

INTRODUCTION



A great city in northern Europe is struck by an unusual heat wave in the middle of winter as an asteroid approaches Earth. In the evening, residents go out into the streets in their pajamas, wiping away the sweat that is running down their cheeks, and look anxiously up at the sky, seeing the asteroid grow larger as they watch. They all fear the same thing: that this mass of molten matter will collide with our planet. Hordes of panicked rats are fleeing the sewers, car tires are exploding, the asphalt is melting. Then a strange figure dressed in a white sheet and wearing a long beard begins to harangue the crowd, striking a gong and shouting: “This is punishment, repent, the end of Time has come.”

We smile at this tawdry prophet belching forth prophecies, since this scene occurs in a comic book, Hergé’s *The Shooting Star*.¹ However, beneath the silliness, what truth there is in the cry: “Repent!” That is the message that, under cover of its proclaimed hedonism, Western philosophy

¹ Casterman, 1947.

has been hammering into us for the past half-century—though that philosophy claims to be both an emancipatory discourse and the guilty conscience of its time. What it injects into us in the guise of atheism is nothing other than the old notion of original sin, the ancient poison of damnation. In Judeo-Christian lands, there is no fuel so potent as the feeling of guilt, and the more our philosophers and sociologists proclaim themselves to be agnostics, atheists, and free-thinkers, the more they take us back to the religious belief they are challenging. As Nietzsche put it, in the name of humanity secular ideologies have out-Christianized Christianity and taken its message still further.

From existentialism to deconstructionism, all of modern thought can be reduced to a mechanical denunciation of the West, emphasizing the latter's hypocrisy, violence, and abomination. In this enterprise the best minds have lost much of their substance. Few of them have avoided succumbing to this spiritual routine: one applauds a religious revolution, another goes into ecstasies over the beauty of terrorist acts or supports a guerilla movement because it challenges our imperialist project. Indulgence toward foreign dictatorships, intransigence toward our democracies. An eternal movement: critical thought, at first subversive, turns against itself and becomes a new conformism, but one that is sanctified by the memory of its former rebellion. Yesterday's audacity is transformed into clichés. Remorse has ceased to be connected with precise historical circumstances; it has become a dogma, a

spiritual commodity, almost a form of currency. A whole intellectual intercourse is established: clerks are appointed to maintain it like the ancient guardians of the sacred flame and issue permits to think and speak. At the slightest deviation, these athletes of contrition protest, enforce proper order in language, accord their imprimatur or refuse it. In the great factory of the mind, it is they who open doors for you or slam them in your face. This repeated use of the scalpel against ourselves we call the duty of repentance. Like any ideology, this discourse is at first presented in the register of the obvious. There is no need for demonstrations because things seem clear: one has only to repeat and confirm. The duty to repent is a multifunction fighting machine: it censures, reassures, and distinguishes.

First of all, the duty to repent forbids the Western bloc, which is eternally guilty, to judge or combat other systems, other states, other religions. Our past crimes command us to keep our mouths closed. Our only right is to remain silent. Next, it offers those who repent the comfort of redemption. Reserve and neutrality will redeem us. No longer participating, no longer getting involved in the affairs of our time, except perhaps by approving of those whom we formerly oppressed. In this way, two different Wests will be defined: the good one, that of the old Europe that withdraws and keeps quiet, and the bad one, that of the United States that intervenes and meddles in everything.

Of course, one cannot train whole generations to practice self-flagellation without paying a price. There are negative effects associated with certain secondary ben-

efits. A movement I described in 1983² is now spreading and growing deeper. But we are no longer in the age of the white man's tears, an ephemeral prostration of the former dominator before those who were his slaves when the Cold War and the still lively hope for a worldwide revolution galvanized a continent whose eastern portion had been colonized by the USSR. The Old World, which has fallen victim to its victory over communism, has laid down its arms since the fall of the Berlin Wall. An atmosphere of renunciation has replaced the euphoria of triumph. Africa, Asia, the Near East, the whole world is knocking at the door of Europe, wants to gain a foothold in it at the time when it is wallowing in shame and self-loathing. This book seeks to understand this paradox, to define our moral decay, and to offer some theoretical tools to remedy it.

² In *Le Sanglot de l'homme blanc: Tiers-Monde, culpabilité, haine de soi* (Paris: Seuil, 1983). English translation: *The Tears of the White Man: Compassion as Contempt* (New York: Free Press, 1986).