor, which ends in failure, crime and death, cannot be averted by mere knowledge, by a better understanding of human nature or of social conditions or of anything else; knowledge is not enough. The doctrine of the Enlightenment that we can discover what men truly want and can provide technical means and rules of conduct for their greatest permanent satisfaction and that this is what leads to wisdom, virtue, happiness is not compatible with Karl Moor's proud and stormy spirit, which rejects the ideas of his milieu, and will not be assuaged by the reformist gradualism and belief in rational organisation advocated by, say, the *Aufklärung* of the previous

generation. 'Law has distorted to a snail's pace what could have been an eagle's flight.' Human nature is no longer conceived of as, in principle, capable of being brought into harmony with the natural world: for Schiller some fatal Rousseauian break between spirit and nature has occurred, a wound has been inflicted on humanity which art seeks to avenge, but knows it cannot fully heal.

Jacobi, a mystical metaphysician deeply influenced by Hamann, cannot reconcile the demands of the soul and the intellect: 'The light is in my heart: as soon as I try to carry it to my intellect, it goes out.' Spinoza was for him the greatest master since Plato of the rational vision of the universe; but for Jacobi this is death in life: it does not answer the burning questions of the soul whose homelessness in the chilly world of the intellect only self-surrender to faith in a transcendent God will remedy.

Schelling was perhaps the most eloquent of all the philosophers who represented the universe as the self-development of a primal, non-rational force that can be grasped only by the intuitive powers of men of imaginative genius – poets, philosophers, theologians or statesmen. Nature, a living organism, responds to questions put by the man of genius, while the man of genius responds to the questions put by nature, for they conspire with each other; imaginative insight alone, no matter whose – an artist's, a seer's, a thinker's – becomes conscious of the contours of the future, of which the mere calculating intellect and analytic capacity of the natural scientist or the politician, or any other earthbound empiricist, has no conception. This faith in a peculiar, intuitive, spiritual faculty which goes by various names – reason, understanding, primary imagination – but is always differentiated from the critical analytic intellect favoured by the Enlightenment, the contrast between it and the analytic faculty or method that collects, classifies, experiments, takes to pieces, reassembles, defines, deduces, and establishes probabilities, becomes a commonplace used thereafter by Fichte, Hegel, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Goethe, Carlyle, Schopenhauer and other anti-rationalist thinkers of the nineteenth century, culminating in Bergson and later anti-positivist schools.

This, too, is the source of that stream in the great river of romanticism which looks upon every human activity as a form of individual self-expression, and on art, and indeed every creative activity, as a stamping of a unique personality, individual or collective, conscious or unconscious, upon the matter or the medium in and upon which it functions, seeking to realise values which are themselves not given but

generated by the process of creation itself. Hence the denial, both in theory and in practice, of the central doctrine of the Enlightenment, according to which the rules in accordance with which men should live and act and create are pre-established, dictated by nature herself. For Joshua Reynolds, for example, the 'great style' is the realisation of the artist's vision of eternal forms, prototypes beyond the confusions of ordinary experience, which his genius enables him to discern and which he seeks to reproduce, with all the techniques at his command, on his canvas or in marble or bronze. Such mimesis or copying from ideal patterns is, for those who derive from the German tradition of revolt against French classicism, not true creation. Creation is creation of ends as well as means, of values as well as their embodiments; the vision that I seek to translate into colours or sounds is generated by me, and peculiar to me, unlike anything that has ever been, or will be, above all not something that is common to me and other men seeking to realise a common, shared, universal, because rational, ideal. The notion that a work of art (or any other work of man) is created in accordance with rules dictated by objective nature, and therefore binding for all practitioners of it, as Boileau or the Abbé Batteux had taught, is rejected *in toto*. Rules may be an aid here or there, but the least spark of genius destroys them, and creates its own practice, which uncreative craftsmen may imitate, and so be saying nothing of their own. I create as I do, whether I am an artist, a philosopher, a statesman, not because the goal that I seek to realise is objectively beautiful, or true, or virtuous, or approved by public opinion, or demanded by majorities or tradition, but because it is my own.

