The Symbolical Career of Georgios Gemistos Plethon

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IN the middle of the 14th century Georgios Gemistos Plethon was born in Constantinople. Little is known of the career of this man, and of this little nothing is very remarkable. It appears that he lived for many years at Mistra in the Peloponnese, where he settled when he was quite young and where he became a judge. He was a representative of the Orthodox Church at the Council held at Florence in 1439 on the question of the unity of the Eastern and Western Churches (it was then that he added 'Plethon' to his name); and it was at Florence also that he gained the admiration of Cosimo de' Medici. He died in 1450; and fifteen years after his death a Venetian general, Sigismonda Pandolfo Malatesta, transferred his remains from Mistra to the Church of St. Francesco at Rimini and enclosed them in a marble tomb on which, in Latin, a suitable inscription was written. Yet it has been said with reference to Gemistos that 'the Renaissance can point to many a career which is greater, but none which is so strangely symbolical[1].

What is there to justify this statement? There is first of all his relationship to western scholasticism. From the time when Boethius made his translation of Porphyry's *Isagoge*, if not from an earlier date, western scholastic philosophers moved steadily along that path which was to culminate in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. Broadly speaking, scholastic philosophy was an attempt to provide Christianity with a self-conscious and systematic organ of thought and of formal logic based on the teachings of Aristotle. It was an attempt in fact to reconcile Christian

[1] E. M. Forster, "Gemistus Pletho" in *Abinger Harvest*, London, 1942, p. 186. The Latin form "Pletho" is commonly used by historians of the Renaissance and is acceptable provided the first name is also latinized, as in the present case.

theology with Aristotelian philosophy. But in the end so intimate became this reconciliation that any attack on the philosophy of Aristotle was felt to amount to an attack on the Christian doctrine itself. This created something of a dilemma. Aristotle had not been a Christian. He had been a 'heathen'. His writings were not divine revelation, nor were they sacrosanct. The Church could not pretend that his teaching, that of a heathen, had the same authority as the teaching of Holy Scripture. It could not prohibit attacks on Aristotle or prevent discrimination between his teaching and the mystery of the Christian faith. But when he was attacked with his own dialectical weapons or when it was pointed out that his doctrines had little or nothing to do with Christianity, so deeply was the corpus of scholastic theology involved with his concepts that it would only have been possible for the Church to condemn him through condemning that theology as well.

Moreover, the status of Aristotle in the Latin West was deeply affected by other factors. First, his writings were known only through translations, first of all from the Arabic, later from the Greek. Second, and more important, there was a lack of knowledge of any other ancient author whose works could be set alongside or contrasted with those of Aristotle. The implications of the fact that Aristotle dominated almost exclusively the theological and intellectual development of the later Middle Ages in Western Europe down at least to the middle of the 15th century are enormous. Had the works of any other major author of antiquity—Plotinus for instance—been available, this development might have been very different.

Western Europe was not, however, all Europe. In fact, from an intellectual point of view, during the mediaeval centuries the mainstream of European history was represented, not by the Latin West, but by Byzantium; and when the works of Aquinas began to be translated into Greek, they were immediately subject to the scrutiny of men for whom not only was Aristotle well known—as he never was in the West—from his original works and from the works of his commentators, but for whom also Aristotle was far from being the sole and masterful authority, even among the 'heathen' philosophers. The theologians of Byzantium were quite as familiar with Plato and the Neo-Platonists as they were with Aristotle. Although the Academy in Athens had been closed in 529 by Justinian, by the 6th century also Platonism had been ‘incorporated’ into the east Christian tradition through the works of Alexandrians like Clement and Origen, of

Cappadocians like St. Gregory of Nyssa, and of Dionysios the Areopagite; and subsequent Byzantine theologians, even if they used Aristotelianism as a method, remained faithful to the earlier tradition. This is not altered by the fact that such important figures as John Damaskos in the 7th century or as Photios in the 9th century might be counted as Aristotelians. From Maximos the Confessor, who embraced and developed the writings of the Areopagite, through St. Symeon the New Theologian, down to Nicholas Cabasilas and St. Gregory Palamas the theology of Byzantium was mystical and contemplative in character, a theology 'which does not demonstrate the truth, but exposes it nakedly, in symbols, so that the soul, changed by holiness and light, penetrates without the reason into it'.[2]

