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**ON SOME ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL ROOTS OF GEORGE  
BERKELEY'S THOUGHT**

**A thesis submitted by Costica Bradatan in accordance with the  
requirements of the University of Durham for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**Department of Philosophy**

**April 2003**

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- 7 JUL 2003

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Costica Bradatan

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**Abstract of *On Some Ancient and Medieval Roots of George Berkeley's Thought*, a thesis submitted by Costica Bradatan for the degree of Ph.D. in Philosophy, University of Durham, 2003**

This thesis proposes a consideration of Berkeley's thought from the standpoint of its roots, rather than (which is the prevalent perspective in today's Berkeley scholarship) from the point of view of the developments that this thought has brought about in modern philosophy. Chapter One deals with a number of specific introductory issues, and then delineates a theoretical context within which my own approach will reveal its scholarly significance. In Chapter Two I advance the idea that there is in Berkeley's early writings an entire network of Platonic features, attitudes, and mind sets, prefiguring his speculative and openly Platonic writing *Siris*. Chapter Three is a systematic attempt at considering Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy in close connection to the topic of *liber mundi*, with the twofold objective of pointing out those of the medieval implications of the topic that Berkeley preserved, and the "novelties" he brought forth in his use of the topic. The central idea around which Chapter Four is clustered is that, in *Siris*, Berkeley comes to make use of one of the most ancient "spiritual techniques": alchemy. Berkeley's arguments and notions in *Siris* will be discussed by constant reference to alchemic notions, writings and authors. Chapter Five is an attempt at considering Berkeley's thought from the standpoint of the Christian apologetic tradition, and its objective is to show that one of the roots of Berkeley's thought could be found precisely in this tradition. In Chapter Six I will show that even when designing such a practical project as the "Bermuda scheme" Berkeley was under the modeling influence of the past. More precisely, the chapter purports to offer a discussion of Berkeley's "Bermuda scheme" in light of the Western representations of the "happy islands", "earthly paradise", "*eschaton*". The last chapter (Chapter Seven) purports to undertake a comparative analysis of some of the ideas professed by medieval Catharism, and George Berkeley's denial of the existence of matter. The central notion around which my comparative approach is articulated is the idea that, in both cases, matter is regarded as *the source of evil*. What I will try to show is that Berkeley's attitudes to the material world echoed certain Cathar theological anxieties and patterns of thought.

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Previous versions of most of the chapters in this dissertation have been presented at conferences, workshops and symposia both in Europe (United Kingdom, Norway, The Netherlands, Hungary) and in the USA. I wish to thank those members of the audience who asked me questions about my presentations, and gave me valuable advice, comments and suggestions. Similarly, previous versions of most of the chapters have been, or will be, published in journal or themed volumes. I wish to thank the editors and anonymous referees of these journals and volumes for having read my papers, and for their valuable comments. Thanks to all these people, this dissertation is now better and more carefully articulated.

## **Chapter One:**

### **Introduction**

This introductory chapter has a twofold aim. In the first place, I will deal with a number of specific introductory issues: what are the primary objectives to be attained through this work, why these particular objectives rather than any others, what are the main guidelines and principles on which my approach is based, how is this work related to the existing scholarship, and what precisely a reader should *not* expect from this work. This will be done in the first part of the chapter (1.1.). In the second place, in light of the fact that this thesis purports to be, above all, a study in the history of philosophy, I will advance some general considerations about the nature and significance of the historical research, the role that the past plays in the configuration of present states of affairs, and about the philosophical significance of the study of the past. Finally, the *philosophical past* will be specifically considered, along with a number of issues in the history of philosophy. These rather general considerations are intended as an attempt at delineating a theoretical context within which, it is hoped, my own approach will reveal its scholarly significance. All these will make the object of the second part (1.2.).

#### ***1.1. The objective, character, and structure of the present work***

##### **1.1.1. The Objective**

The ultimate objective of this dissertation is to propose a new way of looking at George Berkeley's philosophy. More precisely, to propose a consideration of Berkeley's thought



from the standpoint of its roots, rather than from the point of view of the various developments that this thought has brought about in the sphere of modern philosophy. In other words, I propose a consideration of Berkeley's philosophy from the perspective of *its past*, rather than from that of *its future*. The most interesting thing about such a shift of perspective is the fact that what we see when we look at George Berkeley from the perspective of his past is *strikingly different* from what we see when we consider him from the perspective of his future, which is to say, from the perspective of our own time. It is as if there were *two Berkeleys*, separated from each other.

A characteristic trait of today's mainstream (analytically-minded) Berkeley scholarship is its tendency to single out from the whole of Berkeley's thought only those features, topics, problems, questions that seem to have a certain importance for *today's* philosophical debates. There is a certain inclination to consider Berkeley interesting only insofar as he has something relevant to say about the problems *we* are concerned with, and only as long as he is able to solve what *we* consider as significant philosophical problems. (Of course, this is the case not only with Berkeley.) As a result, a certain selection operates throughout the exegesis, teaching — and, by way of consequence, common reception — of Berkeley's philosophy: from the huge variety of arguments, topics, problems, and ideas one might come across when reading Berkeley's writings, only some of them are, on the criterion of their usefulness for the contemporary philosophical debates, taken seriously and given the "right" of being really "philosophical". Accordingly, in today's mainstream scholarship, Berkeley seems to be considered an "important philosopher" because of, among others, his anticipation of the "linguistic turn" in philosophy (hence, his significant contribution to the advancement of analytic philosophy), his contribution to the development of the Empiricist tradition, his "linguistic" approach to problems of traditional metaphysics, his anticipation of pragmatism as a philosophical position, his contributions in philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of science, economics, even twentieth century physics<sup>1</sup>, and so on. Hardly will one find today a monograph dedicated to George Berkeley without encountering in it a great deal of discussion about Berkeley's doctrines of vision, perception, abstraction, meaning, existence, realism, other minds, distinction between primary and secondary

qualities, intentionality, causality, common-sense, etc. These are indeed topics about which Berkeley certainly had something significant to say, and they are popular in today's philosophical debates, too. Needless to say, the fact that Berkeley could still be found useful from the point of view of the various contemporary philosophical concerns, and that he can still offer answers to our own philosophical interrogations, testifies to his greatness as a philosopher, and to the sharpness of his thinking. As a consequence, those mainstream Berkeley scholars (most of them of analytic orientation) who, whether knowingly or unknowingly, make the linkage between Berkeley's writings and our own philosophical concerns — looking in Berkeley for solutions to *our* problems — have merits difficult to over-estimate. Of course, contemporary philosophy must take over, re-interpret and make use of arguments borrowed from the past philosophers (Berkeley's arguments included) for its own purposes: this has always been the case, and this is the way in which philosophy, and knowledge in general, advances. If there is already a body of knowledge available, it would be absurd to simply ignore it and start everything anew. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a critical attitude to what has been said in the past. My only observation is that this thing must be done *in full awareness of the situation*: that is, with the understanding that, when doing so, we do *not* do historical work, but simply deal with our own (present) problems.

Nevertheless, my present thesis is not necessarily intended as a criticism of what the mainstream (analytic) Berkeley scholars have done. Its only intention is to do justice to the historical truth, as far as this is possible, by pointing to the existence of *another* Berkeley, as it were, one in general unaccounted for by the mainstream analytic scholarship. The idea of the present work has been born out of precisely the realisation that today's mainstream Berkeley scholarship, valuable as it is, does not deal with the *entire* Berkeley (and, which is worse, in most of the cases it does not even acknowledge that it *has to* do so), but only with certain segments of his philosophy, namely with those that, in some way or other, prove to be useful in *our* debates, and interesting from the standpoint of *our* current concerns. As I will show in the following chapters, there are in Berkeley a number of important topics, notions and concerns, that are not dealt with — sometimes, not even mentioned *en passant* — in today's mainstream Berkeley

scholarship. In other words, this scholarship does not seem interested in taking aboard the entire intellectual universe that is Berkeley's philosophy, and sometimes it happens that Berkeley scholars even seem embarrassed when coming, in some of Berkeley's writings, across issues totally out of fashion: alchemy, the search for the *Elixir Vitae*, the search for the "earthly paradise", utopia, philosophy as apologetics, philosophy as palimpsest, *liber mundi*, Platonism, Cathar-like attitudes to the material world, and so on. These topics are not in general present in our current philosophical debates, but — as I will try to show — they *are* massively present in Berkeley, and if one hopes to know "things as they are", one cannot simply pass over the existence of such topics in Berkeley's thought. There must be a sense in which dealing with a past figure goes beyond what that figure might have to say about our present philosophical concerns, a sense in which a past figure, event, or system of thought, must also be studied *for their own sake*, and not only for *ours*. (But more about this will be said in the second part of this chapter.)

Of course, this is not the case with the entire Berkeley scholarship. For there are also excellent monographs dedicated to George Berkeley's historical background, predecessors and past influences, there are studies trying to place him within a broader historical context and to relate him to the past. A. A. Luce, T. E. Jessop, Charles McCracken, Ian Tipton, David Berman, Harry Bracken, Stephen Clark, Stephen Daniel, to give only very few examples, have published over the years excellent scholarly studies, in which Berkeley's philosophy is approached with a sense of awareness of its historical roots, and its predecessors. The numerous references that I make to their writings throughout this thesis testify to my indebtedness to these authors.

The character of novelty of the present research comes, I suggest, from its plan to systematically look at George Berkeley from the perspective of his intellectual ancestors, rather than from that of his "descendants" (which is commonly the case with the mainstream scholarship), from its constant focusing on a number of traditional roots of Berkeley's thought, some of which have never been previously considered ("earthly paradise", utopianism, Cathar-like attitudes), while others have been only briefly discussed (*liber mundi*, philosophy as palimpsest), as well as from the accompanying attempt at placing Berkeley's thinking within a much broader framework of

spiritual/religious traditions, perennial patterns of thought and bold utopian projects. It is hoped that, as a result of these endeavours, a more complete and more faithful image of George Berkeley's philosophy, and of his place in the history of European thought, will be proposed.

### 1.1.2. The Character

The first thing I should emphasise at this stage is that it is not my intention in this thesis to undertake a *critical analysis* of Berkeley's philosophical theories, arguments and concepts. In other words, what I am concerned here with is not whether Berkeley *is right* on such and such a point, nor whether his arguments are good ones, and his theories empirically justified. Precisely because there are already plenty of excellent works dealing analytically with Berkeley's arguments and theories<sup>2</sup>, I have chosen to take in this research an approach significantly different from the current (analytical) ones.

I would very briefly characterise my approach as being:

a) *history of ideas*-based. The roots of Berkeley's thought that this thesis seeks to explore are traditional topics, or clusters of topics, whose individual "stories" are narrated, and whose genealogies are followed in some detail, before discussing the way in which Berkeley incorporated them into the texture of his own philosophy. And it is precisely this genealogical approach to the roots of Berkeley's thought that plays an important part in the present research. This is why a good part of it might well be seen as a study in the history of ideas.

b) *comparative*. Berkeley's philosophy is constantly "confronted" in this thesis with various other systems of thought, modes of thinking and worldviews. In an attempt to discover who are his intellectual ancestors, I will constantly look at Berkeley's philosophy as if it were a voice within a larger conversation.

c) *interdisciplinary*. Apart from the specific fields of the history of philosophy and history of ideas, which are the two main areas into which this research is to be articulated, there will also be frequent "journeys" into issues and topics belonging to other humanistic

fields: history of religions, religious studies, literary history, comparative literature, symbolic geography, utopian studies.

In terms of writing procedures and techniques, the present research constantly makes use of extensive quotations from Berkeley's works, as well as from various other authors to whom he is being related and compared with throughout the thesis. What lies behind this particular technique is my belief that, in some way or other, even Berkeley's stylistic inclinations and literary preferences might betray certain affinities with those authors, traditions and modes of thought into which, as I try to show, the substance of his philosophy was rooted.

Finally, given the obvious necessity of focusing this research only on a limited number of topics and areas of study, I have been forced to leave aside, with some exceptions, George Berkeley's significant contributions to the field of: ethics, politics, economics, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of science. The discussion of these contributions in this dissertation, important and interesting as they are, would have made it unreasonably lengthy, and consequently weakened the argument it proposes.

### **1.1.3. The Structure**

The structure of this dissertation derives to some extent from the character of the approach it undertakes: each of its chapters explores historically a certain topic — or cluster of topics — and then seeks to determine the precise role that particular topic plays within Berkeley's thinking.

After this introductory chapter, I will try to advance, in Chapter Two, the idea that there is in Berkeley's early writings an entire *network* of Platonic features, attitudes, and mind sets, and that however allusive or ambiguous these Platonic elements might seem, they constitute a coherent whole, playing an important role in shaping the essence of Berkeley's thought. In other words, I suggest that, given some of the ideas contained in his early works, it was in a way unavoidable for Berkeley, in virtue of the inner logic of

the development of his thought, to arrive at such an openly Platonic and speculative writing as *Siris*.

Following on from the chapter dealing with Berkeley's Platonism, Chapter Three is a systematic attempt at considering Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy in close connection to the topic of the Book of the World (*liber mundi*), with the twofold objective of pointing out, on the one hand, those of the medieval implications of the topic that Berkeley preserved in his philosophy, and, on the other hand, the "novelties", or at least some of the major changes, he brought forth in his use of the topic.

The central idea around which Chapter Four is clustered is that, in his *Siris*, Berkeley comes to employ and make extensive use of the alchemic tradition. Berkeley's arguments and notions in *Siris* will be discussed by constant reference to alchemic notions, writings and authors. It is the objective of this chapter to show that, apart from its being under the strong influence of the Platonic tradition Berkeley's thought, as it appears in *Siris*, seems to have been also marked by some intellectual inclinations, spiritual concerns, and mind-sets characterizing the alchemic tradition.

Chapter Five is an attempt at considering Berkeley's thought from the standpoint of the Christian apologetic tradition, and its objective is to show that one of the roots of Berkeley's thought could be found precisely in this tradition. This chapter deals mainly with *Alciphron* as an apologetic writing, in an attempt to place this book in the tradition of Christian apologetics. Also, it discusses some of the rhetorical tools employed by Berkeley against free-thinkers, and the pragmatism of Berkeley's apologetics: that is, the beneficial practical effects that the adoption of an active Christian attitude might have upon people's morality and social life are seen as an argument for the Christian faith.

In Chapter Six I will show that not only his philosophy was rooted in some ancient or medieval traditions of thought, but also even when designing such a practical project as the "Bermuda scheme" Berkeley was, in a serious way, under the modeling influence of the past. More precisely, the chapter purports to offer a discussion of Berkeley's project to build a theology college in the Islands of Bermuda in light of some traditions and patterns of thought governing the Western representations of the "happy islands", "earthly paradise", "*eschaton*". I will also point to a certain symbolic

relationship that might be established between the substance of Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy and the utopian character of his "Bermuda project".

Finally, the last chapter (Chapter Seven) undertakes a comparative analysis of some of the ideas professed by the medieval Dualistic heresies (Catharism in particular), and George Berkeley's denial of the existence of matter. The central notion around which my comparative approach is articulated is the idea that, in both cases, matter is regarded as *the source of evil*. What I will try to show is that Berkeley's attitudes to the material world *echoed* certain Cathar theological anxieties and patterns of thought.

## **1.2. Dealing with the (philosophical) past**

### **1.2.1. The past and our knowledge of it**

One of the main suppositions on which my present research is based is that *there is* something called "the past", something objective, exterior to us, and different in several ways from ourselves, and from our personal perspectives and interests. As such, if this is granted, the historical scholars — as truth-seekers — must be guided in their enterprises by the principle that what they should be focused on is precisely this objective reality called "the past", their mission being to try to offer the best possible description of it, leaving aside, for the time being, the various ways in which their historical knowledge might be used by other people, for purposes alien to the historical scholarship. My point here is that, even if such things as "historical truth" and "historical certainty" are sometimes extremely difficult to attain, this is not at all a reason for ceasing to pursue them.

Nevertheless, this is not the only way of seeing the nature and role of dealing with the past. There is another position, one according to which knowledge of the past cannot, and should not, be pursued for the past's sake, but for satisfying our own current

intellectual needs and pragmatic interests. If the results of a particular historical research cannot be translated into something interesting *for us*, then we do not have any reason to further pursue that research. In other words, there is no such a thing as gratuitous historical research. What this position upholds has been expressed, analogically, as follows:

The anthropologist is not doing his job if he merely offers to teach us how to bicker with his favourite tribe, how to be initiated into their rituals, etc. What we want to be told is whether that tribe has anything interesting to tell us — interesting by *our* lights, answering to *our* concerns, informative about what *we* know to exist. Any anthropologist who rejected this assignment on the grounds that filtering and paraphrase would distort and betray the integrity of the tribe's culture would no longer be an anthropologist, but a sort of occultist. He is, after all, working for *us*, not for *them*. (Rorty, Schneewind, & Skinner 1984: 6-7)

As such, history is seen as being the business of the present, whose pursuit must result in our better dealing with the present — and future — states of affairs. Historical research is of course to be encouraged because it supplies us with excellent means through which we can be more successful in our various undertakings. For example, we appeal to historical arguments for supporting our current positions and undermining our rivals' positions. According to such a line of thought, this is the case with every field in which knowledge of the past might play a certain part. In philosophy, for example, the various “versions” of the philosophical past might be used as arguments for various contemporary philosophical positions. Each “historian of philosophy is working for an ‘us’ which consists, primarily, of those who see the contemporary philosophical scene as he does. So each will treat in a ‘witchcraft’ manner what another will treat as the antecedents of something real and important in contemporary philosophy.” (*Ibid.*: 7) As such, the past “in itself”, the past *as it really is*, does not concern anyone anymore. The true importance of the past actually lies in its flexibility and wonderful capacity of supplying us with the various arguments we need for our current purposes.

Pushed at its limits, this position comes to assert that the idea of “the truth about the past, uncontaminated by present perspectives or concerns” is “like the idea of ‘real essence, uncontaminated by the preconceptions and concerns built into any human



language.” It is a romantic ideal of purity which has no relation to any actual enquiry which human beings have undertaken or could undertake.” (*Ibid.*: 8)<sup>3</sup> As a result, history becomes *instrumental*, and does not have an epistemic value *per se*: it acquires a certain (pragmatic) value only when the arguments it provides are successfully employed by others, in other fields.

The problem with this position comes, I suggest, from a certain confusion it seems to make between the actual *conditions* under which such and such historical researches take place, on the one hand, and the *principles* guiding any historical research, on the other hand. It is true, it happens that the research is, to various degrees, “contaminated”, or “impurified”, by the researcher (that is, by his personal and cultural background, by his particular “prejudices”, idiosyncrasies and minds-sets, etc.), but that research would be utterly impossible as a serious intellectual enterprise if the researcher would start his work with the conviction that there is no such thing as “historical truth”, and that the past is not “out there”, but it is ultimately the result of some human invention. In other words, a serious historical research cannot be done in the absence of an *ideal* of truthfulness. We have of course personal inclinations and preferences, certain perspectives and affinities, but this does not necessarily mean that we will eternally remain, in MacIntyre’s words, “prisoners of the present in our ostensible renderings of the past” (MacIntyre 1982: 33). There are ways of freeing ourselves from the prison of the present, and our sheer awareness of the fact that the past objectively exists is certainly one of them. Needless to say, the historian knows that some results of his work might be interpreted and “used” for a better dealing with present states of affairs, but this does not prevent him from performing the specific tasks that his profession requires him to do. To use the same analogy with the anthropologist, the “anthropologist wants to know how primitives talk to fellow-primitives as well as how they react to instructions from missionaries. For this purpose he tries to get inside their heads, and to think in terms which he would never dream of employing at home.” (Rorty 1984: 50) Even if the historian realizes that, say, such and such ancient beliefs he studies are *wrong* (“wrong”, of course, by standards current in the world from which he comes), this realization should not change his attitude to them<sup>4</sup>. It is not his mission as an historian to assess the truth value of those beliefs, nor

to express his personal views on them, but only to unearth them, place them in the appropriate context (thus making them intelligible), describe the role that those beliefs played within that particular context, and so on. And — it might be further observed — the less he lets his personal proclivities and idiosyncrasies interfere with his work the better historian he is.

It seems to me that, above all, it is a matter of “intellectual honesty”, to say the least, not to try to interfere with the past, and “change” it for one’s purposes. Properly speaking, the past does not, and cannot, belong to us: it is a reality outside us, much greater and “older” than ourselves. The best thing we can do about the past is to simply take it as such, and, as far as we can, try to understand it. And understanding the past means acknowledging its character of *otherness*. We always have to establish certain relationships with this otherness, but this fact does not make it *ours*. Ultimately, I suppose that we must have to the past a, so to speak, “ecological” attitude: we do not have any right to “use” the past, the less so to “abuse” it.

The alternative to this “ecological” attitude to the past is what we encounter, in its extreme version, in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: the permanent re-writing of the past in the (changing) interests of the present. With supreme literary talent, Orwell grasps the entire absurdity of the situation, and shows how (just like in that old joke, once very popular in Eastern Europe) it is not the future that is impossible to predict, but the past:

Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. In this way every prediction made by the Party could be shown by documentary evidence to have been correct [...] All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as was necessary. [...] Books, also, were recalled and re-written again and again, and were invariably re-issued without any admission that any alteration had been made. (Orwell 1987: 42-3)<sup>5</sup>

### **1.2.2. Philosophy and the history of philosophy**

This tendency to “correct” the past, and to “adapt” it to the various needs of the present is manifest in the field of philosophy, too. The fact has been noticed with concern by

numerous philosophers, historians of philosophy and intellectual historians, and it is seen as having given birth to a certain crisis in today's philosophical world.

As a result of this tendency in philosophy, the great philosophers of the past are commonly considered philosophers only insofar as they seem to "understand" and are able to answer our own questions: "Past authors may be read, but they are treated as if they were contemporaries. They earn a right to enter the dialogue because they happen to offer good formulations of one or another position which is worthy of a hearing. They are not explored as origins, but as atemporal resources." (Charles 1984: 17) We return to the great dead to take from them what we need in order to successfully deal with our problems, without paying in general attention to what they are like *aside from their being useful to us*. We "use" them and, as Alasdair MacIntyre ironically puts it, they even must be proud for having been helpful to us in this way: "we shall admit the philosophers of the past to our debates only in our own terms, and if that involves historical distortion, so much perhaps the better. We shall have paid the past the compliment of supposing it to be as philosophically acute as we are." (MacIntyre 1982: 39)

According to a widespread opinion<sup>6</sup>, this situation has been triggered by the dramatic process of re-definition of philosophy, and of the "genuinely philosophical problems", that has been undertaken by the analytic philosophy during the last one hundred years or so. Rorty et al describe how the new definition of philosophy has had as a result the emergence of a division of the entire philosophical past into two main categories<sup>7</sup>. Attacking the analytic philosophers' tendency to consider themselves "the first to have understood what philosophy is, what questions are the genuinely philosophical ones"<sup>8</sup>, Rorty et al relate how this self-representation of the analytical philosophers resulted in an attempt

to tease out the "genuinely philosophical elements" in the work of past figures, putting aside as irrelevant their "religious" or "scientific" or "literary" or "political" or "ideological" concerns. [...] This... has the result of dividing up past-philosophers into those who anticipated the questions asked by contemporary analytic philosophers and those who held back the maturity of philosophy by diverting attention to other questions. Such an attitude produces a history of philosophy which eschews continuous narrative, but is more like a collection of anecdotes —

anecdotes about people who stumbled upon the “real” philosophical questions but did not realise what they had discovered. (Rorty, Schneewind, & Skinner 1984: 11)

Strictly speaking, even if references are made in their writings to past philosophers, the analytic philosophers do not, according to Rorty et al, have a genuinely *historic* interest in studying the past, but they simply make use of various philosophical arguments of the past, taking them out of context, and depriving them of any historical specificity. As Rorty et al ironically say, “stories about people who almost stumbled upon what we now know to be philosophy are like stories about people who would have discovered America if they had just sailed a little further. A collection of such stories cannot be a *history* of anything.” (*Ibid.*: 12) Thus, it could be said that, according to the analytical (re-)definition of philosophy, the problems with which the past philosophers have been concerned are either “genuinely philosophical problems”, and in this case they do not have anything to do with history, or simply pseudo-problems, in which case they do not have anything to do with (analytical) philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

The programmatic tendency — the big ambition, actually — of the analytical philosophy to “solve problems”, and to focus upon things “as they are in themselves”, has gradually determined the rise, among its supporters, of a certain impatience with what appear as uselessly sophisticated “stories” that have been woven over the centuries around the “genuinely philosophical problems”. Hence a certain dismissive attitude on their side towards history of philosophy and any historically-centred philosophies. It is this attitude among many analytic philosophers that makes Richard Popkin talk about “a very strong tendency among philosophers, especially those of our century, to reject any historical study of the subject, to reject any historical interpretation, and to reject the historians of philosophy as part of the philosophical enterprise.” (Popkin 1992: 325)<sup>10</sup>

The lack of a more serious interest in historical issues is certainly one of the causes of the criticisms that analytic philosophy has had to face over the last decades. This is seen as lacking in historical self-awareness, and even driven by an unreasonable “arrogance”. On the other hand, the fact that problems with which some great philosophers of the past were concerned, but considered pseudo-problems from the analytic perspective, are still debated today in various circles — philosophical or not — is

taken as a sign of the failure of the analytic project. Rorty et al, for example, decries that fact that

analytic philosophers have tried to think of themselves as the culminating development of a natural kind of human activity (“philosophical activity”), rather than simply as participants in a brilliant new intellectual initiative. This attempt has had bad effects... on philosophy itself. For the disciplinary matrix of analytic philosophy has made it increasingly difficult for those within it to recognize that questions once asked by great dead philosophers are still being asked by contemporaries — contemporaries who count neither as “philosophers” nor as “scientists”. (Rorty, Schneewind, & Skinner 1984: 13)<sup>11</sup>

It seems to me that the analytic philosopher’s dismissal of the history of philosophy — and of any historically-minded philosophy — as dealing with “stories” about things, and not with “things are they are” (which, for him, is the real job of a philosopher) betrays a certain misunderstanding on his side. For what concerns the historian of philosophy is not a futile thing at all, but something very serious: just like the analytic philosopher, the historian of philosophy deals with things as they are, which is for him: *the past*. The historian’s job is not simply “story-telling”, he does not seek to “tell stories” for their own sake, or look for entertaining “anecdotes”, but his object of research is *the historical truth*, and those “stories” he “tells” are the particular modality through which this truth reveals itself.

Finally, in light of these introductory and general considerations, I would like to point out that, in a sense, this thesis itself comes as a response to the crisis in today’s philosophy I mentioned earlier on in this chapter. By showing the various ways in which George Berkeley’s philosophy is connected to a system of ancient traditions and neglected modes of thought, and by revealing the crucial role that these traditions and modes of thought play in the formation and identity of Berkeley’s way of thinking, I hope to point also to the tremendous importance of the historical scholarship for a better understanding of the philosophical thinking. It would be foolishly naïve to claim that what this research will have offered its reader at the end will be, as it were, the whole truth about Bishop Berkeley. What I want to say is that what I have all the time borne in

mind when working on this research was the belief that *there must be* a truth about Berkeley, and that through what I was doing at least I would not go astray from it.

### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Karl Popper's article "A Note on Berkeley as Precursor of Mach" (Popper 1956)

<sup>2</sup> I will give only few examples, out of very many possible: A. C. Grayling's *Berkeley: the central arguments* (Grayling 1986), Jonathan Dancy's *Berkeley: An Introduction* (Dancy 1987), David Berman's *Berkeley: Idealism and the man* (Berman: 1994), George Pappas' *Berkeley's Thought* (Pappas 2000), etc.

<sup>3</sup> Let me say here that this is not necessarily the position defended by Rorty, Schneewind & Skinner. They just try to make a case for it, and compare this position with its rivals. I use their description of this position simply because it is clear and precise.

<sup>4</sup> "There is knowledge — historical knowledge — to be gained which one can only get by bracketing one's own better knowledge about, e.g., the movements of the heavens or the existence of God." (Rorty 1984: 50)

<sup>5</sup> In a very recent book, Bernard Williams makes (Williams 2002) the same point about historical research being based upon an idea of truth and an ideal of truthfulness. He, too, uses the example offered by Orwell's masterpiece.

<sup>6</sup> I make here repeated references to Rorty et al (Rorty, Schneewind, & Skinner 1984), finding their work particularly useful for my purposes in this thesis, but there are also other contemporary authors who hold similar views.

<sup>7</sup> "'Philosophy' is a sufficiently flexible term so that no one is greatly surprised when a philosopher announce that half of the previous canon of 'great philosophers' must be thrown out because the problems of philosophy have been discovered to be different than had been previously been thought. Such a philosopher usually explains that the slack will be taken up by something else ('religion' or 'science' or 'literature')." (Rorty, Schneewind, & Skinner 1984: 8-9)

<sup>8</sup> The complete fragment runs as follows: "We would urge that, in Britain and America, the historiography of philosophy has recently been less conscious than it ought to have been. In particular, the influence of analytic philosophy has worked against self-consciousness of the desired sort. Analytical philosophers have seen no need to situate themselves within Gadamer's 'conversation which we are' because they take themselves to be the first to have understood what philosophy is, what questions are the genuinely philosophical ones." (Rorty, Schneewind, & Skinner 1984: 11)

<sup>9</sup> "On the analytic philosophers' own account of the situation, indeed, there is nothing which can properly be called 'the history of philosophy', but only a history of almost-philosophy, only a pre-history of philosophy." (*Ibid.*: 12)

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<sup>10</sup> For Popkin the (analytic) philosophers “are often willing to eliminate the study of the history of philosophy, since what called itself philosophy in the past was just confusion and error. They are willing to curtail access to the historical past through what they encourage and discourage as proper activities of students, professors and publishers.” (Popkin 1992: 325)

<sup>11</sup> A more commonsensical criticism is brought by MacIntyre: “for any particular philosophical generation its occupation of the present can only be temporary; in some not too distant future it will have been transmuted into one more part of the philosophical past.” (MacIntyre 1982: 39)

## **Chapter Two:**

### **George Berkeley and the Platonic Tradition**

There is already a certain amount of literature dedicated to the presence in Berkeley's early philosophy of some Platonic topics (archetypes, the problem of God's mind, etc.). Based on some of these writings, on Berkeley's own works, as well as on the examination of some elements of the Platonic tradition, in this chapter I will advance the idea that, far from being just isolated topics, loosely scattered in Berkeley's early writings, they form an entire *network* of Platonic features, attitudes, and mind sets, and that however allusive or ambiguous these Platonic elements might seem, they constitute a coherent whole, playing an important role in shaping the essence of Berkeley's thought. In other words, I suggest that, given some of the ideas contained in his early works, it was in a way unavoidable for Berkeley, in virtue of the inner logic of the development of his thought, to arrive at such an openly Platonic and speculative writing as *Siris* (1744).

#### ***2.1. Platonism in Berkeley's Early Philosophical Writings***

##### **2.1.1. Defining the Platonic tradition**

"Platonism", or "the Platonic tradition", is not easy to define. The more so in a paper dealing not with Platonism as such, but primarily with Berkeley's philosophy and with a possible connection between the latter and certain elements of the Platonic tradition. It seems to me at this stage that a reasonable solution to such a difficulty would consist in starting out this discussion without attempting to give a complete, fully satisfactory



definition of Platonism, but only provisionally outlining some general information on it, in the hope that by constantly seeing and considering the development of Berkeley's thought in light of some elements of the Platonic tradition, and by setting the two terms "face to face" (which is actually the main objective of this chapter), a much more complete and appropriate understanding of Platonism *would also result*.

Very schematically, by "Platonism", in accord with a long usage of the term, I mean here a certain line of metaphysical thought originating in Plato's doctrines, and developed by such figures as Philo, Plotinus, Proclus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Marsilio Ficino, the Cambridge Platonists and many others. There are authors who draw a clear-cut distinction between Platonism (strictly understood as Plato's doctrine), and Neoplatonism (the subsequent philosophical schools and currents inspired by Plato's thought). For reasons of simplicity, in this thesis I will use throughout the term "Platonism" in a broad sense, that is, as covering also the meaning(s) of any "Neoplatonisms". Besides, I will sometimes use the phrase "the Platonic tradition" with more or less the same meaning as "Platonism".

Obviously, just as this impressive tradition of thinking which Plato inaugurated did not take over the whole of Plato's thought<sup>1</sup>, so it has with the passing of time acquired new elements, Christian or otherwise, more or less alien to Plato's initial ideas. For one of the important traits of the Platonic tradition has always been its impressive capacity to interact, "communicate" and establish relationships with — to "colonise" and eventually incorporate — various other philosophical systems, ways of thinking and cultural forms. There have been links, whether profound or superficial, temporary or long-lasting, between Platonism and theology (be it Christian, Jewish or Islamic), Platonism and mysticism, Platonism and Gnosticism (Esotericism, or Kabbalah), between Platonism and literature (and, in general, the arts), between Platonism and the utopian tradition, etc. From all these forms of marriage have resulted new entities: sub-currents, sects, heresies, various schools of thought, philosophical clubs, intellectual fashions and attitudes. The fascinating thing about this situation is probably the fact that, pervading all these "alienations", "alliances" and combinations, there almost always remains a distinct "Platonic" flavour, something that ultimately reminds us of "the spirit of Plato's thought".

But in what precisely lies the essence of this “Platonic spirit”? What is ultimately “Platonism”? Because of its synthetic qualities, I have chosen to borrow the description offered by Andrew Louth:

It is fundamental to Platonism, in virtually any guise, that this world, the world we perceive through the senses and about which we hold a variety of opinions, is not the real world. This world is a world of change, decay, and, for all of us, death; all of which bear the mark of unreality. The real world is changeless, incorruptible, a place of enduring life: it is, for Plato, the realm of the Forms. (Louth 1994: 54)

Another issue to recall before properly starting discussing the problem of the Platonic influences on Berkeley’s thought is that of the specific Platonism-Christianity relationship. There was a sense in which Christianity and Platonism had something essential in common, something they shared, making, in a way, unavoidable their “marriage”, very early in the history of the Christian church. This privileged relationship between the Platonic tradition and Christianity should play an important part in any discussion of the Platonic tradition within the European context. For, of all ancient philosophical schools, it was probably Platonism that had the strongest and most durable influence upon the shaping and development of Christian theology. As it has been said, Platonism encouraged an emphasis on man’s spiritual side, “where the clear air of the knowledge of God was attained by self-denial, subjugation of the flesh and the cultivation of the intellectual purity, and man’s soul could rise above his baser nature. Christ could be seen as the highest Reason, God’s Wisdom.” (Evans 1993: 25) When Nietzsche called Plato a “Christian before Christ” he did nothing but openly recognise a fundamental truth about the ultimate constitution of the European mind. Platonism simply helped the Christian faith acquire its doctrinal, theological identity. As Andrew Louth rightly notices, the story of the influence of

Platonism on Christian theology goes back as least to the second century of the Christian era, if not earlier, and became so pervasive that it is almost impossible to envisage Christian theology apart from its Platonic dress. [...] The principal reason for this influence is simply that Platonism and Christianity had so much in common: that [...] meant that Christian

theologians soon came to look to Platonism for arguments with which to defend Christianity. (Louth: 1994: 52).

At the same time, several Christian notions, attitudes and beliefs influenced to an important degree the further development of the Platonic thinking itself, Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena, Marcilio Ficino, the Cambridge Platonists being only the most notorious cases from this point of view. There was a mutual influence involved here, or, as Andrew Louth puts it, “the traffic between the Platonic tradition and Christianity was not all one way.” (*Ibid.*: 59)<sup>2</sup>.

### **2.1.2. Seeing Berkeley as a Platonist**

It was within this particular metaphysical Christian-Platonic context that the rise of George Berkeley’s philosophy took place. But there is no agreement among Berkeley scholars as to the exact extent to which Berkeley was a Platonist, if he was one. If Berkeley has sometimes been perceived as a Platonic thinker, this has only been with regard to his last work *Siris*, the earlier ones not being in general considered from a Platonic point of view. For example, in his history of *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy* John Muirhead, on the occasion of one of the very few mentions of Berkeley in the entire book, describes how that “the seed” of Platonism, replanted in Britain by the Cambridge Platonists, “failed to show above the ground except in the pale form of the later speculations of Bishop Berkeley.” (Muirhead 1931: 13). More than that, Paul Shorey even considered that “Berkeley’s earlier writings are apparently at the opposite pole from Platonism.” (Shorey 1938: 207) In the first part of the twentieth century Berkeley’s early philosophizing was still perceived in the strict context of the “new philosophy”, and in the terms determined by the development of the “British empiricism”, as a natural logical step from Locke to Hume.

However, during the last thirty years or so many studies have been published dealing with the presence in Berkeley’s earlier writings of some specific topics which could be seen as belonging to the Platonic tradition<sup>3</sup>. The problem is that these topics are in general considered isolated Platonic topics, or notions, or patterns of thought,

occasionally scattered in Berkeley's earlier work, and no systematic and sustained attempt has been made until recently to establish some sort of "necessary connection", on the one hand, between themselves as they appear in the early Berkeleian writings and, on the other hand, between their presence in Berkeley's early writings and his avowed Platonism in *Siris*. It is true, Peter Wenz, for example, wrote some decades ago that "the neo-Platonism of the *Siris* should be viewed as compatible with, rather than as a reversal of both the empiricism and the attack upon abstract ideas present in the *Principles of Human Knowledge*" (Wenz 1976: 542) pointing to such a connection, but without following it up in detail, or considering it otherwise than in light of the archetypes-"abstract ideas" relationship. Then, some other authors took over Wenz's insight, but it was Stephen Daniel who, in a recent article (Daniel 2001), took a decisive step forward, proposing "to consider the *Principles* and the *Dialogues* in light of his [Berkeley's] Christian Neoplatonic metaphysics", and suggesting that "that metaphysics is already present in his early works". (*Ibid.*: 239-40)

In a certain sense, my approach in this chapter might be seen as a continuation of Daniel's. Nevertheless, I will be trying to significantly enlarge this discussion by assuming that there is an entire *network* of Platonic topics, patterns of thought, and mind sets in Berkeley's earlier works (a network within which the archetypes dealt with by Daniel and others represent only one "knot"), that, however allusive, ambiguous or vague these Platonic elements might seem, they formed a coherent whole, and played a crucial part in shaping the essence of Berkeley's thought as he displayed it in his earlier philosophical writings, and that — moreover — once Berkeley started following this line of (Platonic) thinking, the speculations in *Siris* were not only possible, but in a way unavoidable<sup>4</sup>.

In the following I will be outlining some "knots" of this "Platonic network".

### **2.1.3. The likeness relationship: the human mind—the divine mind**

One of the central arguments employed by Berkeley in order to supply his immaterialist system with logical soundness, metaphysical depth, and eventually with a serious means

of refuting any accusations of solipsism is that the existence of sensible things is ultimately based on their being *continually* perceived (conceived of) by God, or — in other words — on their being in God’s mind. Simply saying that *esse* is *percipi* is not enough, but it necessarily requires this essential addition: *perceived not only by us, but also by God*. We perceive things in the world and this fact makes them existent *to us*, but in our absence, before our birth and after our death, they must be, so to speak, “cared for” by some infinite, uninterruptedly active spirit — that is, God:

sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that seeing they depend not on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, *there must be some other mind wherein they exist*. As sure therefore as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit who contains and supports it. (Berkeley 1949: II, 212 [*Three Dialogues...*])

As it were, as far as *we* human beings are concerned, things exist only insofar as we perceive them, according to our limited faculties, and — in some sense — “for our sake”, but as far as *things themselves* are concerned, they must necessarily be thought of by an infinite mind, according to its infinite powers, and for *their own sake*. In a similar passage, Berkeley stresses that when

I deny sensible things an existence out of the mind, I do not mean my mind in particular, but all minds. Now it is plain that they have an existence exterior to my mind, since I find them by experience to be independent of it. There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist, during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them [...]. And as the same is true, with regard to all other finite created spirits; it necessarily follows, there is an *omnipresent eternal Mind*, which knows, and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner, and according to such rules as he himself hath ordained, and are by us termed the *Laws of Nature*. (*Ibidem*, 230-1)

The most obvious thing to observe here is that the underlying supposition behind such an argument is that there is a fundamental likeness and a *similarity of function* between the human mind and the divine mind. Of course, the human mind is endowed only with limited powers, has a limited scope, and is deeply marked by a character of dependence

and *finitude*, but — despite all its imperfections — in Berkeley *the human mind performs exactly the same act as the divine mind actually does*: perceives, or conceives of, objects, thus conferring on them existence and intelligibility, and ultimately rendering them *real*. Even if on a much more reduced scale, the human mind *mirrors* as it were the activity of the divine one.

Now, in light of the fact that, for Berkeley, philosophy had pre-eminently religious and apologetic<sup>5</sup> functions and objectives<sup>6</sup>, and considering the entire religious background against which his thought emerged, as well as Berkeley's own formation as a churchman, I would propose here the hypothesis that this notion of a fundamental "similarity of function" between the human mind and the divine mind should be considered in connection with a certain ancient insight. Namely, it is the notion, we encounter in the "Book of Genesis" (1: 26, 27) that God made us in his "image and likeness": "And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness. ...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him." Needless to say, this is too complex a theological problem to be satisfactorily dealt with here, even in passing, but all what I am now concerned with is only to point to a possible *theological source* of Berkeley's argument. I do believe that this is a reasonable hypothesis to advance: Berkeley was formed as a theologian, considered that what he was doing must serve religion to the highest degree, in the sense that he conceived of his mission as a philosopher to "utterly destroy" atheism and free-thinking; therefore, borrowing a theological notion on which to build up one of his main arguments seem quite plausible.

It is true that, according to this line of theological thought, although God created man "in His image and likeness", due to several causes, "the image of God in us" (*imago Dei in nobis*), as the medieval writers put it, has become corrupted and unclear. St. Anselm expressed very well the deep anxiety caused by the realisation of this fact:

Lord, I acknowledge that I thank thee that thou hast created me in this thine image, in order that I may be mindful of thee; but that image has been so consumed and wasted away by vices, and obscured by the smoke of wrong doing, that it cannot achieve that for which it was made, except thou renew it, and create it anew. (Anselm 1962: 6 [*Proslogion*])

Nevertheless, the fact remains that, despite all its imperfections, errors, and bad inclinations, the human mind still bears on itself *the mark* of God.

As far as Berkeley's philosophy is concerned, this divine mark impressed upon the human mind manifests itself precisely through the fact that human mind functions as a God *en miniature*. The idea that, within Berkeley's system, the human mind perceives things and thus renders them existent (*esse est percipi*) does nothing but confirm that it is indeed created "in the image of God", and "after His likeness", insofar as the supreme mission of God himself — the main reason for his existence, so to speak — is to do exactly the same thing, namely, to perceive things thus rendering them existent: "Men commonly believe that all things are known or perceived by God, because they believe the being of a God, whereas I on the other side, immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God, because all sensible things must be perceived by Him." (*Ibid.*: 212)

At the same time, this privileged relationship between the human mind and the divine one is a crucially important topic in Platonism. It is one of those points where ancient Greek philosophy turns out to be so amazingly akin to some central ideas derived from the biblical tradition. As in the Judaic-Christian *Weltanschauung*, within a Platonic context, the two terms are not at all indifferent to each other, but there is a permanent dramatic drive, on the human side, towards the divine realities, and this is possible precisely in virtue of the above mentioned "ontological" likeness between the human and the divine. A central doctrine in Platonism is that based on "the belief in a world of higher realities, beyond the fallible realm of sense-perception; the belief that the soul belongs to that higher world and can find its way back there." (Sheppard 1994: 17-8) As it were, the human mind, through all its endeavours, efforts, and undertakings, permanently "looks for" its divine origin; this tendency is embedded in its deepest structures. For example, in *Phaedo*, Plato makes Socrates imply that his being ready (and happy) to die is actually a required part of an ampler scenario, a scenario at the end of which the human mind/soul is to encounter and find the rest in its divine counterpart:

there is good hope that on arriving where I am going, if anywhere, I shall acquire what has been our chief preoccupation in our past life, so that the journey that is now ordered for me is full of good hope, as it is also for any

other man who believes that his mind has been prepared and, as it were, purified. (*Phaedo* 67b-c, Plato 1997: 58 [trans. G.M.A Grube])

This is why philosophy, as the supreme form of spiritual achievement, comes to be seen as a “training for death” (*Phaedo* 81a [trans. G.M.A. Grube]). “Death” means, accordingly, a fundamental initiatory experience by means of which the ultimate truths are completely revealed to the human mind, it coming to see its divine counterpart “face to face” (*facie ad faciem*), as St. Paul would say later. To put it briefly, “the soul’s gaining the spiritual world is experienced as a homecoming (*nostos*).” (Louth 1994: 54) In a remarkably expressive manner, Plotinus says that “our fatherland is whence we have come, and there is the Father.” (Plotinus, *Enneads* I.6.8.21) Therefore, trying to get beyond all what the sensible world gives us, in order to comprehend as much as we can of the intelligible realities (in the hope of a final “re-joining” with them), should be taken as most important employment of the human mind throughout one’s lifetime. This is not, of course, an easy job: a common Platonic concern was that deriving from the fact that “the human condition is a perpetual struggle between a debasing materialism and an elevating spirituality” (Evans 1993: 95), but, nevertheless, it is only through this difficult struggle that we can free ourselves from the “prison of the body” and of the material world, and through which we arrive at what is “most appropriate” to us. The “place” where human reason can most properly be said to be “at home” is only where the Reason resides. Hence the prevalence, within the Platonic-Christian tradition, of the ideal of “reason transfigured, able to see clearly the supreme Reason which is its pattern and to enjoy purely intellectual joys untainted by the urgencies of the demands of the flesh.” (*Ibid.*: 95)

In view of these brief considerations, Berkeley’s account of the relationship between the divine mind and its human counterpart acquires, it is hoped, a more complete understanding, and a more appropriate contextualization. For his argument was not at all a piece of brilliant sophistry, or some philosophical device ingeniously employed in order just to dismiss accusations of solipsism, but — when using such an argument — he actually followed an ancient and consecrated pattern of thought. This was a pattern whose feasibility and strength had already been “tested” by a long tradition of Platonists and religious thinkers who took basically the same view as Berkeley: a view according to



which the human mind actually functions as some *speculum Dei*, mirror of God. And it is precisely this function that gives the mind (“the Candle of the Lord” in us, in Benjamin Wichcote’s phrasing) a very special character, transforming it into a definitely privileged realm. Our perceiving of things, with the very special sense that the word “perception” has in Berkeley, is our profoundest way of “imitating” God. Made as we are in “His image” and “after His likeness” we faithfully reproduce, *en miniature*, the divine process through which the world comes into being.

#### 2.1.4. The archetypes

Yet, the sheer assertion of God’s mind as a “place” where things exist is not enough: there must be an immediate *modality* through which God’s mind can perceive objects, or — in other words — a means by which objects exist in the divine mind. Hence the introduction of the ancient notion of *archetypes*. In his article on the archetypes in Berkeley published in 1976 Peter Wenz writes that: “there is good reason to believe that Berkeley was [...] a Christian neo-Platonist, one who holds the view that abstract ideas exist in the mind of God and that the world was created by God using these ideas as models or archetypes.” (Wenz 1976: 537) Even if there are still some problematic aspects in this identification, in the sense that Berkeley’s attack upon abstract ideas might be seen as one against the divine abstract ideas as well<sup>7</sup>, and even if Berkeley’s immaterialism does not match in absolutely every detail the traditional pattern of using the archetypes, it could be however shown that the existence and function of the archetypes (a Platonic topic *per excellence*) is crucially important in Berkeley’s thought. As a matter of fact, the employment of the notion of archetype is simply *necessary* and *unavoidable* for accounting for the way in which God’s mind comprehends and makes intelligible things in the world. It is not enough to say that “things exist in God’s mind”: an account of *how* they do so is also required. As Steven Daniel pointed out, “if God’s perception of things is [...] Berkeley’s way to avoid the solipsistic implications of his doctrine that to be is to be perceived, then it would seem that his theory of divine ideas or archetypes would be at the heart of his idealistic immaterialism.” (Daniel 2001: 247)

Although the role of the archetypes is so important in Berkeley's system, as they supply it with a relatively non-problematic — and long verified — means of making things exist in the divine intellect, Berkeley did not in his earlier writings pay a proportionate attention to the theory of archetypes as such. He frequently used the term, with its Platonic meaning, but *did not seem* to rely upon the archetypes theory as much as one could expect. For example, in the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, he says:

whoever shall reflect, and take care to understand what he says, will [...] acknowledge that all sensible qualities are alike *sensations* and alike *real*; that where the extension is, there is the colour, too, to wit, in his mind, and that their archetypes can exist only in some other *mind*. (Berkeley 1949: II, 84)

In the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* the notion of archetypes is systematically and thoroughly employed, but at the same time one often encounters hesitation on Berkeley's side between considering the perceivable "things" (that is, "ideas") and "their archetypes". For example: "no idea or archetype of an idea can exist otherwise than in a mind" (Berkeley 1949: II, 212-3). Or, in another passage:

the things I perceive must have an existence, they or their archetypes, out of my mind: but being ideas, neither they nor their archetypes, can exist otherwise than in an understanding: there is therefore an understanding. But will and understanding constitute in the strictest sense a mind or spirit. (*Ibidem*: 235)

Nevertheless, for all his hesitation, the logical context within which he employs the notion of archetype is the same as that in which archetypes were employed in traditional Platonism, which is to say, archetypes are in God's mind, being the favorite divine way of comprehending the created world:

the things I perceive are my own ideas, and [...] no idea can exist unless it be in a mind. Nor is it less plain that these ideas or things by me perceived, either themselves or their archetypes, exist independently of my mind, since I know myself not to be their author, it being out of my power to determine at pleasure, what particular ideas I shall be affected with upon opening my eyes or ears. They must therefore exist in some other mind, whose will it is they should be exhibited to me. (*Ibid.*: 214-5)

Finally, in a letter to Samuel Johnson, dated March 24, 1730, that is, some twenty years after Berkeley published his first works, he comes to say that:

I have no objection against calling the ideas in the mind of God archetypes of yours. But I object against those archetypes by philosophers supposed to be real things, and to have an absolute rational existence distinct from their being perceived by any mind whatsoever. (Berkeley 1949: II, 292)

This statement is of greatest importance as it allows us to realize that Berkeley was much against the use of the term “archetype” with a Lockean meaning, that is, against “archetype” as meaning simply an external object, a “real thing”, whose mental image (or idea) is reflected in our mind, and which can be said to be the “model”, “original” or “archetype”, on which that image is modeled. Given the then prevailing influence of Lockean opinions and language in the intellectual and philosophical circles, this explains to a great extent why Berkeley was so hesitant in using the term “archetype”, still without rejecting it. On the one hand, he was inclined to resorting to the term for its metaphysical implications and the problems its employment would have solved in *his* philosophy; yet, on the other hand, he was aware that “archetype” still had Lockean connotations he did not want to take aboard. This is exactly what most commentators have noticed about the issue in question. T. E. Jessop, for example, says: “On archetypes not as supposed corporeal originals of mental copies but as models in the divine intellect, Berkeley seems to have had an open mind.” (Jessop 1949: 78, n. 1)

A very important, not to say decisive, step forward, as far as the employment of the *Platonic* notion of archetypes is concerned, is taken when Berkeley, in *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, comes to recognize that: “I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things.” (Berkeley 1949: II, 244) The things are, as it were, *reified ideas*, they exist only in so far as are the expressions of a higher order of reality — that is, the order of ideas. In a remarkably precise manner, this last Berkeleian statement virtually contains, or summarizes up, a fundamental principle of Platonism: that this sensible world we see around is but a reflection of a world of ideas, or archetypes, that all things in “this world” are — in a sense — but some sort of “embodied ideas”, “terrestrial” shades of a higher, “celestial” ontological order. And in the process of

bringing things into being it is God who plays the decisive part. Thanks to His intervention, a process of “reflection” takes place, through which things in the world appear as more or less faithful “copies” of the archetypes: “God is the supreme soul, the Mind which knows the intelligible objects but whose function is to create the sensible world in terms of the intelligible model furnished to it by the Ideas.” (Feibleman 1971: 28) From this point of view, Berkeley’s understanding of the role of God, and of the use He makes of the archetypes, is strikingly similar to that of the traditional Platonism:

All objects are eternally known by God, or which is the same thing, have an eternal existence in his mind: but when things before imperceptible to creatures, are by a decree of God, made perceptible to them; then are they said to begin a relative existence, with respect to created minds. (Berkeley 1949: II, 252 [*Three Dialogues...*])

This passage casts an excellent light on Berkeley’s use of the notion of archetypes, and their role in “producing” the sensible world. “All objects” means of course the archetypes, the “models” of the physical objects we come across in the world: they have an eternal existence in the mind of God, and only at some point in time, by a decree of God they cause another order of reality — it is, presumably, what we read about in the Book of Genesis. This is an order of reality “relative” to our perceiving faculties, dependent on our mind: it exists only insofar as we perceive it. Now, what we do on our encounter with the world is precisely a *re-construction*, from our point of view, of the process through which God instituted things simply by thinking them: we perceive things and thus render them existent. And by so doing, we can safely be said to be *re-producing*, on a much smaller scale, *en miniature* as it were, the divine process.