What this creative self may be differs according to doctrine. Some regard it as a transcendent entity to be identified with a cosmic spirit, a divine principle to which finite men aspire as sparks do to the great central flame; others identify it with their own individual, mortal, flesh-and-blood selves, like Byron, or Hugo, or other defiantly romantic writers and painters. Others again identified the creative self with a super-personal 'organism' of which they saw themselves as elements or members – nation, or church, or culture, or class, or history itself, a mighty force of which they conceived their earthly selves as emanations. Aggressive nationalism, self-identification with the interests of the class, the culture or the race, or the forces of progress – with the wave of a future-directed dynamism of history, something that at once explains and justifies acts which might be abhorred or despised if committed from calculation of selfish advantage or some other mundane

motive – this family of political and moral conceptions is so many expressions of a doctrine of self-realisation based on defiant rejection of the central theses of the Enlightenment, according to which what is true, or right, or good, or beautiful, can be shown to be valid for all men by the correct application of objective methods of discovery and interpretation, open to anyone to use and verify. In its full romantic guise, this attitude is an open declaration of war upon the very heart of the rational and experimental method which Descartes and Galileo had inaugurated, and which for all their doubts and qualifications even such sharp deviationists as Montesquieu, or Hume and Rousseau and Kant, fully and firmly accepted. For the truly ardent opponents of classicism, values are not found but made, not discovered but created; they are to be realised because they are mine, or ours, whatever the nature of the true self is pronounced to be by this or that metaphysical doctrine.

The most extravagant of the German romantics, Novalis or Tieck, looked on the universe not as a structure that can be studied or described by whatever methods are most appropriate, but as a perpetual activity of the spirit and of nature which is the selfsame spirit in a dormant state; of this constant upward movement the man of genius is the most conscious agent, who thus embodies the forward activity that advances the life of the spirit most significantly. While some, like Schelling and Coleridge, conceive this activity as the gradual growth into self-consciousness of the world spirit that is perpetually moving towards self-perfection, others conceive the cosmic process as having no goal, as a purposeless and meaningless movement, which men, because they cannot face this bleak and despair-inducing truth, seek to hide from themselves by constructing comforting illusions in the form of religions that promise rewards in another life, or metaphysical systems that claim to provide rational justification both for what there is in the world and for what men do and can do and should do; or scientific systems that perform the task of appearing to give sense to a process that is, in fact, purposeless, a formless flux which is what it is, a brute fact, signifying nothing. This doctrine, elaborated by Schopenhauer, lies at the root of much modern existentialism and of the cultivation of the absurd in art and thought, as well as of the extremes of egoistic anarchism driven to their furthest lengths by Stirner, and by Nietzsche (in some of his moods), Kierkegaard (Hamann's most brilliant and profound disciple) and modern irrationalists.

The rejection of the central principles of the Enlightenment –

universality, objectivity, rationality, and the capacity to provide permanent solutions to all genuine problems of life or thought, and (not less important) accessibility of rational methods to any thinker armed with adequate powers of observation and logical thinking – occurred in various forms, conservative or liberal, reactionary or revolutionary, depending on which systematic order was being attacked. Those, for example, like Adam Müller or Friedrich Schlegel, and, in some moods, Coleridge or Cobbett, to whom the principles of the French Revolution or the Napoleonic organisation came to seem the most fatal obstacles to free human self-expression, adopted conservative or reactionary forms of irrationalism and at times looked back with nostalgia towards some golden past, such as the pre-scientific ages of faith, and tended (not always continuously or consistently) to support clerical and aristocratic resistance to modernisation and the mechanisation of life by industrialism and the new hierarchies of power and authority. Those who looked upon the traditional forces of authority or hierarchical organisation as the most oppressive of social forces – Byron, for example, or George Sand, or, so far as they can be called romantic, Shelley or Büchner – formed the 'left wing' of the romantic revolt. Others despised public life in principle, and occupied themselves with the cultivation of the inner spirit. In all cases the organisation of life by the application of rational or scientific methods, any form of regimentation or conscription of men for utilitarian ends or organised happiness, was regarded as the philistine enemy.

