

Intellectualism and the Gnostic Debacle: Julian the Apostate in the Modern Literary Imagination

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Plato knows of those intelligible and invisible gods which are immanent in and coexist with the creator himself and were begotten and proceeded from him. Naturally, therefore, the creator in Plato's account says "gods" when he is addressing the invisible beings, and "of gods," meaning by this evidently, the visible gods [i.e., *the stars*]. And the common creator of both is he who fashioned the heavens and the earth and the sea and the stars, and begat in the intelligible world the archetypes of these. (Emperor Julian, "the Apostate," *Against the Galileans* [Wright's translation] 337-39)

Most venerable fathers, I have read in the records of the Arabians that Abdul the Saracen, on being asked what thing on, so to speak, the world's stage, he viewed as most greatly worthy of wonder, answered that he viewed nothing more wonderful than man. And Mercury's, "a great wonder, Asclepius, is man!" agrees with that opinion . . . O great liberality of God the Father! O great and wonderful happiness of man! It is given to him that he chooses to be that which he wills . . . he will be an Angel and a Son of God. (Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man* [Wallis' translation] 3 & 5)

I

This essay, which explores the origin and meaning of *intellectualism*, grows out of a previous one, on Augustine's *City of God* as one of the sources of Henryk Ibsen's two-part historical drama *Emperor and Galilean* (1873). Under the title "The Senescence of the World," that precursor-essay will appear in print later this year (2004) in a hardcover symposium on *Augustine and Literature*, edited by Kim Paffenroth of Iona College, New York, under the imprimatur of Lexington Books.

One result of reading Augustine together with Ibsen was the discovery of how convergent

are their views on the standing noetic prejudices of Late Antiquity. Both see something curiously dogmatic in the supposedly free realm of dialectics and speculation, tinged with mysticism, of the period. Both see intellectualism—an impassioned commitment to the worldview of radical nominalism—as spiraling down on and compressing itself negatively until it becomes pure nihilism, a rancorous rebellion against reality as it is given. Thought, making of itself an idol and seeking, through the propitiation of that idol, to transform the intolerable reality, thereby cancels thought. The human likewise cancels the human in favor of bodiless abstraction that turns its wrath against the very limitation implied by the notion of *body*. I thus stressed in “The Senescence of the World” the playwright’s unexpected partiality for the Christian—specifically for the Augustinian—over the Pagan judgment on the famous “Apostate” Caesar. Another way of putting this is to say that Ibsen prefers the moral to the metaphysical interpretation of the supposedly benevolent dictator because the moral interpretation remains connected with actual human scene.

I wish in the present occasion to expand the earlier analysis and apply it to our own condition, which I see as characterized by a widespread, casual denial of the human through a reemphasis of metaphysics in its most distorted form. This application of the insight will entail one other thing: showing the *paradox* of intellectualism, which consists in the intellectual’s (or let us say the metaphysician’s) inability to come to terms with the paradox inherent in the messy and imperfect thing that makes human beings specifically human—namely their consciousness, as articulated in scenic structure of language. This aspect of the argument might be summed up in an *aperçu* of Eric Gans, in his *Signs of Paradox* (1997), that “it is in the very nature of logic to be obsessed by the wish to expel paradox” in order to ensure “the protection of form against its dissolution in the chaos of content” (42). One might also say that intellectualism, when it reaches its inevitable acme in Gnostic wrath, amounts to an absolute impatience with the deferral of appetitive satisfaction entailed by the operation of significance on the human scene. There is a type of patience inherent in Christianity, stemming from the indefinite postponement of the Second Coming, that is not available in the bodiless peregrinations of spirit that characterize metaphysical theology. Nor can metaphysics reliably supply a practical moral framework for everyday life, another one of its anthropological defects.

In the interpretation of *Emperor and Galilean* referred to above—unpredictable given that the adjudicator is Ibsen, whom one associates with modern Pyrrhonism in matters religious—Julian appears neither as the valiant defender of a pristine tradition now under concerted and narrow-minded assault, nor as the Romantic non-conformist and individualist, but rather as a typical case of the true-believing *illuminatus* who excoriates the world for its defects (as though the world could be otherwise than as it is) and who becomes convinced, through a kind of egophany, of his own godhead. To account for any fact that undermines these assumptions, the true believer requires an increasingly complicated explanation, which takes on the character of a witting falsification of reality. Part of the reality that Julian would falsify is the appeal of Christianity, of “the carpenter’s son” (*Emperor and Galilean*

447), to the masses of his empire. The Galileans rankle Julian. Fitting nowhere in his scheme of the world, they scandalize him, the consummate metaphysician, because they exist. As Gans has remarked, “metaphysics ultimately cannot tolerate the existence of another minimal discourse than its own” (58).

2

Compared to Christianity, the Neoplatonism espoused by Julian is not minimal at all but quite *maximal*. The maximal character of this doctrine finds expression in an aggressiveness at odds with its irenic claims and in an inflation that contrasts greatly with the modest implicit in the reciprocal model of ethics of the Gospel. While the best of the Christians in Ibsen’s play advocate their creed as vehemently as Julian does his, none of them believes that he himself is God, which Julian arguably does. One must be cautious, of course. Ibsen in no wise subscribes to Christianity but neither does he take up a rigidly anti-Christian position, such as Julian increasingly espouses in his story as told in the drama. Other literary interpreters of Julian’s career—the French nineteenth-century writer Alfred de Vigny, for example, or the American twentieth-century writer Gore Vidal—tend to find irresistible the opportunity afforded by the imperial apostasy to make polemic against the Gospels. In exploiting Julian for propaganda purposes, a Vigny or a Vidal shows himself to be in continuity with the Apostate’s metaphysical intolerance for non-propositional theology. Gans provides an apposite formulation in *Originary Thinking* (1993):

In its more sophisticated forms, metaphysics becomes wary of the term “God,” whose commonality with the individual being of religious belief might appear to call for an explanation [that the metaphysician would prefer not to give]. To speak of the idea of God is in effect to display a suspect continuity, or at least a contiguity, with religious modes of thought. But not to do so is simply to imply the meaninglessness of the idea, and therefore to fall within the ranks of non-believers—that is, to dissolve the synthesis that metaphysics had originally sought to effect. (33) These words sum up Julian’s dilemma for, by the Fourth Century, Christianity had already displaced the philosophical schools as the dominant intellectual-theological authority in the Empire: Christianity had *become* the tradition, to which its enemy could now, in his reactionary manner, counterpoise the older lore that the Gospel dispensation had all but vanquished, Hellenism, with its quasi-saints in Socrates, Plato, Orpheus, Pythagoras, and so forth. The very sequence of Socrates-to-Orpheus suggests why Hellenism had fallen vulnerable to a new revelation. There was a lapse from philosophical-anthropological penetration to mystical opacity, accompanied by an increasingly pedantic, allegorical style of presentation designed to rescue myth from its status as so much outdated curiosity. Believing that the true deity can, as it were, be derived from logical principles, Julian takes especial offense in the obstreperous irrationality of the God who is three-in-one, in the grotesque of the incarnation, and in a radically egalitarian morality that refuses to grant to the philosophical initiate more worth than to a lowly slave. Even Christians—educated ones in any case—can see *part* of what Julian saw: that

the moral triumph of the Church entailed both loss of prestige for philosophy and a demotion for esthetics. Ibsen grasps this. His Julian's constant complaint is about the primitiveness of the Christians. Built up meticulously on the fourth-century documentation, Ibsen's Julian merely reflects the elite prejudices of his day—the ones, not incidentally, which take their most acute form in Gnosticism.

Ibsen's refusal to join himself to the anti-Christian stance implicit in the Romantic celebration of Julian has a connection to the playwright's interpretation of the modern, or self-consciously post-Christian, mentality as a libidinous deformation of existence—as an assault on the human scene. Ibsen sees the “*anti*,” so to speak, as the peculiarly modern disease. He furthermore sees the modern age (his own nineteenth century) as a peculiar repetition of that final phase of Antiquity during which the contest occurred between (i) an attitude that accepts the world as given and (ii) those various intellectual systems that show in common a denial of the worldly “*is*” in preference for the arbitrarily posited intellectual “*ought*.” So, as Ibsen says in a letter to Edmund Gosse, his Julian drama has a contemporary significance and is by no means a mere antiquarian fantasy. “I work every day at *Julianus Apostata*, and hope to have the whole book finished by the end of the present year . . . It is part of my own spiritual life which I am putting into this book; what I depict, I have, under different conditions, gone through myself; and the historical subject chosen has a much more intimate connection with the movements of our own time than one might first imagine” (*Letters* 248).

These terms—*world denial*, *Gnosis*, *egophany*—are perhaps unfamiliar, as they figure but little in the vocabulary of contemporary literary criticism. It is true that Harold Bloom writes a good deal about “Gnosticism,” but he claims to *be* a Gnostic, and his vocabulary falls short of the analytical. A good way all at once to elucidate these terms and to summarize the significance of *Emperor and Galilean* is to take a close look at the climax of Ibsen's dramatic presentation—namely Part II, Act V, or what I call here “The Gnostic Debacle.” Julian ends where all Gnostics end: defeated and humiliated by the hard stubbornness of the given and by the non-magical reality of the adamantly non-nominal real. This is the pattern—the *moral*, even—that Ibsen sees within or draws from (however best to put it) the weird confusion of events at the end of Julian's ill-starred Persian campaign, when the conviction that he is Alexander the Great *redivivus*, or perhaps Dionysus, fatally consumes the philosophical warrior-prince.

I shall cheat a little, begging pardon along the way. I shall begin with a discussion of *Gnosis*, that unaccountable knowledge based not in experience but, rather, mystically vouchsafed to the knower from beyond this world, that so pervasively colors Late Antiquity. The Late Antique centuries constitute a strange period, full of baroque extravagance in philosophy and theology, from which Christianity could boast no absolute invulnerability. Nevertheless, the main religious and social distinction of this historical phase is that between Gnostic elaborations of mankind's cosmic plight and the minimal cosmology—and maximal

anthropology-of the Gospel message.