This being said, it will not be too surprising that John Dillon, in a comparative study on Plotinus and Berkeley, comes to openly conclude that in his using of the term “idea” itself Berkeley was in fact under a strong Platonic influence, borrowing its meaning from Plotinus: “En se servant du term ‘idée’, Berkeley est soumis à l’influence de l’usage du mot grec *idéa* chez Plotin, et dans la tradition du platonisme disponible à Berkeley, il allait de soi que ces *idéai* étaient des pensées dans l’intellect d’un dieu suprême.” (Dillon 1997: 107) As a matter of fact, once embarked on his ambitious project of understanding the world as some form of “unfolding” of God, Berkeley could not

avoid doing so: thanks to their elegant functionality and explicative virtues, in a way he *had to* accept the archetypes, along with all the Platonic philosophizing clustered over the centuries around them.

Moreover, there are, in Dillon's view, some other similarities that could be found between Plotinus' idealism and Berkeley's. For example, within the context of a Platonic theory of archetypes, there must be some individualised modality through which the divine archetypes come to be effective in terms of bringing the sensible things into existence, and it is at this point that Plotinus sees the sensible things as been "radiated", or "issued", in some hierarchical way, from the One, the supreme metaphysical reality:

All things which exist, as long as they remain in being, necessarily produce from their own substances, in dependence of their present power, a surrounding reality directed to what is outside them, a kind of image of the archetypes from which it was produced: fire produces the heat which comes from it; snow does not only keep its cold inside itself. Perfumed things show this particularly clearly. As long as they exist, something is diffused from themselves around them, and what is near them enjoys their existence. (*Enneads* V.1.6.27-40)

Even if it would be only in *Siris* that Berkeley would take over, almost literally, such a view as this just quoted from Plotinus, incorporating it in his own thinking and making extensive use of it, at this stage (that is, when writing the *Three Dialogues*...) there is nevertheless a sense in which Berkeley could be said to be not completely alien from some of the implications of Plotinus' doctrine:

*there is a mind which affects me every moment with all the sensible impressions I perceive.* And from the variety, order, and manner of these, I conclude the Author of them to be *wise, powerful, and good, beyond comprehension.* [...] the things by me perceived are known by the understanding, and produced by the will, of an infinite spirit. (Berkeley 1949: II, 215)

God is not at all a *quiet presence* in Berkeley's world, but he continuously reveals himself to our minds; in Berkeley God *overwhelms us with his presence*. As such, above all other similarities one might encounter in Berkeley and Plotinus, there is this one that makes their philosophies so strikingly akin. Namely, in Dillon's words,

le point où les deux philosophes se rencontrent et où ils semblent s'éclairer l'un l'autre [...] c'est leur opposition radicale à toute théorie qui voudrait insérer une différence entre ce qui se trouve disponible à nos sens et quelque substance qui leur est sous-jacente. (Dillon 1997: 107)

As a result, in both Plotinus and Berkeley, what we immediately encounter in the world is the direct effect of a generous Divinity. There is no place, in either of these two philosophies, for any intermediary substances, source of alienation and useless digressions from our true mission in this world.

#### 2.1.5. "The two worlds"

An immediate logical consequence of the theory that there are archetypes in the mind of God is the idea that there are *two worlds*: in virtue of its nature, the world of archetypes (*kosmos noetos*) implies the existence of a world of sensible "copies" (*kosmos aisthetos*), of things made in their image, existing as mere "earthly" imitations of the "celestial" models. A theory of archetypes thus implies necessarily "the recognition of an unseen world of unchanging reality behind the flux of phenomena, a spiritual universe compared with which the world of appearance grew pale and unsubstantial and became only a symbol or even an illusion" (Inge 1926: 7-8) This is actually (another) central doctrine professed by virtually all Platonic movements, whether ancient or modern, a doctrine with important consequences not only in metaphysical terms, but also in anthropological and soteriological terms. It is this doctrine that makes Plato, as it has been said, "the paradigmatic representative of a perennial, 'other worldly' tendency which has never ceased to attract or repel, the emotions as much as the intellect." (Cooper 1996: 107) In light of this twofold state of reality, the human beings are now to be defined by their *dual* nature<sup>8</sup>:

We human beings belong to both worlds: clearly to this world (which is why we call it *this* world), but in virtue of our possessing (or strictly: being) a soul (strictly: an intellect, *nous*), we belong to the spiritual world.

For Plato the whole point of philosophy is to secure our passage to the spiritual world: philosophy is “practising death”, *melete thanatou* (*Phaedo* 81a), for death is the separation of the soul from the body. (Louth 1994: 54)

The true philosophical and intellectual accomplishment means, in a Platonic context, to understand what lies behind the misleading multiplicity of things, to find out their eternal “patterns” or “forms”. Obviously, our immediate knowledge of the external world is only a knowledge of sensible “copies”, it being impossible to be otherwise, but the most important thing is to understand their true nature, and not to mistake them for their “archetypes” — which might be sometimes a difficult job because although the copies “lack the perfection of the Form they are nevertheless regarded as ‘imitating’ the Form; they are like it even though they fall short of it.” (Sheppard 1994: 6) That means that an appropriate knowledge of the world presupposes, on the Platonic knower’s side, an acute awareness of the specific ontological “weight” of each class of things that his mind is concerned with at every moment.

Let me also observe, in passing, that, under the massive influence of a Platonizing St. Augustine, this representation of how our knowledge of the world is constituted, was to become one of the most widespread notions in the philosophy of the Middle Ages, before the rediscovery of Aristotelism. Important and influential medieval thinkers saw the knowledge of the world as a progressive and liberating ascension from the sensible level of things to their intelligible source — namely, God, truly the only reality towards which we should permanently direct our epistemic enterprises and intellectual efforts:

Medieval versions of Augustine’s account of a progression from sense-perception by way of image-making and abstraction to a truly spiritual and rational encounter with the mind of God are to be found in, for instance, Anselm’s *Monologium* and Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*; but the notion is widely diffused in many authors. (Evans 1993: 38)

It is this doctrine postulating the existence of two worlds that Berkeley readily admits. As a matter of fact, he could not have done otherwise as such an idea was the logical result of the principles on which his approach had been based. In *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, his mouthpiece, Philonous comes to ask:

do I not acknowledge a twofold state of things, the one ectypal or natural, the other archetypal and eternal? The former was created in time; the latter existed from everlasting in the mind of God. Is not this agreeable to the common notion of divines? or is any more than this necessary in order to conceive the Creation? (Berkeley 1949: II, 254 [*Three Dialogues...*])

In other words, insofar as things are perceived *by us* they are ideas, “second hand” realities, “imitations”, whereas insofar as they are comprehended *by God* they are archetypes, eternal models upon which sensible things are made.

More than that, in *Alciphron*, written some twenty years later, Berkeley would express views not only consonant with those expressed in his early writings, but in a sense even more deeply Platonic. The fundamental metaphysical attitude betrayed by a passage like the following one is likely to be found in any important writing of the Platonic tradition: “To me it seems the man can see neither deep nor far who is not sensible of his own misery, sinfulness, and dependence; who doth not perceive that this present world is not designed or adapted to make rational souls happy.” (Berkeley 1950: III, 178) In a sense, it is this kind of *existential* anxiety that confer upon Berkeley’s thinking an even more Platonic flavor. If in his earlier writings, Berkeley’s Platonism was rather theoretical, conceived of as a sophisticated system of metaphysical notions by means of which the existence and nature of things were explained as in detail as possible, it was in *Alciphron* that Berkeley allowed himself to express the specific anxieties and feelings accompanying a Platonic way of seeing the world.

There is nevertheless a certain ambiguity in Berkeley’s doctrine of the “twofold state of things”, which gives rise to a difference between his own view and the traditional Platonic view of “the two worlds”. This ambiguity is originated in his radical denial of the existence of matter. Plato himself allowed matter (*hule*) some sort of existence, even if a problematic, inferior and obscure one, and so did many Platonists after him, even though some others, Plotinus included, took a view closer to Berkeley’s<sup>9</sup>. Berkeley instead did not recognize any sort of material existence and reduced the traditional Platonic opposition between “the two worlds”, one of ideas and the other of physical objects, to an opposition (somehow less dramatic than in Plato) between a realm of archetypes, existing in God’s mind, and a realm of sensible objects, occasioned by our



perceiving God's archetypes. (Of course, there is some element of novelty in Berkeley's solution, which novelty is still to be dealt with by scholars of Platonism.) In this respect, as John Dillon suggests, Berkeley is even more radical than Plotinus:

Pour Berkeley, même plus que pour Plotin, le monde extérieur des objets physiques, au delà des sens, constituait une menace. Il lui semblait que, si on admettait l'existence d'une couche matérielle inférieure aux qualités primaires et secondaires [...] on défiait ainsi l'omnipotence et la providence de Dieu. Ces objets matériels de Locke seraient des entités extra mentales qui existeraient en dépit de la connaissance de quelque esprit. Ils seraient donc des entités dont l'existence serait tout à fait indépendante de l'esprit — même de l'esprit divin." (Dillon 1997: 100-1)

On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that such an ambiguity is to be found not only in Berkeley's philosophy. It probably derives from what Andrew Louth calls the "unresolved problem for Christian Platonism". When God occupies so important a place within a system of thought, when — according to such a system — He permeates everything and it is only him who renders the whole of reality intelligible (as he does both in Berkeley and in the Christian Platonists referred to by Louth), then it becomes difficult indeed to find any appropriate room for the existence of matter as such, or of any other bodily reality. There is a sense in which, in these systems, matter tends to "dematerialise" itself..

#### **2.1.6. "The book of the world"**

(Since the next chapter of this thesis — Chapter Three — will be dedicated precisely to the place that Berkeley occupies in the *liber mundi* tradition, I will deal here with this topic very briefly, only insofar as this is necessary for a better understanding of the Platonic character of Berkeley's early philosophical writings.)

However dramatic the gap between "the two worlds" might appear in traditional Platonism, there is nevertheless at least one means of bridging it. Very schematically put, it consists in considering the immediately visible reality ("this world") as a mere system of signs, or symbols, by means of which God communicates with us, keeping a living

relationship with his creatures, and informing them about his nature. Even if Plato himself did not use the topic as such, in the Middle Ages the Christian Platonists used to a large extent the topic in the form of the metaphor of the “book of nature” or “book of the world” (*liber naturae* or *liber mundi*). As A. E. Taylor has pointed out, according to such a Christian Platonic view, nature “is only half-real”, at the same time suggesting the existence of a “further reality which lies beyond itself”. Nature is “a system of symbols”, and our ascension to the ultimate reality takes place as a result of “learning to pass from the symbols to the non-sensuous realities symbolized” (Taylor 1963: 41-2) Saint Bonaventure, for example, says that “the creature of the world is like a book in which the creative Trinity is reflected, represented, and written” (*Creatura mundi est quasi quidam liber, in quo relucet, repraesentatur et legitur Trinitas fabricatrix*) (*Breviloquium*, II, chap. 12). The physical world is, so to speak, “redeemed” in the Christian Platonism, being radically transformed into something *meaningful* to the greatest extent.

It is precisely this ancient topic of the “book of the world” that is one of the notions most frequently resorted to by George Berkeley. In the shape of a “divine language”, or of an “optic language”, Berkeley employs the topic in almost all his important philosophical writings, and considers it as properly expressing the essence of his philosophy. In his first philosophical writing, namely *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), he says that

the proper objects of vision constitute an universal language of the Author of Nature, whereby we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies, as also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive of them. It is by their information that we are principally guided in all the transactions and concerns of life. (Berkeley 1948: I, 231)

Then, in *The Principles of Human Knowledge* Berkeley talks, in a manner reminding us of the medieval authors, of the true mission of the philosopher when he is to approach the natural world:

it is the searching after, and endeavoring to understand those signs instituted by the Author of Nature, that ought to be the employment of the natural philosopher, and not the pretending to explain things by corporeal causes; which doctrine seems to have too much estranged the minds of

men from that active principle, that supreme and wise spirit, in whom we live, move, and have our being. (Berkeley 1949: 69-70)<sup>10</sup>

For George Berkeley the world is thus a book (“an universal language”) in a fundamental way, and not only as a rhetorical device. For him “the whole system of Nature is a system of signs, a visual divine language, speaking to our minds of God” (Copleston 1994: V, 248). He clearly speaks of the existence of an author who has “written” or rather “spoken” the world (“the Author of Nature”), of the existence of an author/subject relationship between him and the world, as well as well of the existence of a “reader” whose ultimate aim should be to transcend the “sign”, which is the immediately visible world (*kosmos aisthetos*), to the “signified thing”, which is the world of the divine archetypes (*kosmos noetos*).

## **2.2. Platonism in *Siris***

### **2.2.1. Preliminary remarks**

Although, as we have seen, it would be possible to talk, in Berkeley’s early philosophical works, of an entire network of Platonic notions, “traces” and mind sets, there is a sense in which their Platonism might still be seen as “veiled”, or “hidden”, behind the (non-Platonic) terminology and ways of thinking presupposed by the “new philosophy”. (This is why it has been difficult to reach some agreement, among Berkeley scholars, as to the Platonism of his early writings, some of these authors being utterly opposed to accepting such an idea.) It is in Berkeley’s last published work, *Siris* (1744), that one encounters the specific topics, the whole scope, manner, and unmistakable “flavor” of the old Platonic style of philosophizing. In *Siris* Berkeley makes fully explicit and avows openly what in his early writings had sometimes only an implicit Platonic character.

Since, on the one hand, the contents of *Siris* makes the object of another chapter in this thesis (Chapter Four) and, on the other, its Platonism is somehow speaking for itself, I have decided to focus the remainder of the present chapter on the literary form of

*Siris* rather than on its contents, in attempt to find out the particular rhetorical procedures through which Berkeley seeks to insert himself in the Platonic tradition. Therefore, the main question I will be trying to answer in the following is: is there any sense in which the literary *form* itself of this writing comes to betray certain Platonic suppositions or ways of thinking?

In trying to answer this question I will have to discuss a certain way of understanding the nature and role of philosophy, characterizing especially the Platonic tradition: namely, philosophy as a systematic attempt at recovering a primordial/immemorial wisdom, or, to put it otherwise, *philosophy as palimpsest*. The metaphor of the “palimpsest” seems to me particularly useful in this context since it suggests, with a certain degree of accuracy, the existence of a multileveled, multifaceted discourse, and the notion that, within a given philosophical text, it is always possible to come across fragments, or “layers”, belonging to earlier authors or writings. This second section of the chapter will have, in its turn, two parts: 1) In the first part (2.2.2.) I will very briefly explore those elements of the Platonic pointing to the existence, throughout it, of a conception of philosophy as palimpsest. 2) Then, the second part (2.2.3.) will be dedicated to showing how this topic works within a particular case, namely in Berkeley’s *Siris*.

### **2.2.2. In search for a primordial wisdom**

An however rapid look at Plato’s dialogues reveals the perplexing fact that one of the most original and influential philosophers ever frequently prefers to disguise himself, resorting to various masks: he appears, more often than not, to play the modest role of the mouthpiece *for others*. Not only does he attribute his main teachings to Socrates, but he often employs mysterious characters to whom he attributes doctrines and myths that had been supposedly established a “very long time ago”. He repeatedly appeals to figures of the past (be they real or legendary, Greek or otherwise) as preservers, or conveyers, of a perennial genuine wisdom, of an almost celestial origin, and compared to which his own

philosophy — or any other philosophy of his time — seem to be, as it were, a mere imitation. For example, Plato is fascinated with the — already in his time — ancient Egypt, and, in several of his dialogues, he makes numerous enthusiastic references to the Egyptian world, resting some of his philosophical claims on a supposedly Egyptian tradition of wisdom and inspired knowledge. In general, to our amazement — and, anyway, to some of his modern commentators' embarrassment — rather than simply following his own arguments and ways of thinking, Plato seems often very keen to mix ancient myths, sayings, and “exotic” stories with his own philosophical line of argumentation, and — more than that — he seems to highly value the employment of such procedures.

It is worth noticing that this is not in Plato merely a rhetorical device, some technical subtlety employed for literary purposes only, but such a way of thinking essentially stems from his own way of considering the past, from his philosophy of history, as he revealed it in some of his dialogues. Namely, it is the view that history is a process of decay and corruption, that the “best things” occurred sometime “at the beginning”, and that, with the passing of time, things are *necessarily* getting worse and worse, until another cosmic cycle starts anew. For example, in the *Statesman*, he makes the “Eleatic Stranger” speak of a “golden age” in which everything was marked by some form of original perfection. The Stranger kindly invites the young Socrates to follow him in his attempt “to explain the origin of our traditions concerning man’s life in that paradise”:

A god was their shepherd and had charge of them and fed them even as men now have charge of the other creatures inferior to them - for men are closer to the divine than they. When God was shepherd there were no political constitutions and no taking of wives and begetting of children. For all men rose up anew into life out of the earth... they had fruits without stint from trees and bushes. ...For the most part they disported themselves in the open needing neither clothing nor couch, for the seasons were blended evenly so as to work them no hurt. (Plato 1961: 1037 [271e-272a, transl. J.B. Skemp])

Of course, what matters here, from the perspective of a history of philosophy seen as a *palimpsest*, is not so much the contents of the Platonic myth taken in itself, with all their

political implications, nor the specific narratives or anecdotes that the myth bring forth, but rather the elements of philosophy of history that Plato exhibited in the *Statesman* by the means of this myth. For, I believe, it is precisely in Plato's vision of history as one marked by a primordial fall and then characterised by a continual decay that the notion of philosophy as an attempt at recovering a primordial, "paradisiacal" knowledge originated.

Very briefly, according to the myth narrated in the *Statesman*, humanity as we know it appeared as a result of some primordial disaster after which the state of the world changed decisively for the worse:

Bereft of the guardian care of the daemon who had governed and reared us up, we had become weak and helpless ... Men lacked all tools and all crafts in the early years. The earth no longer supplied their food spontaneously and they did not yet know how to win it for themselves: in the absence of necessity they had never been made able to learn this. For all these reasons they were in direst straits. It was to meet this need that the gifts of the gods famous in ancient story were given, along with such teaching and instruction as was indispensable. Fire was the gift of Prometheus, the secrets of the crafts were made known by Hephaestus and his partner in craftsmanship, and seeds and plants were made known by other gods. (*Ibid.*: 1039 [274b-d])

As a consequence of this view of history, the doctrines professed, as well as the ways of life recommended, by our remote ancestors were necessarily much better and more appropriate than ours, more genuine and completely fitted for the prosperity of human nature. As such, the best thing for us to do is to try and resuscitate the teachings of that golden past as much as we can. For there are reasons to believe that, as the Eleatic Stranger puts it, "the happiness of the men of that era" might have been "a thousandfold greater than ours." (*Ibid.*: 1038 [272c])

Some centuries after Plato, in a perfectly Platonic manner, Plotinus claimed that he was only a commentator on Plato, doing nothing more than to explain and clarify Plato's philosophy to his own disciples. However strange this might appear to us today, Plotinus conceived of his mission simply as a teacher of the Platonic philosophy. In his *Enneads* the references to Plato are numerous and highly appreciative: "We can scarcely do better ...than follow Plato." (Plotinus 1956: 86); or "We have to fall back on the illustrious Plato, who uttered many noble sayings about the Soul..." (*Ibid.*: 357) As one

rightly remarked, “Plotinus would have been surprised at being thought of as the founder of a new school, Neoplatonism. He considered himself a Platonist, pure and simple, without prefix or qualification — in other words, as an interpreter and follower of Plato.” (Paul Henry in Plotinus 1956: xxxvii)

And this sophisticated form of philosophical modesty eventually became one of the distinctive features of all subsequent Platonic movements, in which not only the authorities cited by Plato or Plotinus were venerated, but also Plato and Plotinus themselves, as well as other supposedly kindred figures, whether historical or fictitious (Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, etc.). All of them were seen as forming a “golden chain”, through which the true wisdom of the remote past could still be conveyed to those living in the immediate present. They saw their own role within this chain as being limited to simply conveying the received knowledge to their audiences, in an attempt to make sure that this privileged knowledge is in no way altered or corrupted, but faithfully transmitted to the next generation of scholars. In other words, knowledge was not so much *produced* as *administrated*, not *discovered*, but *taught*.

Over the centuries, this notion of a “golden chain” become absolutely central to the Platonic tradition. It came to be regarded as so important that, for example, among the Renaissance Platonists there was a widespread opinion according to which

Plato was the heir to a line of philosophers going back to earliest times. In this scheme of things, Plato was the conveyor of ancient wisdom deriving ultimately from Adam and shared by others in a line of ancient sages which also included Zoroaster, Orpheus and Hermes Trismegistus. Thus in the Renaissance, the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato rendered his philosophy at once more systematic as a coherent whole, and more eclectic, incorporating strands of thought not properly belonging to Plato. (Hutton, 1994: 70)

Now, it is fair enough to say that one of the theoretical presuppositions behind this vision on the history of philosophy must have been the notion that the source of the true (philosophical) knowledge was to be found not in the limited faculties of the individuals (living necessarily in deeply corrupted epochs), nor in the empirical observations of (or experiments with) things in the world around, but only in the “old books”, legends and

myths, privileged containers of all important revelations, as well as the visible embodiments of an immemorial tradition.

This will be the case with the modern representatives of the Platonic tradition, too. The Cambridge Platonists, for example, basically shared with almost all previous Platonic authors the view that there was some “golden chain” connecting them, in a subtle way, to the most ancient sages and doctrines. As Ernst Cassirer noticed, for

Cudworth and More, as for Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, Plato formed but one link in that golden chain of divine revelation, which besides him includes Moses and Zoroaster, Socrates and Christ, Hermes Trismegistus and Plotinus. Plato is for them the living proof that the true Philosophy is never opposed to genuine Christianity. He is the ancestor and patron of that *pia philosophia*, which existed even before the Christian revelation, and which has proved its force and vitality throughout the centuries. (Cassirer 1953: 9)

Ernst Cassirer is perfectly right to speak of a curious “intermingling of the holy and the profane, of the Christian and the heathen” in the case of the Cambridge Platonists (*Ibid.*: 25) Indeed, the perfect compatibility, or the complete synthesis, of (pagan) Greek philosophy with the requirements of the Christian faith seemed to be, in their cases, something beyond any reasonable doubt. In light of their unifying principles, Christian and heathen authors, beyond any superficial disagreements that might seem to have existed between them, partook in the same tradition. Let us consider only an isolated example: namely, a fragment by John Smith, one of the most prominent figures among the Cambridge Platonists. *What* he talks here about does not matter so much, but *the manner* in which he deals with the subject is very significant for the purposes of the present discussion:

When *Zoroaster's* Scholars asked him what they should do to get *winged Souls*, such as might soar aloft in the bright beams of divine Truth, he bids them bathe themselves in *the waters of Life*: they asking what they were; he tells them *the four Cardinal Vertues*, which are *the four rivers of Paradise*. It is but a thin, airy knowledge that is got by meer Speculation, which is usher'd in by Syllogisms and Demonstrations; but that which springs forth from true Goodness, is *theiotion ti pases apodeixeos*, as Origen speaks [...] We may, like those in Plato's deep pit with their faces



bended downwards, converse with *Sounds* and *Shadows*; but not with the *Life* and *Substance* of Truth... (Smith 1969: 130)

As it clearly appears, John Smith finds absolutely no inconsistency in putting together such differing (and, for many authors, conflicting) sources within one and the same paragraph. For, to him, beyond any local differences that might have existed between the Persian, Greek, and Christian authors he quotes, there is a fundamental underlying unity making them contributors to the same tradition of the true wisdom, to the same *philosophia perennis*. The differences that might have existed between their principles, doctrines, backgrounds and purposes, are decisively overshadowed — in Smith's view, and in continuity with an entire tradition of Platonic thought — by their deeper similarities, by their having been active parts of the same primordial wisdom.

### 2.2.3. Berkeley's case

A striking characteristic of *Siris* is its purposefully impersonal *écriture*. There is, so to speak, an impressive amount of modesty involved in this writing as, within it, Berkeley seems just to appeal to ancient authorities and sources (mostly Platonic, alchemic and esoteric, but also modern), and report others' opinions on the subject he deals with, without trying very much — especially in the last (Platonic-speculative) part of the work — to give *his own version* of it. We can eventually learn his views not by simply reading his text, but by gradually realizing what is *his attitude* towards the authors and sources he quotes. There is a sharp contrast between this manner of writing (doing) philosophy and Berkeley's earlier style, as it is revealed in such works as *The Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. Almost needless to say, this manner of writing philosophy opposes Berkeley to most of the other promoters of the “new philosophy” (Descartes, Locke, etc.). Based primarily on the supposition that, in virtue of its natural “lights”, powers and abilities, the human mind can grasp, and then describe, the true nature of things, these representatives of the “new philosophy” did not feel in general that they had to appeal to ancient authorities in order to validate the truths

about the natural world they were talking about. Indeed, such appeals to venerated authorities (either sacred or profane) was then perceived as having been massively discredited by many Scholastic authors (whose excessive bookishness was actually one of the factors making possible the rise of the “new philosophy” itself).

While in his early works Berkeley did — following the guiding lines of the new manner of philosophizing — try to expound his views only by appeal to the “natural light” of reason, and using, in weaving his discourse, basically the same rhetorical tools as those employed in shaping the “scientific discourse” of his day, almost without any references to past authorities, in *Siris* the repeated appeals to venerated authors and ancient sages who supposedly “grasped” the truth of things is, so to speak, Berkeley’s main working method. His own contribution, as he seems to see it, consists only in a better understanding of how the “great tradition” works, how the ancient authors are connected to each other, and how they complement one another. In his last writing Berkeley conceived of his own role as an extremely modest one and he apparently gave up any “ambition” to discover and express the “nature of things” by himself, being content only with telling how the ancients, long before him, discovered and expressed the most important truths one can ever attain:

If we may believe Diogenes Laertius, the Pythagorean philosophers thought there was a certain pure heat or fire, which had somewhat divine in it, by the participation whereof men became allied to the gods. And according to the Platonists, heaven is not defined so much by its local situation as by its purity. The purest and most excellent fire, that is heaven, saith Ficinus. And again, the hidden fire that everyone exerts itself, he calls celestial. (Berkeley 1953: V; 103-4)

He seeks, as it were, to make his writing play the role of a *palimpsest*, the fortunate occasion on which *others’* writings come to reveal themselves. Obviously, the underlying idea here is that there is — or must be — some fundamental truth “hidden” in these ancient writings, a truth of which modern authors have been unfortunately deprived, and which could to a certain extent be resuscitated by a proper re-assertion and cultivation of the classical scholarship:

It was an opinion of remote antiquity that the world was an animal [...]. If we may trust the Hermaic writings, the Egyptians thought all things did partake of life. This opinion was also so general and current among the Greeks that Plutarch asserts all others held the world to be an animal, and governed by Providence, except Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus. [...] from all the various tones, actions, and passions of the universe, they supposed one symphony, one animal act and life to result. (*Ibid.*: V, 129)

Against a clearly and repeatedly asserted *Christian* religious and intellectual background, Berkeley quotes and makes extensive use of opinions of an amazingly diverse nature and origin. And, I believe, this fact places him decisively in the long tradition of thinking I dealt with in the previous section (2.2.2.). For what is interesting at this point is that, following exactly the same discursive practices as the Platonic authors discussed above, Berkeley finds it perfectly justified to quote, within — say — one and the same sentence, figures belonging to the ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, the Hellenistic world, and so on, clearly implying in this way the existence of an essential agreement between these authors and the possibility of their being considered as forming one and the same “family of minds”. For example, Berkeley writes:

It is a doctrine among other speculations contained in the Hermaic writings that all things are One. And it is not improbable that Orpheus, Parmenides, and others among the Greeks, might have derived their notion of *to hen*, THE ONE, from Egypt. Though that subtle metaphysician Parmenides, in his doctrine of *hen hestos*, seems to have added something of his own. (*Ibid.*: V, 134)

Each of the authors Berkeley quotes is, as it were, an important link within a “golden chain” of esoteric knowledge, a chain through which we could possibly get connected with the genuine wisdom of the past, and extract from it a perfectly valid science for coping with the present. Almost needless to say, any *increase in knowledge* — *augmentatio scientiarum* — could under such circumstances occur not in terms of an enlargement of the amount of information we have about the surrounding world (along with a better systematization and clarification of it), but only in terms of a more comprehensive understanding of *the philosophical past*, of the *Tradition*, as it were, and through a better interpretation and clarification of it. Ideally, all the information we could

have of the natural world is *filtered* through the ancient doctrines, and — in this way — *validated*:

Jamblichus declares the world to be one animal, in which the parts, however distant each from other, are nevertheless related and connected by one common nature. And he teacheth, what is also a received notion of the Pythagoreans and Platonics, that there is no chasm in nature, but a Chain or Scale of beings rising by gentle uninterrupted gradations from the lowest to the highest, each nature being informed and perfected by the participation of a higher.. (*Ibid.*: V, 128-9)

As far as the *authorship* problem is concerned, it should be clear by now that an unspoken supposition laying behind this way of thinking (and writing) is that there must be some primordial *anonymous text*, one and the same, not conceived of by any human author, but in some mysterious way revealed to the humans at an immemorial time, and containing virtually all the ultimate truths at which human mind could ever possibly, at its best, arrive. This text (Text) is “out there”, it has some mysterious, yet certain existence, and all what we can do about it is to sharpen our intellectual and critical faculties so that to be able to properly “extract” it, as it were, from the multitude of texts, legends, stories, myths, and other relics, we encounter in our dealings with the past.

As a consequence, the crucial mission that the scholars, philosophers, and sages of this world have to accomplish is only to preserve, convey, and explain the contents of this primordial text to those of their fellow-humans less endowed to do so by themselves.

#### **2.2.4. Berkeley's Library**

Before concluding this chapter, let me just add that, by a fortunate chance, there is at the British Museum a catalogue of Berkeley's family library as it was put up for sale in 1796<sup>11</sup>. It is a forty-six pages document, listing over 1600 titles<sup>12</sup>. It goes without saying that such a document is of greatest importance for anyone studying Berkeley's thought, its formation and sources. A careful and detailed study of this document, in connection with, say, a study of the disciplines and authors studied by Berkeley as a student at Trinity

College, Dublin, would massively contribute to the proper understanding of his philosophical formation and background. As far as the topic of the present discussion is concerned, it will suffice here to say that this library contained, among other things, *four* different editions of Plato's *opera* (in Greek, Latin and French)<sup>13</sup>, Plotinus' *Opera Philosophica*, Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, some work by Philo Judaeus, two titles by Origen, two titles by Moses Maimonides, "Dionysii Opera", Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, Boehme's *Aurora* and many others. The presence of all these works, and of other similar ones, in Berkeley's library might be seen as a visible trace that his deep immersion in the Platonic tradition left in the world.

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> "The Neoplatonists stressed and developed certain aspects of Plato's metaphysics and of the resulting view of man. For them the important part of man is his soul and any discussion of the soul's abilities and aspirations must be seen in the context of the universe as a whole." (Anne Sheppard, "Plato and the Neoplatonists" in Baldwin & Hutton [eds.] 1994: 6)

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the relationship was more complex than it could appear at a first sight. Christianity borrowed certain ideas from Platonism, at the same time criticizing or rejecting others: "Certain Platonic doctrines were fairly uniformly rejected, notably the doctrine of the Pre-existence of Souls; gradually the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* came to distinguish Christian theology from developments in Platonism, notably in Neoplatonism [...] This piecemeal adaptation of Platonism makes it, in fact, difficult to put one's finger on unambiguously Platonic elements in Christianity." (Andrew Louth, "Platonism and the Middle English Mystics" in Baldwin & Hutton [eds.] 1994: 53)

<sup>3</sup> For example, on the particular problem of the archetypes in Berkeley's philosophy there is already number of studies by Peter S. Wenz (Wenz 1976), Charles J. McCracken (McCracken 1979), C.C.W. Taylor (Taylor 1985), Stephen H. Daniel (Daniel 2001), and others.

<sup>4</sup> "As he grows older he gains confidence; he conceals less from prudential motives; he makes less and less use of the current (and confusing) jargon of the philosophers; and he widens his horizon and finds his kinship more surely with the ancient philosophers." (Ardley 1968: 10)

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter Five in this dissertation for a detailed discussion of this problem.

<sup>6</sup> He constantly claimed that his immaterialist view is, and should be considered, perfectly compatible with the basic principles of the Christian *Weltanschauung*: "to a Christian it cannot surely be shocking to say, the

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real tree existing without his mind is truly known and comprehended by (that is, *exists in*) the infinite mind of God. Probably he may not at first glance be aware of the direct and immediate proof there is of this, inasmuch as the very being of a tree, or any other sensible thing, implies a mind wherein it is." (Berkeley 1949: II, 235 [*Three Dialogues...*])

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the criticisms brought by Robert McKim to Wenz's ideas (McKim 1982).

<sup>8</sup> More about the Platonic dualism will be said in Chapter Seven (especially 7.2.3.).

<sup>9</sup> Dillon speaks of "...les procédés philosophiques pour 'déconstruction' du monde matériel objectif que ces deux philosophes [Berkeley and Plotinus] partageaient également." (Dillon 1997: 100)

<sup>10</sup> Some twenty years later, in *Alciphron or The Minute Philosopher* (1732) he re-affirms the importance of the *liber mundi* topic: "God speaks to men by the intervention and use of arbitrary, outward, sensible signs, having no resemblance or necessary connexion with the things they stand for and suggest; ...by innumerable combinations of these signs, an endless variety of things is discovered and made known to us; ...we are thereby instructed or informed in their different natures; ...and we are directed how to regulate our motions, and how to act with respect to things distant from us, as well in time and place." (Berkeley 1950: III, 149)

<sup>11</sup> The front page of the auction catalogue reads:

"A Catalogue of the Valuable Library of the late Right Rev. Dr. Berkeley, Lord Bishop of Cloyne. Together with the Libraries of his Son and Grandson, the late Rev. George Berkeley, D. D., Prebendary of Canterbury, and the late George Monk Berkeley, Esq. Including a good Collections of Books in *Divinity, Foreign and English Domestic History, Voyages, Travels, Classics, Belles Lettres, Miscellanies, Poetry*, and in almost in every Branch of Polite Literature, in both modern and dead Languages. N.B. Several *Editiones Principes* in the fifteenth and sixteenth Centuries. *Which will be Sold by Auction*, by *Leigh and Sotheby*, Booksellers, At their House in York-Street, Covent-Garden, On Moday, June 6, 1796, and the Five following Days. Beginning each Day at Twelve o'Clock. To be viewed to the Time of Sale."

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of the fortunes and contents of this catalogue, see Aaron's article "A Catalogue of Berkeley's Library" (Aaron 1932).

<sup>13</sup> The library in question was a family library, containing also books purchased after Berkeley's death, by his son and grandson. But I think that Jessop's following remark is applicable not only to the books by Plato, but also to those by the Platonic authors: "The sale-catalogue of Berkeley's family library (1796) lists four different editions of the works of Plato. If we may judge from the directions of interest of Berkeley's son and grandson, the volume had probably not been their." (T. E. Jessop, "Editor's Introduction" in Berkeley 1949: II, 156, n. 1 [*Three Dialogues...*])

## **Chapter Three:**

### **George Berkeley and the *liber mundi* tradition**

As it has been showed in the previous chapter, one of the hallmarks of the Platonic tradition is a consideration of the whole visible world in symbolic terms: namely, as a coherent system of signs, as a sophisticatedly encrypted *message* that God is continuously sending to his creatures. Born somehow out of the chapter dealing with Berkeley's place in the Platonic tradition, the present chapter is a systematic attempt at considering George Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy in close connection to the topic of the Book of the World (*liber mundi* or *liber naturae*), with the twofold objective of pointing out, on the one hand, those of the medieval implications of the topic that Berkeley preserved in his philosophy, and, on the other hand, the "novelties", or at least some of the major changes, he brought forth in his use of the topic.

The chapter is structured in two major sections: 1) the first part is a brief historical survey of the tradition of *liber mundi* as it developed within the Christian world from St. Paul to George Berkeley. Given the tremendous complexity, multifaceted and interdisciplinary character of this tradition, I will limit myself only to very few moments and features of it, a significant number of other implications of the *liber mundi* topic being only hinted at in footnotes or simply left aside. 2) The second section deals almost exclusively with the presence of the topic in Berkeley's philosophy in the shape of the "visual language".

Let me also add at this stage that Berkeley never uses the phrase "Book of Nature" as such: he only talks of the "language of nature" or "natural language", just as he talks of the "optic" or "visual language", of nature as a Discourse of God, and so forth.

This is why, in this chapter, I take the topic of the Book of Nature in a rather broad sense, as an umbrella-topic including all these sub-topics.

### 3.1. *Liber mundi from St. Paul to modern times*

#### 3.1.1. The theological grounding of the *liber mundi*

*Liber mundi* is one of the most complex and fascinating cultural-philosophical topics of the medieval universe. It seems to belong to that sort of all-encompassing metaphors that eventually come, in some way or other, to “mirror” or “encrypt” in themselves the essentials of an entire culture. Almost needless to say, the topic predates significantly the Christian Middle Ages. To give only one example, out of many possible, the history of this topic could be traced as far back as the Platonic usage of the ancient notion of *stoicheia*. Initially, the word *stoicheia* (singular: *stoicheion*) meant simply “letters” as part of the alphabet, but later, starting with Plato, it was used to designate also the four elements out of which the entire visible world was made: “Originally the name for the letters of the alphabet, *stoicheia* was a technical term from Classical physics and metaphysics, apparently beginning (...) with Plato’s *Theaetetus* and then in (...) *Timaeus*, for fire, water, air and earth and the four elements.” (Pelikan 1993: 104) This situation has triggered significant difficulties as far as the translation of *Timaeus* into modern languages is concerned. Benjamin Jowett, for example, was forced to resort to a compromise solution: “...we speak of fire and the rest of them, as though men knew their natures, and we maintain them to be the first principles [*archai*] and letters or elements [*stoicheia*] of the whole”. (48b) (Plato 1961: 1175)

Nevertheless, it was within the theological context generated by the emergence of Christianity that the topic of the *liber mundi* was given a new, much deeper significance, *una vita nuova*, as it were. There are at least two fragments in the New Testament where one can possibly find the theological Christian grounding of the *liber mundi* as it would



reveal itself throughout the Middle Ages: namely, in St. John (1: 1-14) and in St. Paul (1 Cor 13: 12-13). What is interesting is that this “double grounding” would be well preserved and remain easily recognizable along all the subsequent developments of the topic. One of my working hypotheses in this chapter is that each of these two fragments implies a consideration of the *liber mundi* from a *specific* perspective. As the idea of “book of the world” necessarily requires at least *two* elements (a text to be read and a reader to do it), I propose to hypothetically take, on one hand, St. John’s fragment as implying the *liber mundi* “text perspective” (which is to say, the cosmic text considered in itself, or in relationship with its divine author), and, on the other hand, St. Paul’s fragment as implying *liber mundi* “reader’s perspective” (which is to say, the cosmic text considered in its relationship with its “readers”, with their intellectual/spiritual needs, and with their *awareness* that their encounter with the natural word around is actually a process of “reading” and “interpretation”). Let me also note that these perspectives are not opposite at all, but, on the contrary, they are fully complementary, and sometimes sophisticatedly interwoven.

From a strictly theological point of view, we find in St. John’s Gospel the most clearly stated Christian ground on which *liber mundi* is based: “In (the) beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things received being through him, and without him not one (thing) received being which has received being. (...) And the Word became flesh” (1: 1-14). One comes across, in this short passage, a very fruitful semantic ambiguity at work, since the word “Word”, as it is presented in John’s Gospel, is in fact the translation of the Greek word *logos* meaning at once both “word” (*verbum*) and “reason” (*ratio*). As a result, from a Christian theological standpoint, it would be fair to say that the Incarnation made the world not only “readable” (since the Word “penetrated” and “inscribed” it), but — more than that — “ration-able”, comprehensible (since God as *ratio* brought this world into being); indeed, not only do we have access to the world, but we have good chances to “grasp” it, to know it as it is in itself.<sup>1</sup> In the long run, this fact would play a crucial role in the configuration and development of some of the patterns of rationality characterizing the European culture as one “obsessed” with knowledge of the world: the world is

considered “thinkable” since it essentially contains “reason” (*logos*), that is, a process of knowledge of the world is a process of “self-recognition” in which our reason (as a faculty of knowledge) *is recognizing itself* in the essence of world (as one that was brought into being by Supreme Reason). It is quite interesting, precisely from this point of view, to see how St. John’s saying that “All things received being through him, and without him not one (thing) received being which has received being” (1, 3) would be, many centuries later, rigorously reflected in that cryptic Hegelian statement: “What is rational is real and what is real is rational”. In a way, what St. John’s Gospel did was (echoing a certain Parmenidian idea: *to on = to noeton*) to offer one of the essential theological premises of the European culture, as far as the knowledge of the world is concerned.

On the other hand, St. Paul’s fragment offers a grounding of the *liber mundi* that is related to the set of soteriological, “existential”, and even ethical consequences of the fact that the world is perceived *as a divine message*. The Pauline text (1 Cor 13: 12-3) in question reads as follows: “For we see now through a dim window obscurely, but then face to face; now I know partially, but then I shall know according as I also have been known.” (*Videmus enim nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem; nunc cognosco ex parte, tunc autem cognoscam, sicut et cognitus sum.*) As a matter of fact, the Latin version conveys much better than the English one the Pauline idea that, on our encounter with the world, this world is given to us in the shape of a system of symbols we have to decipher: we see the world *per speculum*, which is to say (as if) through a mirror, and have to go beyond the play of appearances. More than that, there is with certainty a significance hidden in these appearances, and throughout our lifetime we have incessantly to attempt at “extracting” this meaning from the riddle (*aenigma*) of the existence. Of course, we do not come across in the Pauline text such direct words as “letter”, “book”, “reading”, and the like. Nevertheless, there is at least one important reason why St. Paul should be placed at the root of the Christian tradition of the *liber mundi*: as it has been often noticed, there is a hermeneutic “interchangeability” between the idea of mirror (*speculum*) and that of book (*liber*), and this interchangeability operated to a large extent throughout the medieval culture. Both *speculum* and *liber* point to some

determined physical objects, endowed with a special capacity of comprehending virtually unlimited contents. To take only one example, the medieval poet Alan of Lille (1128?-1202), whose place in the history of the *liber mundi* I will be discussing in some detail later on in this chapter, simply takes for granted this interchangeability between *liber* and *speculum*, as if these two terms were more or less synonymous: *omnis mundi creatura / quasi liber, et / pictura / nobis est, et speculum*. (Alan of Lille 1909: I, 288) Significantly, *speculum* came to be in the Latin Middle Ages a very common name for encyclopedias as “books of books”. An encyclopedia was seen as “a mirror of...”<sup>2</sup>. It was a microcosm in itself, ambitiously compiled in the hope of reflecting, or “mirroring”, the truths about the cosmos proper: “Encyclopedias... are also called mirrors because, as Vincent [of Beauvais] says, mirrors induce speculations and imitation...” (Mazzotta 1993: 4)<sup>3</sup>

As such, the whole world comes to be seen in St. Paul as a great, though sometimes confusing, system of signs and messages, of “riddles” and hidden meanings; no one of its parts is insignificant or accidental, but each of them is as it were a letter, a *gramma*, and the whole frame of things constitutes this most interesting “book”, that we are actually faced with. The most important thing is to learn how to “read” it, to grasp its “grammar”. And this “reading” is not a “cultural practice” among many others, but it plays — in St. Paul’s view — the role of a supreme *praeparatio*: this “reading” of the world is an important stage of an “initiatory process” through which we are given a chance to attain the plenitude of our life (*tunc*). The “reader’s perspective” on *liber mundi* mentioned above is massively implied by this Pauline passage; actually, this whole fragment *is about* the “reader” and their inner needs to be “saved”, their spiritual “benefits” and “progresses”, and their other intimate interests in reading the “book of the world”. Most important, the Pauline text testifies to the need, on reader’s side, to transcend the mere and imperfect act of reading (*nunc cognosco ex parte*) and to necessarily associate the “reading” of the “cosmic text” to a process of *ascensio coeli* as salvation, in order to reach a state of perfect ultimate ontological transparency (*tunc cognoscam, sicut et cognitus sum*).

It was precisely this “existential” component of the *liber mundi* (“reader’s perspective”) that would be further developed to a significant extent by St. Augustine.

Actually, St. Augustine was among the first Christian authors to write systematically about this topic, and — moreover — to place it within a system of theological-philosophical speculations. St. Augustine's place in the history of *liber mundi* has been recognized as such and praised by those of the modern writers who have dealt with the topic. Umberto Eco, to give only one example, simply regards Augustine as the Christian author in whom all the medieval speculations on *liber mundi* originated: "The Middle Ages would borrow from Augustine the idea of a perfect language, that is not a language of words, but one of things, a language of a world which is — as later it would be called — *quasi liber scriptus digito Dei*." (Eco 1994: 11)<sup>4</sup>

One of the passages in which Augustine employs the *liber mundi* topic is in his *Confessions* (Book 13, chap. XV, § 16-8). Here St. Augustine depicts the entire cosmos as an ample text being displayed in front of our eyes:

You have extended like a skin the firmament of your Book, your harmonious discourses, over us by the ministry of mortals.... Let the angels, your supracelestial people, praise your name. They have no need to look upon this firmament, to know through reading your word. For they always see your face, and read there without the syllables of time your eternal will. They read, they choose, they love. They are always reading... the changelessness of your counsel.

Augustine emphasizes the fateful gap between the two levels of being ("the celestial" and "the earthly"), namely by implying the existence of a huge difference between "angels" and "mortals" as far as their approach to the cosmic book is concerned: angels do not need to read this book at all, as they have direct access to its source, this being actually the hallmark of their superiority, whereas humans find in this book their *only* source of meaning (apart from the Scripture). Paradoxically, St. Augustine's fragment, for all the restrictions it imposes, points *at the same time* to the only way of (as well as the supreme purpose for) reducing such a difference: for it is precisely within this ontological interval that human beings are able to genuinely discover themselves and their world *by comparison* to, and by meditation on, the celestial "archetypes", and by finding out the likeness relationship connecting the earthly and the celestial. As Jesse Gellrich has noted, this Augustinian fragment "illustrates the value of meditating on their similitude, and his

procedure corresponds perfectly with the broad exhortation of the fathers of the church who instructed mediaeval readers to clarify and explain the mysterious purpose of the divine Word within the revealed words, such as the Bible and the Book of nature.” (Gellrich 1985: 29)

Almost needless to say, the fact that Christianity is a “religion of the Book” contributed greatly to the emergence and then flourishing of the speculations on the *liber mundi* throughout the Middle Ages and later.<sup>5</sup> It was the central role that the Bible<sup>6</sup> played within Christianity that made this topic not only immediately comprehensible, but also appealing to a remarkably wide audience. As it were, the sheer reading of the Bible, as *the Book*, triggered in some way or other a representation of the world in the shape of a book: “In its simplest form, the idea of the Book begins in mediaeval readings of the Bible.” (Gellrich 1985: 32) Within the medieval *Weltanschauung*, the Bible played the role of a universal divine “prototype” of all possible human knowledge, and it was perceived as the model *par excellence* of every kind of writing, be it religious or profane. The Bible fascinated and enchanted the medieval minds to such an extent that eventually it came to be seen as providing some *a priori* “interpretative pattern” by means of which the whole natural and social world was to be perceived, understood and explained. In other words, the sheer fact of the “centrality” of this sacred text marked in a deep and serious way almost all the medieval conceptions about the natural world and the place of the human beings within it, about the human society, the human knowledge and the shape it should take, about the “meaning of life” and the ultimate aim of the human’s intellectual efforts.

