

Plant life.

Some of us try to save the dying forest from the effects of industrial civilisation. Just as some others tried to save, some time ago, civilisation from the advancing forest. There seems to be a struggle between plants and people, and not only the beautiful complementarity ecologists tell us about. But if there is struggle and complementarity, if indeed people, (and animals in general), are involved in an ambiguous relationship with plants, then one should obviously try to understand what it is plants are after. (Supposing that we know what we are after.) One should try to put oneself in the place of the plants, and look at animal life from that viewpoint. Not even the most radical ones among the "Greens" try to do this, which is, to come to think of it, surprising. For two reasons: The one is that ecology tells us of the interwoven, "cybernetical", feed back between ourselves and plants, so that in fact the distinction between ourselves and them seems to be artificial. Why should we not be able to see ourselves from that other pole of our biological situation? The other reason for surprise is that, Humanism being dead or dying, many other, non-human points of view seem to have become accessible to us. Why should we not be able to assume the point of view of Vegetarianism, (the term means here not "devouring of plants", but "plant perspective"). Why should we not try to "permit the phenomenon "plant" to speak for itself", as Husserl and the other phenomenologists recommend us to do? There are methods to do so.

One is to watch accelerated films of plant life. Accelerated in a way that the sequence of day and night appear as a flicker in the back-ground. (One day = one second). This acceleration will show the plants to be feeders, copulators, fighters, in sum: living beings as we are. Incidentally, it will show the rotation of the Earth, and thus the Solar system, and by extension the universe of Astronomy, from the vegetable view point. It will also show how animals are perceived by plants: they appear, if they appear at all, like imprecise traces which cross the landscape. Which suggests that plants perceive us like we perceive particles in a Wilson chamber. But what the accelerated film will show clearly are happenings which we do not perceive otherwise, like mushrooms expelling seeds as if they were ejaculating phalli, or like the merciless strangling of trees by parasites. We are being witness, while watching such films, to a form of life which is alien to our own, but where we recognise many of our own life processes. Why should science fiction films imagine an alien life somewhere in the depth of the cosmos, if all we need to do, if we want to have such encounters of the third type, is to accelerate plant life films?

All that such films do is to manipulate a single dimension of our world, (time), and they leave all the other dimensions unchanged. Plants live more slowly than we do, but they are otherwise subject to the same living conditions as we are. Their program, (their genetic information), is very similar to our own, it obeys the same rules, and it originated from the same germ. From

2

the point of view of inorganic substance, (for instance from the point of view of the Alps), the difference between ourselves and the plants is so slight that it may be disregarded. Should there be an inorganic form of life somewhere, (out in space or even here on Earth), neither the plants nor ourselves would notice it, even if it were to produce "superior spiritual values". Thus the Vegetarianism here recommended does not require a very big effort: it demands a slight shift in view-point. It only demands of us to live a bit more slowly. This should not be too difficult, because, after all: are we in such a hurry to get there?

An example for what we might see if we were to go more slowly: We know that the most profound of all the revolutions human history went through is the Neolithic one, and it consisted mainly in the taming of grasses. The consequences for Man were staggering: he became an eater of grass seeds, and by the same token he turned into a settler, an owner, a warrior, an oppressor of women, a geometrician, a builder of towns and of empires, in sum: he turned into Man such as we ourselves are. How does this event look from the point of view of the grasses? It did not happen ten thousand years ago, but last year. And all that happened was that a few species of grass took advantage of exceptionally favorable circumstances to evolve some new forms, (hybrid wheat for instance). By the way: those forms would have evolved very probably anyhow in the course of future centuries by the method of chance variations, ("natural selection"). From the point of view of grass the Neolithic event is not a revolution at all, and if people think it is one they are victims of an optical delusion.