What the entire Enlightenment has in common is denial of the central Christian doctrine of original sin, believing instead that man is born either innocent and good, or morally neutral and malleable by education or environment, or, at worst, deeply defective but capable of radical and indefinite improvement by rational education in favourable circumstances, or by a revolutionary reorganisation of society as demanded, for example, by Rousseau. It is this denial of origianl sin that the church condemned most severely in Rousseau's *Émile*, despite its attack on materialism, utilitarianism and atheism. It is the powerful reaffirmation of this Pauline and Augustinian doctrine that is the sharpest single weapon in the root-and-branch attack on the entire Enlightenment by the French counter-revolutionary writers de Maistre, Bonald and Chateaubriand, at the turn of the century.

One of the darkest of the reactionary forms of the fight against the Enlightenment, as well as one of the most interesting and influential, is to be found in the doctrines of Joseph de Maistre and his followers

and allies, who formed the spearhead of the counter-revolution in the early nineteenth century in Europe. De Maistre held the Enlightenment to be one of the most foolish, as well as the most ruinous, forms of social thinking. The conception of man as naturally disposed to benevolence, cooperation and peace, or, at any rate, capable of being shaped in this direction by appropriate education or legislation, is for him shallow and false. The benevolent Dame Nature of Hume, Holbach and Helvétius is an absurd figment. History and zoology are the most reliable guides to nature: they show her to be a field of unceasing slaughter. Men are by nature aggressive and destructive; they rebel over trifles – the change to the Gregorian calendar in the mid-eighteenth century, or Peter the Great's decision to shave the boyars' beards, provoke violent resistance, at times dangerous rebellions. But when men are sent to war, to exterminate beings as innocent as themselves for no purpose that either army can grasp, they go obediently to their deaths and scarcely ever mutiny. When the destructive instinct is evoked men feel exalted and fulfilled. Men do not come together, as the Enlightenment teaches, for mutual cooperation and peaceful happiness; history makes it clear that they are never so united as when given a common altar upon which to immolate themselves. This is so because the desire to sacrifice themselves or others is at least as strong as any pacific or constructive impulse. De Maistre felt that men are by nature evil, self-destructive animals, full of conflicting drives, who do not know what they want, want what they do not want, do not want what they want, and it is only when they are kept under constant control and rigorous discipline by some authoritarian élite – a church, a state, or some other body from whose decisions there is no appeal – that they can hope to survive and be saved. Reasoning, analysis, criticism shake the foundations and destroy the fabric of society. If the source of authority is declared to be rational, it invites questioning and doubt; but if it is questioned it may be argued away; its authority is undermined by able sophists, and this accelerates the forces of chaos, as in France during the reign of the weak and liberal Louis XVI. If the state is to survive and frustrate the fools and knaves who will always seek to destroy it, the source of authority must be absolute, so terrifying, indeed, that the least attempt to question it must entail immediate and terrible sanctions: only then will men learn to obey it. Without a clear hierarchy of authority – awe-inspiring power – men's incurably destructive instincts will breed chaos and mutual extermination. The supreme power – especially the church – must never seek

to explain or justify itself in rational terms; for what one man can demonstrate, another may be able to refute. Reason is the thinnest of walls against the raging seas of violent emotion: on so insecure a basis no permanent structure can ever be erected. Irrationality, so far from being an obstacle, has historically led to peace, security and strength, and is indispensable to society: it is rational institutions – republics, elective monarchies, democracies, associations founded on the enlightened principles of free love – that collapse soonest; authoritarian churches, hereditary monarchies and aristocracies, traditional forms of life, like the highly irrational institution of the family, founded on life-long marriage – it is they that persist.

The *philosophes* proposed to rationalise communication by inventing a universal language free from the irrational survivals, the idiosyncratic twists and turns, the capricious peculiarities of existing tongues; if they were to succeed, this would be disastrous, for it is precisely the individual historical development of a language that belongs to a people that absorbs, enshrines and encapsulates a vast wealth of half-conscious, half-remembered collective experience. What men call superstition and prejudice are but the crust of custom which by sheer survival has shown itself proof against the ravages and vicissitudes of its long life; to lose it is to lose the shield that protects men's national existence, their spirit, the habits, memories, faith that have made them what they are. The conception of human nature which the radical critics have promulgated and on which their whole house of cards rests is an infantile fantasy. Rousseau asks why it is that man, who was born free, is nevertheless everywhere in chains; one might as well ask, says de Maistre, why it is that sheep, who are born carnivorous, nevertheless everywhere nibble grass. Men are not made for freedom, nor for peace. Such freedom and peace as they have had were obtained only under wisely authoritarian governments that have repressed the destructive critical intellect and its socially disintegrating effects. Scientists, intellectuals, lawyers, journalists, democrats, Jansenists, Protestants, Jews, atheists, these are the sleepless enemy that never ceases to gnaw at the vitals of society. The best government the world has ever known was that of the Romans: they were too wise to be scientists themselves: for this purpose they hired the clever, volatile, politically incapable Greeks. Not the luminous intellect, but dark instincts govern man and societies; only élites which understand this, and keep the people from too much secular education that is bound to make them over-critical and discontented, can give to men as much happiness

