

## Surfaces



# FROM THE INQUISITION TO DESCARTES. THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN SUBJECT

Wlad Godzich

Volume 2, 1992

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065235ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065235ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Résumé de l'article

La problématique discursive de l'émergence du sujet moderne, et les difficultés qui surgissent de ses rencontres avec la différence culturelle.

### Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

### ISSN

1188-2492 (imprimé)

1200-5320 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Godzich, W. (1992). FROM THE INQUISITION TO DESCARTES. THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN SUBJECT. *Surfaces*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065235ar>

Copyright © Wlad Godzich, 1992



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

## **FROM THE INQUISITION TO DESCARTES**

### **THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN SUBJECT**

Wlad Godzich

#### **ABSTRACT**

*An account of the discursive problematic that accompanies the emergence of the modern subject, and of the difficulties attendant upon that subject's encounter with cultural difference.*

#### **RÉSUMÉ**

*La problématique discursive de l'émergence du sujet moderne, et les difficultés qui surgissent de ses rencontres avec la différence culturelle.*

In an essay published a little over ten years ago, a French historian by the name of Cardaillac, an eminent specialist of the Spanish Golden Age, relates the following incident. A Spanish countrywoman by the name of Maria de Molina is the object of an anonymous denunciation to the Holy Inquisition for harbouring heterodox beliefs and other creeds contrary to the Christian Faith. Maria de Molina is a *morisca*, that is a member of the Iberian population formerly subject to Islam but converted to Christianity following the fall of the kingdom of Granada. Our countrywoman is traduced in front of an Inquisition tribunal which conducts the customary interrogation.

"What is the central tenet of the Christian faith," she is asked. "It is the belief in the Holy Trinity," she replies. This is a good answer but it requires some further inquiry: "What is meant by the Holy Trinity?" "It is the true nature of God," replies the countrywoman with some assurance. "And what is this true nature?" "It is that of a God in three persons." The Inquisitors are ready to declare themselves satisfied with these perfectly orthodox and even theologically sophisticated answers. Almost as if to give the accused an occasion to dispel any further doubt as to her true allegiance to Christianity, or perhaps out of a sense of duty, they offer a final question, a throw-away question we may be tempted to say: "Name the three persons of the Holy Trinity." Without hesitation and indeed with the same assurance she has evidenced throughout the interrogation, Maria de Molina retorts: "Jesus Christ, Allah and Mahoma." Flabbergasted, one of the Inquisitors asks her to repeat what she has just said. For the first time she hesitates, appears to be confused, then, gathering herself once again, she offers the following reply: "Jesus Christ, Allah, Vizmillah." This last term is the morisco or aljamiado version of "Bismillah" which means "in the name of God" in Arabic and appears at the beginning of many a Koranic surat.

The Inquisitors decided they had heard enough and they retired to discuss Maria de Molina's case. Is she a Christian or a *morisca* still attached to her former faith? But the very idea of the Trinity, the concept of which she grasps perfectly, is anathema to Muslims. One can therefore conclude that she is not a Muslim and thus not an infidel. But her last answer is certainly not that of a good Christian. Is she therefore a heretic? a finding that is potentially far more damaging than that of infidel, for an infidel is someone who can still be converted to the Christian faith, whereas a heretic, we are told by the Repertorium Inquisitorum of Valencia dating from 1494, is someone who has exercised his or her free will against the true faith and must therefore be severely punished for this lapse. Is Maria de Molina a heretic then? The Inquisitors hesitate: her statement does go against the tenets of the faith but it seems to emanate from within the faith. The necessary conditions for a finding of heresy are present but are they sufficient? Maria de Molina has named Jesus Christ and Allah twice; it is therefore clear that 'Allah' for her is God the Father, speculate the Inquisitors. She then invoked two different denominations to refer to the third person of the Trinity, first calling it Mahoma, and the Vizmillah. It is this double answer that causes the perplexity of the Inquisitors, and this in spite of the fact that neither is acceptable. What if Maria were really trying to name the Holy Spirit, wonder the Inquisitors -- concerned not only with being just, but also with being accurate in their evaluation of a case that has suddenly turned messy. What if that is indeed what she was tried to do without success, and thus fell back upon names that she knew, such as Muhammad, or even on words the meaning of which is obviously alien to her, like "Vizmillah"?