On the other hand — and in addition to the Christian prestige of the Bible itself (as a “revealed” or “divinely inspired” text) — the book was already, at the time when Christianity emerged, a “cultural product” generally received as the most important means for preserving, conveying and enhancing human knowledge. It was regarded as one of the most significant “human inventions”, with tremendously beneficial effects on the state of affairs in the field of sciences and arts: within a conveniently limited space it was possible to store an enormous amount of information, and, which was more, that information could be conveyed to an audience belonging not only to other cultural spaces,

but also to other epochs. (The fabulous prestige that the Library of Alexandria enjoyed over the centuries would be a sufficient proof for that.) Finally, the book was an “object” governed by some strict constructing and functioning rules, and therefore an autonomous and self-sufficient entity, a precise “device” whose functionality and usefulness could be easily assured, controlled, and even enhanced.

As such, by the time when Christianity made its debut, the book had come to have all the theological, historical, technical and symbolical premises to become a fully convenient and highly expressive metaphor to be successfully employed within the medieval cultural universe. This being said, a metaphor such as this one, especially within a cultural and religious context like the Judeo-Christian one, in which the idea of book had acquired so privileged a status, was to become one of the dominant topics employed, for several centuries, in the theological, philosophical, literary, scientific, devotional, and ethical discourses<sup>7</sup>. It was precisely the use of such a topic that made possible for the medieval man to see the surrounding natural world as a most *meaningful* thing. As Taylor remarked, in the medieval worldview:

Nature, the realm revealed by our senses, is only half-real, but it suggests a further reality which lies beyond itself. It is a system of symbols, and we ascend to truth by learning to pass from the symbols to the non-sensuous realities symbolized. Christian thought was dominated by this view of nature from St. Augustine to St. Thomas, and it has never really outgrown it. (Taylor 1963: 41-2)

Almost needless to say, within such a context, the study of nature belongs decisively to the field of the theological disciplines, and there must necessarily be a certain religious sense in any “scientific” approach to the natural world. Nature is not to be studied for its own sake, nor for our pragmatic interests, but only as a means of learning more about God. For, ultimately, there is only one reason enabling us to do research on nature: “The true reason for seeking information about Nature is that given by St. Paul, that the invisible things of God have been made known from the beginning by the things which are visible.” (*Ibid.*: 45)

On the other hand, between Nature and Scripture there is a privileged relationship. Not only is God directly involved in making both of these texts, by Creation and

Revelation respectively, but the Book of Nature might well serve as a prolegomenon toward any serious study of the teachings of Scripture. Given the extreme difficulty of properly grasping what the Scriptures say, spending some time with the “reading” of Nature, before starting to read the Scripture, is highly recommended by the medieval authors:

Nature, rightly understood, becomes a key to the divine hieroglyphics of Scripture. This is the only reason why Nature has an interest for the mind. In its own right, Nature would not concern the intellect at all, for the proper and adequate object of the intellect is not the symbols but the God whom they partially disclose. (*Ibid.*: 44)

### **3.1.2. Medieval philosophy and the topic of *liber mundi***

In philosophy the notion of *liber mundi* or *liber creaturarum* had its promoters, too. A great number of important medieval philosophers may well be considered as belonging to this way of thinking inaugurated by St. Paul and St. Augustine: Johannes Scottus Eriugena, Guilelmus of Auvergne, Raymundus Lullus, Saint Bonaventure, Raymond Sebond, and others. It is not the object of this chapter to study in detail how each of these thinkers made use of the topic of the Book of the World. Nevertheless, an however rapid look at some of their ideas would be sufficient to convey to us the sense in which *liber mundi* was indeed a serious source of inspiration for a good part of the medieval philosophy.

St. Bonaventure (1221-1274) is one of the important medieval thinkers who systematically developed this topic, and threw a new light on it. According to Bonaventure, if we look carefully at the world around (*natura* or *creatura*), we will soon be able to discover within it something important about the nature and the ways of manifestations of God Himself as Creator of this world. In his treatise *Itinerarium mentis*

in Deum, Bonaventure sees the knowledge of *creatura* as the first stage of an “ascending” epistemic process through which the human mind is approaching God.<sup>8</sup> And this first stage (called *theologia symbolis*) supposes the consideration of the sensible world as a system of signs (*vestigia*) revealing God. In a fragment faithfully echoing the Pauline language used in the text quoted earlier in this chapter, Bonaventure says: “We may behold God in the mirror of visible things, not only by considering creatures as vestiges of God, but also by seeing Him in them; for He is present in them by His essence, His power, and His presence.” (*Sed quoniam circa speculum sensibilibum non solum contingit contemplari Deum per ipsa tanquam per vestigia, verum etiam in ipsis, in quantum est in eis per essentiam, potentiam et praesentiam.*) (Bonaventure: 1998: 50-51) The things we come across in the world should not be taken in themselves, simply as “natural phenomena” with no significance beyond their sheer physical appearances, but they should be considered in what they *signify* since, as far as we are concerned, they play the role of “reminders” of our divine author: *Haec autem omnia sunt vestigia, in quibus speculari possumus Deum nostrum.* (*Ibid.*: 54) Bonaventure took over from St. Augustine the notion of *Vestigia Trinitatis*, and integrated it within his own system of thought. According to him, in nature we could see reflected the Trinity itself: “If, therefore, all knowable things must generate a likeness of themselves, they manifestly proclaim that in them, as in mirrors, can be seen the eternal generation of the Word, the Image, and the Son, eternally emanating from God the Father.” (*Si ergo omnia cognoscibilia habent sui speciem generare, manifeste proclamant, quod in illis tanquam in speculis videri potest aeterna generatio Verbi, Imaginis et Filii a Deo Patre aeternaliter emanantis.*) (*Ibid.*: 56-7).

Raymond Sebonde (d. 1436), to take another example, wrote a massive volume entitled *Liber creaturarum, seu Naturae, seu Liber de Homine propter quem sunt creaturae aliae*. In the “Prologue” to this work, Sebonde attempts at offering the basis of a “science of the book of creatures”. This is a book that every Christian must know in order to be able to defend it and, if necessary, even to die for its sake. He argues that it is only such a science that makes possible the unmistakable knowledge of the whole Catholic faith and the proof of its truth (*et per istam scientiam tota fides catholica*



*infallibiliter cognoscitur et probatur esse vera*). This science is a complete and self-sufficient one, as it does not need any other complementary sciences or books. For the only two books which God gave us are the Book of Nature and the book of Scriptures: *...duo sunt libri dati a Deo, scilicet liber Universitatis creaturarum seu liber naturae, et alius est liber sacrae scripturae*. (Sebonde 1909: Prologue)<sup>9</sup>

Finally, although Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682) was a “modern man”, I have chosen to discuss here his dealing with the topic of *liber mundi* since he offers an interesting *synthetic* view of this notion, and of how it was received in some circles toward the end of the Middle Ages and at the dawns of modernity. His *Religio Medici* contains an ample and sophisticated exposition of some of the theological, philosophical and scientific implications that the use of the *liber mundi* topic came to have for a seventeenth-century man:

there are two Books from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of His servant Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the Eyes of all; those that never saw him in the one, have discover'd Him in the other. This was the Scripture and Theology of the Heathens: the natural motions of the Sun made them more admire Him than its supernatural station did the Children of Israel; the ordinary effects of Nature wrought more admiration in them than in the other all His Miracles. Surely the Heathens knew better how to joyn and read these mystical Letters than we Christians who cast a more careless Eye on these common Hieroglyphicks, and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of Nature. (Browne 1943: 337)

The interesting thing about a passage like this is that, apart from the usual (traditional) considerations on the relationship between “the two books”, it reveals a new, then emerging “epistemic attitude” toward nature, and — more than that — it is implied that this attitude should be considered as a serious and equal alternative to the strictly theological knowledge. This new epistemic approach consisted in trying to know the essence of nature (the “Creature”) in a more genuine way: namely, in the way in which the Ancients did, or at least in the way Browne *thought* the Ancients did. To me, this fragment seems extremely symptomatic as it succeeds, under the guise of a rhetorical *tour de force*, in putting “face to face”, within the same page as it were, two radically different

attitudes to the natural world: the medieval one, sophisticatedly theological and highly symbolic, and the modern one, marked by a drive to “grasp” nature as it is *in itself*.

Considering the whole medieval system of speculations and doctrines clustered around the idea of *liber mundi*, it is fair to say now that in this tradition of thinking the knowledge of the natural world, of God’s *Creatura*, had — besides its specifically gnoseological, cognitive function — a certain *soteriological* dimension: what the medieval man sought in most cases in his encounter with the world was to gain a knowledge allowing him to “save” his soul, and to secure his immortality. Let me also say that, on the long run, this particular connection between knowledge and faith (*id est*, the fact that knowing the world was part of a *religious experience*), as a characteristic feature of the medieval worldview, might be regarded as a premise of the outstanding scientific developments in modern Europe. In other words, the intensely religious/soteriological character of the medieval starting point might have conferred a certain strength and depth on the secular “drive to knowledge” subsequently characterizing the European modernity. This is not to say, however, that this is the *only* root of the modern drive towards knowledge as a form of essential human experience. In fact, there were medieval thinkers (Roger Bacon, to take only one example) who advocated a certain “reading” of the world for its own sake, without necessarily looking for its Author within it, and no one can deny that such thinkers played an important role in announcing, and indirectly configuring, the modern *Weltanschauung*. All what I want to say here is that the intense soteriological attitudes that often accompanied the medieval “readings of the world” might have later turned into what is considered a modern (secular) “religion” of knowledge: “knowledge for its own sake”, knowledge as a supreme, self-sufficient and total experience.

In conclusion, *liber mundi* is a significant texture of the things themselves and the writing of an un-human author. “Learning to read the signs of that Book was a process not of ‘inventing’ or ‘creating’ *sententia* for the ‘sentences’ in the Bible or nature, but of coming to comprehend a writing” that was, as it were, objective (Gellrich 1985: 34). Since this writing is not a human product at all, but belongs to the things themselves and *points to* something beyond the things themselves, there arises the necessity of searching

for its proper “author”, for the ultimate source of this writing. Such a compelling necessity was felt and dealt with by all those who have been concerned with the problems of writing and authorship. Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1976: 18), for instance, shows how the writing is transcending itself in search for its own “eternal” author. And what the medieval philosophy clustered around *liber creaturarum* did was precisely to address these issues in a wonderfully sophisticated and fruitful manner.

### 3.1.3. Everything is a book

As a “master metaphor”, *liber mundi* is without a doubt present not only in mysticism, theology and philosophy, but it is manifest in other cultural forms of the medieval life, too. Given the “centrality” of the Bible in the medieval period referred to earlier on in this chapter, and the profound consequences this fact had on shaping and modeling the medieval life, in all of its forms, *liber mundi* ended up being received as a *global* metaphor, the highly condensed expression of the medieval civilization<sup>10</sup>.

Poetry, for example, was a privileged space where the topic could be exploited at its maximum. Ernest Robert Curtius proved this impressively in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Curtius 1979), and so did Jesse Gellrich in *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages* (Gellrich 1985), to give only a couple of examples. Their contribution to the study of the history of this topic in the Middle Ages is difficult to overestimate, and the present research is very much indebted to what these authors (and others, besides them) did.

Anyone studying the presence of the *liber mundi* in the medieval poetry cannot overlook Alan of Lille’s contribution, as in it the topic of *liber mundi* undoubtedly reached its cultural maturity and one of the best literary expressions:

*omnis mundi creatura  
quasi liber, et pictura  
nobis est, et speculum.*

*Nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis,  
Nostrae status, nostrae sortis.  
Fidele signaculum.*  
(Alanus de Insulis 1909: I, 288)

It is within a passage like this one that, thanks especially to the formal aspects of the poem (sonority, rhythm, alliteration, etc.), Alan of Lille succeeds in conveying to his readers the sense of existential ambiguity, subtle melancholy, and delicate uneasiness that seeing everything as a book, or as in a mirror, brings about. For, in spite of all the lofty metaphysics this topic presupposed, the poet felt that, ultimately, there was a sense in which to see something “as in a mirror” was to admit its ontological precariousness and uncertainty. As it were: maybe these things are something in the eyes of God, but *hic et nunc* they are nothing more than mere letters and reflections coming out from an empty and cold mirror.

On the other hand, of course, Alan grasps here, in a most artful and elegant manner, almost all the fundamental metaphysical implications of the metaphor we have been dealing with in this chapter:

Alan’s most quoted verse reflects the sense that the whole of creation is a harmonious totality and a symbolic construction of things and words, a book and a mirror, whose alphabet can be deciphered, whose arcane signs can be distinguished and classified, and whose secret allegorical images can be revealed as a faithful representation (*fidele signaculum*) of our condition. (Mazzotta 1993: 17)

Another important medieval writer who artfully employed this topic in his poetry was Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). In his book *Dante's vision and the circle of knowledge*, Giuseppe Mazzotta places Dante in the long tradition of using this metaphor within the Western literature and shows how Dante developed and enriched the topic (Mazzotta 1993). In his doing so, Mazzotta refers to this marvelous fragment from *Divina Commedia*:

*Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna  
legato con amore in un volume  
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:  
sustanze e accidenti e lor costume*

*quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo  
che ciò ch'io dico è un semplice lume  
(Par: XXXIII, 85-90)*

I saw how it contains within its depths  
all things bound in a single book by love  
of which creation is the scattered leaves:  
how substance, accident, and their relation  
were fused in such a way that what I now  
describe is but a glimmer of that Light.  
(Dante 1984: 392-3 [Trans. Mark Musa])

Mazzotta finds Canto XXXIII of *Paradiso* in the *Divina Commedia* highly indicative of both what *liber mundi* means philosophically and of the encyclopedic tendencies of the Middle Ages. As we saw earlier, the *liber mundi* topic was inextricably connected throughout the Middle Ages to a certain canonical form of organizing, administrating and transmitting the knowledge then available: *encyclopedia*. Just as the author of an encyclopedia aspired to “grasp” and “embody” in it the entire corpus of knowledge about the world available at a given moment, so those who employed the idea of *liber mundi* nourished similar aspirations: to use an ingenious device by means of which to encapsulate the entirety of the world, and “translate” it, if possible, into one single ideogram. At the heart of both approaches lies one and the same “drive to completeness”, one and the same dream of synthesizing everything into a conveniently limited device. And what Mazzotta finds in Dante is precisely this sense of universality and holism of knowledge: “At the end of the poem, the pilgrim’s vision of the whole cosmos as a volume whose leaves are scattered through the layers of the material world (...) merely confirms both Dante’s notion that creation is a book and his imaginative impulse of conflating and reconstructing into a unity the rich, unfolding variety of creation.” (*Ibid.*: 18)

To conclude, it would be fair to say that, from a general point of view, the whole system of medieval speculations clustered around *liber mundi* reflected in fact some more profound religious and metaphysical suppositions on which the medieval culture was based. As it has been noticed, the medieval worldview did seriously imply the belief in an ordering and organizing principle as an earthly imitation or “shadow” of the heavenly order.<sup>11</sup> And it is precisely “the belief in a revealed theological-symbolic universe [that] is

the premise making possible the representation of the totality and unity of knowledge”. (*Ibid.*: 5) All these notions of “unity”, “totality”, “synthesis” of knowledge are constant and essential characteristics of the medieval learning. Hence a general scholarly tendency that made itself visible all along the Middle Ages in “the commonplace attempt to gather all strands of learning together into an enormous Text, an encyclopedia or summa, that would mirror the historical and transcendental orders just as the Book of God’s Word (the Bible) was a speculum of the Book of his Work (nature)”. (Gellrich 1985:18) As such, the idea of book most conveniently represented the insight into a central principle organizing and structuring the whole knowledge about the world; by paraphrasing Thomas of Celano’s words, this book would eventually be a book in which the total is contained (*liber in quo totum continetur*).

There is a wonderful story told about Saint Francis de Assisi who, allegedly, collected and saved carefully every single piece of parchment he came across during his travels. To him, the “letters themselves were intrinsically sacred” (*Ibid.*: 35). For he supposedly justified his doing so with this saying: *litterae sunt ex quibus componitur gloriosissimum domini Dei nomen* (“letters are the things from which the most glorious name of God is composed”) (*Ibid.*: 35). It is true, then, that — as one author excellently has put it — the “metaphor always has and always will tend to take on a life of its own and ask to be understood literally.” (Singer 1989: 69)

### **3.2. George Berkeley’s “universal language of nature”**

#### **3.2.1. In search for a tradition**

Interestingly enough, among the few major twentieth century thinkers to recognize the presence of the topic of Book of Nature in George Berkeley’s thought were two French philosophers. First, in his influential *L’Intuition philosophique* (1911), Henri Bergson, in an attempt to explain Berkeley’s philosophical system, came at a given moment to make

the following remark: "It seems to me that Berkeley considers matter as a *thin transparent film* situated between man and God ('comme une *mince pellicule transparente* située entre l'homme et Dieu'). Matter remains transparent as long as the philosophers are not concerned with it, and thus God is immediately manifest." This is why, Bergson believes, the most appropriate way of understanding Berkeley's philosophy is to consider the material world as being "the language that God speaks to us" ('une langue que Dieu nous parle'). This would lead us, in Bergson's view, to properly grasping the essence of Berkeley's immaterialism. In contrast, he goes on, the "materialist" philosophies, by emphasizing each syllable, as it were, and stating it as an independent entity, "divert us from the meaning" and "prevent us from following the divine word". (Bergson 1959: 1356) About one decade later, in 1922, Étienne Gilson would talk about a relationship that might be established between Berkeley's philosophy and a certain way of thinking characterizing the Middle Ages. More precisely, Gilson saw a possible connection between Berkeley's notion of "optic language" and the philosophy of a medieval Irishman, namely Scotus Erigena: "We would not betray Scotus Erigena's thought in saying that for him [Scotus], just as for Berkeley, Nature is the language that its Author is speaking to us ('la nature est le langage que nous parle Son Auteur'). Let us dedicate this connection to Taine's memory: Berkeley and Erigena were both Irishmen." (Gilson 1944: 214)

Whether or not Berkeley was indebted for his employment of the topic of *liber mundi* precisely to his being an (Anglo-)Irish, is quite difficult to know. What can be shown more easily instead is that he made an impressively extensive use of this topic, turning it into an argument central to his philosophical system. And this is in fact one of the most remarkable things about George Berkeley's case: it renders his philosophy not only original in its eighteenth century context, but also strikingly complex when considered in itself.

Berkeley employed the notion of the world as a text starting with his first important philosophical work, namely *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, published in 1709. Here he basically proposes a theory according to which the things we see in the world around are in fact *signs*:

These signs are constant and universal, their connexion with tangible ideas has been learnt at our first entrance in the world; and ever since, almost every moment of our lives, it has been occurring to our thoughts, and fastening and striking deeper on our minds. (Berkeley 1948: I, 229)

These signs are what we immediately experience when we encounter the world outside us. Even if, for strategic reasons<sup>12</sup>, Berkeley did not, in this first writing, overtly deny the existence of matter as such, he nevertheless considered the external world completely mind-dependent, and accessible to us only in the shape of these signs. In light of the subsequent developments of Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy, we cannot experience *anything else* apart from such immaterial signs, our cognitive faculties being unable to grasp anything of the nature of matter. Berkeley undertakes a rigorous analysis of the notion of its existence and is eventually compelled to conclude that *matter does not exist* as such since, in order for something to exist, we have to have some form of perception of it, which is not the case with matter. What we do perceive — properly speaking — is a succession of signs, a system of symbols, based on which, through habit and repetition, we can get a certain degree of understanding of the world around. In other words, we humans are fated to always live among symbols, and to end up turning our lives into a form of everyday hermeneutics. Still, one cannot help asking this question: what are the principles on which such a peculiar system of thought is based?

A satisfactory answer to this question is possibly to be found in an essay Berkeley published several years later, in the shape of an explanatory and apologetic *addendum* to his earlier work on vision, and titled, quite significantly for the purpose of the present discussion: *The Theory of Vision — or Visual Language shewing the immediate Presence and Providence of a Deity — Vindicated and Explained* (1733).<sup>13</sup> This *addendum*, by making much more explicit what was initially maybe insufficiently clear or somewhat ambiguously stated, is extremely useful for understanding the *principles* on which Berkeley based his theory of the “visual language”.

As the title clearly implies, Berkeley conceived of this “visual language” as being in immediate relationship with the “presence and providence” of God. This means that through this “language” *God makes himself known* to those who are able to understand



such a language, and — moreover — that nature does not have a high value *as such*, but only insofar as it *signifies* something about God. The nature of this type of metaphor is such that it necessarily places God at the heart of the whole system of things. As William J. Mills pertinently put it: “To view the earth as a book is necessarily to view it theocentrically.” (Mills 1982: 238) Given this fact, given that — within such a system of thought — nature can never tell us anything about itself, God is, and must be, the only source of meaning, the ultimate source of explanation for everything we see happening around us. Actually, in Berkeley, *seeing* is a very important thing, as it is our chief cognitive faculty: “*Vision is the Language of the Author of Nature*, from thence deducing theorems and solutions of phenomena, and explaining the nature of visible things and the visive faculty.” (Berkeley 1948: I, 264) Or, even more explicitly, as Berkeley was to put it later on:

the phenomena of nature, which strike on the senses and are understood by the mind, form not only a magnificent spectacle, but also a most coherent, entertaining, and instructive Discourse; and to effect this, they are conducted, adjusted, and ranged by the greatest wisdom. The language or Discourse is studied with different attention, and interpreted with different degrees of skill. (Berkeley 1953: V, 121)

This is exactly the fundamental supposition based on which all the medieval speculations around the topic of the *liber naturae/mundi* were developed, as it has been shown in some detail in the first section of this chapter. There is a sense in which Berkeley’s notion of the “visual language” faithfully reflects Johannes Scotus Erigena’s insight that “[t]here is nothing, in visible and corporeal things, that does not signify something incorporeal and invisible.” (*Apud* Gilson 1955: 120) In his turn, Erigena based his approach on St. Paul’s Epistles, on St. Augustine, on the doctrine of Jesus Christ’s Incarnation, as well as on a markedly Platonic way of thinking. Then, Erigena’s insights on the visible-invisible dialectics grew more and more popular over the centuries, with the long-term result that the notion eventually became widespread that the natural world was, to use the famous phrase, “like a book written with God’s own finger” (*quasi liber scriptus digito Dei*). All these things have already been discussed earlier on in this chapter.

### 3.2.2. The world as a divine language: how it works and for whom

Returning now to Berkeley's works, we can see very clearly how, once he appropriated the traditional insight of the world as a divine text, he further developed his own notion of a "visual language" — that is, a language of things, not of words, some sort of *reified discourse* — by following in detail the rules, laws and principles based on which any human language (or, as he calls it, "artificial language") works<sup>14</sup>. For example, in the same *addendum* to his early writing on vision, Berkeley says:

A great number of arbitrary signs, various and opposite, do constitute a language. If such arbitrary connexion be instituted by men, it is an artificial language; if by the Author of Nature, it is a natural language. Infinitely various are the modifications of light and sound, whence they are each capable of supplying an endless variety of signs, and, accordingly, have been each employed to form languages; the one by the arbitrary appointment of mankind, the other by that of God Himself. A connexion established by the Author of Nature, in the ordinary course of things, may surely be called natural; as that made by men will be named artificial. (Berkeley 1948: II, 265)

Let us note, at this stage, the special emphasis Berkeley always places on the importance of God as *Author* of the world's discourse. Just as in the metaphysics underlying the medieval use of the *liber mundi* topic God is revealing himself through each individual letter of the world's book, so in Berkeley God has a crucial role to play within the cosmic scheme of things: God is by no means a remote entity, vaguely associated with the world, but he is *immediately present* in every element of the world's text as the only source of its meaning. Actually, God *is speaking* the "language of nature", and we are his attentive audience. God is the supreme guarantor of the grammar of the world as he instituted the rules according to which the signs are combined and connected with each other; thanks to his continual care and attentiveness, the meaningful *cosmos* is prevented from turning into a meaningless *chaos*.

Indeed, in a certain sense, Berkeley's God is even more actively and immediately present than was the medieval God who "wrote" the *liber mundi*: Berkeley's God *is*

*speaking* through every single thing we see around, whereas in the medieval context of *liber mundi* we are, as it were, *reminded* of God as its author, the sensible things pointing to God as their Creator. This is one of the significant differences between Berkeley and those authors who saw God as the author of the Book of Nature: properly speaking, in Berkeley the “world is not, as it was for the mediaevals, the *book* of God, since written words have only an indirect connection with their creator. Rather, it is the *speech* of God, so many immediate expressions of, and testaments to, His presence with us.” (Cooper 1996: 264) Of course, both Berkeley’s “visual language” and the medieval *liber mundi* belong essentially to the same tradition of thought, one according to which the world as we see it is just a system of signs, riddles and symbols, and it is only through them that we learn something about God himself, who is behind all these; nevertheless, there is, in Berkeley, a certain shift of emphasis, with the result that God is given an even more prominent role than in the medieval universe, he being seen now as more directly and immediately present in the world. It is only for reasons of simplicity that I am talking in this chapter about Berkeley’s use of *liber mundi: lingua mundi* would have been a more appropriate term to use in Berkeley’s case.

On the other hand, just as in the case of the medieval philosopher, for Berkeley studying “this world” is essentially a theological enterprise, and should be accomplished with the carefulness and purity of mind that the practice of theology requires. As he says:

it is the searching after, and endeavoring to understand those signs instituted by the Author of Nature, that ought to be the employment of the natural philosopher, and not the pretending to explain things by corporeal causes; which doctrine seems to have too much estranged the minds of men from that active principle, that supreme and wise spirit, *in whom we live, move, and have our being*. (Berkeley 1949: II, 69)

The last (italicized) phrase is, in fact, a quotation from the Bible (*Acts*, 17: 28)<sup>15</sup>, and it is one of the Biblical sayings most frequently quoted by Berkeley throughout his works. As a matter of fact, the notion of God is absolutely central to the immaterialist scheme of things. Immaterialism is definitely a God-centered philosophy, a strictly *theocentric* system of thought, in which God is the beginning and the end of everything. In its turn, this central position that God occupies in Berkeley’s thought determines the way in which

he sees the mission of philosophy itself as a discipline “in charge” of making sense of the world we live in: to him philosophy is not simply an intellectual discipline among many others, but above all philosophy is some form of “religious exercise” (*askesis*), and, as such, has a privileged status among the humanistic disciplines. The primary aim of philosophy consists, as Berkeley says in his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* in providing us with “the sublime notion of a God, and the comfortable expectation of immortality”. (Berkeley 1949: II, 168) In Berkeley’s view, philosophy has a clear apologetic and soteriological function, and it should be first of all considered in terms of dissemination and making clearer the Christian doctrine, and of pointing to some “paths of salvation”. He would happily agree with the Augustinian dictum: *una vera philosophia — Christiana philosophia*. And it is particularly this attitude of his towards what philosophy should be that, once more, points to a strong relationship between his own way of thinking and a certain medieval consideration of philosophy as somehow subordinate, as playing the role of “helper” of theology (*ancilla theologiae*). But more about that will be said in Chapter Five of this dissertation, a chapter dedicated specifically to Berkeley’s place in the history of Christian apologetics.

As we just saw, Berkeley believes that the “endeavoring to understand those signs instituted by the Author of Nature, that ought to be the employment of the natural philosopher”. The philosopher is, as it were, a “professional reader” of the text of the world, one who has the superior ability and competence, along with the social recognition, to read and interpret the *liber mundi* for the others, which more often than not is not a very easy thing to do. Throughout his writings Berkeley gives ample and sophisticated explanations of the way the “discourse” of the world is constituted, what lies behind what we see in the first instance, how precisely the “reading” of the world should take place, and which are the best rules one has to follow when undertaking such an enterprise. In *The Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), for example, he says:

the connexion of ideas does not imply the relation of cause and effect, but only of a mark or sign with the thing signified. The fire which I see is not the cause of the pain I suffer upon my approaching it, but the mark that forewarns me of it. In like manner, the noise that I hear is not the effect of

this or that motion or collision of the ambient bodies, but the sign thereof.  
(Berkeley 1949: II, 69)

Then, a crucial passage occurs in which Berkeley openly proposes a “methodological shift” from an explanation based on “causal” relationships between two given entities to one based on a relationship of “signifying” between those entities. Berkeley would say, for instance, that fire is not the *cause* of the pain, but a *sign* of the pain. Moreover, he considers that such a shift cannot but have hugely beneficial effects on the progress of knowledge and mark out our better understanding of the world around:

the reason why ideas are formed into machines, that is, artificial and regular combinations, is the same with that for combining letters into words. (...) Hence it is evident, that those things which under the notion of a cause co-operating or concurring to the production of effects, are altogether inexplicable, and run us into great absurdities, may be very naturally explained, and have a proper and obvious use assigned them, when they are considered only as marks or signs for our information.  
(*Ibid.*: II, 69)

In a similar manner, in *Alciphron or The Minute Philosopher* (1732), namely in the fourth dialogue, Berkeley talks of the arbitrary, “non-necessary” character of the relationship between what semiotics would consider *signum* (“sensible signs”) and *signatum* (“the things they stand for”). Just as between the particular way in which, for instance, the word “tree” sounds, on the one hand, and the form of a real tree, on the other, there is no resemblance or necessary connection, so between a certain configuration of shapes, colours, and movements we see at a given moment and the real thing they “signify” there is no essential relationship, but simply an arbitrary one. Besides, within the same dialogue, some important hints are given as to what is the ultimate purpose of the reading of the world:

God speaks to men by the intervention and use of arbitrary, outward, sensible signs, having no resemblance or necessary connexion with the things they stand for and suggest; ...by innumerable combinations of these signs, an endless variety of things is discovered and made known to us; ...we are thereby instructed or informed in their different natures; ...we are taught and admonished what to shun, and what to pursue; and we are

directed how to regulate our motions, and how to act with respect to things distant from us, as well in time and place. (Berkeley 1950: III, 149)

Our approach to the language of nature must first of all be a *pragmatic* one: we are users of the language called “world” because we have necessities, needs and practical interests in this world-language. The better and closer our “reading” of the world is, the happier and smoother our passing through the world will be. As a comprehensive conclusion of this part of the dialogue, Berkeley says:

Upon the whole, it seems the proper objects of sight are light and colours, with their several shades and degrees; all which, being infinitely diversified and combined, form a language wonderfully adapted to suggest and exhibit to us the distances, figures, situations, dimensions, and various qualities of tangible objects: not by similitude, nor yet by inference of necessary connexion, but by the arbitrary imposition of Providence, just as words suggest the things signified by them. (*Ibid.*: III, 154).

In other words, just as in the language proper there are puns and other tricks, so in the language of nature there are such tricky signs as visual illusions. “These tricky signs show (...) that there is no necessary connection in either language between sign and thing signified.” (Berman 1994: 139)

### 3.2.3. “Le grand livre de la nature” and the world as a machine

In his postulating God as an immediate “linguistic” presence, as one who *is uninterruptedly speaking to us* through the sensible things we see around, Berkeley was rather eccentric and somehow “outdated” for his own time. For, although the topic of the “great Book of Nature” — in virtue of its historical prestige and intrinsic suggestiveness, and thanks to the “guaranteed” rhetorical effects one would have obtained through its employment — continued to be used to a large extent throughout the eighteenth century (and later, of course), nevertheless sometime during the seventeenth century it happened that a new, more successful, metaphor began to be increasingly employed in the scientific, philosophical, literary and even political discourse: *the world as a machine*<sup>16</sup>.

This move is in itself symptomatic for the new theoretical needs and interests of that epoch. For, as William Mills excellently put it, the choice of “one metaphor rather than another is highly indicative of the needs and aspirations of that society. The chosen metaphor is exploited for all its implications, around which a systematic world vision is elaborated.” (Mills 1982: 238) The machine metaphors (body as a machine, earth as a machine, etc.) had been used long before, in a tradition that might be traced back to Girolamo Cardano, Leonardo da Vinci<sup>17</sup> or even earlier, but in the seventeenth century, within the context of the “mechanical” ways of explanation enthusiastically proposed by the “new philosophy”, it gained widespread popularity and unprecedented success. To the extent that, in sharp contrast with Berkeley’s philosophizing on the “visual language”, most of the promoters of the “new philosophy” (Locke, Descartes, Gessendi, etc.) became increasingly more fascinated with a vision of the world as a precise and wonderful machine.

A consequence of such a vision is that all human knowledge should serve to finding the functioning rules and principles of this divine, most interesting machine that endlessly amazes and delights us. And one of the most consequential things about using the machine metaphor — especially when compared to the use of the book metaphor — is that, in its case, the emphasis is placed not so much on God as *the maker* of this machinery (he is increasingly seen as a “retired engineer”, and his “omniscience and omnipotence are now to be demonstrated only by His total abstinence from intervention in the world” [*Ibid.*: 247]) as on discovering, describing and enjoying the *machine itself*. Actually, these modern minds were so fascinated with the “constitution”, “movements”, principles, “predictability”, “inner parts” of this marvelous machine, that they failed sometimes to seriously question its “origin”.

Of course, people continued to use the topic of the Book of Nature, but they saw in it not so much the ultimate “model of the universe” as a rhetorical device. Let us take only one example: René Descartes’ case. It is true, at the very beginning of his *Discourse on Method* we come immediately across the famous Cartesian confession: “I resolved to seek no other knowledge than that which I might find within myself, or perhaps in the great book of nature.” (Descartes 1956: 6) Nevertheless, this metaphor plays for him the

role of a rather *rhetorical device*. Given the precise autobiographical context within which he places this confession, it is reasonable to suppose that what he implied by this statement was the fact that he preferred the empirical study of nature to the bookishness and book-worshipping characterizing, in his view, the Scholastic ways of thinking. That his mind was in a serious way attached to the idea of “the world as a machine” is proved by the repeated appeals to the mechanistic metaphor in, for example, *Principia Philosophiae*. Here he says: “I have described the Earth and the whole visible universe in the manner of a machine...” (Book 4, § 188) or: “The only difference I can see between machines and natural objects is that the workings of machines are mostly carried out by apparatus large enough to be readily perceptible by the senses (as is required to make their manufacture humanly possible), whereas natural processes almost always depend on parts so small that they utterly elude our senses.” (Book 4, § 203) (Descartes 1954: 229-236). And many other similar passages can be found throughout the Cartesian works.

Let me also say that, in choosing to use the metaphor of the world as a discourse rather than the machine metaphor, Berkeley was fully aware of the differing metaphysical implications that the use of each of the two metaphors could have. By passionately advocating the world as a text, he endeavored to warn against, and rule out, the deistic implications that, thought he, the alternative choice might have brought about:

Some philosophers, being convinced of the wisdom and power of the Creator, from the make and contrivance of organized bodies and orderly system of the world, did nevertheless imagine that he left this system with all its parts and contents well adjusted and put in motion, as an artist leaves a clock, to go thenceforward of itself for a certain period. But this Visual Language proves, not a Creator merely, but a provident Governor, actually and intimately present, and attentive to all our interests and motions, who.... designs throughout the whole course of our lives, informing, admonishing, and directing incessantly, in a most evident and sensible manner. (Berkeley 1950: III, 160 [*Crito speaks*])



### 3.2.4. Berkeley's "pragmatism"

Finally, letting aside the distinction *book-speech* I mentioned above, there is a sense in which Berkeley's metaphor of the "universal language of nature" brings something definitely new in the history of the *liber naturae* topic. This novelty is about the ultimate "purpose" of reading and understanding the cosmic discourse. More precisely, Berkeley talks about "an universal language of the Author of Nature" whereby

we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies, as also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive of them. It is by their information that we are principally guided in all the transactions and concerns of life. And the manner wherein they signify and mark unto us the objects which are at a distance is the same with that of languages and signs of human appointment, which do not suggest the things signified by any likeness or identity of nature, but only by an habitual connexion that experience has made us to observe between them. (Berkeley 1948: I, 231)

The underlying supposition behind such a passage is the idea that our interests in understanding the "universal language of the Author of nature" are — above all — *practical* interests, derived from necessities of our everyday life. The most immediate thing one can attain by grasping the meaning of the "language of nature" is, in Berkeley's view, the "preservation and well-being" of one's body, and avoiding "whatever may be hurtful and destructive" to it. As it were, some "letters" or "words" or "sentences" of this visible language may cause injuries and troubles to its users, and have therefore to be carefully avoided.

This is undoubtedly a significant change in the use of this metaphor within the European tradition. In a traditional Christian context, the Book of Nature had been always regarded as some prolegomenon towards a better understanding of what the Bible said: it helped people realize what God's message was about as far as the natural world was concerned. Accordingly, considering the *liber naturae* in itself would have been for a medieval man the most incomprehensible thing to do. The two books (Nature and Scripture) were always considered together, and they were referred to as such. For instance, as Ernest Robert Curtius notices, "[f]or the preacher the book of nature must figure with the Bible as a source of material." (Curtius 1979: 320) Reading the "revealed

book” (the Bible) and reading the Book of Nature were performed with the understanding that these were *complementary* practices, and not at all alternative. “Those who knew how to read this book [of nature] were able to understand the allegories hidden in the scriptures, where, beneath references to simple earthly things (plants, stones, animals), symbolic meanings lay.” (Eco, 1995: 15) There is an intimate connection between Nature and Scripture, as both are texts in whose making God is immediately involved. Therefore, reading the Book of Nature had a very clear *soteriological* dimension: it was not for the sake of “this world” that one had to endeavor to understand the cosmic discourse, but for the sake of his soul’s fate once arrived in “the world after”. A proper Christian life means to know how to grasp in the book of the world the truths revealed by the sacred doctrines. For instance, in his famous *Imitatio Christi* Thomas à Kempis says: “If thine heart were right, then every creature should be to thee a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine.” (*si rectum cor tuum esset, tunc omnis creatura speculum vitae et liber sacrae doctrinae esset*). (Thomas à Kempis 1943: 175) Nature as such, along with our practical dealings and concerns with it, does not deserve any theoretical interest on our side; it is only the superior necessity of “getting rid” of this world that makes us have a temporary involvement in its affairs.

On the contrary, Berkeley’s attitude towards his “language of nature” is a remarkably *pragmatic* attitude. Although Berkeley was a genuinely religious person, and an ardent apologist of the Christian faith, when he approached the natural world he did not look in it for “paths to salvation”, but he simply tried to *accommodate* to its conditions, rules and requirements. In other words, his approach to the “external world” is one in terms of utility, efficiency and well-being, and his religiosity is of a different kind from that of the medieval believer. It is true, ontologically speaking, nature is still a text, a sophisticated system of signs, just as in the medieval tradition, but the real reason *why* one has to read this book differs significantly from the reason a medieval man felt he had to do it.

This is not to say that the pragmatic attitude is the only one we might have to the surrounding world. Berkeley’s world essentially displays a “great beauty”, orderliness, and harmony. This is precisely because this world is God’s epiphany. Moreover, in

*Alciphron*, when talking about the tremendous benefits that the acceptance of the idea of God might have upon our understanding of the world, Crito shows that only in a world created by God there is place for beauty and orderliness:

In a system of spirits, subordinate to the will, and the direction of the Father of spirits, governing them by laws and conducting them by methods suitable to wise and good ends, there will be great beauty. But in an incoherent fortuitous system, governed by chance, or in a blind system, governed by fate, or in a system where Providence doth not preside, how can beauty be, which cannot be without order, which cannot be without design? (Berkeley 1950: III, 129-30 [*Crito speaks*])

This being said, Berkeley's "pragmatism" should be seen not as an apology for our "using" of the world, but — on the contrary — as a wise means through which we can integrate ourselves, as smoothly as possible, in this beautiful world: "living reasonably while we are here upon earth, proportioning our esteem to the value of things, and so using this world as not to abuse it." (*Ibid.*: III, 178 [*Crito speaks*])

### 3.2.5. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, it should be clear enough by now that for George Berkeley the world is a text or, more precisely, *a discourse* ("an universal language") in an explicit and fundamental way. When Frederick Copleston comes to deal with Berkeley's philosophy, in his monumental *A History of Philosophy*, he overtly recognizes that, for the Irish Bishop, "the whole system of Nature is a system of signs, a visual divine language, speaking to our minds of God" (Copleston 1994: V, 248). In contrast to other promoters of the "new philosophy", for whom the topic of *le grand livre de la nature* plays primarily rhetorical roles, for Berkeley "the language of nature" actually means that *God speaks to us by the means of the world*, or, in his own words, "the great Mover and Author of Nature constantly explaineth Himself to the eyes of men ... In consequence, ... you have as much reason to think the Universal Agent or God speak to your eyes, as you can have for thinking any particular person speaks to your ears." (Berkeley 1950: III,

157) Thus, in Berkeley, as a result of our appropriate and unprejudiced dealings with the world around, we must get the “feeling”, or the insight, that our life is ultimately an uninterrupted *conversation with God*: “In fact our understanding of what is the case amounts, for Berkeley, to knowing what God wishes us to do: correct description of the natural world is to engage in conversation with God who guides us.” (Clark 1998: 24)

Of course, some of the medieval implications of the topic are not manifest in Berkeley’s thought anymore, but the main metaphysical suppositions on which the use of the topic of the *liber naturae* was based are clearly asserted in his philosophy. For Berkeley’s explicit manner of postulating *liber naturae* implies: a) the perception of God as a divine *author* who has “spoken” the world; b) the perception of “this world” as a *discourse*, or text, or language — a meaningful whole and a coherent system of signs; c) the existence of a precise author/subject relationship between God and the world; and d) the existence of a “reader” who consciously and constantly endeavors to transcend the “sign” (*signum*) to the “signified thing” (*signatum*).

It is worth noticing, I think, that there is a certain sense in which, given his denial of the existence of matter, Berkeley is much more radical than any other author, medieval or modern, who had written on this topic before him. This *radicalism* comes from the fact that it belongs to the nature of any book, language or discourse — the discourse of nature included — to resort to some material *support*, however lesser or insignificant, in order to make itself visible/readable: paper, ink, etc. Of course, if confronted with such a criticism, Berkeley would, based on the principles of his immaterialism, probably show that there is nothing inconsistent in supposing a text without a material support: a piece of paper, for example, is not matter as such, but only an idea, and that, similarly, in order for the world to be a discourse it does not need to be a material world. Nevertheless, in order for a sign to signify it has to make use of something that is *not* sign itself: which is problematic when, as in Berkeley’s philosophy, *everything is sign*. It is true that, by saying that this world is God’s speech, Berkeley reduces to a minimum the need for a material support of the sign: a spoken word, or a speech, needs comparatively less material than a book does. Nevertheless, even God’s speech, in order to make itself

heard, needs — like in the case of any other sound — the physical vibration of “something”.

This is another consequence of Berkeley’s uncompromising immaterialism and should be considered, I think, in immediate connection to what might be metaphorically called the *angelism* underlying his whole system: just as in the world of angels there is absolutely no need for material entities, bodies, corporal substances and the like, and nevertheless such a world *works* and remains *coherent* in its own way, so in Berkeley’s world there is no need for matter and material substances, for bodies and corporeal things. For instance, angels can, according to the traditional Christian view, perfectly communicate with each other, and uninterruptedly praise God without their having to be involved in the world of matter at all. They *sing*, and *speak*, and, in so doing, *they use a language*, but the language they use does not suppose any material support at all. In a fashion somehow similar to that of the angelic world, Berkeley’s “visual language” seems to make sense, *in its own way*, in the absence of the realm of matter.

Finally, a few words about the necessity of placing Berkeley in the tradition of the Book of Nature. There have been numerous studies published over the last decades dealing with Berkeley’s “optic language”. Nevertheless, the general tendency in the contemporary Berkeley scholarship, as far as this topic is concerned, is to isolate completely Berkeley’s dealing with the “optic language” from the long tradition of the Book of Nature. The “optic language” is most often considered in itself, as “Berkeley’s argument for a divine visual language”, being discussed almost exclusively in terms of formal consistency, logical coherence, etc., ignoring the long and complex tradition of thought behind Berkeley’s approach. To take only one example, a recent article titled “Is Berkeley’s World a Divine Language?”, by James P. Danaher, and published in *Modern Theology* (18: 3, 2002), deals precisely with Berkeley’s “visual language”, but without making *any reference*, however vague or allusive, to the theological tradition of the Book of Nature, a tradition that certainly inspired and nourished Berkeley’s notion of the world as a “discourse” of God. Berkeley’s “visual language” is considered either in itself, as an argument for his immaterialism, or in connection to Locke’s “semantic atomism”, Saussure’s “structuralism”, Aristotle’s doctrine of the “active intellect”, and even a

reference is made to Winston Churchill's speeches during World War II (Danaher 2002). Nevertheless, there is no mention at all of the medieval tradition of the *liber mundi*. Anyway, to write a paper with such a title, and, moreover, to publish it within an important theological journal, and, nevertheless, to succeed in systematically avoiding any mention of any of the tremendously important theological implications of the notion of "divine language" must be, in itself, a remarkable enterprise.

### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Let us note in passing that this theological grounding of *liber mundi*, as it is revealed in this context, is similar to the theological justification of the representation of divine figures (*icons*): theologically speaking, the icon is not simply a "painting", but it can "grasp" God's image because, by Incarnation, God has decided to make Himself visible to earthy eyes. The icon is not made only by wood and paints, but it also contains a "hidden" part: God's image as a spiritual unseen reality. Thus the icon has a double nature, just as Christ has a dual nature. Just as, to return to my topic, the "book of the world" itself has: *signans* and *signatum*.

<sup>2</sup> Let us also quote, to illustrate, some titles of medieval encyclopedic books: *Speculum quadruplex* (Vincent of Beauvais), *Speculum humanae salvationis* (Hugues of Saint-Cher), *Speculum humanae conditionis*, and so forth.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent discussion of the relationship between book and mirror in the Middle Ages and beyond see, for example, Peter Harrison's study "The 'Book of Nature' Metaphor and Early Modern Science" (Harrison 2003).

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to see how this metaphor of the "invisible hand" changed its meaning along the centuries, to the extent that, for example, in Adam Smith's economic theory, it would mean nothing divine or theological at all, but simply the laws of free market.

<sup>5</sup> Naturally, the topic is also present within the other "religions of the Book". For instance, as regards the Muslim civilization, Mohhyddin ibn-Arabi considers that "this Universe is an immense book" (Chevalier and Gheerbrandt 1969: entry "Book"). But an inquiry, however sketchy, into how the topic appears, not only in Christianity, but also in the other "religions of the Book" would have gone much beyond the scope and purpose of the present chapter.

<sup>6</sup> "The old traditional religions of the Greeks and the Romans were not embodied in sacred books. Judaism and Christianity and, later, Mohammedanism were religions of the book. The name, Bible, may come from

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*biblion*, papyrus rolls, or from Byblus, a town in Syria famous as a papyrus market; as we have it, the Bible was written down between 1000 B.C. and A.D. 150." (Artz 1980: 39-40)

<sup>7</sup> See, for this discussion, Chapter 16 ("The Book as Symbol") of Curtius' book (Curtius 1979: 302-347)

<sup>8</sup> This process is, of course, much more complex than presented here, the "reading" of *liber creaturarum* being only a first stage. As a matter of fact, in Gilson's summarization, "this elevation is marked by three main stages. The first one consists in finding again God's traces within sensible world; the second one consists in searching for God's image in our souls; and the third one consists in transcending all created things and finding the mystical delights of the knowledge and adoration of God ." (Gilson 1986: Chap. VIII, § 2)

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of Sebonde's doctrine see Gilson's book (Gilson 1944: 465-7)

<sup>10</sup> Jesse Gellrich's book, referred to already many times in this chapter and to which I am particularly indebted, is specifically concerned with the idea of book in relation to the many "cultural forms" (language theory, mythology, fiction, manuscript painting, sacred architecture, music, etc.) of the Middle Ages (Gellrich 1985).

<sup>11</sup> It is not difficult to see that a certain "Platonic" dimension is present in this principle of imitation. Some authors, for example, see the climactic point of this tendency in the thirteenth century: "The perception of the earthly society as an ordered structure reflecting the greater harmonies of the universe was ... a basic pillar supporting the thirteenth-century world view." (Barber 1993: 475)

<sup>12</sup> See David Berman's discussion of this problem (Berman 1994: 22-28).

<sup>13</sup> Published in answer to a newspaper criticism against *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*. Adam Smith described this short work as "one of the finest examples of philosophical analysis that is to be found, either in our own, or in any other language". (*Apud* Berman 1994: 136).

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion of the "natural language" in the Seventeenth Century, and of the entire literary, philosophical, linguistic context, see, for example, Margreta de Grazia's and Thomas C. Singer's articles (Grazia 1980 & Singer 1989)

<sup>15</sup> "...for in him we live and move and exist". (*Acts*, 17: 28) The idea is also present in Cleanthes.

<sup>16</sup> See, for the use of these two metaphors in the Middle Ages and in the modern period, Mills' excellent article (Mills 1982)

<sup>17</sup> For Leonardo da Vinci's mechanics, as well as for the specific relationship between his conceptions and Descartes's mechanical conceptions, see, for instance, the fascinating book that Paul Valéry wrote about Da Vinci (Valéry 1957).

## Chapter Four:

### George Berkeley and the alchemic tradition

In the second part of Chapter Two George Berkeley's last published work *Siris* have been dealt with from the point of view of the literary procedures and rhetorical techniques by means of which this writing was produced. In other words, *Siris* has been considered in that chapter from a *formal* angle, without paying too much attention to *what* this writing is about. It is the present chapter that deals with *Siris*'s contents. The central idea around which the chapter is clustered is that, in this writing, Berkeley comes to employ and make extensive use of one of the most ancient "spiritual techniques" and speculative ways of thinking: that is, *alchemy*. Hence the fact that Berkeley's arguments and notions in *Siris* will be discussed by constant reference to alchemic topics, writings and authors. It is the objective of the present chapter to show that, apart from its being under the strong influence of the Platonic tradition — though in close connection with it — Berkeley's thought, as it reveals itself in *Siris*, seems to have been marked by some intellectual inclinations, spiritual concerns, and mind-sets characterizing the alchemic tradition.

The chapter has three parts: 1) the first part is dedicated to the problem of the search for *Elixir Vitae* in alchemy and in Berkeley's *Siris*; a special prominence will be given in this part to the way in which the "philosophers' stone" (*lapis philosophorum*) played in the alchemic tradition a double role: panacea *and* symbol of salvation; 2) the second part deals with the theory of "The Great Chain of Being" as it manifests itself in both the alchemic tradition and in *Siris*; and 3) the third part contains some general remarks on the spirit of alchemy and on George Berkeley's late philosophical position, in an attempt at making more sense of *Siris*, one of Berkeley's most neglected writings.