and justice and freedom as, in this vale of tears, men can expect to have. But at the back of everything must lurk the potentiality of force, of coercive power.

In a striking image de Maistre says that all social order in the end rests upon one man, the executioner. Nobody wishes to associate with this hideous figure, yet on him, so long as men are weak, sinful, unable to control their passions, constantly lured to their doom by evil temptations or foolish dreams, rest all order, all peace, all society. The notion that reason is sufficient to educate or control the passions is ridiculous. When there is a vacuum, power rushes in; even the blood-stained monster Robespierre, a scourge sent by the Lord to punish a country that had departed from the true faith, is more to be admired – because he did hold France together and repelled her enemies, and created armies that, drunk with blood and passion, preserved France – than liberal fumbling and bungling. Louis XIV ignored the clever reasoners of his time, suppressed heresy, and died full of glory in his own bed. Louis XVI played amiably with subversive ideologists who had drunk at the poisoned well of Voltaire, and died on the scaffold. Repression, censorship, absolute sovereignty, judgements from which there is no appeal, these are the only methods of governing creatures whom de Maistre described as half men, half beasts, monstrous centaurs at once seeking after God and fighting Him, longing to love and create, but in perpetual danger of falling victims to their own blindly destructive drives, held in check by a combination of force and traditional authority and, above all, a faith incarnated in historically hallowed institutions that reason dare not touch. Nation and race are realities; the artificial creations of constitution-mongers are bound to collapse. 'Nations', said de Maistre, 'are born and die like individuals . . . They have a common soul, especially visible in their language.' And since they are individuals, they should endeavour to remain 'of one race'. So too Bonald, his closest intellectual ally, regrets that the French nation has abandoned its ideal of racial purity, thus weakening itself. The question of whether the French are descended from Franks or Gauls, whether their institutions are Roman or German in origin, with the implication that this could dictate a form of life in the present, although it has its roots in political controversies in the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, now takes the colour of mystical organicism, which transcends, and is proof against, all forms of discursive reasoning. Natural growth alone is real for de Maistre. Only time, only history, can create authority that men can worship

and obey: mere military dictatorship, a work of individual human hands, is brutal force without spiritual power: he calls it *bâtonocratie*, and predicts the end of Napoleon. In similar strain Bonald denounced individualism whether as a social doctrine or an intellectual method of analysing historical phenomena. The inventions of man, he declared, are precarious aids compared to divinely ordained institutions that penetrate man's very being, language, family, the worship of God. By whom were they invented? Whenever a child is born there are father, mother, family, God; this is the basis of all that is genuine and lasting, not the arrangements of men drawn from the world of shopkeepers, with their contracts, or promises, or utility, or material goods. Liberal individualism inspired by the insolent self-confidence of mutinous intellectuals has led to the inhuman competition of bourgeois society in which the strongest and the fastest win and the weak go to the wall. Only the church can organise a society in which the ablest are held back so that the whole of society can progress and the weakest and least greedy also reach the goal.

These gloomy doctrines became the inspiration of monarchist politics in France, and together with the notion of romantic heroism and the sharp contrast between creative and uncreative, historic and unhistorical individuals and nations, duly inspired nationalism, imperialism, and finally, in their most violent and pathological form, Fascist and totalitarian doctrines in the twentieth century.

The failure of the French Revolution to bring about the greater portion of its declared ends marks the end of the French Enlightenment as a movement and a system. Its heirs and the counter-movements that, to some degree, they stimulated and affected in their turn, romantic and irrational creeds and movements, political and aesthetic, violent and peaceful, individualist and collective, anarchic and totalitarian, and their impact, belong to another page of history.

