

Labyrinths

**Selected Stories & Other
Writings**

by
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The Fearful Sphere of Pascal

It may be that universal history is the history of a handful of metaphors. The purpose of this note will be to sketch a chapter of this history.

Six centuries before the Christian era, the rhapsodist Xenophanes of Colophon, wearied of the Homeric verses he recited from city to city, lashed out at the poets who attributed anthropomorphic traits to the gods, and offered the Greeks a single God, a god who was an eternal sphere. In the *Timaeus* of Plato we read that the sphere is the most perfect and most uniform figure, for all points of its surface are equidistant from its center; Olof Gigon (*Ursprung der griechischen Philosophie*, 183) understands Xenophanes to speak analogically: God is spherical because that form is best -- or least inadequate -- to represent the Divinity.

Parmenides, forty years later, rephrased the image: "The Divine Being is like the mass of a well-rounded sphere, whose force is constant from the center in any direction." Calogero and Mondolfo reasoned that Parmenides intuited an infinite, or infinitely expanding sphere, and that the words just transcribed possess a dynamic meaning (Albertelli: *Gli Eleati*, 148). Parmenides taught in Italy; a few years after his death, the Sicilian Empedocles of Agrigentum constructed a laborious cosmogony: a stage exists in which the particles of earth, water, air and fire make up a sphere without end, "the rounded *Sphairos*, which exults in its circular solitude."

Universal history continued to unroll, the all-too-human gods whom Xenophanes had denounced were demoted to figures of poetic fiction, or to demons --

although it was reported that one of them, Hermes Trismegistus, had dictated a variable number of books (42 according to Clement of Alexandria; 20,000 according to Hamblicus; 36,525 according to the priests of Thoth -- who is also Hermes) in the pages of which are written all things. Fragments of this illusory library, compiled or concocted beginning in the third century, go to form what is called the *Corpus Hermeticum*; in one of these fragments, or in the *Asclepius*, which was also attributed to Trismegistus, the French theologian Alain de Lille (Alanus de Insulis) discovered, at the end of the twelfth century, the following formula, which future ages would not forget: "God is an intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." The Pre-Socratics spoke of a sphere without end; Albertelli (as Aristotle before him) thinks that to speak in this wise is to commit a *contradictio in adjecto*, because subject and predicate cancel each other; this may very well be true, but still, the formula of the Hermetic books allows us, almost, to intuit this sphere. In the thirteenth century, the image reappeared in the symbolic *Roman de la Rose*, where it is given as a citation from Plato, and in the encyclopedia *Speculum Triplex*; in the sixteenth century, the last chapter of the last book of *Pantagrue* referred to "that intellectual sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere and which we call God." For the medieval mind the sense was clear -- God is in each one of His creatures, but none of them limits Him. "The heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee," said Solomon (I Kings 8:27); the geometric metaphor of the sphere seemed a gloss on these words.

Dante's poem preserved the Ptolemaic astronomy which for 1,400 years reigned in the imagination of

mankind. The earth occupies the center of the universe. It is an immobile sphere; around it circle nine concentric spheres. The first seven are "planetary" skies (the firmaments of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn); the eighth, the firmament of the fixed stars; the ninth, the crystal firmament which is also called the *Primum mobile*. This in turn is surrounded by the Empyrean, which is composed of light. All this elaborate apparatus of hollow, transparent and gyrating spheres (one system required 55 of them) had come to be an intellectual necessity; *De hypothesibus motuum coelestium commentariolus* is the timid title which Copernicus, denier of Aristotle, placed at the head of the manuscript that transformed our vision of the cosmos.

For one man, for Giordano Bruno, the rupture of the stellar vaults was a liberation. He proclaimed, in the *Cena de la cenere*, that the world is the infinite effect of an infinite cause, and that divinity is close by, "for it is within us even more than we ourselves are within ourselves." He searched for words to tell men of Copernican space, and on one famous page he inscribed: "We can assert with certitude that the universe is all center, or that the center of the universe is everywhere and the circumference nowhere" (*De la causa, principio ed uno, V*).

This phrase was written with exultation, in 1584, still in the light of the Renaissance; seventy years later there was no reflection of that fervor left and men felt lost in time and space. In time, because if the future and the past are infinite, there can not really be a when; in space, because if every being is equidistant from the infinite and the infinitesimal, neither can there be a where. No one exists on a certain day, in a certain place; no one knows the size of his own countenance. In the Renaissance,

humanity thought to have reached the age of virility, and it declares as much through the lips of Bruno, of Campanella, and of Bacon. In the seventeenth century, humanity was cowed by a feeling of senescence; in order to justify itself it exhumed the belief in a slow and fatal degeneration of all creatures consequent on Adam's sin. (We know -- from the fifth chapter of Genesis -- that "all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred sixty and nine years"; from the sixth chapter, that "there were giants in the earth in those days.") The First Anniversary of John Donne's elegy, *Anatomy of the World*, lamented the very brief life and limited stature of contemporary men, who are like pigmies and fairies; Milton, according to Johnson's biography, feared that the appearance on earth of a heroic species was no longer possible; Glanvill was of the opinion that Adam, "the medal of God," enjoyed both telescopic and microscopic vision; Robert South conspicuously wrote: "An Aristotle was but the fragment of an Adam, and Athens the rudiments of Paradise." In that dispirited century, the absolute space which had inspired the hexameters of Lucretius, the absolute space which had meant liberation to Bruno, became a labyrinth and an abyss for Pascal. He abhorred the universe and would have liked to adore God; but God, for him, was less real than the abhorred universe. He deplored the fact that the firmament did not speak, and he compared our life with that of castaways on a desert island. He felt the incessant weight of the physical world, he experienced vertigo, fright and solitude, and he put his feelings into these words: "Nature is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." Thus do the words appear in the Brunschvicg text; but the critical edition published by Tourneur (Paris, 1941), which reproduces the crossed-out words and variations of

the manuscript, reveals that Pascal started to write the word *effroyable*: "a fearful sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere."

It may be that universal history is the history of the different intonations given a handful of metaphors.

Translated by Anthony Kerrigan

Partial Magic in the *Quixote*

It is plausible that these observations may have been set forth at some time and, perhaps, many times; a discussion of their novelty interests me less than one of their possible truth.

Compared with other classic books (the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, the *Pharsalia*, Dante's *Commedia*, Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies), the *Quixote* is a realistic work; its realism, however, differs essentially from that practiced by the nineteenth century. Joseph Conrad could write that he excluded the supernatural from his work because to include it would seem a denial that the everyday was marvelous; I do not know if Miguel de Cervantes shared that intuition, but I do know that the form of the *Quixote* made him counterpose a real prosaic world to an imaginary poetic world. Conrad and Henry James wrote novels of reality because they judged reality to be poetic; for Cervantes the real and the poetic were antinomies. To the vast and vague geographies of the *Amadis*, he opposes the dusty roads and sordid wayside inns of Castille; imagine a novelist of our time centering attention for purposes of parody on some filling stations. Cervantes has created for us the poetry of seventeenth-