At this juncture in the deliberations a division occurs among the three Inquisitors: the oldest, and no doubt the least patient, asserts that in fact it will never be known whether Maria de Molina is ultimately a Christian or a

Muslim. Her answer is ambiguous in its admixture of orthodox and heretical elements, he continues, and is therefore not ambiguous at all since ambiguity is nothing more than the indication that there is a double code at work, a code of doubleness if not duplicity. For this Inquisitor, Maria de Molina is a *dissimulatrix* and she must be condemned. But the other two Inquisitors beg to differ from their senior colleague, notwithstanding the respect they owe him, his learning, and his experience. For them, Maria simply lacks the words she needs, namely the words "God the Father and the Holy Spirit." And they draw upon the fact that she says *Dios* to name God in three persons and reserves *Allah* for God the Father, and that she is obviously in search of a serviceable term to name the Holy Spirit. This is not a strategy of dissimulation but rather evidence of the fact that Maria has been raised in a Muslim milieu and that, in spite of the fact that she is illiterate, she has the *impedimenta* of someone who is *culta* in Islam, and these *impedimenta* interfere with her more recent, but evidently sincere, acquisition of Christianity. The youngest of the Inquisitors goes so far as to suggest that this is a conflict between two acquired contents, a conflict of *cultures*, anticipating thus by some three hundred years anthropology's appropriation of the term.

But our anecdote is far from over. The first Inquisitor is profoundly shocked by this analysis which he finds truly outrageous for its insouciant placement of the Christian faith and of Muslim beliefs on a footing of equality on the basis of the putative fact that they are both acquired beliefs whereas it is undeniable that one is inspired by the devil and seeks to turn human beings away from God whereas the other has not only been given to us by God but God has given his life for it so that we can live in it. He implores his colleagues to abandon quickly the road they have embarked upon in the consideration of this case and he reminds them that it is the duty of the Holy Inquisition to err on the side of Prudence, that is to resolve all ambiguities in favor of the faith and against heretics. If the inquisitorial tribunal must decide what is the meaning of the word "Allah" in Maria de Molina's mouth, then let it by all means decide that it means the false "God of the Muslims" and not God the Father in proper Castilian. And as far as the other terms are concerned, they are even more ambiguous and thus further proof of Maria's grave errors of faith. Convinced of the righteousness of his stand and not a little impatient with his colleagues, the senior Inquisitor then adds what he thinks is the clincher to his argument: if they want to avoid problems with the Inquisition, let these Moriscoes learn proper Castilian in the first place and we will stop all this nonsensical talk of ambiguity. Let her be condemned, it will teach her and her ilk what is what and lean the language. But this last argument raises the hackles of the two other Inquisitors who were actually on the verge of surrendering to their senior, especially since they understood quite well that their equation of Christianity and Islam in terms of culture was redolent of infernal sulfur: Christianity is not a matter of Castilian speech. Many Christians, true believers with a faith above suspicion, do not speak this language, in fact a great many of them are to be found among the inhabitants of this peninsula, asserts the youngest one whose name, Fernet, sounds suspiciously Catalan. It is true however, retorts

the first one, that all those who speak Arabic are Muslims, but even that statement is immediately challenged.

History does not tell us what happened to Maria de Molina nor to what was the ultimate disposition of her case. It remains forever for us the perfect example of the indeterminacy of the faith of the *Moriscos*. But history does relate something far more important. The three Inquisitors wrote a report in which they provide an account of this most trying case, one that challenged their collective patience and their intellectual capacities. The point of their report is to put into question the mode of interrogation that they were expected to follow in the consideration of such cases. The protocol they applied produced answers that are not clear-cut; they are confused and, more importantly, confusing; they require lengthy deliberations and even stabs at exegesis on the part of the interrogators, without offering any guarantee of a happy outcome to the whole enterprise. And so they ask to be dispensed henceforth from interrogating those who are brought, for one reason or another, in front of them on points of Christian doctrine, for they are Inquisitors and not exegetes or theologians. It would be far better to let them ask questions that would insure their ability to discern the heretic and the dissimulator. What kind of questions? Questions such as these: Do you eat cous-cous? Do you put henna in your hair? Do you cover your hair or your face? When you wash in the morning do you follow a set procedure, and which one? Would you eat a nice plate of good fat pork if we were to present you with one right now? Would you drink some wine with it? and so on.

