

A Defense of the Kabbalah

Neither the first time it has been attempted, nor the last time it will fail, this defense is distinguished by two facts. One is my almost complete ignorance of the Hebrew language; the other, my desire to defend not the doctrine but rather the hermeneutical or cryptographic procedures that lead to it. These procedures, as is well known, include the vertical reading of sacred texts, the reading referred to as *boustrophedon* (one line from left to right, the following line from right to left), the methodical substitution of certain letters of the alphabet for others, the sum of the numerical value of the letters, etc. To ridicule such operations is simple; I prefer to attempt to understand them.

It is obvious that their distant origin is the concept of the mechanical inspiration of the Bible. That concept, which turns the evangelists and prophets into God's impersonal secretaries, taking dictation, is found with imprudent energy in the *Formula consensus helvetica*, which claims authority for the consonants in the Scriptures and even for the diacritical marks—which did not appear in the earliest versions. (This fulfillment, in man, of God's literary intentions is *inspiration* or *enthusiasm*: words whose true meaning is "to be possessed by a god.") The Muslims can boast of exceeding this hyperbole, as they have decided that the original Koran—the Mother of the Books—is one of God's attributes, like His pity or His wrath, and they consider it to be older than speech, older than Creation. Similarly, there are Lutheran theologians who dare not include the Scriptures among created things, and define them as an incarnation of the Spirit.

Of the Spirit: here we touch on a mystery. Not the divinity in general, but rather the third hypostasis of the divinity was the One who dictated the Bible. This is the common belief. Bacon, in 1625, wrote: "The pen of the Holy Spirit hath laboured more over Job's affliction than over Solomon's

good fortune.”¹ And his contemporary John Donne: “The Holy Spirit is an eloquent writer, a vehement and copious writer, but not verbose, as removed from an impoverished style as from a superfluous one.”

It is impossible to both name the Spirit and silence the horrendous threefold society of which it is part. Lay Catholics consider it a collegial body that is infinitely correct but also infinitely boring; the liberals, a useless theological Cerberus, a superstition which the numerous advances of the century will soon abolish. The Trinity, of course, surpasses these formulas. Imagined all at once, its concept of a father, a son, and a ghost, joined in a single organism, seems like a case of intellectual teratology, a monster which only the horror of a nightmare could spawn. This is what I believe, although I try to bear in mind that every object whose end is unknown to us is provisionally monstrous. This general observation is obstructed, however, by the professional mystery of the object.

Disentangled from the concept of redemption, the distinction of three persons in one must seem arbitrary. Considered as a necessity of faith, its fundamental mystery is not lessened, but its intention and uses are blunted. We understand that to renounce the Trinity—or at least the Duality—is to turn Jesus into the accidental delegate of the Lord, a historical incident, not the imperishable, constant receiver of our devotion. If the Son is not also the Father, then redemption is not a direct divine act; if He is not eternal, then neither will be the sacrifice of having come down to man and died on the cross. “Nothing less than infinite excellence could atone for a soul lost for infinite ages,” insisted Jeremy Taylor. Thus one may justify the dogma, even if the concepts of the Son generated by the Father, and the Spirit proceeding from the two, heretically imply a priority, not to mention their guilty condition as mere metaphors. Theology, determined to differentiate the two, resolves that there is no reason for confusion because one results in the Son, and the other in the Spirit. An eternal generation of the Son, an eternal issue of the Spirit, is Irenaeus’ grim conclusion: the invention of an act outside of time, a mutilated *zeitloses Zeitwort* that we can reject or worship, but not discuss. Hell is merely physical violence, but the three inextricable persons import an intellectual horror, a strangled, specious infinity like facing mirrors. Dante depicted them as a reverberation of diaphanous multicolored circles; Donne, as entangled serpents, thick and inseparable.

¹In the Latin version: “*diffusius tractavit Jobi afflictiones.*” In English, he had written with greater success, “hath laboured more.”

"*Toto coruscat trinitas mysterio*," wrote St. Paulinus; the Trinity shines in full mystery.

If the Son is God's reconciliation with the world, the Spirit—the beginning of sanctification, according to Athanasius; an angel among the others, for Macedonius—may best be defined as God's intimacy with us, His immanence in our breast. (For the Socinians—I fear with good reason—it was no more than a personified expression, a metaphor for divine action, that was later dizzily elaborated.) Whether or not a mere syntactical formality, what is certain is that the third blind person of the entangled Trinity is the recognized author of the Scriptures. Gibbon, in the chapter of his work that deals with Islam, includes a general census of the publications of the Holy Spirit, modestly calculated at a hundred and some; but the one which interests me now is Genesis: the subject matter of the Kabbalah.

The Kabbalists believed, as many Christians now do, in the divinity of that story, in its deliberate writing by an infinite intelligence. The consequences of such an assumption are many. The careless dispatch of an ordinary text—for example, journalism's ephemeral statements—allows for a considerable amount of chance. It communicates—postulates—a fact: it reports that yesterday's always unusual assault took place on such-and-such a street, at such-and-such a corner, at such-and-such an hour of the morning; a formula which represents no one, which limits itself to indicating such-and-such a place about which news was supplied. In such indications, the length and sound of the paragraphs are necessarily accidental. The contrary occurs in poetry, whose usual law is the subjection of meaning to euphonic needs (or superstitions). What is accidental in them is not the sound, but the meaning. It is thus in the early Tennyson, in Verlaine, in Swinburne's later works: dedicated only to the expression of general states by means of the rich adventures of their prosody. Let us consider a third writer: the intellectual. In his handling of prose (Valéry, De Quincey) or of verse, he has certainly not eliminated chance, but he has denied it as much as possible, and restricted its incalculable compliance. He remotely approximates the Lord, for Whom the vague concept of chance holds no meaning. The Lord, the perfected God of the theologians, Who sees all at once (*uno intelligendi actu*), not only all the events of this replete world but also those that would take place if even the most evanescent—or impossible—of them should change.

Let us imagine now this astral intelligence, dedicated to manifesting itself not in dynasties or annihilations or birds, but in written words. Let us also imagine, according to the pre-Augustinian theory of verbal inspiration,

that God dictates, word by word, what he proposes to say.² This premise (which was the one postulated by the Kabbalists) turns the Scriptures into an absolute text, where the collaboration of chance is calculated at zero. The conception alone of such a document is a greater wonder than those recorded in its pages. A book impervious to contingencies, a mechanism of infinite purposes, of infallible variations, of revelations lying in wait, of superimpositions of light. . . . How could one not study it to absurdity, to numerical excess, as did the Kabbalah?

[1932]

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²Origen attributed three meanings to the words of the Scriptures: the historical, the moral, and the mystical, corresponding to the body, the soul, and the spirit which make up man; John Scotus Erigena, an infinite number of meanings, like the iridescence of a peacock's feathers.