

## 5. The Decay of Words

One of the indications that the course of history has not at all amounted to a form of progress on any level apart from the purely material, is the poverty of modern languages compared to many ancient ones. In terms of structural organicity, articulation and flexibility, not one of the so-called 'living' Western languages can compare, for example, to ancient Latin or Sanskrit. Among the European languages only German, perhaps, has preserved some features of its archaic structure (which is why the German language is said to be 'so difficult'), whereas English and the Scandinavian languages have undergone a process of erosion and levelling. Generally speaking, it may be argued that the ancient languages just mentioned were three-dimensional, whereas modern ones are two-dimensional. Here too time has exerted a corrosive influence; it has made languages 'practical' and 'fluid', to the detriment of their structural coherence. This is but a reflection of what has occurred in many other areas of culture and life.

Words too have a history, and often the change they undergo in terms of content provides an interesting measure of corresponding changes in their speakers' general sensibility and world-view. In particular, it might be interesting to compare the meaning possessed by certain words in the ancient Latin language with that of many corresponding terms which have outwardly remained almost the same in Italian and often other Romance languages.<sup>41</sup> Generally speaking, one observes a drop in level here. The more ancient meaning has either been lost or only survives in a residual form in particular uses of the word or expression, which no longer correspond to what has become its general and dominant meaning; or else they have been utterly distorted and frequently trivialised. I shall provide a few examples.

**1 — *Virtus*.** The most typical and best known case is perhaps the word *virtus*. 'Virtue' in a modern sense has almost nothing to do with ancient *virtus*. *Virtus* meant strength of mind, courage, prowess, virile steadfastness. It was connected to *vir*, a term describing man in the strict sense — not in the generic and naturalistic one.<sup>42</sup> In modern languages, the same word has

instead acquired an essentially moralistic meaning, one very frequently associated with sexual prejudices, to the point that Vilfredo Pareto coined the term ‘virtuism’ with reference to it, to describe bourgeois puritan and sexophobic morality.<sup>43</sup> What is generally meant today by a ‘virtuous person’ is something very different from expressions like *vir virtute praeditus*, with their very effective reiteration.<sup>44</sup> And this difference frequently turns into a kind of antithesis. Indeed, a steadfast, proud, fearless and heroic spirit is the opposite of a ‘virtuous’ person in the modern, moralistic and conformist sense.

The meaning of *virtus* as an efficacious force has only been preserved in certain specific modern expressions: the ‘virtues’ of a plant or a drug, ‘by virtue’ of this or that.

**2 — *Honestus*.** Connected to the idea of *honor*,<sup>45</sup> in Antiquity this term mainly meant ‘honourable’, ‘noble’, ‘of noble rank’. What is preserved of this in the corresponding modern term? An ‘honest’ person now means a ‘decent’ member of bourgeois society, someone who does not do anything really bad. The phrase ‘*nato da onesti genitori*’ today takes on an almost ironic nuance,<sup>46</sup> whereas in ancient Rome it was used specifically to designate nobility of birth, which often also corresponded to biological nobility. *Vir honesta facie* meant a man of fine appearance, just as the Sanskrit term *arya* referred both to a person worthy of honour and to a nobility that was as much of the mind as it was of the body.<sup>47</sup>

**3 — *Gentilis, gentilitas*.** Today, these terms bring the gentleman to mind, an affable and well-mannered person. The ancient terms, however, referred to the concept of *gens*, stock, race, caste or lineage. For the Romans, someone was *gentilis* when he possessed qualities deriving from a differentiated lineage and blood. These might — yet only as a reflection — determine a demeanour of detached courtesy, something very different from ‘good manners’, which even a parvenu can acquire by studying etiquette — and different too from the vague modern notion of ‘kindness’.<sup>48</sup> Few people today are able to grasp the fuller and deeper meaning of expressions such as ‘a gentle spirit’ and the like, which survive as isolated extensions of the original meaning in the language of writers of the past.