Whatever became of Maria de Molina, it is clear that the two younger Inquisitors had prevailed (which leads me to suspect that they probably let the older one save face and have his way in condemning Maria), and had managed to reorient the questioning away from points of doctrine to habits of culture. How had they gotten there and what have been the consequences of this reorientation, those are the issues that I wish to examine today.

Let us return to Maria de Molina's interrogation. The Inquisitors test her on the doctrinal content of Christianity and it turns out that she has not only been exposed to the teachings of the church but that she understands their meaning, their importance and their tenor. It can be said that Maria adheres to Christianity on the plane of the intellect. The interference that fractures her responses does not originate in the intellect, for were that the case she would be caught in a contradiction if not in an aporia, or she would truly be a dissimulatrix. The terms she comes up with to designate the persons of the Trinity do not come from the operations of the intellect but from her lived experience, an experience validated by her social environment. What one finds in Maria (and in her interrogators as well, I hasten to add) is a model of knowledge and of the human soul that is well anchored in western thought since Aristotle: human beings partake of two worlds, the world of intelligible objects and the world of sensible objects. They do so by means of

two distinct faculties of the soul: the intellect for intelligible objects, and common sense (*sensus communis*) for sensible objects. In this conception of the human soul, a human being is effectively composed of two distinct subjects: a subject of knowledge, which is the intellect, and a subject of experience, which is common sense. I emphasize that these are two distinct subjects that constitute a human being for therein lies the crux of the problem, and we were a little too hasty in calling them faculties of the soul.

The subject of experience was *sensus communis* which must not be confused with its Enlightenment counterpart nor with what is generally meant in English by "common sense." As Aristotle makes quite clear in the *De Anima* the *sensus communis* is present in each individual and it is the principle that makes judgments. The subject of knowledge, which Aristotle calls *noûs* is entirely separate from the *sensus communis* and has nothing to do with it for the subject of knowledge has nothing to do with experience which is, after all, the realm of the changeable, the corruptible, the sublunar, whereas the *noûs* is impassive and even divine. Actually, for Aristotle and his medieval successors, knowledge does not have a subject as such, certainly not in the sense of the modern ego; the *noûs* as *intellectus agens*, as agential intellect, actualizes knowledge in the person who submits to it, that is in the person who makes of his or her self the *subjectum*, the subject of this *noûs*, which is unique, separate, and divine. To remove oneself from the purview of such a *noûs*, such an *intellectus agens*, is indeed to be unfaithful to it, to be infidel; to acknowledge it and then to remove oneself is indeed an act of heresy.

But the problem is rendered more complicated for human beings for they are also beholden to the subject of experience. The problem that arises is indeed the one that the Inquisitors face: what happens when there is a discrepancy or even a discordance between the *noûs* and the subject of experience? In principle there is nothing surprising about the fact that this should occur since knowledge and experience constitute two entirely distinct domains. The *noûs* is not the psyche nor the soul. The *noûs*, separate, without admixture and impassive in Aristotle's formula, communicates with the soul in order to actualize knowledge. It follows then that for Antiquity the central problem of knowledge is not that of the relation between a subject and an object but that of the relation between the one and the multiple. What is for us, as post-Enlightenment beings, the problem of experience, was for the ancients the problem of the relation between the separate intellect and singular individuals, between the one and the multiple, between the intelligible and the sensible, between the human and the divine. And the area of greatest concern had to be the boundary between human knowledge and divine knowledge, a boundary that one wants to reconnoiter, to experience, but to experience it is not to return from it, for this boundary is death, and the few who have experienced it and have returned cannot tell the tale. This is the meaning of the Mysteries in Antiquity which hold out the promise of an exploration of this boundary, recognizing all the while that that this experience will remain unsayable. In the middle ages, this concern became that of the mystics. In both cases, the

boundary is the object of an interdiction: it cannot be said in the language of humans; it can only be evoked or alluded to.

