Chapter Thirty-Three

Pascal and Marx: On Lucien Goldmann’s
Hidden God

A Review of Lucien Goldmann, The Hidden God

The irregular verb which many Anglo-Saxon philosophers conjugate on their way to international conferences runs: ‘I am sober; you are intoxicated; he is a French philosopher.’ A tradition of rhetoric and a belief that, for Frenchmen, clarity is not an achievement but a birthright have admittedly often worked havoc with analytical sobriety across the Channel. But the unfamiliar atmosphere of French philosophy has other more admirable causes. It is, in particular, more conscious of its background in intellectual and social history, and not just in the history of philosophy. It is therefore often at its best when it is self-consciously historical in its approach. And this, too, is often the best way for us to approach it. History may provide an initial common ground where philosophy itself would fail us. Metaphysical excitement may appear the more justified at the close, if the starting-point was dull and factual. What facts more dull than names and dates?

---

Every one of Macaulay’s utopian schoolboys knows the name of René Descartes; not even they know that of Antoine Le Maître. But it was in successive years (in 1636 and in 1637) that Descartes published the account of that winter morning nearly twenty years before when he stayed in by the stove and so founded modern philosophy, and that Le Maître withdrew from the world to live in solitary penance at Port-Royal. Both Descartes and Le Maître are significant because of what the future was to make out of them, and the more significant because they came to symbolise two incompatible alternatives for the modern world. It turned out that Descartes had woven into a single rational system some of the dominant themes of the next age, in its life as well as in its thought: the isolated individual as self-sufficient in knowledge and action; the ideal of mechanical explanation; the reduction of God to the status of a guarantee that the gaps in rational argument can be filled, and the actions of individuals harmonised; the dualisms of reason and the passions, and of mind and matter. Cartesianism is the new consciousness expressed as a doctrine. From the world to which Descartes gave expression Le Maître withdrew, abandoning his already successful career as a lawyer. His spiritual director was the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, friend of Cornelius Jansen, the Bishop of Ypres, and director of the nuns of Port-Royal, then in Paris. On May 2, 1638, Saint-Cyran was arrested on Richelieu’s orders, accused of depriving the state of its ablest subjects, and never left prison.

From the very first, therefore, the devotional and doctrinal movement of Jansenism was recognised by the powers that be as their enemy. Withdrawal from the modern world was challenge to it. In its withdrawal Jansenism asserts its own counter-thesis: ‘It is from our separation and absence from the world that is born the presence and feeling for God’ (Saint-Cyran). Or again:

We must have a low opinion not only of the truths which we discover through our own minds, but also of those which God gives us by his divine light. For this light is not the perfect gift of which the Scriptures speak…

(Barcos).

Most radically of all, Jansenism declared that there are divine commandments which the just man who lacks the requisite Grace – and the just man may

---

2 Goldmann 1964, p. 40.
3 Goldmann 1964, p. 147.