Gnosis, as Hans Jonas tells us in his classic study *The Gnostic Religion* (1957/65), is an anti-cosmic dualism strongly associated with the Hellenism of the final centuries of the Roman Empire. From Homer through Plato right unto the Stoics, the symbol of *Kosmos* possesses, for the Old Mediterranean mind, a positive value. It does so etymologically through its denotation of something *beautiful* (hence its not entirely remote affiliation with the English term *cosmetics*), and it does so philosophically in the doctrine of an orderly, a just, a divinely created world, where each properly fashioned thing takes its place on the proverbial Ladder of Being. Beginning in the aftermath of Alexander's conquests, however, and gaining strength under the Roman annexation of the Hellenic world, a new strain of thought appears in philosophy and religion that reverses the value of the venerable symbol.

3

We can measure the difference this way: for Plato, the world is beautiful; its wonderful beauty reflects the moral sublimity of its creator. Humanity, endowed with reason, learns of harmony, balance, justice, and meaning from contemplating the world. The *polis*, mirroring the orderliness of *Kosmos*, functions as a microcosm within the macrocosm. The household, or *oikos*, functions similarly within the *polis*. The world-creator has fitted each part perfectly to the whole. The philosophical Judaism of Alexandria assimilates this optimistic view to the cosmogony of Genesis, as in Philo Judaeus. Paul's Christianity likewise assimilates it, despite the ascetic, unworldly element in the Pauline ethos. Yet when we reach the Neoplatonism of the Second and Third Centuries, something has changed. What E. R. Dodds, in his *Pagan and Christian* (1963), famously describes as "An Age of Anxiety" has set in. Plotinus, the best known of the Neoplatonists, treats his body with disdain because he regards matter as absolutely inferior to spirit; the spirit has *descended* into the body and longs to be free of it. In one of his treatises, Plotinus argues against the Gnostics, but he nevertheless shares his anti-materialism with them. Porphyry and Iamblichus, Plotinus' two major successors, are equally anti-materialist in their disposition.

For all the syllogistic elaboration in their *tractate*, however, all of the Neoplatonist thinkers share in common what one might call a public relations weakness related to their unworldly or anti-worldly attitude. They appeal, in their distress, to a deity so without human quality that he—or *it*—cannot even be supposed to exist in any manner meaningful to ordinary people in their tribulations. In his analysis of the concept of God, Gans notes that this idea "includes existence not because the 'greatest' or 'most perfect' being must exist, but precisely because this concept could never have arisen if human reason had at its disposal only abstractions like 'greatest' or 'most perfect'" (31). In this way, despite the *philosophical* refinement, the Neoplatonist deity is, anthropologically, a conceptual decline from the anthropomorphic gods of classical polytheism. The anthropomorphic Zeus of *Odyssey* at least takes an interest in human justice and sends his lieutenants to assist those, like

Odysseus, whose quest for justice various contingencies have unduly delayed.

The Gnostics themselves—in such persons as Marcion of Sinope and Valentinus of Alexandria—take anti-materialism one step further. Depending on whether they are Judaeo-Christian or Platonic in their starting orientation, they treat the cosmogony of Genesis or that of *Timaeus*, not as glorious, but as catastrophic. The Old Testament's Creator God and the Platonic Demiurge both become, in this rereading, wicked villains in rebellion against the "Unknown" or "Invisible" God—the "Real" or "Hidden" God—who is the ultimate source of being. The created world devolves, at minimum in this scheme, into a travesty and, at maximum, into a deliberate, perverse *parody* of the Real God's *actual*—spiritual hence immaterial—Creation. Matter, as the Gnostic sees it, is not merely something to which the spirit must be indifferent, but it is something inherently evil and therefore antithetical to spirit. Matter and spirit, shadow and light, fight in a great ontological struggle. To restore the realm of light from its catastrophe entails the abolition of matter. I quote Jonas:

It is almost by exaggeration that the divinity of the cosmic order is turned into the opposite of divine. Order and law [constitute] the cosmos here too, but rigid and inimical order, tyrannical and evil law, devoid of meaning and goodness, alien to the purposes of man and to his inner essence, no object for his communication [or] affirmation. A world emptied of divine content had its own order: an order empty of divinity. Thus the metaphysical devaluation of the world extends to the conceptual root of the cosmos-idea, that is, the concept of order itself, and includes it with its quality perverted in the now debased concept of the physical universe. In this manner the term "cosmos," endowed with all its semantic associations could pass over into gnostic use and could there, with its value-sign reversed, become as symbolic as it had been in the Greek tradition. (*The Gnostic Religion* 250). From *Kosmos* so re-conceived, as the botched sub-creation of an inferior divinity and as a muddy prison-house for souls, the Gnostic naturally seeks escape. The modes of this escape might vary, with all of the variations nevertheless retaining intact the fundamental premise. The aspirant might turn from worldly life by embracing a rigorous asceticism, including self-mortification, or he might conversely sin his way to salvation under the notion that, because *law* is pernicious, he who has come to understand this perniciousness must *de rigueur* attack and destroy the law. Both responses begin in *Gnosis* itself, that potent influx of knowledge under whose stark light every custom and all the items of inherited lore show their inherent falsehood so that the knower suddenly knows himself as ontologically different from—and ontologically superior to—those who continue in their wretched ignorance. I remark once again that the Gnostic position can be summed up in the complaint that the *scene* is inexcusably flawed in that the Gnostic himself feels discomfited by it and would therefore recast it after his own inflexible taste. Gnosticism is a type of noetic non-adaptation: a desire to abolish what makes us human—the fact that we have fitted ourselves to the world, as to our own hard-wired propensities.

Both the contemporaries of the Gnostics, such as Augustine, and modern scholars, such as

Jonas himself or Giovanni Filoramo or Kurt Rudolph, note the insistence of the *illuminati* that they are the elect while all those outside the light are a preterit, hardly human. The parallel with the modern claims of an artistic, a philosophical, or a political *avant-garde* is easy to see. Filoramo quotes Basilides' claim that "one in a thousand is capable of attaining the Gnostic mysteries" (*A History of Gnosticism* 174). Filoramo describes the typical Gnostic *thiasos* as "a group . . . rigid and compact internally [and] in total retreat from the surrounding world" (174). The members see themselves as representing a particular genealogical line, as from Adam and Eve's son Seth. A strong Gnostic streak of just this rebellious and exclusive type marks Julian's own writings, which Ibsen studied, as in the introduction to the encomium on *King Helios*, written in Julian's first year as emperor. Referring to his Mithraic initiation under the tutelage of Maximus of Ephesus, Julian writes how he always, in his words, "from my earliest years [enjoyed] an extraordinary longing for the god" whose "ray [has] penetrated deep into my soul" (Wright's translation, Vol. II 353). Julian declares that he is "endowed by the god Helios" with the privilege of having been born "of a house that rules and governs the world in my time" (355). His birth is not accidental, therefore, but belongs to a divinely ordained destiny. The spark of that divinity experiences discomfort in *this world*. In the treatise *Against the Galileans*, also written during his tenure in office, Julian reveals another Gnostic inclination, that of positing a superior God beyond the gods.

4

This positing of a supra-deity known only to the farsighted constitutes an essential Gnostic trump. In deploying his trump, Julian employs a Platonic vocabulary. He derives the inferior-the material-creation from what he calls the *intelligible matrix* in the mind of the concealed or *Intelligible*, God, the one apprehensible only to the philosophical initiate, but never to the mass of the unwashed, who must make do with the cults of the preterit. In Julian's view of existence, material creation lies at the farthest remove from the real Creator, who sometimes suffers to be called by the name of Helios. The soul being spiritual rather than material, it sojourns but unhappily in the weightiness of a benighted world.

While I have never encountered the term *Gnostic* in Ibsen (this vocabulary was nascent in his day), the purport of *Emperor and Galilean* is, even so, to reveal Julian as an *illuminatus* in revolt against reality, who comes to believe that he can transform reality by an act of his own will. Ibsen discovers these traits in the historical sources and they are thus well founded. The debacle comes with the Emperor's decision to campaign against Rome's traditional enemy, Persia-the source, ironically, of his Mithraism. Julian's trajectory is thus deeply self-destructive. The battle with the Persians, in which the Roman army in fact vanquished the Persian army, forms the subject matter of Part II, Act V.

II

Ibsen assembles the full cast of Julian's spiritual and political advisors, his flatterers and detractors, for the chaotic finale. The *personae* are almost all historical: many of them, like Julian himself, left considerable literary remains that allow us to grasp their thinking with some clarity, or perhaps to sample its nebulosity. Among these are Priscus, Oribases, Eutherius, and the omnipresent Maximus. They represent, by degrees, the mystic preoccupations of Late Antique paganism, Priscus and Oribases being undistinguished Neoplatonists, Maximus being the Spiritual Perfect and Prophet of the Superman, whom he believes himself to have cultivated in Julian. Hence his admonition to the Emperor: "The world-will has placed its power in your hands" (*Emperor and Galilean* 442), a remark by which Ibsen identifies the Left Hegelianism of his own time, if not Hegel's proper doctrine, with ancient Gnosis. The general and historian Ammianus Marcellinus, Julian's chief chronicler and a participant in the Persian war, also stirs about. Among the Christians, Ibsen produces Basil, later Bishop of Caesarea. If, in Julian, Ibsen portrayed zealous delusion, then in Basil he would give us a picture of spiritual and philosophical balance. Sincere in his faith, Basil nevertheless passionately studies the Greek classics; he defends their value against the bigoted prejudice of the zealots among his co-religionists. Basil thus avoids the mistake made by the speculators and *illuminati*. He would rather not expel the anthropomorphic deities of Classical Olympian religion—no doubt because he sees that they, rather than the God of the Philosophers, have something in common, by way of anticipation, with the Christian God. An image is more minimal, as we might say, than a system in the form of so many interdependent propositions or syllogisms. In the final moments of Ibsen's drama, Basil refuses to celebrate the Apostate's death. Which is not, for him, something abstract, but something supremely present and pathetic. Julian had been Basil's friend.