Let us return to our preoccupation however: the separation of the realms of the intellect-agent (*noûs*) and of experience. This separation gives rise to a number of problems. It allows for example for the rather curious situation in which a number of heterogeneous, if not heterodox, practices in the realm of experience co-exist with an orthodoxy in the realm of knowledge. Aristotle had grown concerned over this possibility and he had tried to understand the variety, and the variability, of human mores and customs around the Mediterranean rim in connection with what seemed essential to him: the idea of a human nature. He resorts then to a metaphor--actually to the metaphor of metaphor since he invoked this example in order to clarify the sense of metaphor in the *Rhetoric*: the inhabitants of the various lands of the Mediterranean have endowed themselves with a large variety of laws, both written and customary; this may lead us to think that they have in fact an equally large variety of values, but these values are actually mutually convertible, just as much as their different currencies are mutually convertible. At first sight, this may seem to be not the case but it suffices to note that each of the currencies is convertible into a certain weight of gold to realize that it is possible to establish their respective value in relation to this benchmark value, this standard, and from there, their respective values are easily calculable. The same obtains in the realm of non-monetary values, Aristotle asserts with assurance. All that is needed, and Aristotle is not blind to the immensity of the undertaking, is to formulate the golden rule, or rather the rule of the golden mean to then measure the relation of individual laws to this rule. What matters most here is to note that Aristotle looked upon this golden rule as a standard, that is a sort of regulating principle that would allow heterogeneous and heterodox practices to continue while insuring their communicability, that is insuring that they could be brought to some common denominator in case of necessity. Given Aristotle's commitment to Athenian mercantile economy and ideology it is not surprising that his solution to the problem of heterogeneity should rely upon a model of exchange-value calculations.

The solution will be altogether different at the onset of modern times. The Spanish Inquisition undergoes a radical transformation in its nature with the pact of unification between the crowns of Castille and Aragon and the implementation of a policy of homogenization of the territory of the Iberian peninsula. In 1215 the Lateran Council had declared that the traditional customs of people recently converted to Christianity were not heretic in themselves even though it was the duty of Church officials to combat these practices in order to facilitate the integration of these new Christians within the extended family of the Church. The subsequent declarations of the Papal Curia on the problem of the Moriscos had always confined themselves to points of doctrine and had expressly left out of consideration the matter of practices. It is only with the advent in 1480 of what was called the New

Inquisition, also known as the Castilian Inquisition, that things began to change. For the New Inquisition indeed conceived itself as being not only in the service of the faith but also as serving the interests of the state, and it became the great promoter of *Españolidad*, that is of a Spanish identity in a context where no such identity existed.

A small anecdote dating from the conquest of Mexico, and related by a contemporary historian of the latter, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, may allow us to better appreciate the scope of this transformation. Shortly after having landed upon the Mexican coast and undertaken the conquest of the Aztec empire, Cortez learns that several years earlier a Spanish caravel had shipwrecked on this very coast and two of its occupants had survived the wreck. Their subsequent behaviour and fate have been diametrically opposite, to the point that one may well wonder whether these are not characters out of some morality play or legend. The first character, called Guerrero, was a sailor, though it eventually turns out that he can read and write, a level of education rarely attained among the sailors of his day. In any case, having found himself alone on Mexican soil, he decided to adopt the customs of the land, converting to Mexican religion, marrying a Mexica woman, and, having proven himself a man of courage and daring on the battlefield, he has even achieved the status of a military leader among the local Mexicans, a position from which he will even go so far as to lead his adopted compatriots against the invading Spaniards, his former compatriots. Although there would be much to say about this first Westerner to "go native," as the phrase goes, it is his counterpart who is more relevant to the argument. The other survivor, called Aguilar, was of noble origin and was as firm in opposing everything Mexican as Guerrero was eager to embrace it. He refuses to forswear his allegiance to the King of Spain or to renounce his Christian faith, and finds himself reduced to slavery by the Aztecs. When Cortez learned of his existence he sent him a message enjoining him to meet his troop forthwith, and Aguilar, apparently enjoying far more freedom of movement than it is customary to grant to slaves, managed to do so. But when he presented himself in front of the *conquistadores*, he had been so altered by his fifteen years of captivity that the latter had considerable difficulty in accepting the fact that the person standing in front of them was one of their own, for there was nothing to distinguish him in his appearance from the Aztecs around him, either in clothing, demeanor, or colour of skin. For his part, he did not seem to be too sure of the identity of the people he has just come upon, and Bernal Díaz relates the following exchange:

Are you human beings or Christians?

