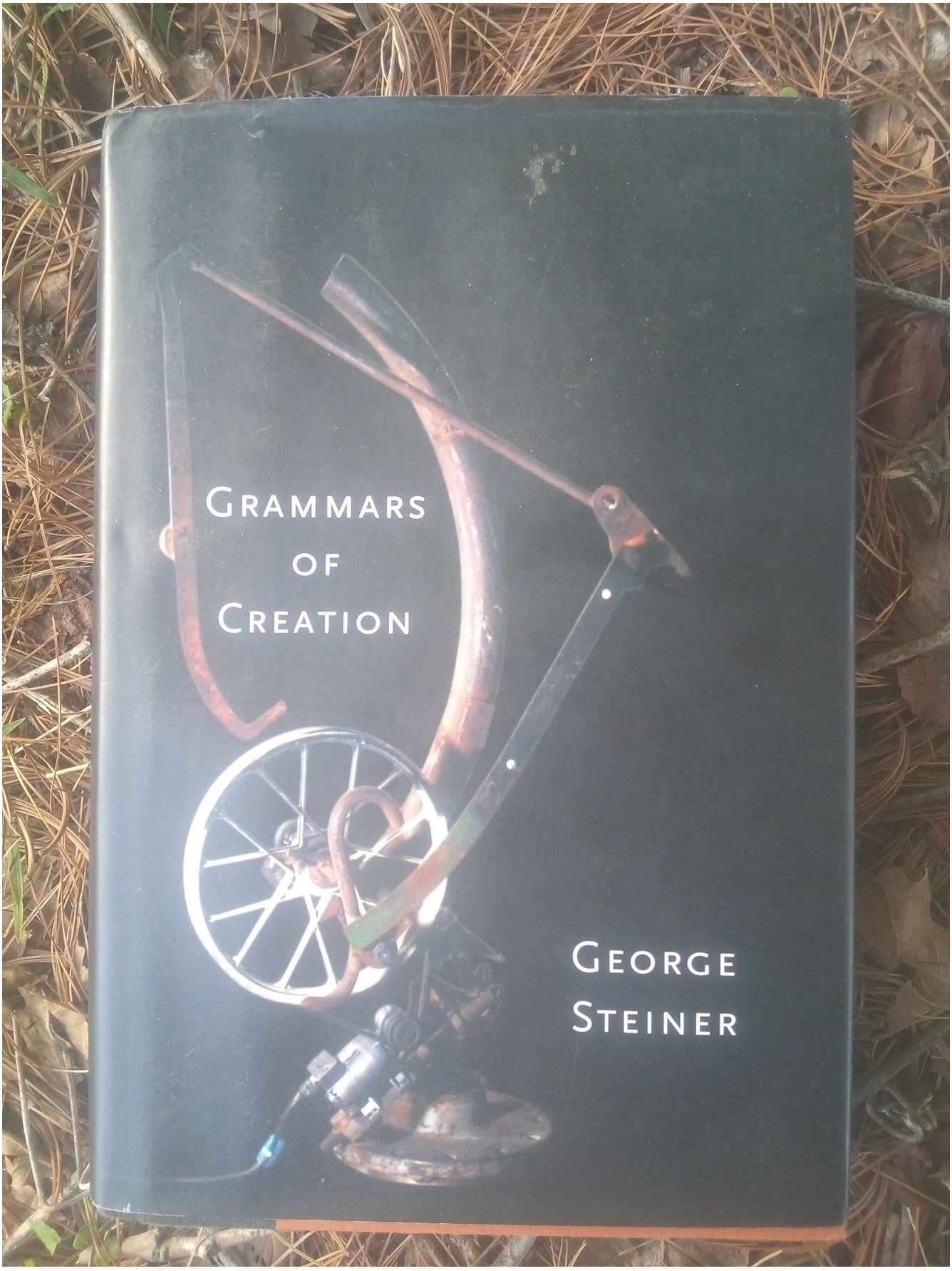
GRAMMARS
OF
CREATION
GEORGE
STEINER

GRAMMARS OF CREATION

Originating in the Gifford Lectures
for 1990

George Steiner

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

We have no more beginnings. *Incipit:* that proud Latin word which signals the start survives in our dusty "inception." The medieval scribe marks the opening line, the new chapter with an illuminated capital. In its golden or carmine vortex the illuminator of manuscripts sets heraldic beasts, dragons at morning, singers and prophets. The initial, where this term signifies beginning and primacy, acts as a fanfare. It declares Plato's maxim —by no means self-evident—whereby in all things natural and human, the origin is the most excellent. Today, in Western orientations—observe the muted presence of morning light in that word—the reflexes, the turns of perception, are those of afternoon, of twilight. (I am generalizing. My argument, throughout, is vulnerable and open to what Kierkegaard called "the wounds of negativity.")

