

*I'll join with black despair against my soul,
And to myself become an enemy.*

– Richard III

Genealogy of Fanaticism

In itself, every idea is neutral, or should be; but man animates ideas, projects his flames and flaws into them; impure, transformed into beliefs, ideas take their place in time, take shape as *events*: the trajectory is complete, from logic to epilepsy . . . whence the birth of ideologies, doctrines, deadly games.

Idolaters by instinct, we convert the objects of our dreams and our interests into the Unconditional. History is nothing but a procession of false Absolutes, a series of temples raised to pretexts, a degradation of the mind before the Improbable. Even when he turns from religion, man remains subject to it; depleting himself to create fake gods, he then feverishly adopts them: his need for fiction, for mythology triumphs over evidence and absurdity alike. His power to adore is responsible for all his crimes: a man who loves a god unduly forces other men to love his god, eager to exterminate them if they refuse. There is no form of intolerance, of proselytism or ideological intransigence which fails to reveal the bestial substratum of enthusiasm. Once man loses his *faculty of indifference* he becomes a potential murderer; once he transforms *his* idea into a god the consequences are incalculable. We kill only in the name of a god or of his counterfeits: the excesses provoked by the goddess Reason, by the concept of nation, class, or race are akin to those of the Inquisition or of the Reformation. The ages of fervor abound in bloody exploits: a Saint Teresa could only be the contemporary of the auto-da-fé, a Luther of the repression of the Peasants' Revolt. In every mystic outburst, the moans of victims parallel the moans

of ecstasy . . . Scaffolds, dungeons, jails flourish only in the shadow of a faith – of that need to believe which has infested the mind forever. The devil pales beside the man who owns a truth, *his* truth. We are unfair to a Nero, a Tiberius: it was not they who invented the concept *heretic*: they were only degenerate dreamers who happened to be entertained by massacres. The real criminals are men who establish an orthodoxy on the religious or political level, men who distinguish between the faithful and the schismatic.

When we refuse to admit the interchangeable character of ideas, blood flows . . . firm resolves draw the dagger; fiery eyes presage slaughter. No wavering mind, infected with Hamletism, was ever pernicious: the principle of evil lies in the will's tension, in the incapacity for quietism, in the Promethean megalomania of a race that bursts with ideals, that explodes with its convictions, and that, in return for having forsaken doubt and sloth – vices nobler than all its virtues – has taken the path to perdition, into history, that indecent alloy of banality and apocalypse . . . Here certitudes abound: suppress them, best of all suppress their consequences, and you recover paradise. What is the Fall but the pursuit of a truth and the assurance you have found it, the passion for a dogma, domicile within a dogma? The result is fanaticism – fundamental defect which gives man the craving for effectiveness, for prophecy, for terror – a lyrical leprosy by which he contaminates souls, subdues them, crushes or exalts them . . . Only the skeptics (or idlers or aesthetes) escape, because they *propose* nothing, because they – humanity's true benefactors – undermine fanaticism's purposes, analyze its frenzy. I feel *safer* with a Pyrrho than with a Saint Paul, for a jesting wisdom is gentler than an unbridled sanctity. In the fervent mind you always find the camouflaged beast of prey; no protection is adequate against the claws of a prophet . . . Once he raises his voice, whether in the name of heaven, of the city, or some other excuse, away with you: satyr of your solitude, he will not forgive your living on the wrong side of his truths and his transports; he wants you to share his hysteria, his fullness, he wants to impose it on you, and thereby to disfigure you. A human being possessed by a belief and

not eager to pass it on to others is a phenomenon alien to the earth, where our mania for salvation makes life unbreathable. Look around you: everywhere, specters preaching; each institution translates a mission; city halls have their absolute, even as the temples – officialdom, with its rules – a metaphysics designed for monkeys . . . Everyone trying to remedy everyone's life: even beggars, even the incurable aspire to it: the sidewalks and hospitals of the world overflow with reformers. The longing to become a source of *events* affects each man like a mental disorder or a desired malediction. Society – an inferno of saviors! What Diogenes was looking for with his lantern was an *indifferent man* . . .