## 4.1. *The search for the Elixir Vitae*

### 4.1.1. *Siris*: a peculiar philosophical writing

*Siris* (1744) is quite controversial among Berkeley's works. In Berkeley's lifetime it was one of his very few "best-sellers". Nevertheless, despite its being "the most immediately influential of all Berkeley's books, with five editions in Dublin and London within the year", *Siris* is "most frequently ignored by modern Berkeley scholars." (Walmsley 1990: 142) On publication, for all its immediate success, it intrigued the sober-minded scholarly circles of Berkeley's day, making many of his learned contemporaries laugh at him<sup>1</sup>; then, with the passing of time, when not simply ignored, it was particularly this writing that has embarrassed many adepts of Berkeley's philosophy, and caused some hot disputes among his commentators<sup>2</sup>. *Siris* is indeed a peculiar piece of writing: it is a fascinating and puzzling book, a writing within which medical knowledge is curiously mixed with metaphysical speculations, and the so-called "natural philosophy" is dealt with in close, and very often surprising, connection with some ancient esoteric doctrines. As Horace Walpole quipped: "The book contains every subject from tar-water to the Trinity." (Qtd. in Walmsley 1990: 144)

Why did Berkeley write such an odd book? What was his intentions when writing this piece? Very briefly, in this writing Berkeley intends, in his own words,

to communicate to the public the salutary virtues of tar-water; to which I thought myself indispensably obliged by the duty every man owes to mankind. And, as effects are linked with their causes, my thoughts on this low but useful theme led me to farther enquiries, and those on to others, remote perhaps and speculative, but, I hope, not altogether useless or unentertaining. (Berkeley 1953: V, 31)

These curative virtues are countless and impressive. Berkeley offers a detailed list with numerous individual cases he knew of in which this medicine has been successful, as well as the numberless illnesses to be cured using the wonder medicine. It proved to work well against all sorts of illnesses: not only against various temporary affections, but also

against chronic, more serious diseases; it had beneficial effects not only for the health of the body, but also for the well-being of the mind. As a matter of fact, in a private letter, George Berkeley even comes to recognize that tar-water is for him a *panacea*:

I freely own that I suspect tar-water is a panacea. I may be mistaken, but it is worth trial: for the chance of so great and general a benefit, I am willing to stand the ridicule of proposing it. [...] And if God hath given us so great a blessing, and made a medicine so cheap and plenty as tar to be withal so universal in its effects, to ease the miseries of human life, shall men be ridiculed or bantered out of its use, especially when they run no risk in the trial? (*Ibid.*: 175)

Very much like in the case of his “Bermuda project”, some two decades earlier (a case I will discuss in detail in Chapter Six), Berkeley was ready again to “stand the ridicule” of proposing what he, in spite of the majority’s opinion, believed to have tremendously beneficial effects on his neighbours’ lives. When such a major thing as easing the “miseries of human life” is at stake, the ridicule one might have to suffer as a result is very low price to pay. For someone whose “sole end of all his projects, and the business of his life” was the “charity to men’s souls and bodies” (Berkeley’s wife qtd. in Luce 1949: 182) “standing the ridicule” of proposing a panacea must have meant very little. On the other hand, apart from his touching willingness to stand the ridicule, what makes his present enterprise even more peculiar is the fact that it is not a very common thing among modern philosophers, not even among the most eccentric of them, to deal with such a magic medicine, or panacea, as that proposed by Bishop Berkeley. Hence the misunderstandings that its proposal has copiously enjoyed over the centuries.

To a today’s reader it is especially the content of some of the “scientific” information described in Berkeley’s *Siris*, and the modalities of producing, exposing and testing it, that seem particularly outdated. Although “he studied the best chemistry and physics of his day” (Luce 1949: 205), Berkeley did no more, from our retrospective point of view, than summarize and (re)deliver the markedly deductive and speculative statements of late medieval and early modern science<sup>3</sup>. As one modern editor of Berkeley’s *Siris* rightly noticed, to “read Berkeley’s scientific sections is humiliating, for here one of our ablest and most learned minds is writing things which the most mediocre

student of to-day knows to be wrong.” (T. E. Jessop *in* Berkeley 1953: V, 7) In short, as a “scientific approach”, in the modern, generally received sense of the word, Berkeley’s *Siris* is to be considered, either in total or in part, a failure.

Nevertheless, there is another, deeper aspect of this work that requires, I think, some special attention and a more appropriate contextualization from its today’s commentators. For, in some way, considered in its *spirit* and within the broader context of history of ideas, Berkeley’s specific dealing with tar-water as a panacea, as well as the whole historical and metaphysical argumentation he quite impressively employed for that purpose, could prove to be more significant and, theoretically, more fascinating than many of the sober, more rigorous — but often nothing more than this — medical writings of the XVIII-th century. There are things in this writing escaping our current comfortable, when not simply complacent, ways of labeling and classifying matters of the past in view of today’s received ideas. Not that he is “right” in his considerations on tar-water: his being “right” or “wrong” is of little import in this context. I do believe that Berkeley’s considerations in *Siris*, if we are to make some sense of them and not simply rule them out as “funny”, are not to be judged by standards imposed by the subsequent developments in physics, chemistry and biology. If thus judged, we easily come to realize that they are wrong. But, in such a case, this realization is all that we gain from reading *Siris*.

It is one of the central ideas of this chapter that, in proposing his panacea, Berkeley was in fact placing himself in a long (especially alchemic) tradition of the search for the *Elixir Vitae*, for some “magic tincture” or medicine curing all illnesses, and supplying the “patient” with a number of outstanding attributes: perfect health, well being, moral and intellectual betterment, and so forth. From the standpoint of the alchemic way of thinking, Berkeley’s puzzling approach was not a “novelty” or an oddity at all; rather it could be regarded as a late, even if somehow “alienated”, version of a perennial and widespread tradition. And it is particularly such a fact that could to some extent explain many of the misunderstandings related to the reception of Berkeley’s *Siris*: as it were, even if it failed as a scientific or medical work, it “succeeded” in some way as a comprehensive and bold intellectual attempt, on the part of the “good bishop”, at

improving the “human condition” and proposing, or dreaming of, a “better life” for his neighbours. Berkeley’s curious proposal of his panacea betrays a marked idealistic/utopian propensity towards human integrity and self-improvement. On the other hand, as far as today’s reception of *Siris* is concerned, it is one thing to dismiss Berkeley’s tar-water panacea as bit of silly medicine, but quite another thing — and a presumptuous one — to dismiss the whole alchemic cast of thought to which Berkeley’s proposals belong. Certainly, it ill-becomes people today — who make very large and sometimes utopian claims about the potential benefits of genetic engineering — to scoff at the idea of “transmuting” nature for our benefit.

I will in the following discuss in some detail the alchemic notion of *lapis philosophorum*, its significance, complexity and symbolism, and the relationships it bears especially with the traditional Christian *Weltanschauung*. Given the fact that, hypothetically, the alchemist’s *lapis* is equated in this chapter with Berkeley’s tar-water, it is hoped that a detailed discussion of the *lapis philosophorum* will also cast a better light on — and bring forth a better understanding of — Berkeley’s speculations on tar-water, its curative virtues, and the broader spiritual consequences deriving from its existence.

#### **4.1.2. *Lapis philosophorum* as a universal medicine**

Within the medieval (both Arab and Latin) alchemic traditions one of the most important functions of the “philosophers’ stone” was to stand for a universal medicine, for some miraculous substance (the so-called *Elixir Vitae*) healing all imaginable bodily illnesses, as well as conferring on the “patient” a constant perfect health and a prosperous, long — or rather “prolonged” — life. Simply, as E. J. Holmyard has put it, the Stone “was also sometimes known as the Elixir or Tincture, and was credited not only with the power of transmuting but with that of prolonging human life indefinitely”. (Holmyard 1990: 15) The area of applicability of the *lapis* was not at all limited to the mineral world, only to metals and non-organic substances, but it supposedly worked with good results within the

organic realm as well. Paracelsus, for example, starts out one of his alchemic treatises in this vein:

Having first invocated the name of the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour, we will enterprize this Work; wherein we shall not only teach to change any inferiour Metal into better, as Iron into Copper, this into Silver, and that into Gold, & c., but also to help all infirmities, whose cure to the opinionated and presumptuous Physicians, doth seem impossible: But that which is greater, to preserve, and keep mortal men to a long, sound, and Perfect Age. (Paracelsus 1975: B)

As a matter of fact, within the Latin alchemic literature one might quite often encounter this equivalence: *Lapis philosophorum seu Medicina universalis*. And it ought also to be said that such an equivalence is not an accidental feature, but it seems to be central to every system of alchemic thought/practice — in any case, it is one of the factors making possible its survival and development, as well as the tremendous success it has widely enjoyed over the centuries<sup>4</sup>. Certainly, there are sophisticated symbols and hardly intelligible terminology involved in alchemy, and it is quite frequent that, when coming across an alchemic text, one has to fight a Hermetic and highly ambiguous manner of saying things, but, in spite of all the obstacles of understanding and impossibility of obtaining a unique homogeneous interpretation, this single fact is relatively unambiguous and clearly supported by bibliographical evidences<sup>5</sup>: the special role played in alchemic literature by the *lapis* considered as *Elixir Vitae*, no matter the numerous different names under which this is to be known: Red Tincture, *pharmakon athanasias*, *pharmakon zoes*, *aurum potabile* and the like. For example, in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652), in a poem reference is made to

the Golden Oyle called *Aurum potabile*,  
A medicine most mervelous to preserve Mans health,  
And of Transmutation the greatest can bee...  
(Ashmole 1968: 422)

Such an equivalence could take place as an immediate consequence of the decisive fact that, in realising his *magisterium*, the alchemist is, in the first instance, somehow *self-oriented*: all the outward things he seems to work upon, and which seem to suffer so

radical a transformation (*transmutatio*) through his approach, play as a matter of fact only the role of a *visible*, “solidified” metaphor of the inner transformation occurring *within* the alchemist himself. A successful *transmutatio* presupposes the accomplishment of some state of perfect ontological transparency between the inner spiritual world of the alchemist (*artifex*) and the natural world around him, as — according to the alchemic teachings — the *lapis* seems to be at the same time an empirical object belonging to the external world and an ultimate principle of the human life: “Truly, this matter [philosophers’ stone] is that created by God which is firmly captive within you yourself, inseparable from you, wherever you be, and any creature of God deprived of it will die.” (*Verum est quod ista res [lapis philosophorum] sit ea que magis in te fixa a deo creatur, et ubicumque fueris, semper tecum inseparata manet, et omnis a deo creatus, a quo hec res separatur, morietur.*) (Moriénus 1974: 26-7) There is, of course, a certain amount of ambiguity involved here, but this is an ambiguity making possible in fact the constant and fruitful interplay between the “inside” and the “outside” of the alchemic work. Hence

les indications assez fréquentes, même si parfois seulement allusives, sur la connexion nécessaire entre transmutation extérieure et intérieure, cette dernière consistant dans l’augmentation de puissance des valeurs spirituelles dans l’âme de l’artisan (*artifex*), comme aussi la fréquente interchangeabilité des buts sotériologiques prévus par certains courants alchimiques (correspondant à des sommets de perfection en différentes séries hiérarchiques: or, santé, longue vie, renouvellement spirituel). (Crisciani & Gagnon 1980: 50)

And it is particularly this fact that, in a sense, makes alchemy be a “spiritual technique”, rather than simply a practical, profit-oriented craft. On the other hand, and in the long term, this explains why alchemy enjoyed so deep an interest on the side of several psychoanalysts in the XX-th century, Carl Gustav Jung, with his writings on alchemy — especially his *Psychology and Alchemy* (Jung 1953) — being only the most widely known and influential.

According to such a line of thought, the external, visible effects of the *magisterium* (serenity, spectacular longevity and perfect health, etc.) are only “social signs” of a successful inner transformation; they are but the inevitable (and pleasant)

consequences of a deep and complex, sometimes painstaking, “inward transmutation” successfully performed. As a direct consequence of this fact, as it has been noticed, the

European alchemic literature overflows with delightful legends of adepts who attained magical longevity by virtue of their chemical accomplishments. The successful practitioner was typically revered as an ancient man whose physical well being, in addition to his wealth, marked outwardly the nobility of spirit derived from inward transmutation. (Lee Stavenhagen *in* Morienus 1974: 66)

This is why the myth of longevity, in most cases, is in some way or other related to the arcane world of alchemy, if not openly derived from it.

Although the search for a panacea is manifest in practically all alchemic traditions, it is within the Islamic alchemy that the *Elixir Vitae*, in the shape of a real, concrete “pharmaceutical product”, played a quite outstanding role. Here alchemy was “professed” most often by professional physicians, and some special relationships between alchemy and medicine could be established. Such brilliant personalities as Jabir Ibn Haiyan (721-815), al-Razi (866-925) or Avicenna (980-1036) were renowned as physicians and alchemists *at the same time*. Indeed, it happened sometimes that the medical art itself was taken for some sort of alchemy as the alchemic “products” were believed to have been used with good results in curing various illnesses. Al-Razi, for example, explicitly admits that, in case that the “transmutation process” fails, “if the elixir is unsuitable to transform lead into gold or glass into rubies, it may quite possibly serve as a medicine”. (Federman 1969: 71) In such a case, the *medical function* of the “philosophers’ stone” is exclusive and fundamental. Also, following Razi’ ideas, Avicenna

saw in this [philosophers’ stone] a medication, a medication of universal efficacy, the cure-all, the panacea. It was he who [...] started off the medieval adepts, who saw in the elixir the way to eternal health and everlasting youth. Though the line that leads from Avicenna to Paracelsus passes through the brains of ever so many monks, physicians, madmen and quacks, the idea is the same. It is the idea of the grand arcanum that cures all ills. (*Ibid.*: 73)

In general, as many historians have noticed<sup>6</sup>, Islamic alchemy had a marked “empirical” character, with a special emphasis placed on its sources in the natural world, as well as on its would-be applicability to the sphere of everyday life (in medicine, technology, etc.); Islamic alchemy was above all a *practical* enterprise, usually leaving little room, if any, for abstract speculations or other esoteric developments.

#### **4.1.3. *Lapis philosophorum* as a symbol of salvation**

Christian alchemy instead has come to acquire a strong esoteric and speculative dimension. Of course, the Islamic “medical” component was to great extent transmitted to the Christian world along with the alchemy itself (sometimes in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Centuries). But, *in addition* to all the practical and technical considerations, the Christian alchemists supplied their *magisterium* with a high degree of metaphysical and theological sophistication, as well as with a complex system of ethical and mystical speculations. Briefly speaking, under the new Christian circumstances, alchemy turned out to be not only a medical practice, but also a sophisticated “spiritual technique” and a “soteriological art”, with its main component (*opus magnum*) playing the role of a metaphor of the Christian’s efforts to acquire the “eternal salvation”:

In Christian Europe, the Great Work, already reflecting a spiritual significance, often took on a profoundly soteriological character. Here, the stages of the Work, from the initial chaos of matter stripped of its basic qualities to the triumphant success of the last stage were regarded as a metaphorical process mirroring the struggle of the human soul toward salvation. (Kren 1990: viii)

Let us have a more detailed look at some of the phases of this interesting process.

First of all, there were some ethical, religious and “existential” prerequisites an alchemist had to meet before properly starting his approach. In other words, performing the alchemic art supposed a careful and detailed *praeparatio* on the side of the alchemist not only in terms of specific learning and technical instruction, but also in terms of personal morality, self-discipline, and even liturgical *katharsis*: “The adept has to be morally worthy; his magisterium only witnesses the degree of refinement in virtue he has personally attained. Nobility of birth, ascetic faith, piety, and humility were still the



fundamental requisites, failing which the magic elixir would certainly elude the seeker after knowledge". (Lee Stavenhagen *in* Morienus 1974: 66-7) Why so? Because, according to the alchemic teachings, at the heart of his approach the alchemist will find the "fingerprints" that the Creator himself left in this world: the most intimate constitution of the world will come to be as it were at his feet. It will be at this point that, thanks to the distinctiveness and superiority of his art, the alchemist will "meet" God, if not *facie ad faciem*, at least through the numerous *vestigia* He has left in each single item of this world, and such a meeting obviously requires a special ethical preparation and a serious spiritual/theological training on the alchemist's side. As Paracelsus clearly states,

This ART was by our Lord God the Supreme Creator, ingraven as it were in a book in the body of Metals, from the beginning of the Creation, that we might diligently learn from them. [...] Therefore, when any man desireth thoroughly and perfectly to learn this Art from its true foundation, it will be necessary that he learn the same from the Master thereof, to wit, from God, who hath created all things, and onely knoweth what Nature and Propriety he himself hath placed in every Creature. (Paracelsus 1975 B-B1)

As a matter of fact, one of the most important guiding principles in Christian alchemy was that expressed by the formula *tam ethice quam physice*: the alchemist's involvement in his *operatio* was explicitly regarded not only as an empirical approach towards the natural world, but also as a way of accomplishing spiritual values *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. In other words, the Christian alchemist might well be considered some sort of priest or ascetic, rather than simply a secular scholar<sup>7</sup>. Being able to perform the "royal art" was, in fact, not only a matter of scholastic instruction, but especially a consequence of a long series of *exercitia spiritualia*, undertaken under the direct guidance of God himself:

We will therefore take him [God] to be our Master, Operator, and Leader into this most true Art. We will therefore imitate him alone, and through him learn and attain to the knowledge of that Nature, which he himself with his own finger hath engraven and inscribed in the bodies of these Metals. (*Ibid.*: B1)

Eventually, as a result of such a tremendous preparatory process, the practitioner is in a position to hope that he will be considered an *electus*, that he will receive the *donum Dei*: that is, the special divine gift enabling him to perform the *opus magnum*. There is a sense in which the alchemist must be a profoundly modest person, with an acute awareness of the partial, provisional — somehow uncertain — role that he is to play within the complex alchemic process. In other words, the alchemist must be aware that many of the things occurring during the *operatio* are out of his control, and that ultimately the secrets of alchemy “are never merely to be found out by human labour, but by ‘bi teaching or revelacion’ and the Stone is to be obtained by grace, rather than reading. Like religion, alchemy depended ultimately on divine revelation. There is a notion of alchemic <election>, just as there is a religious one...” (Roberts 1994: 79) Such a fact is clearly and repeatedly attested by the alchemic texts themselves. In some of these texts one might encounter the term *donum dei*, used in connection with the successfulness of the alchemic approach:

No one will be able to perform or accomplish this thing [the Great Work] which you have so long sought or attain it by means of any knowledge unless it be through affection and gentle humility, a perfect and true love. For this is something which God gives into the sure keeping of his elected servants until such time as he may prepare one to whom it may be handed on from among his secrets. Thus it is only the gift of God, who chooses among his humble and obedient servants those to whom he reveals it. (Morienus 1974: 11)<sup>8</sup>

The next stage of this process consisted in considering the entire alchemic process from a purely symbolical point of view. And the most appropriate cultural and religious framework within which such a symbolism could take some concrete and efficient forms was that offered by the Christian theology. Indeed, it was the Christian doctrine, with all its complex and already matured soteriology, Christology, doctrines of *Sacramenta*, and ethics, that became at that moment the perfect home for the newly adopted alchemy. Carl Gustav Jung follows in details how, for example, the holy *Sacramentum*, as it is described by St Ambrose, is being made highly compatible with the alchemic “inner transmutation”<sup>9</sup>. As a matter of fact, from its very outset, alchemy contained a set of features that could be easily interpreted in a Christian manner:

Images of death and resurrection, which for later alchemists prefigured the dissolution of the prime matter and its reconstitution into the glorious Stone, were central to Christian doctrine [...] In the eighth century Stephanos of Alexandria used the transformation of metals as an analogy for the transformation of the soul. Later alchemists too thought of metals being redeemed from their “sins”. (Roberts 1994: 78)

Once explicitly and systematically projected onto the Christian theological background, all the sophisticated symbols, figures, scenarios and devices of the traditional alchemy could live, so to speak, *una vita nuova* and enjoy a degree of sophistication, dissemination and eventually popularity never known before.

Now, as a result of this ample process, “throughout the Latin literature on the subject the alchemic process is treated symbolically. The base matter, of course, was man, corrupted by sin; the elixir was the cleansing power of the holy spirit; and so on. Consequently, the ultimate attainable by the Great Work was an *imitatio*, an approach to perfection as symbolized by alchemic gold” (Lee Stavenhagen *in* Morienus 1974: 66) So that the *Elixir Vitae* (*lapis philosophorum*), comes to be considered not only a panacea (*medicina universalis*), as it used to be in Hellenistic or Islamic alchemy, but also a strong metaphor of the Salvation itself, and constantly seen as some *speculum* of any human perfection. This is why, eventually, within the mainstream of the Christian alchemic tradition, the *Elixir Vitae* came to be regarded primarily not as a means of curing people’s bodies, but of saving their souls. As it were, producing the *Elixir* was a way of searching for an “eternal”, sanctified life, rather than simply of obtaining a worldly medicine. In such a case, alchemy was not about “making gold” (*crysopoiesis*) any more, but about making people feel “saved”, or — in any event — spiritually elevated; just as alchemy was not only a source of medicine for bodily illnesses (like in its Islamic version), but a superior “spiritual technique”, a way of “healing” human souls.

It was the above mentioned notion of “inward transmutation” that played a central role within this form of alchemy, giving birth to what is usually called “mystical alchemy”. “Mystical alchemy” is an interesting notion, as it reminds and describes in detail the entire alchemic apparatus and all the successive operations required by the performance of the alchemic *magisterium*, but not necessarily implying their real, factual

occurrence. The *operatio* was now a purely inner process occurring within the alchemist's spirit, without supposing the real existence of the alchemic substances, laboratory, devices, etc.<sup>10</sup> As a result, based on the profound knowledge of the Christian theology, there have been established a set of such fundamental symbolic equivalencies as: "philosophers' stone" = Jesus Christ, "prime matter" = sinful and corrupted man to be saved through the *magisterium*, "alchemic gold" = state of salvation, etc. The most important and spectacular of all these symbolical equivalencies was from far the *lapis-Christ* parallel. Once this paralleling took place, the "marriage" between alchemy and Christianity was completely accomplished: the main figure in Christianity, Jesus Christ himself, came to be associated with the most important element of any alchemic system: *lapis philosophorum*. Moreover, this parallel was not a circumstantial one or merely some rhetorical device: it was essentially based on fundamental similitudes and common patterns. For example, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, along with His Resurrection (the central points of the Christian doctrine), were to be rigorously mirrored within the alchemic process: "the death of our Lord Jesus Christ and His resurrection in a glorified body was to the alchemist to be compared to the death of the metals and their rebirth as the glorious stone". (Taylor 1951: 152-3) In English alchemic poetry, to take only a random example, one could find such convincing evidence of the Christ-*lapis* parallel as this one offered by a poem of John Donne (1527-1608): 'For these three daies become a mineral; / Hee was all gold when he lay downe, but rose / All tincture...' (Donne 1952: 28)

The parallel Christ-*lapis* plays a quite prominent role in C. G. Jung's fascinating book *Psychology and Alchemy* (Jung 1953); Jung was in fact one of the main modern promoters (or re-discoverers) of this interpretation. As for modern alchemic commentaries, the parallel enjoys a broad and enthusiastic acceptance among the most important experts on medieval Christian alchemy. Claudia Kren's and Lee Stavenhagen's considerations on the subject were just quoted above. Chiara Crisciani and Claude Gagnon (Crisciani, & Gagnon 1980), to take some other examples, offer a highly synthetic and finely systematized image of the *lapis philosophorum* in view of its mystical association with Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

## 4.2. "The Great Chain of Being"

### 4.2.1. Preliminary remarks

The notion that Berkeley's speculations in *Siris* might well be placed within the alchemic tradition is supported not only by the equation between *lapis philosophorum* and tar-water, but also by other arguments. That there might be an alchemic "reading" of Berkeley's *Siris* has been noticed, even if with some embarrassment and regret, by some of Berkeley's modern commentators<sup>12</sup>, and it was in 1954 that A. D. Ritchie even gave a lecture at the British Academy on Berkeley's *Siris* in direct connection with the alchemic theory (Ritchie 1954). Unfortunately, in his lecture, Ritchie barely did more than announce the subject, without going deeply into its substance, and without following properly and fully the consequences of his insight.

Once the relationship between *lapis* and tar-water has been discussed in some detail, I would like to deal in this chapter with another important argument supporting the notion of a presence of alchemy in Berkeley's *Siris*. This argument is based upon the idea of "The Great Chain of Being", resorted to by both Berkeley and the alchemists. Both in *Siris* and in the alchemic works, what really makes possible the existence, power and efficacy of the panacea is the special relationship it bears to the rest of the Creation, or, in other words, its particular place and function within "The Great Chain of Being". Apart from any other similarities of language, terminology, bibliographical authorities and historical sources, Berkeley shares with the alchemists the same fundamental belief in the special virtues that a certain link within the chain ("vegetable tar" and "philosophers' stone", respectively) comes to acquire, condense and manifest.

The topic of "The Great Chain of Being" is one of the oldest and most prestigious metaphysical and cosmological notions to be employed, developed and used largely throughout the history of European philosophy. As Arthur Lovejoy has expressed it, this is a "conception of the plan and structure of the world" which, from the remote antiquity

down to the eighteenth century, if not even later, “many philosophers, most men of science, and, indeed, most educated men” accepted “without question”. Structurally speaking, the universe is, according to this theory of “The Great Chain of Being”,

composed of an immense, or [...] of an infinite, number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents, which barely escape non-existence, through “every possible” grade up to the *ens perfectissimum* — or [...] to the highest possible kind of creature, between which and the Absolute Being the disparity was assumed to be infinite — every one of them differing from that immediately above and that immediately below it by the “least possible” degree of difference. (Lovejoy 1964: 59)

Based, originally, on some religious and mythical suppositions, the notion that everything existing “in Heaven and on Earth” is in some way unified, linked together, and interconnected, matched, so to speak, perfectly with man’s primordial need for *understanding* the world he lives in and the ways it “works”. There is nothing chaotic in the universe, but everything is orderly and in its own place. As a consequence of accepting the theory of “The Great Chain of Being”, the world becomes essentially *comprehensible*. Not that, thanks to it, we can know now everything about the world, but we know *how* to gain our knowledge of the world. For one of the major merits of this theory comes from the fact that it offers a good explanation of how is it that our knowledge of the world *is possible*, and how precisely this knowledge is produced. Namely, from the acquaintance with those links which are immediately accessible, we can rightly infer knowledge about the remoter links; based on what we are given in our immediate encounter with the world, we can make statements and predictions, and propose hypothesis about things which are, in virtue of their nature, far away from us, if not simply out of our reach. The result is that, according to the theory of “The Great Chain of Being”, there is orderliness, hierarchy, interconnection, harmony, meaning, and beauty in the world, and — which is equally important — our mind has the capacity of grasping the truths about this world.

#### 4.2.2. "The Great Chain of Being" in alchemy

It is precisely the notion of "The Great Chain of Being" that the alchemists made use of a great deal, and based on which they built up, and developed their cosmological speculations: "the idea of the harmony and unity of the universe, 'One is All, and All is One', led to the belief that the universal spirit could somehow be pressed into service [...] by concentrating it, so to speak, in a particular piece of matter — the philosophers' stone." (Holmyard 1990: 23) In fact, this fundamental principle postulating the unity of the world, in the particular form of an unseen cosmic chain penetrating and interconnecting it, as well as conferring it a certain identity, homogeneity and continuity, could be recognized even in what is believed to be the first and most important alchemic writing, namely *Tabula Smaragdina*, a short Hermetic text attributed to the mythical founder of alchemy, Hermes Trismegistus:

True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing. And as all things were by the contemplation of one, so all things arose from one thing by a single act of adaptation. (*Apud* Holmyard 1990: 97)

All the subsequent developments, however sophisticated, all the exotic speculations and countless refinements of the alchemic theories throughout the centuries did nothing but to echo this original principle. To the point that any definition of alchemy today must take seriously into account the theory of "The Great Chain of Being" as one of its fundamental ingredients. Claudia Kren, for example, when trying to offer a quite synthetic description of alchemy, says:

By almost universal agreement, alchemy in Western Europe was one of the products of a Hellenistic culture — Hermetic and neoplatonic — where the universe was a unified cosmos with all parts interrelated in a web of hierarchical correspondences and with all aspects in some way animate and active. This complex of semi-religious notions was joined by an influential theory which held that the elemental forms of matter were convertible one into another. (Kren 1990: viii)

Let me also add that this idea of a chain unifying everything was not, in alchemy, only a matter of historical coincidence, some theoretical device that happened to be employed by the alchemic authors in their discourse, and without which the alchemy would have remained more or less the same. The notion of the “unity of the world” belongs structurally and functionally to the alchemic way of thinking. It was not, so to speak, an accident, but a real substance. “The unity of matter” was one of the two “*a priori* postulates upon which the deductive reasoning of alchemy was mainly based” (the second one being “the existence of a potent transmuting agent”). In the absence of a theory firmly postulating the unity and homogeneity of the world, the alchemists would have lost one of the main metaphysical and cosmological premises enabling them to believe in the very possibility of transmutation and, consequently, in the existence and efficacy of their panacea. For from the notion of the unity of matter they derived another assumption, namely that the “philosophers’ stone”,

the medicine of the base metals, would act also as a medicine of man; hence, in the form of the Elixir Vitae or Red Tincture, the stone was depicted as an agent for curing all human ills and conferring longevity. Herein may perhaps be perceived a Greek influence, emanating from the Platonic conception that nothing exist that is not good and from Aristotle’s dictum that nature strives always towards perfection. (Read 1947: 4)<sup>13</sup>

#### 4.2.3. “The Great Chain of Being” in *Siris*

It is in a strikingly similar manner that Berkeley seeks to explain how is it that such a thing as his panacea is possible<sup>14</sup>. As a philosopher, Berkeley did not find it sufficient to simply propose his “medicine” and list its magic virtues and qualities, without looking into what was behind it. He felt he had to look for a serious philosophical explanation of how his panacea was *ontologically possible*. So that, after describing in detail the mode in which tar-water is to be prepared, after listing the various forms of illness and medical case histories in which this medicine proved to be successful, and inquiring into the chemical properties of the vegetable tar, Berkeley proposed the theory of “The Great Chain of Being” as *making possible his panacea*. This is, in his own words, the theory



that there “runs a chain throughout the whole system of beings. In this chain one link drags another. The meanest things are connected with the highest.” (Berkeley 1953: V, 140)<sup>15</sup>

For that purpose he undertakes an ample historical “journey” in search for those, whether ancient or modern, thinkers (philosophers, poets, scientists, alchemists, physicians, and so forth) supporting, in some way or other, his own ideas regarding “The Great Chain of Being”. His approach is deeply interdisciplinary, highly speculative and of an impressive theoretical openness. As it has been remarked, medicine “leads Berkeley to botany, botany to chemistry, chemistry to metaphysics, and *Siris* finally comes to rest on the nature of God.” (Walmsley 1990: 144) And he does so by tracing back this topic to the most ancient of its sources and promoters, to the mythical and theosophical views professed in ancient Egypt, or to the cosmological and metaphysical speculations of the early Greek philosophers, not to mention the repeated appeals he makes to Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, or the Renaissance Platonists. He largely, sympathetically summarizes the ancient doctrines, at the same time bearing always in mind, and frequently alluding to, his own tenets to be strengthened and supported by the dictums, fragments and beliefs of the celebrated figures of the past. In a way, as it has been remarked in Chapter Two of this dissertation, *Siris* has a marked character of “intertextuality”, and some sort of “joint discourse” is involved here: Berkeley’s own words are constantly echoed by those of the others, just as the others’ words are mirrored in his own phrasing:

If we may trust the Hermaic writings, the Egyptians thought all things did partake of life. [...] from all the various tones, actions, and passions of the universe, they supposed one symphony, one animal act and life to result. [...] It is a doctrine among other speculations contained in the Hermaic writings that all things are One. And it is not improbable that Orpheus, Parmenides, and others among the Greeks, might have derived their notion of *to hen*, THE ONE, from Egypt. Though that subtle metaphysician Parmenides, in his doctrine of *hen hestos*, seems to have added something of his own. [...] one and the same Mind is the universal principle of order and harmony throughout the world, containing and connecting all its parts, and giving unity to the system... (Berkeley 1953: V, 128-34)

Yet, the relationships between Parmenides, or the Greek philosophers in general, on the one hand, and the Egyptians, on the other, is of the same type as the relationships

Berkeley himself has with all of them. Their “joint discourse” is reflected within — and harmoniously interrelates with — Berkeley’s own text, giving birth to a new “joint discourse”. It is very much like in a process of alchemic transformation, within which primary elements are successively combined (“joined”) with one another, resulting in more and more complicated substances. Let us notice, at the same time, that some of the notions that Berkeley borrows in this writing from the ancient philosophers (the world as a symphony, the fundamental metaphysical unity behind the multiplicity of the visible things, etc.) are closely related to what he had already said in his earlier philosophical works: the world as a coherent system of signs, and as a divine “epiphany”. Once again, in *Siris* he seems to have pushed to the last consequences and fully developed what in his earlier writings was only vaguely alluded or hinted at.

Berkeley comes, then, to openly use the phrase “Chain or Scale of beings” in the proper, traditional sense of the word. He quotes Jamblichus’ fragment asserting the “world to be one animal”, an animal whose

parts, however distant each from other, are nevertheless related and connected by one common nature. [...] there is no chasm in nature, but a Chain or Scale of beings rising by gentle uninterrupted gradations from the lowest to the highest, each nature being informed and perfected by the participation of a higher. As air becomes igneous, so the purest fire becomes animal, and the animal soul becomes intellectual: [...] each lower nature being, according to those philosophers, as it were a receptacle or subject for the next above it to reside and act in. (*Ibid.*: 129)

What is interesting and original enough at this point is that, in Berkeley, this chain is not only of a cosmic nature, animating, unifying and interrelating the outside world, but it is also *a chain unifying our own minds*, and conferring upon them orderliness, unity and identity. This “chain” also functions as an “inner chain” connecting and interrelating our faculties and making them work properly. As a true mirror of the cosmos, the human mind *reproduces* for itself, on a much smaller scale, “The Great Chain of Being”; the human mind is of such a nature that it *reflects* the hidden architecture of the universe:

By experiments of sense we become acquainted with the lower faculties of the soul; and from them, whether by a gradual evolution or ascent, we arrive at the highest. Sense supplies images to memory. These become



subjects for fancy to work upon. Reason considers and judges of the imaginations. And these acts of reason become new objects to the understanding. In this scale, each lower faculty is a step that leads to one above it. (*Ibid.*: 140)

And it is precisely through this inner chain that, in Berkeley's view, we have access to divinity. He believes, in an Augustinian manner, that the divine is precisely what we discover at the end of the "inner ascension": "the uppermost naturally leads to the Deity, which is... the object of intellectual knowledge" (*Ibid.*: 140) Almost needless to mention, this "dual chain", manifesting itself both in the cosmic realm and in ourselves, points to the ancient Hermetic analogy between macrocosm and microcosm, an analogy which plays a fundamental role within any alchemic tradition:

As the Platonists held the intellect to be lodged in soul, and soul in aether; so it passeth for a doctrine of Trismegistus [...], that mind is clothed by soul, and soul by spirit. Therefore, as the animal spirit of man, being subtle and luminous, is the immediate tegument of the human soul, or that wherein and whereby she acts; even so the spirit of the world, that active fiery ethereal substance of light, that permeates and animates the whole system, is supposed to clothe the soul, which clothes the mind of the universe. (*Ibid.*: 91)

Now, keeping in mind that "luminous spirit lodged and detained in the native balsam of pines and firs" (*Ibid.*: 105), "tar" appears as a secretion of the vegetal realm coming to play a quite special role within the cosmic chain. A. D. Ritchie even says that the choice of tar is, in itself, another alchemic "trace" in *Siris*: "It was one of the alchemic doctrines that the 'essence' of plants is to be found in aromatic or sweet-smelling constituents, especially when these are volatile and can be concentrated by distillation." (Ritchie: 1954: 50) Nevertheless, there are authors who believe that the choice of the "vegetable tar" is quite circumstantial.<sup>16</sup>

But how does it happen that tar proves to be so important a link within the cosmic chain? What precisely makes tar play such an important role? Why tar and not something else?

At a given moment in his historical (as well as cosmological) "journey", Berkeley come to talk about "a certain pure heat or fire, which had somewhat divine in it, by the

participation whereof men became allied to the gods". This fire is not at all what we commonly designate by the word, but it has a definite metaphysical significance, having been the object of philosophical speculations from the ancient Greeks to, say, the Renaissance Platonists. This fire is the

purest and most excellent fire, that is heaven, saith Ficinus. And again, the hidden fire that everyone exerts itself, he calls celestial. He represents fire as most powerful and active, dividing all things, abhorring all composition or mixture with other bodies... This is the general source of life, spirit, and strength, and therefore of health to all animals [...]. The same spirit, imprisoned in food and medicines, is conveyed into the stomach, the bowels, the lacteals, circulated and secreted by the several ducts, and distributed throughout the system. (*Ibid.*: 104)

And it is precisely the tar that, in Berkeley's opinion, best "serve[s] as a vehicle to this spirit" (*Ibid.*: 106). In a manner clearly reminding us of the alchemic speculations on *lapis philosophorum*, and of its complex religious symbolism, Berkeley sees the vegetable tar as having a special "affinity" with the solar light, that is, with "the general source of life", as it grasps and concentrates light, conveying to the animal body its regenerating powers: "light attracted, secreted, and detained in tar [...] is not a violent and sudden medicine [...] but a safe and mild alterative, which penetrates the whole system, opens, heals, and strengthens, the remote vessels, alters and propels their contents, and enters the minutest capillaries..." (*Ibid.*: 68) In virtue of the special relationship it bears with the metaphysical substratum of the world (the celestial fire), tar, once properly prepared and consumed in appropriate doses, necessarily brings in us a fundamental "restoration". Thanks specifically to this characteristic of the tar, our bodies are healthily and harmoniously *re-linked* to the whole of the cosmic chain.

In short, for Berkeley tar functions as a special link within the cosmic chain due particularly to its peculiar capacity to retain, storage and transform light: "This balsam [...] abides the action of the sun, and, attracting the sunbeams, is thereby exalted and enriched, so as to become a most noble medicine: such is the last product of a tree, perfectly matured by time and sun." (*Ibid.*: 44) In other words, tar has the wonderful capacity to successfully "transmute" *light into life*.

Finally, it is the symbolism of light and fire, the dream of our “restoration” and of a redeeming “renewal” of our bodies, the notion of a smooth and harmonious reintegration of the human within the cosmic realm that, once again, strengthens the relationship between Berkeley and the alchemic tradition.

### **4.3. Alchemy as a “perennial wisdom”**

#### **4.3.1. The alchemy revisited**

Even though the alchemists strongly believed that what they were doing was “science”<sup>17</sup> — that is, a sincere and determined attempt at understanding nature as it is in itself — alchemy as such appears today as dramatically “outdated”; it definitely belongs to *the history of science*, rather to the science proper. Nevertheless, however outdated or even un-serious alchemy might seem, on a deeper analysis and placed within a broader context, alchemy proves to be, as it is more and more recognized by today’s scholars, a meaningful practice, a significant part of human’s “cultural behaviour”. Alchemy betrays a serious need for *transcendence*, a drive for *human perfection* and *moral betterment*, which confers upon it a certain perennial mark. As Jung has put it, “[t]here are very modern problems in alchemy, though they lie outside the province of chemistry.” (Jung 1953: 267) Alchemy is *of course* “wrong”, but this does not makes it less interesting as a cultural and historical phenomenon.

There is a certain sense in which, as some historians of alchemy point out, the alchemist might be regarded as an *exemplary person*. His approaches to, and ways of considering, the world around acquire, with the passing of time, some *paradigmatic* character: “Il y a dans l’alchimie une représentation du Moi qui est exactement et précisément l’image d’une certaine façon de connaître et de travailler que nous avons subconsciemment mais pas moins rationnellement écartée. Cette façon n’est qu’une interférence et cette interférence n’est audible que dans l’histoire.” (Crisciani & Gagnon 1980: 79) There is in this “façon de connaître et de travailler” of the alchemist a greatness and meaningfulness that can never become “outdated”. I have chosen to deal

here, very briefly, with three general features of the alchemic approach to the world, features which I think confer upon alchemy a character of “perennial wisdom”.

First of all, alchemy is characterized by a certain “therapeutic” view of the world. Moreover, not only of the natural world, but also of the human world, and, within it, not only in bodily terms, but also in terms of intellectual renewal, moral betterment, and ultimately in soteriological terms (alchemy seen as a search for “eternal salvation”). In a very particular sense, the alchemists might be said to have been the first “ecologists” as they heartily *cared about* the state of the material world around, and tried as it were to “heal” it:

In alchemy imperfect metals, often considered as ill, were helped to perfection and an ideal internal balance by the medicine of the elixir. Alchemy teaches “the restoral (*restituere*) of all fallen and inform bodies and how to bring them back to a true balance (*temperamentum*) and the best of health”. (Roberts 1994: 37)

Among other factors, it is the vivid sense of *tenderness* and *attentiveness* towards the surrounding world that, from our retrospective point of view, makes alchemy so appealing. The alchemists held a *generous* view of the natural world, and conceived of it as driven by a perpetual search for perfection and “redemption”. As one anonymous English alchemic writer said: “I must tel you, that nature alwaies intendeth and striveth to the perfection of Gold”. (*Apud* Read 1947: 6) Naturally, the alchemist’s current relationships to his immediate environment (*natura*) were marked by a certain form of *anthropomorphosis*; as it is proved by numerous pieces of evidence, he did not consider it in terms of a radical ontological *alteritas*, but he saw nature as being constituted, structured, and made operational in purely human terms: “To give to the combination of the two substances to make a third the name or symbol of ‘a marriage and birth’ was to fit the phenomenon into his world and so to make sense of it. He would then act on the principle that the phenomenon *was* a marriage and birth.” (Taylor 1951: 158) And this was only a first step the alchemist took: both *natura* and *anthropon* were to be eventually considered, within the alchemic view, in terms of some grand divine scenarios (of sacrifice, redemption, rebirth, etc.).

Secondly, alchemy essentially presupposes a *unified* conception on nature, man, and God. The significant role that the notion of “The Great Chain of Being” played in alchemy was discussed in some detail earlier on in this chapter. From an epistemological point of view, the most important consequence of the idea that there is an unseen chain pervading the entire cosmos is that the entire *knowledge* of reality must be (kept) unified and homogeneous, that basically there is only one *scientia mundi* making possible and explaining every piece of “local knowledge”, and guaranteeing its validity. Moreover, alchemy is not only about science. The alchemists, through all their writings, speculations and curious undertakings, tried to advance a bold and refreshing *synthesis of science, religion and philosophy*. They based their approach on the supposition that there was (or had to be) some form of pre-established harmony between the objectives of science, man’s need for understanding the world surrounding him and for reflexive attitudes, and, so to say, the fundamental thirst of immortality inherent to every human being. As one said,

Alchemy has suffered the misfortune of being classed as a science from a modern point of view [...]. Scientific it certainly was when it first reached the West sometime late in the twelfth century, but in thoroughly medieval sense, in which nothing, science least of all, could be separated from ethics, morals, and religion. For if science could not substantiate man’s claim on immortality, what use was it? (Lee Stavenhagen *in* Morienus 1974: 66)

Finally, the alchemic tradition is the historical expression of a drive towards *human perfection and moral betterment* — ultimately, it is the expression of man’s need for *transcendence*, and this fact makes alchemy, to some extent, perennial. The soteriological dimension of alchemy, which was discussed above, is to be necessarily taken into account when dealing with its history. For “l’alchimie se désigne immémorialement: art royal et sacerdotal. Elle n’a pas d’histoire, son histoire étant celle de la vie, de la mort, de la résurrection de l’univers en chaque homme”. (Robert Marteau *apud* Crisciani & Gagnon 1980: 23) Beyond any sophisticated practicalities involved, beyond the numerous arcane technicalities one encounters when reading an alchemic text, alchemy might be ultimately seen as a discourse on the eternal human search for a conciliation between the many

(often divergent) forms of being in history. In its strict details, an alchemic approach might be wrong and even seem “funny”, especially if judged by the standards of modern science, but — once considered in its *spirit*, and in a broader cultural and historic context — it proves to be a quite impressive attempt at offering a complex and *integrated* image of the human condition.

#### 4.3.2. Berkeley's use of alchemy

It is not difficult to see that, in *Siris*, Berkeley uses extensively alchemic terminology, notions and ideas<sup>18</sup>, quoting richly not only such late alchemists (or early chemists) as Paracelsus, Homberg, Van Helmont, and others, but also a celebrated “founding father” of the alchemic tradition such as Hermes Trismegistus, or the Renaissance Platonists, who openly placed themselves within the alchemic tradition.

Moreover, what is quite amazing from this point of view is the fact that Berkeley seems to have literally believed in the possibility of “alchemic transmutation”, of transforming base metals into gold. Interestingly, he did so by placing the transmutation, technically, within the proper theoretical and historical framework that the alchemists themselves used. Thus, at a given point in his demonstration in *Siris*, Berkeley brings forward, in support of the idea that “bodies attract and fix the light”, the results of what obviously was a transmuting experiment performed by the French alchemist Homberg:

Of this there cannot be a better proof than the experiment of Monsieur Homberg, who made gold of mercury by introducing light into its pores [...]. By this junction of light and mercury both bodies became fixed, and produced a third different from either, to wit, real gold. [...] This seems to have been not altogether unknown to former philosophers; Marsilius Ficinus [...] and others likewise before him, regarding mercury as the mother, and sulphur as the father of metals; and Plato himself, in his *Timaeus*, describing gold to be a dense fluid with a shining yellow light, which well suits a composition of light and mercury. (Berkeley 1953: V, 97-8)

However puzzling, even embarrassing, this belief of Berkeley (in the possibility of making gold out of base metals) might appear to a today's reader, it has nevertheless the



merit of *signaling* Berkeley's commitment to a worldview whose fundamental tenets and suppositions functioned also as the theoretical justification of what the alchemists were doing. But alchemy was not primarily about making gold. Some modern historians of alchemy are even inclined to believe that the gold-making side of alchemy was actually a form of disguise, something behind which they pursued their real interests, which were philosophical and spiritual in essence<sup>19</sup>. As a matter of fact, as it was shown above, what Berkeley took from alchemy was first of all the medical component, the belief in the existence of an ontologically privileged substance — along with the supporting arguments — based on which our bodies can be “healed” and restored. More than that, there is a sense in which Berkeley went beyond the strict medical technicalities, and shared with the alchemists some important spiritual affinities: the belief in a supreme principle of order (“The Great Chain of Being”) in virtue of which everything “in Heaven and on Earth” is secretly united and interconnected, the belief in the possibility of a cosmic restoration, either at a macro- or micro-level, the conception of the world as a symphony in which every single detail is meaningful and has its own role to play, the felt need for transcendence and betterment.

On the other hand, Berkeley's case, a case in which the “medical science” in the traditional, Hermetic sense coexisted with the philosophical modernity, whose brilliant representative Berkeley certainly was, proves sufficiently how difficult is to postulate some radical and unbridgeable gap between the traditional (medieval) and the modern. After a life dedicated primarily to promoting such fundamental ideals of European philosophical modernity as the constant appeal to experience, common sense and critical, rational argumentation, and so forth, Berkeley is, in *Siris*, “quitting science for venerable metaphysics, where he all but blends his own original philosophy with the theosophical theories of ancient Greece and the yet more ancient Middle East.” (T. E. Jessop *in* Berkeley 1953: V, 7)<sup>20</sup>

This is undoubtedly a very interesting step on his part, and should probably be considered by commentators otherwise than with embarrassment, regret or retrospective apologies. Berkeley took this step at a time when he had reached his full intellectual and existential maturity, after a life full of scholarly, literary and public accomplishments,

various private experiences (fortunate or unfortunate), etc. That is why, I believe, this was a deeply symbolical gesture on the side of the philosopher, betraying some fundamental shift in his way of considering philosophy: a shift from philosophy considered as an impersonal, so to say “objectivist” approach towards philosophy as a more personal, private exercise: if not openly as some sort of religious or “soteriological technique”. *Siris* is undoubtedly about things or facts of the external world, it is a “chain” of cosmological, physical, chemical, medical, etc. speculations, but — exactly as in an alchemic approach — behind all these concerns, there is a very *personal* need for overcoming, or reconciliation with, the fragile, limited “human condition” in view of its ultimate role within a cosmic-divine story.

Berkeley’s conviction that God is permanently speaking to us have now acquired a higher degree of specificity. As it were, the message that *Siris* sends might read: if we are attentive enough to the world around — that is, to what God is telling us — we will learn more than simply how to deal *in general* with this world: we will learn specific arts and techniques through which this world shall be kept in order, and our passage through it made smoother and healthier.