We are Spaniards.

Here in a nutshell is to be found the profound transformation that had taken place between the end of the fifteenth century, that is the moment when



Aguilar was shipwrecked, and 1516, the date when he meets with the *Conquistadores*. Aguilar left a world that was divided between Christians and Infidels. Some of the latter, the Mudejars, even lived among Christians. His years of captivity had led him to evolve in the direction of a certain humanism, and to recognize that the category of Christians was not the over-arching one and all others merely break-away groups (actual or potential) from it; rather it is itself a sub-group of the much larger category of human beings. But the Conquistadors whom he meets do not define themselves in either Christian or Humanistic terms: they are Spaniards, a category that is heterogeneous with respect to the distinction between human beings and Christians, for it does not refer to a concept of humanity nor to faith but to the existence of a state.

The New Inquisition of 1480 put itself in the service of this state, and it conceived its activity as the rooting out of heterogeneous practices on the territory of the state. It is for this reason that it set out initially to abolish the status of the Mudejares--Muslims residing in Christian Spanish territory who were guaranteed by the treaties of surrender the right to continue to practice their religion and to be judged according to the *shariah*, that is, Islamic law. Arguing that pluri-juridicality, that is, a heterogeneous plurality of legal systems, is incompatible with the sovereignty now vested in the conjoined crowns of the *Reyes Católicos*, that is, in the new Spanish state, the New Inquisition sought and obtained the abolition of the status of infidel for the Mudejares, a status that had effectively removed them from its jurisdiction, in order to force them to convert. Similar measures had already been taken against Jews. This wave of mandatory conversions of Mudejars produced the *Moriscos*, literally little Moors. But this was not enough: heterogeneous practices had to be eradicated in order to insure the advent of the homogeneous state. The New Inquisition pursued this goal by the enactment of the famous, or rather infamous, Edicts of the Faith, proclaimed for the first time in 1524 and updated annually until 1614, the date when the expulsion of all *Moriscos* from Spain finally deprived it of any further object of persecution, except for the occasional heretic. These Edicts of the Faith define some of the religious practices of the *Moriscos*, who were now Christian converts, as heretical. Ultimately they condemned their cultural practices, and the significance of the Maria de Molina case, which dates from 1529, is that it marks the shift toward this cultural hegemony. It marks the moment when the boundary between religious and profane practices was crossed and the Inquisition put itself in the service of a cultural orthodoxy, such as the obligation for a every good Christian to consume a pork dish on a regular basis, something that is still referred to, to this very day in Old Castille, as *un almuerzo de Cristiano Viejo*, a dish that consists of braised or boiled ham hocks served with the large white beans that Old Castillians call *judías*, just in case one missed their gastronomic and ironic enforcement of Christian cultural orthodoxy. I should add that this push toward hegemony and the abolition of all heterogeneity was not limited to Jews and Moriscos: all regional or folkloric religious practices were equally pursued until eliminated. It is as if the Spanish state, which was then embarking upon its imperial mission, had to clean up back home in order to present a seamless Spanishness to the heterogeneity that awaited it without.