The scene in Part II, Act V is at first crepuscular (late afternoon) and then eerily nocturnal. When the night comes on, a link is formed with Acts I and V of Part I, earlier nocturnal moments in the drama that define Julian's spiritual rebellion and put his professed solar religiosity in a different light. Julian's army wanders in confusion in the Anatolian hinterland, seeking contact with the foe. Ibsen describes "a stony desert plain without trees or grass . . . Exhausted soldiers are lying in groups on the plain" and "from time to time detachments of the army pass from left to right" (434). These details are anthropologically significant. They suggest the dissolution of the human—the communal—scene. The desertion and desolateness of the setting sums up the quandary of the Fourth Century, with its many spiritual and political crises as summed up in the career of Julian himself: the old order, the pagan order, is irreparably in dissolution; Julian's proposed new philosophical order cannot itself replace imperial syncretism, nor can Mithraism or the cult of the *Magna Mater*. Given the discovery, forced on the imperial citizenry through the brute *fact* of empire (Roman or Persian, as they both compete to occupy the same spatiotemporal domain), of the universality of mankind, the disorganization implied by the scene is intolerable. The universal people require reunion. Such a reunion requires a new *minimal referent*, which is

precisely what the (to Julian) contemptible Christian word supplies.

Julian dismisses his philosophic retinue—Priscus, Eutherius, and Oribases—and goes looking for Maximus. (*Of course!*) An inability of his usual soothsayers and magicians to interpret the sacred signs has troubled Julian, suggesting to him the flight of divinity from the rites that should record its disposition. Julian points to a stagnant pond. He says to Maximus:

Look at that black pool. Do you think . . . if I were to vanish from earth without a trace, and my body were never found, and no one discovered what had become of me . . . do you think a legend would grow that Hermes had come to me and carried me off, and that the gods had admitted me to their company? (445) Maximus replies, “the time is near when men shall not need to die in order to live as gods on earth” (445). Julian replies again, “I am consumed with a longing for home, Maximus . . . home with the light, and the sun, and the stars” (445). In these words, Julian confesses his failure, which we must therefore credit him with understanding, at least partly. The intellectual is above all alienated *a priori* from the human scene: he is alienated from it because in pre-existing him it affronts an inarticulate desire to establish and dominate on the model of the invisible *authority* who is central to the scene. Julian takes redoubled offense in the fact that this invisible authority is now the despised Galilean. As man is a mimetic creature, subject in his nature to resentment, it follows, to cite Gans again, that “we identify with the centrality we resent and are alienated from the centrality we desire” (*Originary Thinking* 137).

5

Julian tells Maximus that he has had a vision, a veiled figure appearing to him, which Maximus identifies as “the Spirit of Empire” (446). The same apparition presented itself during Julian’s initiation into the mysteries, under Maximus’ tutelage, in Athens, before he became emperor. At that time Maximus assured his student that this divine messenger foretold Julian’s own destiny as the God-Man who incarnates the world-will. Ibsen has discerned in Julian’s baroque Helios-doctrine a bedrock of dualism, introduced in the contrast between the “black pool” to which the material world seems to have shrunk on the eve of battle and “the light” for which Julian nostalgically yearns. Thus in *King Helios*, Julian describes human nature as “a two-fold contending . . . of soul and body compounded into one, the former divine, the latter dark and clouded” (Wright’s translation, Vol. I 389). In *King Helios* Julian mentions also how the Sun God “endows with superior lot the nobler races—I mean angels, demons, heroes, and those divided souls which remain in the category of model and archetype and never give themselves over to bodies” (397). The truth belongs to the elect and lifts them above the run of humanity. In *Emperor and Galilean*, under Maximus’ theory of the God-Man, Julian ought to have acquired an ever more subtle body: his *will*, reflecting the pure light of Helios, should be an ever more effective instrument in reshaping the grossness of the world. Alas, it has not happened. This disappointment constitutes the real kernel of Julian’s panic, as he seeks from Maximus some consolation

that will save the notion from the appearances.

Let me say something about Maximus, both Ibsen's dramaturgical *persona* and the *Magus* of the historical sources. According to Eunapius, in *The Lives of the Sophists*, the flamboyant Maximus dominated Julian both intellectually and spiritually from the time they first met, in Ephesus, when Julian had not yet completed his study of philosophy. Eunapius says little, regrettably, about Maximus' doctrine, but we can discern in his sketch the basic outlines. No philosopher in the strict sense, Maximus disdained dialectic, a propensity that distinguished him from other favorites of Julian, such as Chrysanthius and Priscus, whose common doctrine appears to have been a pure nominalism: a redeeming truth exists in the form of a luminous syllogism. Where Chrysanthius and Priscus venerated intelligence, Maximus affected a rhetorical apotheosis of *will*. He claimed that the *will* (his own, for example) could sublimate matter and liberate the entombed spirit. He grew famous in his day as a wonder-worker, once bringing to life, apparently, a statue of Hecate in a temple in Ephesus.

One suspects that—given Maximus' Mithraic orientation—his doctrine corresponded to a dualism, a typical Gnostic characteristic. Eunapius records how Maximus once told Chrysanthius that a “learned man” (441) should assume as his goal “to wrestle with the heavenly powers” (441). This conceit maintains rapport with a widespread Gnostic conviction that the *illuminatus* can, once he has established communion with the Hidden God, command the lesser divinities to make them do his will. He will, bending divinities to his *libido*, become himself the equivalent of (at least) a lesser divinity. This is the goal of every *Magus*, from Maximus to Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, or to Robert Fludd and the lesser numerologists and alchemists. Difficult it is sometimes to distinguish between Gnosis as theology and Gnosis as theurgy or magic. The ambiguous “Empire” (*Emperor and Galilean* 446)—sometimes “Third Empire”—that Ibsen makes Maximus promise to Julian connotes the *will's* reversal of the catastrophe of matter and its reassertion of the precedence of the immaterial. In Ibsen's drama—in Part II, Act V—Maximus tries to revive Julian's flagging confidence by urging him that “victory comes to him who wills” (446). Julian, deeply shaken, replies in the interrogative:

And what does the victor win? Is it worthwhile to conquer? What did the Macedonian Alexander, what did Julius Caesar win? Greeks and Romans speak of their fame with cold astonishment . . . while the other one, the Galilean, the carpenter's son, reigns as the king of love in the warm believing hearts of men.

Where is he now? . . . Is he busy elsewhere, since what happened on Golgotha? (446)

Since his youth, Ibsen's Julian has demonstrated an obsession with “the carpenter's son” and with “the Galileans.” He begins as a nominal Christian, only to rebel against what he takes for a rigid and paltry dogma. So also it seems to have been with the historical Julian,

to judge by the literary remains. Julian makes the same set of arguments against Christianity that Celsus and Porphyry do: all three deny-Julian last in the line-that the divine could ever take on a material form without being defiled. On the other hand, the recipient of *Gnosis* might transcend his material condition and assume divinity. At the acme of his conviction, after his defeat of the Germans in the West, Julian, in Ibsen's handling of him, believes himself to be the reincarnated life force of the ancient gods and heroes-of Alexander the Great and of Dionysus. This conceit by no means violates the apotheotic drift of historical documents. Ibsen's Julian sees himself as restoring the interrupted True Doctrine and, by so doing, ridding the world of Christian falsehood. When Ibsen has the Emperor invoke Alexander of Macedon and Julius Caesar, the invocation implies the old, Maximus-inspired fantasy of the "Logos in Pan" (256). One might note that Julian's *agon* with Christ and with Christianity is almost identical to Nietzsche's. The date of *Emperor and Galilean* means that Ibsen had seen how much modernity would articulate itself as an attempt to expel Christian onto-theology decades *before* Nietzsche made such a characterization obvious. Neoplatonists, Julian, and Nietzsche together, and in a similar vocabulary, accuse Christianity of being a religion of base *ressentiment*. The slaves and women who constitute Christianity's degraded clientele resent their pagan overlords and husbands and, in dissimulating response to their ire, celebrate thralldom and weakness as virtues, as *their* strength. "Nietzsche," writes Gans, "inaugurated the modern analysis of resentment by creating a dubious typology" (141). Yet the Late Antique polemic prefigures this typology. Nietzsche's Oedipal relation to Christ is *the same* as Julian's, sixteen centuries earlier: both attempt to stave off being absorbed into the egalitarian scene posited by Christian reciprocal morality by establishing the Manichaeic-hence Gnostic-dichotomy of preterit and elite, assigning themselves to the latter category.

6

Now, however, Julian suffers another vision, which he reports to Maximus:

I dreamt about him [i.e., Jesus] recently. I dreamt I had subjected the whole earth. I ordered that the memory of the Galilean should be erased from the earth; it was erased . . . Then the spirits came and ministered unto me, and tied wings to my shoulders, and I soared out into infinite space, until I set foot on another world. (446)

When, from this visionary new world, Julian gazes down on the old, he sees an ecumene "cleared of Galileans" and he thinks to himself "that all I had done was very good" (446). One might meditate on the phrase, "cleared of Galileans." *Klarad af Galiléer*. Its import is less than pretty. At the same instant, to his chagrin, Julian also sees going past him a procession of souls-"soldiers and judges and executioners at the head, and weeping women follow[ing] after"-among whom walks "the living Galilean, bearing a cross on his back" (447). The "son of the carpenter" refuses to be expunged. The "place of the skull" has become the psychic center of the universe, the point of articulation of all thought. Cries

Julian: "Oh, if I could only lay waste the world! Maximus . . . is there no poison, no consuming fire, which can lay waste creation, as it was that day when the solitary spirit moved upon the face of the waters?" (447).

Such cosmic *ressentiment* tends inevitably towards nihilism, expressed by Ibsen's Julian in the hyperbolic urge to "lay waste creation" because "the world" fails to correspond to the plaintiff's idea. Ibsen has elicited another feature of Julian's disposition that assigns it a place in the Gnostic category. I refer to the dependence of the Helios-doctrine on what it attacks, namely the ontological *offense* of *the Galilean* through his mere existence. Indeed, Julian's *King Helios* does not reveal its full import unless and until one reads it in direct conjunction with his *Against the Galileans*. As Kurt Rudolph says in his masterly *Gnosis* (1987), "Gnosticism strictly speaking has no tradition of its own but only a borrowed one" and might even be considered as "parasitic" on its "host religions" (55). In *Against the Galileans*, Julian in fact appropriates the Old Testament in a typically Gnostic fashion. "But even if He who is honoured among the Hebrews really was the immediate creator of the universe, our beliefs about him are higher than theirs, and He has bestowed on us greater blessings than on them, with respect both the soul and to externals" (Wright, Vol. III 355). Julian accepts the text only as long as it falls subject to *his* interpretation of it. The Mosaic Creator-God thus becomes the *Sol Invictus* of *King Helios*, an entity "Supra-Intelligible" and "the very Idea of being" (Wright, Vol. I 359). Those who persistently identify him with the Jehovah of Moses become betrayers of the text. I have shown in my previous essay how Ibsen's drama represents Julian's lack of originality by making him vehemently reject Christianity only to advocate a revived paganism that is little more than a dull pastiche of vital religion. Put it this way: even those who wish to abolish the human scene as it is given can think of nothing other than the scene by which to replace it. Characteristically, they try to insert a difference through complicating what is given. Thus Julian would replace what he regards as the unworthy proletarian narrative of the Gospels with his own baroquely syncretic Helios-doctrine. Reaction always deludes itself about originality.