There have been previous senses of ending and fascinations with sundown in Western culture. Philosophic witness, the arts, historians of feeling report on "closing-times in the gardens of the West" during the crises of the Roman imperial order, during the apocalyptic fears at the approach of the first millennium A.D., in the wake of the Black Death and the Thirty Years' War. Motions of decay, of autumn and failing light have always attached to men and women's awareness of physical ruin, of common mortality. Moralists, even prior to Montaigne, pointed out that the newborn infant is old enough to die. There is in the most confident metaphysical construct, in the most affirmative work of art a *memento mori,* a labour, implicit or explicit, to hold at bay the seepage of fatal time, of entropy into each and every living form. It is from this wrestling-match that philosophic discourse and the generation of art derive their informing stress, the unresolved tautness of which logic and beauty are formal modes. The cry "the great

god Pan is dead" haunts even those societies with which we associate, perhaps too conventionally, the gusto of optimism.

Nevertheless, there is, I think, in the climate of spirit at the end of the twentieth century, a core-tiredness. The inward chronometry, the contracts with time which so largely determine our consciousness, point to late afternoon in ways that are ontological—this is to say, of the essence, of the fabric of being. We are, or feel ourselves to be, latecomers. The dishes are being cleared. "Time, ladies and gents, time." Valediction in the air. Such apprehensions are the more compelling because they run counter to the fact that, in the developed economies, individual life-spans and expectancies are increasing. Yet the shadows lengthen. We seem to bend earthward and towards night as do heliotropic plants.

A thirst for explanation, for causality, inhabits our nature. We do want to know: Why? What conceivable hypothesis can elucidate a phenomenology, a structure of felt experience, as diffuse, as manifold in its expressions, as that of "terminality"? Are such questions worth asking seriously, or do they merely invite vacuous high gossip? I am not certain.

Inhumanity is, so far as we have historical evidence, perennial. There have been no utopias, no communities of justice or forgiveness. Our current alarms—at the violence in our streets, at the famines in the so-called third world, at regressions into barbaric ethnic conflicts, at the possibility of pandemic disease—must be seen against the background of a quite exceptional moment. Roughly from the time of Waterloo to that of the massacres on the Western Front in 1915–16, the European *bourgeoisie* experienced a privileged season, an armistice with history. Underwritten by the exploitation of industrial labour at home and colonial

rule abroad, Europeans knew a century of progress, of liberal dispensations, of reasonable hope. It is in the afterglow, no doubt idealized, of this exceptional calendar—note the constant comparison of the years prior to August 1914 with a "long summer"—that we suffer our present discomforts.

When, however, allowance is made for selective nostalgia and illusion, the truth persists: for the whole of Europe and Russia, this century became a time out of hell. Historians estimate at more than seventy million the number of men, women, and children done to death by warfare, starvation, deportation, political murder, and disease between August 1914 and "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans. There have been hideous visitations of pestilence, famine, and slaughter before. The collapse of humaneness in this twentieth century has specific enigmas. It arises not from riders on the distant steppe or barbarians at the gates. National Socialism, Fascism, Stalinism (though, in this latter instance, more opaquely) spring from within the context, the locale, the administrative-social instruments of the high places of civilization, of education, of scientific progress and humanizing deployment, be it Christian or Enlightened. I do not want to enter into the vexed, in some manner demeaning, debates over the uniqueness of the Shoah ("holocaust" is a noble, technical Greek designation for religious sacrifice, not a name proper for controlled insanity and the "wind out of blackness"). But it does look as if the Nazi extermination of European Jewry is a "singularity," not so much in respect of scale—Stalinism killed far more—but motivation. Here a category of human persons, down to infancy, were proclaimed *guilty of being*. Their crime was existence, the mere claim to life.