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> “Tar is a black and sticky substance with none too good a name in letters, and the very idea of a bishop discarding his white lawn sleeves and handling it and extracting a nasty medicine from it is too much for our sense of gravity, and Berkeley’s tar-water has become a jest.” (Luce 1949: 197)

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, besides the Bermuda Project, *Siris* was, as I already mentioned, one of the main sources of Berkeley’s popularity during his lifetime, and even after his death: “Berkeley’s philosophical writings have suffered a curious fate. In his own day the earlier works, such as his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, were little read and had even less influence, but his *Siris* enjoyed great popularity; if not for the philosophy, at least for the tar-water.” (Ritchie: 1954: 41)

<sup>3</sup> “In his last work *Siris*, he reverted to earlier modes of thought, to those of the seventeenth century, so far as it had not yet come under the influence of Descartes, Hobbes and Locke.” (Ritchie: 1954: 41)

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<sup>4</sup> “One alchemist complained that, falling under this suspicion [that he had discovered the secret of the *Elixir Vitae*] because he had happened to effect some rather spectacular cures during an epidemic, he had to disguise himself, shave off his beard, and put on a wig before he was able to escape, under a false name, from a mob howling for his elixir”. (Holmyard 1990: 16)

<sup>5</sup> One of Paracelsus’ most important alchemic works is even entitled *De vita longa*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Lee Stavenhagen’s commentary on Morienus’ *Testament of Alchemy*: “While Greek writers on this topic were inclined to employ allegory as their main technique, the great Islamic theorists generally moved in a more experimental direction, ingeniously combining astrology and number magic with patterns observed in metallurgical reactions”. (Lee Stavenhagen in Morienus 1974: 64-5)

<sup>7</sup> This is, of course, a rather simplified view of the medieval alchemist for the sake of the argument. Actually, he played several social roles, and, as historians show, had a polymorphous, though picturesque appearance: “Au X<sup>IV</sup>e siècle, de tout façon, l’alchimiste présente des aspects divers: il y a le médecin de cour, le franciscain dissident, les opérateurs présents à la cour anglaise, le savant spécialisé qui se croit digne, puisque sa recherche rentre entre les sciences (*scientiae*), de s’insérer dans l’institution universitaire”. (Crisciani & Gagnon 1980: 73)

<sup>8</sup> *Quia istam rem, quam tu diu quesivisti, non poterit aliquis perpetrare nec perfectare, nec potuerit ad istam applicare ab aliquo sapiente nisi per dilectionem et humilitatem molliciem et amorem perfectum atque verum. Et est ista res quam deus adducit suis fidelibus quibus illam adducere disposuit cum fortitudine maiori usquedum sibi parat hominem a quo eam sciat et eam sibi detegat a suis secretis. Nec ista res aliquid est nisi donum dei, qui eam cui vult ex suis servis demonstrat, qui sibi sunt humiles et in omnibus subditi.* (Morienus 1974: 10)

<sup>9</sup> “St. Ambrose called the transformed [transsubstantiated] bread *medicina*. It is the *pharmakon athanasias*, the drug of immortality, which, in the act of communion, reveals its characteristic effect in and on the believer - the effect of uniting the body with the soul. This takes the form of a healing of the soul (*et sanabitur anima mea*) and a *reformatio* of the body (*et mirabilis reformasti*).” (Jung 1953: 297-8)

<sup>10</sup> “In this aspect of the alchemic enterprise (sometimes referred to as <esoteric> alchemy), the would-be adept considered his materials and apparatus as elements in a spiritual metaphor, an inner process brought to a successful fruition only by those with no crass motive such as personal gain.” (Kren 1990: vii)

<sup>11</sup> “[L]e *lapis* est presque la déification du projet de salut, au point que dans de nombreux textes de l’alchimie latine il est présenté comme l’analogie du Christ. Le *lapis* est aussi le lieu où s’apaisent les hiérarchies (il est unique, indépendant, sans généalogie); il ne rentre pas dans les hiérarchies et les efface. La fonction du *lapis* apparaît claire si l’on observe le langage qu’il produit: il est sans nom et par conséquent il peut prendre tous les noms possibles: il supporte toute prédication parce qu’aucune ne le referme dans une définition univoque; il est le seul possible prédicat de soi-même dans une tautologie représentative de son être universel et particulier à la fois, étant parole de Dieu incarnée.” (Crisciani & Gagnon 1980: 50)

<sup>12</sup> For example, T. E. Jessop, *Siris*’s editor, says in his “Introduction”: “In claiming that it was probably a panacea [...], he belonged to his age: in his time even physicians of standing had their ‘catholicons,’ and there was very little science against them, and the old alchemistic faith behind them.” (T. E. Jessop in Berkeley 1953: V, vi-ii)

<sup>13</sup> It is exactly what an unknown alchemic writer, quoted by Read himself, says: “I must tel you, that nature alwaies intendeth and striveth to the perfection of Gold.” (*apud* Read 1947: 6)

<sup>14</sup> As a matter of fact, A. D. Ritchie makes exactly the same point: “One of the most ancient and widespread types of cosmological system is the theory of the Great Chain of Being. The central doctrine, in the form in which it is the basis of alchemy. Is summarized in a sentence quoted by Berkeley from one of the *Hermetic*

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works: 'All parts of the world vegetate by a fine subtle aether which acts as an engine or instrument subject to the will of the supreme God.'" (Ritchie: 1954: 46-7) Once again, what is regrettable with his article is that he did not develop the idea as much as he could, just as he did not follow sufficiently its consequences.

<sup>15</sup> As A. D. Ritchie suggests, Berkeley possibly had some sort of personal affinities with this particular theory: "The fundamental tenet of the Great Chain Theory is that all things in heaven and earth are interconnected. Whatever else Berkeley may or may not have believed, that he believed with all his heart. His favourite text was "In God we live and move and have our being.'" (Ritchie: 1954: 41)

<sup>16</sup> It is the case of T. E. Jessop, who, in his "Introduction" to *Siris* says: "The lowest link could have been anything in the sensible world, but at the time of writing Berkeley was thinking much of vegetable tar, and it is from this that he follows the chain to the Trinity - starting with empiric medicine, seeking a theory for it in vegetable and animal physiology old and new, finding the physical Aether as the quickening force in all things..." (T. E. Jessop *in* Berkeley 1953: V, 6-7)

<sup>17</sup> "Judged in the light of the then prevailing concepts the alchemists were engaged in an exact science, basing as they did their assumptions on the teaching of Aristotle. According to him all substances are but differing forms of one and the same prime matter, and it was thus theoretically possible to change one substance into another. This possibility seemed close at hand, as was the splitting of the atom in the early decades of our century, for Aristotle's teachings were as axiomatic in those days as is the theory of relativity today. [...] This is one of the main reasons alchemy enjoyed such long life." (Federman 1969: 4)

<sup>18</sup> Let us take only an example: "Mr. Homberg, the famous modern chemist, who brought that art to so great perfection, holds the substance of light or fire to be the true chemic principle sulphur, and to extend itself throughout the whole universe. It is his opinion that this is the only active principle; that mixed with various things it formeth several sorts of natural productions; with salt making oil, with earth bitumen, with mercury metal; that this principle, fire, or substance of light, is in itself imperceptible, and only becomes sensible as it is joined with some other principle..." (Berkeley 1953: V, 95)

<sup>19</sup> C. G. Jung, for example, advocates this view.

<sup>20</sup> "To make the mental journey with him is to leave the screeching of this bustling age, and to enjoy the effortless movement of one of our rarest minds gently expanding its practiced powers, carrying strange learning lightly, oscillating with ease between minute observations of natural history and the large visions of cosmology and theology, rising and falling freely through the several dimensions of reality and thought — such was the charm of this voyaging mind — insufflating the narrative of it all with a breadth as aromatic as the balsam with which it began." (T. E. Jessop *in* Berkeley 1953: V, 7)

## Chapter Five:

### Philosophy as Apologetics

As I showed in Chapter Two, God plays a central role in Berkeley's philosophy, as He is the supreme *Perceiver* of the world, which means that it is only thanks to him that things *exist* in the fullest sense of the word. Yet, God cannot remain an abstraction. He does not exist only in metaphysics, but also in history: there are always concrete modalities through which God pervades people's lives, conferring upon them meaning, and through which people worship God and seek to approach him. Hence religion. Berkeley was not content with simply postulating God as the supreme Author of the world, but he also did a great deal of philosophizing on religion and its importance in people's lives.

In this context, the present chapter is an attempt at considering Berkeley's thought from the standpoint of the Christian apologetic tradition, and its objective is to show that one of the roots of Berkeley's thought could be found precisely in this tradition. Though this is not a chapter dedicated to what might be called Berkeley's theology<sup>1</sup>, references will nevertheless be made here and there to some of Berkeley's theological ideas and arguments; it is not even possible to deal properly with an apologetic gesture without constantly taking into account the specific theological suppositions on which this is based, and whose visible and social expression that gesture is. The chapter has two large parts: 1) the first part is dedicated to delineating the theoretical framework within which the discussion of Berkeley's apologetics is to be placed, and, then, to the special relationship that theism bears, in Berkeley's system, to his immaterialism; and 2) the second part deals with *Alciphron* as an apologetic writing, in an attempt to place this book in the tradition of Christian apologetics. This part also discusses some of the rhetorical tools employed by Berkeley against free-thinkers, and the *pragmatism* of Berkeley's

apologetics: that is, the beneficial *practical* effects that the adoption of an active Christian attitude might have upon people's morality and social life are seen as an argument for the Christian faith.

## **5.1. Fighting against atheism<sup>2</sup>**

### **5.1.1. In search for a framework: the relationship philosophy-religion**

It is almost a truism to say that, historically, philosophy has overlapped with religion. Yet, not only in a historical — which is to say, genetic — sense do many philosophical traditions seem to “emerge” from certain developments occurring in the sphere of mythology and religion (or religious thought), but there is also a *structural* sense in which philosophy is sometimes related to the religious. In this structural sense, there is something in the nature of philosophical exercise itself that has at bottom a certain *religious* character; in some way or other, explicitly or implicitly, much of philosophy has aimed at providing “ultimate explanations”, which at the same time is one of the distinctive marks of any mature religion. And it is this situation that gives birth sometimes to a certain rivalry between philosophers and theologians. As Frederick Copleston has remarked,

It seems evident.... that as far as doctrines and theories are concerned, philosophies can overlap with religions. Both may provide frameworks for life-orientation and doctrines about God and man's relation to him. And for this reason it is understandable if some theologians are inclined to look on metaphysical systems as rivals to divine revelation and as offering an *ersatz* religion. (Copleston 1974: 5)

To put it differently, just as some of the important philosophical questions are also problems with which theologians are concerned (even if they look at them from a different angle), so some of the theological problems happen to be common currency in certain areas of philosophy. It is probably this fundamental “impurity” of philosophy, in the sense of its being sometimes “contaminated” by certain religious aspirations and

claims of “ultimate explanations”, that confers upon it the tremendous cultural prestige it has enjoyed over the centuries, and still enjoys, among other humanistic disciplines — if not even a certain “superiority of principle” over them. That the value, or quality, of a philosophy proves to be below one’s expectations is not relevant in this case: what is relevant is that that philosophy, by its mere existence, is an expression of man’s fundamental need for self-understanding, and for understanding the world within which he has found himself. As Frederick Copleston says,

philosophical systems have in the past been inspired by a felt need which can properly be described as religious. Moreover, whether the philosopher is or is not the proper person to meet the need, the need has hardly vanished. [...] This need is based on man himself, on man as existing in a historical situation in which... he has to act in view of end or goals. Hence it seems to me untrue to say that the idea of a religious promise or religious *a priori* is outmoded. (Copleston 1974: 8)

Needless to say, the fact that philosophy and religion address similar fundamental questions does not mean at all that the answers, or solutions, they will bring forth are the same. Sometimes they might have something in common, just as sometimes they might differ radically. Theism, deism, atheism, agnosticism, various forms of religious/cultural relativism and skepticism — each of them is a particular manner (with its own principles, suppositions, and methods) of addressing the same set of interrogations, at which both philosophy and religion ultimately arrive. But it is not my intention here to deal in detail with the complex and multifaceted interdisciplinary situation resulted from the overlapping between philosophy and religion, however fascinating its investigation might be. What I am mainly concerned with is only to delineate, even if in a sketchy manner, the theoretical framework within which a discussion of Berkeley’s apologetic philosophy is to be placed. This is why I will in the following focus only on few aspects of theistic (Christian) philosophy.

One of the first things that a Christian philosopher has to do — *qua* philosopher — is undoubtedly to attain a proper rapport between *faith* and *understanding*. To put it very schematically, just as faith without understanding would rule him out as a philosopher, so understanding without faith would rule him out as a Christian. As a

consequence, a Christian philosopher will look, whether knowingly or unknowingly, for the most harmonious possible relationship between the two. Of course, even within a non-religious context, faith and understanding are not completely independent from each other: there is always a complex dialectics operating here, and a subtle interdependence between the two terms, as any intellectual exercise presupposes, in he who does it, "faith" in a certain set of (logical, methodological, etc.) axioms, rules and principles, just as any act of faith has a certain "understanding" behind it, completely "blind faith" being an impossibility.

But it is in the sphere of religious philosophy that this dialectical relationship between faith and understanding reaches its highest degree of complexity. St. Anselm expressed the fact most poignantly in his *Proslogion*: "I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe — that unless I believed I should not understand." (Anselm 1962: 6-7) In Anselm's view, the act of faith must necessarily buttress any attempt at understanding the divine and discoursing about it; without the existence of faith such attempts would be not only a *hubris* (unforgivable arrogance) in ethical/spiritual terms, but they would also be completely fruitless in strictly epistemic terms. Not that St. Anselm initiated this debate, or "invented" the problem (the issue at stake had been present in Christianity from its beginning, and Augustine, for example, dedicated a great deal of thinking to it), but it was Anselm who fully and acutely realized the crucial importance that the relationship faith-understanding might have for the idea of a specifically Christian philosophy. As a matter of fact, as Copleston has rightly noticed, once the process through which faith seeks self-understanding has made its debut, the emergence of a coherent system of Christian metaphysical thought is, in a way, unavoidable: "the process of faith seeking understanding of itself must lead at some point or other to what can be reasonably be described as metaphysical reflection." (Copleston 1974: 53). The notion of *fides quaerens intellectum* will become one of the distinctive marks of the Christian theism, defining it as a distinctive form of philosophizing. Of course, within such a context, philosophy had what we would call today an "instrumental value": it was not in general pursued "for its own sake", as it seems to be today, but all its undertakings, approaches, and "discoveries" were overtly



put into the service of that supreme end: “the faith seeking understanding of itself”. If we prefer, we might say that philosophy was “subordinated” to religion — that is, to an end alien to philosophy itself. But, I suppose, that language belongs to our own anachronisms, to our own projections onto the past, rather than to what medieval thinkers themselves thought of what they were doing. When one reads medieval philosophical texts one never comes across the frustration that a “subordination”, or “enslavement”, of philosophy should normally bring forth. On the contrary, one of the commonest notes of these texts seems to be a certain gladness of mind, intellectual enjoyment and visionary delight on the side of their authors. They simply seem to take what this form of “subordinated” philosophizing might bring to them as the supreme good one can attain in one’s lifetime: “Since I conceive of the understanding to which we can attain in this life as a middle term between faith and the [beatific] vision, I judge that, the more anyone attains to it, the closer he comes to the vision to which we all aspire” (Anselm 1962: 178 [*Cur Deus homo*])

Although faith has to support understanding, it nevertheless *does not interfere* with the intellect’s specific approaches. Anselm explains that what he aims at in the *Monologion* is to explain things in such a way that

nothing from Scripture should be urged on the authority of Scripture itself, but that whatever the conclusion of independent investigation should declare to be true, should, in an unadorned style, with common proofs and with a single argument, be briefly enforced by the cogency of reason, and plainly expounded in the light of truth. (Anselm 1962: 35)

This is possible thanks to the fact that one of the fundamental principles upon which theism is based is that truth does not result from any human imposition, interpretation, negotiation, etc., but truth is the *Truth*, one of God’s names. Truth is what both faith and understanding incessantly look for, each in its own way. “The order of faith” and the “order of understanding” are only different modalities of approaching one and the same thing. Truth, in this theological acceptance, is precisely what makes possible various “truths”, in philosophy, in sciences or even in everyday life; at the same time, it is what confers upon one’s faith certitude and firmness. That being said, within such a system of thought, it would be practically impossible for a mind to arrive at something contrary to

what faith asserts, as long as that mind has been well instructed and conducted, and the faith has been a “right” faith. The existence of Truth is the supreme “principle of order” conferring upon the believer’s life meaning, integrity and direction. As Stephen Clark expressively remarked with regard to the case of the Christian theism,

Christian theists acknowledge that there is a Truth wider than our conception of It, which demands our worshipful attention; that Its nature is such that It needs no further explanation; that It is such that we can reasonably think we might find out about It; that It is One, and therefore immaterial; that It must actually and entirely be what, intermittently, we are — that is, conscious; that it contains the standards for each finite being; that there must somewhere be something that is at once completely human and completely God. (Clark 1998: viii-ix)<sup>3</sup>

One of the interesting ironies about the relationship theism-atheism is that, as it has been repeatedly remarked, *atheism is massively dependent on theism*. This dependence is in terms of vocabulary<sup>4</sup>, arguments, historical contexts, “techniques of persuasion”, but it is also dependent in a deeper and more serious sense: its *existence* depends upon what occurs in the sphere of theistic thinking. Michael Buckley, in his monumental *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, undertakes a systematic study of atheism in light of its “necessary” dependence on theistic thinking: “If the emergent atheism simply reveals dialectically the internal contradiction which was lodged within the content of theism itself, then the understanding of atheism is possible only through the understanding of its generating matrix, theism. One issues from the other; one cannot make sense unless the other does.” (Buckley 1987: 16) As a result, any investigation of the history of atheism, in its various shapes, should take as its starting point a thorough study of the tradition of theistic philosophy:

Any attention to the origins of atheism in the West must attend as much — if not more — to the theism of the theologians and the philosophers as to the atheism of their adversaries. Atheism must be seen not as a collation of ideas which happened to arise in Western thought but as a transition whose meaning is spelled out by the process and whose existence is accounted for in terms of the ideas which preceded it. (Buckley 1987: 16)

If Buckley considers atheism dependent on theism in a rather genetic sense — that is, in terms of vocabulary, historical contexts, influences, etc. — Stephen Clark takes a step further and considers this dependence in a structural sense: an atheistic thinking would not even be able to formulate itself, and make itself intelligible, in the absence of those principles of intelligibility postulated and advocated by theism. As a result, in the process of contesting the theistic world-view, the atheist is actually *confirming* the doctrine he opposes:

even atheists, as long as they are rational ones, rely on Christian axioms, on theorems that would not be true if Christian theism — or something very like it — weren't. [...] If rational discourse is only possible in a God-directed universe, it follows that rational atheists must actually rely upon the truth of theism even to argue against it: this is not to say that atheists are incapable of rational thought, but only that — perhaps forgivably — they miss the implication of their own practice. (Clark 1998: viii)

To Clark a theistic philosophy seems to be “the safest option” (Clark 1998: 134), and his ultimate idea is that, given our particular ontological make up, and the type of relationships we can establish with each other, with the world and with the past, the best thing we can do — here and now — is to philosophically resort to *faith*<sup>5</sup>.

### 5.1.2. The philosopher's mission

The first two editions (1713 and 1725) of George Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* bore the following long subtitle: *The design of which is plainly to demonstrate the reality and perfection of human knowledge, the incorporeal nature of the soul, and the immediate providence of a Deity: in opposition to Sceptics and Atheists. Also to open a method for rendering the Sciences more easy, useful and compendious.* When Berkeley published the third edition (1734) of the *Dialogues*, he shortened this subtitle, and left only this phrase: *In opposition to Sceptics and Atheists.* Yet, even in its shortened form, the subtitle makes it clear that Berkeley took as his supreme mission in the *Dialogues* (which, one might say, is a “translation” of the *Principles* into a more accessible and agreeable language) to fight and silence what he saw then as the

increasingly influential groups of atheists, sceptics, and free-thinkers, and in so doing he took his immaterialist philosophy as his main weapon. He knowingly “subordinated” his philosophical enterprise to a non-philosophical end, but he seemed particularly happy in doing so.

It should be emphasised at this stage that Berkeley’s notion of philosophy as a form of modern apologetics lies at the heart of his thinking. In other words, his intention was not, among other things, to silence the atheists with the arguments provided by his philosophy, but this was precisely his *main* intention, and he did everything in his power to accomplish it. He knowingly designed his immaterialist philosophy as a means of countering what the atheists and free-thinking were saying, and if one overpasses this fact there are chances that one will seriously misrepresent the essence of Berkeley’s immaterialist philosophy.

In the “Introduction” to the *Dialogues* Berkeley voices what he considered to be the main aim of writing this book: namely, an “utter destruction of atheism and scepticism”. He believes that this will take place simply as a logical consequence of his new philosophical principles being accepted by the public:

If the principles, which I here endeavour to propagate, are admitted for true; the consequences which, I think, evidently flow from thence, are, that *atheism* and *scepticism* will be utterly destroyed, many intricate points made plain, great difficulties solved, several useless parts of science retrenched, speculation referred to practice, and men reduced from paradoxes to common sense. (Berkeley 1949: II, 168)

It was his ardent hope that, as a result of a proper public assimilation and dissemination of his philosophy, not only would such intellectual diseases as scepticism and atheism disappear, but many of the current problems, theoretical difficulties and puzzles in the sciences will be solved for ever, as it were, as long as commonsense will triumph over paradoxes. As Berkeley saw it, his immaterialism had a certain *therapeutic value*. He will say in *Alciphron*: “as bodily distempers are cured by physic, those of the mind are cured by philosophy” (Berkeley 1950: III, 139 [*Crito speaks*]). This manner of seeing philosophy in terms of medical metaphors has a long history behind it, with Buddha, Socrates and Plato at the beginning, and with a list of brilliant representatives.

Then, in the same “Introduction” to the *Dialogues* a crucial passage occurs in which Berkeley confesses his philosophical creed that “the sublime notion of a God, and the comfortable expectation of immortality, do naturally arise from a close and methodical application of thought” (Berkeley 1949: II, 168). In a manner that definitely places him in the tradition of theistic Christian philosophy I discussed very briefly above, Berkeley comes to see the contemplation of God as a *natural* end of all the mind’s pursuits: if well and carefully conducted (“a close and methodical application of thought”), the human mind cannot but arrive at the sphere of the divine, enjoying the prospect of immortality and eternal peace. In other words, according to this line of thought, there is in us a fundamental natural inclination that makes us always direct all our desires, interests and actions towards what is eternal and changeless: “Among all these things... those only are the true objects of enjoyment which we have spoken of as eternal and unchangeable.” (Augustine 1877: 18) If, in reality, the situation is different and we find ourselves sometimes desiring perishable or insignificant things, this happens — we will be advised — only because we are temporarily alienated.

### 5.1.3. Either God or matter

It was Berkeley’s most profound conviction that the best way in which he could serve the cause of theism was to deny the existence of matter and of the material world. As it has been remarked, this was one of his earliest philosophical insights: even “as a teenager, Berkeley was already convinced that the notion of matter was incoherent, superfluous, at odds with common sense, and dangerous.” (Cooper 1996: 260) At the beginning of his philosophical career, at a time when he was writing his *Commonplace Book*, he observed: “Matter once allow’d. I defy any man to prove that God is not matter.” (Berkeley 1948: I, 77) In a certain sense, all what he was going to do after that, through all his writings, was an incessant and laborious attempt at confirming that early intuition. In another chapter of this dissertation I will be trying to propose a look at Berkeley’s immaterialism from the point of view of the Cathar doctrines about matter, and to show how Berkeley’s intuition

of the nonexistence of matter reflects at bottom a certain anxiety, on his side, of a Gnostic and Dualistic nature. But for the time being I will only try to see how his immaterialism functions as a form of apologetic philosophy.

First of all, *there is no need* for matter. Not only is matter unintelligible — we cannot, properly speaking, say that we perceive matter — but there is no reason whatsoever for accepting matter even as a problematic notion, to accept matter as, say, some “hypothetical notion” we might provisionally employ for “the sake of the argument”, as it were. The acceptance of matter would bring us no theoretical benefits simply because there *cannot be* benefits, of any kind, that acceptance of matter might bring about. Philosophically speaking, matter is unnecessary and superfluous. God is more than sufficient as a source of meaning and (causal) explanation: all things have their “roots” in God, and it is in God that we can easily find their ultimate cause and explanation. God is what makes every explanation possible, meaningful and — above all — God is what confers upon any explanation *completeness*. Then, having no reason for accepting the existence of matter, only one reasonable solution remains — its complete denial:

it is evident that the being of a *spirit infinitely wise, good, and powerful* is abundantly sufficient to explain all the appearances of Nature. But as for the *inert senseless matter*, nothing that I perceive has any the least connection with it, or leads to the thoughts of it. And I would fain see anyone explain any the meanest phenomenon in Nature by it, or shew any manner of reason, though in the lowest rank of probability, that he can have for its existence ; or even make any tolerable sense or meaning of that supposition. (Berkeley 1949, II [*Principles...* § 72])

Berkeley becomes concerned with the unhealthy effects that the acceptance of the existence of matter might have upon our minds, and upon the notions, theories, systems of interpretation we incessantly resort to in our attempts at making sense of the world we live in. Berkeley’s thesis is that the acceptance of existence of matter *is not an innocent thing* at all. Although superfluous, the belief that matter exists, once given a place within our world-views, tends to *corrupt* our native common sense, and induce in us various pernicious notions and unhealthy theories. Chief among them is atheism. For Berkeley

atheism is one of the likely consequences of the acceptance of matter. An atheist is someone who gets the (wrong) idea that the world he finds himself in is the *only* world, the only reality; he is, as it were, “blinded” by what he encounters, and thus put in a position from which he cannot see anything beyond the cause of his blindness. And then he names this blinding world “matter”. As Berkeley puts it, it was precisely upon the doctrine of matter or corporeal substance that

have been raised all the impious schemes of *atheism* and irreligion. Nay so great a difficulty hath it been thought, to conceive matter produced out of nothing, that the most celebrated among the ancient philosophers... have thought matter to be uncreated and coeternal with him. [...] All their [the atheists’] monstrous systems have so visible and necessary a dependence on it, that when this corner-stone is once removed, the whole fabric cannot choose but fall to the ground; insomuch that it is no longer worth while, to bestow a particular consideration on the absurdities of every wretched sect of *atheists*. (*Ibid.* II [*Principles*... § 92])<sup>6</sup>

According to Berkeley’s line of thought, not only are the atheists wrong: what is worst in their case is that they mistake their intellectual disease for an excellent health, and, as if this misfortune would not be enough, they seek to propagate and widely disseminate their disease among others. For, as it has been observed, militant atheism “trades on exactly the same conviction as any proselytizing creed: that those who don’t align themselves with Truth are lost, and must — for their own sake — be disabused of all their false conceptions, even if it kills them” (Clark 1998: 44)<sup>7</sup>.

As such, the only solution lies in a systematic attempt at “healing” these “sick” people — the atheists. And this is precisely what Berkeley tries to do by the means of his philosophical writings. The fact that he decided to “translate” the philosophical substance contained in *The Principles* into a more accessible and friendly language in the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* witnesses to the impressive determination that Berkeley invested in this project. Berkeley was deeply “disturbed at the remoteness of the ‘God of the philosophers’ from the intimate God of simpler belief.” (Cooper 1996: 260), and he was convinced that a solution for bridging this gap between the “two Gods” would consist in expelling the notion of matter out of the sphere of philosophy, arts and

sciences. For Berkeley, this would have as a result a replacement of — to use the famous Pascalian phrasing — *le Dieu des philosophes et des savants* with the true God of Religion, *le Dieu d'Abraham, d'Isaac, et de Jacob, le Dieu de Jésus-Christ*. God will be then resorted to as our ultimate source of metaphysical and existential meaning, and, as a result, some *magna restauratio* will necessarily take place in all branches of knowledge, with tremendously beneficial effects upon the future state of affairs of the mankind:

Matter being expelled out of Nature, drags with it so many sceptical and impious notions, such an incredible number of disputes and puzzling questions, which have been thorns in the sides of the divines, as well as philosophers...; that if the arguments we have produced against it, are not found equal to demonstration (as to me they evidently seem) yet I am sure all friends to knowledge, peace, and religion, have reasons to wish they were. (Berkeley 1949, II [*Principles...*], § 96)<sup>8</sup>

## **5.2. Fighting against free-thinking**

### **5.2.1. Alciphron**

In 1732, some twenty years after he published his first writings of speculative philosophy, by means of which he was trying to fight against atheism, Berkeley published his longest work, in the shape of seven philosophical and apologetic dialogues. Its full title is: *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher. In Seven Dialogues containing An Apology for the Christian Religion, against those who are called Free-Thinkers*. From some points of view, *Alciphron* is significantly different from Berkeley's previous writings, with perhaps the exception of the *Three Dialogues*. The difference is in terms of length, contents, types of argumentation, reliance upon authorities, style, literary devices and rhetorical techniques employed, and perhaps even in terms of the audience intended. The fact that his early philosophical writings had not enjoyed the success Berkeley expected, or even some form of acceptance among the public, had probably something to say about why *Alciphron* differs so much from them.



First of all, from a literary point of view, *Alciphron* is almost unanimously recognized as one of the major accomplishments in the English language: “as a work of art it stands supreme in the whole body of our English literature of philosophy, and perhaps supreme also in our literature of religious apologetics” (Jessop 1950: 2). Berkeley’s writing had always been elegant and highly expressive, but with *Alciphron* the artistry and literary qualities of Berkeley’s writing came to occupy a central position, functioning as a distinct means of persuasion and as an important weapon in disputes with free-thinkers and atheists. T. E. Jessop, one of *Alciphron*’s modern editors, placed Berkeley’s *Alciphron* in a tradition of the dialogical form in philosophy whose history could be traced as far back as the Platonic dialogues. Actually, when reading *Alciphron*, one cannot help thinking that Berkeley wrote this work constantly bearing in mind the Platonic art of the philosophical dialogue:

his model was clearly Plato, from whom he learned more than anyone else has done the art of writing philosophical dialogue. After his master, only he has produced dialogues that are at once good philosophy and eminent literature. Some of his passages read as though they were transcripts of a Socratic conversation in a new Attic tongue. Outside Plato there is nothing in this genre to compare *Alciphron* with, except Berkeley’s own *Three Dialogues*. (*Ibid.*: 2)

Both Crito and Euphranor, the two characters standing for Berkeley’s own position in the confrontation (Crito’s “knowledgeable, sarcastic, and witty interventions express one side of Berkeley’s mind; Euphranor’s simple sincerity expresses the other side” [*Ibid.*:15]), make abundant use of Socratic irony, sarcasm, pretended ignorance and other techniques of puzzling and silencing the opponents. (More will be said about this later on in the chapter.)

In the second place, *Alciphron* differs from Berkeley’s other writings in the sense that it is conceived of as an apologetic writing, and has to follow the specific rules of the genre to which it belongs. “Apologetic is... the defence of a cause or party supposed to be of paramount importance to the speaker. It... is distinguished from polemic (which need not assume any previous attack by the opponent) and from merely epideictic or occasional orations.” (Edwards et al. 1999: 1). As such, when writing *Alciphron* Berkeley was not

supposed to simply state his own position and then support it with arguments and various forms of evidence. The fundamental requirement that an apologist has to meet is to cope successfully with what his opponents claim against his position, to counter their claims by showing, as well as he can, that the counter-arguments brought against the position he defends are flawed in some way or other: “apologetics address outsiders, and must deal with the views of their own group and others’ misconceptions of them” (Price 1999: 106) More than that: not only does he have to perform all these things, but he has to do so in such an *elegant, persuasive, and compelling* manner that the current opponent should “mysteriously” become some day a supporter of the apologist’s position. As a result, what we should expect to find in *Alciphron* is not a systematic presentation of the Christian philosophy, but a solid refutation of what free-thinkers then thought about Christianity. And, indeed, as has been remarked, in *Alciphron* “Christian beliefs are stated defensively, not in the order required by their own logic, but with a shape and emphasis devised to meet the contemporary objections of intellect and mood. The philosophy in it is subservient to that aim.” (Jessop 1950: 4)<sup>9</sup>

In the third place, *Alciphron* is specifically and vigorously directed against a certain social and intellectual group, or “sect”, increasingly more influential in Berkeley’s time, namely, the *free-thinkers*: “The author’s design being to consider the free-thinker in the various lights of atheist, libertine, enthusiast, scorner, critic, metaphysician, fatalist, and sceptic” (Berkeley 1950: III, 23 [*Advertisement*]). Of course, as we have seen above, in a way Berkeley’s all philosophical writings were conceived of as means of silencing the atheists, sceptics, and free-thinkers. Yet, whereas in his previous writings he dealt with the theoretical principles on which he thought atheism was founded (the doctrine of matter, for example), and brought forth speculative arguments against these principles, in *Alciphron* Berkeley addresses free-thinking as a (pathologic) *social and cultural* phenomenon:

Free-thinking was rampant in drawing-rooms, coffee-houses and taverns, and there it was less decent than it was in books. To call that a cult of reason would be cant, and to stigmatize Berkeley’s satire as overdrawn would be to take our picture of the life of his day from its published documents. He rightly makes his characters... remind us that free-thinking

as a social fact was to be found most in conversation. [...] He was dealing less with a theory... than with a fashionable attitude, one that regarded religious people, and most of all the clergy, as stupid, inelegant, and either sycophantic or tyrannical... (Jessop 1950: 6)

The necessity that Berkeley stringently felt of “healing” his neighbours’ minds and morals, of immediately expelling the intellectual disease of free-thinking out of society, requires that the emphasis in *Alciphron* be placed not so much on the would-be philosophical doctrines behind the free-thinking (although a great deal is dedicated to tracing their sources and to showing their flaws) as on warning against, describing in detail, and combating the extremely pernicious effects that these doctrines might have on public and private morality, on the civic life and well-being of the community: “If any man wishes to enslave his country, nothing is a fitter preparative than vice; and nothing leads to vice so surely as irreligion.” (Berkeley 1950: III, 104 [*Crito speaks*]); “all those who write either explicitly or by insinuation against the dignity, freedom, and immortality of the human soul, may so far forth be justly said to unhinge the principles of morality, and destroy the means of making men reasonably virtuous.” (*Ibid.*: 23 [*Advertisement*]).<sup>10</sup>

As a matter of fact, this was the wisest solution that Berkeley could arrive at. One of the reasons why it is so difficult to counter and fight efficiently against atheism is that there are so many ambiguities about it. As Michael Buckley said,

The problem with atheism is that it is not a problem. It is a situation, an atmosphere, a confused history whose assertions can be identical in expression and positively contradictory in sense. The ambiguity which marks such terms as *god* and *atheism* can be discovered in almost every critical proposition about this situation. (Buckley 1987: 13-4)

Thus, realizing that metaphysical argumentation against materialism, and abstract disputes with atheists, might in fact be of no practical use (the fortune of his earlier writings might have convinced him sufficiently of that), Berkeley decided to change his modalities of expression, employ new types of argumentation, and resort to some novel, more efficient weaponry. More specifically, he resorted to some of the weapons used by his own opponents.

### 5.2.2. Approaching free-thinking à la Voltaire

One of the most interesting and refreshing things about *Alciphron* is probably the fact that the two characters standing for Christian apologists (Crito and Euphranor) make — in defending their Christian faith and refuting the claims advanced by the free-thinkers — an extensive and impressive use of rhetorical tools traditionally attributed to the free-thinkers themselves: irony, caustic satire, arguments based on the *reductio ad absurdum*, sophisticated derision, humour, and so on. Obviously, *Alciphron* is not only that: it contains a great deal of theological, historical, ethical and philosophical materials, but — besides all these — there is in this book a distinct element of devastating irony and supremely artful satire directed against free-thinkers. This will make Berkeley's free-thinkers be defeated, as it were, in a purely *Voltairean* manner<sup>11</sup>.

It goes without saying that Berkeley used this rhetorical procedure deliberately, and expected from its employment certain results in terms of persuading the audience and gaining their approval and support: "Like all satire, *Alciphron* is designed to encourage and direct our feelings of contempt and resentment." (Walmsley 1990: 115) Once he becomes "caught up" within the carefully woven narrative, the reader of Berkeley's book ceases to be an impartial and detached observer, but — thanks to, again, the admirable artistry, refined rhetoric and sophisticated techniques of persuasion Berkeley employed — he feels that he has to make a certain choice: namely, to side with the cause of Christian theism. And he will do that for the simple reason that siding with the free-thinkers would go against his deepest emotions and feelings caused by the internalisation of the book. In fact, this was exactly what was supposed to happen as satire (and *Alciphron* is an admirable satire) in a means of providing an "emotive constraint on the vicious man, playing upon his fears of rejection. But satire also appeals widely to public spirit, stirring our anger against those who threaten the *status quo*." (*Ibid.*: 115)

The two free-thinkers are portrayed only sketchily at the beginning, and as the dialogues progress, they are made to reveal themselves in their entirety. "They are both men of fashion, and would be agreeable enough, if they did not fancy themselves free-

thinkers. But this, to speak the truth, has given them a certain air and manner which a little too visibly declare they think themselves wiser than the rest of the world.” (Berkeley 1950: 33 [*Crito speaks*]) A first hint is thus dropped that what is called “free-thinking” is not in fact something existing positively and substantially, but it just happens that there are some eccentric people who decide to “fancy themselves” free-thinkers. As it were, free-thinking is merely a word some people use in order to ennoble their eccentricity or desire to *épater le bourgeois*. The elder free-thinker, Alciphron, “is above forty, and no stranger either to men or books”. He is well traveled (“through the polite parts of Europe”) and since his return from *le grand tour* “he hath lived in the amusements of the town, which being grown stale and tasteless to his palate, have flung him into a sort of splenetic indolence” (*Ibid.*: 32 [*Crito speaks*]). In a sense, Alciphron is (depicted as) a honest and commonsensical person, having become an atheist only as a result of a sequence of skeptical crises<sup>12</sup>. Due to the numerous prejudices that free-thinkers are, according to Berkeley, particularly predisposed to, he was not able to overcome these crises and chose to “fancy himself a free-thinker”. Lysicles, instead, is much more interesting a case, and Berkeley abundantly exercises his irony when portraying him. “The young gentleman...is ...one of lively parts and a general insight into letters, who, after having passed the forms of education and seen a little of the world, fell into an intimacy with men of pleasure and free-thinkers, I am afraid much to the damage of his constitution and his fortune.” (*Ibid.*: 32 [*Crito speaks*]) Lysicles is cynical, stubborn and sophisticated; as Walmsley says, he “is a philosopher only so far as he may use reason to undermine those laws, human and divine, which threaten to rob him of his pleasure.” (Walmsley 1990: 111) Crito is somewhat exaggerating when saying about Lysicles that he has a “general insight into letters”: Lysicles himself confesses later on in the course of the dialogues that, caught up as he was in the demanding practice of free-thinking, he could not find the time, in his university years, to “mind the books”<sup>13</sup>. Otherwise, he does not have anything to reproach the university with: “For my part, I find no fault with universities. All I know is that I had the spending three hundred pounds a year in one of them, and think it the cheerfulest time of my life. As for their books and style, I had no leisure to mind them.” (Berkeley 1950: 197 [*Lysicles speaks*])<sup>14</sup>.

One of the recurrent ideas in *Alciphron* is that there is a fundamental *duplicity* in the current behaviour of the free-thinkers, and that using double standards is one of their favorite tricks. Not only are free-thinkers destroyers of the morality proper (as upholders, among other things, of the “private vices, publick benefits” theory), but, suggests Berkeley, by the way in which they behave in debates and intellectual confrontations, they break fundamental rules of the “ethics of knowledge”: “To me it seems the minute philosophers, when they appeal to reason and common sense, mean only the sense of their own party.” (*Ibid.*: 243 [*Crito speaks*]) Thanks to their compulsive desire to *épater le bourgeois*, free-thinkers often come to place themselves in, to say the least, very embarrassing situations:

When one of them has got a ring of disciples round him, his method is to exclaim against prejudice, and recommend thinking and reasoning, giving to understand that himself is a man of deep researches and close argument.... The same man, in other company, if he chance to be pressed with reason, shall laugh at logic, and assume the lazy supine airs of a fine gentleman, a wit, a *railleur*, to avoid the dryness of a regular and exact enquiry. This double face of the minute philosopher is of no small use to propagate and maintain his notions. (*Ibid.*: 158 [*Crito speaks*])

The free-thinker is too much an actor to be an authentic and honest thinker. His behaviour is dictated primarily by the imperative of pleasing, provoking, or wooing various audiences. The free-thinker, as portrayed in *Alciphron*, does not feel any need for self-coherence or intellectual honesty: “If Mahometanism were established by authority, I make no doubt those very free-thinkers, who at present applaud Turkish maxims and manners to that degree you’d think them ready to turn Turks, would then be the first to exclaim against them.” (*Ibid.*: 193 [*Crito speaks*]). What they pursue is not the truth, but what happens to be fashionable at a given moment or considered scandalous in conservative circles. Yes, they make frequent references to common sense, experience, and nature — “O nature! Thou art the fountain, original, and pattern of all that is good and wise.” (*Ibid.*: 62 [*Alciphron speaks*]) — , but it is obvious enough that as soon as the common sense, nature and experience will infirm their claims, they will call any appeal to them “prejudice” and “obscurantism”. Thanks to their lack of seriousness and intellectual honesty, to their duplicity, thirsty of social success, thanks to their permanent eagerness to

*épater le bourgeois*, Berkeley's free-thinkers are very much like some of the ancient sophists, as Plato depicted them in his dialogues, and, one might add, like some upholders of today's postmodernism, multiculturalism, etc. The free-thinkers' enjoyment is not one derived from some deeper intellectual satisfaction, but it is one coming from the childlike pleasure of doing things "for the sake of the game". This makes Euphranor advance, very ironically, the idea of a certain "resemblance between fox-hunters and free-thinkers; the former exerting their animal faculties in pursuit of game, as you gentlemen employ your intellectuals in the pursuit of truth. The kind of amusement is the same, although the object is different." (*Ibid.*: 175 [*Euphranor speaks*]). As a result, irresponsible as they are, they are never prepared to accept the logical outcome of what they have been saying or assenting to<sup>15</sup>. If the definition of prejudice is to take as a starting point what can only be attained through argumentation, and to refuse to accept what has been attained through argumentation, then the two free-thinkers are simply caught in *flagrant délit* of gross prejudice:

*Alciphron*: I have been drawn into some concessions you won't like.

*Lysicles*: Let me know what they are.

*Alciphron*: Why, that there is such a thing as a God, and that His existence is very certain.

*Lysicles*: Bless me! How came you to entertain so wild a notion?" (*Ibid.*: 162)

One of the supremely humorous events in *Alciphron* occurs when Crito openly accuses free-thinking of *bigotry*. This is exactly the type accusation that we expect the least to be brought to free-thinkers<sup>16</sup>. To draw a contemporary comparison, it is as though some feminist activist would be openly accused of *macho* attitudes:

it has been often remarked by observing men that there are no greater bigots than infidels. [...] I see a bigot wherever I see a man overbearing and positive without knowing why, laying the greatest stress on points of smallest moments, hasty to judge of the conscience, thoughts, and inward views of other men, impatient of reasoning against his own opinions..., and attached to mean authorities. (*Ibid.*: 283 [*Crito speaks*])

This peculiar bigotry, their histrionics, playfulness and lack of any deeper intellectual commitment are exactly what undermine the free-thinkers' approaches most seriously. They cannot succeed in proving God's nonexistence because, properly speaking, they have decided not to do so. All they mainly wish to do is to draw people's attention to them, by shocking those who happen to listen to them. As a result, their atheistic claims, if taken seriously, seem to the two Christian apologists so weakly supported by arguments and evidence that Crito simply exclaims: "I cannot help thinking there are points sufficiently plain, and clear, and full, whereon a man may ground a reasonable faith in Christ: but that the attacks of minute philosophers against this faith are grounded upon darkness, ignorance, and presumption." (*Ibid.*: 280 [*Crito speaks*])

Behind Berkeley's humorous attack is the serious point that, according to some authors, "there are more difficulties than atheistical commentators... suppose in conceiving a truly godless universe in which it would still be reasonable to prefer one outcome to another" (Clark 1998: 14). Thus, the crucial existential advantage that the recognition of God's existence might confer upon the one who makes the theistic claim is that, in making this claim, he is thoroughly self-consistent. As it were, according to this line of thought: God exists, He is the Logos, the ultimate principle upon which human reason itself is based, and without which no meaningful utterances would ever be possible. Therefore, the fact itself that one is saying "God exists" is, in a way, a proof of God's existence. The possibility of a meaningful utterance is based on the fact that there is a Meaning. Of course, from a logical point of view, this might be seen as circular, but the theist might well answer this objection by pointing to the fundamental circularity that generally characterizes our discourses. Stephen Clark, who is an upholder of this point of view, says: "The rules and axioms of free-thinkers are also taken upon trust, and are less acceptable than religious rules and axioms just because they claim that nothing should be taken upon trust." (Clark 1998: 130) Ironically, free-thinkers, despite their "holy war" against prejudices of any kind, come to rely on various prejudices themselves:

self-styled free-thinkers who spoke out against "religious prejudice" necessarily relied on prejudice themselves, while simultaneously denying themselves the right to do so. Those who say there is no inner light at all, cannot coherently trust their own judgment; those who say that testimony



and inherited opinion must all be abandoned condemn themselves to an incorrigible ignorance. (*Ibid.*: 129)

This is, of course, too complex a situation to be dealt with here, in a chapter not specifically dedicated to the problem of atheism. All what I wished to point to was the larger context within which Berkeley's discussion of free-thinking should be placed.

### 5.2.3 "The holy alliance"

One of the important means by which Crito and Euphranor constantly support their theistic claims consists in the resort to a perennial tradition of wisdom, to sayings of various Oriental sages, ancient thinkers and other authoritative figures, in order to validate their claims. This will be, in fact, Berkeley's main working method in *Siris* (see Chapter 2, especially the section 2.2), but he uses this technique to a great extent in *Alciphron*, too. If the arguments brought forth by Crito or Euphranor for accepting such and such an opinion, however strong they might be, are nevertheless deemed insufficiently compelling by their opponents, then a reference is made to some past venerated figures who held the same, or a similar, opinion. The supposition behind the use of such a techniques is that — human reason being one and the same everywhere and at all times — by accepting theism, one in fact accepts what is only natural for reason to accept, that, in other words, theism in nothing but the most reasonable philosophy, or the healthiest doctrine, of mankind, having been confirmed again and again over the centuries, not only in Europe, but also in China or Persia, not only by Christians, but also by Heathens or Jews:

Reason is the same, and rightly applied will lead to the same conclusions, in all times and places. Socrates, two thousand years ago, seems to have reasoned himself into the same notion of a God which is entertained by the philosophers of our days, if you will allow that name to any who are not of your sect. And the remark of Confucius, that a man should guard in his youth against lust, in manhood against faction, and in old age against

covetousness, is as current morality in Europe as in China. (Berkeley 1950: III, 58-9 [*Euphranor speaks*])

Not that we should accept unconditionally all that comes from authorities. This would be simply prejudice and laziness of mind. But the point is that, in those cases in which, after we have been given reasonable arguments that a certain doctrine is true, and — more than that — had it endorsed by the wise men of the past, there is no reason left *why not to* accept it.

The resort to the wisdom of the past centuries functions in *Alciphron* as another test that the notions advanced by the two free-thinkers have to pass. And the fact that these notions fail to pass this test is one more proof that the free-thinkers are mistaken. Of course, there were sufficient logical and philosophical arguments against the free-thinkers' notions, but Berkeley, through his mouthpieces Crito and Euphranor, wants us to see even more clearly not only that free-thinking is unnatural to our reason, but that it has been so all over the mankind's history.

Let us see how this testing works. Crito explains how the free-thinkers have taken a course contrary

to all the great philosophers of former ages, who made it their endeavour to raise and refine human-kind, and remove it as far as possible from the brute; to moderate and subdue men's appetites; ...and direct them to the noblest objects; to possess men's minds with a high sense of the Divinity... and the immortality of the soul. [...] But... our minute philosophers act the reverse of all other wise ...men; it being their end... to erase the principles of all that is great and good...; to unhinge all order of civil life, to undermine the foundations of morality, and... to bring us down to the maxims and way of thinking of the most uneducated and barbarous nations, and even to degrade human-kind to a level with the brute beasts. (*Ibid.*: 54 [*Crito speaks*])

The past is not dead, nor vanished, but it constantly comes into the present to give it shape, more coherence and self-understanding. What has been *significant* and *valuable* in the past is now condensed, or embodied, in various forms, and in our current dealings with the world, or in our dealings with ourselves, we cannot simply pass over these embodiments of the past. Just as one person has his own heritage of private memories,

stories, and personal histories, a heritage that actually *shapes* his present life, conferring upon it coherence and identity, so a community — be it a village, a city or a nation — has its own storage of stories and historical memories that certainly shapes its present, and future, life. In other words, not only do we have to just “take into account” our past, but — more importantly — we have to know how to make the best use of it.

The use that Berkeley made of the “wisdom of the Heathens”, and of the other “past authorities” is in fact a feature that Berkeley shares with the entire Christian apologetic tradition. From its very beginning, Christian apologetics showed a marked tendency to appeal to, and make use of, non-Christian elements in order to support its own claims. These non-Christian elements were put together and made to work in harmony. Needless to say, what was overtly contrary to the principles of the Christian faith was left aside and even refuted, following the advice of St. Justin Martyr: “Reason dictates that those who are truly pious and philosophers should honour and love only the truth, declining to follow the opinions of the ancients, if they are worthless” (Justin 1997: 23). But there were still enough elements of the classical culture that the early Christian philosophers and apologists could safely take aboard and use in their interest<sup>17</sup>. And so they did: “The leading apologists [of the first Christian centuries] are almost unanimous in opting for a synthesis of Biblical faith with classical culture. They take over many of the characteristic theses of Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus, and Porphyry.” (Dulles 1971: 71) Especially the classical Greek philosophy was highly regarded by the early Christian authors, and they made every effort to take over its “healthy” part and to incorporate its into Christianity. Not only was Greek philosophy (particularly the Platonic tradition, as Aristotle was to become fashionable among Christians much later) “in agreement” with some of the fundamental tenets of the Christianity, but some of the early Christian authors developed the interesting notion that it was particularly through their philosophy that the ancients were in fact preparing Christ’s coming.

With writers such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, we find the notion of philosophy as the instrument by which the Logos, which illuminates every man who comes in to the world, prepared the minds of the Gentiles for the gospel of Christ. The Jews were prepared by the Law and the prophets, the Gentiles by

philosophy. The Christian revelation was the fulfillment of both.  
(Copleston 1974: 25)

The early Christians saw Plato as, so to speak, a “Christian before Christ”. For philosophy, at its best, cannot be but work is the service of Logos; one cannot do philosophy without being, at the same time, a worshiper of the true God, a lover of the divine Wisdom. Jesus Christ was revealed to the Jews personally, in flesh and blood, but to the Greeks philosophically, as philosophical logos. In St. Justin Martyr’s words: “not only among the Greeks through Socrates were these things revealed by reason [*logos*], but also among the Barbarians were they revealed by logos personally, when He had taken shape, and become man, and was called Jesus Christ.” (Justin 1997: 26).

Not only did this borrowing from the ancients simply take place, but we can even find in St. Augustine a sophisticated theory about the Christians’ “right” to take over, incorporate and use what was valid in the past: in his own words, it is a taking over “from those who have unlawful possession of it”. Reading analogically the story of the Jews’ flight from Egypt, Augustine offers an excellent and powerful sample of Christian philosophising about history, about deaths and births of civilisations, and about ways of using the past:

if those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are... to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it. For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver,... which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use..., in the same way all branches of heathen learning... contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver... These... the Christian... ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel. (Augustine 1877: 75-6)

As we can see, the past was not dead at all for these authors, and they knew how to make the best use of it.