III

The sudden manifestation of a Persian ambush briefly rallies Julian, who snaps back for a time into the spiritually crusading mode so carefully inculcated by Maximus. For battle, however, Julian has ill prepared himself: his mood totters, this way and that. He has previously burned his ships, cutting himself off from re-supply under the erroneous belief that his "Empire" should burst forth by predestination because his *will* is so supremely pitched. Ibsen, drawing on Ammianus, even makes Julian throw off his armor to fight with sword and shield only, so absolutely does he wager on a favorable outcome. Yet the old confusion swiftly returns. Julian seems to forget whom he battles or, as one might say, he remembers only too vividly who the real nemesis is. The ruddy clouds of dawn make display on the horizon. Julian shouts:

They are the Galilean's hosts, I tell you! Look . . . those in the crimson-edged garments. They are the ones whose blood was shed. There are women surrounding them, singing, and twisting bowstrings from the long hair they've torn from their heads. Children are with them, disemboweled, plaiting slings from their entrails. Burning torches . . . Thousands of them . . . no end to them! They are heading this way! They are all looking at me; they are all making straight for me!

Stand fast, Greeks! Stand, stand, Romans! Today we shall free the world! (452)

Fallen soldiers appear to Julian as so many supine crucifixions, flinging out their arms and bleeding from their wounds. Ibsen has intuited a feature of Christian revelation that distinguishes it—again in the direction of minimality—from Neoplatonist and Gnostic constructions. In *Science and Faith* (1990), Gans calls this feature *polycentrism*. The ecumenical character of the Roman Empire, which subordinated scores of formerly independent ethnic nations under a unified administration, gave rise, at first in the case of the conquered Jews, to “a vision of the world beyond social difference, ruled by universal reciprocity” (97). As the pre-ecumenical centers of the local cultures have been displaced or demoted by an imperial syncretism, which remains meaningless to subject peoples, “it is for each individual to become his own center, recognizing at the same time the centrality of the other” (97). This notion, best articulated in the Gospels and in Paul’s formulations of what became the Church, “is essentially polycentric” for “it cannot be conceived as emerging in revelatory fashion from a single point” (97). All of the fallen thus appear to Julian as sacred victims. In his hallucination, he himself becomes an object of persecution, and he tastes how terrible persecution is. But why say that Christian *polycentricity* is minimal in comparison to, say, the Helios doctrine? Because devolving sacrality on each and every individual makes otiose the ritual structures and hierarchical conceptions of speculative theology.

7

Having suggested the radical shift in religious thought that Christianity entails, Ibsen now deliberately swerves from his major documentary source for the battle, Ammianus: Ibsen has Agathon, a Christian fanatic, wound Julian with a spear in his side, a rumor that Ammianus specifically denies but which has considerable dramatic power. Maximus says that, in Julian’s fatal wound he is “betrayed!” (456) It is Basil, poignantly, in whose propinquity the stricken Julian takes the deepest consolation: “Basil . . . friend, brother . . . the two of us have spent many a fine day together” (456). Urging Basil not to mourn, Julian speaks the first half of his concluding soliloquy:

Do we not all love wisdom? And does not wisdom teach us that supreme happiness is in the life of the soul, not that of the body? In that the Galileans are right, though . . . but we will not talk of it. If the powers of life and death had let me complete a certain treatise I think I could have . . . (456)

Ibsen gives us, in these words, a Julian who is an intellectual, even something of a pedant, to the last. *If only he had completed that "certain treatise,"* then he might fully have plumbed that "mysterious power," as he says, "outside us which essentially determines the outcome of human endeavor" (457). "*Vaesentligen beviser*": "*essentially determines.*" Ibsen's Julian, breathing his last, speaks the language of the Danish Hegelians, those *other, modern* initiates of the "World Spirit" and the "World Will" whose dialectical Synthesis constitutes an intellectual "Third Empire." In a delirium of "beautiful temples . . . pictures . . . But so far away" and of "beautiful garlanded youths," the Julian of *Emperor and Galilean* expires. Now a brief contest occurs, with echoes of the squabble in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* over the body of the dead king. Maximus, seething, excoriates the Christians as the authors of all misery. Basil calmly responds that he "perceive[s] the truth in all its radiance and grandeur: here lies a glorious shattered instrument of the Lord" (459). Julian, Basil says, "was a rod of correction . . . not for our death, but for our resurrection" (459). The playwright gives the last line to Macrina, who once loved Julian before his apostasy: "Oh brother, let us not seek to the bottom of this abyss. [. . .] Erring human souls . . . if you were *forced* to err, allowance will indeed be made on that great day when the Mighty One shall come in a cloud to judge the living dead and the dead who live" (459).

In Basil and Maximus, as they appear over Julian's corpse, Ibsen highlights once again the distinction between (i) a attitude that accepts the world as given and (ii) those various intellectual systems that show in common a denial of the worldly "*is*" in preference for the arbitrarily posited intellectual "*ought.*" Basil is reconciled to reality while Maximus, because reality does not respond to his "*ought,*" remains in rancorous rebellion against it. Ironically it is in Basil that a kind of "Third Empire" in a positive sense actually finds its figure. Basil would distinguish himself, when he assumed the Episcopate of Caesarea, as the successful advocate against the puritans among his coreligionists for continued non-censorious study of the pagan classics. In Basil, then, Hellene and Galilean converge.

I would like to pick up a strand from the final section of "Ibsen's Unknown Masterwork and its Sources." I asked the question, "what did Ibsen mean when he wrote to Edmund Gosse that *Emperor and Galilean* represented 'part of my own spiritual life' and when he said that 'the historical subject [. . .] has a much more intimate connection with the movements of our own time than one might first imagine'?" I proposed, by way of an answer, how "one should remark the resemblance of Julian to other characters of the Ibsen *oeuvre*-to the precursor, Brand, and to the successor, Doctor Stockman." These other of Ibsen's *personae*, I said, start, as does Julian, from genuine premises and even design to bring about good, but swiftly find that their efforts, distorted by a deeply seated *superbia*, entail unwonted consequences, at variance with the design. The goal refuses to be realized. The crusader blames the world for its recalcitrance. Ultimately he rebels for the sake of rebellion, makes empty protest against reality, as he finds it *given* to him, inalterable. In fact, the rebellious subject's attitude reflects the *radical binarization*, to use one of Gans's terms, characteristic of contemporary victim-discourse. The source of the current notion that this or that

marginalized minority suffers *oppression* through the arbitrariness and exclusiveness of the established center stems from the primitive *ressentiment* against *the* human scene—*any* human scene—as unresponsive to the particular ego, which would like to exercise its private *libido* without hindrance. The term *radical binarization* also neatly describes the fundamental Gnostic gesture of dividing existence into the wretchedness of the given and the superior *being* of those who constitute the elite.

Ibsen's life records a doctrinaire and radical phase, in which we find him briefly flirting with actual rebellion. The author of the Julian drama, whom his critics typically accused of having a completely negative outlook, came under the influence, in his twenties and thirties, of Hegel and the Hegelians, whose aura began to be felt in Denmark and Norway at this time. Ibsen's association with Brandes for a time reinforced the playwright's Hegelianism, while tipping it in the direction of the Left Hegelians. The emblem of "The Third Empire," in *Emperor and Galilean*, indicates the influence of Hegel himself (the famous *synthesis*) and of Emmanuel Feuerbach and David Strauss, among others, on Ibsen's thinking: the religious and scientific outlooks might somehow combine in a new *Weltanschauung*, the Left Hegelians argued, thereby signifying a New Age. In Norway this would require a republic, free of the state religion. The line quoted earlier, Maximus' words to the effect that the time is near when *men will not need to die in order to live like gods*, is a Feuerbach-like sentiment. Yet Ibsen, at the time he when was writing his Julian-drama, began decisively to dissociate himself from almost everything that could be called ideology or doctrine.

An aside made by Brandes, in *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature* (1871), on the character of Hegelianism hints at the underlying cause. "At the time of Hegel's death . . . in 1831," Brandes says, "his followers compared him to Aristotle, to Alexander the Great, even to Christ" (227). Ibsen would have been aware of such inflation and would have reacted against it. In addition to describing Hegelianism positively as "modern Hellenism," Brandes says that the teaching of the Jena master "acted as an emancipating spiritual power . . . that destroyed faith in religious dogma and freed the individual from the burden of the Christianity of the State church" (227). Never mind that *about Julian* and *about Neoplatonism* Hegel himself wrote with remarkable objectivity, saying in *The Philosophy of History* (1831), that while Plato, in repudiating Homeric religion, "was accused of Atheism," the Hellenists "endeavored to demonstrate a speculative truth in the Greek conceptions of the gods: and the emperor Julian resumed the attempt, asserting that pagan ceremonials had a strict connection with rationality" (Friedrich's translation 330). The formula pithily summarizes Neoplatonism and Julian's role in it. But Hegel's radicalizing students are what Brandes is discussing. It was Hegel's student, Christian Baur (1792-1860), who, in his *Christlicher Gnosis* (1835), first linked Hegel explicitly to Late Antique *illuminismus*. Baur's evaluation, like Brandes', is positive, however, and not a rejection or a critique. As Filoramo writes, Baur "regarded the Gnostics as the first philosophers of the Christian religion, the vanguard of the type of reflection that was to manifest itself many centuries later in the Gnosis of the Hegelian system" (10-11).