The Originality of Machiavelli

I

THERE is something surprising about the sheer number of interpretations of Machiavelli's political opinions.[1] There exist, even now, over a score of leading theories of how to interpret *The Prince* and *The Discourses* – apart from a cloud of subsidiary views and glosses. The bibliography of this is vast and growing faster than ever.[2] While there may exist no more than the normal extent of disagreement about the meaning of particular terms or theses contained in these works, there is a startling degree of divergence about the central view, the basic political attitude of Machiavelli.

This phenomenon is easier to understand in the case of other thinkers whose opinions have continued to puzzle or agitate mankind – Plato, for example, or Rousseau, or Hegel, or Marx. But then it might be said that Plato wrote in a world and in a language that we cannot be sure we understand; that Rousseau, Hegel, Marx were

[1] The first draft of this paper was read at a meeting of the British section of the Political Studies Association in 1953. I should like to take this opportunity of offering my thanks to friends and colleagues to whom I sent it for their comments. They include A. P. d'Entrèves, Carl J. Friedrich, Felix Gilbert, Myron Gilmore, Louis Hartz, J. P. Plamenatz, Lawrence Stone and Hugh Trevor-Roper. I have greatly profited from their criticisms, which have saved me from many errors; for those that are left I am, of course, alone responsible.

[2] The full list now contains more than three thousand items. The bibliographical surveys that I have found most valuable are P. H. Harris, 'Progress in Machiavelli Studies', *Italica* 18 (1941), 1–11; Eric W. Cochrane, 'Machiavelli: 1940–1960', *Journal of Modern History* 33 (1961), 113–36; Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini* (Princeton, 1965); Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Machiavelli anticristo* (Rome, 1954), trans. into English as *Machiavelli* (New York, 1967; London, 1968); De Lamar Jensen (ed.), *Machiavelli: Cynic, Patriot, or Political Scientist?* (Boston, 1960); and Richard C. Clark, 'Machiavelli: Bibliographical Spectrum', *Review of National Literatures* 1 (1970), 93–135.

ONE

Dialogue and Dissemination

In certain quarters dialogue has attained something of a holy status. It is held up as the summit of human encounter, the essence of liberal education, and the medium of participatory democracy. By virtue of its reciprocity and interaction, dialogue is taken as superior to the one-way communiqués of mass media and mass culture. In 1956 the psychiatrist Joost Meerloo voiced a complaint against television that recurs like the locust with every new medium: "The view from the screen doesn't allow for the freedom-arousing mutuality of communication and discussion. Conversation is the lost art."[1] Leo Lowenthal likewise singled out the media: "True communication entails a communion, a sharing of inner experience. The dehumanization of communication has resulted from its annexation by the media of modern culture—by the newspapers first, and then by radio and television."[2] Media, of course, have long served as scapegoats for worries, many of them quite legitimate, about unaccountable power or cultural debasement. Criticism of the media for perpetuating structural inequalities and spiritual tawdriness is both perfectly fair and urgently needed. But such criticism ought not to overlook the inequalities that exist outside media or the tawdriness that fills our hearts unbidden.

1. Joost A. M. Meerloo, *The Rape of the Mind: The Psychology of Thought Control, Menticide, and Brainwashing* (1956; New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1961), 210.

2. Leo Lowenthal, "Communication and Humanitas," in *The Human Dialogue: Perspectives on Communication*, ed. Floyd W. Matson and Ashley Montagu (New York: Free Press, 1967), 336. Obviously, dialogism has an elective affinity with the self-definition of professional humanist educators.

To blame media for distorting dialogue is to misplace pathos. First, media critique has bigger fish to fry: the concentrations of political economy and the inherent list to perversity in human appetites. Second, media can sustain diverse formal arrangements. It is a mistake to equate technologies with their societal applications. For example, "broadcasting" (one-way dispersion of programming to an audience that cannot itself broadcast) is not inherent in the technology of radio; it was a complex social accomplishment (see chapter 5). The lack of dialogue owes less to broadcasting technologies than to interests that profit from constituting audiences as observers rather than participants. Third and most important, dialogue can be tyrannical and dissemination can be just, as I will argue throughout this chapter. The distortion of dialogue is not only a form of abuse but one of the distinctive features of civilization, for better and for worse. Distortions of dialogue make it possible to communicate across culture, across space and time, with the dead, the distant, and the alien.