Moreover, alongside and often challenging this theology was a more purely philosophical tradition of Platonism, represented by such figures as Michael Psellos, John Italos and Georgios Gemistos; and it was Georgios Gemistos who, while at the Council of Florence in 1439, first pointed out to the Latin West, in his tract entitled *Concerning the difference between Plato and Aristotle*, that Aristotle, as compared with Plato, not only did not agree with Christianity in the way that was thought, but in some of his doctrines might even be said to lay himself open to the charge of atheism.[3] Thus Gemistos was the first who in an authoritative way attacked the hegemony of Aristotle in western thought. If it is further considered that it was due to Gemistos' direct influence that the Platonic Academy was opened at Florence; that he supported Marsilio Ficino, translator of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, as its first president; and that the teaching and spirit of the Academy marked a breach in the scholastic-bound, Aristotelian cosmos, then something of the symbolic significance of Gemistos' career may be understood.

There is, however, another aspect to this career. Foreseeing the imminence of the fall of the Byzantine empire, Gemistos yet hoped that it might be possible to preserve in the Peloponnese—the cradle, as he saw it, of Hellenism—a small but vital area in which this Hellenism could survive in a physical sense and prepare for its future. It was to this end that he outlined a series of reforms which involved a total change in the social and economic structure of the Peloponnese; it

[2] Dionysios: Epist. IX, 1.P.G.3, 1105 CD.

[3] See Taylor, J.W.: Georgius Gemistus Pletho's Criticism of Plato and Aristotle, University of Chicago, 1921, p. 7.

was to this end also that he advised the building of a wall across the Isthmus of Corinth to hold back the advancing Turk; and it was finally to this end that he sought a complete regeneration and recreation of the religious life of his people. Here perhaps we reach what is most important in Gemistos' significance. He understood, as few modern reformers seem to understand, that no amount of reforming will by itself have in the end the slightest effect unless it is accompanied by a corresponding change in religious orientation. 'Everything in human life', he said, 'as regards it being done rightly or wrongly, depends on our religious beliefs'.[4] Yet in this question of religious beliefs, Plethon did not aim at reform within the existing structure of Christianity. He looked to a reform through the reshaping of the religious traditions of the ancient world. During his stay at Florence in 1438-39, he is reported to have expressed his belief that both Christianity and the Moslem faith would soon be superseded by a religion not greatly differing from that of the ancient Greeks. But it would be a mistake to see Gemistos as one of those academic dilettantes who, having no real religious capacity, seeks to substitute for it a vacuous worship of gods and goddesses that he somehow believes had something to do with ancient Greece. Gemistos' reshaping of ancient tradition represented an attempt to reaffirm certain principles which he felt had been displaced or overlaid by Christianity. He regarded himself as the heir to the great teachers of the ancient world, to Zoroaster, Pythagoras, Plato and the neo-Platonists, to mention but a few of them. These were the masters in a tradition of which he was a humble representative. Plethon was one of the first—if not the first —of those figures at the close of the Middle Ages who sought to base a religious renaissance on what was fundamentally a Platonic and neo-Platonic tradition. To grasp the significance of this endeavor, as well as of certain aspects of the thought of later writers like Goethe, Blake or Nietzsche to modify, enrich or eliminate Christianity, they must be set within the wider historical perspective of the traditions concerned.

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[4] Alexandre's edition of Plethon's *Laws*, with French trans. by Pellissier, Paris 1858: *Traite des Lois*, p. 130. See also Tozer, "A Byzantine Reformer", in J.H.S. VII, 1886, p. 353ff.

Gemistos himself regarded Plato as his direct spiritual master, and it was in recognition of this that he assumed the surname of ‘Plethon’, which he held to be a purer form of Plato's own name; and indeed Plato is a key figure in this whole enquiry. But if Plato is a key figure, he is not altogether a straightforward one. His philosophy is complex and at times contradictory. For our purposes it is enough to indicate but two contradictory aspects. On the one hand, there is Plato the dualist, whose dualism is of an extreme nature. There is an absolute opposition between the world of Ideas, which is good, and the sensible world, which is evil. There is an absolute opposition between the soul and the body. The world of Ideas, the supreme Good, is entirely removed from the sensible world; it has no contact with it and no regard for it. The purpose of human life is the catharsis, an asceticism whereby the soul is slowly delivered from the prison-house of the body and takes its place once more in the disincarnate, never-to-be-incarnate intelligible world. Here, in this side of Plato's thought, is a complete gulf between the world of the senses, ultimately negative in value, and the transcendent world, in which alone reality is to be found.