It will be readily understood then that the New Inquisition, propelled by its desire to insure the homogeneity of the state, sets its sights on the heterogeneity that is within the heart of human beings, that is upon the separation between the subject of knowledge and the subject of experience, in order to bring about the advent of a single subject, the subject of the modern state. In this respect it anticipates modern science with which it shares an overriding passion for certainty in the face of uncertainty. Whereas ancient and medieval thought reserved certainty to God alone, and thus conceived of the authority of tradition as the counterweight or supplement to the uncertainty that is the epistemological fate of human beings, modern science, no less than the New Inquisition, seeks certainty at all cost, and they converge in the means to be employed in the achievement of their goal: the disqualification of experience and its subordination to the subject of knowledge henceforth identified as the Subject--period. That is the actual meaning of the questions recommended by the three Inquisitors frustrated with the uncertainties, ambiguities and aporias of the Maria de Molina case, especially when they want to know how the suspects proceed with their morning grooming. This quotidian activity is in point of fact the result of a learning -- directed by parental authority and carried out without the intervention of the subject of knowledge. The Inquisitors want to bring this most innocent of activities under the purview of the subject of knowledge for they suspect that, carried out mechanically, this daily grooming may well hide the far more sinister morning ablutions of the devout Muslim. They demand therefore that consciousness intervene in, and assume responsibility over, this activity formerly left to the subject of experience, and that all of the realm that had hitherto been reserved to the latter be now closely examined and made answerable to consciousness or to the intellect, for it is only through such a reassignment of cognitive responsibility that the sum total of the activities of the inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula will be *subject* to the control of the new Spanish state, the very first modern state I must emphasize, and it is only in this fashion that all of these inhabitants will become Spaniards, a word that we must take to mean "moderns" at this particular juncture. A Modern, or a Spaniard, is thus someone who will have internalized the New Inquisition within, who will provide the basis for certainty, who will produce certainty and be a product of its search.

Modern science harbours the same prejudice against experience in which it sees the last refuge of the irrational, and it too will seek to abolish the separation between knowledge and experience, making of the latter no more than the way (*methodos* in Greek) towards knowledge. To this end it must redefine experience and reform the operations of the intellect, starting with a program of eradicating all heterogeneity, that is starting by expelling separate and incommunicable subjects to replace them by a single new subject. The great revolution of modern science is not to value lived experience over the authority of acquired experience, but to have referred knowledge and experience to a single subject, which is nothing more than the point in which they coincide in an abstract Archemidean point: the

Cartesian *ego cogito*, consciousness, the doctrine of which is elaborated scarcely twenty years after the expulsion of the Moriscoes from Spain. This single subject is universal and impassive, just like its predecessor, the *noûs*, but it is not divine; it is an ego that unites within itself all the properties of the separate intellect and of the subject of experience.

Giorgio Agamben is quite right in asserting that modern science follows the course laid out man by ancient astrology; I would add it shares this ground with the Inquisition which, for its part, lines up on the positions of ancient Mysteries, for in both instances it is a matter of overcoming and even abolishing, at least epistemologically, the boundaries. It will be recalled that for the Ancients the cosmos was divided into celestial spheres, which are pure intelligences, free of change and of corruption, quite distinct from the sublunar world, which is the terrestrial world in which we human beings reside and in which everything is subject to change and to corruption. Such a differentiation makes sense only when it is set in a culture that conceives knowledge and experience as separate and autonomous spheres. But it raises the question of knowledge in our world, the question of human knowledge. For Pythagoras and his successors, this problem was resolved by the doctrine of the harmony of the spheres which posits from the outset their communicability and their ultimate homogeneity, reducing the latter to a problem of calculation. It is well known that this problem is far from having been resolved, that Kant, e.g., was forced to invoke the theory of the hypotyposis to explain how our mind, quite distinct from the world, can nonetheless gain reliable knowledge of it. Modern psychology and epistemology are still grappling with this problem.

In Antiquity, it is the speculations of the astrologers that evince the most concern with setting into communicable relation the celestial spheres of pure intelligence and down-to-earth individual experience, and it is in this that astrology is a precursor of modern science. Like alchemy, astrology seeks to bind, or at least to weave bonds between, earth and the heavens, between the divine and the human spheres, between the contingent and the necessary, and it seeks to do so in a single subject. The theory of the great chain of being, inspired by Plotinus, provides a glimpse of how the sensible and the intelligible, the corporeal and incorporeal, can unite by means of the *pneuma*, the spirit, and especially by that spirit that medieval mystics called the *spiritus subtilis* (*spiritus phantasticus*). The opposition rationalism vs irrationalism which permeates our culture so fundamentally is secretly grounded in this mutual implication of astrology, mysticism, and science, and it therefore follows that any critique of astrology, of mysticism, or of alchemy, must also eventually turn into a critique of modern science, for they are all based upon the possibility of overcoming the distinction between the separate intellect and the incorruptible cosmos on the one hand and the sublunar world of change and experience on the other. And their point of conjunction has been the theory of the subject.