**4 — *Genialitas*.** Who is a ‘genius’ today? A predominantly individualistic man who is imaginative and full of original ideas. At the extreme, there is

the artistic ‘genius’ that in humanistic and bourgeois civilisation represents an object of fetishistic worship, to the point that the ‘genius’ — more so than the hero, the ascetic or aristocrat — has often been regarded, within this civilisation, as the highest type of man. The Latin term *genialis*, instead, alludes to something that is not at all individualistic and ‘humanistic’. It comes from the word *genius*, which originally designated the formative and generative, inner, spiritual and mystical force of a given *gens* or blood lineage. One could argue, therefore, that the qualities of *genialitas* in the ancient sense had a certain relationship with qualities that are ‘racial’ in the higher sense of the word. By contrast to the modern sense of the word, the element of ‘genius’ distinguishes itself from the individualistic and the arbitrary; it is bound to a deep root, it obeys an inner necessity through faithfulness to the already supra-personal forces of blood and race — forces that, as is well-known, were connected in any patrician lineage to a sacred tradition.

**5 — *Pietas*.** There is no real need to state what we mean by a ‘pious person’ today. One thinks of a more or less humanitarian, sentimental attitude — ‘pious’ is almost synonymous with compassionate.<sup>49</sup> In the ancient Latin tongue, *pietas* instead pertained to the realm of the sacred. It designated the special relationship that the Roman had first of all with the the gods, and secondly with other elements of the world of Tradition, including the State itself. Before the gods, it meant an attitude of calm, dignified veneration: a sense of belonging and, at the same time, of respect, of mindful concern, even of duty and loyalty: an intensified form of the feeling elicited by the stern figure of the *pater familias* (hence *pietas filialis*).<sup>50</sup> As already mentioned, *pietas* could also manifest itself in the political domain: *pietas in patriam* meant loyalty and duty towards the State and the fatherland. In some cases, the term also takes on the meaning of *iustitia*.<sup>51</sup> He who is foreign to *pietas* is unjust, almost impious, and does not know his place — the place he must hold within a higher order which is both divine and human.

**6 — *Innocentia*.** This word, too, evoked ideas of clarity and strength; according to its prevalent meaning in antiquity, it expressed purity of soul, integrity, disinterestedness, and righteousness. It did not merely have the negative sense of ‘not guilty’. It was free of the shade of banality found in the phrase ‘innocent soul’ today, which is almost synonymous with

‘simpleton’. In other Romance languages, such as French for example, the same term, *innocent*, even designates idiots, poor souls that are congenitally feeble-minded and dazed.<sup>52</sup>

**7 — *Patientia*.** The modern meaning of the term, compared to the ancient one, once again shows signs of dulling and weakening. A ‘patient’ person today is someone who does not get angry, who is not irritated, who shows tolerance. In Latin, *patientia* designated one of the primary ‘virtues’ of the Roman: it encompassed the idea of an inner strength, an unshakable firmness; it alluded to the capacity to stand one’s ground, to maintain an unwavering spirit in the face any setback or adversity. This is why the race of Rome was said to possess the power to accomplish great things as well as to endure<sup>53</sup> equally great adversities (cf. Livy’s famous saying: *et facere et pati fortia romanum est*).<sup>54</sup> The modern meaning, compared to the older, proves completely watered down. Today, even a donkey is taken as an example of a typically ‘patient’ nature.

**8 — *Humilitas*.** With the religion that has come to dominate the West, ‘humility’ has become a ‘virtue’ — certainly not in a Roman sense. It is glorified by its very contrast to the kind of dignity, strength and calm awareness described above. In ancient Rome, *humilitas* stood for the very opposite of all *virtus*. It meant baseness, wretchedness, lowliness, abjection, cowardice, and dishonour — so that death or exile were considered preferable to ‘humility’: *humilitati vel exilium vel mortem anteponenda esse*. Associations of ideas such as *mens humilis et prava*, ‘a low and evil mind’, were common. The expression *humilitas causam dicentium* refers to the inferior and guilty condition of those being brought before a court. Here, too, the idea of race or caste comes into play: *humilis natus parentis* meant born of the people, in the pejorative, plebeian sense, by contrast to noble birth, and hence in a sense that diverges significantly from the modern one of the expression ‘of humble origins’, especially considering that practically the sole criterion for social positions today is the economic one. In any case, a Roman of the good old days would never have dreamed of making a virtue of *humilitas*, let alone of boasting of it or of preaching it to others. As for a certain ‘morality of humility’, one might recall the remark of a Roman emperor, that nothing is more despicable than the pride of those who say they are humble — which does not mean that arrogance and presumptuousness are to be encouraged.<sup>55</sup>