There is, however, another aspect of Plato which from the point of view of that tradition from which Gemistos claimed descent is more important. According to this aspect, the absolute Platonic dualism is, if not eliminated, at least attenuated. For here the visible world itself is said to be penetrated by the Good, and there is a direct intermingling of the transcendent world of Ideas and the world of the senses. This second aspect of Plato—this attempt to express the omnipresence of reality, the penetration of the visible by the invisible, of the sensible world by the intelligible—is something which develops as Plato matures. At the time when he wrote the *Republic*, he attributed no positive significance to the sensible world because this world, being in disorder (*en ataxia*), was without value; it was in fact evil. But in his later dialogues, in above all the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*, as the question of actually realizing the good city on earth became for him more and more pressing, so he was increasingly compelled to grapple for a vision which would embrace the sensible world, this disorder, and would integrate it to the intelligible world, to the total ‘divine’ order of the cosmos. He was compelled to face the problem of reconciling the motionless world of Ideas with the changing world of the senses, and of finding some positive relationship between the one and the other. He had to escape from the old Parmenidean

dualism of Being and Non-Being, of Truth and Opinion, by which he had hitherto been dominated, and to approach more closely the dynamic vision of a Herakleitos, who found in movement itself the secret of stability.

The solution for which he sought is first indicated in the *Phaedrus* (245 d 7), where the soul is said to be the origin of movement (*arche tis kineseos*), and not something static as it had previously been regarded. This new approach is developed in the *Timaeus*. The soul, the origin of movement, is self-moving, yet moves after the pattern of the motionless, intelligible world. It is an intermediary between the static eternal world of Ideas and the sensible world. Human morality must be founded on the order of the cosmos. The human soul is linked to the soul of the World. There is in the *Timaeus* a sort of trinity of Intellect, Soul (from which comes life and movement) and Body of the World. There is what one might call a process of incarnation, embryonic as yet but capable of great development. The changing sensible world takes its place in the world of Being; it is rooted in the divine world. The trinity of Intellect, Soul and Body forms 'the sum total of Being' (the *pantelos* on of the *Sophist*). The Demiurge that fashions the sensible world is not so much a rival and distinct power as a mythical double of the Soul of the World. The world is eternal, a divine Cosmos, an order always in movement that is subordinate to the Soul of the World, which is also eternal. The world is in a sense the living body of the divine, a revelation of the divine. Plato is here approaching a vision of the organic wholeness of things denied in his earlier dialogues.

The *Timaeus* expresses that idea of a cosmic God which was so to dominate the Hellenistic world. But this God is an objective and an impersonal God. He is not a personal and subjective God. The importance of this becomes apparent when the place of man in the cosmos and his relation to the divine is considered. For the Plato of the *Timaeus*, man is not an isolated pole linked with another isolated pole which is God. The relationship of man and God is not a personal relationship, complete in itself, a mutual reciprocity between one pole and the other. Nor is this relationship any more personal for the Hellenistic sages. The God of the Hellenistic sages is essentially a God of the cosmos. Man is a part of the cosmos. Divorced from the cosmos, man has no existence. This is in keeping with the dominant trend of the philosophy of the city states. For the Vth and IVth centuries B.C., man was first of all a member of the city, the *polis*. It

was only within the larger unit of the city that he achieved his proper status. It was membership of the city that distinguished him from the animals; or at least membership of a city was proof of that element of reason in him which distinguished him from the animals. He called himself a political animal, *a zoon politikon*. It is only from this point of view that one can understand the dread and the severity of banishment from the city. To be banished from the city was to be deprived of human status; it was to be prevented from communion in all that gave human life value. Outside the city there was no human life.