It is enough for me to hear someone talk sincerely about ideals, about the future, about philosophy, to hear him say 'we' with a certain inflection of assurance, to hear him invoke 'others' and regard himself as their interpreter – for me to consider him my enemy. I see in him a tyrant *manqué*, an approximate executioner, quite as detestable as the first-rate tyrants, the first-rate executioners. Every faith practices some form of terror, all the more dreadful when the 'pure' are its agents. We mistrust the swindler, the trickster, the con man; yet to them we can impute none of history's great convulsions; believing in nothing, it is not they who rummage in your hearts, or your ulterior motives; they leave you to your apathy, to your despair or to your uselessness; to them humanity owes the few moments of prosperity it has known: it is they who save the peoples whom fanatics torture and 'idealists' destroy. Doctrineless, they have only whims and interests, accommodating vices a thousand times more endurable than the ravages provoked by principled despotism; for all of life's evils come from a 'conception of life.' An accomplished politician should search out the ancient sophists and take lessons in oratory – and in corruption . . .

Whereas the fanatic is incorruptible: if he kills for an idea, he can just as well get himself killed for one; in either case, tyrant or martyr, he is a monster. No human beings are more dangerous than those who have suffered for a belief: the great persecutors are recruited among the martyrs not quite beheaded. Far from diminishing the

appetite for power, suffering exasperates it; hence the mind feels more comfortable in the society of a braggart than in that of a martyr; and nothing is more repugnant to it than the spectacle of dying for an idea . . . Revolted by the sublime and by carnage, the mind dreams of a provincial ennui *on the scale of the universe*, of a History whose stagnation would be so great that doubt would take on the lineaments of an event and hope a calamity . . .

The Anti-Prophet

In every man sleeps a prophet and when he wakes there is a little more evil in the world . . .

The compulsion to preach is so rooted in us that it emerges from depths unknown to the instinct for self-preservation. Each of us awaits *his* moment in order to propose something – anything. He has a voice: that is enough. It costs us dear to be neither deaf nor dumb . . .

From snobs to scavengers, all expend their criminal generosity, all hand out formulas for happiness, all try to give directions: life in common thereby becomes intolerable, and life with oneself still more so; if you fail to meddle in other people's business you are so uneasy about your own that you convert your 'self' into a religion, or, apostle in reverse, you deny it altogether; we are victims of the universal game . . .

The abundance of solutions to the aspects of existence is equaled only by their futility. History: a factory of ideals . . . lunatic mythology, frenzy of hordes and of solitaries . . . refusal to look reality in the face, mortal thirst for fictions . . .

The source of our actions resides in an unconscious propensity to regard ourselves as the center, the cause, and the conclusion of time. Our reflexes and our pride transform into a planet the parcel of flesh and consciousness we are. If we had the right sense of our position in the world, if *to compare* were inseparable from *to live*, the revelation of our infinitesimal presence would crush us. But to live is to blind ourselves to our own dimensions . . .

And if all our actions – from breathing to the founding of empires or metaphysical systems – derive from an illusion as to our importance, the same is true a fortiori of the prophetic instinct. Who, with the exact vision of his nullity, would try to be effective and to turn himself into a savior?

Nostalgia for a world without 'ideals,' for an agony without doctrine, for an eternity without life . . . Paradise . . . But we could not exist one second without deceiving ourselves: the prophet in each of us is just the seed of madness which makes us flourish in our void.

The ideally lucid, hence ideally *normal*, man should have no recourse beyond the *nothing* that is in him . . . I can imagine him saying: 'Torn from the goal, from all goals, I retain, of my desires and my displeasures, only their formulas. Having resisted the temptation to conclude, I have overcome the mind, as I have overcome life itself by the horror of looking for an answer to it. The spectacle of man – what an emetic! Love – a duel of salivas . . . All the feelings milk their absolute from the misery of the glands. Nobility is only in the negation of existence, in a smile that surveys annihilated landscapes. Once I had a "self"; now I am no more than an object . . . I gorge myself on all the drugs of solitude; those of the world were too weak to make me forget it. Having killed the prophet in me, how could I still have a place among men?'