#### 5.2.4. The argument from utility

Since the “visual language argument” for God’s existence that George Berkeley brings forth in *Alciphron* makes the object of another chapter in this dissertation (Chapter III, especially the section 3.2.), I will in the following deal only with what might be called “the argument from utility” that Berkeley provides in this writing for God’s existence.

The two Christian apologetics in *Alciphron*, after having brought a great deal of logical, philosophical, historical, authoritative arguments and evidence in support of their claim that Christian theism is the best option, arrived at a point where they employed a series of *pragmatic arguments* for accepting the Christian faith. In other words, if the previous arguments are not to be considered compelling enough, then there still remains the possibility that one should accept Christianity for reasons of *utility*. The extremely beneficial effects that accepting Christianity have over the centuries had on people’s lives, morals and well-being, the wonderful “works” that Christianity have constantly performed in terms of making people better, wiser, happier, more virtuous and readier to help their neighbours, the social peace, general harmony and public reconciliation that living by Christian standards brings always about — all of these are undeniable proofs that this religion is the right choice, and that anyone, if he is to be a man of sense, has to accept it immediately:

one great mark of the truth of the Christianity is, in my mind, its tendency to do good, which seems the north star to conduct our judgment in moral matters, and in all things of a practick nature; moral and practical truths being ever connected with universal benefit. [...] the Christian religion, considered as a fountain of light and joy, and peace, as a source of faith, and hope, and charity..., must needs be a principle of happiness and virtue. (Berkeley 1950: III, 178 [*Crito speaks*])

In his “natural state”, man is a rather gross, rude and unpleasant creature. His reason is weak, and untrained, his feelings are elementary and brutal, and his opinions uncertain and shapeless. His aspirations are reduced to merely survival, meeting the elementary

needs of life and sheer absence of suffering. In this context, it is religion that helps him rise from this state of brutality and become a creature “in the image and likeness of God”. Particularly, Christian religion, in those places in which it has come to prevail, has proven to be an invaluable means of civilizing and bettering people’s lives. In order to illustrate this argument, Berkeley gives a number of concrete examples. One of them regards the formation of the English people under the guidance and stimulation of the Christian faith. He takes it as an “invincible proof” of the “power and excellency of the Christian religion” that, “without the help of those civil institutions and incentives to glory, it should be able to inspire a phlegmatic people with the noblest sentiments, and soften the manners of the northern boors into gentleness and humanity.” (*Ibid.*: 184-5 [*Crito speaks*]) Berkeley is not saying that this was a miracle, but the note of enthusiasm of these and other passages implies that we could safely use here the term “miracle” at least in a metaphorical sense.

Fascinated as he was with the world of the South, which produced — among other good things — Greek and Roman classic antiquity, Berkeley thought that it was only thanks to the tremendous civilizing efforts the Christianity constantly made over the centuries that modern English culture was now able to raise itself to the same level of sophistication, refinement and good taste as that of the ancient Greeks. Given the particular circumstances under which the Northern peoples lived, they had to do through great effort what the ancient Greeks did simply in virtue of their natural inclinations:

what but religion could kindle and preserve a spirit towards learning in such a northern rough people? Greece produced men of active and subtle genius; and their natural curiosity was amused and excited by learned conversations, in their public walks and gardens and porticos. Our genius leads to amusements of a grosser kind: we breath a grosser and a colder air; and that curiosity which was general in the Athenians... is among our people of fashion treated like affectation. (*Ibid.*: 201 [*Crito speaks*])

Obviously, this is not only a fact belonging to British history. Wherever and whenever Christianity has been accepted and left to guide people’s lives, its practical effects have always been impressive. In times of crisis and uncertainty, the Church has been the only stable ground, the only hope for those who were seeking hope. If there still was in Europe

a sense of what classical antiquity meant, that was due mainly to Christianity. The transmission itself of the classical heritage to the modern times was only possible through the important efforts made by the Church; Christian authors (and authorities) have always paid a special attention to the preservation and encouragement of the classical learning:

But who are they that encouraged and produced the restoration of arts and polite learning? What share had the minute philosophers in this affair? Matthias Corvinus King of Hungary, Alphonsus King of Naples, Cosmus de Medicis, Picus of Mirandola,... famous for learning themselves, and for encouraging it in others with a munificent liberality, were neither Turks, nor Gentiles, nor minute philosophers. Who was it that transplanted and revived the Greek language and authors, and with them all polite arts and literature, in the West? Was it not chiefly Bessarion a cardinal, Marcus Musurus an archbishop, Theodore Gaza a private clergyman? (*Ibid.*: 203 [*Crito speaks*])

Finally, we should not take the utility argument as being concerned only with social, historical, civilizational and cultural aspects. In addition, there is also a deeper sense in which accepting the points of Christian theism would have significantly beneficial effects upon our *inner life*. For being a Christian means not only performing certain rites and observing a certain set of moral rules, but also a certain way of looking at, of understanding and making sense of the world in which one has found himself. For, in Berkeley's view, it is precisely by adopting a Christian theistic position that we are given a key to the ultimate beauty, harmony, and orderliness of this world:

In a system of spirits, subordinate to the will, and the direction of the Father of spirits, governing them by laws and conducting them by methods suitable to wise and good ends, there will be great beauty. But in an incoherent fortuitous system, governed by chance, or in a blind system, governed by fate, or in a system where Providence doth not preside, how can beauty be, which cannot be without order, which cannot be without design? (*Ibid.*: 129-30 [*Crito speaks*])

It is worth observing that Berkeley's *pragmatism* in matters apologetical was not at all his own invention. In fact, in employing the arguments from utility he was actually placing himself in a long tradition of Christian thinkers, theologians and apologists who have in the past made a similar use of the utility arguments. Pointing to the beneficial effects that

accepting the Christian faith could have on one's social, moral and intellectual life had been a method used by apologists since the beginnings of Christianity. For example, in his *First Apology*, St. Justin Martyr explains how the idea of an all-knowing and all-seeing God makes Christians necessarily improve their moral lives: "...not only our deeds, but also our thoughts are open before God. And many, both men and women, who have been Christ's disciples from childhood, have preserved their purity at the age of sixty or seventy years. [...] what shall we say then of the countless multitude of those who have turned away from intemperance...?" (Justin 1997: 32) Origen draws a sharp comparison between the social behaviour of various communities of Christians ("Churches of God") and the behaviour of their fellow-citizens. The Christian way of life definitely helps the former live a more decent and virtuous life than the latter do:

The Church of God; say, at Athens is meek and quiet, since it desires to please God. But the assembly of the Athenians is riotous and in no way comparable to the Church of God there. [...] If the man who hears this has an open mind, and examines the facts with a desire to find the truth, he will be amazed at the one who both planned and had the power to carry into effect the establishment of the Churches of God in all places. (Origen 1953: 147)

Origen then observes how those Christians who are in positions of authority or charged with public responsibilities, due to their virtuous private lives and their "improved" natures, show a tendency to serve better their communities, and to be better rulers than the non-Christians: "compare the ruler of the Church in each city with the ruler of the citizens, and you will understand how... there is a superior progress towards the virtues surpassing the character of those who are councillors and rulers in the cities." (*Ibid.*: 148) In short, there are numberless practical points of view from which adopting Christianity can be seen as the best, the safest and most profitable solution.

The special role that the performance of miracles might play in inspiring people's faith and in converting them to Christianity might also be considered in connection with this pragmatic apologetics. In his *De Civitate Dei* St. Augustine<sup>18</sup> talks of three "incredibilities" revealed by Jesus' life and the subsequent expansion of Christianity:



It is incredible that Christ should have risen in His flesh and, with His flesh, have ascended into heaven; it is incredible that the world should have believed a thing so incredible; it is incredible that men so rude and lowly, so few and unaccomplished, should have convinced the world, including men of learning, of something so incredible and have convinced men so conclusively.<sup>19</sup>

St. Augustine does not explicitly see the rapid expansion of Christianity as a miracle, but he seems to suggest it<sup>20</sup>. As it were, everything was — by common human standards — so incredible and beyond any reasonable expectations that only through the secret intervention of the divine might we explain why this happened in the way in which it did.

The issue will be taken over by St. Thomas Aquinas, who will overtly consider the successful conversion of large communities of people as a “miracle”, a “sign” that God is sending us as a means by which we could learn even more about the truth, rightfulness and providentiality of the Christian religion. As St. Thomas puts it,

This wonderful conversion of the world to the Christian faith is the clearest witness of the signs given in the past; so that they should be further repeated, since they appear most clearly in their effect. For it would be truly more wonderful than all signs if the world had been led by simple and humble men to believe such lofty truths, to accomplish such difficult actions, and to have such high hopes. Yet it is also a fact that, even in our own time, God does not cease to work miracles through his Saints and for the confirmation of the faith. (Aquinas 1955: 1, 72-3 [*Summa contra Gentiles*])

But this is, obviously, another story. The only reason why I have made here these references to some of the figures of the Christian apologetics was to offer an intelligible historical framework within which to place Berkeley’s pragmatic arguments for the Christian faith in his *Alciphron*.

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> For the theological dimension of Berkeley’s thought see, for example, Stephen Clark’s *God, Religion and Reality*, specially the chapter “Communities of Faith” (Clark 1998: 123-134), Edward Sillen’s *George Berkeley and the Proofs for the Existence of God* (Sillen 1957), and Hedenius’ *Sensationalism and Theology in Berkeley’s Philosophy* (Hedenius 1936)

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the ideas contained in this section might slightly overlap with what has been already said in the chapter “Berkeley and the Platonic tradition” or elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> One of the major theoretical consequences that the existence of such a metaphysical supposition has upon a theistic philosophy consists in the advantage “of principle”, so to say, that it has over an atheistic one in offering much “bolder”, more comprehensive and more synthetic explanations, or, as it has been said, “a greater coordinating and synthesizing power” (Copleston 1974: 69). A theistic philosopher may — safely and self-consistently — cluster around his notion of God a whole system of suppositions and hypotheses based on which he would be able to make sense of things otherwise very difficult to explain: “a theistic world-view is capable of accommodating within itself the forms of human experience and the aspects of reality which other world-visions take account of, and that, in addition, it makes better sense of certain forms of experience, such as religious experience, than can be made by a non-theistic world-vision.” (Copleston 1974: 88)

<sup>4</sup> “Atheism is necessarily dependent upon theism for its vocabulary, its meanings, and its embodiments. Atheism has often been dependent upon theism for its evocation and its existence.” (Buckley 1987: 17)

<sup>5</sup> “It is reasonable to believe what we cannot ‘prove’; it is even reasonable to believe, and feel, what we can’t understand. Both theses depend upon a further ‘religious’ axiom, that the Origin is to be trusted. If we could not sensibly believe the testimony of ages, nor trust our common sense or ‘natural taste’, we should have no escape from chaos. To that extent, we *must* live on faith. If we could not sensibly believe that what is now obscure may still have a solution, and may guide our hearts, we must remain ‘*minute* philosophers.’” (Clark 1998: 132)

<sup>6</sup> The corresponding fragment in *Three Dialogues* reads as follows: “But allowing matter to exist, and the notion of [its] absolute existence to be as clear as light; yet was this ever known to make the Creation more credible? Nay hath it not furnished the *atheists* and *infidels* of all ages, with the most plausible argument against a Creation? That a corporeal substance, which hath an absolute existence without the minds of spirits, should be produced out of nothing by the mere will of a spirit, hath been looked upon as a thing so contrary to all reason, so impossible and absurd, that not only the most celebrated among the ancients, but even divers modern and Christian philosophers have thought matter coeternal with the Deity. Lay these things together, and then judge you whether materialism disposes men to believe the creation of things. (Berkeley 1949: II, 256 [*Three Dialogues*...])

<sup>7</sup> In *Alciphron*, when a the central debate is agreed upon Crito remarks about the two free-thinkers: “they will please themselves with the prospect of leaving a convert behind them, even in a country village.” (Berkeley 1950: III, 33)

<sup>8</sup> More will be said about George Berkeley’s denial of the existence of matter in Chapter VII in the present dissertation.

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, “*Alciphron* is a model of the psychology and logic of controversy, and to a large degree of the ethics of it too. No other apologetic work known to me has stated the objections to Christianity so fully, cogently and pungently, met them so directly, and kept the logical principles of decent discussion so clearly to the fore.” (Jessop 1950: 8)

<sup>10</sup> If free-thought had lost some of its novelty by the time Berkeley wrote *Alciphron*, its proponents had lost none of their energy. Both Collins’s *Discourse Concerning Ridicule and Irony* and the second volume of Mandeville’s *Fable* were first published in 1729, and in 1730 Tindal’s exhaustive *Christianity as Old as Creation* appeared. Berkeley’s satiric purpose in *Alciphron* is the exposure of this social phenomenon; Lysicles and Alciphron are not just reflections of the moral and religious ideas they propound, but renderings of a recognizable social type.” (Walmsley 1990: 110)

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<sup>11</sup> “While Euphranor’s method seems radically different from Crito’s, its effect is surprisingly similar - and ironic rereading of the free-thinkers’ words. As with Crito’s parodies, the end is a comic self-negation in which the voice of free-thought is made to contradict itself.” (Walmsley 1990: 114)

<sup>12</sup> “[H]aving observed several sects and subdivisions of sects espousing very different and contrary opinions, and yet all professing Christianity, I rejected those points wherein they differed, retaining only that which was agreed to by all, and so become a Latitudinarian. Having afterwards, upon a more enlarged view of things, perceived that Christians, Jews, and Mahometans had each their different system of faith, agreeing only in the belief of one God, I became a deist. Lastly, extending my view to all the other various notions which inhabit this globe, and finding they agreed in no one point of faith, but differed one from another, as well as from the forementioned sects, even in the notion of God, in which there is as great diversity as in the methods of worship, I thereupon became an atheist.” (Berkeley 1950: III, 43-4 [*Alciphron speaks*])

<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, the most enlightened among free-thinkers are not people who have dedicated themselves to the academic study: “Our philosophers... are of a very different kind from those awkward students who think to come at knowledge by poring on dead languages and old authors, or by sequestering themselves from the cares of the world to meditate in solitude and retirement. They are the best bred men of the age, men who know the world, men of pleasure, men of fashion, and fine gentlemen.” (Berkeley 1950: III, 47 [*Alciphron speaks*])

<sup>14</sup> For the proper education of the free-thinker the crucial thing is not to attend universities, but to find out a “good company”. Finding a “good company” is the key to every successful education, as only by the means of such a company does the free-thinker’s formation properly take place: “much is to be got by conversing with ingenious men, which is short way to knowledge, that saves a man the drudgery of reading and thinking” (Berkeley 1950: III, 165 [*Lysicles speaks*]) But where precisely do these sages teach their learning? Where can these embodiments of wisdom be found and attended? The answer comes from Crito: “in a drawing-room, a coffee-house, a chocolate-house, at the tavern, or groom’s porter. In these and the like fashionable places of resort, it is the custom for polite persons to speak freely on all subjects, religious moral, or political. [...] Three or four sentences from a man of quality, spoke with a good air, make more impression and convey more knowledge than a dozen dissertation in a dry academic way.” (Berkeley 1950: III, 48 [*Crito speaks*])

<sup>15</sup> “Your free-thinkers... seem to mistake your talent. They imagine strongly, but reason weakly; mighty at exaggeration, and jejune in argument.” (Berkeley 1950: III, 209 [*Crito speaks*])

<sup>16</sup> “Those who think of themselves as ‘scientists’, and especially those who most despise the dogmas of religion, are often willfully dogmatic.” (Clark 1998: 131)

<sup>17</sup> “[I]n the process of faith seeking understanding of itself — in the development, that is to say, of theological reflection — use was made of concepts, or at any rate of terms, taken from the philosophy of the ancient world.” (Copleston 1974: 26)

<sup>18</sup> Actually, one of the writings of St. Augustine is called *On the Usefulness of Belief*.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Dulles (Dulles 1971: 64)

<sup>20</sup> See Dulles for this discussion (Dulles 1971: 64)

## Chapter Six:

### George Berkeley's "Bermuda Scheme"

The objective of this chapter is twofold. First, I would like to show that not only were Berkeley's ways of philosophizing rooted, as it has been shown in the previous chapters, in some ancient and medieval traditions of thought, but also even when designing such a practical project as the "Bermuda scheme" Berkeley was, in a serious way, under the modeling influence of the past. More precisely, the present chapter purports to offer a discussion of Berkeley's project to build a theology college in the Islands of Bermuda (the so-called "Bermuda Scheme") in terms of symbolic geography and utopian projections, and in light of some traditions and patterns of thought governing the Western representations of the "happy islands", "earthly paradise", utopia, and *eschaton*. In the second place, I would like to point to a certain relationship that might be established between the substance of Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy and the utopian character of his "Bermuda project".

The chapter has three parts: 1) In the first part I will try to place Berkeley's idealized representation of the Islands of Bermuda in the tradition of the search for the "earthly paradise", as it has been traditionally described in the ancient and medieval literature. Then, I will show how Berkeley's project might be regarded as occupying a place in the history of educational utopias. 2) In the second part I will be showing that Berkeley's American Project is hardly understandable without taking seriously into account its *Messianism*; and 3) The third part will be dedicated to following a certain parallel between Berkeley's philosophy and theoretical commitments, on the one hand, and some facts of his biography, especially the Bermuda affair, on the other.

## 6.1. Between “earthly paradise” and educational utopia

### 6.1.1. Berkeley’s “happy island”

It was in 1725 that Berkeley published a paper titled — not particularly concisely — “A Proposal for the better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations, and for Converting the Savage Americans, to Christianity, By a College to be erected in the *Summer Islands*, otherwise called *The Isles of Bermuda*.” (Berkeley 1955: VII, 343-60) This title is in fact describing almost the whole project. Prior to that, the philosopher, since about March 1722, had written several private letters to friends and acquaintances on the same topic, each of them containing enthusiastic descriptions of the Bermuda islands. The letter to Lord Percival, dated March 4<sup>th</sup> 1722 (Berkeley 1956: VIII 127-9), is of special interest, as in it Berkeley announces for the first time his intention to establish a theology and fine arts college in those remote islands, and — more than that — to spend there all the rest of his life (“It is now about ten months since I have determined with myself to spend the residue of my days in the Island of Bermuda, where I trust in Providence I may be the mean instrument of doing good to mankind.” [*Ibid.*: 127])<sup>1</sup>. Finally, there are of course those famous stanzas by Berkeley dedicated to the project, confessing his lack of satisfaction, if not disappointment, with the Old World, and announcing that “Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way”. (Berkeley 1955: VII 373 [*Verses on America*])

Despite the fact that he had never travelled to Bermuda (and, ironically, he would never do so), Berkeley offered in both his letter to Percival mentioned above and his *Proposal* an amazingly detailed description of the islands, of their natural landscapes, beauties, resources, richness, prosperity, of their inhabitants (emphasising, for example, the purity and innocence of their manners), and so forth. Berkeley’s literary talent helps him to portray the islands magnificently, compensating for the absence of a direct familiarisation with them. Since the description itself is an excellent piece of writing and plays a significant role in my argument, I will reproduce below some excerpts from it:

The climate is by far the healthiest and most serene, and... the most fit for study. [...] There is the greatest abundance of all the necessary provisions for life, which is much to be considered in a place for education. [...] It is

the securest spot in the universe, being environed round with rocks all but one narrow entrance, guarded by seven forts, which render it inaccessible [...] The inhabitants have the greatest simplicity of manners, more innocence, honesty, and good nature, than any of our other planters. (Berkeley 1956: VIII 128 [*Letter to Percival*])

On the other hand, although the *Proposal* is written some years after this letter, it still retains the same enthusiasm and idealization as does his letter to Percival. Everything about those islands was as perfect as something could possibly be in this world:

no Part of the World enjoys a purer Air, or a more temperate Climate, the great Ocean which environs them, at once moderating the Heat of the South Winds, and the Severity of the North-West. [...] the Air of Bermuda is perpetually fanned and kept cool by Sea-breezes, which render the Weather the most healthy and delightful that could be wished, being... of one equal Tenour almost throughout the whole Year, like the latter End of a fine May. (Berkeley 1955: VII 351)

A crucial part of the description is that in which the numberless natural “beauties of Bermuda” are listed. The islands seem unusually full of wonders and blessings, abundantly supplied with lots of natural resources as useful as beautiful. On Bermudas the whole of nature conspired to produce one of the most beautiful places in the universe. The fact that the island was a “chosen” place for unusual spiritual accomplishments was, as it were, beyond any reasonable doubt. The only thing one can do is just to admire unreservedly what one “encounters” there:

the summers refreshed with constant cool breezes, the winters as mild as our May, the sky as light and blue as a sapphire, the ever green pastures, the earth eternally crowned with fruits and flowers. The woods of cedars, palmettos, myrtles, oranges & c., always fresh and blooming. The beautiful situations and prospects of hills, vales, promontories, rocks, lakes and sinuses of the sea. The great variety, plenty, and perfection of fish, fowl, vegetables of all kinds, and... the most excellent butter, beef, veal, pork, and mutton. But above all, that uninterrupted health and alacrity of spirit, which is the result of the finest weather and gentlest climate in the world. (Berkeley 1956: VIII 128 [*Letter to Percival*])

Now, one of the first ideas occurring in one’s mind when reading such a description is that the way in which Berkeley describes the Islands of Bermuda is strikingly similar to

those in which the “earthly paradise” has traditionally been described and represented within the medieval *mirabilia*, in the medieval, Renaissance and early modern travel literature, and various other “amazing” accounts of “Happy Islands”. And one of the striking things about the portrait of his islands is that behind his detailed description of them does not actually lie any actual documentation or “field research”, but only the primordial phantasm, so to speak, of a wonderful, innocent and uncorrupted world. In a way, Berkeley did not even need to go and see the islands in order to be able to describe them: he apparently found them, with all their wonderful paradisiacal appearance, in the repertoire of his own inner intellectual world. On writing these texts, Berkeley seemed to be driven by a strong tendency towards “idealization”, or “sacralization”, of something otherwise quite profane. He ends up attributing to a neutral group of Atlantic islands almost all the ennobling characteristics of the “earthly paradise”, as it had traditionally been imagined since the Greco-Roman antiquity<sup>2</sup>.

First of all, it is the very *notion of island* that confers on the whole story a special character<sup>3</sup>. An island is not a place like any other; an island is a clearly *privileged* space, a space that — thanks to its isolation, remoteness and difficult accessibility, to its mysteriousness and autonomy — has acquired a particular cultural-symbolical dignity from the very outset of the human culture<sup>4</sup>. The sophisticated interplay between water and land, the agonic and complex dialectics between these two primordial elements (*stoicheia*) gave birth eventually to a new, intermediary entity: *the island*. The island is more than land-and-water, it acquires something that neither land nor water has: the capacity to cause in us a greater fascination and curiosity. As Claude Kappler excellently put it, if there are “any places that have a special appeal for imagination it is islands. [...] an island is by its nature a place where marvels exist for their own sake outside the laws that generally prevail... Ever since Greek antiquity, islands have been favorite places for the most astounding human and divine adventures.” (Qtd. in Delumeau 1995: 98)<sup>5</sup> This makes islands have an impressive metaphorical value. Like mountains, for example, they are often involved in several forms of the intellectual discourse: literary, poetical, theological, mythological, utopian, political, etc. An island could be made to signify, from case to case: hope, survival, salvation, firm ground, freedom, independence, regeneration,

*una vita nuova*, certitude, and so on. No wonder then that the “earthly paradise” itself has often come to be located somewhere on an island: “Dante ...gave the earthly paradise the characteristics of an island, and in many medieval travel stories, especially Mandeville’s, the kingdom of Prester John is located on an island. According to Mandeville, mysterious India is ‘divided into isles on account of the great rivers which flow out of Paradise.’” (Delumeau 1995: 98)

The usual name under which the “earthly paradise” islands have been traditionally known is that of “Happy Island(s)”. Why this particular name? Medieval scholars had a particular way of explaining it. Pierre d’Ailly, for example, says that the “name ‘Happy Isles’ means that these islands contain all good things. It is the fruitfulness of the soil that makes people believe that paradise was located in these islands...” (Qtd. in Delumeau 1995: 99) In fact, as Jean Delumeau has showed, this explanation was borrowed from Isidore of Seville, and it was widely spread throughout Middle Ages. In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore states that: “The name ‘Happy Isles’ means that they produce all sorts of good things; that they enjoy a quasi-blessedness and have the advantage of happy abundance. By their very nature they give birth to precious trees and fruits. The slopes of the hills are naturally covered with vines. Instead of grass the soil for the most part yields crops and vegetables.” (Qtd. in Delumeau 1995 99)

This repetition, in several cases, of the same explanation, emphasizing the same factors (abundance of goods, ideal climate, wonderful landscapes, etc.) certainly contributed to the strengthening of the tradition, and confirms that the “Happy Island” was not an isolated and marginal *topos* at all, but a deeply rooted and long lasting one. They played an essential part in the formation and dissemination of a symbolic geography, one which, as we will see later on in this chapter, would massively shape the conceptions and representations of the Western discoverers and travelers:

the Happy Islands stand in a Greco-Roman poetic tradition that is based on passages in Homer, Hesiod, and Plutarch. According to this tradition, beyond the towering Atlas there lie islands with enchanted gardens, a constant temperate climate, and fragrant breezes, where human beings have no need to work. In the Christian era Isidore of Seville gave this belief a new popularity by assigning it a place in his geography, which then exerted a lasting influence on Western culture. (Delumeau 99)



What is interesting at this stage is that Berkeley himself, in another private letter, uses openly the term: he came to talk about “that happy Island” (Berkeley 1956: VIII 156) with explicit reference to his Bermuda project. As it is known, he was also a lecturer in Greek and Latin and had an impressive classical training. So that it is reasonable to suppose that he knew something about this tradition of the *insula pomorum que fortunata vocatur* (the island of apples that is called the happy island), as Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1154) describes it in his *Vita Merlini*, as well as about the various ways in which the “earthly paradise” had been searched for, described and eulogized in the European world ever since classic antiquity.

In consequence, based on the (imaginary) account that Berkeley gives of the Island(s) of Bermuda, and on the various similar accounts by ancient, medieval or early modern authors, of which some were referred to above, it can safely be suggested that Berkeley’s representation of the location and settings of his future theology and arts college was deeply marked by a certain nostalgia for an “earthly paradise”. It was probably the religious substance of this feeling that gave him an extraordinary strength and determination to pursue his project for so many years, and overcome all the criticisms it encountered from the side of the more practical politicians and “technicians” of the day. It may have been this “nostalgia” for the “earthly paradise” that made him be so wonderfully enthusiastic<sup>6</sup> and, as we shall see below, particularly unrealistic about the real situation of, and problems with, those islands (the poverty and immorality of the inhabitants, unstable climate, strong winds, etc.). Quite expectedly, the project eventually failed, Berkeley being much laughed at, and even considered mad, by some London wits of that time<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, despite its failure, this project has something significant to say not only about Berkeley’s personality, but also about the deeper intellectual perspectives that nourished his philosophy and understanding of the world around, as well as about his rapport with the past.

The natural place of Berkeley’s enthusiastic description of the Bermudas — with all their countless wonders and amazing resources and paradisiacal landscapes, with their perfect situation, the “gentlest climate in the world”, “the securest spot in the universe” — is simply on one of those “detailed maps from the end of the Middle Ages [which] still

teaches” us that “there exist in the West paradisaical islands ‘that abound in all good things’. These islands combine most of the elements that make for an earthly paradise: pleasant warmth, perpetual spring, delicious and fragrant fruits.” (Delumeau 1995: 100-102) Even if Berkeley’s Bermudas cannot possibly exist in terms of actual geography, they certainly have an important role to play in the history of symbolic geography. Needless to say, it is not a very common thing for a philosopher, the less so for a promoter of the “new philosophy”, to deal with such “un-serious” and speculative things as the “earthly paradise”. But this is maybe what makes Berkeley so interesting: his being a truly uncommon philosopher.

### 6.1.2. Berkeley’s utopia

The nostalgia for an “earthly paradise” revealed by Berkeley’s Bermuda project is only one of the facets of Berkeley’s “Bermuda Scheme”. The “happy island” is only the “spatial” framework within which *something (important) is going to take place*, the item of symbolic geography based on which his project is going to be put into practice. Therefore, there must be another element of this scheme we have to deal with: it is, namely, its *utopian* dimension. Berkeley’s project, far from being an isolated attempt, a personal and incomprehensible *caprice*, might be coherently placed in the long tradition of the “educational utopias”. Since his main intention was to establish a *college* there, a place dedicated to learning and the cultivation of sciences, an investigation of Berkeley’s “Bermuda project” precisely in light of the utopian tradition would cast, I think, a better view on the entire affair. Let me mention at this stage that I am not the only one to use this term in relation to his Bermuda project. One hundred years ago, dealing with Berkeley’s educational project, A. C. Fraser came to talk about Bermuda as “a region whose idyllic bliss poets had sung, and from which Christian civilisation might radiate over the Utopia of a New World, with its magnificent possibilities in the future history of the human race.” (Fraser 1901: IV 343)

As Northrop Frye once put it, any utopia is ultimately a discourse about education. If not in their explicit purposes and statements, utopian authors presuppose — at least

implicitly — a consideration of education as a decisive factor in *transforming* (improving) their fellow-humans. Indeed, in Frye's view, this has a certain Platonic component, whether or not the utopian writers are Platonists themselves:

And though not all utopia-writers are Platonists, nearly all of them make their utopias depend on education for their permanent establishment. It seems that the literary convention of an ideal state is really a by-product of a systematic view of education. That is, education, considered as a unified view of reality, grasps society by its intelligible rather than its actual form, and the utopia is a projection of the ability to see society, not as an aggregate of buildings and bodies, but as a structure of arts and sciences. (Frye 1965: 37-8)

Of course, Berkeley's utopia is, in a rigorous sense, only an incomplete, *partial utopia*. So to speak, it is not a *hard*, but a *soft utopia*. More than the ambitious ideal state envisaged in Plato's *Republic*, Berkeley's Bermuda resembles to some extent, for example, that *Bildungsprovinz* described in Herman Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*: an ideal scholarly society, dedicated to cultivating superior arts and sciences, located in some privileged space, clearly *separated* from the corrupted and corrupting outside world, and designed to embody, preserve and convey the noblest values and virtues of the humankind. The island becomes in such a case a *spatial symbol* of salvation and regeneration through learning, science and fine arts.

The notion of (utopian) separation from the outside (profane) world<sup>8</sup>, of self-protection and inaccessibility is clearly expressed several times by Berkeley: "The Group of Isles ...walled round with Rocks, which render them inaccessible to Pirates or Enemies; there being put two narrow Entrances, both well guarded by Forts. It would therefore be impossible to find any where, a more secure Retreat for Students." (Berkeley 1955: VII 352) Berkeley's strong emphasis on this aspect of his project is perfectly justified when considered in light of the utopian tradition: remoteness, difficulty of access and isolation are necessary not only for keeping young innocent students safe from the corrupting profane world, or for preventing it from interfering with the normal course of the academic/utopian affairs, but also for conferring a high prestige and esteem, on this scholarly community. For the strength of such an ideal scholarly community does not consist only in the intrinsic nature, in the volume and quality of its learning or in its

scientific accomplishments, but also — maybe more importantly — in *its publicly and socially recognized image*.

Once all the specific requirements are met, Berkeley's "soft" utopia is ready to make its debut:

Among a People [the inhabitants of Bermuda] of this Character, and in a Situation thus circumstantiated, it would seem that a *Seminary of Religion* and Learning might very fitly be placed. The Correspondence with other Parts of *America*, the Goodness of the Air, the Plenty and Security of the Place, the Frugality and Innocence of the Inhabitants, all conspiring to favour such a Design. Thus much at least is evident, that young Students would be there less liable to be corrupted in their Morals; and the governing Part would be easier, and better contented with a small Stipend, and a retired academical Life, in a Corner from whence Avarice and Luxury are excluded. (*Ibid.*: 353)

As it appears, life — of course, private life included — in such an "ideal community" is dominated by a certain form of *artificiality*: as it were, life is not allowed to take its *natural* course, but it is very carefully and in detail "regulated", ordered, surveyed, controlled, kept far away from any possible "un-natural" vices and temptations — in short, life is thoroughly *rationalized*. As has been said, "Utopias are necessary for many reasons. One reason is that there is always a need to accommodate the excess of private desires to the public good, politics to ethics, moderation to freedom." (Mazzotta 2001: 60)

This process of "rationalization" is an essential characteristic of any utopian organization, starting with its very outset: recruitment of its members. As has been remarked about the recruitment of new members in Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*, "an exchange between Castalian institutions and their surroundings persists: since all Castalians are celibate men and since they do not have any alternative form of perpetuating their ascetic community (immortality, regeneration, cloning, etc.), lay children are recruited on the basis of their intellectual and artistic performance by thoroughly combing the schools of the real world." (Antohi 2000: xi) Similarly, Berkeley's ideal scholarly society needs regularly new members. Its main intention is to produce worthy priests and missionaries who are to be involved in the propagation of

Gospel and conversion of Indians; consequently, there is a need for an established way of replacing them and permanently renewing the utopian community.

It is at this point that Berkeley's system differs significantly from that envisaged by Hesse. For, while the new members of Castalia were "elected", being invited to join the utopian community only after an extremely difficult process of selection, in Berkeley's Bermuda among the toughest procedures are those related to the recruitment of future members of the scholarly community. Basically,

The young *Americans* necessary for this Purpose, may in the beginning be procured, either by peaceable Methods from those savage Nations, which border on our Colonies, and are in Friendship with us, or by taking captive the Children of our Enemies. (Berkeley 1955: VII 347)

This controversial aspect of Berkeley's Bermuda scheme has long been discussed among Berkeley scholars. David Berman openly regards this violent solution as "chilling" and, despite his constant sympathetic consideration of Berkeley, he cannot help being very sarcastic at this point: "The Indian children are to be kidnapped. Why? No doubt, for their spiritual advantage." (Berman 1994: 132-3) On the other hand, Harry Bracken advances an interesting millennialist hypothesis which I will be examining later on in this chapter.

Apart from that, there are clear and detailed regulations with regard to the schooling itself. As in other utopias, for example in Plato's *Republic*, there are similarly rationalized and detailed procedures regarding access to the utopian community, starting age, precise subject matters to be taught, and so on:

It is proposed to admit into the aforesaid College only such Savages as are under ten Years of Age, before evil Habits have taken a deep root; and yet not so early as to prevent retaining their Mother Language, which should be preserved by Intercourse among themselves.

It is further proposed, to ground these young *Americans* thoroughly in Religion and Morality, and to give them a good Tincture of other Learning; particularly of Eloquence, History and practical Mathematics; to which it may not be improper to add some skill in Physics. (Berkeley 1955: VII 347-8)

This is the only reference Berkeley makes to the curriculum to be used in his college. Had he got the necessary funds from the British authorities, he would have of course had to

offer a much more detailed curriculum, and an ampler description of the academic programs to be undertaken in the college. Sketchy as it is, the *Proposal* does not go into more detail about Berkeley's educational doctrines. It is interesting to notice at this point that Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy does not play any role in shaping his utopian project. He did not built up his utopian project on principles derived from his own philosophical system, but he simply followed the traditional utopian way of thinking. The details he provides in his *Proposal* are derived not from such and such Berkeleian immaterialist theses, but from the inner logic of utopianism itself.

Some of Berkeley's commentators and admirers have been seriously embarrassed coming across such tough things in his writings. The conventional image of the "good Bishop" would rather exclude all these unpleasant procedures, regulations or "brutalities". It seems to me at this point that, in light of the utopia-based hypothesis announced above, such procedures, however cruel or "totalitarian" they might appear, are to some extent *understandable*, or at least made intelligible: they belong to a certain pattern of utopian thought, to a particular way of considering the relationship private life-public life, and — in the mind of their upholders — such procedures tend to lose their seeming "cruelty" and "totalitarianism" if considered as mere means for obtaining a much greater good: an obvious improvement, or transfiguration, of the fellow-humans' ways of life. According to such a line of thought, which can be easily followed from Plato to Marx, the impressive, overwhelming "advantages" that such a transfiguration would bring about are much greater and more important than the possible "local inconveniences" it might cause to those who happen to be involved. Eventually, it is the benevolence, noble motivations and generosity of the utopian projects that result in these unpleasant side-effects.

Obviously, it is not here a matter of agreement or disagreement with these violent procedures: I am simply trying to place them in a wider context of traditions of utopian thought, and see how are they derived, explained and justified. For, insofar as it is possible to talk about a "perennial utopian theme", as Frank Manuel has put it (Manuel 1965: 70), I think that Berkeley's Bermuda project could be better understood if regarded as belonging to the long tradition of those similar projects through which this utopian

theme has been approached, developed, and made famous. All these detailed and unpleasant provisions, regulations and tough measures Berkeley envisaged are, as it were, born out of an ardent genuine desire to see his neighbours happier, less distressed and more virtuous, just as in any other utopian project. Besides, Berkeley lived in a rather “innocent” age, one that had not witnessed any real attempts at putting utopian projects into practice.

### 6.1.3. The “incongruity”

If a “state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs” (Mannheim 1936: 192), then Berkeley’s state of mind when conceiving of and proposing his Bermuda project was certainly utopian. The huge and unbridgeable gap (or “incongruity”, in Mannheim’s terminology) between the *real* (geographical, natural and social) situation of the islands and their *ideal* situation in Berkeley’s mind (i. e., the way in which he misrepresented them) is revealed by both some of the contemporary opponents to his scheme and — maybe more importantly — by several accounts of the *real* Bermudas from the first colonists there, dated some decades before Berkeley’s scheme and which are still extant.

Arthur Aston Luce, who studied thoroughly the whole affair, found that — when the project came to be discussed in the British Parliament for obtaining the necessary financial support — opposition to Berkeley’s “Bermuda scheme” was not all the time malevolent or unjustified. There were some realistic people (“enlightened opposition”) who criticized Berkeley’s project on the basis of their own knowledge of the real situation of the Islands. Among them, William Byrd of Virginia, for example, “who with local knowledge opposed the project, not as undesirable, but as impracticable”, brought — in a remarkably ironical form — pertinent and solid arguments against Berkeley’s project. He saw Berkeley as “a Don Quixote in zeal” and his project as a “visionary scheme”:

There is no bread in Bermuda; there is nothing fit for the sustenance of man but onions and cabbages; its inhabitants are healthy, because, forsooth, they have so little to eat; the air is pure because swept by storms and hurricanes.... There are no Indians in Bermuda, “nor within two

hundred leagues of it upon the continent, and it will need the gift of miracles to persuade them to leave their country and venture themselves upon the great ocean, on the temptation of being converted". The Dean must take the French way and dragoon them into Christianity. He must take half a dozen regiments, and "make a descent upon the coast of Florida, and take as many prisoners as he can." Behind the sarcasm... is the assurance of the man with local knowledge. (Luce 1949: 137)

On the other hand, there are those accounts from the first colonists in Bermuda, mainly private letters which were edited some time ago under the title *The Rich Papers. Letters from Bermuda 1615-1646. Eyewitness Accounts Sent by the Early Colonists to Sir Nathaniel Rich*, describing both the natural circumstances under which the islands were then planted and administrated, but also the numerous other problems, for example serious troubles caused by the drunkenness and immorality of the inhabitants. The sharp contrast between the poor "state of reality" in Bermuda and Berkeley's too enthusiastic "state of mind" is marked at times by such chilling fragments as this one: "If the Adventurers [the company then administrating the islands] send noe clothes to this poore people before this time 12 months, many of them wilbe naked if not dead." (Ives 1984: 14) Undoubtedly, some of the serious problems might have been solved by Berkeley's time, but it is not reasonable to believe that the very unfriendly climate, for example, had changed very much in the meantime.

These accounts depict a small world, with its fortunes and misfortunes, with its happy and unhappy events, all of them bearing apparently no resemblance to any "earthly paradise". At least not more than any other corner (island) of the known world. Life in Bermuda was taking its course in a more or less bearable manner, but sometimes there were events so terrific that seemed to seriously jeopardize the very minimal conditions of living there. For example, as it is recorded, one such event was a tremendous invasion of rats:

Rattes have been and are a great judgement of God upon us. All the Ilands have been in a manner like so many Cunny [coney, rabbit] warrens, which did put the people much out of heart. It is incredible how they did swimme from Iland to Iland, and suddainly like an armie of men did invade the Ilands from one end to an other, devouring the fruites of the earth in strange manner. (*Ibid.*: 14)<sup>9</sup>



As for the morals of the inhabitants, highly praised by Berkeley, they were not, at the time of writing of these accounts, as exemplary as one could wish. For example, some of the Bermudans seem to have often resorted to the virtues of wine. To the extent that, far from being overwhelmed by innocence, moderation, and other noble virtues, some of them had come to be seriously fond of drinking. A Bermuda priest wrote once to Sir Nathaniel Rich:

Good sir, for God sake do what you can to send hither godly preachers, before sinne hath got the upper hand. It is lamentable to see how sinne aboundeth every day more and more as the people do increase. I am not able to expresse the abhominable drunkenness, loathsome spuing [spewing, vomiting] swearing, swaggering and quarrelling, while the ship is in harbour with any wine or strong waters in her. (*Ibid.*: 161-2)

## 6.2. Eschatology

### 6.2.1. The Millenarist context

It is worth recalling that Berkeley's college was not designed as an end in itself, but simply as a *means*. Its ultimate mission was to produce worthy priests and theologians, "missionaries" able to persuade the "savage Indians" to accept Christianity — which mission had at that time some special connotations. More precisely, I suggest that, in closed connection with the topics of the "earthly paradise" and utopianism discussed above, a consideration of Berkeley's *Proposal* within the context of the religious (apocalyptic, millennialist and eschatological) ideas and attitudes that lay behind the early transoceanic voyages of discovery (and then of colonization) of America would be of great importance for a better understanding of his project. As both Mircea Eliade and especially Harry M. Bracken and David Berman have shown, Berkeley's American Project is hardly understandable without taking seriously into account its *messianism*. Bracken has even published an interesting paper titled "Bishop Berkeley's Messianism" (Bracken 1988: 65-80)<sup>10</sup>. To put it very briefly, Bracken suggests that Berkeley embraced

the then popular analogy between the "Lost Tribes of the Israel", whose conversion would have had a special value according to St. Paul, and the American Indians. Hence Berkeley's eagerness to convert those Indians might be regarded as an attempt to prepare for the Second Coming. And it is precisely this messianic feature of Berkeley's project that is much indebted to the religious and theological background against which the first transatlantic voyages occurred. How so?

There is some agreement among many historians and religious scientists nowadays that a crucial factor in realizing the new geographic discoveries was in fact, as Mircea Eliade has put it, "the nostalgia for the earthly paradise that the ancestors of the American nations had crossed the Atlantic to find." (Eliade 1965: 261) According to such a line of thought, the deeper causes and motivations of the transatlantic voyages undertaken by the early discoverers and colonists are not only of an economic or political nature, but they have also something to do with a certain religious atmosphere characterizing the European world towards the end of the Middle Ages. More precisely: an atmosphere marked by eschatological expectations, millennialist dreams and by some need for a radical "moral transformation" and "regeneration". And it was within "this messianic and apocalyptic atmosphere that the transoceanic expeditions and the geographic discoveries that radically shook and transformed Western Europe took place. Throughout Europe people believed in an imminent regeneration of the world." (*Ibid.*: 262) Mircea Eliade and Jean Delumeau are among the historians supporting this line of thought, and in doing so they exhibit an impressive knowledge and a deep understanding of the whole cultural, religious, and intellectual context of that wonderfully confused and multifaceted age:

Scholars have long pointed out how the search for paradisaic islands was an important stimulus to voyages of discovery from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Nostalgia for the garden of Eden; the conviction of Christopher Columbus and missionaries that the end time was at hand; the will to bring religion to new lands; and the desire to find gold, precious stones, and other rare commodities: all these combined to spur travelers, religious, sailors, and conquerors on to new horizons. Their culture and the dreams it brought with it led them, at least in the beginning, to see in the strange lands opening up before them the characteristics of those blessed

countries that had haunted the Western imagination since antiquity.  
(Delumeau 109-10)

An easy way of illustrating Eliade's and Delumeau's interpretations would be to try to find out what the discoverers and first colonists themselves thought about what they were then doing, seeing, experiencing, etc.

We can thus see how, in a letter sent by Amerigo Vespucci to Lorenzo de Medici, sometime between 1499-1502, the famous navigator talks about

the friendly land, covered with countless very tall trees that do not lose their leaves and emit sweet and fragrant odors and are loaded with tasty fruits that promote the body's health; the fields of thick grass that are filled with flowers which have a wonderfully delightful perfume; the great throng of birds of various species, whose feathers, colors, and songs defy description. [...] For myself, I thought I was near the earthly paradise.  
(Qtd. in Delumeau 110)

If in the case of Vespucci these things were veiled in a poetical and somewhat vague form, Christopher Columbus openly considered his transoceanic enterprise in terms of Sacred History, and saw his "mission" as definitely belonging to a divine plan. He "did not doubt that he had come near the Earthly Paradise" and consequently — however strange this might appear today — he considered his adventurous navigation in theological and mystical rather than secular terms:

He believed that the fresh water currents he encountered in the Gulf of Paria originated in the four rivers of the Garden of Eden. [...] The New World represented more than a new continent open to the propagation of the Gospel. The very fact of its discovery had an eschatological implication. [...] Columbus was persuaded that the prophecy concerning the diffusion of the Gospel throughout the whole world had to be realized before the end of the world — which was not far off. In his *Book of Prophecies*, Columbus affirmed that this event, namely, the end of the world, would be preceded by the conquest of the new continent, the conversion of the heathen, and the destruction of the Antichrist. (Eliade 1965: 262)

Then, what is equally important is that such a state of mind not only persisted even after the establishment of the colonies, but it also increased in intensity, developed and spread widely throughout America<sup>11</sup>. The first colonists' dreams and phantasms proved to be so

intense that it was as if what they found out after crossing the ocean actually confirmed all their eschatological expectations and millenarist ideas: “the most popular religious doctrine in the Colonies was that America had been chosen among all the nations of the earth as the place of the Second Coming of Christ, and the millennium, though essentially of a spiritual nature, would be accompanied by a paradisiacal transformation of the earth, as an outer sign of an inner perfection.” (*Ibid.*: 264) Thus, the awareness of their being “chosen”, the sense of their blessing, election and mission — and the corresponding “responsibilities” — made them feel in some way “associates” or “partners” of God, trustful implementers of His plans. As it were, theirs were not simply human enterprises, their doings were not facts of social history, but they perceived themselves as being deeply involved in some apocalyptic and divine affairs:

The first English colonists in America considered themselves chosen by Providence to establish a “City on a Mountain” that would serve as an example of the true Reformation for all Europe. They had followed the path of the sun toward the Far West, continuing and prolonging in a prodigious fashion the traditional passing of religion and culture from East to West. [...] The first pioneers did not doubt that the final drama of moral regeneration and universal salvation would begin with them, since they were the first to follow the sun in its course toward the paradisiacal gardens of the West. (*Ibid.*: 264)

Broadly speaking, this was the religious context within which Berkeley’s *Proposal* emerged. Keeping this fact in mind when considering the “boldness”, “savagery” or “unrealistic” character of his project would be, I think, of some help.

### 6.2.2. Berkeley’s messianism

Since one of the main aims of his projected college was to supply the colonies with virtuous, well-prepared priests and missionaries<sup>12</sup>, some commentators — based also on the last stanza of that famous poem that Berkeley dedicated to America — concluded that his motivation in initiating and pursuing the project was ultimately one of an eschatological and millennialist nature. The poem is called *America or the Muse’s*

*Refuge. A Prophecy*, and is an excellent piece of poetry that he disseminated about in order to get more support for his scheme. At the beginning, it was circulated anonymously, but eventually Berkeley published it in the *Miscellany* (1752) under his own name. David Berman discusses in some detail “the eschatological aspect of Berkeley’s poem and project” in his book on Berkeley (Berman 1994: 116), and one of his conclusions is that it is “evident that his poem is apocalyptic and eschatological.” (*Ibid.*: 118). As a matter of fact, Berman follows in general Bracken’s interpretation that I will be summarizing below. (Let me also add that Mircea Eliade has a rather similar interpretation of this poem, but without going into too much detail.)

I reproduce here only the last stanza of the poem, namely, that which has received special interest from commentators:

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way,  
The four first Acts already past.  
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day,  
Time's noblest offspring is the last.  
(Berkeley 1955: VII, 370)

In trying to interpret the symbolism of the five acts Bracken resorts to the Old Testament, namely, to *Daniel*. He says: “I take the symbolism of the final stanza, the four plus one Acts, to be from *Daniel*, chapter 2, where the four kingdoms, usually taken to be Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, shall be succeeded by a fifth: ‘And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed...’ (2: 44)” (Bracken 1988: 71) Given the complex millennialist and apocalyptic context depicted above, with all its great expectations, intensely religious feelings of — and preparations for — the Millennium, an interpretation like this acquires a certain degree of reasonableness. Bracken epitomizes his demonstration with a decisive Scriptural argument. According to him, “the key to this extraordinary proposal is that Berkeley accepts the [then] popular view that the American Indians are the Lost Tribes of Israel. As Jews, their conversion is especially dear to God and each conversion promises, as Paul tells us in *Romans xi*, to bring closer the Second Coming.” (73) Then, he undertakes a detailed research of some of the beliefs *then* current in America, beliefs according to which the American Indians were — in some way or other — of Jewish origin. Of course,

it is not the truthfulness of those beliefs that I am concerned with here, but simply their sheer existence, and Berkeley's encounter with them.