At the end of the IVth century, after the breakdown of the city state, man's existence as a citizen did not fundamentally change, but now, instead of being a member of a local city, he became a member of a cosmic city. But apart from the cosmic city he still had no real existence. He was still but a part of a more important whole and his destiny could only be achieved by subordinating himself to the whole. The whole was a Living Being, a God, who was far superior to man. The world, the cosmic city, possessed a soul. It was obedient to the order of God. Man was good or bad in so far as he submitted himself to and identified himself with the divine order of the cosmos. The order of the cosmos was something external to and independent of him. God himself was self-sufficient without man. What was important for God was not the single person but the whole. In the time of the city state, what had been important was not the prosperity of the single person but the prosperity of the city. Now what was important was the cosmic order. This the single person could in no essential way disturb. His part was to learn the divine plan with what was most impersonal and objective in him—his reason—to obey it, to adjust himself to it, to become one with the cosmic order. But whether he did or did not was a matter of indifference to the order itself. The order itself simply was; man had not made it and it was outside him. It was eternal and complete. Even if there was no man, the cosmos would still be what it was, realized, complete, beautiful and everlasting.

Stoicism carried some of these tendencies to their limit. All that is in the world is linked. The Fire or Breath penetrates everything. It is what holds together and unifies the elements that compose each thing. One thing differs from another only by the degree to which it is penetrated by the Fire, the Logos. There is more Logos in some things than in others. There is more Logos in man than in a stone. But these differences are differences of degree, not of quality. All in the

universe is joined together by the presence in everything of Fire-Breath. All lives, moves, and has its being within the universal spirit. The world is a whole. The history of the world is an unbroken chain in which not only the present but the whole world, human and cosmic, past and future, is involved. Yet this process is still essentially objective and impersonal. Its logical outcome was an enormous sense of fatality. Such a sense was sometimes overcome by identifying Fate with Providence: what is, is for the best. Where the Gnostics are concerned, it was overcome by separating the God of Fate from a totally disembodied, extra-terrestrial, pure God, removed as far as possible from all contact with or regard for the world; in other words, it was overcome by resorting to a dualism even more extreme than that of the Plato of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.

It is in the collection of writings known as the *Corpus Hermeticum* that the two sides of Plato of which we have spoken, meet. They do not meet to be reconciled. The *Corpus Hermeticum is* not a new synthesis. The dualism of intelligible and sensible, of soul and body, is proclaimed as strongly as ever. 'There are two sorts of things, the corporeal and the incorporeal; that which is mortal is of the one sort, and that which is divine is of another sort'. (Lib.IV.6).[5] Or again: 'The kosmos is one mass of evil' (Lib.VI.4). The value of the sensible world and its participation in the divine is denied: 'For all things that come into being are full of perturbations, seeing that the very process of coming into being involves perturbation. But wherever there is perturbation, there the Good cannot be' (Lib.VI.2). Concrete reality is illusion. What is real is 'that which is not sullied by matter... nor limited by boundaries, that which has no color and no shape, that which is without integument, and is luminous, that which is apprehended by itself alone, that which is changeless and unalterable' (Lib.XIII.6). The body is an obstacle to knowledge of God; it must be discarded, denied, rejected: 'But first you must tear off this garment which you wear —this cloak of darkness, this web of ignorance, this prop of evil, this bond of corruption—this living death, this conscious corpse, this tomb you carry about with you—this robber in the house, this enemy who hates the things you seek after, and grudges you the things which you desire' (Lib.VII.2). In other words, the authors of some of the Hermetica

[5] All quotations from the *Corpus Hermeticum* are from: *Corpus Hermeticum*. Hermetica of Trismegistus. Ed. and Trans. by Walter Scott, Oxford, 1924.

subscribe on the one side to a complete sense-denying ethic; they exalt the transcendental at the expense of the earthly; they attack the primal instincts of man, and bid man free himself from them; they endorse and emphasize the negative and evil character of the world, of nature, and of man in so far as he is part of the world and of nature; they would have man sacrifice what is natural and earthly in himself to the impersonal, objective and transcendental Good, to the intelligible world.

On the other hand there are passages in the *Corpus Hermeticum* which affirm the participation of the sensible world in the divine world in a way far more positive than the *Timaeus* affirms it. Life is not a nightmare only, the world is not a barren nothing, the kingdom of shadows: 'God is the source of all that is; He is the source of mind, and of nature, and of matter. To show forth his wisdom has He made all things; for He is the source of all' (Lib.III.l). The world is God's revelation of himself; it is 'in God that nature has her being' (Lib.III.I). The sensible, changing world is also part of an invisible unmoving reality: 'God, who is unmoved, moves in all that moves, and He who is hidden is made manifest through his works' (Lib.V.5). God is ever making 'all things, in heaven, in air, on earth, and in the deep, in every part of the kosmos, in all that is and in all that is not. For in all this there is nothing that He is not. He is both the things that are, and the things that are not' (Lib.V.9). God, reality, is both one and many, He is a unity-in-difference, an incorporeal corporality: 'He is hidden, yet most manifest. He is apprehensible by thought alone, yet we can see Him with our eyes. He is bodiless, yet has many bodies, or rather, is embodied in all bodies. There is nothing that He is not; for all things that exist are even He. For this reason all names are names of Him, because all things come from Him, their one Father; and for this reason He has no name, because He is the Father of all'. (Lib.V.10). It is an echo of the Psalmist's: 'If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall Thy hand lead me'.[6] It would seem from such passages that the dualism is overcome, but not in any way which is explicable in terms of reason, for such an attempt to explain results necessarily in the dualism from which one seeks to escape. The understanding of reality which is expressed in the *Hermetica* in such passages as these and which