The catastrophe which overtook European and Slavic civili-

zation was particular in another sense. It undid previous advances. Even the ironists of the Enlightenment (Voltaire) had confidently predicted the lasting abolition of judicial torture in Europe. They had ruled inconceivable a general return to censorship, to the burning of books, let alone of heretics or dissenters. Nineteenth-century liberalism and scientific positivism regarded as self-evident the expectation that the spread of schooling, of scientific-technological knowledge and yield, of free travel and contact among communities would bring with them a steady improvement in civility, in political tolerance, in the mores of private and public business. Each of these axioms of reasoned hope has been proved false. It is not only that education has shown itself incapable of making sensibility and cognition resistant to murderous unreason. Far more disturbingly, the evidence is that refined intellectuality, artistic virtuosity and appreciation, scientific eminence will collaborate actively with totalitarian demands or, at best, remain indifferent to surrounding sadism. Resplendent concerts, exhibitions in great museums, the publication of learned books, the pursuit of academic research both scientific and humanistic, flourish within close reach of the death-camps. Technocratic ingenuity will serve or remain neutral at the call of the inhuman. The icon of our age is the preservation of a grove dear to Goethe within a concentration camp.

We have not begun to gauge the damage to man—as a species, as one entitling himself *sapiens*—inflicted by events since 1914. We do not begin to grasp the co-existence in time and in space, a co-existence sharpened by the immediacy of graphic and verbal presentation in the global mass media, of Western superfluity and the starvation, the destitution, the infant mortality which now batten on some three-fifths of mankind. There is a dynamic

of clear-sighted lunacy in our waste of what is left of natural resources, of fauna and flora. The South Col of Everest is a garbage dump. Forty years after Auschwitz, the Khmer Rouge buries alive an estimated hundred thousand innocent human beings. The rest of the world, fully apprised of the fact, does nothing. New weapons soon start flowing from our factories to the killing fields. To repeat: violence, oppression, economic enslavement and social irrationality have been endemic in history, whether tribal or metropolitan. But this century has, owing to the magnitude of massacre, to the insane contrast between available wealth and actual *misère,* to the probability that thermonuclear and bacterial weapons could, in fact, terminate man and his environment, given to despair a new warrant. It has raised the distinct possibility of a reversal of evolution, of a systematic turn-about towards bestialization. It is this which makes Kafka's *Metamorphosis* the key-fable of modernity or which, despite Anglo-Saxon pragmatism, renders plausible Camus's famous saying: "The only serious philosophical question is that of suicide."

What I want to consider briefly is something of the impact of this darkened condition on grammar. Where I take grammar to mean the articulate organization of perception, reflection and experience, the nerve structure of consciousness when it communicates with itself and with others. I intuit (these are, of course, almost wholly conjectural domains) that the future tense came relatively late into human speech. It may have developed as late as the end of the last Ice Age, together with the "futurities" entailed by food-storage, by the making and preservation of tools beyond immediate need, and by the very gradual discovery of animal-breeding and agriculture. In some meta- or pre-linguistic register, animals would appear to know presentness and, one sup-

poses, a measure of remembrance. The future tense, the ability to discuss possible events on the day after one's funeral or in stellar space a million years hence, looks to be specific to *homo sapiens*. As does the use of subjunctive and of counter-factual modes which are themselves kindred, as it were, to future tenses. It is only man, so far as we can conceive, who has the means of altering his world by resort to "if"-clauses, who can generate clauses such as: "if Caesar had not gone to the Capitol that day." It seems to me that this fantastic, formally incommensurable "grammatology" of verb-futures, of subjunctives and optatives proved indispensable to the survival, to the evolution of the "language-animal" confronted, as we were and are, by the scandal, by the incomprehensibility of individual death. There is an actual sense in which every human use of the future tense of the verb "to be" is a negation, however limited, of mortality. Even as every use of an "if"-sentence tells of a refusal of the brute inevitability, of the despotism of the fact. "Shall," "will," and "if," circling in intricate fields of semantic force around a hidden centre or nucleus of potentiality, are the pass-words to hope.

