[The greco-roman world - suite]

Auteur : Foucault, Michel

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Hippocrates, after curing many sicknesses, himself fell sick and died" (III, 3). Indeed, in the context of a reflection of this sort he speaks of the philosophers, and precisely of those who particularly influenced him, as if they were not individual personalities at all; he uses their names in the plural: "How many a Chrysippus, a Socrates, and Epicurus has Eternity already sucked down! Let the same thought strike you in the case of any single individual or object" (VII, 19).

Thus his consciousness of the ephemeral nature of man and of all human affairs was strengthened by his contemplation of the monotony of history, a contemplation which revealed the dissolution of historic happenings into the uniformity of Nature.* The energy of a man born to action must, it might be thought, be crippled by all this. Yet the emperor Marcus developed an assurance and a quiet greatness of character that made him one of the most perfect men who ever lived. Is resignation the complete solution of this enigma? [91]

The emperor Marcus will have nothing to do with the planning of political Utopias.

> Don't hope for Plato's Republic, but be content to make a very small step forward, and reflect that the result even of this is no trifle . . . For who will change men's convictions? And without a change of conviction what else is there save a bondage of men who groan and pretend to obey? Go to now and talk to me of Alexander, Philip, and Demetrius of Phalerum. If they saw what Universal Nature willed and went to school to her, I will follow: but if they were but actors on the world's stage, no one has condemned me to imitate them. The work of philosophy is simplicity and self-respect; lead me not away to vainglory (IX, 29).

He had no illusions about the world and mankind. He wanted always to "see to the bottom", so that "the true composition of nothing" should escape him. We can see how this road to reality led him through sufferings and disappointments; the similes change and the words come more quickly and more excitedly when he speaks of "contemporary manners". These experiences, together with the idea of the ephemeral nature of all the elements of fame, form the most subtly expressed part of his Meditations. He observes the "wolf's profession of friendship" in men; he notes how they flatter one another and give way though they despise one another, and try to overreach one another: "even the most charming of them is hard to suffer, not to say it is hard for them to endure each other," (VII, 3). "A procession's vain pomp, plays on a stage, flocks, herds, sham fights, a bone thrown to puppies, a crumb into fishponds, toiling and moiling of ants carrying their loads, scurrying of startled mice, marionettes dancing to strings" (VII, 3).

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* *Cf.* XI, 1; II, 14; VI, 46; VI, 37; IX, 35.

For his part he makes use of a naturalistic technique of dissection, in order "to see things naked in all life", to destroy pretty "fables" and the "senseless deception" that "is at its most fascinating when we imagine that we have attained something worth striving after". Water, dust, bones, dirt—that is the material of everything; heaped dishes are the corpses of fish, birds, pigs; purple dye is blood, marble is swollen earth, gold and silver but sediment: such ideas "are excellent imaginings, going to the heart of actual facts and penetrating them so as to see the kind of things they really are" (VI, 13). Or in song and dance, slit up the melody into its notes, the dance into its movements and poses, and then ask: are you above that? "Generally, then, excepting virtue and its effects, remember to have recourse to the several parts and by analysis to go on to despise them, and to apply the same process to life as a whole" (XI, 2).

It is difficult to conceive a more unbending determination to live in intellectual truth. Manifestly here, where the intellectual truth, carried to the extreme, turns into untruth, and loses real touch with human existence, there must be another positive relation to life. If the emperor Marcus had contented himself with resorting to the Stoic doctrine of man's freewill, which remained man's most assured certainty, whether it was a divine ordering or a mechanical necessity that ruled the world,* then he would have been the resigned Stoic so often pictured. But he went further, lived in an atmosphere of lucidity. The firm ground of which experience of the world and reflection robbed him, he found again in the universal life. That is the great step taken by his Stoic morality to religiousness. The tension of the autonomous personality, based on freewill, is resolved in the union of the soul with the divine universe, and from the Stoic teaching of universal sympathy, that is, of the affinity or intimate connexion of all parts of the universe or "members" of the "city of Zeus", comes kindness and gentleness and love of mankind. One has no desire to add anything to this; we will merely put together the individual notes in the book that appear to us as religious.

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* XII, 14; *cf.* IX, 39.