[6] Psalm, CXXXIX.

seems to transcend the dualism of the Parmenidean-Platonic legacy requires a mode of apprehension which is beyond that of the reason; it requires the subordination of reason to a form of intellectual or noetic perception which the *Hermetica* indicates in saying that God can be seen 'with the heart alone' (Lib.VII.2). It is the same form of perception as that indicated by Plotinus when he writes: 'In the vision of God, that which sees is not reason, but something greater and prior to reason, something presupposed by reason, as is the object of vision'.

It is in a passage which speaks of man's sexual passions that most reveals how far at times the authors of the *Hermetica* can pass beyond the dualist point of view, beyond the objectivity and impersonality of the Greek and Hellenistic philosophical tradition, and reach an understanding of reality which escapes from dominantly rational categories. The sexual passions are those which are most readily attacked in a sense-denying, dualistic morality. Their irrational character is a scandal and a stumbling-block to those who conceive 'heaven' to be a state of pure rational order and harmony; hence they are regarded as 'evil' and as something to be repressed and extinguished by a long process of ascetic discipline. The image of Eros 'crucified' on the cross of reason stands above most so-called morality. The *Hermetica* in the following passage goes beyond such morality; it links the erotic passions to the highest processes of life, seeing them as manifestations of divine energy itself: 'And in that conjunction of the two sexes, or, to speak more truly, that fusion of them into one, which may be rightly named Eros, or Aphrodite, or both at once, there is a deeper meaning than man can comprehend. It is a truth to be accepted as sure and evident above all other truths, that by God, the Master of all generative power, has been devised and bestowed upon all creatures this sacrament of eternal reproduction, with all the affection, all the joy and gladness, all the yearning and heavenly love that are inherent in its being. And there were need that I should tell of the compelling force with which this sacrament binds man and woman together, were it not that each of us, if he directs his thought upon himself, can learn it from his inmost feeling', (Asclep.III.21).

It would be a mistake to emphasize too greatly this break of *Corpus Hermeticum* with the more rational side of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. It need only be pointed out that such a break is implicit in certain passages of the *Corpus*. Reality cannot be grasped by the reason alone; another mode of apprehension is needed, a more intuitive and contemplative mode. But in

general the *Corpus* continues the objective, impersonal tradition which descends from Plato and whose course we have briefly glanced at. Thus on the one hand the *Corpus* reasserts the dualism of the Plato of the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and the *Republic*. But on the other hand it also expresses that vision of the organic wholeness of life, of the intermingling of sensible and intelligible, visible and invisible, which is suggested in Plato's *Timaeus* and in some aspects of Stoicism. God does not exclude the world of the senses; reality is present in the forms of nature itself: it is not opposed to creation. Both form and matter, the ever active consciousness and the passive non-consciousness, are aspects of a single reality, which is everywhere, in everything: 'Everywhere God will come to meet you, everywhere he will appear to you, at places and times at which you look not for it, in your waking hours and in your sleep, when you are journeying by water and by land, in the night-time and in the day-time, when you are speaking and when you are silent; for there is nothing which is not God. And do you say 'God is invisible'? Speak not so. Who is more manifest than God? For this very purpose he has made all things, that through all things you may see him. This is God's goodness, that he manifests himself through all things. Nothing is invisible, not even an incorporeal thing; mind is seen in its thinking, and God in his working' (Lib.XI.22).