As it were, following Bracken's hypothesis, by converting the Indians the graduates from Berkeley's college would have converted the Lost Tribes of the Israel, which — according to St. Paul — was a clear sign of the much expected, triumphal end of the world: the *Apocalypse*. Thus, in Berkeley's mind the propagation of Gospel in America and the conversion of the Indians living there would have had a highly spiritual value as they would have been at the same time preparations for, and signs of, the approaching Second Coming. Hence the ardent necessity of building a missionary college in Bermuda: "Given what we know about Berkeley, we must find a reason not only for his committing himself so completely to his American dream, but especially for the savagery he was prepared to inflict on Indian children." (Bracken 1988: 80)

Bracken's tempting and documented interpretation, even if one does not accept it entirely<sup>13</sup>, has the merit of underlining the complexity of the Bermuda project, and suggesting some ways of explaining several of the confused aspects of Berkeley's enterprise. More than that, it is perfectly consistent with the complex religious context presented above. Almost needless to say, Bracken's interpretation fits pretty well with — and, to a great extent, is supported by — my own attempt, earlier on in this chapter, at placing Berkeley in the tradition of the search for an "earthly paradise" and of the educational utopias. His reconstruction of Berkeley's way of thinking as far as this particular problem is concerned could be applied to the way in which a lot of his contemporaries were then thinking. For, as it has been said, in "the eyes of the English ...the colonization of America merely prolonged and perfected a Sacred History begun at the outset of the Reformation. Indeed, the push of the pioneers toward the West continued the triumphal march of Wisdom and the True Religion from East to West. For some time already, Protestant theologians had been inclined to identify the West with spiritual and moral progress." (Eliade 1965: 263)

As it appears, at least two fundamental Christian ideas were inextricably interwoven in Berkeley's "Bermuda Scheme": a nostalgia for an "earthly paradise" and the "the expectation of a kingdom of happiness that is to be established on our earth and

to last for a millennium” (Delumeau 1995: 1). The “happy island”, despite its imaginary, utopian nature — if not simply *because of* that — has been the chosen space for such an enterprise, its privileged environment. It has played a central role in this story. Its isolation from the outside world, its purity (as it is surrounded by the water of the endless ocean), its difficult accessibility, exoticism, paradisiacal appearance, beauties, innocence of its inhabitants, etc. — all these are attributes enabling us to consider that island as some un-earthly or un-natural place, a place where the marvels or such supernatural events as the Second Coming and Millennium are at any time possible.

Then, the millennialist interpretation of Berkeley’s Bermuda scheme presented above adds to his *utopia* a character somehow different from that of a simply political/social utopian project. Of course, Berkeley’s utopia remains an utopia in the tradition of Plato, Campanella, Thomas More or Herman Hesse, but — in addition to that — it is also characterized by certain chiliastic elements. Berkeley’s is a religiously modeled utopia, an “educational utopia” with a certain soteriological mission. Even if the main emphasis is not placed, in his project, upon Messianism, the chiliastic features are present and have something to say about the ultimate specificity of the “Bermuda scheme”. To be more precise, the Messianism belongs not so much to the project itself (explicitly and essentially) as to its *unspoken presuppositions*, to the intellectual and religious background against which it was conceived of. As it were, the Millennium is rapidly approaching: under such circumstances, getting ready (*praeparatio*) is the crucial and most urgent thing to do. Hence the imperative necessity of preparing a body of worthy, well trained and dedicated people, ready to prepare, in turn, their neighbours for the great event, which is to say, to save their souls *in aeternum*. Or, instructing such special people is an extremely difficult and demanding job. Actually, a job that is made possible only within the firm boundaries of a highly disciplined “educational utopia”. And this is where Berkeley’s project is making its debut.

### **6.3. Making some (philosophical) sense of the “Bermuda Scheme”**

### 6.3.1. Philosophy and biography

There is a remark about Berkeley, made by Bishop Atterbury, that, I think, has something significant to say about the way in which Berkeley was perceived by some of his contemporaries, and I would like to quote it here: “So much understanding, so much knowledge, so much innocence, and such humility, I did not think had been the portion of any but angels till I saw this gentleman.” (Qtd. in Luce 1949: 63) Based on Bishop Atterbury’s generous remark, as well as on other similar ones, I think it would be interesting to see Berkeley’s biography as being driven by a certain form of *angelism*<sup>14</sup>. By Berkeley’s “angelism” I mean here a dominant tendency, manifest throughout his life, toward seeing the best in people, toward an *idealization* of real facts and situations, toward generosity, benevolence and even self-sacrifice — a tendency easily recognizable in Berkeley’s everyday behaviour, as well as in his initiatives, projects, undertakings, deeds, etc. There is a sense in which Berkeley’s biography, un-subdued to the strict “necessities of life”, was touchingly marked by various dreams of universal salvation and idealistic enterprises: the tar-water and Bermuda episodes, dealt with in some detail in this thesis, being only the most famous of them. There are numerous records, writings and documents witnessing to Berkeley’s “unusual generosity”, kindness, philanthropy, good nature, benevolence, and so forth. I just quoted above Bishop Atterbury’s eulogy. Similarly, in a poem, Pope wrote that famous line: “To Berkeley, ev’ry virtue under heav’n” (Qtd. in Berman 1994: 120), Johnson called him a “profound scholar and a man of fine imagination”, just as A. A. Luce’s *Life of George Berkeley* — probably the most important biography of Berkeley ever written — ends in this vein: “He was clearly something of a saint.” (Luce 1949: 225)

The most touching and detailed account of this kind, revealing to an admirable extent the “angelism” of his character, comes from Berkeley’s widow. Of course, there was something personal involved in her confession, and we should consider it with some caution. Yet, beyond the personal character of this confession, one can easily discover a realistic and believable portrait of Berkeley. In a letter to one of their sons, she remembers how Berkeley’s “instructive conversation was delicate” and when he dealt directly with religion he



did it in so masterly a manner, that it made a deep and lasting impression. You never heard him give his tongue the liberty of speaking evil. Never did he reveal the fault or secret of a friend. [...] an universal knowledge of men, things, and books prevented the greatest wit of his age from being at a loss for subjects of conversation; but had he been as dull as he was bright, his conscience and good nature would have kept close the door of his lips rather than to have opened them to vilify or lessen his brother. [...] Now he was not born to all this, no more than others are, but in his own words, his industry was greater; he struck a light at twelve to rise and study and pray, for he was very pious; and his studies were not barren speculations, for he loved God and man... (Qtd. in Luce 1949: 181-2)<sup>15</sup>

The most important thing that a confession like this conveys is, I think, the sense of continuity, and the admirable consistency, between what Berkeley professed as a philosopher, and the way in which he lived his life. As his wife's letter suggests, there is no gap, no "incongruity" between Berkeley's thinking and his way of life: his religious and ethical thought pervaded his entire biography, conferring upon it greatness and exemplarity. What is more important: "he was not born to all this", but he had to make efforts and painstakingly fight with himself in order to attain such a state of ethical transparency.

Now, Berkeley's "Bermuda scheme", as it was presented in detail above, might serve as a good illustration of the notion of a Berkeleian "angelism" that I am trying to advance here. The American Project, failed as it was, was deeply marked precisely by the tendency toward seeing the best in people, towards *idealization* of real situations and state of affairs<sup>16</sup> that I mentioned above when defining the notion of Berkeley's "angelism". Berkeley's "Bermuda project" represented, in a sense, the culmination of his "angelism", being its most remarkable and expressive embodiment. It was precisely in this project that all his idealistic pursuits and utopian dreams were put at work. Before this daring enterprise there had been numerous occasions on which Berkeley's outstanding character manifested itself, but the Bermuda affair played an essential role in the formation and dissemination of Berkeley's renown as a "modern apostle"<sup>17</sup>. To the extent that, at a given moment, some of his contemporaries knew him not as a philosopher, but first of all as the eccentric promoter of the Bermuda scheme, while others were certain that his philosophy would be in the future decisively overshadowed by the significance of his

missionary enterprises: "His eminent Talents, by which he shines in the learned World, will not give him so much Lustre and Distinction in the annals of future Times, as that Apostolic Zeal which he is so confessedly endowed", wrote an anonymous author (Qtd. in Berman 1994: 105).

Based on much of what has been said above about Berkeley's enthusiastic commitment to the utopian ways of thinking, and on his readiness to put the rest of his life into the service of a missionary cause, I would suggest here that Berkeley's "Bermuda scheme" might be seen as a remarkable instantiation of the ancient conception of *philosophy as a way of life*<sup>18</sup>. In other words, a conception of philosophy whose aim is an *existential* transformation taking place within the philosopher himself. Berkeley's whole project, even if failed, points to the fact that he regarded philosophy not only as simply an academic discipline to be taught in schools and discussed in specialist writings or journals, but rather as a reflexive exercise that must result in some improvement in people's lives: first, a self-improvement occurring in the philosopher himself, and, then, an improvement of his neighbours' lives. Berkeley's design of, and then enthusiastic embarking on, the "Bermuda project" suggests that, at a given point in life, he felt that it was not enough for him to teach philosophy at Trinity College, and that he had to make his philosophical preoccupations, in some way or other, *useful for life*, useful in some broader terms and for a larger community of people than simply the group of scholars involved. It must have been something of Berkeley's conception of philosophy as a form of (ascetic) life that his friend Jonathan Swift meant when saying that he was "an absolute philosopher with regard to money, titles, and power." (Qtd. in Luce 1949: 100)

My view here that Berkeley's "Bermuda project" betrays a commitment to a conception of philosophy as a way of life is supported, among other Berkeley scholars, by David Berman, who even draws a more specific parallel between the "Bermuda project" and Berkeley's theological writings (especially *Alciphron*, discussed in the previous chapter):

The benevolent Bermuda project of 1724-31 and the theological writings of 1732-5 fit and support each other perfectly, especially if one subscribes ...to the orthodox view on the connection between religion and morality. ...the fact that Berkeley himself was one of the most zealous adherents of

this position helped to complete the picture. Dean Berkeley could therefore be seen as an almost perfect instantiation of the orthodox position. As Marcus Aurelius is often seen as the exemplification of the ideal Stoic sage, so Berkeley came to be seen as a paradigmatic Christian: perfectly moral and religious. (Berman 1994: 122)

Berman's reference, in this context, to the Stoics, with their constant emphasis upon the "utility for life" that must characterize any philosophical exercise, confirms my interpretation. Another confirmation I find in the above quoted letter of Berkeley's widow. At a given moment, she makes this remarkable statement: "Humility, tenderness, patience, generosity, charity to men's souls and bodies, was the sole end of all his projects, and the business of his life." (Qtd. in Luce 1949: 182) When a philosopher decides to embrace a worldview according to which "charity to men's souls and bodies" is "the business of his life", this is a sign that he wants to leave in the world not only the books he writes, but some other "traces" as well. And the safest way of influencing others' lives, and leaving "traces" upon their souls, is by one's own example: if one succeeds in guiding his own life according to what one teaches, this is the best validation of one's philosophy.

### **6.3.2. Immaterialism and utopianism**

Finally, I ask whether it would not be possible to talk about an even more specific, if somehow speculative, parallel between certain features of Berkeley's "Bermuda project" and certain tenets of his philosophy. More precisely, my question is: to what extent is such an utopian and, so to say, un-earthly mode of thinking as that revealed by the "Bermuda project" consistent, or even kindred, with the immaterialist character of his philosophy? In other words, to what extent is it possible to follow some deeper continuities, some common patterns of thought, connecting his utopian propensities to the essence of his main philosophical message? This is, of course, too large and complex a topic to be dealt with exhaustively here. It is not my intention to do so now, at the end of this chapter, but simply to point to the possibility of such a questioning.

An utopia would be, according to such a tempting analogy, an immaterialism “applied” to the social order, some sort of *practical idealism*. To put it otherwise, the utopianism of Berkeley’s “Bermuda project” would be with regard to social things the mirror of what his immaterialism is with regards to natural things. Just as Berkeley’s natural world lacks solid and dense materiality, so his utopian project lacks those basic features that generally characterize “realistic” projects. Just as, in Berkeley’s immaterialism, the cosmos we see around is but the sophisticated interplay between our mind and God’s, our “conversation” with God, articulated according to a certain grammar, so Berkeley’s utopia is a careful rational construction, a complex “narrative” woven according to certain rules established in the course of the utopian tradition. Just as the ontological precariousness of the things in the world is compensated for by their being perceived, and “cared for”, by God himself, so the fragility of the social actors is compensated for, on the utopian island, by their playing a part in a redeeming whole. As it were, Berkeley’s being a “dreamer” in social affairs might well be associated with his being an immaterialist in philosophical matters. And his utopian “impossible” proposals might be regarded as some social or civic *reflection* of, say, his paradoxical claims that matter does not exist, and only spirits and minds exist. It is basically the same dissatisfaction with the current states of (both natural and social) affairs, and the same tendency toward replacing the existent state of things with an ideal one, that might be seen as manifest in both cases. Let me add that A. C. Fraser even uses the term “social idealism” with reference to Berkeley’s project: “It [*The Proposal*] is the lamentation of an ardent social idealist over the corrupt civilization of Britain and the Old World. Soon after a social enterprise of romantic benevolence presented itself to his imagination.” (Fraser 1901: IV 342) In some connection with this possible paralleling, William Butler Yeats insightfully realized that Berkeley’s world is ultimately dependent on our “dreaming” it:

God-appointed Berkeley that proved all things  
a dream,  
That this pragmatical, preposterous pig of a world,  
its farrow that so solid seem  
Must vanish on the instant if the mind but changes its theme  
(Yeats 1965: 268)

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “For whatever reasons, Berkeley seems to have lost confidence in the Old World and was looking hopefully to America. For it was probably in the early months of 1722 that he conceived his plan for a missionary and art college in Bermuda, which was to engage him for the next decade.” (Berman 100)

<sup>2</sup> Of course, he says several times that he was informed about the islands by very trustful persons (“the best Information I could get”), but, as we shall see below, his description did not fit the real situation of the islands at all. He was either misinformed or — more probably — the trustful persons conveyed to him something of the popular medieval view of the “paradisical islands”.

<sup>3</sup> It is true, later on, when the project had already started to fail, Berkeley showed himself ready to build the college somewhere in the American mainland. But what I am particularly interested in here is his first, genuine, impulse and intention, as recorded in the letters mentioned and the *Proposal*.

<sup>4</sup> “Distance lends enchantment, and isolation preserves things in existence. Later on, many ‘utopias’, among them that of Thomas More, would be located on islands.” (Delumeau 98)

<sup>5</sup> Kappler’s book, cited by Delumeau, is *Monstres, demons et merveilles a la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris: Payot, 1980)

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes his enthusiasm infected others. For example, one of his contemporaries said: “Young and old, learned and rich, all desirous of retiring to enjoy peace of mind and health of body, and of *restoring the golden age* in that corner of the world.” (a contemporary [Dan Dering] *Qtd. in* Luce 97) [emphasis added]

<sup>7</sup> Many people “found the entire enterprise absurd. ...those with first-hand experience of the American Church or educational scenes were profoundly distressed with Berkeley’s ignorance. It is clear that for many years, Berkeley was seen as something of a nut.” (Bracken 68)

<sup>8</sup> According to some authors, this remoteness of the island from the American mainland was in fact one of the main causes of the failure of the entire project. A. Luce, for example, considers that “the tragedy of the Bermuda project was just Bermuda. Six hundred miles of ocean separate it from the nearest point of the mainland. Students might have come sixty miles, but not six hundred. The romance of Bermuda won support for the scheme, the facts of Bermuda killed it.” (Luce 99)

<sup>9</sup> Then, far from being “the best air in the world”, as Berkeley said in a private letter (Berkeley VIII 156), Bermuda’s air was often violently agitated by “terrible winds”, causing much trouble and many falls to the Bermudans: “Mr Lewis [a settler]... hath taken a greate hurt by a fall, which hath bruised him much, and his [he is] att this instant very weake, the force of the wind beeing soe terrible. Att the same tyme the like was never seen. Mr Lewis, goeing to the governors, the wind beeing so stronge that it bente hime to the ground. And the same day there were many of our howses blowne downe. We have hadd a very unseasonable summer and winter that it hath hinred [hindered] much labour, which otherwise might hadd been performed.” (Ives 1984: 85)

<sup>10</sup> And, as Bracken openly recognizes, this is not only the case with Berkeley. Even if for different reasons, “there is hardly a single great mind of the period which is not involved in millennial thinking. Henry More, Sir Isaac Newton, and Sir Robert Boyle may be the names best known to academic philosophers.” (Bracken 78)

<sup>11</sup> “[C]ertain pioneers already saw Paradise in the various regions of America. Traveling along the coast of New England in 1614, John Smith compared it to Eden: ‘heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man’s habitation... we chanced in a lande, even as God made it.’ George Alsop presents Maryland

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as the only place seeming to be the 'Earthly Paradise'. Its trees, its plants, its fruits, its flowers, he wrote, speak in 'Hieroglyphicks of our Adamitical or Primitive situation.' Another writer discovered the 'future Eden' in Georgia - a region located on the same latitude as Palestine: 'That promis'd *Canaan*, which was pointed out by God's own choice, to bless the Labours of a favorite People.' For Edward Johnson, Massachusetts was the place 'where the Lord will create a new Heaven and a new Earth.' Likewise, the Boston Puritan, John Cotton, informed those preparing to set sail from England for Massachusetts that they were granted a privilege of Heaven, thanks to 'the grand charter given to *Adam* and his posterity in Paradise.'" (Mircea Eliade 264-5)

<sup>12</sup> "[T]o provide, in the first Place, a constant Supply of worthy Clergymen for the *English Churches* in those Parts; and in the second Place, a like constant Supply of zealous Missionaries, well fitted for propagating Christianity among the Savages" (Berkeley VII 345).

<sup>13</sup> In general, he is very careful and scrupulous in his analysis. He admits that his is only a partial and possible interpretation, with the possibility of other points of view: "*if* it is granted that Berkeley hoped to use the traditional symbolism of Daniel so that he might characterize America in messianic terms then we have a *partial* answer to the point of the American Project." [emphasis added] (Bracken 73)

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Maritain, in his book *Three Reformers* (Maritain 1950) uses this term with reference to Descartes. He talks about Descartes' "sin of *angelism*" ("He turned Knowledge and Thought into a hopeless perplexity, and abyss of unrest, because he conceived human Thought after the type of angelic Thought." [Maritain 1950: 54]). Needless to say, unlike Maritain, I use here the term in a positive and appreciative sense.

<sup>15</sup> Certainly, some of these phrases belong to a certain degree to the specific rhetoric and general polite formulae of the age, but the convergence of so many witnesses, from so many and different people, tends nevertheless to confirm and "validate" them. Such a portrait and excellent "public image" could have hardly been built up in the absence of a set of actual character traits and biographical facts enabling Berkeley's contemporaries to see and describe him in the way in which they did.

<sup>16</sup> Not to say that one of the probable reasons why the project eventually failed was Berkeley's tendency towards idealizations and his "lack of realism".

<sup>17</sup> "Berkeley's moral character had been eulogized before the Bermuda project — by, for example, Richard Steele and Bishop Aterbury. But their praise would hardly have been well known. It was, above all, the Bermuda project that gave their remarks prominence and substance. ...Bermuda was the river that powered Berkeley's moral reputation." (Berman 1994: 120-1)

<sup>18</sup> There has been recently some interesting discussions dedicated to this topics. I would give here only two examples: Pierre Hadot in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Hadot 1995) and Alexander Nehamas's *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Nehamas 2000).

## Chapter Seven:

### George Berkeley and the Catharism

This (final) chapter purports to undertake a comparative analysis of some of the ideas professed by the medieval Dualistic heresies (Catharism in particular), on the one hand, and George Berkeley's (philosophically scandalous and controversial) denial of the existence of matter, on the other hand. The central notion around which my present comparative approach will be articulated is the idea that, in both cases, matter comes to be regarded, in some way or other, as *the source of evil*. Based on this central insight other comparative considerations will be also advanced. What I will be trying to show in this chapter is not that Berkeley was some modern Cathar (in his explicit tenets), but that his attitudes to matter and the material world *echoed* certain Cathar theological anxieties and patterns of thought.

The chapter has two parts: 1) the first part offers a very brief historical introduction to the problem of Catharism. Then, the Cathar doctrine about the material world is briefly presented, in an attempt to offer a new perspective from which to look at Berkeley's immaterialism; 2) the second part is dedicated to telling the "story" of Berkeley's refutation of the material world, as it appears in light of the Cathar doctrine on matter. Finally, both Berkeley's refutation of matter and Catharism are placed within a broader theoretical framework, and connected to a recurring *archetypal Dualistic pattern* employed in facing the "evil realm of matter" by other thinkers or artists, living in other cultural epochs.

## 7.1. The Cathars

### 7.1.1. The Cathar heresy

The reason why, of all the Dualistic heresies, I have chosen Catharism as a comparison term in this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, Cathar history and doctrines are relatively well known, with a great deal of scholarship dedicated to the subject, and with a multitude of approaches: Catharism has preoccupied to various degrees historians of religion, political historians, art historians, historians of literature, theologians, philosophers, and so on. On the other hand, Catharism is the last important (and probably the most consequential) embodiment of the Dualistic tendency in Western Christian world, marking to a certain extent — directly or indirectly, more or less traceably — some of its mentalities, intellectual and emotional perspectives, favourite topics and ways of thinking. Catharism did not disappear from the European culture along with the last occupants of the Montségur castle: it simply changed its mode of existence, from a troubling heresy into a fascinating cultural topic, which was to capture many people's minds over the next centuries. Thus, as it has been remarked, the disappearance of Catharism as a heresy from the Western world coincided with the emergence of a new source of inspiration for the European imagination

the saga of the collision between Catharism and Catholicism has long been one of the most favoured subjects for research, myth-making, romance and controversy. The fall of the Cathar citadel of Montségur and the ensuing mass burning of the Cathar *perfecti* ... is often deemed to represent what Lawrence Durrell called "the Thermopylae of the Gnostic soul", and the Cathars, whether maligned or romanticised, still retain their peculiar mystique and long-lasting hold on the European imagination. (Stoyanov 2000: 292)

This being said, I am hopeful that, within a broader context of history of ideas, a consideration of Berkeley in light of the Cathar doctrines on matter might bring about a better and more appropriate understanding of his immaterialism.

In the absence of a comprehensive corpus of Cathar writings it is difficult enough to establish, when investigating what the Cathars actually professed, which were the specifically Cathar beliefs (and not Dualistic in general). This is why, we should rely to a great extent on what their Catholic opponents (and especially the Inquisition) attributed to them. (In this context, Le Roy Ladurie's book, based on the direct access to the



confessions of the Cathar heretics, in the Inquisition's archives, is of an invaluable help for any researcher of Catharism.) Anyway, as a number of studies suggest, it is reasonable to suppose that the core Cathar ideas regarding matter and the material world — and which properly form the object of my comparison — are not necessarily the Cathars' "invention", but they are somehow derived from the mainstream teaching of the Dualistic tradition. The persistence of religious Dualism in the Western world over the centuries<sup>1</sup>, even if influenced from time to time by similar ideas coming from the East, is nowadays a received fact among many historians and religious scientists: "Western scholars tend to stress the existence of a Dualist tradition in the West throughout the Dark Ages and to regard the Balkan influence on the heretical movement, which no one now denies, as coming in rather late in the story. Certainly a Western Dualist tradition persisted from early times; but I believe that it was continually reinforced from the East, through Italy, where connections with the East were always maintained." (Runciman 1982: viii)

First of all, Catharism was undoubtedly "a Christian heresy". It appeared in France and Italy in the twelfth century, as an attempt at "reforming" the Catholic church. The Cathars "considered and proclaimed themselves 'true Christians', 'good Christians', as distinct from the official Catholic Church which according to them had betrayed the genuine doctrine of the Apostles." (Ladurie 1978: viii) There are authors who even associate the emergence of Catharism in Europe with some other major developments taking place in the Western culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Yuri Stoyanov, for example, places Catharism within the same context with the Gothic art and architecture, and with the new ascetic and reforming movements within the Catholic world: "Along with Gothic art and architecture, the renewed ideals of monasticism, asceticism and apostolic life, the advent of the dualist heresy in the west was symptomatic of the religious enthusiasm and permutations of the twelfth century." (Stoyanov 2000: 184) On the other hand, we should constantly bear in mind that, even if Catharism was born within a Catholic context, it brought with itself numerous heretical elements, anyway enough to draw the Church's attention immediately:

Catharism stood at some distance from traditional Christian doctrine, which was monotheist. Catharism accepted the (Manichaean) existence of two opposite principles, if not of two deities, one of good and the other of evil. One was God, the other Satan. On the one hand was light, on the other dark. On one side was the spiritual world, which was good,

and on the other the terrestrial world, which was carnal, physical, corrupt. (Ladurie 1978: viii)

Expectedly enough, in the absence of an established and inflexible corpus of doctrines, and of an authority responsible for keeping and monitoring its “orthodoxy,” Catharism was naturally predisposed to numerous interpretations, deviations and versions. Indeed, it was most probably not only the spontaneous and uncontrollable nature of the heresy itself that played so important a part in the emergence of these conflicting interpretations, but also the natural inclination of Gnosticism — inherent to all these Dualistic movements — towards endless speculation, luxuriant imagination and spectacular mythology and narratives. Consequently, there is a long and interesting history of the various smaller “heresies” having appeared here and there within the Dualistic heresy itself. To the extent that, in the tenth century, an ironical remark was made about the Bulgarian Bogomils that each of them “invented something for himself” (Loos 1974: 133). And this was the case with almost all the Dualistic heretics:

the Benedictine Eckbert reproached the German Cathars for the same variety of opinions. Already in the Byzantine world the teaching of the sect were constantly enriched by the results of free speculation on the texts of the New Testament, and by the creations of the folk-imagination, inspired by apocryphal writings. In the West the variety and permutations of the dualist doctrines can be traced quite distinctly, although of course it is difficult to say what has been taken over from the eastern branches of the sect and what is the later contribution of the western Cathar groups. (*Ibid.*: 133)

Given some of the Cathar accounts of the precise relationships between the two principles (God and Devil), historians have retained two main versions, or tendencies, of Catharism: a “radical” one (in France) and a “moderate” one (in Italy). As Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie has concisely put it: “On the one hand there was absolute dualism, typical of Catharism in Languedoc in the twelfth century: this proclaimed the eternal opposition between the two principles, good and evil. On the other hand was the modified dualism characteristic of Italian Catharism: here God occupies a place which was more eminent and more «eternal» than that of the Devil.” (Ladurie 1978: viii) These two branches of Catharism constantly fought each other, and it is rather ironical that one of the few Cathar writings still extant, *Liber de duobus principiis* (Thouzellier: 1973), is in fact a polemical “radical” tract directed against the “moderate” Cathars.

Yet, for the purposes of the present comparative research, these divisions within Catharism do not matter very much. What is really significant about the Cathars, from the point of view of my present comparative approach, is the strong contempt they permanently and unreservedly showed to all what belonged to the material world. Such a contempt was their distinctive feature, and, so to say, *le point d' honneur* of all Cathar adherents: "All 'Cathars' — men of the pure life — were united in their revulsion against all that binds the human being to his material body." (Loos 1974: 251) And indeed it is precisely this feature that makes Catharism so symptomatic, illustrative and appealing as to the subsequent inner developments of the European cultural history. They offer a radical worldview, a vision of the material world as a corrupted and corrupting realm, something from which we could not expect anything positive and should keep safely apart. "In this dualist theodicy the cosmos is viewed as the outcome and the battleground of two opposed principles, good and evil or light and darkness" (Stoyanov 2000: 2) and it is precisely the siding with the principle of light, and putting one's life into its service, that confers meaning on one's life.

Due precisely to its peculiar doctrines about the material world, Catharism, despite the terrible and finally fatal prosecutions from the Catholic Church (if not, sometimes, simply *because of them*) has over the centuries come to be considered, in many scholarly circles, with great sympathy and interest, and seen as an important ingredient of the Western literature, music, arts, and other forms of sensibility or social life<sup>2</sup>. I will in the following examine in some detail the Cathar doctrine on matter.

### 7.1.2. The "Prince of this world"

Matter had always troubled thinkers, theologians and scholars (whether ancient or medieval) as to the conceivability of its origin, nature, composition, constitution or movements, but the Cathar (or, in general, Dualistic) response, by attributing its origin, existence and maintenance to the Devil (or the Evil God), was certainly one of the most intriguing solutions ever found: characteristically, it was a simple solution and a sophisticated one at the same time. *Simple*, because it appealed to an universal, manifold and abstract principle answering a large number of philosophical and theological questions<sup>3</sup>; and it was *sophisticated*, because, at the psychological and ethical level of the

individual, it brought about a terrible complexity: the soul was now regarded as some sort of “metaphysical” *battlefield* between the “ultimate principles” themselves. The individual soul was dramatically and uninterruptedly disputed by God and the Devil in person: “The battle was fought on a cosmic scale, but also within the human breast. One Cathar tract asserted that ‘every day the evil god effects great evil against him [the good god] ...and the latter god, our god, exercises great power in combating the former one.’” (Fichtenau 1998: 161) It was probably this marked sense of self-importance, “election” and immense pride that, among other factors, made Catharism so attractive for many medieval audiences: at every moment of his life, man felt he was wanted by and fought over by God and Devil. Everything in the surrounding world acquired now a new significance, just as all his doings could not be indifferent or neutral any longer. Consequently, the current setting of his earthly life, that is, the *material* world around (and within) him played a new role: it was an essential *datum* involved in the cosmic “battle,” by means of which (more precisely, by the human attitudes adopted to it), he could be “rescued” or “lost” for ever.

It was of little importance for the attitude adopted towards this material world whether one or another force created amorphous matter *ex nihilo*. Views on the ultimate origin of the material being might change, the decisive point was that the Devil or the evil God had made (*fecit*) this world of ours and all that it contains. This was one of the fundamental theses acknowledged by all branches of the sect. ...all that we see around us is the work of the Devil; he is the creator and ruler of all earthly things; it is he who gave the command to lie with women, to eat meat and to drink wine. (*Ibid.*: 253)

Now, the notion that the creation of the material world should be attributed precisely to the Devil must have been resulted from a process of theological systematisation like the following one. First, there is the empirical, everyday-life evidence that *there is evil in the world*. Then, under the circumstances of *a peculiar theological sensibility*, this evidence tends more and more to be perceived as overwhelming, and to result in an argument as follows: there is such a consistent, widespread and deeply rooted *negative side* of our earthly world that attributing its creation to God would raise embarrassingly insoluble theological problems; there is nothing in the world resembling God, whereas there are a lot of things reminiscent of the nature, and the works, of Devil. It must have been this very special theological sensibility that explains why Cathars were in general so uneasy

and anxious about the (material) world around: "Sorrow and darkness permeate everything, the world contains more evil than good, and hence it belongs to the devil rather than God. Since our days are also marked by fear, illness, hardship, and misfortune, things that we humans must suffer in this life, 'We say that the days of this present world are evil.'" (Fichtenau 1998: 160) Under such circumstances, attributing the creation and maintenance of the material world to the Devil has come to be regarded as a natural conclusion. Jesus Christ himself had notoriously named Devil "the Prince of this world". Hence the Cathar interpretation of this particular Biblical passage as supporting their own beliefs: "this world" is the material world of Devil, and we should make all efforts to keep away from it.

Given the fact that within the medieval Christian frames of the theological (and philosophical) conceptualisation, the notion of God always implies a *maximum of existence* (God is always seen as the Supreme Being, or Essence, bearing the positive attributes of *plenitude, eternity, perfection*, etc.), it is self-evident that a principle opposed to God, "the principle of darkness", together with all his workings, modalities and agents, must be necessarily characterised by a *minimum of existence*, eventually by "non-existence." On the other hand, at the personal psychological level and under the circumstances of the peculiar theological sensibility mentioned above, the negative terms in which Cathars considered the material world (overwhelmed as it was by sorrow, darkness, illness, misfortune, suffering, etc.) tend, by contamination, to be associated with *negativity itself*. As a result, it happens that the *lack of value* tends to be increasingly perceived as a *lack of real existence*. (However "fallacious" and illegitimate such a step might appear to us today, within the framework of an intensely religious movement, marked by *impatience* and *urgency*, it acquires a certain *psychological justification*: as it were, what does not deserve to exist, does not properly and truly exist.) Therefore, the next natural step for Cathars to take was to consider this "wicked" material world in terms of *non-being* and *nothingness*: and they immediately took this step, which they gladly did. Here is a fragment from a theological conversation between a Cathar, one Peter, and a Catholic, William, who is trying to learn from him as much as he can about the Cathar theology:

A crucial text from the first chapter of St. John's gospel emerged: "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made." In the vulgate, the term used is *nihil*, "*Sine ipso factum est*

*nihil*.” Peter followed a tradition of interpreting the *nihil* to mean visible things, turning John’s poetic phrase into support for their crucial tenet that the visible world was not the creation of the good God. “Visible things,” he said, “are *nothing*.” (Lambert 1998: 160)

Peter reveals a great ability in countering his Catholic opponent’s opinions, and he does so in an interesting, and theologically documented and ingenious, manner. The fragment strengthens the idea that Catharism is a Christian heresy, Peter’s way of defending his opinions being deeply marked by the style of the theological debates of the day. Peter “had a clear understanding of the basic Cathar rejection of the whole visible world and sexuality as evil” and the ability to refute

counter-texts which did not support dualism.... When he [William] objected the Colossians text “In Him were all things created in heaven and earth, visible and invisible,” Peter replied “Visible to the heart and invisible to the eyes of the flesh.” William showed him his hand and asked if his flesh would rise again; Peter struck a wooden post and said, “Flesh will not rise again except as a wooden post.” (*Ibid*: 160)

Catharism was a rather pessimistic religious movement, but not a completely desperate one: however evil the world might be, there is nevertheless a way to escape it, there are means for Cathar adherents to “purify” themselves and “save” their souls from the *corrupted* and *corrupting* world within which they were “incidentally” born and then “forced” to live. These means include specific practices (fasts, abstinence from eating certain foods — meat, eggs, milk, drinking wine, etc.), rituals (first of all, of course, the *consolamentum*, which is the proper entrance in the rank of the “elect,” the Cathar elite) and, underlying all these, the comprehensive and detailed *knowledge* of the Cathar doctrines, the acute awareness that the world is created, constituted, and maintained precisely in the way in which Cathar theologians say it is. This was a redeeming knowledge, which of course betrays, once again, the *Gnostic* character of Catharism.

The Gnostic character or ascendant of Catharism has been repeatedly highlighted by those religious scientists and historians exploring these topics. Heinrich Fichtenau, to take only one recent example, offers an excellent account of the way in which Catharism “flows” from Gnosticism, and of their close, “structural” relationships. Fichtenau puts together “the Gnostics, Bogomils, and Cathars”, and talks about their commitment to the theology of the Dualist tradition. In their hands, says Fichtenau,

dualism became the key to unlocking the meaning of the universe. It was said of the Cathars that “they ...maintain ...there are two ages of the world (*saecula*), a good one and an evil one; similarly, there are two worlds (*mundos*), two realms, two heavens, two earths, and in this way they maintain that there are two of everything.” While this remark is not strictly accurate, it still illustrates a fundamental tendency inherent to this ontology. And only a story that did not rest content with the Gnostic idea of an emanating good principle could measure up to this view. The prosaic Gnostic myth was supplanted by one that played upon human emotions to greater dramatic effect, involving as it did the fall of angels, imprisonment, liberation, and re-ascendance. (Fichtenau 1998: 161)

Catharism took over from Gnosticism the notion that we, as spiritual substances, are temporarily in this world and have to make every effort to find our way back to the “principle of light”. Our soul is, in Catharism as well as Gnosticism “a stranger and an exile in the body”. The Cathars learned from the Gnostics that “the souls of men were ‘precious pearls’, divine sparks from this spiritual realm and had descended into the wicked material world of the ‘howling darkness’ to be imprisoned in material bodies and could be released only through the redeeming mediation of *gnosis*” (Stoyanov 2000: 87) According to this line of thought, there is nothing, in this life, more important than learning how to fight the realm of matter and recover the original lightness of light.

## **7.2. Berkeley’s denial of the existence of matter**

### **7.2.1. The problem**

George Berkeley’s denial of the existence of matter is not only the most important part of his philosophy, but also one of the greatest challenges he left to his commentators, whether critical or apologetic. Most of Berkeley scholars have considered his refutation of matter in terms of strength or weakness of his rational arguments against the material world, paying much attention to his abolition of the then received distinction between primary and secondary qualities, his refutation of the Lockean abstract ideas, his detailed accounts on the inconceivability, meaningless and superfluity of matter, and so forth. There are consequently a lot of excellent and comprehensive monographs and studies on Berkeley’s immaterialist philosophy, considered from this particular point of view,

revealing either the ingenuity and justification of Berkeley's arguments or the inconsistencies and weak points he showed in refuting matter (those by J. O. Urmson, A. C. Grayling, D. Berman, Ian Tipton, G. Pitcher, J. Dancy or G. J. Warnock being only the best known and most influential).

Nevertheless, it seems to me that, at the present stage of Berkeley studies, some *shift* from the strictly logical and analytical consideration of his argumentation against matter to a discussion of it in terms of religious studies, cultural history and history of ideas would be as necessary as it is fruitful. Such a shift in Berkeley's scholarly reception might happily bring about a supplementation of the current logic-analytical approaches with a better and more powerful historical *contextualization* of the Berkeleian immaterialist philosophy, and indeed offer us a deeper and maybe more complete understanding of it. My suggestion is that by placing Berkeley within a broader framework of religious traditions (a framework in which the Cathar doctrines on matter have a certain part to play) would result in the fact that Berkeley's immaterialism would *make more sense*.

The interesting thing here is that it is George Berkeley himself who, in a way, points to the necessity of such an interpretative shift in the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, § 96:

Matter being expelled out of Nature, drags with it so many sceptical and impious notions, such an incredible number of disputes and puzzling questions, which have been thorns in the sides of the divines, as well as philosophers, and made so much fruitless work for mankind; that *if the arguments we have produced against it, are not found equal to demonstration* (as to me they evidently seem) yet I am sure *all friends to knowledge, peace, and religion, have reasons to wish they were*. (Berkeley 1949, II) [emphasis added]

From such a passage at least two important ideas might be inferred. Firstly, it is obvious that there is something that Berkeley considers to be *superior* to the mere strength or soundness of the logical argument(ation): namely, the *utility* and *efficiency* of the philosophical ideas in terms of some broader existential benefits; that is, by quoting Berkeley's own words, in terms of their long-term contribution to the consolidation and advancement of "knowledge, peace, and religion".

Secondly, this fragment implies — it seems to me — that the non-existence of matter is not necessarily in Berkeley the logical conclusion, or outcome, of a lengthy



reasoning approach, but — perhaps on the contrary — a presupposition, an “intuition” that Berkeley had possibly had from the outset of his intellectual enterprise, prior to, and independent of, any logical, argumentative procedure. I suggest that the ultimate nature of this “intuition” is a *theological* or *religious* one, and by the means of his writings George Berkeley just tried to justify it logically, and offer it a respectable philosophical, even “scientific,” appearance.

As it clearly follows from the passage just quoted, Berkeley’s primary aim is to supply his philosophical teachings with an immediate character of social and ethical-practical efficacy. As it were, to him philosophy is not simply a matter of arguing, counter-arguing, reasoning or persuading people for its own sake, but it is, so to say, a matter of life (and death), of improving and enlarging the conditions of human living, and of “healing” others’ minds and souls; eventually, philosophy is to look for some *practical* horizon as its real place of manifestation. In other words, Berkeley essentially intended to consider his philosophy in terms of public and political (in the original sense of *polis*) relevance, rather than strictly scholarly or academic relevance (although he never neglected the scholarly significance and fate of his writings). But I do not want to insist anymore on this aspect of Berkeley’s work as it was already dealt with in some detail in some of the previous chapters.

### 7.2.2. Matter and Evil

Once Berkeley started seeing philosophy as having to be — in some way or other — *useful for life*, his intellectual approach acquired, apart from its specifically metaphysical character, a marked religious-practical character. And it is precisely at this point that he joins the Cathar (Dualistic, in fact) searching for the “origin of evil.” Or, one of the main objectives of this chapter is to show that a consideration of Berkeley’s refutation of matter *in view of the Cathar ideas* presented above would cast a new and seminal light on this most scandalous and provocative of his theses, and contribute substantially to our better understanding of it. My central argument for such a consideration is that, by his trying to locate the source of his neighbours’ alienation (in the shapes of atheism, scepticism, unbelief, etc.), Berkeley was in fact asking the same question as the Cathars did. The question is, in Tertullian’s phrase: *Unde malum et qua in re?* (“Whence came

Evil, and in what does it exist?"). Moreover, my argument is decisively supported by the fact that both Berkeley and Cathars gave the ancient question comparatively the same answer: *matter*. In both cases matter is regarded as *being related to the source of evil*. Of course, there might be found numerous elements distinguishing Berkeley's philosophy from the Cathar theology, but there are at least these common central ideas: matter is regarded as being — in some way or other — the source of evil, this fact being accompanied by specific theological anxieties and concerns, and by the arduous desire to keep away from the world of matter.

Almost needless to say, George Berkeley is not a Dualist thinker in the proper and full sense of the word, as he clearly and repeatedly says that "only minds and spirits" exist. Nevertheless, even if denied philosophically, there is a sense in which matter has a marked (and very interesting) *psychological existence* in Berkeley's philosophical thinking: it embarrasses, troubles and concerns him, and it always puzzles and obsesses his mind. Matter occupies an essential position in most of his writings, just as it is contained in the very name he gave his philosophy: *immaterialism*. It would be difficult to say about Berkeley, otherwise than metaphorically, that he is *a modern Cathar*. Nevertheless, there is something in his case echoing a set of Cathar attitudes: his underlying psychology, his radical refutation of matter and his overall attitudes to the material world, his intense anxiety about the intellectual and ethical dangers that the recognition of matter brings about, and — above all — his passionate advocacy of the spiritual side of human life. All these point to the existence in Berkeley's philosophy of a mentality that one always encounters when studying the Cathar phenomenon.

Although the "gentle Bishop" was in general an example of polite manners and mild temper, when coming to talk about the upholders of matter, he could not help using a rather "strong language", with adjectives and phrases which are reminiscent of the most passionate of the Christian apologists:

upon the same foundation [the doctrine of matter] have been raised all the impious schemes of *atheism* and irreligion. [...] How great a friend material substance hath been to *atheists* in all ages, were needless to relate. All their monstrous systems have so visible and necessary a dependence on it, that when this corner-stone is once removed, the whole fabric cannot choose but fall to the ground; insomuch that it is no longer worth while, to bestow a particular consideration on the absurdities of every wretched sect of *atheists*. (Berkeley 1949, II [*Principles...*], § 92)

A fragment like this, betraying so intense a concern and deep interest on philosopher's side, leads us to probably one of the most interesting and spectacular elements revealed by a comparison of Catharism and Berkeley's denial of the existence of matter: *their similar shift from depreciating matter to considering it non-existent*. Somehow paradoxically, matter, although responsible for so numerous destructive consequences, is in fact *non-existent*; matter, although so particularly dangerous for any human knowledge, serenity and virtue, is actually *nothing* — which means, exactly in the same way as in the Cathar case, that the *lack of value* comes to be perceived as a *lack of real existence*. And it is especially this shift that proves sufficiently the *religious* nature of Berkeley's "intuition" of the non-existence of matter: this paradoxical solution cannot be "explained" in logical terms at all, but only as an extreme result of a peculiar theological vision of the world, a vision whose inner articulations and ways of manifestation are very similar to those of the Cathar theology examined above. There is a fragment in *Alciphron* that bring forth, in a remarkably expressive manner, some of the key features of Berkeley's Cathar-like vision: religious pessimism, bitter awareness of the human imperfections and weaknesses, and a deep contempt to the earthly world. The fragment runs as follows: "To me it seems the man can see neither deep nor far who is not sensible of his own misery, sinfulness, and dependence; who doth not perceive that this present world is not designed or adapted to make rational souls happy." (Berkeley 1950: III, 178 [*Crito speaks*]) And there are, of course, numerous other similar fragments in Berkeley attesting to a certain theological sensibility very close to that of the Cathars.

Berkeley's impatience and ardent desire to offer his neighbours an immediate and efficient *solution* for their uneasiness and alienation make him be extremely hostile to all partisans of matter, no matter their epochs, schools or philosophical arguments and justifications. In his extreme view, even the slightest recognition of the existence of matter makes possible the triumph of materialism, which is more or less the same with atheism, which — to him — means the explicit encouragement of immorality, selfishness, public corruption, ruin of every human society. In short, to him, materialist philosophers attack the very foundations of the Christian faith:

Nay hath it [matter] not furnished the *atheists* and *infidels* of all ages, with the most plausible argument against a Creation? That a corporeal substance, which hath an absolute existence without the minds of spirits,

should be produced out of nothing by the mere will of a spirit, hath been looked upon as a thing so contrary to all reason, so impossible and absurd, that not only the most celebrated among the ancients, but even divers modern and Christian philosophers have thought matter coeternal with the Deity. Lay these things together, and then judge you whether materialism disposes men to believe the creation of things. (Berkeley 1949: II [*Three Dialogues...*], 256)

Yet, there is a significant difference between Berkeley and the Cathars in their seeing matter as the origin of evil. While Catharism considered matter a principle of evil as to man's *nature* (avoidable only through specific religious practices, prayers and ritual gestures), Berkeley saw the existence of matter as a source of evil in terms of man's *culture* (avoidable only through the theoretical denial of matter): namely, in religion and theology, philosophy, sciences (physics and even mathematics), everyday moral life, and so forth. This is probably one of the most important differences between Berkeley's "Catharism" and Cathars' ideas. In most of his writings, Berkeley deals not so much with, say, the way in which "human condition" is affected by its "materiality", that is, he pays comparatively little theoretical attention to the fact that, by its nature, human is essentially an "embodied soul", whereas he is very much concerned with the way in which the recognition of the existence of matter by philosophers, theologians, scientists and scholars in general affects *human intellectual products*, vitiates sciences, and deadly "contaminates" man's beliefs and wisdom.

In the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, he talks extensively about "the great advantages that arise from the belief of immaterialism, both in regard to religion and human learning." (*Ibid.*: II, 257). These theoretical advantages are numerous, impressive and, Berkeley thinks, easily and immediately recognisable. Berkeley traces them in various fields, but his fragment actually implies that, beyond any possible enumeration, the denial of the existence of matter necessarily brings benefits for any imaginable human enterprise. I will give only a few examples.

In the field of theology, the advantages brought about by the refusal of matter are among the greatest. As Berkeley says, the "being of a God", the "incorruptibility of the soul",

those great articles of religion, are they not proved with the clearest and most immediate evidence? When say the being of a *God*, I do not mean an obscure general cause of things, whereof we have no conception, but *God*, in the strict and proper sense of the word. A being whose

spirituality, omnipresence, providence, omniscience, infinite power and goodness, are as conspicuous as the existence of sensible things, of which... there is no more reason to doubt, that of our own being. (*Ibid.*: II, 257)

Also, in the sphere of physical sciences (“natural philosophy”) the refutation of matter would produce, however paradoxical this might appear to us, benefits very difficult to over-value. Once the existence of matter is denied, a lot of difficult, if not completely insoluble, problems, many scholarly disputes and conflicts would instantly disappear for ever. According to Berkeley, it is precisely the embracing of the notion of matter that leads natural philosophers into error:

what intricacies, what obscurities, what contradictions, hath the belief of matter led men into! To say nothing of the numberless disputes about its extent, continuity, homogeneity, gravity, divisibility, & c. do they not pretend to explain all things by bodies operating on bodies, according to the laws of motion? and yet, are they able to comprehend how any one body should move another? [...] Can they account by the laws of motion, for sounds, tastes, smells, or colours, or for the regular course of things? [...] But laying aside matter and corporeal causes, and admitting only the efficiency of an all-perfect mind, are not all the effects of Nature easy and intelligible? If the phenomena are nothing else but *ideas*; God is a *spirit*, but matter an unintelligent, unperceiving being. (*Ibid.*: II, 257)

It is worth noticing at this point that Berkeley can coherently advance an entire system of “philosophy of science” without supposing at all the existence of matter. In today’s Berkeley scholarship this is considered an important and quite original characteristic of his thought. As Urmson has pointed out, what makes his philosophy interesting is the fact that “that he claims that his ontology is perfectly compatible with both common sense and religious beliefs and that [...] he can give a satisfactory account of the nature and value of the sciences without invoking the hypothesis of matter.” (Urmson 1982: 33)

The same important advantages one encounters in ethics if the matter is expelled. The immediate presence and manifestation of God, without the useless interposition of matter, would be of greatest help in supporting people’s moral endeavours. As Berkeley says, “the apprehension of a distant Deity, naturally disposes men to negligence in their *moral* actions, which they would be more cautious of, in case they thought Him immediately present, and acting on their minds without the interposition of matter, or unthinking second causes.” (Berkeley 1949: II [*Three Dialogues...*], 257)

In metaphysics, the notion that matter does not exist, once generally accepted by scholars and philosophers, would have wonderful effects for the solving of numerous traditional philosophical problems, puzzles and disputes. As a result of the denial of the existence of matter, metaphysics would become much sounder, more commonsensical and reasonable:

what difficulties concerning entity in abstract, substantial forms, hylarchic principles, plastic natures, substance and accident, principle of individuation, possibility of matter's thinking, origin of ideas, the manner how two independent substances so widely different as *spirit* and *matter*, should mutually operate on each other? What difficulties, I say, and endless disquisitions concerning these and innumerable other the like points, do we escape by supposing only spirits and ideas? (*Ibid.*: II 257)

However strange it might appear, the recognition of matter has disastrous effects even in mathematics, and only thanks to its refutation, it would be possible to put an end to the numberless paradoxes, perplexities, and intellectual sufferings that matter has always caused to mathematicians: "Even the *mathematics* themselves, if we take away the absolute existence of extended things, become much more clear and easy; the most shocking paradoxes and intricate speculations in those sciences, depending on the infinite divisibility of finite extension, which depends on that supposition." (*Ibid.*: II 257)

Even the worst and most unimaginable mistakes, fallacies, and sins have had the belief in matter as their main cause. As a matter of fact, it would be hard to talk about false ideas, prejudices or other dangerous beliefs without immediately noticing the recognition of matter as their ultimate source. For example, the ultimate roots of idolatry are to be found in the fact that we take the visible things as being material, which is thus not only an error in theoretical terms, but also a serious religious offence:

on the same principle [doctrine of matter] doth *idolatry* likewise in all its various forms depend. Did men but consider that the sun, moon, and stars, and every other object of the senses, are only so many sensations in their minds, which have no other existence but barely being perceived, doubtless they would never fall down, and worship their own *ideas*; but rather address their homage to that Eternal Invisible Mind which produces and sustain all things. (Berkeley 1949, II [*Principles*])

It is easy to see that matter plays a central role in Berkeley's account of the nature (and the forms of manifestation) of evil in the sphere of human culture. From all these

fragments just quoted it becomes manifest that Berkeley comes, as it were, to “demonise” matter. And it is precisely this “demonization” of the material world that, once again, reminds us how close his ideas are to the doctrines of those Cathars who formerly thought that the Devil (“father of matter”) was the cause of all human unhappiness and imperfection.