The Hegelian impulse seemed to Ibsen to entail violence almost inevitably, for in 1870 the Lutheran state, Prussia, had crushed the Catholic state, France—a repetition, as it were, of the Arian-Orthodox *polemics* of the Fourth Century. Ibsen found the spectacle demoralizing. Nor could the other religious implications of the times and their events be concealed. It was Hegel, not Nietzsche, who first proclaimed the epochal *death of God*. Says Brandes, himself a materialist, the Left Hegelians “avoid employing the words Jewish or Christian,” but they seize instead on Hegel’s coinage of “Nazarene” to indicate “men with ascetic, image-hating dispositions, inclined to morbid spiritualization,” whom they despise and whom they oppose to those of a “cheerfully realistic temperament, inclined to genial self-development” (288). Nietzsche retains this rancorous Hegelianism in *The Anti-Christ*, his least likeable book. Such characterizations are inevitably *parti pris*.

The response of the nineteenth-century intellectual to Christianity thus echoes the response of the Late-Antique *illuminatus* to the same. One employs the pejorative *Galilean*, the other the pejorative *Nazarene*. The synonymous responses articulate a synonymous prejudice. I might humbly call attention to my *Anthropoetics* article of a few years ago, *Celsus, the First Nietzsche* (1997), which has since migrated to a number of websites, making it easily accessible. *The First Nietzsche* documents in detail the parallelism between the second-century Neoplatonist / Gnostic and the nineteenth-century atheist critiques of the Gospels. The analysis that applies to Celsus’ *True Doctrine* also applies to Porphyry’s *Against the Christians* and to Julian’s *Against the Galileans*. Jonas, Dodds, Rudolph, and Filoramo have all spoken of the *Gnosticizing* tendency in Late Antique thought: the insistence that an elite—and an elite alone—can authoritatively interpret existence; and that, to borrow the album-title from the redoubtable Fire-Sign Theater, “Everything You Know is Wrong.” I have earlier commented on the *ressentiment* implicit in the Neoplatonist and Gnostic obsession with constructing increasingly complicated speculative systems in response to the simplicity (they would say the stupidity) of the Gospels; the speculations remain tied to that which they would abolish. The same is true of the modern atheist response to the Gospels. I defer once again to Gans. In *Originary Thinking*, he writes how

Once the idea of God exists, it can be forgotten; and once it has been forgotten for even an instant, human culture is already engaged in the process of secularization of which the contemporary atheist is the final product. [But] because the idea of God . . . is coeval with the origin of humanity, the process of this forgetting can never be concluded. Even if someday not one believer remains, the atheist will remain someone who rejects belief in God, not someone for whom the very concept is empty. (43) In light of the citation above, we should remember Filoramo’s declaration that the various manifestations of Gnosticism are typically derivative of, even “parasitic” on, what the Italian calls their “host religions.” Hans Jonas again, and the late Eric Voegelin, and Ellis Sandoz, and Thomas Molnar, among others, have identified a similar Gnosticizing tendency in modern thought, beginning with

Marsilio Ficino's Fifteenth-Century Hermetic speculation, and embracing German Idealism and its *sequelae*. Giordano Bruno and Pico Della Mirandola—the latter's famous *Oration* alludes to Thrice-Great Hermes in only its second sentence—continued where Ficino left off. We think of them as humanists, like mild-mannered professors, but they correspond rather more closely to the image of a *Magus* who aims magically to transform a defective world into his own vision of utopia. Jonas says, in his essay on "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism" (1965), that "the existentialist deprecation of the concept of nature obviously reflects its spiritual denudation at the hands of physical science, and it has something in common with the gnostic contempt for nature" (337). Elsewhere: "Gnostic man is thrown into an antagonistic, anti-divine, and therefore anti-human nature, modern man into an indifferent one" (338). Think of Antoine Roquentin confronting the plane-tree roots in *La nausée*. Think of the "Nada" prayer from Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Nietzsche and Heidegger are, for Jonas, the modern Gnostics *par excellence*. But the whole of what its practitioners since Marx have called "theory" is implicated.

Where Jonas admires both Gnosticism *and* Existentialism (he studied with Heidegger), Voegelin takes a less sympathetic stance. In *The New Science of Politics* (1952), Voegelin argues that a Gnostic revolt against reality animates modern history in such disparate phenomena as "the puritan churches of the saints," a reference to Oliver Cromwell, and "the Marxian mysticism of the realm of freedom and the withering away of the state" (In *Modernity without Restraint* 226). Voegelin penetrates to the epistemological core of Gnosis and explains how the perceptual issue is connected with the moral one. He writes:

In classic and Christian ethics the first of the moral virtues is *sophia* or *prudentia*, because without adequate understanding of the structure of reality, including the *conditio humana*, moral action with rational co-ordination of means and ends is hardly possible. In the gnostic dream-world, on the other hand, nonrecognition of reality is the first principle. As a consequence, types of action that in the real world would be considered as morally insane because of the real effects that they have will be considered moral in the dream world because they intended an entirely different effect. The gap between intended and real effect will be imputed not to the gnostic immorality of ignoring the structure of reality but to the immorality of some other person or society that does not behave as it should according to the dream conception of cause and effect. (226) Voegelin's character-sketch fits Ibsen's Julian perfectly, right down to his obsessive notion that, but for the Galileans, and if only he had finished that "certain treatise," his "Third Empire" would have sprung magically into being. This is what Voegelin means under the designation of "the dream conception of cause and effect." Ibsen indeed appears to grant to the best of the Christians—Basil and Macrina—a *Sophia* or a *prudentia*, in Voegelin's terms, that Julian, for all his intellectual posturing, simply cannot match. Ibsen thus anticipates Voegelin in his adjudicative typology of Late Antique religiosity more than he anticipates Jonas. Ibsen's portrait of Julian also differs significantly from more or less contemporary portraits, such as the one given by Alfred de Vigny in his *avant-garde* novel *Daphné* (1847).

For Vigny, Julian qualifies as the warrior-idealist, “*qui marche avec un livre de Platon sous son bras, le rhéteur [qui] écrit en marchant, et gagne des batailles entre deux Poèmes qu’il compose*” (Oeuvres 822). Julian, in Vigny’s version, has realized “*la pensée de Marc-Aurèle, le règne des philosophes*” (822). The two “poems,” as Vigny calls them, would be *King Helios* and *The Mother of the Gods*. Vigny’s narrator sits in session with Julian in the *Daphneum* in Antioch and hears the Emperor-Pontiff and his spiritual brethren excoriate “*les dogmes religieux, avec leurs célestes illusions*” of the Christians while they extol “*le Roi-Soleil*” and “*les Anges solaires*” (837), elements in their own baroque *dogme religieux*, to the supposedly dignified syncretism of which Vigny contrasts the undignified, “*Jets and Sharks*” street-combat of “*le Donatistes et les Ariens . . . et ceux qui se nomment orthodoxes*” (845).

Vigny seems unaware that his protagonists, in effect, also *se nomment orthodoxes*, and that he is advocating their orthodoxy. One of the “Solar Angels” once appeared to him, Julian says, to announce to him his destiny, and this spirit bore the name of “*Le Génie de l’Empire*” (837). Earlier in the novel, Vigny has depicted the nominally Christian bourgeoisie of his own time as an anti-intellectual rabble, to whom the sublimity of the poetic mind is completely alien, and who are therefore incapable of salvation by means of the esthetic. Like Ibsen, Vigny sees a parallelism between the centuries of Late Antiquity and those of Modernity, and his scenario draws on the same sources. His interpretation is nevertheless the opposite of Ibsen’s. In Vigny—as in his precursor Edward Gibbon and again in his successor, as we shall see—we discover the Romantic Julian, embraced by his celebrant because he stands against values that have prevailed as normative for two thousand years.

Julian’s romantic advocates take the position of Ibsen’s Brand and his Doctor Stockman: the majority is *always wrong*. Ibsen judges, however, that the reactionary is *always* in a *derivative position*, unoriginal, dependent on what he denounces. There is thus a kind of madness or perversity in the “*anti*” position. The “*anti*” makes difficulty but *others* find themselves immiserated. Ibsen uses the solar effulgence as a symbol for madness for the first time in *Emperor and Galilean*, but not for the last time. Oswald Alving, the pensive, Bohemian protagonist of Ibsen’s *Ghosts (Gjengångere)* (1881), who ends up in syphilitic madness, closes the play dedicated to his sorry plight with a Julian-like, Heliolatric invocation of “*The sun, the sun!*” Where have we heard that before?

IV

After Ibsen’s *Emperor*, Gore Vidal’s *Julian* (1962) ranks as the second most ambitious literary statement about the meteoric career of the would-be savior of Paganism. Vidal is the successor to Vigny mentioned above. While owing a good deal also to *Emperor*, *Julian* has considerable literary merit on its own—even though its author occupies a seat on the literary

Parnassus below Ibsen's. As Vidal's "Partial Bibliography" appended to the end of the novel tells, he researched his subject quite as thoroughly as did Ibsen his a century earlier. It is not only Julian, as Vidal says, who "continues to fascinate," but rather "the Fourth Century itself" (*Julian VII*). "For better or worse," as Vidal writes, "we are today very much what they were then" (*VIII*). Vidal's historical novel possesses another value in the present context. Unlike Ibsen, who played everything close to his vest, Vidal volubly states his case. Far from concealing his convictions—which he takes from Nietzsche and from Epicurus, making him certifiably a member of the Hellenist faction—he has always aggressively staked out his territory.