Hope and fear are supreme fictions empowered by syntax. They are as indivisible from each other as they are from grammar. Hope encloses a fear of unfulfilment. Fear has in it a mustard-seed of hope, the intimation of overcoming. It is the status of hope today which is problematic. On any but the trivial, momentary level, hope is a transcendental inference. It is underwritten by theological-metaphysical presumptions, in the strict sense of this word which connotes a possibly unjustified investment, a purchase, as the bourse would say, of "futures." "Hoping" is a speech-act, inward or outwardly communicative, which "presumes" a listener, be it the self. Of this act, prayer is an exemplary

case. The theological foundation is that which allows, which requires the desideratum, the forward venture and intent to be addressed to divine hearers in "the hope," precisely, of support or, at the least, understanding. The metaphysical re-insurance is that of a rational organisation of the world—Descartes must gamble on the supposition that our senses and intellect are not the toys of a malignant deceiver—and, even more importantly, on a morality of distributive justice. Hope would be meaningless in a wholly irrational order or in one of arbitrary, absurdist ethics. Hope, as it has structured the human psyche and behaviour, is only trivially operative where reward and punishment are determined by lottery (gamblers' hopes at roulette are exactly of this vacant order).

The formally religious subscription of the act of hope, direct resort to supernatural intervention, has weakened almost continually in Western history and individual consciousness. It has atrophied into more or less superficial ritual and inert figures of speech. Unthinking, one still "hopes to God." The philosophical edifice of hope is that of Cartesian rationality (where, most subtly, the theological drifts, like sand in an hour-glass, into the metaphysical and the scientific). It is that of Leibniz's optimism and, most eminently, of Kantian morality. A shared pulse of progress, of meliorism, energizes the philosophic-ethical enterprise from the early seventeenth century to the positivism of Comte. There are dissenters from hope, visionaries made desperate such as Pascal or Kierkegaard. But they speak from the margin. The prevailing motion of spirit makes of hope not only a fuel for political, social, and scientific action, but a reasonable mood. European revolutions, the improvement of social justice and material well-being, are crystallizations of hoped-for futurity; they are rational advents to tomorrow.

Out of Mosaic and prophetic Judaism grew two major branches or "heresies." The first is that of Christianity, with its promise of God's kingdom to come, of reparation for unjust suffering, of a Last Judgement and eternity of love through the Son. The future tense of the verb inhabits nearly every saying of Jesus. He is, for his followers, hope made flesh. The second branch, largely Jewish in its theoreticians and early proponents, is that of utopian socialism and, most signally, of Marxism. Here the claims on transcendence are made immanent, the kingdom of justice and equality, of peace and prosperity, is proclaimed to be of this world. With the voice of Amos, socialist idealism and Marxist-Leninist communism cry anathema on selfish wealth, on social oppression, on the crippling of countless common lives by insensate greed. The desert marches on the city. After the bitter struggle (after Golgotha) comes "the exchange of love for love, of justice for justice."

The twentieth century has put in doubt the theological, the philosophical, and the political-material insurance for hope. It queries the rationale and credibility of future tenses. It makes understandable the statement that "there is abundance of hope, but none for us" (Franz Kafka).

It is not the cant-phrase "the death of God," in fact predating Nietzsche and to which I am unable to assign any arguable meaning, that is pertinent. The determinant of our current situation is more embracing. I would call it "the eclipse of the messianic." In Western religious systems, the messianic, whether personalized or metaphoric, has signified renovation, the end of historical temporality and the coming in glory of an after-world. Over and again, the future tense of hope has sought to date this event (the year 1000 or 1666 or, among present-day chiliastic sects, the imminent turn of our millennium). In a literal sense, hope has

sprung eternal. Western faiths are redemption-narratives. But the messianic is no less instrumental in secular programmes. For anarchist and Marxist imaginings of futurity, it will be represented by the "withering away of the state." Behind this figure, lie Kant's argument on universal peace and the Hegelian thesis of an end to history. In a paradoxical regard, the messianic can be independent of any postulate of God: it stands for man's access to perfectibility, to a higher and, presumably, enduring condition of reason and of justice. Again, on both the transcendental and the immanent levels of reference—these two being always closely related in a dialectical reciprocity—we are undergoing a radical displacement. Who except fundamentalists now awaits the actual coming of a Messiah? Who except literalists of a lost communism or anarcho-socialist Arcadia now awaits the actual re-birth of history?