The strenuous standard of dialogue, especially if it means reciprocal speech acts between live communicators who are present to each other in some way, can stigmatize a great deal of the things we do with words. Much of culture is not necessarily dyadic, mutual, or interactive. Dialogue is only one communicative script among many. The lament over the end of conversation and the call for refreshed dialogue alike miss the virtues inherent in nonreciprocal forms of action and culture. Life with others is as often a ritual performance as a dialogue. Dialogue is a bad model for the variety of shrugs, grunts, and moans that people emit (among other signs and gestures) in face-to-face settings. It is an even worse normative model for the extended, even distended, kinds of talk and discourse necessary in large-scale democracy. Much of culture consists of signs in general dispersion, and felicitous communication—in the sense of creating just community between two or more creatures—depends more basically on imagination, liberty, and solidarity among the participants than on equal time in the conversation. Dialogue, to be sure, is one precious part of our tool-kit as talking animals, but it ought not to be elevated to sole or supreme status.

Rather than survey contemporary dialogians (a term to rhyme with theologians) and their intellectual roots—the various liberals, communitarians, Deweyans, Habermasians, radical democrats, plus occasional postmodernists and feminists (not necessarily mutually exclusive categories, these) who prescribe conversation for our political and cultural woes—my plan in this chapter is to sketch a deep horizon against which to set contemporary controversies. In staging a debate between the

greatest proponent of dialogue, Socrates, and the most enduring voice for dissemination, Jesus, I aim to rediscover both the subtleties of what can count as dialogue and the blessedness of nondialogic forms, including dissemination. The rehabilitation of dissemination is not intended as an apology for the commissars and bureaucrats who issue edicts without deliberation or consultation; it is to go beyond the often uncritical celebration of dialogue to inquire more closely into what kinds of communicative forms are most apt for a democratic polity and ethical life.

Socrates and Jesus are the central figures in the moral life of the Western world. Their points of contact and difference have long been debated. They were both ironists or counterquestioners; martyrs whose kingdom was not of this world; teachers from whom we possess not a single word unrefracted by the interests of their disciples; and consequently personalities whose historical actuality has aroused enormous puzzlement and interest. Both of them taught about love and the dispersion of seeds, but to different effects. "Socrates" in Plato's *Phaedrus* offers one horizon of thinking about human discursive activity since then: the erotic life of dialogue. Parables attributed to "Jesus" by the synoptic Gospels provide a countervision: invariant and open dissemination, addressed to whom it may concern. These two conceptions of communication—tightly coupled dialogue and loosely coupled dissemination—continue today. The *Phaedrus* calls for an intimate love that links lover and beloved in a reciprocal flow; the parable of the sower calls for a diffuse love that is equally gracious to all. For Socrates, dialogue between philosopher and pupil is supposed to be one-on-one, interactive, and live, unique and nonreproducible. In the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (I take up John later), the Word is scattered uniformly, addressed to no one in particular, and open in its destiny. Socrates sees writing as troubling delivery and cultivation: his vision is sender oriented. The question for him is the care of the seeds and their proper nurturing, not what the recipient might add to the process. Jesus, in contrast, offers a receiver-oriented model in which the sender has no control over the harvest. The pervasive sense of communication disturbance in the twentieth century, I argue, finds a wellspring in the Socratic privilege of soul-to-soul connection and an antidote of sorts in Jesus' sense of the necessary looseness of any communicative coupling.

My aim here is to contrast two *Grundbegriffe* in communication theory, dialogue and dissemination, as they have since taken historically effective shape in European thought. The focus is not the historical Socrates or Jesus but rather the afterlife of these figures in specific texts written by their canonical disciples, Plato and the synoptic evangelists.

Plato may have invented much of Socrates as he lives today, and Jesus of Nazareth's doctrinal originality may fade once placed in the context of first-century nascent rabbinical culture, but my focus is the intellectual and moral shadow those personages have cast, not their precise historicity. In the fusion of horizons I hope to orchestrate, the point is less to illuminate Plato or the Gospels than to let them instruct us, by their distance and familiarity. Thus we may discover what it might look like if we took communication theory seriously as an open field for reflection.