In his *Nation* essay "Monotheism and its Discontents" (1992), for example, Vidal commits himself to the precept that:

The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three antihuman religions have evolved—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These are sky-god religions . . . The sky-god is a jealous god, of course . . . [who] requires total obedience from everyone on earth, as he is in place not just for one tribe but for all creation . . . Ultimately, totalitarianism is the only sort of politics that can truly serve the sky-god's purpose. (*Essays: 1952-1992* 1049) Vidal invites his readers to "dwell upon the evils" that the followers of the sky-god ("Christers" or "red-neck divines," as he styles them) "have wrought" (1051). Says Vidal: "Hatred of blacks comes straight from their Bad Book" and "racism is in the marrow and bone of the true believer" (1051); both "patriarchal rage at the thought of Woman ever usurping Man's place" and "the ongoing psychopathic hatred of same-sexuality" (1051) are equally integral to the sky-god cult. Environmental pollution also stems from Scripture. Followers of the sky-god smugly ignore the blighting of the earth because they consider mortal life as merely a "staging area for heaven," whereupon they shrug their shoulders and pose the exculpatory question: "why bother to clean it up?" (1051). These epithets constitute the degree-zero of contumely, for, in essence, Vidal claims that *dirt* and *hatred* exude from the poisonous *center* of our culture (the object, as it were, of an unlawful usurpation) and so taint it, by their radiation, everywhere along the otherwise immaculate periphery. By race, class, and sex, turning us against one another, Christianity has fomented the quintessential sacrificial crisis. The sky-god cult distorts life. It makes existence intolerable for the clairvoyant, clean-living elect who, scurrying past its seductions, would prefer to live, unprofaned, in their gate-guarded utopia—somewhere presumably between Seattle and San Francisco. Vidal inverts the particularly Christian morality that he loathes in a manner the parasitical cast of which nevertheless remains opaque to him. Another observation by Gans will explain what I mean. In *Signs of Paradox*, Gans writes:

love, but in the resentful mode of “the last shall be the first,” the “last” being defined as the collective victims of historic injustice. To occupy the Victimary position absolves one of the narrowness of one’s own worldly interests; the place of the victim is the sole locus of human truth and the sole human truth is that of victimization. But the Victimary critique of universal anthropology is circularly self-fulfilling. It is an anthropological hypothesis only in the tautological sense that its denial of universality makes it the only universal statement conceivable in its own terms. (181) Notice how although Vidal is not an intellectual *per se* and can even make fun of intellectuals—as in his *New York Review of Books* essay “The Hacks of Academe” (1976), which ought to be mandatory reading—his complaint against those normative values that his sentences in the “Monotheism” essay caricature is the same as theirs. And theirs is the same as that, say, of Julian himself, or of Porphyry, the Third Century Syrian-born student of Plotinus. In Porphyry’s *Against the Christians*, devotees of the Gospel appear as “renegades waiting for their chance to seize [political] control” (29), ingrates who are careless about the beauty of creation (67) and about the “rationality of nature” (67), preachers of “nonsense” (42), purveyors of “degraded, unintelligible images” (77), “devoid of sense” (47), “asinine” (59), “illiterate” (74), and “dim” (74). But Porphyry might simply have been quoting from Celsus, his precursor, and little distinguishes either of those two from their latter-day successor, Voltaire. *Ecrasez l’infâme!* Implicit, however, in all these complaints is the notion that Christianity is not merely vulgar and brutal, but that it is triumphantly vulgar and brutal and that its triumph entails the misery of those who, like Vidal, understand it critically. Whether it is Porphyry or Voltaire or Vidal, the plaintiff declares himself *in effect* a victim and his victimization (no doubt well remunerated) becomes his own overwhelming truth.

Vidal’s Julian, like his historical model, frequently cites Porphyry. In one instance: “Following Porphyry I have discovered some sixty-four palpable contradictions and absurdities” in the Gospels, which together tell “a confused story” in “bad Greek,” that will “disgust” an educated person (*Julian* 331). Vidal’s Julian calls Christianity “savagery” (148), “lunatic superstition” (167), and a “Death Cult” (385), while Christians are, for him, “hypocrites,” “ravenous,” and “beasts” (378). One is tempted to write *et cetera* because the list is indefinitely extendable. Christ is “the dead Jew” (362), as in the occasional similar construction in Ibsen, usually from the mouth of one of the Hellenist zealots. In Ibsen, however, the insults are never incontrovertibly authorial. In my previous arguments, I have striven to show why we need not scruple too much over the adverb: Ibsen stands back and lets the conflict reveal itself.

In opposing Christianity, which he identifies with “the general atheism of the day” (362), Vidal’s Julian works, with authorial sympathy, towards a *synthesis* (Julian’s own word) of “all true religion in a single comprehensive system” (331). *Synthesis* and *system*: the rhetoric of the Anti-Gospel has a long pedigree and this rhetoric is intertwined in an inextricable way with the kindred rhetoric of intellectualism—whence the sophistic reversal that transforms Christian belief into “atheism” so that nonbelievers in the New Testament (and perhaps in

anything else except *matter* or *self*) might assume the title of *fideist* and so legitimate an animosity by an exchange of the normative terms. In an *Observer* essay, "Gods and Greens" (1982), after characterizing Judaism and Christianity equally as "immaculate evil," Vidal declares that "it is time for us in the West to look to more subtle religions and ethical systems, particularly those of China and India" (*Essays* 1043). Vidal misses a point that Ibsen, for his part, obviously grasped: that it is the minimal Christian morality, resilient and plastic, that opens the Western outlook to competing dispensations and permits their considerable assimilation. Ibsen's figure of this openness is Basil, who, as we have seen, sympathizes with Julian as neither Julian nor his followers can sympathize with Basil. The historical Basil, as I have mentioned, fought a battle with his puritanical coreligionists to maintain the study of the pagan classics. Vidal clearly does not propose that western Christians *make room* in their ethical purview for essential lessons from Buddhism or Hinduism; he wants Buddhism or Hinduism as replacements for Christianity, which he wishes would disappear.

The passage of time between the early 1960s and the early 1990s no doubt focused Vidal's ire—hence the hyperbolic rancor of the *Nation* piece. But the attitudes that pervade *Julian*, by no means latently, are identical to those that Vidal expresses in the later essay. No one becomes a curmudgeon or a prig overnight. Where Ibsen treats Pagan and Christian with scrupulous fairness, revealing his own judgment subtly, Vidal distributes his merits and demerits among the *dramatis personae* unsubtly and—as one says—with an agenda in mind. The foremost instance lies in the aura that Vidal puts in place to make Julian's religious experience vital and palpable; the novelist endows none of his Christian characters with anything at all like the Apostate's transcendently affirmed certitude in his own doctrine. *Julian's* protagonist (who tells his story in the first person, in the form of diaries, on which two of his preceptors—Priscus and Libanius—make editorial comments) undergoes serial initiations into the Mithras Cult, supervised by the notorious Maximus. Persia, lying to the east of the Roman Empire, offers a "more subtle" religious alternative to Christian intemperance, for Persia is the origin of Mithras. Indeed, according to Maximus, even while they work to mandate "one final rigid myth on what we know to be various and strange," the Christians "borrow from our mystery rites, particularly those of Mithras" (86). Priscus and Libanius make similar comments, which echo, in fact, a theme developed in sequence by all Late Antique critics of the rising faith. As we have seen, Vidal applies the identical postulate to the present, recommending what is to us what Persia was to a Fourth Century Greco-Roman intellectual—the Light of the Buddha and the sublime serenity of the Mystic East.

11

On Julian's first initiatory excursion, the result is a vision, extrapolated from Julian's own *King Helios*:

When the day ended . . . and I stumbled from the cave, I was born again . . . As I looked at

the setting sun, I was possessed by light. What is given to few men was given to me. I saw the One. I was absorbed by Helios . . . My veins coursed not with blood but light . . . I saw the simplicity at the heart of creation. The thing which is impossible to grasp without the help of divinity, for it is beyond language and beyond mind: yet it is so simple that I marveled at how one could *not* have known what is always there, a part of us just as we are part of it. (93) Later, following Maximus' advice, Julian submits to initiation in the Mysteries of Eleusis. He records the "logic" that seems to him to give order to "what is revealed [in the rites so] that one is astonished not to have understood it before" (166). Vidal's fictional Libanius comments approvingly on Julian's claim about the Mysteries and rebukes Priscus for being skeptical: "I find Priscus' remarks about Eleusis distasteful, even atheistic" (167). Note the pattern. Vidal consistently links an authentic religious experience—possession by light, the encounter with "the One"—with intellectual terms such as *system*, *synthesis*, and *logic*. The Christians in *Julian*, by contrast, give no evidence of having experienced anything like the profound, visionary transformation to which Vidal allows the emperor-to-be to lay claim in his account of the various mysteries; nor does Vidal grant his Christians any capacity for *synthesis*, *system*, or *logic*. On the contrary, they present themselves invariably as coarse, cynical, unlettered, and cruel, if not downright stupid. When, using an elegant syllogism based on statements from the Old and the New Testaments, Julian cleverly confutes a gathering of bishops, one of them, Bishop Maris, confronts him. Says Julian: "I had never seen such malevolence in a human face" (339). Vidal puts in Maris' mouth the hissing dogmatic pronouncement that Julian is "Apostate" and that he will "burn in hell" (339).

When a wicked monster calls a fellow "Apostate" and pronounces him destined to hellfire, it functions, naturally, as a compliment in context. Such Vidal intends it to be. In another, similar *rencontre*, Vidal arranges for Julian to debate Bishop Meletius of Antioch. When Meletius assents that the God of the Old Testament is a god strictly of the Jews and, in this way, is limited, Julian triumphs that Yahweh cannot therefore be "the One God, who . . . can have no limitation" (366). In Ibsen, Julian grows tired of such demonstrations, even disgusted by them. For Vidal, they carry weight.

Let us note a contradiction observed also by Ibsen in the same talkative—that is to say, intellectual—milieu. When philosophy absorbs the *cultus*, as it does in Hellenism, it begins to endow syllogism with the luster of something sacred. Seneca, Plutarch, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Porphyry are unanimous that *philosophy* has succeeded religion. Read any page at random of any of them. Vidal's scenario reflects this. Peculiarly, however, the numinous *source* of syllogism's noetic supremacy under the philosophical dispensation is the subject's claim to a revelatory *possession by the light*, which the claimant confesses has no content that can be put into a formula, except that it demands the worshipful respect of sensible people. Sensible people, meanwhile, are those in agreement with the promulgator. The religious experience of the two Testaments—for Vidal the *inauthentic* religious experience, therefore not really a *religious* experience at all—has a different character. When

Moses, in Exodus, confronts the Burning Bush, the Divinity identifies Himself as a sentence, "I am," and asks His witness to announce to the people that He will lead them out of Egypt. When Paul ("the blasphemous Paul" [339], as Vidal's Julian calls him) undergoes his conversion in Acts, it takes the form of a voice that asks *why do you persecute me?*

The historical Julian and Vidal's Julian are both right when they say that Judaism and Christianity are *non-philosophical*. Not that there are no Jewish or Christian syllogisms: there are—but in commentary, not in Scripture. *Help me lead the people out of Egypt* and *stop persecuting the innocent* are nevertheless concretely ethical proposals on which one can act; they are articulations, whereas an inexpressible *possession by the light* amounts to so much esthetic vagueness. Of course, this kind of amorphous illumination can be the topic of innumerable allegories and syllogisms even though, *ab origine*, it is irrational and *sans* content. Precisely in its vagueness, then, the pantheistic illumination constitutes the *manna* of intellectualism.