Inevitably, this eclipse of the messianic presses on the future tense. The notion of the *Logos,* at once central and resistant to paraphrase, or of what is today called "grammatology" (the *Logos* inheres in this word), are relevant. The "Word" that was in the "beginning," for the pre-Socratics as well as for St. John, comprised a generative, dynamic eternity out of which time could spring forward, a present indicative of "to be" pregnant (in an almost material sense) with "shall" and "will." Future tenses are an idiom of the messianic. Take away energizing anticipation, the luminous imperative of waiting, and these tenses will be end-stopped. "Life-expectancy" is, then, no longer a messianic-utopian projection, but an actuarial statistic. Such pressures on the incipience of meaning and communication in the individual and collective sub-conscious, on the means of articulate speech, are gradual. Figures of daily discourse, totally devoid of concrete

truth—"sunrise" for example—will persist like domestic ghosts. Except in masters of poetry and of speculative thought, language is conservative and opaque to nascent intuitions (hence the need for mathematical and logically formal codes in the swiftly moving sciences). But just as the almost imperceptible tectonic movements in the deeps of the earth sever and re-shape continents, so the forces emanating from the eclipse of the messianic will find manifest expression. Grammars of nihilism flicker, as it were, on the horizon. Poets put it succinctly. Unless I misread, ours are "Those Evenings of the Brain" (Emily Dickinson).

2

Valedictions look backward. In our age of transition to new mappings, to new ways of telling the story, the natural and the "human" sciences (*sciences humaines*) present a spiralling motion. It is that of which Nietzsche's "eternal return" and Yeats's "great gyres" are images. Knowledge proceeds forward technically, in its methods, in the ground it covers. But it seeks out origins. It would identify and grasp the source. In this movement towards "primacy," different sciences, different bodies of systematic inquiry, draw strikingly close to each other.

Cosmology and astrophysics are proposing models of the birth of our universe with a scenic sweep and speculative flight far closer to ancient or "primitive" creation-myths than they are to mechanistic positivism. Just now, the hypothesis of "continuous creation," of the provenance of matter out of interstellar "dark matter" or nothingness, is out of favour. Some kind of "big bang" is thought to have detonated our cosmos around fifteen billion years ago. Background radiation and the compaction of "lumps"

into new galaxies are held to be spoors of this *incipit*. In a sovereign paradox, the further the horizon of radio-astronomy, of the observation of nebulae at the "edge of the universe," the deeper our descent into the temporal abyss, into the primordial past in which expansion began. The crux is indeed the concept of a beginning. Continuous-creation models dispense with the problem. They adduce eternity, a *perpetuum mobile* such as was dreamt of by medieval alchemists and makers of automata. In the physics of the "big bang" and of the possible transit "through" black holes into mirror-universes—though mathematically rigorous, the entailed similitudes are those of wildest fable and surrealism—the time-notion is Augustinian. Our current *magi* tell us that it is, *stricto sensu*, absurd, without meaning, to ask what was before the initial nanoseconds of the "bang." There was nothing. Nothingness excludes temporality. Time and the coming into being of being are quintessentially one (exactly as Saint Augustine taught). The present of the verb "to be," the first "is," creates and is created by the fact of existence. Though the conditions of "strangeness" and "singularity"—terms that reach as probingly into metaphysics or poetics as they do into the physics of cosmology—during the initial particle of time may still escape our computations, late-twentieth-century science is now "within three seconds" of the start of this universe. The creation-story can be told as never before.

In this story, the evolution of organic life comes late. Here also the energies of insight press on origination. The question as to the origin and evolution of self-replicating molecular structures occupies palaeontology, biochemistry, physical chemistry, and genetics. Life-forms more and more rudimentary, nearer and nearer to the threshold of the inorganic, are being discovered

or modelled. The study of DNA (where the double helix is itself an icon of the spiralling pattern in today's sciences and systems of sensibility) leads back to the inception of ordered vitality, of the encoding of developmental possibilities. This "re-duction" or leading backward in the etymological sense has brought with it the likelihood that genetic material, capable of self-reproduction, will be created in the laboratory. The Adamic act, the making of the Golem are rationally conceivable. I will, in this study come back to what could prove to be not only a new chapter, but a change of language in the grammars of creation.