The great break with the impersonality and objectivity of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, with its emphasis on the wonders of the world without and its worship of a God whom it identified with an intelligible cosmic order, comes of course with Christianity. The accent is transferred from the objective to the subjective, from the world without to the world within, onto the internal struggle and stress of the human soul. How much of the Christian mystery was prefigured in the mystery religions of the ancient world need not at this point concern us. What is important is that with Christianity, the single individual, the human person, was brought face to face as an isolated pole with an equally living person, another equally isolated pole—God. Christianity gave to the human individual the sense that within him, a single being, quite apart from any city or any cosmic order, the deepest mysteries of life are to be found; the supernatural dwells within. He no longer has to sacrifice himself to any larger, more important but more impersonal whole in order to achieve his destiny. He is, potentially, himself the whole. His task is to penetrate into his own inner depths where he can meet and unite with that Other who is both

the source and the most real aspect of his own personality. In the Christian mystery, as it is developed by the great masters of the Christian contemplative tradition, the last traces of that impersonal and 'objective' form of classical intellectualism which are still present in the thought of Plotinus are eliminated, and the whole drama of human life is focused on an inner, intimate, intensely personal exchange between the human individual and God, between the human creature and the Uncreated Light. It is a drama which takes place within the depths of the isolated and withdrawn human soul.

Yet at the same time as it placed reality in the unexplored depths of individual experience, restored the subjective and personal side to man's life and so rescued him from his sense of helplessness and insignificance before the vast impersonal processes of the cosmos, Christianity also made its own a dualism, similar in many ways to that of one aspect of Platonism, which represented a vast depreciation of the world as it is presented through the senses. The cosmos was 'de-mystified', robbed of its association with the divine. The elements of the cosmos—water, earth, air, fire—were seen as controlled by spirits hostile to God. The transcendent was exalted at the expense of the natural, the invisible at the expense of the visible. It is true that at least so far as Greek Patristic theology is concerned, nature in its original state is said to be good and to represent a series of divine theophanies; and even in its fallen state it preserves forms whose contemplation may lead the mind back to an awareness of divine beauty. But only too often the sensible world in itself is regarded as no more than a 'lump of perdition', handed over to the forces of evil. Hence Christian asceticism demanded a rejection of this world, its abandonment in favor of a supra-sensible world. In the sphere of nature and of natural passions and instincts the devil is active. The purpose of the devil is to prevent the soul's union with God. Consequently, the first step towards such a union is the mortification of the senses and the passions, and the severance of whatever ties link man as a sensible creature to the universe.

It was against this aspect of Christianity that Gemistos Plethon initiated a reaction. In the event, it is difficult to do more than guess at the substance of his reaction: the work in which his central ideas were gathered, the *Laws*, was burnt shortly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 by the Patriarch Gennadios, for long the opponent of Plethon; and only fragments of it survive. But it is clear that he regarded as inadequate a religion which like Christianity seemed to be

largely negative in its attitude towards the world of the senses and which, in order to account for the destructive and irrational forces of life, had associated them with a host of demons that had no share in the divine world. For Plethon, Christianity, in making its own a dualism which radically separated the world of the senses from its transcendental origin and by focusing attention almost exclusively on the historical redemption of man, had broken the great tradition of the ancient world. It had broken the myth of this tradition which had linked the visible cosmos to its invisible archetypes. It had conceived a divinity that excluded the sense of the sacredness of the natural order, a monotheism that excluded polytheism. Plethon sought to regenerate an awareness of the living realities upon which the cosmos depended. So far as one can gather, he attacked the belief in evil demons as conceived by the Christians, and sought to link every aspect of life with the divine through a whole chain of being stretching from the highest to the lowest forms of existence. In other words, he sought to refer the whole of creation to the divine, and to bridge the gulf which, he thought, Christian dualism had opened between the two.

Gemistos Plethon was not of course the only person to react against this apparent dualism in mediaeval Christian thought. Rather he stood at the head of a long and distinguished line of speculative thinkers who included among their number not only his immediate successors like Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Gioraaiio Bruno and the Cambridge Platonists, but also writers like Goethe and Blake. It was, however, with Nietzsche that the full force of this reaction developed. But Nietzsche's attack was directed not simply against the Christian form of dualism. He saw the historical origins of this dualism, not in Christianity, but in aspects of the philosophical tradition of the ancient Greek world itself, in fact in precisely that dualistic side of the Platonic thought we have indicated in an earlier part of this paper. According to Nietzsche, it was this dualism which, before it had taken its Christian form, had already crippled the creative life of ancient Greece: 'The apparition of Greek philosophers since the time of Socrates is a symptom of decadence; the anti-Hellenic instincts become paramount' (Will to Power l, aph. 427).[7] These philosophers represent a revolt of reason against the instincts. They establish an absolute morality set over against life. They teach the immortality of the soul, a doctrine of the Beyond, and a denial of the senses. They turn their back on the world and thus prepare the way for Christianity. Nietzsche