In recent times, Vidal has taken an interest in Abraham Lincoln, but his Lincoln, the subject of an eponymous 1976 novel, is curiously like his Julian. In Vidal's "First Note on Abraham Lincoln" (1981), he informs us how "it will come as a terrible shock to many of those who have been twice-born in the bosom of Jesus to learn that Lincoln not only rejected Christianity but wrote a small book called 'Infidelity' (meaning lack of faith in God)" (*Essays* 666). Julian wrote *Against the Galileans*. Like Julian before he becomes Augustus, Vidal's Lincoln has to pretend orthodoxy in order to please the prevailing powers. Now Vidal has mixed feelings about Lincoln, but he clearly admires what he takes to be Lincoln's religious conviction, a sense of the Almighty, rather in the manner of Julian's "One," that disdains specificity in favor of an Emersonian *cum* Buddhist atonement with the All. The All, which *all at once* exists and does not exist, offers its paradoxical existence-nonexistence to the rhetorical purpose of evading all tough questions, while its devotees agitate to reshape the world. I defer to Leszek Kolakowski's "On the Death of Utopia Reconsidered" (1983), where he reminds us that it is possible "to recognize in the [modern] utopian temptation a vague echo of those oriental and Neoplatonist theologies to which our separation from the source of being . . . was a sort of ontological curse" such that the ideological utopia becomes "a secular caricature of Buddhist metaphysics" (*Modernity on Endless Trial* 141).

12

V

My perspicacious examiners will have gleaned that Ibsen's argument, if not Vidal's, boasts a general implication beyond the assessment of Julian as an *illuminatus* drunk on the apocalypse of his own ego and fixated on the insuperable scandal of "the Galilean." The set of phenomena under the rubric of *Gnosticism* is a sub-sample of the set of phenomena under the rubric of *intellectualism*. Not all intellectualism is Gnosticism, but Gnosticism, as it is

the *nec plus ultra* of intellectualism, can tell us something about the larger and less specific of the two categories within which it nestles. One must also take care to note that intellectualism is not always given away by its style, although there is a definite type of polysyllabic prose typical of the *illuminatus*. Sometimes, however, as in the case of the verbally Plain-Jane Vidal, intellectualism takes the form, not of a baroque vocabulary and a convoluted syntax, but rather of a set of characteristic assumptions.

Is intellectualism endemic in the Western, the Judeo-Christian dispensation? When Ibsen insists on the *contemporary significance* of his drama, he implies as much. So does Vidal explicitly when he remarks that we have a relation—a direct one—to the Fourth Century (“We are today very much what they were then”). Ibsen conducts a critique of intellectualism; Vidal exhorts for it, complaining that the anti-intellectuals (the evil monotheists) have held the floor for far too long and need to be disestablished. Of course, a like reactionary reflex might be traced as far back as Akhenaten, the Fifteenth Century B. C. pharaoh who tried to disestablish the long-standing Ra cult, leading to a time of troubles that saw, on good evidence, a twenty-five percent reduction in the population of Egypt’s major cities. Freud even tied Mosaic revelation to the Aten, which shows many proleptic similarities to the content-less “Intelligible Sun” of the much later Neoplatonist dispensation and to the utopianism of the Gnostic prophets. There is something tantalizing in the fact that Gnosticism and Neoplatonism both have strong Egyptian affiliations, and that the pseudo-Scripture of *Hermetica* posits itself as a Nilotic *ur*-revelation.

But we shall leave such speculation aside. A continuum of Gnosticizing, pseudo-philosophical and pseudo-political discourse is apparent that stretches from the Imperial-Philosophical heliolatry of Iamblichus-Celsus-Porphiry-Julian through German idealism, including Hegel, to the present day. Consider the putatively (and, let us grant, the *actual*) founding statement of an identifiably modern-humanist discourse, the *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (circa 1480), by Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494). The background to the *Oration* is the arrival in Italy of Byzantine Greeks during and after the Ottoman reduction of the Byzantine Empire in the mid-Fifteenth Century, especially Gemistus Plethon (1355-1450), and the study and promotion of *Prisca Theologia* by Plethon’s Florentine heritor, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), whose student, in turn, Pico was. Various Byzantine Neoplatonist texts brought by Plethon and other émigré Greeks made an exotic impression on Italian scholars, suggesting a mighty and ancient intelligence unknown in the by comparison inferior Latinate world.

The term *Prisca Theologia* refers to the notion that there is a secret, aboriginal revelation behind the traditional revelations expressed in accepted Scripture; the prevailing religion, under this light, appears as exoteric only, vulgar, unscholarly, and instrumentally ineffective. *Prisca Theologia* continues to exercise its appeal to this day, as attested in the best-selling status of Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). Umberto Eco satirized the aura of such low-grade Gnosticism in his *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1989). The *frisson* of

what Helena P. Blavatsky successfully marketed as “secret doctrine” already at the end of the nineteenth century will nevertheless outlast the debunking of the satirists. Ficino thought that he had discovered the esoteric *ur*-doctrine in *Hermetica*, a second-century Gnostic farrago purporting to consist of revelations vouchsafed by the god Hermes to an Egyptian *illuminatus* (“Asclepius”) at a time prior to Exodus. The gist of Hermetic doctrine is that man *is* god, while remaining unaware of his extraordinary gifts. The task of the initiate is *to remember his own godhood*, just as Julian, in Ibsen’s drama, *remembers* that he is Adam or Achilles or whichever august person it is that Maximus succeeds in suggesting to him. To cite the section of *Hermetica* known as *Poimandres* (or in seventeenth-century English as *Pymander*): “For [the sacred *light*] shining steadfastly upon and round the whole mind, it enlighteneth all the Soul; and loosing it from the bodily senses and motions, it draweth it from the Body, and changeth it into the Essence of God” (Everard’s translation 22).

As earlier intimated Pico cites Hermes in only the second sentence of the *Oration*: “A great wonder, Asclepius, is man” (Wallis’ translation 3) because man is a god in disguise, unbeknownst to himself. In the course of the essay, Pico also cites “Bacchus . . . whose father was the sun” (14), “Apollo . . . the true, not the invented, Apollo” (14), “Pythagoras” (15), “Porphyry” (23), “Iamblichus” (23), “Xalmoxis” (27), “Eudoxus” (27), “Hermippus” (27), “Orpheus” (32), “Dactylus” (32), and “Zoroaster” (32). The list bears a strong resemblance to those that one might compile in canvassing *King Helios* or *Against the Christians* by the Emperor Julian: Pico puts us in the realm of Fourth Century Neo-Platonism, with its admixtures of Egyptian and Persian myth-material. In Nietzsche’s *oeuvre*, the last name on the list becomes central to modern discourse, thus providing an *ersatz* Scripture for those who cannot come to terms with the existing Scripture. The same list reveals a great craving for *priority*, also evident in the rejections of Christianity by the polemicists Celsus, Porphyry, Julian, and Nietzsche.

This craving for priority is a type of *ressentiment du monde*—as one might say, a spurning of the sociologically *given* or indeed of the *world*, as the world is what is given in a superlative and circumambient way. Pico needed to make some concessions to religious authority. His gesture for keeping shy of trouble entails, not a rejection of the Testamental God, but a claim to having increased the depth of Testamental revelation. God has “a secret wisdom” (4) hitherto undisclosed; while the moral law remains valid, there is yet another law “more secret and true” (24) accessible to and effective for the one who knows how to find it. Pico refers also to Origen’s claim that “Jesus Christ . . . revealed many things to his disciples which they did not want to write down, lest they become common to the vulgar” (30). For that sentence alone, Pico deserves the title of modern *ur*-intellectual.

In his Julian-drama, Ibsen makes a theme of *will*. The crusading emperor comes to believe,

in his final deluded hours, that his own godlike will can transform the world by a mere act of intention. Willfulness, of the same Gnostic type, also figures in the formula of the *Magus* announced by Pico in his *Oration*. Among the secret divulgements made by God to Adam, for example, is the admonition, quite contrary to anything in Genesis, that “thou art confined by no bounds” (5). Notice the casual abolition of any determinate human nature. When the explorer rediscovers the hidden glory in himself, Pico writes, then “the happiness of man” will consist of his “fix[ing] the limits of nature” and of *choosing* “that which he wills” (5). Human nature having been abolished, nothing remains to rein in *libido*, which can now, as Dostoyevsky would prophesy, do as it pleases. In these achievements, the *Magus* will “compete with the angels in dignity and glory” (7) and will indeed “be an angel and a son of god” (5). The “fathers” whom Pico addresses in the *Oration* are not only the priests of the Inquisition who examined him, prior to a fortunate change in the Papacy, but the Archons of the Gnostic myth, who tyrannize arbitrarily over the world that they have made solely for the sake of exercising their dominion. They are the looming obstacles of the *Magus’* own *ressentiment*. As in Julian’s synthetic creed, so in Pico’s scheme “the secret rites of the Greeks” (13) play an important role: “Who does not seek to be initiated into such rites” (13), Pico asks. When Gnosticism had absorbed and transformed the mysteries in the Late Antique centuries, they served as magical avenues of *escape* from an intolerable creation. That is how Pico sees them. He forecasts the result when one has been initiated:

Then Bacchus, the leader of the muses, in his own mysteries, that is, in the visible signs of nature, will show the invisible things of God to us as we philosophize, and will make us drunk with the abundance of the house of God . . . We, raised up in the loftiest watchtower of theology, from which, measuring with indivisible eternity the things that are, will be, and shall have been, and looking at their primeval beauty, shall be prophets of Phoebus, his winged lovers, and finally, aroused with ineffable charity as with fire, placed outside of ourselves like burning Seraphim, filled with divinity, we shall now not be ourselves, but He himself who made us. (14) The standard reading of Pico takes all this as metaphor, but Pico self-evidently means it literally. Pico not only has a theory of self-deification, but he has a *practice* as well, that of Cabalistic magic: so did his followers Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Robert Fludd (1574-1637). Of Bruno’s *Spaccio della bestia trionfante* (1584), Frances Yates notes how, in it, Bruno “is taking Renaissance magic back to its pagan source, abandoning the feeble efforts of Ficino to do a little harmless magic whilst disguising its main source in [*Hermetica*,] utterly flouting the religious Hermetists who tried to have a Christian Hermetism . . . proclaiming himself a full Egyptian who, like Celsus in his anti-Christian arguments . . . deplores the destruction by the Christians of the worship of the natural gods of Greece, and of the religion of the Egyptians, through which they approached the divine ideas, the intelligible sun, the One of Neoplatonism” (*Giordano Bruno* 214). Again, the standard reading would have it that *Spaccio* (“Expulsion”) is simply a defense of Copernican cosmography. Who but a throwback could be opposed to Copernican cosmography? Copernicus, however, took an interest in the astronomical, not in the “intelligible” sun. Bruno’s “beast” (*bestia*) is an amplification of Pico’s “fathers.”