**9 — *Ingenium*.** The modern word has only preserved part of the ancient sense of the term and, once again, its least interesting aspect. In Latin, *ingenium* also signified perspicacity, sharpness of mind, sagacity, and foresight — but at the same time, it referred to one’s character, to that which in each person is organic, innate, and really one’s own.<sup>56</sup> *Vana ingenia* could therefore refer to persons without character; *redire ad ingenium* could mean to return to one’s own nature, to a lifestyle consistent with what one really is. This more important sense has been lost in the modern word, which has acquired almost the opposite meaning. Indeed, if we understand ‘ingeniousness’ in an intellectualistic and dialectic sense, it clearly stands in contrast to the second meaning of the ancient term, which refers to one’s character, to a style that conforms with one’s own nature. The modern term indicates superficiality by contrast to what is organic; a restless, brilliant and inventive mobility of the mind, in contrast to a rigorous way of thinking perfectly suited to one’s own character.

**10 — *Labor*.** So far as the changes in the value attached to words goes, changes that clearly indicate a radical change in world-view, the most typical case is perhaps the term *labor*. In Latin, this word had a mainly negative meaning. Although in some cases it could refer to activity in general — as in the expression *labor rei militaris*, activity in the army — its predominant meaning expressed the idea of toil, exhaustion, unpleasant effort, and sometimes even misfortune, torment, a burden, a punishment. The Greek term *ponos* had an analogous meaning.<sup>57</sup> Thus, *laborare* could also mean to suffer, to be anguished or tormented. *Quid ego laboravi?* means: ‘Why did I torment myself?’ *Laborare ex renis, ex capite* means: to suffer from backache or headache. *Labor itineris* means: the fatigue and inconvenience of travel — and so on.

The Roman, then, would never have thought of making *labor* a sort of virtue and social ideal. Yet Roman civilisation can hardly be described as a civilisation of slackers, loafers, and ‘idlers’. The truth is that at that time there was a sense of distance. ‘Work’ stood in contrast to *agere*, action in the higher sense. ‘Work’ corresponded to the dark, material, servile and insignificant forms of human activity, and referred to those for whom activity was determined exclusively by need, necessity or an unfortunate fate (the ancient world also had a metaphysics of slavery). Opposed to such people were those who act in the proper sense of the term, those who devote

themselves to free, non-physical, conscious, deliberate and to some extent disinterested forms of action. Indeed, the term ‘work’ was not applied in the case of a person who exercised material activities, but rather it was applied with a certain qualitative character, and on the basis of an authentic and free vocation; such a person was an *artifex* (there was also the term *opifex*), and this view was also retained in later times, in the climate and style of the traditional craft guilds.

The change in the meaning and value of the word in question is therefore a very clear sign of the plebeian character that has increasingly come to dominate the Western world, a civilisation increasingly shaped by what are in any complete social hierarchy the lowest strata. The modern ‘cult of work’ is all the more aberrant because today, more than ever, in our regime of industrialisation, mechanisation and anonymous mass production, work has necessarily lost any higher value it might have had. Despite this, we have come to speak of a ‘religion of work’, of a ‘humanism of work’ and even of a ‘labour state’, making work a kind of insolent ethical and social imperative for everyone, to which one almost wants to answer defiantly with the Spanish saying *El hombre que trabaja pierde un tiempo precioso* (‘The man who works loses precious time’).

More generally, I have already noted on another occasion that the traditional world stands in contrast to the modern by virtue of the fact that whereas in the former ‘work’ could take the form of an ‘action’ or art, in the modern world even action and art sometimes take on the character of ‘work’ — that is, of a coerced, opaque and interested activity performed, not according to a vocation, but according to need and, above all, for profit, for *lucre*.

**11 — *Otium*.** This term has undergone a change exactly inverse to that of the preceding one: almost without exception, it has acquired a pejorative meaning. According to modern usage, someone is idle<sup>58</sup> when he is useless to himself and to others. To be idle is more or less the same as to be indolent, distracted, inactive, listless, and prone to the ‘*dolce far niente*’ of today’s mandolin-playing Italy for tourists.<sup>59</sup> However, the Latin *otium* once meant a period of free time essentially corresponding to a meditative state of concentration, calm, and transparent contemplation. Idleness<sup>60</sup> in the negative sense — which was also known in antiquity — indicated only what this can lead to when misused: only in such cases could the Romans say, for example, *hebescere otio* or *otio diffluere*, that is to become stupid or

dissipated through idleness. But this is not the predominant sense. Cicero, Seneca, and other Classical authors chiefly understood *otium* as the healthy and normal counterpart to all forms of action, and even as a necessary condition for action to truly be action, and not agitation, business (*negotium*) or ‘work’.