We are so used today to represent to ourselves the subject as a substantial psychological reality, that is as a consciousness within which there unfold various psychic processes, that we forget the novelty that the emergence of this conception of the subject constituted, especially since its psychic and substantial nature is far from established. In fact at the moment when Descartes begins to formulate it he certainly does not conceive of it as a psychological reality, but no more than a point: describing his quest for the subject he compares the entity he seeks to an Archimedean point:

*Nihil nisi punctum petebat Archimedes, quod esset firmum & immobile, it integram terram loco dimoveret.*

*Archimède pour tirer le globe terrestre de sa place, et le transporter en un autre lieu, ne demandait qu'un point qui fût fixe et assuré.*

Archimedes, in order to take the terrestrial globe from its place and move it to another, asked only for a point which was fixed and assured.

Applying a procedure well known to medieval mystics, Descartes abolishes all psychic content in order to arrive at a pure act of thought:

Let us pass then to the attributes of the soul and see if there are any of these in me. The first are eating and walking; but if it is true that I have no body [something Descartes established earlier] it is true also that I cannot walk or eat. Sensing is another attribute, but again this is impossible without the body; besides I have frequently believed that I perceived in my sleep many things which I observed, on awakening, I had not in reality perceived. Another attribute is thinking, and I here discover an attribute which does belong to me; this alone cannot be detached from me.

But in this moment of original purity the Cartesian subject is nothing more than the subject of a verb, a purely linguistic and functional being and its reality and duration coincide with the moment, the very instant, of its utterance:

I am, I exist: this is certain; but for how long [quandiu autem]? For as long as I think, for it might perhaps happen, if I ceased to think, that I would at the same time cease to be or to exist.

This ego is impalpable; it has no substance, and Descartes has quite a bit of difficulty in naming it and in identifying it beyond the confines of the simple

utterance "I think, I am." When he tries to describe it, he begins by calling it "res cogitans" but he realizes that this designation is far too vague and he seeks to reduce this vagueness by lumping together all the terms he knows, and thereby aggravates it: "*res cogitans, id est mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio*" finally stopping with the word *mens*, which, in the French translation of the *Meditations* of 1647 becomes *esprit*.

It is easy to understand that Descartes cannot allow himself to be stopped in his quest for certainty by the uncertain nature of the subject, and we find him indeed moving very quickly toward a substantial if not substantialist definition of the subject:

Sed quis igitur sum? res cogitans. Quid est hoc? Nempe dubitans, intelligens, affirmans, negans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque, & sentiens.

But what, then, am I? A thing that thinks. What is a thing that thinks? that is to say, a thing that doubts, perceives, affirms, denies, wills, does not will, that imagines also, and which feels.

In this enumeration the subject has just assumed all of the properties that characterize the soul of traditional psychology, including sensation. The union of experience and of knowledge, of the *noûs* and of the *psyche*, is now effected upon this substantialized I, and it is upon this union that the modern conception of the subject as psychological reality is based, a conception that replaces both the soul of medieval psychology and the *noûs* of Greek metaphysics.

As can be expected such a transformation of the subject has consequences for the concept of experience itself. It will be recalled that experience was the dimension within which human beings matured and then died, indeed its function, recalled by Montaigne, was to prepare us for death, a death conceived of as the accomplishment and totalization of experience. Experience was something finite, something that one could *have* and not merely do, and it grounded authority. Montaigne already faces the unravelling of that conception. The modern subject, who is foremost a subject of knowledge, is incapable of maturing and of maturity. He or she can only increase his or her knowledge. Experience thus becomes something that one can do but that one can never have, and knowledge takes on its modern form: it cuts itself off forever from wisdom, though it will maintain a nostalgic love for it, a love it calls *philosophy* and which it practices, like all forms of nostalgia, in the mode of absence, and knowledge itself takes on the form of an infinite process.