THE QUEST for point zero in astrophysics, for the ultimate foundation of organic life in molecular biology, has its counterpart in the investigations of the human psyche. Freud himself privileged the comparison with archaeology, with the methodical excavation of successive strata of consciousness. Depth psychology, in the Jungian programme, seeks to go even deeper. Its image could be that of probes into those marine trenches in the ocean floor, vents into the final deeps in whose turbulent volcanic heat emerge anaerobic life-forms and proto-organic shapes. We sense that the pre-history of the first person singular, of the organization of the ego, must have been long and conflictual. Autism and schizophrenia, as we now know them, may well be vestiges of this uncertain evolution, markers of a complex beginning as are background-radiations in cosmology. Myths are replete with motifs which point towards the prolonged opaqueness of the individual self to itself, to the fragility and terror of the borderlines to be drawn between the "I" and the other. In progressive interplay, neurophysiology, genetics, neurochemistry, the study of artificial intelligence and psychology, analytic and clinical, are

edging towards the earliest sediments of mental being. The subconscious, even, conceivably, the outlying regions of the unconscious—of that first long night in us—is being drawn towards observation. This rising out of chaos is mimed perfectly in the celebrated initial chord of Wagner's *Ring*. Whose resonance, simultaneously radiant and ominous, poses the question: As we comb the deeps, what monsters are we trawling?

To seek out the instauration of human consciousness is to explore the birth of language. After the ebbing of theological-mystical paradigms, still functional in Hamann and in Herder at the close of the eighteenth century, the whole topic of the origins of language becomes suspect. Comparative philology and the rise of modern linguistics regard the search for a "first language" as more or less fatuous. Meditations on "Adamic speech," attempts to discover what tongue would be used by children isolated from society, were the pursuit of cranks. During these past two decades, the scene has altered dramatically. Anthropology and ethno-linguistics are arguing for the probable existence not only of a small number of language-nodes from which all subsequent tongues derive but for the possibility of one *Ur-Sprache*, that primal speech which positivist linguistics and cultural history had rejected as a fantasm. *Ur*, this untranslatable German prefix, connoting immensities of retrospection and the location of an absolute "first" or "prime," is becoming the code-word, the signature-tune in our new manuals.

Arrestingly, as on a spiral staircase, descent into the past and the ascent of knowledge meet in ambiguous intimacy. Archaic religious-mythological figurations re-emerge, barely concealed. Marx's 1844 manuscripts infer some catastrophic event in the genesis of society which provoked the deployment of class-

enmity, of social exploitation and the cash-nexus. In the Freudian legend of the structuring of the human psyche, familial and social relations arise from the primal murder of the father by the horde of his sons. (It is as a master of myth, as a teller of tales latent with secondary stories and extrapolations, that Freud will endure.) In the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, so direct if recalcitrant an heir to Frazer, the domestication of fire makes man "transgress" into culture; it severs him from nature and impels him towards the solitude of history. Quite obviously, these scenarios of explanation are borrowed from that of Original Sin, of the Fall of Man out of the sphere of innocent grace into that of tragic knowingness or historicity. As we seek out the "lost" beginnings of our universe, of our organicity, of our psychic identity and social context, of our language and historical temporality, this search, this "long day's journey into night" (to borrow the title of one of the representative masterpieces in recent literature), is not neutral. It tells, as Hegel famously taught, of sundown. It adumbrates intuitions of some primal error. It manifests what is, as I have tried to suggest, the most deep-seated of the many crises or revolutions we are experiencing: that of the future tense. The utopian, messianic, positivist-meliorist "futures" presumed, blueprinted in the Western legacy from Plato to Lenin, from the Prophets to Leibniz, may no longer be available to our syntax. We now look back at them. They are monuments for remembrance, as obstinately haunting as Easter Island stone faces, on the journey into our outset. We now remember the futures that were.

In one sense, therefore, this book is an *in memoriam* for lost futures and a stab at understanding their transmutation into something "rich and strange" (though the "richness" is, perhaps, in doubt). In another sense, I want to consider the word and con-

cept "creation" at a moment when Western culture and argument are so fascinated by origins. "Creation" is cardinal in theology, in philosophy, in our grasp of art, music, and literature. My inquiry is founded on the assumption that the semantic field of this word is most active and questionable where religio-mythological narratives of the origins of the world, in *Genesis*, for example, or in Plato's *Timaeus*, press upon our attempts to understand the coming into articulate being of philosophic visions and poetics. How do stories of the inception of the *Kosmos* relate to those which recount the birth of the poem, of the work of art or melody? In what regards are theological, metaphysical, and aesthetic conceptions of conception kindred or divergent? Why is it that Indo-European languages allow, indeed solicit, the sentence: "God created the universe," whereas they flinch at the sentence: "God invented the universe"? The intricate play of differentiation and overlap between "creation" and "invention" has been little explored. Does the eclipse of the messianic infirm the concept of philosophic and poetic creation even as deconstructive and "postmodern" theories subvert that of the "creator"? Or, more drastically: What significance attaches to the notion of the creation of expressive and executive forms, which we call "art" and, I believe, "philosophy," if the theological possibility, in the larger sense, is put in the dustbin (Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* is an allegory of precisely this question)?