Dialogue and Eros in the Phaedrus

Nominating Plato as a source of communication theory might seem simply an act of grasping for a noble lineage if the *Phaedrus* were not so astoundingly relevant for understanding the age of mechanical reproduction. There is a partial precedent for this argument.[3] Eric Havelock has argued that Plato's work should be read against the transition in Greek culture from a dying world of orality to a nascent one of literacy. Since then many have taken Socrates' critique of the written word at the end of the *Phaedrus* as prophetic of worries about new media more generally, including recent tectonic shifts in forms of communication.[4] Walter J. Ong, for instance, has argued that Socrates' complaints about writing—that it diminishes memory, lacks interaction, disseminates at random, and disembodies speakers and hearers—are similar to late twentieth-century worries about computers as well as fifteenth-century concerns about printing.[5] The deprivation of presence, in one way or another, has always been the starting point of reflection about communication, and the *Phaedrus* has taken its place as the Platonic text most likely to be studied by those interested in media today.

Taken as a whole, the *Phaedrus* is much more than a compendium of anxieties about technology's effects on human intercourse. The critique of the written word is only part of a larger analysis of the gaps in soul

3. In 1935 Paul Lazarsfeld claimed the *Phaedrus* for social research: "The Art of Asking Why," in *Public Opinion and Propaganda: A Book of Readings*, ed. Daniel Katz (New York: Dryden Press, 1954), 675. Other invocations of the *Phaedrus* in mass communication theory include Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Continuities in the Language of Social Research* (New York: Free Press, 1972), 153; Robert K. Merton, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive* (New York: Harper, 1946), 108; and Lowenthal, "Communication and Humanitas," 338–40.

4. Eric Alfred Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963). An illuminating discussion, focusing on book 10 of Plato's *Republic* rather than the *Phaedrus*, is Alexander Nehamas, "Plato and the Mass Media," *Monist* 71 (1988): 214–34.

5. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 79–81.

and desire that inform any act of communication. By focusing on the problem of when one should yield to or abstain from a suitor's entreaties and exalting an erotically charged but disembodied union of souls, "Socrates" explicitly articulates what is implicit in most twentieth-century worries about communication: the fierce longing for contact with an untouchable other. In the *Phaedrus* the question is not about media, but about love; not techniques, but mutuality. The dialogue's sensitivity to the wrinkles in new forms of inscription grows from an appreciation of the potential for distance and gaps between people, even in the supposedly immediate situation of face-to-face interaction. The dialogue contrasts modes of distribution (of words, of seeds, of love) that are specifically addressed and reciprocal in form to those that are indifferent to the receiver's person and one-way in form. Socrates' critique of writing is part of a larger deliberation on the varying tightness of the coupling between person and person, soul and soul, body and body. For Socrates the issue is not just the matching of minds, but the coupling of desires. Eros, not transmission, would be the chief principle of communication. In this the *Phaedrus* is far richer than the long spiritualizing trend in the intellectual history of communication theory—the dream of angel-like contact between souls at any distance—a trend that Plato, to be sure, indirectly contributes to.

The dialogue sketches both the dream of direct communication from soul to soul and the nightmare of its breakdown when transposed into new media forms. Both in its dramatic form and in its famous conclusion, the *Phaedrus* unites the hope of soul-to-soul contact with worries about its distortion. Facing the new medium of writing, Plato was haunted by multiplication, a term that ought to be taken in its double sense of simple copying and sexual reproduction.[6] Whereas oral speech almost invariably occurs as a singular event shared uniquely by the parties privy to the discussion, writing allows all manner of strange couplings: the distant influence the near, the dead speak to the living, and the many read what was intended for the few. Socrates' interpretation of the cultural and human significance of the new medium of writing is governed by worries about erotic perversion; writing disembodies thought, thus forging ghostly sorts of amatory and intellectual linkage. His sense that new media affect not only the channels of information exchange but the very embodiment of the human foreshadows similar anxieties in the nineteenth century, when the concept of "communication" first took its current shape.

6. Plato's *Seventh Letter* gives evidence specifically of Plato's interest in writing as a cultural form.