We could also refer to the Greeks, as Cicero wrote: *Graeci non solum ingenio atque doctrina, sed etiam otio studioque abundantes* — ‘The Greeks are rich not only in innate gifts and learning but also in *otium* and diligence’. Of Scipio the Elder it was said: *Nunquam se minus otiosum esse quam cum otiosus esset, aut minus solum esse quam cum solus esset* — ‘He was never less idle than when he was idle, and never less alone than when he enjoyed solitude’, which stresses an active (in a higher sense) type of ‘idleness’ and solitude. And Sallust wrote: *Maius commodum ex otio meo quam ex aliorum negotiis reipublicae venturum* — ‘My leisure will be more useful to the State than the busyness of others.’ To Seneca we owe a treatise entitled *De otio*, in which ‘idleness’ gradually takes on the character of pure contemplation.

It is worth mentioning some of the characteristic ideas expounded in this treatise. According to Seneca, there are two States: a greater State, without exterior and contingent limits, which encompasses both men and gods; and the particular, earthly State, to which one belongs by birth.

Now, Seneca says, there are men who serve the two States at once, others who serve only the greater State, and others that serve only the earthly State. The greater State can also be served through ‘idleness’, if not better through idleness — by investigating what constitutes *virtus*, strength and virile dignity: *huius maiori rei publicae et in otio deservire possumus, immo vero nescio an in otium melius, ut quaeremus quid sit virtus*. *Otium* is closely linked to the tranquillity of mind of the sage, to the inner calm that allows one to attain the summits of contemplation. If understood in its correct, traditional sense, contemplation is not an escape from the world or a distraction, but an immersion within oneself and elevation to the perception of the metaphysical order that every true man must never cease to keep in sight when living and struggling in an earthly State.

Moreover, even in Catholicism (before the Church came up with Christ the Worker — to be honoured on May 1 — and before it ‘opened itself to the left’) one found the phrase *sacrum otium*, ‘sacred idleness’, which referred precisely to a contemplative activity. But in a civilisation in which all action has taken on the dull, physical, mechanical and mercenary traits of

work, even when that work is done in one's mind ('intellectual workers', who naturally also have their 'unions' and fight for the 'demands of their professional sector'), the positive and traditional meaning of contemplation was bound to be lost. This is why in relation to modern civilisation we should speak not of an 'active civilisation' but of a restless and neurotic one. As compensation for 'work' and a reaction against the strain of a life that has been reduced to a vain acting and producing, Classical *otium* — contemplation, silence, the state of calm and pause allowing one to return to oneself and find oneself again — is foreign to modern man. No: all he knows is 'distraction' (the literal meaning of which is 'dispersion');<sup>61</sup> he looks for sensations, for new tensions, and new stimuli — almost as psychic narcotics. Anything, as long as he can escape himself, as long as he can avoid finding himself alone with himself, isolated from the noise of the outside world and interaction with his 'neighbour'. Hence the radio, television, cinema, cruises, the frenzy of sports or political rallies in a regime of the masses, the need to hear things, to chase after the latest or most sensational news, 'supporters' of all kinds, and so on. Every expedient seems to have been diabolically brought into play in order to destroy any kind of genuine inner life, to prevent any internal defence of one's personality, so that, almost like an artificially galvanised being, the individual will let himself be swept away by the collective current, which — naturally, according to the famous 'meaning of history' — moves forward according to an unlimited progress.<sup>62</sup>

**12 — *Theoria*.** Through an association of ideas, this brings to mind the collapse which the meaning of the Greek term *theoria* has undergone. To speak of 'theories' today is more or less to refer to 'abstractions', things far removed from reality, 'intellectual' matters; a great poet even wrote: 'All theory is grey, my friend. But forever green is the tree of life.'<sup>63</sup> Again, we find an alteration and a weakening of meaning. According to its ancient meaning, *θεωρία* does not signify abstract intellectuality but a fulfilling vision, something particularly active, the act of the highest principle in man, the *νοῦς*, or Olympian intellect (which will be discussed in another chapter).<sup>64</sup>