Walter Benjamin dreamt of publishing a book composed entirely of quotations. I lack the necessary originality. Juxtaposed, quotations take on novel meanings and enter into mutual debate. Let me cite some of the cairns on a taxing journey. The crux is that of a query as old as pre-Socratic thought, but given canonic formulation by Leibniz: "Why is there not nothing?" Hegel's reflections on "beginnings" in the *Science of Logic* are indispensable.

He evokes a characteristic "modern discomfort (*Verlegenheit*) in the face of a beginning." Almost disturbingly, Hegel assigns to God alone the "undisputed right to be made a start" (*daß mit ihm der Anfang gemacht werde*). Like the *Odyssey*, of which his analytic process is so often an analogue, Hegel knows that every voyage towards a source is a homecoming. Wherever possible, I want the "makers" to speak for themselves. Paul Celan, in a letter of 1962: "I have never been capable of *inventing*." What light is thrown on the implicit demarcation by Roman Jakobson's dictum: "Every serious work of art tells of the genesis of its own creation"? Too often, the material I must advert to is forbidding in its stature, in its contempt for parasitic comment or paraphrase. Martin Heidegger's warning is apposite: "to remain small when confronting the secret terror (*geheime Furchtbarkeit*) of the presence of all that is beginning (*Gestalt alles Anfänglichen*)." Spoken in 1941, this monition has a special gravity. What in the world—itself not an altogether transparent idiom—can Schopenhauer have purposed when he affirmed that "were the universe to perish, music would endure"? And throughout, underwriting what I take to be the crucial common ground, Boccaccio in his *Life of Dante:* "I assert that theology and poetry can be said to be almost one and the same thing; indeed I say more: that theology is nothing more than a poem of/on God" (*che la teologia niuna altra cosa è che una poesia di Dio*). To which I would add that philosophic discourse is a music of thought.

3

The magnetic fields around "creation" are exceptionally charged and manifold. No religion lacks a creation-myth. Religion could be defined as a narrative reply to the question of "why

there is not nothing," as a structured endeavour to demonstrate that this question cannot elude the contradictory presence within itself of the verb "to be." We have no stories of continuous creation, of undifferentiated eternity. There would, in a strict sense, be no story to be told. It is the postulate of a "singularity," of a beginning in and of time which necessitates the concept of creation. Is this postulate incised in human mentality? Is it possible for us, at the level of intuitive immediacy, to imagine, to apprehend substantive meaning, existence without origination? Epistemology and the philosophy of mind have made of this a central crux. Thomist and Cartesian faith consider the availability to us of the bare notion of the infinite to be a proof of the presence of God. Subtly, however, these classical models of consciousness insist on the finitude of the infinite so far as we, with our limited reach, are able to reason. It is of our infirm ("fallen") nature that we cannot conceptualize on anything but a formal-mathematical plane, that which has no beginning. *Pace* the ironies of the cosmologist when, like Stephen Hawking, they invoke the nonexistent "mind of God," something at the very roots of our consciousness and of language continues to ask: "What of the hour before the big bang?" Out of which "illegitimate" or childish question—children and grammars of creation are intimately meshed—unfolds the compelling conceit of a first making. Of a first *fiat*. The algorithms of the computer can devise scenarios in which the universe is one of reversible time, of the "unbegun." In their natural state, in natural language, the human intellect and its psychological matrix, possibly to the deepest levels of the pre-conscious, will raise the matter of foundation. A child strains to uncover the facts or myths of birth.

We have no myths, no figurations, of a non-creating deity. As

we shall see, mystical and subversive experiments in thought have, at certain moments in theology, ascribed to God regrets over creation, withdrawals from it or the impulse towards annihilation (which is the sombre backdrop to numerous fables of flood or universal fire). But our definitions of the divine are, not logically but tautologically, at one with the attribute of creativity. Numerous divines and metaphysicians have gone so far as to discern in the absolute equivalence between God and the act of creation the sole constraint on God's freedom. He cannot but create. He is, by self-definition, *le Grand Commenceur* (René Char). A sterile God, one who would not, in Hegelian idiom, negate negation, would be worse than a sinister absurdity: He would be a final *aporia*, this is to say a non-sense, an irresolvable scandal in logic. (The "tiredness" of the Prime Mover *after* the labours of creation is another matter. Kafka felt it in his bones.)