### 7.2.3. A broader framework

The aim of these final speculative considerations is to place both Catharism and Berkeley’s denial of the existence of matter within some broader theoretical framework. For some of the possible questions an over-critical reader might ask now, once my comparative exercise is completed, are: How is it possible to undertake, legitimately, such a comparative approach as this one? How justified is the parallel drawn between these two phenomena, so remote in space and time, and how can it be sustained theoretically?

One possible, though somehow speculative, answer to such questions may be found in the following considerations. The legitimacy of a comparative approach of this nature comes from the fact that both Catharism and Berkeley’s “intuition” of the non-existence of matter might be regarded as deriving from the same unique source. Namely: from a fundamental *archetypal Dualistic pattern*, to which both of them belong, and which — it can be further speculated — seems to be recurrent in the religious and intellectual history of numerous other cultures. The existence of such an archetypal pattern has been observed and discussed — or at least presupposed — by numerous historians, religion scientists and theoreticians. Its roots are various: anthropological, mythical, social, empirical, etc., just as its manifestations are far from being limited to the field of religious life: they are manifest, too, in philosophy, literature, mentalities, visual arts.

Originally, there were a number of fundamental pairs of opposites (“left-right”, “up-down”, “day-night”, “life-death”, etc.) that, according to some authors (e.g. Cassirer), might to some extent have contributed an anthropological Dualistic element to the formation of some *Weltanschauung* or another, beginning with the most primitive mythical thought. As Ernst Cassirer said, the development of “the mythical feeling of space always starts from the opposition of *day* and *night*, *light* and *darkness*. The

dominant power which this antithesis exerts on the mythical consciousness can be followed down to the most highly developed religions.” (Cassirer 1955: II, 96) Thus, according to this line of thought, seeing and considering things in a Dualist manner have gradually come to stay at the roots of various “cultural behaviours”, known under various guises and names. A synthetic and precise account of how this archetypal Dualistic pattern is originally formed and how it uses different expressions is given by H. Fichtenau, who in fact continues Cassirer’s approach:

Whoever perceives the world as a maelstrom of incomprehensible phenomena will try to impose some order. The simplest mode of organisation is a ‘binary’ system that characterises things as either “on” or “off,” being or non-being, or in the dualistic terms common to the worldviews and religious concepts of the most diverse peoples. (Fichtenau 1998: 160-1)

Subsequently, based on the internalisation of such a fundamental anthropological and then mythical set of distinctions, more elaborated and diverse forms of Dualism were brought into being and developed. For example, in philosophy Dualism has played an essential role, even from its inception. Philosophical Dualistic tendencies can be traced as far back as the Presocratics, but it was in Plato’s thought, “with its dualities between the mortal body and the immortal soul, or the world perceived by the senses and the world of eternal ideas, comprehended by the mind.” (Stoyanov 2000: 2), that the philosophical dualism was to be given one of its most sophisticated and durable expressions. The Platonic dualism would stay at the heart of almost all the subsequent philosophical dualisms in Western thought. For the “Platonic type of soul-body duality” enjoyed an outstanding posterity. It came to influence

important Jewish and Christian traditions. A dualist spirit-matter opposition along with a rigorous asceticism was cultivated in the esoteric-initiatory trends of Orphism and Pythagoreanism.... The Orphic-Pythagorean teaching which explains the physical body as a tomb for the divine and immortal soul is shared in the Gnostic type of religiosity with its implicit focus on the rescue of the “divine spark” in man from the bodily prison... — a preoccupation shared by the medieval Bogomil and Cathar heresies. (*Ibid.*: 5)

As such, the detailed Gnostic accounts of the nature and origin of man occupied a crucial position, and played successfully the role of the source of inspiration for several subsequent Dualist religious (and even intellectual) movements<sup>4</sup>. From this standpoint,



the Cathar theology — which we dealt with briefly earlier on in this chapter — almost did nothing but take over, clarify and develop some of the main cosmological and anthropological ideas professed within the various branches of the ancient Gnosticism. An excellent summarisation of the Gnostic accounts of man's nature, fate and possibilities of salvation offers Milan Loos. According to him, in Gnosticism, man's soul is imprisoned in

this dungeon of the world, confined in the darkness of matter; but it originated in a very different place, in a timeless world, in the bright abode of another God of whom the earthly world and its rulers have no conception. The soul partakes of the very substance of this Unknown God, but in the material world it has lost the consciousness of its identity. [...] Only *gnosis* can awaken it, knowledge which come from above and is really only the reviving memory of the soul's origin. (Loos 1974: 21-2)

Besides its numerous occurrences in the field of religion, theology or (religious) philosophy, this archetypal Dualist pattern might also be found in various other areas, some of them remote enough from the religious. Indeed, there are several secularised forms through which it manifests and reveals itself: *Romantic nihilism*, to take only a modern and better known example, might be to some extent regarded as one of these forms. A close and special relationship between the Dualist outlooks and the idea of *nothingness* has been observed both in Catharism and in Berkeley's immaterialism. Dualism may presuppose the idea of nothingness as an extreme form of "existence" of one of its terms. As such, within the context of this particular relationship, we can see how some of the modern European nihilists expressed sometimes views echoing ideas of a peculiarly Dualist or Gnostic character, even if they considered themselves as being outside the religious sphere, if not simply atheists. Here is Giacomo Leopardi's dramatic confession: "I was terrified finding myself in the midst of nothingness, and myself nothing. I felt as if I were stifled believing and feeling that everything is nothing, solid nothingness." (Qtd in Schenk 1979: 53)

As a matter of fact, this *nihilism* is the distinctive mark of a broader modern sensibility, whether Romantic or post-Romantic, a sensibility characterising a large number of artistic, philosophical and intellectual modern movements. As Hans Georg Schenk has excellently showed, Schopenhauer's thought, for instance, might be regarded as one of the most significant philosophical embodiments of this sensibility. It is not difficult to see how human existence is often associated in Schopenhauer with the idea of

meaningless, absurd suffering and useless sacrifice, which is of course strongly reminiscent of the traditional Dualistic perception of the earthly world as deeply corrupted, valueless, and non-deserving to exist:

As with Leopardi and Senancour, so with Schopenhauer, the idea of man's utterly senseless existence produces gloom and despondency [...] From the very start the philosopher's mind is focused on man's torments and agonies, which... he depicts in all their manifold shapes. Enjoyment and happiness, on the other hand are sadly dismissed as a mirage, and thus the whole course of life seems to be oscillating between the two poles of suffering and *ennui*. ...the world appears as the worst of possible worlds... (Schenk 1979: 59)<sup>5</sup>

Finally, we might — needless to say — find numerous significant differences between the ancient Gnostics or medieval Cathars, on the one hand, and the modern nihilists and Schopenhauer, on the other. Nevertheless, despite all these differences, even in the most elaborated modern cases, it is often possible to discern some traces of that *primordial Dualist tendency to contest the established, commonly received state of things, in an attempt at transcending it*. For it is ultimately the same fundamental attitude of the isolated individual facing the hostile universe that appears either in the form of a need for spiritual, religious elevation (and escape from it) or, perhaps more sophisticatedly, in the form of a feeling of nothingness and universal vanity.

This lengthy divagation is not intended as a part of my main argument in this chapter for a possible Cathar reading of Berkeley's immaterialism. The only reason why I have advanced here these speculations was the need for pointing to a broader theoretical framework within which both Catharism and Berkeley's immaterialism might be safely placed, and a comparative approach to them makes more sense, and legitimises itself even for an over-critical reader.

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the “dualists sects” and “dualist religion” in the West, see Stoyanov’s book. (Stoyanov 2000: 287)

<sup>2</sup> To take only an indirect and modern example, the great success that Denis de Rougemont’s book *L’amour et l’Occident* has enjoyed over the years proves this sufficiently.

<sup>3</sup> Referring to Dualism in general S. Runciman makes relatively the same point: “Dualism, for all its claims, does not, any better than Orthodoxy, solve the problem of good and evil. The Orthodox might be unable to explain God the Omnipotent should have permitted such a thing as evil to be and to enter into the world of His creation. But the Dualists only answered the question by raising a new difficulty. If Satan created the world, how and why did God allow any good to be imprisoned in it? For the Dualists had to admit that Man possesses the consciousness of good; otherwise there could be no such thing as religion at all. To solve this problem they had to invent innumerable stories to explain the presence of good in the world.” (Runciman 1982: 175)

<sup>4</sup> As far as the influences of Gnosticism on Western literature are concerned, Harold Bloom, in a recent book, talks of Gnosticism as the “religion of literature” *par excellence*: “From Valentinus through the German Romantic poet Novalis, the French Romantic Nerval, and the English William Blake, Gnosticism has been indistinguishable from imaginative genius. I venture... the judgment that it is pragmatically *the religion of literature*.” (Bloom 2002: xviii)

<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is not only in literature or philosophy that this way of seeing things appears. There are also works which belong to the visual arts expressing it. From this point of view, Schenk has some interesting considerations on the way in which the idea of absurd and meaningless makes itself “visible” in some of Goya’s paintings. In some way, devil is, if not its proper creator, at least the powerful master of Goya’s world, echoing, if you wish, that Cathar association of the visible material world with the rule of demon and nothingness: “as in Schopenhauer’s case, Goya’s almost exclusive preoccupation with the dark side of the life helps to produce a diabolical picture of the world. It has been observed that while Hieronymus Bosch, the fifteenth-century Flemish artist, introduces men into his infernal world, Goya introduced the infernal into the world of man. In the end it is no longer human beings, however vile or insane, but gruesome monsters that haunt his ‘Disparates’ and, with a vengeance, his ‘Pinturas Negras.’ Their inexpressible horror, as Aldous Huxley has pointed out, is based on their ‘mindlessness, animality and spiritual darkness’.” (Schenk 1979: 63)

## Conclusions

What has been said is sufficient, I hope, for pointing to the possibility of a new way of looking at Berkeley's thought, one better articulated historically and more intelligible than what today's mainstream Berkeley scholarship offers. It has not been my intention in this thesis to "replace" the existing (dominantly analytic) manner of approaching Berkeley's philosophy with the manner I propose in this thesis. As I said in the introductory chapter, the analytic Berkeley scholars do an excellent job in their constantly relating Berkeleian arguments and ideas to important issues in our contemporary debates. And this linkage between the needs of the present and the resources that the past incessantly offers is a really important factor for the advancement of any form of human knowledge.

Instead, what I have tried to do here was to show that it is not only necessary, but also possible to *supplement* the existing analytically-minded scholarship with a certain sense of historical awareness, with an understanding of the remarkable intellectual richness and cultural complexity laying behind Berkeley's thinking, and with the notion of a much larger framework of cultural and religious-metaphysical traditions, a framework within which Berkeley's philosophy is placed in close connection with a number of kindred ways of thinking characterizing the European intellectual world. Berkeley's philosophy has been systematically dealt with in this thesis as the meeting point of a large number of currents of thought, manners of philosophizing, religious/theological movements, spiritual/soteriological techniques, traditional *topoi* and various cultural representations. Nevertheless, my objective here has not been to account for all these strictly from the point of view of an antiquarian, but to make a deeper sense of them by investigating the significance of their presence in Berkeley, and the role they

played in the constitution of Berkeley's thought. I have simply tried to see how Berkeley's thought appeared from *their* perspective.

For this purpose, in my attempt to discover *whence* Berkeley's philosophy comes, I have constantly endeavored, throughout this thesis, to "bracket" what I knew about Berkeley's importance for some of today's philosophical debates, and to focus mainly on the possible roots of his thought, without even asking whether a discussion of those roots is or is not "interesting" from the point of view of the contemporary philosophical discussions. I openly acknowledge that, say, showing how *Siris* was based on an alchemic mode of thinking might not contribute a great deal to solving what passes today as "genuinely philosophical problems". Nor does placing Berkeley's "Bermuda scheme" in the tradition of the search for the "earthly paradise" answer many of our current philosophical interrogations.

What I do nevertheless believe is that there are also other questions, and that my approach in the present dissertation offers a proper way of asking and, hopefully, answering them: What is Berkeley's relationship with the past? What role does the ancient and medieval heritage play in the constitution of his own philosophy? To what extent is he indebted to various traditional modes of thinking and to what extent is his philosophy "novel"? To what extent was he aware of the modeling influence of the past on his own way of philosophizing? Did he try to resist it? Etc. These are important questions because they are in fact specific instantiations of a set of other — ampler and more difficult — questions, of whose theoretical significance it is difficult to seriously doubt, and which my approach hints at, even if it leaves them eventually unanswered: How does a given philosophy articulate itself? To what extent is it possible to escape the dominating influence of the past when designing one's own philosophy? Considering this influence, why and when is a given philosophy considered "new"? What precisely renders it so? How is it that novelty appears against a certain intellectual background? Does philosophical novelty consist of proposing new solutions to old problems or, rather, of proposing — "inventing" — new problems? And, in general, how is novelty possible in the history of philosophy? Is there any *philosophia perennis*?

Yett — it might be asked — do all these questions have any philosophical significance whatsoever? My belief, a belief on which the entire design of this thesis has been built up, is that the answer is *yes*. Behind all these questions there is a fundamental and perennial need to understand what the past is, and what are the favorite ways through which the past is shaping our present lives. In other words, all these questions, and any other similar ones, are but instantiations of one and the same fundamental interrogation: *Whence we came?*

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## APPENDIX:

### Waiting for the *Eschaton*: Berkeley's "Bermuda Scheme" between Earthly Paradise and Educational Utopia<sup>1</sup>

— Article forthcoming in *Utopian Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 36-50 —

The objective of this article is a discussion of George Berkeley (1685-1753)'s project to build a theology college in the Islands of Bermuda (the so-called "Bermuda Scheme") in terms of utopian projections and symbolic geography, and in the light of a set of traditions and patterns of thought governing the Western (Christian) representations of the "happy islands", "earthly paradise", "*eschaton*", and so forth. There are at least three points I will be trying to make in this writing:

Firstly, the way in which Berkeley considers the Islands of Bermuda (in his private letters, as well as in his *Proposal*) is very similar to that in which the "earthly paradise" has been traditionally described and represented within the medieval *mirabilia*, medieval and Renaissance travel literature, and various other "amazing" accounts on the *Happy Islands*.

Secondly, Berkeley's project, far from being an isolated negligible attempt, could be placed in the long tradition of the "educational" utopias. From such a standpoint, Berkeley's Bermuda seems to be very close to that *Bildungsprovinz* described in Herman Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*: an ideal scholarly society, located in some privileged space, clearly *separated* from the corrupted and corrupting outside world, and designed to embody the noblest values and virtues of the humankind.

Finally, following Mircea Eliade's and especially Harry M. Bracken's and David Berman's studies, I will be showing that Berkeley's American Project is hardly understandable without taking seriously into account its *Messianism* — that is, in Berkeley's mind, the propagation of Gospel and the conversion of the Indians had a spiritual value, and were clear signs of the approaching Second Coming.

#### I.

It was in 1725 that George Berkeley published a paper entitled, not particularly concisely, "A Proposal for the better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations, and for Converting the Savage Americans, to Christianity, By a College to be erected in the *Summer Islands*, otherwise called *The Isles of Bermuda*" (VII 343-60). This title is in fact describing almost the whole project. Prior to that, the philosopher, since about March

1722, had written several private letters to friends and acquaintances on the same topic, each of them containing enthusiastic descriptions of the Bermuda islands. The letter to Lord Percival, dated March 4<sup>th</sup> 1722 (VIII 127-9), is of special interest, as in it Berkeley announces for the first time his intention to establish a “theology and fine arts college” in those remote islands, and, more than that, to spend there all the rest of his life (“It is now about ten months since I have determined with myself to spend the residue of my days in the Island of Bermuda, where I trust in Providence I may be the mean instrument of doing good to mankind [VIII 127])<sup>2</sup>. Finally, there are of course those famous stanzas by Berkeley dedicated to the project, confessing his lack of satisfaction, if not disappointment, with the Old World, and announcing that “Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way” (VII 373).

Despite the fact that he had never travelled to Bermuda (and, ironically, he would never do so), Berkeley offered in both his letter to Percival and his *Proposal* an amazingly detailed description of the islands, their natural landscapes, beauties, resources, richness, prosperity, and their inhabitants (emphasising, for example, the purity and innocence of their manners). Since the description itself is an excellent piece of writing and plays a significant role in my demonstration, I will reproduce a few excerpts from it:

The climate is by far the healthiest and most serene, and consequently the most fit for study. [...] There is the greatest abundance of all the necessary provisions for life, which is much to be considered in a place for education. [...] It is the securest spot in the universe, being environed round with rocks all but one narrow entrance, guarded by seven forts, which render it inaccessible not only to pirates but to the united force of France and Spain. [...] The inhabitants have the greatest simplicity of manners, more innocence, honesty, and good nature, than any of our other planters, who are many of them descended from whores, vagabonds, and transported criminals, none of which ever settled in Bermudas. (VIII 128)



On the other hand, although the *Proposal* is written some years after this letter, it still retains the same enthusiasm, strong determination, and idealization as does his letter to Percival:

no Part of the World enjoys a purer Air, or a more temperate Climate, the great Ocean which environs them, at once moderating the Heat of the South Winds, and the Severity of the North-West. [...] the Air of Bermuda is perpetually fanned and kept cool by Sea-breezes, which render the Weather the most healthy and delightful that could be wished, being ... of one equal Tenour almost throughout the whole Year, like the latter End of a fine May. (VII 351)

A crucial part of the description is that in which the numberless natural “beauties of Bermuda” are listed. The islands seem unusually full of wonders and blessings, abundantly supplied with natural resources as useful as beautiful. As it were, the fact that the island seemed to be a “chosen” place for unusual spiritual accomplishments was beyond any reasonable doubt. The only thing one can do is just to admire unreservedly what one “encounters” there:

the summers refreshed with constant cool breezes, the winters as mild as our May, the sky as light and blue as a sapphire, the ever green pastures, the earth eternally crowned with fruits and flowers. The woods of cedars, palmettos, myrtles, oranges & c., always fresh and blooming. The beautiful situations and prospects of hills, vales, promontories, rocks, lakes and sinuses of the sea. The great variety, plenty, and perfection of fish, fowl, vegetables of all kinds, and (which is in no other of our Western Islands) the most excellent butter, beef, veal, pork, and mutton. But above all, that uninterrupted health and alacrity of spirit, which is the result of the finest weather and gentlest climate in the world. (VIII 128)

Now, one of the first ideas that occurs when reading such a description is that the way in which Berkeley describes the Islands of Bermuda is strikingly similar to that in which the “earthly paradise” has traditionally been described and represented within the medieval *mirabilia*, within the medieval, Renaissance and early modern travel literature, and

various other “amazing” accounts on “Happy Islands”. One of the most interesting things about his islands is that no actual documentation lies behind his detailed description of them, but only the primordial phantasm, so to speak, of a wonderful, innocent and uncorrupted world. In a way, Berkeley did not need to go and see the islands to be able to describe them: he apparently found them, with all their wonderful paradisiacal appearance, in the repertoire of his own inner intellectual world. On writing these texts, Berkeley seemed to be driven by a strong tendency towards “idealization”, or towards the “sacralization” of something otherwise quite profane. He ends up attributing to a group of Atlantic islands almost all the ennobling characteristics of the “earthly paradise”, as it had traditionally been imagined since the Greco-Roman antiquity<sup>3</sup>.

First of all, it is the very *notion of island* that confers on the whole story a special character<sup>4</sup>. An island is not a place like any other; an island is a clearly *privileged* space, a space that, thanks to its isolation, remoteness and difficult accessibility, to its mysteriousness and autonomy, has acquired a particular cultural-symbolical dignity from the very outset of human culture<sup>5</sup>. The sophisticated dialectic of water and land, the agonic and difficult relationship between these two primordial elements (*stoicheia*) gave birth eventually to an intermediary entity: *the island*. As Claude Kappler put it, “[i]f there are any places that have a special appeal for imagination it is islands. [...] an island is by its nature a place where marvels exist for their own sake outside the laws that generally prevail.... Ever since Greek antiquity, islands have been favorite places for the most astounding human and divine adventures” (Qtd. in Delumeau 98).<sup>6</sup> This gives islands an impressive metaphorical value: like mountains, for example, they are often involved in several forms of the intellectual discourse: literary, poetical, theological, mythological, utopian, political, etc. An island could be made to signify, from case to case: hope, survival, salvation, “firm ground”, freedom, independence, regeneration, *una vita nuova*, certitude, and so on and so forth. No wonder then that the earthly paradise itself has often come to be located somewhere on an island: Dante “gave the earthly paradise the characteristics of an island, and in many medieval travel stories, especially Mandeville’s, the kingdom of Prester John is located on an island. According to Mandeville, mysterious

India is ‘divided into isles on account of the great rivers which flow out of Paradise’” (Delumeau 98).

The usual name under which the “earthly paradise” islands have been traditionally known is that of “Happy Island(s)”. Why this particular name? Medieval scholars had a particular way of explaining it. Pierre d’Ailly, for example, says that “[t]he name ‘Happy Isles’ means that these islands contain all good things. It is the fruitfulness of the soil that makes people believe that paradise was located in these islands...” (Qtd. in Delumeau 99). In fact, as Jean Delumeau has showed, this explanation was borrowed from Isidore of Seville, and it was widely spread throughout Middle Ages. In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore states that: “The name ‘Happy Isles’ means that they produce all sorts of good things; that they enjoy a quasi-blessedness and have the advantage of happy abundance. By their very nature they give birth to precious trees and fruits. The slopes of the hills are naturally covered with vines. Instead of grass the soil for the most part yields crops and vegetables” (Qtd. in Delumeau 99).

This very repetition, in several cases, of the same explanation, emphasizing the same factors (abundance of goods, ideal climate, wonderful landscapes, etc.) strengthens the tradition, and confirms that the “Happy Island” was not an isolated and marginal *topos* at all, but a deeply rooted and long lasting one:

the Happy Islands stand in a Greco-Roman poetic tradition that is based on passages in Homer, Hesiod, and Plutarch. According to this tradition, beyond the towering Atlas there lie islands with enchanted gardens, a constant temperate climate, and fragrant breezes, where human beings have no need to work. In the Christian era Isidore of Seville gave this belief a new popularity by assigning it a place in his geography, which then exerted a lasting influence on Western culture. (Delumeau 99)

What is interesting at this stage is that Berkeley himself, in another private letter, openly uses the term: he came to talk about “that happy Island” (VIII 156) with explicit reference to his Bermuda project. He was a lecturer in Greek and Latin and had an impressive classical training, so that it is reasonable to suppose that he knew something about this tradition of *insula pomorum que fortunata vocatur* (the island of apples that is called the

happy island), as Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1154) describes it in his *Vita Merlini*, and about the various ways in which the “Happy Islands” had been searched for, described, and eulogized in the European world.

Based on the (imaginary) account that Berkeley gives of the Island(s) of Bermuda, and on the similar accounts by ancient, medieval, early modern authors, it can be suggested that Berkeley’s representation of the location and settings of his future theology and arts college was marked by some nostalgia for an earthly paradise. It was probably the religious substance of this feeling that gave him the strength and determination to pursue his project for so many years, and overcome all the criticisms it encountered from the more practical politicians and “technicians” of the day. And it may have been this “nostalgia” for the “earthly paradise” that made him be so wonderfully enthusiastic<sup>7</sup> and, as we shall see below, unrealistic about the real situation of, and problems with, those islands. The project eventually failed, Berkeley being much laughed at, and even considered mad, by some London wits of that time<sup>8</sup>.

Finally, Berkeley’s generous description of the Bermudas, with all their countless wonders, amazing resources, and paradisiacal landscapes, may well be placed in the tradition of those “detailed maps from the end of the Middle Ages [which] still teach, on the authority of Isidore of Seville, that there exist in the West paradisaic islands ‘that abound in all good things’. These islands combine most of the elements that make for an earthly paradise: pleasant warmth, perpetual spring, delicious and fragrant fruits” (Delumeau 100-02). Certainly, it is not a very common thing for a philosopher, the less so for a promoter of the “new philosophy”, to deal with such “un-serious” and speculative things as the “earthly paradise”. But this is maybe what makes Berkeley so interesting: his being a truly uncommon philosopher.

## 2.

The “nostalgia for an earthly paradise” revealed by Berkeley’s Bermuda project is only one of the facets of Berkeley’s “Bermuda Scheme”. The “happy island” is only the spatial framework within which something (important) is going to take place, the item of symbolic geography based on which his project is going to be put into practice.

Therefore, there must be another element of this scheme we have to deal with; it is, namely, its utopian dimension. Berkeley's project, far from being an isolated attempt, might be placed in the long tradition of educational utopias.

As Northrop Frye put it, any utopia is ultimately a discourse about education. If not in their explicit purposes and statements, utopian authors presuppose, at least implicitly, a consideration of education as a decisive factor in transforming humans. In Frye's view, this has a certain Platonic component, whether or not the utopian writers are Platonists themselves:

And though not all utopia-writers are Platonists, nearly all of them make their utopias depend on education for their permanent establishment. It seems that the literary convention of an ideal state is really a by-product of a systematic view of education. That is, education, considered as a unified view of reality, grasps society by its intelligible rather than its actual form, and the utopia is a projection of the ability to see society, not as an aggregate of buildings and bodies, but as a structure of arts and sciences.  
(Frye 37-8)

Of course, in a rigorous sense, Berkeley's is only an incomplete, partial utopia. So to speak, it is not a hard, but a soft utopia.<sup>9</sup> More than the ideal state envisaged in Plato's *Republic*, Berkeley's Bermuda resembles to some extent, for example, that *Bildungsprovinz* described in Herman Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*: an ideal scholarly society, dedicated to cultivating superior arts and sciences, located in some privileged space, clearly separated from the corrupted and corrupting outside world, and designed to embody, preserve and convey the noblest values and virtues of the humankind. The island becomes in such a case a spatial symbol of salvation and regeneration through learning, science and fine arts.

The notion of (utopian) separation from the outside (profane) world<sup>10</sup>, of self-protection and inaccessibility is clearly expressed several times by Berkeley: "The Group of Isles [...] walled round with Rocks, which render them inaccessible to Pirates or Enemies; there being put two narrow Entrances, both well guarded by Forts. It would therefore be impossible to find any where, a more secure Retreat for Students" (VII 352).

Needless to say, Berkeley's emphasis on this aspect of his project is perfectly justified: remoteness, difficulty of access, and isolation are necessary not only for keeping innocent students safe from the corrupting profane world, or for preventing it from intervening in the normal course of the academic/utopian affairs, but also for conferring a high prestige and esteem on this scholarly community. For the strength of such an ideal scholarly community does not consist only in the intrinsic nature, in the volume and quality of its learning or in its scientific accomplishments, but also, maybe more importantly, in its publicly and socially recognized image.

Once all the specific requirements are met, Berkeley's soft utopia is ready to make its debut:

Among a People [the inhabitants of Bermuda] of this Character, and in a Situation thus circumstantiated, it would seem that a *Seminary of Religion* and Learning might very fitly be placed. The Correspondence with other Parts of *America*, the Goodness of the Air, the Plenty and Security of the Place, the Frugality and Innocence of the Inhabitants, all conspiring to favour such a Design. Thus much at least is evident, that young Students would be there less liable to be corrupted in their Morals; and the governing Part would be easier, and better contented with a small Stipend, and a retired academical Life, in a Corner from whence Avarice and Luxury are excluded." (Berkeley VII 353)

As it appears, life, of course, private life included, in such an ideal community is dominated by a certain form of artificiality: as it were, life is not allowed to take its natural course, but it is very carefully and in detail regulated, ordered, surveyed, engineered, kept far away from any possible vices and temptations, in short, life is thoroughly rationalized. As has been said, "Utopias are necessary for many reasons. One reason is that there is always a need to accommodate the excess of private desires to the public good, politics to ethics, moderation to freedom" (Mazzotta 60). This process is an essential characteristic of any utopian organization, starting with its very outset: recruitment of its members. As has been said about the recruitment of new members in Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*, "an exchange between Castalian institutions and their

surroundings persists: since all Castalians are celibate men and since they do not have any alternative form of perpetuating their ascetic community (immortality, regeneration, cloning, etc.), lay children are recruited on the basis of their intellectual and artistic performance by thoroughly combing the schools of the real world” (Antohi xi). Similarly, Berkeley’s ideal scholarly society regularly needs new members. Its main intention is to produce worthy priests and missionaries who are to be involved in the propagation of Gospel and conversion of Indians; consequently, there is a need for an established way of replacing them and permanently renewing the utopian community.

It is at this point that Berkeley’s system differs significantly from that envisaged by Hesse. For, among the toughest procedures in Bermuda are those related to the recruitment of future members of the scholarly community. Basically, the “young *Americans* necessary for this Purpose, may in the beginning be procured, either by peaceable Methods from those savage Nations, which border on our Colonies, and are in Friendship with us, or by taking captive the Children of our Enemies” (VII 347). This controversial aspect of Berkeley’s Bermuda scheme has long been discussed among Berkeley scholars. David Berman regards this violent solution as chilling and, despite his constant sympathetic consideration of Berkeley, he cannot help being very sarcastic at this point: “The Indian children are to be kidnapped. Why? No doubt, for their spiritual advantage” (132-3).

Apart from that, there are clear and detailed regulations with regard to the schooling itself. As in other utopias, such as Plato’s *Republic*, there are rationalized and detailed procedures regarding access to the utopian community, starting age, precise subject matters to be taught, and so forth:

It is proposed to admit into the aforesaid College only such Savages as are under ten Years of Age, before evil Habits have taken a deep root; and yet not so early as to prevent retaining their Mother Language, which should be preserved by Intercourse among themselves. It is further proposed, to ground these young *Americans* thoroughly in Religion and Morality, and to give them a good Tincture of other Learning; particularly of Eloquence,

History and practical Mathematics; to which it may not be improper to add some skill in Physic. (VII 347-8)

This is the only reference Berkeley makes to the curriculum to be used in his college. Berkeley's own philosophy does not play any role in shaping his utopian project. It is as if, when designing it, he ceased being the immaterialist philosopher, and just followed the utopian way of thinking. The details he provides in his *Proposal* are derived not from his philosophical opinions, but from the inner logic of the utopianism.

Insofar as it is possible to talk about a "perennial utopian theme", as Frank Manuel has put it (Manuel 70), Berkeley's Bermuda project can be better understood if regarded as belonging to that tradition of thinking within which this utopian theme has been approached, developed, and made famous. All these detailed and unpleasant provisions, regulations and tough measures Berkeley envisaged are, as it were, born out of an ardent genuine desire to see his neighbours happier, less distressed and more virtuous, just as in any other utopian project. Besides, Berkeley lived in an age that had not witnessed any real attempts at putting utopian projects into practice.

If a "state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs" (Mannheim 192), then Berkeley's state of mind when conceiving of and proposing his Bermuda project was certainly utopian. The huge and unbridgeable gap or "incongruity", in Mannheim's terminology, between the real (geographical, natural and social) situation of the islands and their ideal situation in Berkeley's mind, i. e., the way in which he (mis)represented them, is revealed by both some of the contemporary opponents to his scheme and, maybe more importantly, by several accounts of the real Bermudas from the first colonists there, dated some decades before Berkeley's scheme and which are still extant.

Arthur Aston Luce, who thoroughly studied the whole affair, found that, when the project came to be discussed in the British Parliament, opposition to the project was not all the time malevolent or unjustified. There were some realistic people (enlightened opposition) who criticized Berkeley's project on the basis of their own knowledge of the real situation of the Islands. Among them, William Byrd of Virginia, for example, "who with local knowledge opposed the project, not as undesirable, but as impracticable",



brought, it is true, in an ironical form, pertinent and solid arguments against Berkeley's project:

Byrd saw the Dean [Berkeley] as 'a Don Quixote in zeal', and his pious design as a 'visionary scheme'. There is no bread in Bermuda; there is nothing fit for the sustenance of man but onions and cabbages; its inhabitants are healthy, because, forsooth, they have so little to eat; the air is pure because swept by storms and hurricanes. Such criticisms look captious; but Byrd is on sure ground when he examines the proposal to educate Indians at the college. There are no Indians in Bermuda, 'nor within two hundred leagues of it upon the continent, and it will need the gift of miracles to persuade them to leave their country and venture themselves upon the great ocean, on the temptation of being converted'. The Dean must take the French way and dragoon them into Christianity. He must take half a dozen regiments, and 'make a descent upon the coast of Florida, and take as many prisoners as he can.' Behind the sarcasm, not altogether unfriendly, is the assurance of the man with local knowledge (Luce 137).

On the other hand, there are accounts from the first colonists in Bermuda, such as those published as *The Rich Papers. Letters from Bermuda 1615-1646. Eyewitness Accounts Sent by the Early Colonists to Sir Nathaniel Rich*, describing both the natural circumstances under which the islands were then planted and administrated, but also the numerous problems, such as serious social troubles caused by the drunkenness and immorality of the inhabitants. The sharp contrast between the poor state of reality in Bermuda and Berkeley's too enthusiastic state of mind is marked at times by such chilling fragments as this one: "If the Adventurers [the company then administrating the islands] send noe clothes to this poore people before this time 12 months, many of them wilbe naked if not dead" (Ives 1984: 14). Undoubtedly, some of the problems might have been solved by Berkeley's time, but it is not reasonable to believe that the very unfriendly climate, for example, had changed very much in the meantime.

These accounts depict a small world, with its fortunes and misfortunes, with its happy and unhappy events, all of them bearing apparently no resemblance to any earthly paradise. Life in Bermuda was taking its course in a more or less bearable manner, but sometimes there were events so horrific that seemed to seriously jeopardize the very minimal conditions of living there. For example, one such event was a tremendous invasion of rats:

Rattes have been and are a great judgement of God upon us. All the Ilands have been in a manner like so many Cunny [coney, rabbit] warrens, which did put the people much out of heart. It is incredible how they did swimme from Iland to Iland, and suddainly like an armie of men did invade the Ilands from one end to an other, devouring the frutes of the earth in strange manner. (Ives 14)

Then, far from being “the best air in the world”, as Berkeley said in a private letter (Berkeley VIII 156), Bermuda’s air was often violently agitated by “terrible winds”, causing much trouble to the Bermudans:

Mr Lewis [a settler], one friday last, beeing the 6<sup>th</sup> of this present, hath taken a greate hurt by a fall, which hath bruised him much, and his [he is] att this instant very weake, the force of the wind beeing soe terrible. Att the same tyme the like was never seen. Mr Lewis, goeing to the governors, the wind beeing so stronge that it bente hime to the ground. And the same day there were many of our howses blowne downe. We have hadd a very unseasonable summer and winter that it hath hinred [hindered] much labour, which otherwise might hadd been performed. (Ives 85)

As for the morals of the inhabitants, highly praised by Berkeley, they were not, at the time of writing of these accounts, exemplary. For example, some of the Bermudans seem to have been seriously fond of drinking. A Bermuda priest wrote to Sir Nathaniel Rich:

Good sir, for God sake do what you can to send hither godly preachers, before sinne hath got the upper hand. It is lamentable to see how sinne aboundeth every day more and more as the people do increase. I am not able to expresse the abhominable drunkenness, loathsome spuing [spewing,

vomiting] swearing, swaggering and quarrelling, while the ship is in harbour with any wine or strong waters in her.” (Ives 161-2)

There is a sense in which Berkeley's Bermuda project has a deep and interesting significance as far as the central claims of his philosophy are concerned. For it can reasonably be said that in a certain way such a utopian and un-earthly mode of thinking as that of the Bermuda project is consistent with his immaterialist philosophy. In other words, there is some deeper continuity of thought connecting his utopian propensity to his main philosophical message. A utopia would be an idealism “applied” to the social order, some sort of practical idealism. Just as Berkeley's natural world lacks material substantiality, so his Bermuda project lacks those basic features that generally characterize “realistic” projects. His being a “dreamer” in social affairs could be quite consistent with his being an immaterialist in philosophical matters, and his utopian “unrealistic” proposals could be regarded as some social or civic reflection of his claims that matter does not exist, and only spirits and minds exist. It is basically the same dissatisfaction with the current states of both natural and social affairs, and the same tendency toward replacing the existent state of things with an ideal one, that is manifest in both cases. Fraser even uses the term “social idealism” with reference to Berkeley's project: “It [*The Proposal*] is the lamentation of an ardent social idealist over the corrupt civilization of Britain and the Old World” (Fraser IV 342). Berkeley's Bermuda project reveals a dominant tendency toward an idealization of real people, real states and situations, a propensity toward generosity, benevolence and even self-sacrifice. It was probably something of this sort of relationship between Berkeley's philosophical credo and the character of his own life that his friend Jonathan Swift meant when saying that Berkeley was “an absolute philosopher with regard to money, titles, and power” (Qtd. in Luce 1949 100). There are many other records witnessing to his unusual generosity, kindness, philanthropy, good nature, benevolence, and so forth in his biography. For example, one of the most important modern Berkeley scholars, Arthur Aston Luce, concludes his *Life of George Berkeley* in this vein: “He was clearly something of a saint” (Luce 225).

### 3.

Berkeley's college was not an end in itself, but simply a means. Its ultimate mission was to produce worthy priests and theologians, missionaries able to persuade the savage Indians to accept Christianity, which mission had at that time some special connotations. This is why I now turn to a consideration of Berkeley's *Proposal* within the context of the cultural and religious (apocalyptic, millennialist and eschatological) ideas that lay behind the early transoceanic voyages of discovery (and then of colonization) of America. As both Mircea Eliade and especially Harry M. Bracken and David Berman have shown, Berkeley's American Project is hardly understandable without taking seriously into account its messianism<sup>11</sup>. Bracken suggests that Berkeley agreed with the then popular analogy between the Lost Tribes of the Israel, whose conversion would have had a special value from a Paulinic point of view, and the American Indians. Hence Berkeley's eagerness to convert those Indians in an attempt to ready the Second Coming. And it is precisely this messianic feature of Berkeley's project that is much indebted to the religious and theological background against which the first transatlantic voyages occurred.

There is some agreement among historians and religious scientists that a crucial factor in realizing the new geographic discoveries was, as Mircea Eliade has put it, "the nostalgia for the earthly paradise that the ancestors of the American nations had crossed the Atlantic to find" (Eliade 261). According to such a line of thought, the deeper causes and motivations of the transatlantic voyages of the early discoverers and colonists are to be found in an atmosphere characterizing the European world towards the end of the Middle Ages: that is, an atmosphere marked by eschatological expectations, millennialist dreams, and by need for a radical moral transformation and regeneration. And it was within "this messianic and apocalyptic atmosphere that the transoceanic expeditions and the geographic discoveries that radically shook and transformed Western Europe took place. Throughout Europe people believed in an imminent regeneration of the world" (Eliade 262). Jean Delumeau is one of the historians supporting this line of thought:

Scholars have long pointed out how the search for paradisaic islands was an important stimulus to voyages of discovery from the fourteenth to the

seventeenth centuries. Nostalgia for the garden of Eden; the conviction of Christopher Columbus and missionaries that the end time was at hand; the will to bring religion to new lands; and the desire to find gold, precious stones, and other rare commodities: all these combined to spur travelers, religious, sailors, and conquerors on to new horizons. Their culture and the dreams it brought with it led them, at least in the beginning, to see in the strange lands opening up before them the characteristics of those blessed countries that had haunted the Western imagination since antiquity. (Delumeau 109-10)

An easy way of exemplifying such an interpretation would be to try to find out what the discoverers and first colonists themselves thought about what they were then seeing, experiencing, doing, etc.

We can thus see how, in a letter sent by Amerigo Vespucci to Lorenzo de Medici, sometime between 1499-1502, the famous navigator talks about

the friendly land, covered with countless very tall trees that do not lose their leaves and emit sweet and fragrant odors and are loaded with tasty fruits that promote the body's health; the fields of thick grass that are filled with flowers which have a wonderfully delightful perfume; the great throng of birds of various species, whose feathers, colors, and songs defy description. [...] For myself, I thought I was near the earthly paradise.” (Qtd. in Delumeau 110)

Christopher Columbus openly considered his transoceanic enterprise in terms of Sacred History, and saw his “mission” as definitely belonging to a divine plan. He “did not doubt that he had come near the Earthly Paradise” and consequently, however strange this might appear today, he considered his adventurous navigation in theological and mystical rather than secular terms:

He believed that the fresh water currents he encountered in the Gulf of Paria originated in the four rivers of the Garden of Eden. [...] The New World represented more than a new continent open to the propagation of the Gospel. The very fact of its discovery had an eschatological

implication. [...] Columbus was persuaded that the prophecy concerning the diffusion of the Gospel throughout the whole world had to be realized before the end of the world, which was not far off. In his *Book of Prophecies*, Columbus affirmed that this event, namely, the end of the world, would be preceded by the conquest of the new continent, the conversion of the heathen, and the destruction of the Antichrist. (Eliade 262)

Such a state of mind not only persisted after the establishment of the colonies, but it also increased in intensity, developed and spread widely throughout America<sup>12</sup>. The first colonists' dreams and phantasms were so intense that after crossing the ocean this experience actually confirmed all their eschatological expectations and millenarist ideas: "the most popular religious doctrine in the Colonies was that America had been chosen among all the nations of the earth as the place of the Second Coming of Christ, and the millennium, though essentially of a spiritual nature, would be accompanied by a paradisiacal transformation of the earth, as an outer sign of an inner perfection" (Eliade 264). Thus, the awareness of their being "chosen", the sense of their blessing, election and mission, and the corresponding responsibilities, made them feel in some way associates or partners of God, trustful implementers of His plans. Theirs were not simply human enterprises, their doings were not facts of social history, but were apocalyptic and divine affairs:

The first English colonists in America considered themselves chosen by Providence to establish a 'City on a Mountain' that would serve as an example of the true Reformation for all Europe. They had followed the path of the sun toward the Far West, continuing and prolonging in a prodigious fashion the traditional passing of religion and culture from East to West. [...] The first pioneers did not doubt that the final drama of moral regeneration and universal salvation would begin with them, since they were the first to follow the sun in its course toward the paradisiacal gardens of the West. (Eliade 264)

## 4.

Generally speaking, this was the religious context within which Berkeley's *Proposal* emerged. Since one of the main aims of his projected college was to supply the colonies with virtuous, well-prepared priests and missionaries,<sup>13</sup> some commentators, based also on the last stanza of that famous poem that Berkeley dedicated to America, concluded that his ultimate motivation in initiating and pursuing the project was in fact one of an eschatological and millennialist nature. The poem, *America or the Muse's Refuge. A Prophecy*, was disseminated to get more support for his scheme. At the beginning it was circulated anonymously, but eventually Berkeley published it in the *Miscellany* (1752) under his own name. David Berman discusses "the eschatological aspect of Berkeley's poem and project" (Berman 116), and one of his conclusions is that it is "evident that his poem is apocalyptic and eschatological" (118).

The last stanza received special attention from commentators:

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way,

The four first Acts already past.

A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day,

The world's great Effort is the last. (Berkeley VII 370)

In interpreting the symbolism of the five acts Bracken refers to the Old Testament, saying, "I take the symbolism of the final stanza, the four plus one Acts, to be from *Daniel*, chapter 2, where the four kingdoms, usually taken to be Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, shall be succeeded by a fifth: 'And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed...' (2: 44)" (Bracken 71). According to Bracken, "the key to this extraordinary proposal is that Berkeley accepts the [then] popular view that the American Indians are the Lost Tribes of Israel. As Jews, their conversion is especially dear to God and each conversion promises, as Paul tells us in *Romans xi*, to bring closer the Second Coming" (73). Following Bracken's hypothesis, by converting the Indians, the graduates from Berkeley's college would have converted the Lost Tribes of the Israel, which, according to St. Paul, was a clear sign of the much expected, triumphal end of the world: the Apocalypsis. Thus, in Berkeley's mind the propagation of Gospel in America and the conversion of the Indians living there would

have been at the same time preparations for, and signs of, the approaching Second Coming. Hence the need to build a missionary college in Bermuda: "Given what we know about Berkeley, we must find a reason not only for his committing himself so completely to his American dream, but especially for the savagery he was prepared to inflict on Indian children" (Bracken 80).

Bracken's interpretation has the merit of underlining the complexity of the Bermuda project, and of suggesting some ways of explaining several of the confused aspects of Berkeley's enterprise<sup>14</sup>. More than that, it is consistent with the complex religious context presented above. Bracken's reconstruction of Berkeley's way of thinking might be applied to the way in which many of his contemporaries were thinking. For, "[i]n the eyes of the English ...the colonization of America merely prolonged and perfected a Sacred History begun at the outset of the Reformation. Indeed, the push of the pioneers toward the West continued the triumphal march of Wisdom and the True Religion from East to West. For some time already, Protestant theologians had been inclined to identify the West with spiritual and moral progress" (Eliade 263).

## 5.

At least two fundamental Christian ideas were inextricably interwoven in Berkeley's Bermuda Project: a "nostalgia for an earthly paradise" and the "the expectation of a kingdom of happiness that is to be established on our earth and to last for a millennium" (Delumeau 1). The "happy island", despite its imaginary, utopian nature, or more precisely because of that, has been the chosen space for such an enterprise, its privileged environment. Its isolation from the outside world, its purity (as it is surrounded by the water of the endless ocean), its difficult accessibility, exoticism, paradisiacal appearance, beauties, innocence of its inhabitants, etc. all these are attributes enabling us to consider that island as some un-earthly or un-natural place, a place where the marvels or such supernatural events as the Second Coming and Millennium are at any time possible.

Then, the millennialist interpretation of Berkeley's Bermuda scheme adds to his utopia a character somehow different from that of a political/social utopian project. It



remains a utopia in the tradition of Plato, Campanella, Thomas More or Herman Hesse, but, in addition to that, it is characterized by chiliastic elements. Berkeley's is a religiously modeled utopia, an educational utopia with a certain soteriological mission. Even if the main emphasis is not placed upon Messianism, the chiliastic features are present and have something to say about the ultimate specificity of the Bermuda scheme. To be more precise, the Messianism belongs not so much to the project itself (explicitly and essentially) as to its unspoken presuppositions, to the intellectual and religious background against which it was conceived. The Millennium is rapidly approaching: under such circumstances, getting ready (*praeparatio*) is the crucial and most urgent thing to do. Hence the necessity of preparing a body of worthy, well trained and dedicated people, ready to prepare, in turn, their neighbours for the big event, to save their souls *in aeternum*. Or, instructing such special people is an extremely difficult and demanding job, a job that is made possible only within the firm boundaries of a highly disciplined educational utopia. And this is where Berkeley's project belongs.

#### Notes:

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<sup>2</sup> "For whatever reasons, Berkeley seems to have lost confidence in the Old World and was looking hopefully to America. For it was probably in the early months of 1722 that he conceived his plan for a missionary and art college in Bermuda, which was to engage him for the next decade" (Berman 100).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, he says several times that he was informed about the islands by very trustful persons (yet, he does not give any names), but, as we shall see below, his description did not fit the real situation of the islands at all. He was either misinformed or, more probably, the trustful persons conveyed to him something of the popular medieval view of the "paradisiacal islands".

<sup>4</sup> It is true, later on, when the project had already started to fail, that Berkeley showed himself ready to build the college somewhere on the American mainland. But what I am particularly interested in here is his first, genuine, impulse and intention, as recorded in the letters mentioned and the *Proposal*.

<sup>5</sup> "Distance lends enchantment, and isolation preserves things in existence. Later on, many 'utopias', among them that of Thomas More, would be located on islands" (Delumeau 98).

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<sup>6</sup> Kappler's book, cited by Delumeau, is *Monstres, demons et merveilles a la fin du Moyen Age*. Paris: Payot, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Sometimes his enthusiasm infected others. For example, one of his contemporaries said: "Young and old, learned and rich, all desirous of retiring to enjoy peace of mind and health of body, and of *restoring the golden age* in that corner of the world." (a contemporary [Dan Dering] Qtd. in Luce 97) [emphasis added]

<sup>8</sup> Many people "found the entire enterprise absurd. ...those with first-hand experience of the American Church or educational scenes were profoundly distressed with Berkeley's ignorance. It is clear that for many years, Berkeley was seen as something of a nut" (Bracken 68).

<sup>9</sup> I am not the only one to use this term in relation to his Bermuda project. One hundred years ago, dealing with Berkeley's educational project, Fraser talked about Bermuda as "a region whose idyllic bliss poets had sung, and from which Christian civilisation might radiate over the Utopia of a New World, with its magnificent possibilities in the future history of the human race" (IV 343).

<sup>10</sup> According to some authors, this remoteness of the island from the American mainland was in fact one of the main causes of the failure of the entire project. Arthur Aston Luce, for example, considers that "the tragedy of the Bermuda project was just Bermuda. Six hundred miles of ocean separate it from the nearest point of the mainland. Students might have come sixty miles, but not six hundred. The romance of Bermuda won support for the scheme, the facts of Bermuda killed it" (Luce 99).

<sup>11</sup> And, as Bracken recognizes, this is not only the case with Berkeley. Even if for different reasons, "there is hardly a single great mind of the period which is not involved in millennial thinking. Henry More, Sir Isaac Newton, and Sir Robert Boyle may be the names best known to academic philosophers" (Bracken 78).

<sup>12</sup> "[C]ertain pioneers already saw Paradise in the various regions of America. Traveling along the coast of New England in 1614, John Smith compared it to Eden: 'heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation... we chanced in a lande, even as God made it.' George Alsop presents Maryland as the only place seeming to be the 'Earthly Paradise'. Its trees, its plants, its fruits, its flowers, he wrote, speak in 'Hieroglyphicks of our Adamitical or Primitive situation.' Another writer discovered the 'future Eden' in Georgia, a region located on the same latitude as Palestine: 'That promis'd *Canaan*, which was pointed out by God's own choice, to bless the Labours of a favorite People.' For Edward Johnson, Massachusetts was the place 'where the Lord will create a new Heaven and a new Earth.' Likewise, the Boston Puritan, John Cotton, informed those preparing to set sail from England for Massachusetts that they were granted a privilege of Heaven, thanks to 'the grand charter given to *Adam* and his posterity in Paradise'" (Eliade 264-5).

<sup>13</sup> "[T]o provide, in the first Place, a constant Supply of worthy Clergymen for the *English Churches* in those Parts; and in the second Place, a like constant Supply of zealous Missionaries, well fitted for propagating Christianity among the Savages" (Berkeley VII 345).

<sup>14</sup> In general, he is very careful and scrupulous in his analysis. He admits that his is only a partial and possible interpretation, with the possibility of other points of view: "if it is granted that Berkeley hoped to use the traditional symbolism of Daniel so that he might characterize America in messianic terms then we have a *partial* answer to the point of the American Project" (Bracken 73) [emphasis added].

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