**13 — *Servitium*.** The verb *servio*, *servire* in Latin also has the positive sense of 'to be faithful'. However, the predominant meaning is the negative one, 'to be a servant'; it is this latter sense, in any case, that lies at the basis of



the other word, *servitium*, which specifically meant slavery, serfdom, as it derived from *servus* = slave. In modern times, the word ‘to serve’ has become increasingly widespread, while losing this negative and demeaning connotation, to the point that, especially among the Anglo-Saxon peoples, service as ‘social service’ has almost become a kind of ethic, the only truly modern ethic. And just as people have not sensed the absurdity of speaking of ‘intellectual workers’, they have come to see the sovereign as ‘the first servant of the nation’.

In this respect too it is worth noting that, just as the Romans clearly were not a race of ‘idlers’, they also present us with the highest examples of political loyalty, of loyalty to the State and to its leaders. However, the tone is very different. The change in the soul of words is not a matter of chance. The fact that words like *labor*, *servitium*, and *otium* have become common in their modern sense is a subtle yet eloquent sign of a shift of perspective, which has certainly not occurred in the direction of virile, aristocratic, and qualitative vocations.

**14 — *Stipendium*.** We hardly need to mention what the word ‘stipend’ means today. One immediately thinks of an employee, of bureaucracy, of pay-day for civil servants. In ancient Rome, the same term referred almost exclusively to the army. *Stipendium merere* meant to be in the military, under the orders of a particular leader or commander. *Emeritis stipendis* meant after having completed military service; *homo nullius stipendii* meant one who had not known the discipline of arms. *Stipendis multa habere* meant to boast many campaigns, many military enterprises.<sup>65</sup> Here too, the difference is a significant one.

The complete meaning of other Latin words, such as *studium* and *studiosus*, currently only survives in certain special turns of phrase, such as the Italian expression ‘*fare con studio*’, meaning to do something on purpose or with a certain diligence. The Latin term conveyed the idea of intensity, warmth, and keenly felt interest, which has been obscured in the modern word, which brings to mind more or less arid intellectual or scholastic disciplines. The Latin *studium* could even mean love, desire, a vivid inclination. *In re studium ponere* meant taking something to heart, taking a deep and keen interest in it. *Studium bellandi* meant the pleasure, the love of combat. *Homo agendi studiosus* was one who loves action — recalling what was said earlier about *labor*, he was the opposite of the man for whom action can only mean ‘work’ — What should we make, today, of

an expression like *studiosi Caesaris*? It did not mean those who study Caesar, but those who follow him, who admire him, which take his side, and who are devoted and loyal to him.<sup>66</sup>

Other words whose ancient meaning has been forgotten are, for example, *docilitas*, which did not mean docility, but good disposition or ability to learn, to assimilate a teaching or principle; also *ingenuus*, which did not at all mean ingenuous, but referred to the free-born man, to a non-servile condition. It is more or less widely known that the Latin word *humanitas* did not mean ‘humanity’ in the democratic and decayed sense of today, but cultivation of the self, fullness of life and of experience — and this, originally, not even in the ‘humanist’ sense *à la* Humboldt.<sup>67</sup> Another rather telling example: *certus*. In the ancient Latin tongue, the notion of certainty, of something certain, was often connected to the idea of a conscious decision. *Certum est mihi* means: it is my firm resolve. *Certus gladio* is he who can rely on his sword, who knows how to use it. A well-known phrase is *diebus certis*, which does not mean ‘on certain days’ but on the fixed, established days. This could lead us to considerations about a particular conception of certainty: an active conception, certainty as dependent on what lies within our power to decide. Much in the same spirit, Giambattista Vico enunciated the formula *verum et factum convertuntur* — but everything was to end later in the digressions of neo-Hegelian ‘absolute idealism’.<sup>68</sup> I will bring these observations to a close by examining the original content of three ancient Roman notions, those of *fatum*, *felicitas*, and *fortuna*.