Vegetarianism, as an alternative to Humanism, has the advantage that it permits us to see ourselves from a distance. We need no longer to take ourselves so seriously. We can see ourselves as members of an ecosystem. But such a distance has nothing to do with the noble transcendence of St. Francis, (for instance). His distance permitted him to preach to the birds, (although tradition unfortunately does not tell us whether the birds answered back, and if so, what they preached to St. Francis). Our own distance does not permit us to speak to the plants, nor can they answer. Humanism explains why: it says that "logos", (the word), is a human attribute, and that plants do not have it. Vegetarianism suggests otherwise: it says that the plants have their own "logic", and that accelerated films show them speaking. Now suppose that we start indeed to talk to each other. What are we to talk about?

Well, first of all about our ecological feed-back, (about how they feed us and how we feed them). But very soon, the subject of our conversation might grow wider. We might talk about sex, about birth control, about the struggle for life, and the plants might give us some very useful information on those matters. The most interesting subject for discussion would however very probably be a very curious fact: namely that we only see the

lesser half of most plants, and that the most important half, their roots, are hidden from us. The subject matter to discuss is the fact that most plants are rooted, ("radical", "fundamental"), living beings, whereas we are like beings which were thrown into the world, and we lead a rootless "existence". This is a decisive subject, and not only because it permits us to judge a few aspects of the political situation: it lets us see that the most radical, fundamental of all the animals are the plant-like ones, for instance the clams which cling to the sea soil and close themselves up toward the world. And thus to see that those of us who want to be radical and fundamental, (in Islam, but here too), are those who want to vegetate instead of being animated.

But this is not why the subject-matter "roots" is so decisive. What really matters is that the biomass, that slime which covers the globe, clings to it thanks to the roots of the plants, and that animal life can float, swim, walk and fly only because those roots sustain it. That we can permit ourselves the luxury of being animated, (from "anima" = breath), only because the plants vegetate for us, (from "vegare" = encourage). The plants encourage us to breath, which is another way of saying that they are the roots of our "soul" or "spirit". Indeed, such a way of saying it is more to the point than to say that the plants permit us to use solar energy for living. If we were to establish a dialogue with plants, it is this fundamental, radical fact which the plants would insist upon.

If we consider this fact, we may begin to understand what is really involved in the menace, (if indeed it is a menace), which industrial civilisation poses to plant life. Let us suppose two opposite extreme situations: a thermonuclear war destroys all animal life, but not all plant life; and it destroys all forms of life except for a few well-protected human beings. The first alternative is the more probable one because plants are almost incredibly resistant. (The Bible is wrong when it compares human life to the fragility of grass, because the Bible does not see the persistent grass roots.) Now if there were no animals left, plants would continue to vegetate, and with time, very probably a new kind of animal life would come into being. So that such a thermonuclear event would only mark an episode in the history of life on this planet.

Let us now consider the second alternative: a few human survivors on an otherwise lifeless planet. For those survivors oxygen would be the problem. They would have to learn how to breath without plants. No doubt: there are technical solutions to that problem. Astronautics suggest that people can survive on lifeless planets. But in that case life on Earth would have become entirely different. It would have become rootless. We can imagine how such a life would look like. The new humanity would consist of individuals encapsuled, (each one of them), within a protective shell, and they would communicate with each other through "telematic" chan-

nels. Each person would constitute a kind of cell within a global brain, and that brain would be the humanity of a post-thermonuclear future. We can imagine this, because something of the sort is happening already. Indeed: many tendencies now at work in our society seem to presume, even now, that there is no longer any type of life on Earth except for human survivors.

A society which functions like a global brain would be a society of angels, if by "angel" we mean a purely spiritual being. If there were no plants left, we would have to mutate into angels. It is the plants with their roots, those plants which encourage us to breath, which also prevent us from becoming angels. And this is what some of us are doing, when they try to protect the dying forest: they are trying to prevent us from becoming angels. To put it differently: the ultimate purpose of the ecological movement is to prevent man from breaking out of the ecological system, and thus to become angel-like, rootless. It is this point which we should be discussing: is it a good thing, or is it bad, if we persist in the present tendency toward cerebralisation, toward "spiritualisation"? And what was called "vegetarianism" in this paper might contribute to such a discussion.