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The Shattering of the Crystal Spheres: ‘rolling from the centre toward X’

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Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the centre toward X.

Nietzsche 1968, §1.5

Since Copernicus, man seems to have got himself on an inclined plane – now he is slipping faster and faster away from the centre into what? into nothingness? into a ‘penetrating sense of his nothingness’?

Nietzsche 1969 III §25

Therein we have the reason why every man, whether he be on earth, in the sun, or on another planet, always has the impression that all other things are in movement whilst he himself is in a sort of immovable centre; he will certainly always choose poles which will vary according as his place of existence is the sun, the earth, the moon, Mars etc. In consequence, there will always be a machina mundi whose centre so to speak, is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere, for God is its circumference and centre and he is everywhere and nowhere.

Cusa, De Docta Ignorantia Bk. II, Ch. 12

I

Kant claims that his achievement in philosophy is the analogue of that of Copernicus’ in cosmology. Colloquially this carries the sense of a major paradigmatic shift in perception: since Kant is claiming for his achievement the status of a rupture with the past, a clean break. The problem with this claim, however, is revealed as soon as one begins to examine the cosmological, metaphysical and concomitant political charge of Copernicus’ work. It then becomes apparent that Kant’s claim is not really as apocalyptic, as cataclysmic, or as revolutionary, for the terms, conventions, limits and possibilities of thought as he would wish us to think. It is ultimately in
Bataille’s sense, comical. ‘No one can say without being comical that he is getting ready to overturn things: He must overturn, and that’s all’ (Bataille 1991 20/10). Put otherwise, in the line of thought being followed here, Kant’s thought is characterised as being a ‘renovated theology’ (Deleuze 1983, 93). In consequence, far from constituting the invention of a thought that would escape State-form and ‘blast open the continuum of history’ (Benjamin 1973, 264), Kantianism is taken to be a clandestine means of reinstating transcendence.2 The link between the State-form and transcendence is the compliment to the intimacy that can be explored in an abstract diagram of immanent critique and philosophico-political heresy; this intimacy is not accidental but constitutive; the State-form in its different manifestations through history is sustained by transcendence.3 Deleuze and Guattari capture the issue thus:

Whenever there is transcendence, vertical Being, imperial state in the sky or on earth, there is religion; and there is philosophy wherever there is immanence. (Deleuze and Guattari 1991, 46; 1994, 43)

An understanding of this abstract diagram of power and transcendence is the necessary precondition of accepting Kant’s claim to be Copernican; it does of course give that claim an entirely different, negative or strictly delimited value. We can accept Kant’s claim to be Copernican insofar as Copernicus’ revolution is understood as merely having carried out a cosmic swapping of places: that is to say, he places the Sun in the centre of the cosmos, where the Earth had been. Copernicus, in other words, replaces geo- with the still more ancient heliocentrism,4 and trades one variant of hierarchical thinking for another; he leaves in place the clockwork mechanisms of the Ptolemaic cosmos, preserves the crystal spheres, allows them to continue floating in the ether, and allows them to continue playing the resonating music that had entertained despots and popes, and stupefied the subjected for a millennium and a half. This celestial symphony is not disrupted until the rude intervention of the apostate Dominican of Nola, Giordano Bruno, and his decision to stop listening to the ‘asses dressed up with diadems and hacks decked with rings under the title of doctors’ (Bruno 1998, 25). It is only with Bruno that the closed cosmos of the medieval mind is definitively exploded, and it is left to Bruno to venture the possibility of a way of thinking other than the hierarchical, the stratified, for Bruno announces the necessity of thinking the world topologically, rhizomically, and of creating concepts that will reflect the fluid complexity of such a reality, an open conceptual structure, acentric and connected each point to every other by transversal lines, a cosmos and a thought form without a transcendent centre to anchor it. Bruno proclaims an unstable cosmos lacking hierarchy, value and direction, in which meaning does not limit itself, for wherever it goes, always and everywhere it is visible at the centre of the horizon, whether it shifts its