**15. *Fatum*.** According to the most common modern usage of the term, ‘fate’ is a blind power looming over men which imposes itself on them by making what they least of all desire come true, possibly pushing them towards tragedy and misfortune. Hence the term ‘fatalism’, the opposite of any attitude of free, effective initiative. According to the fatalistic world-view, the individual is nothing; his actions, despite his apparent free will, are either predestined or vain, and events unfold according to a law or power that transcends him and that does not take him into any account whatsoever. The adjective ‘fatal’ has a prevalently negative meaning: ‘fatal’ outcome, ‘fatal’ accident, the ‘fatal hour of death’, and so on.<sup>69</sup>

According to its ancient meaning, *fatum* instead essentially corresponded to the law of the continuous development of the world; this law was not deemed blind, irrational, and automatic — ‘fatal’ in the modern sense of the

word — but full of meaning, and proceeding from an intelligent will, above all the will of the Olympian powers. Like the Indo-European *rta*,<sup>70</sup> Roman *fatum* referred to the notion of the world as a cosmos and order, and in particular to the concept of history as a development of causes and events reflecting a higher meaning. Even the Fates of the Greek tradition, while presenting some evil and ‘infernal’ aspects (due to the influence of pre-Hellenic and pre-Indo-European cults), often appear as personifications of the intelligent and just law that governs the universe in certain of its manifestations.

However, the idea of *fatum* acquired particular importance above all in Rome. The reason for this is that Roman civilisation was, of all traditional and sacred civilisations, the one that focused especially on the plane of action and historical reality. Rome was less concerned with knowing the cosmic order as a supra-temporal and metaphysical law than it was with knowing it as a force operating within reality, as a divine will ordering events. This was linked to *fatum* in the Roman sense. This expression comes from the verb *fari*, which also gives the word *fas*, right as divine law. Thus, *fatum* alludes to the ‘word’ — meaning the revealed word, first and foremost that of the Olympian deities, which allows men to know the right norm (*fas*) and also announces what is going to occur. Regarding this second aspect, oracles — through which a special traditional art sought to discern, in embryonic form, whatever corresponded to situations in the process of being realised — were also called *fata*; these were almost the revealed word of the gods.

Given all this, we must remember, with regard to the matters we are examining, that man’s relationship to the general order of the world in ancient Rome and in traditional civilisations in general was very different from the one that later came to predominate. Although the idea of a universal law and a divine will did not erase the notion of human freedom, ancient man was constantly concerned about shaping his life and actions in such a way that they might continue the cosmic order — that they might represent, so to speak, an extension or further development of that order. Starting from *pietas*, which is to say, in Roman terms, the acknowledgement and veneration of divine forces, man set himself the task of foreseeing the direction of these forces in history, in such a way as to bring his actions into accord with them, making them as effective and meaningful as possible. Hence the important role played in the Roman world, even in the field of public affairs and the military art, by oracles and omens. The Roman was

firmly convinced that the worst mishaps, including military defeats, depended not so much on human blunders, weaknesses, or errors, as they did on neglect of the omens — meaning, essentially, the fact of having acted in a disorderly and arbitrary fashion, following merely human criteria, severing one's connections with the higher world (in Roman terms, acting without *religio*, i.e. without a connection),<sup>71</sup> without regard for the 'expedient directions' and 'right moment' ensuring a '*felicitous*' action. Note that *fortuna* and *felicitas* are often, in ancient Rome, only the other side of *fatum*, its specifically positive side. The men, the leaders or the people who use their freedom to act in accordance with the divine forces hidden in things are successful, they succeed, they triumph — and in antiquity this is what being 'fortunate' and 'felicity' meant. A modern historian, Franz Altheim, believed he could discern in this attitude the effective cause of Rome's greatness.<sup>72</sup>

In order to further clarify the link between 'fate' and human action, we can refer to modern technology. There are certain laws governing things and phenomena which can be known or ignored, which can be taken into account or neglected. In the face of these laws, man remains fundamentally free. He can even act in a manner contrary to what these laws advise, thus meeting failure in his action or else achieving his goal only after an enormous waste of energy and every kind of difficulty. Modern technology corresponds to the opposite option: one seeks to know the laws of things so as to be able to make use of them, letting them show the path of least resistance and maximum efficiency in the achievement of a given objective.