Prior to Kant, the line between theological and philosophical discourse is fluid.[1] Both these extravagantly human enterprises have the same root. Human beings are persuaded that the totality of sensory-empirical data such as observation, the sciences and rational analysis which can assemble and order them, is not the whole story. Or, in Wittgenstein's aphorism: that the facts of the world are not, will never be, "the end of the matter." This persuasion, held at an intuitive core by, one suspects, the great majority of mankind even in a scientific and technocratic age, is the begetter of our culture. It animates, literally, the fragile fabric of our identity which, in other respects and, again literally, is bestial.

1. The Kantian demarcation may have prevailed only till Husserl. Consider the two philosophic presences which were most marked in the mid-1990s: Heidegger's ontology is grounded in a constant "keeping at bay" of the theological. Lévinas fuses both modes of discourse.

The intuition—is it something deeper than even that?—the conjecture, so strangely resistant to falsification, that there is "otherness" out of reach gives to our elemental existence its pulse of unfulfilment. We are the creatures of a great thirst. Bent on coming home to a place we have never known. The "irrationality" of the transcendental intuition dignifies reason. The will to ascension is founded not on any "because it is there" but on a "because it is not there." This pragmatic negation can be, has been read in many ways. "Because it is not *yet* there" has, as we have seen, been the postulate of the messianic and the utopian. "Because it is no longer there" serves as axiom for religious, historicist, and socio-psychological models of the human condition. The negation is brimful with different, sometimes antithetical allegories of time and of the sense of history. But it does not inhibit, let alone end-stop our unrest. More than *homo sapiens*, we are *homo quaerens*, the animal that asks and asks. This crowds the borders of language and of image (does music alone appear to cross these borders?) in the conviction, eloquent or inchoate, metaphysically arcane or as immediate as the cry of a child, that there is "the other," the "out there." The Latin adverbs *aliter* and *aliunde* help. As does the persona of "the Stranger" as we shall meet him in Scripture, in Plato, in the poets and painters. Prophets, epic singers, are blind, argues tradition, because they are so certain of the nearness of light.

Thus in philosophy, no less than in theology or poetics, the beginning of the story is also the story of the beginning. At its outset, a philosophy is an ontological narration, this is to say an account of how being originates. The pre-Socratic cosmologies are fables of reason. Illuminated by astonishment, the pre-Socratics—so vivid in twentieth-century thought—put forward disputatious myths of physics to account for the birth and archi-

tecture of reality ("fire," "water," the kneading of earth, the pregnant interplay of light and dark). But the metaphysical fascination with creation persists. The Platonic inquiry into man and the city of man has its foundations in his account of the making of the world as it is set out in the *Timaeus*. Even in its logic, Aristotelianism postulates a Prime Mover—one, himself motionless, who sets in movement the clock-work of being. It is this postulate which, decisively, reconciles Augustinian and Thomist Christianity to their pagan sources. Kant dwells on "first and last things." The *élan* of creativity is Bergson's main concern. In the Deism, more or less duplicitous and Aesopian, of the Enlightenment, the "architect" is reduced to being an "engineer." Frankly materialist-mechanistic cosmologies and biologies, after Comte and Darwin, would exorcise the spectre of creation altogether. We saw that it is now renascent from within these sciences themselves. They too ask: "What gives 'life' to life?" (as does Hofmannsthal in his *Death of Titian: "Indes er so dem Leben Leben gab?"*).

It may be that the arts, like theology and philosophy, are in essence an attempt at an answer.

In its aesthetic context, "creation" is under incessant pressure of neighbouring religious and philosophical values. The semantic fields overlap and interfere. A threefold etymological provenance complicates the lexicon. In the Torah, the vocabulary of creation, of shaping (on the potter's wheel), of causing to be, is obviously pivotal. In Greek, the denotative and connotative sphere of *poieō* and of its desiderate *poiēseō* is exceptionally dense. It embraces immediacies of action and complex causality, material fabrication, and poetic license. Much in this constellation remains to be fully understood. Latin *creatio* is grounded in biology and in