[7] All quotations from Nietzsche are taken from the English trans. of his works ed. Levy.

therefore sees the great period of ancient Greece not in the 5th century B.C., where it had been the fashion to place it, but in the 6th century B.C., and even earlier. Then, he declared, reason and instinct, soul and body, had been at one, a single expression of life. This was the period in which the symbol of Dionysus reigned. It was the period of the affirmation of life: 'In the Dionysian symbol the utmost limit of affirmation is reached'; in it there is 'a formula of *highest affirmation*, born of fullness and overfullness, a yea-saying without reserve to suffering's self, to guilt's self, to all that is questionable and strange in existence itself' (*Appendix* to *Birth of Tragedy*). There was no flight from life itself' was no attempt to pretend that life is anything other than what it is, there was no escape into the beautiful but unreal dream-world of the Olympian gods. On the contrary, there was a yea-saying to life as it is, godless, stricken, without purpose, tragic: 'The saying of Yes to life, including even its most strange and terrible problems, the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibleness in the sacrifice of its highest types—that is what I call Dionysian' (*Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 119-120). It was this unity of life and its acceptance as a whole, for itself, with no question of a Beyond or of any purpose other than that which is fulfilled in its affirmation in spite of all contradictions and illogicalities—it was this that the later philosophers destroyed when they elevated reason to a position of supremacy over the instincts and elaborated a morality derived from that reason which in itself can never escape from the dualist attitude.

Nietzsche went on to affirm that this dualism of the ancient Greek philosophers, with the moral attitude that accompanied it, had been taken over by Christianity; and it was from this point of view that he opened his violent attack on the Christian tradition. He considered this attack his great achievement: 'That which defines me, that which makes me stand apart from the whole of the rest of humanity, is the fact that I *unmasked* Christian morality'. (*Ecce Homo* pp. 138-139). Christian morality had also committed the great crime; it had also said 'no' to life. It had taught a contempt for all the principal instincts of life; it had taught a contempt for the body and the sensual passions. It was a morality of self-renunciation, which 'betrays the will to nonentity', denying the very roots of life. It had torn man up from the earth, uprooted him in the fullest sense. Its whole spirit was one of hostility to life. It was the creation of decadents, of men who hated life and who denied life, who having no vitality of their own could not bear the

manifestations of vitality in other people and who in desire for revenge set up a code of values and moralities which shackled the ascending forces of life and energy and prevented man's creative growth. ‘Morality is the ideosyncracy of decadents, actuated by a desire to *avenge themselves with success upon life'* (*Ecce Homo*, p. 141). It was a vampirism, sucking the blood of life. It was the creation of the weak, fear-smitten herd, to ensure that no one should rise above a common level of mediocrity: ‘Everything that elevates the individual above the herd, and is a source of fear to the neighbor, is henceforth called *evil*; the tolerant, unassuming, self-adapting disposition, the *mediocrity* of desires, attain to moral distinction and honor’ (*Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 201). It was a criticism that the English Blake had already made: 'The Giants who formed this world into its sensual existence, and now seem to live in it in chains, are in truth the causes of its life and the sources of all activity; but the chains are the cunning of weak and tame minds which have power to resist energy; according to the proverb, the weak in courage is strong in cunning’.[8]

The Church with its moral law represented the triumph of the weak and tame minds; it attacked these ‘Giants’, the primal energies and passions, at their roots and so sought to destroy life itself: ‘All ancient moral-mongers were unanimous on this point, "il faut tuer les passions", (*Twilight of the Idols*, p. 26). The great task which awaited man was to release these passions from their chains, to prepare for a new fullness and abundance of life: 'The aim should be to prepare a *transvaluation of values* for a particularly strong kind of man, most highly gifted in intellect and will, and, to this end, slowly to liberate in him a whole host of slandered instincts hitherto held in check' (*Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 260).