Let me return, if I may, one last time to Maria de Molina and her appearance in front of the tribunal of the Inquisition. For the senior Inquisitor the statement she made in response to the question on the identity of the three persons of the Holy Trinity was truly scandalous and even perverse. To say "Jesus Christ, Allah, Mahoma" or "Jesus Christ, Allah, and Vizmillah" is not only to mix up two religions, one of which is, for him, of divine inspiration and the other a Satanic concoction; it is further to mix up two languages: Spanish, or rather Castilian, and Arabic, given them a *de facto* equality of status; but most of all, it is to establish a communicative bridge, in the mode of perversion, between the world of intelligences and the world of experience. The normal locus of such a communication, or rather the faculty charged with insuring such a communicability and actual communications, is well known to the Inquisitor for it is his favourite hunting ground: it is the imagination. Indeed, in the psychology of the Ancients as well as among the Scholastics, the Imagination is the medium of knowledge par excellence. It falls to the Imagination to serve as the mediator between the senses and the intellect, allowing, in the phantasm, the union of sensible form and of possible intellect; what this means is that the Imagination occupies in Antiquity and in the middle ages the very ground that experience comes to occupy in the /pp. 20-21/ world of modernity. We must bear in mind that that the *mundus imaginabilis*, far from being unreal, has its own plenitude between the *mundus intelligibilis* and the *mundus sensibilis*, and that it owes its position, its location, to the fact that it insures communication between these two realms, hence the importance of dreams and other phantasms for the Ancients: they are manifestations of knowledge. But hence also the vigilance of the older Inquisition, the pre-1480 Inquisition, with respect to the Imagination, when one recalls the constitutive ambiguity of Christianity, and even of Judaism, toward knowledge, the provenance of which must always be determined for it is well known since the temptation of Eve that knowledge and its blandishments are the preferred way (*methodos*) of the forces of Evil to insure our Fall.

On this score as well the two younger Inquisitors prove to be courageous indeed, and thus adopt a modern viewpoint: they propose to exclude the Imagination altogether, a ban that Modernity will seek to institute over and over again. By subjecting the operations of experience to the direct, that is unmediated, control of the subject of knowledge in the matter of grooming/ablutions, they set aside the mediating role of the Imagination by putting the sensible and the intelligible in direct relation. Descartes will follow the same path, and his text is marked by this decision: for the Scholastics and their successors, the verb *cogitare* was generally conjugated in the third person and *Imaginatio* is the grammatical subject of choice for this verb. Descartes, acting like a Renaissance neo-Latinist, revives the nearly forgotten deponent verb *imaginabor*, to say I imagine, I exercise my imagination or even I let myself be carried by my imagination, and he does this in order to make of *ego* the only admissible subject of *cogitare* so that thought can properly belong to the I alone. And indeed after him *cogitare* will only admit human beings in operative position, indeed as the sole permissible subjects. Anything else will be agrammatical.

The Imagination was not subjective until then; on the contrary it was defined as the coincidence of the subjective and the objective, of the interior with the exterior, of the sensible and the intelligible. It allowed for a form of knowledge that did go through the pretensions to totality of astrology, of alchemy, or of mysticism. In modernity, banished from its mediating role, it will be reduced to a combinatory or hallucinatory function, and the phantasm will cease to be the subject of experience to become the object of mental alienation, of magic visions, in short of psychological turbulence if not outright trouble.

There too something unexpected results from this shift in the organisation of cognition: with the elimination of the mediation between the sensible and the intelligible, and the placement of experience under the authority of a subject of knowledge that identifies itself with Reason, experience turns out to become inexhaustible and it escapes all attempts at appropriation. It leads to the emergence of something that I suspect the Ancients did not know at all and the middle ages controlled very well, namely desire. But whereas the Imagination allowed for the satisfaction of desire --that is the sense of medieval love poetry-- the expulsion of the imagination results in an unrequitable desire, and this desire figures the constitutive impossibility within modernity of any communication between the subject of knowledge and its Other, the realm of experience. It can control it, appropriate it, subject it, reduce it to the status of an object, but it never communicates with it. There is nothing surprising then about the fact that Modernity should be haunted by this figure of the Other that it seeks so much to domesticate if not to eradicate. When it does manage to summon it forth before the tribunal of its Reason, this Other, not unlike Maria de Molina, replies to its precise questions in an ambiguous transgressive, and ultimately undecidable discourse.

Today, as we see the modern form of the state crumble around us, and we find ourselves having to come up with new conceptions of the subject, we may perhaps learn to hear what Maria de Molina is saying.

**Wlad Godzich**

**Université de Genève**

**Godzich@uni2a.unige.ch**