William Law: Imagination and the Transfiguring of Nature

SELF-SHAPING AND SELF-DENIAL: BACKGROUNDS TO LAW

One paradox of Erasmus' position is that he was often a good deal more elitist than his teachings. As a learned Humanist, he deployed the sophisticated weapons of philology and satire, writing in Latin for those who could appreciate the delicate aggressions of his fine style. In this, his appeal was hardly populist. By contrast, Luther was a leveller in a way Erasmus could never be, and embraced non-clerical life with a gusto that would have made Erasmus faint. Luther married, liked to drink beer, and wrote in German; yet, like Erasmus, he also focused his reform on the priority for Christians of an irreducibly private and interior spiritual experience. In the preface to his Works (1545) he explains how, despite the 'apparently good character of his life as a monk', he had in fact hated God. Contrary to appearances, he had been oppressed by an anguish of guilt until a particular experience of divine grace relieved him.

Luther's experience soon became the charter for other, similar declarations of independence, and as the Reformation spread, so did the variety of confessions of faith and styles of worship praising the mysterious ways of God's spirit working secretly within. On the Catholic side, a parallel set of reforms mirrored Erasmus' stress on the committed will. One result was a new style of mysticism among the alumbrados in Spain and in the 'French School' of Pierre de Bérulle and his followers, issuing eventually into the so-called Quietism that caused the church such unease. Miguel de Molinos (1628–96), Jeanne Guyon (1648–1717), and François Fenelon (1651–1715) preached a version of Bérulle's 'culte du non-moi' that seemed to render the individual so excessively passive before God's grace as to admit indifference to prayer and good works. And so
the church suppressed the Quietists, just as it suppressed the Protestants, who in turn took arms not only against the common Roman enemy, but also against other Protestants. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europe was plagued by religious wars and persecutions, including a crazed and widespread fever of witch-hunting. With good reason, the Enlightenment philosophes sought to wipe their hands of the whole thing, condemning Christianity at large as a war-mongering, superstitious infamy to be satirised from the perspective of enlightened common sense.

Surprising as it might seem, as satirists and stylists, Erasmus and Voltaire have a good deal in common. But in the period between the *Praise of Folly* and *Candide*, Erasmus was scarcely well-enough heard. Luther broke with him, condemning him as a ditherer, and the Roman Church to which he remained loyal put his works on the Index of prohibited books. The wars he had so vehemently denounced spread like wildfire, and the attempted synthesis within his own thinking between traditional consensus and private experience did not survive in the larger arena, but flew apart with a violence that was to reshape European culture beyond his wildest dreams. As I suggested in Chapter 5, in such a context it is possible to chart the emergence of a particular sense of the modern person as a singular individual self, an island of consciousness in the indifferent universe described and charted by the new science. The person thus comes to see itself with special intensity as called to appropriate and shape a material world industriously, and in the manner of rational self-interest.

In order to place William Law (1686–1761) within the story of such a developing sense of the modern person as an individual, self-conscious agent, I need briefly to consider one further aspect of Renaissance thought ignored by Erasmus and Luther, but not by Bacon. For despite his devotion to Plato, Erasmus did not draw much from the Florentine Platonism promulgated by Ficino and his followers, and Luther avoided it altogether. According to the Florentine Academy, Plato occupied a special place among the *prisci theologi*, the earliest theologians who were the wellsprings of God’s revelation to the human race. These theologians included Moses and Hermes Trismegistus as well as such figures as Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato. Hermes Trismegistus was the supposed author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which Ficino translated into Latin as part of his grand project of making available to Western readers the full texts of Plato and Plotinus and other Greek authors lost to