At the same time as attacking Christian morality, Nietzsche also attacked the Christian God; in fact, he attacked the whole idea of a supernatural: ‘I conjure you, my brethren, remain true to the earth, and believe not those who speak unto you of super-earthly hopes. Poisoners are they, whether they know it or not’ (*Zarathustra*, p. 7). The Christian God was hostile to life. He was a destroyer of life: ‘The concept "God" was invented as the opposite of the concept of life—everything detrimental, poisonous and slanderous, and all deadly hostility to life, was bound

[8] “Marriage of Heaven and Hell”. Nonesuch Blake, ed. Keynes, London, 1941, p. 187.

together in one horrible unit in Him' (*Ecce Homo*, p. 142). He was a faithful image of the pitiable and pathetic minds which had created Him: 'The miserable God of Christian monotonotheism' is a 'hybrid creature of decay, nonenity, concept, and contradiction, in which all the instincts of decadence, all the cowardices and languors of the soul find their sanction' (*Antichrist*, p. 147). He was a negation and denial of life: 'With God war is declared on life, nature, and the will to life! God is the formula for every calumny of this world and for every lie concerning a beyond! In God, nonentity is deified; and the will to nonentity is declared holy' (*Antichrist*, p. 146). And he contrasts the pagan affirmation of life with the Christian denial of life: '*Paganism* is that which says yea to all that is natural, it is innocence in being natural, "naturalness". *Christianity* is that which says no to all that is natural, it is a certain lack of dignity in being natural; hostility to Nature' (*Will to Power*, l, aph. 147).

We can see what has happened. Christianity, in asserting that the transcendental dwells within man, had at the same time subscribed to a dualist point of view such as that which Plato had accepted from Parmenides. Regarding the sensible world as lying virtually outside the sphere of the Spirit, it had failed to realize its significance as a means to spiritual insight, that through which revelation is received through contemplation of natural beauty and through participation in and affirmation of life's primal energies. On the basis of this dualism it had erected a life-denying morality whose effect was the suppression of man's instinctive powers. It had split creation in two and had disrupted those ties which link man to the universe. It had regarded as negative and even as evil all that side of man which is cthonic, in which he is joined to earth and to the forces of earth. It had identified what is destructive, irrational and contrary to its conceptions of the 'spiritual life', with what is evil. It had waged war on the body and on man's eroticism. It had, moreover, identified the source of this ascetic morality with the source of spiritual life itself—with God. It had confused religion with moral teaching. It had, as it were, made God Himself responsible for a life-denying moral code. Thus when Nietzsche took upon himself the role of martyr on behalf of that side of life which Christianity had suppressed, on behalf of the 'crucified' passions, he was forced, in order to attack the Christian ethic, to attack also the whole idea of the transcendental dwelling in the depths of the human soul. The idea of a transcendental had become so entangled with morality that any attack on the latter involved attack on the

former.

This was Nietzsche's pathos: Christianity, trapped, as from certain points of view Plato had been, in a false opposition, had attributed to God a moral bias which was no more than a reflection of an inability to grasp that the ultimate subjective ground of being and the source of life in all its various and successive manifestations, are not different; that the inner immortal Self and the great cosmic energies are one and the same, and that to destroy the life without is at the same time to destroy the life within. It was thus that Nietzsche, in his battle for the slandered instincts and energies of life, for the 'Giants who formed this world into its sensual existence', was compelled to take his stand at what amounted to the opposite pole of that same dualism by which, he thought, Christianity itself had been dominated; he was forced to cry: 'Am I understood?—*Dionysus versus the Crucified*—' (*Ecce Homo*, IV, *9*).

The above criticism is nevertheless not the whole story. The realization that these two poles—the 'objective' and the 'subjective', Dionysus *and* Christ—constitute reciprocal aspects of a single reality, and that the changing, multitudinous world of the senses is the expression of, and not separate from, the inner world—this realization is in fact integral to the Christian tradition (a *proper* understanding of its sacramental life presupposes it), just as it is integral to the great religious traditions of the East. But where Christianity is concerned it has been overlaid, historically speaking, in the manner and for the reasons indicated in this essay. It is from this point of view that the challenge to Christianity made by such figures as Plethon, Goethe, Blake, Nietzsche (to name but those of whom we have spoken) may be seen to contain a positive element, however negative it may appear in other respects. Indeed, it could well lead Christian theologians themselves to reaffirm that vision of an organic wholeness of life whose partial eclipse can be said to have provoked the challenge in the first place.