Vidal's hissing version of Bishop Maris belongs to the same figural species: *l'objet énorme de ressentiment*. I see no reason why Rene Descartes' epistemological Deceiver should be exempted from the same category, as he fills the same role of normative super-obstacle. No one can fully grasp the critique of the *Magus*-complex in Goethe's *Faust* without some knowledge of Renaissance Neoplatonism and some acquaintance with its associated techniques. No one can fully understand Renaissance Neoplatonism without some knowledge of the Late Antique anti-Christian—that is to say, Gnostic—polemic and some acquaintance with its rhetorical methods.

Yates traces from Ficino, Pico, and Bruno, among other things, the utopianism of *The City of the Sun* (1602) by Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639), and of the related, posthumous *New Atlantis* (1626) by Francis Bacon (1561-1620). In addition to forecasting the bonus to be gained from the technical manipulation of nature, the aspect of them that commentators seem to note to the exclusion of all else, both of these works also abolish normative social-moral values and settle a kind of materialist godhood on man. Campanella, for instance, dissolves marriage and replaces it with an amorphous but supposedly reasonable *love*. The Behmenist School in the German-speaking countries owes a debt to the Italian *Magi*, bringing New England Transcendentalism into the family tree through R. W. Emerson's admiration of Jacob Boehme. A long-standing myth, given its specific form in Berthold Brecht's treatment of Galileo, makes an admonitory theme of ecclesiastical hostility to science. The real question is not why the church was hostile to the emancipated researchers, but, in two parts, how far the researchers were really emancipated and why they were so hostile to the moral tradition, as embodied in the church.

In picking up a cue from Kolakowski, whom I quoted earlier, I would mention a later, culminating derivation of the *Magus*-tradition, influential on Brecht: the well-known statement, uttered by another chastiser of Judaism and Christianity working in the Left Hegelian tradition, that *the philosophers in their different ways used simply to explain the world, but changing it is what it's all about*. This statement too belongs to a reactionary religious fervor that claims to be neither reactionary—say rather, *progressive*—nor religious: say rather, *scientific*. It has been impossible, for the last one hundred years, to avoid its manifestations, even in so innocuous an adventure as going to graduate school in the humanities in an American university.

14

My own interest in these matters thus springs, as it must, from modest personal experience. It entails my humbling. I started graduate school, at UCLA, in 1984, just when the deconstruction orgasm became pandemic. I dutifully enrolled in Joseph N. Riddel's seminars on "*theory*" and read my way through Heidegger, Derrida, De Man, Foucault, J. Hillis Miller, and Barbara Johnston. I wonder what a videotape of those seminars would show? A weird and repulsive *thiasos*, I am certain, with choruses and expostulations, as in the best

Dionysiac or Televisual-Pentecostal performances. When I think back on our ignorance and our lack of humility, I cringe. I did my best, at the time, to participate in the mania and no doubt succeeded actually in *being* maniacal. A type of intoxication accompanies the brave discovery that the present constitutes the decisive moment for understanding and that all that has gone before is so much confusion, mendacity, and benightedness. Fortunately, while I tramped after Joe Riddel and the major arcana of post-structuralism I also kept up my Scandinavian studies with my Norwegian teacher Mary Kay Norseng, who had published on Ibsen and who usually taught the Ibsen seminar. Now Ibsen in fact figures in the story but incidentally. Here is the non-incidentalist gist: Professor Norseng subscribed to no “theory.” She merely read poems and novels and plays knowledgeably and sensitively. She wrote a lovely book about Cora Sandel, widely and appreciatively reviewed at the time. But the excitement pricked her curiosity, as any grotesque must. She asked me what it meant. I began to tell her about *logocentrism* and *invaginated structures*. When my torrent of polysyllables had run its eructative course a few moments, the professor leaned back in her chair and frowned. It was a withering frown. She said that she set store by me, but only when I made sense. She hoped that I would not couch the paper on Georg Brandes that I had promised her, as part of an independent project, in these “silly terms.”

So, on a rare occasion, an ineffable grace salvages a life. One nevertheless throws off inebriation only with difficulty and throwing it off has taken me a long time. Only recently, for example, did it occur to me that Gustave Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Received Ideas* is *not* a satire of *other people* although in graduate school we used to cackle over it promiscuously as though that were the case.

The deconstruction-orgasm formed one small hiccup in a long sequence of pseudo-philosophical hiccups starting, let us say, with Pico. That the modern period, however one dates it, is emphatically a period of *ideas*—moreover of *vehemently contending ideas*, the more misshapen the better—seems to me a self-evident proposition. A second proposition seems to me equally self-evident, that the typical modern intellectual is liable to being so consumed by whatever idea currently inebriates him that the idea predominates entirely and the person disappears into a welter of slogans, euphemisms, postures, reactions, insinuations, shrieks, paroxysms, somersaults, indictments, capers, and *formulae*. The historical Julian disappears, in this way, into his *ressentiment* over the Galileans and into his fascination for the intelligible light of King Helios. Paul Johnson, in his *Intellectuals* (1988), says that that class of people, “far from being highly individualistic and non-conformist, follow certain regular patterns of behavior” (342), one of which is their attempt, when they form collectives, “to create climates of opinion and prevailing orthodoxies” (342). This brings us back to *Emperor and Galilean*, indeed, for while Johnson’s study rewards examination (I generally like his work), it strikes me as flawed in one quite particular respect.

Johnson includes a chapter on Ibsen, in which he claims that “what Rousseau had done for

the late eighteenth, [Ibsen] did for the late nineteenth century" (82). Johnson argues that "Ibsen preached the revolt of the individual against the *ancien régime* of inhibitions and prejudices" and that "he taught men, and especially women, that their individual conscience and their personal notions of freedom have moral precedence over the requirements of society" (82). As I read it, *Emperor and Galilean* argues exactly the opposite: it roundly criticizes the *superbia* of the ego and, while not precisely defending the doctrinal affinities of the mass of people, at least implies that the people have as much right as the intellectual to make up their own minds about important issues—that should they choose the Galilean, for example, it is their business, not his. I believe that the remainder of Ibsen's *oeuvre*, right up to his last play *When We Dead Awaken* (*Når vi Dode vågner*) (1899), when re-read in light of *Emperor and Galilean*, upholds the same position. The omnipresent *other* of the townspeople is as much a scandal for Doctor Stockman—disastrously so—as the hygiene-crusader is for the townspeople in *An Enemy of the People* (*Folkefiendet*) (1882), a symmetry of offense little remarked in the criticism. Julian's implicit "*the majority is always wrong*" becomes Doctor Stockman's explicit motto, so articulated. This is Gnosticism in its modern, entirely secular variant. Stockman shouts his condemnation angrily when voted down by the town council. They will not permit him to save them from the evil of matter. When he persuades himself to do as he would, the namesake of *Master Builder Sølness* (1896), whose name contains the Norwegian word for the sun, promptly destroys himself, as do the two lovers in *Rosmersholm* (1886). Vigny and Vidal take *Julian's* position: Judeo-Christian culture equals ubiquitous repression and is especially intolerable for sensitive people. Asked to explicate their doctrine, they can only point to the Solar Angels in their mute but convincing effulgence. They, not Ibsen, forecast the reign of the *new*, but really aboriginally *old*, reign of collective *ressentiment mondial* against the impersonal strictures of moral civilization.

Ibsen, who gives my argument its armature, achieves something in *Emperor and Galilean* almost *sui generis*. I can think of only one other work even remotely like the Julian-drama, Flaubert's *Tentation de Saint Antoine*, written in 1848, which its author then revised and published in 1874, the year after the appearance of Ibsen's play. Both works may be seen as responses to Vigny. For Flaubert, as for Ibsen, Gnosticism is a problem that a sane society must regularly overcome. Anthony, in his desert retreat, meets a succession of erudite madmen, beginning with Mani, the Persian arch-dualist and Gnostic thinker *par excellence*, followed up in rapid succession by Marcion, Bardesanes, Cerdo, and Valentine. Valentine's delirious panegyric to "*le plus parfait des êtres, des Éons, l'Abîme, [qui] repose au sein de la Profondeur avec la Pensée*" (*La tentation* 95) might be transplanted to *Emperor and Galilean* and given, say, to Maximus, without upsetting the integrity of Ibsen's play. As is the case with Ibsen, one might plausibly read Flaubert's *oeuvre* as a prolonged meditation on the intellectualist theme. Where Saint Anthony of the Desert manages to deflect temptation, Emma Bovary yields to it: she allows herself to be overcome by the low-grade ideas in the low-grade books that she reads. Frédéric Moreau's Bohemian associates in *L'éducation sentimentale* regard themselves as an ontologically superior esthetic *cum* spiritual sodality

although, because Flaubert shows them to us from the outside, their conceit remains unconvincing. When revolution breaks out, they believe themselves to be participating in a sudden, alchemical transformation of the cosmos, but they cannot even transform themselves—even to the small extent of tidying up the wretched little shop that provides their income.

15

Neither Flaubert nor Ibsen *has a theory*, which is why critics accuse them of negativity, especially Ibsen. The accusation is unfair, as neither of them is, so to speak, an “*anti*,” as theoreticians invariably are. Yet both are acute observers of life and careful recorders of experience, determined not to falsify the world in order to flatter a prejudice. Both, finally, but Ibsen most of all, see in modernity a great, disturbing fervor which, if it were not religion, would nevertheless be something akin to it, an apocalypse not of the heavens but of the self, not of external moral restraint but of the will, not of the “*is*” but of the “*ought*.” We live, by annoying continuous negotiation, in the tangled mischief of such pretensions.

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