Things are no different when spiritual and 'divine' forces rather than the laws of matter are in question. Ancient man believed that it was essential to know or at least to sense these forces, in order to get an idea of the conditions propitious for a given action, and possibly an idea of what he should or should not do. For him, challenging fate, rising up against destiny, was not something 'Promethean' in the Romantic sense glorified by the moderns: it was simply foolish. For ancient man, impiety (meaning the opposite of *pietas*, i.e. the lack of *religio*, of a 'connection' with, and respectful understanding of, the cosmic order) was more or less equivalent to stupidity, childishness, and fatuousness. The comparison with modern technology is flawed in one respect: the laws of historical reality did not present themselves as inanimately 'objective' and completely detached from man and his goals. One might say: the objective, divine order connected to 'fate' extends up to a certain limit, beyond which it ceases to be decisive and

only amounts to a tendency (hence the well-known astrological formula: *astra inclinant non determinant, i.e. the stars influence but do not determine*). This is the point at which the human and historical world, properly speaking, begins. Normally, this world should be continuous with the previous one: in other words, human will should carry the 'divine' will further. Whether this occurs or not essentially depends on freedom: one must will it. If it does occur, that which was only potentiality is realised through human action. The human world will then manifest itself as a continuation of the divine order, and history itself will take the form of a revelation and a 'sacred history'. Man, in this case, will no longer have any value in himself, will no longer act for his own sake, but will be invested with divine dignity, and the whole human world will somehow acquire a higher dimension.

It is evident, therefore, that we are dealing with something quite different from 'fatalism'. Just as any action that goes against 'fate' is foolish and irrational, any action in harmony with 'fate' is not only effective, but also transfiguring. Whoever fails to take *fatum* into account is almost invariably destined to be passively carried along by events; he who knows *fatum*, makes it his own and grafts himself onto it, is instead led to accomplish a higher purpose, by possessing more than a merely individual significance. This is the meaning of the ancient maxim that *fata 'nolentem trahunt, volentem ducunt'*.<sup>73</sup>

In the ancient Roman world and in ancient Roman history, there are numerous episodes, situations and institutions that convey the sense of a 'fateful' encounter between the human world and the divine one, of forces from above that flow through history and manifest themselves in human actions. To limit ourselves to one example, we might recall that 'the culmination of the Roman cult of Jupiter was an action in which the god manifested his victorious essence in a man, the *vir triumphalis*. Jupiter is not just the cause of victory, but is himself the victor; the triumph is not celebrated in his honour, but he himself is the triumphant one. It is for this reason that the *imperator* wears the god's insignia' (K. Kerényi, F. Altheim).<sup>74</sup> To realise the divine in one's actions and life — sometimes prudently, sometimes boldly — was a guiding principle that ancient Rome applied also to the political order. Likewise, some authors have rightly noted the degree to which Rome lacked myths in the abstract and supra-historical sense prevalent in some other civilisations; in Rome myth becomes history, just as history, in turn, takes on a 'fateful' aspect and becomes myth.

An important consequence follows from this. What is realised in such cases is ultimately an identity. It is no longer a matter of a divine word that can either be heeded or not. Rather, this is a kind of unfolding whereby human will appears to coincide with that of higher forces. Here we are in the presence of a very particular, objective, almost transcendental concept of freedom. By opposing *fatum*, I can of course lay claim to a free will, but this is a sterile freedom, a mere 'gesture', since it cannot have any deep effect on the fabric of reality. By contrast, when I act in such a way that my will continues a higher order, that is, when it becomes the instrument by which that order is realised in history, in such a state of coincidence or attunement, what I will may possibly become a command directed at objective forces that otherwise would not easily be dominated, or would have no regard for what human beings desire or hope for.

Now, we may wonder: how did we come to this modern notion of fate as an obscure and blind force? Like many other such changes, this shift is far from random. It reflects a change in people's inner level and can essentially be explained by the rise of individualism and 'humanism' understood in a general sense, which is to say by reference to a civilisation and world-view based exclusively on what is human and earthly. It is evident that once this break occurred one could then perceive, no longer an intelligible order of the world, but only the power of something obscure and alien. 'Fate' thus became the general symbol of all the deeper forces at work, over which man — for all his mastery of the physical world — has little power, since he no longer understands them and has cut himself off from them; but it also symbolises those forces that man, through his own attitude, has released and made sovereign in certain domains of existence.

With this study of the ancient and modern notions of *fatum*, I will end my series of examples. They should suffice to give the reader an idea of how important and interesting an enlightened philology would be, since — as already noted — words have a soul and life, and a return to their origins can often open up surprising perspectives. This work, however, would be even more fruitful if, instead of merely going back from modern 'Romance' languages to the ancient Latin tongue, it connected Latin itself to the much broader, common family of Indo-European languages, of which Latin, in its fundamental elements, represents but one distinct branch.