BERKELEY AND *Liber mundi*

Costică Brădăţan

TEXT

**This electronic edition is a *non-profit* publication
produced by PDFTEX 14.H &
created by LATEX 2$_\varepsilon$ with HYPERREF & HYPERSCREEN**

Costică Brădăţan

BERKELEY AND *Liber mundi*
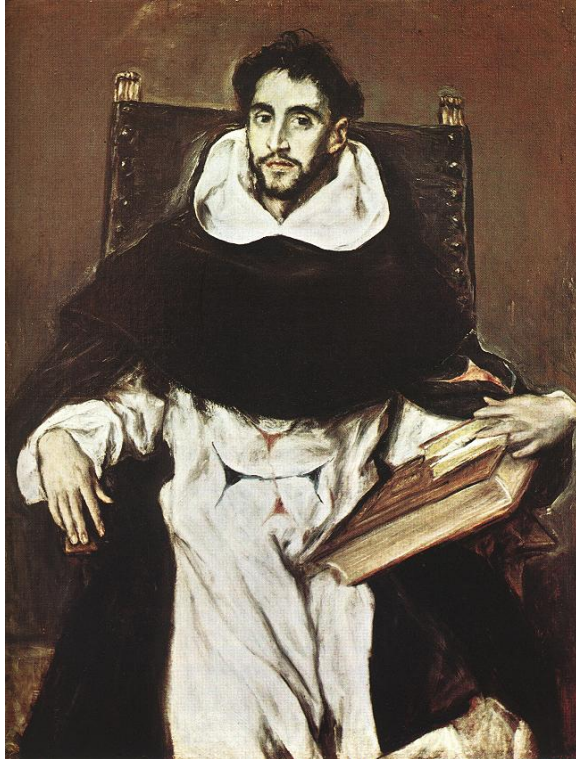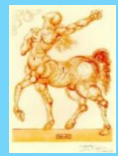
Berkeley and *Liber mundi*[0]

The paradoxical (and also ambitious) aim of this paper consists in attempting to point out the vigorous presence of such a specifically "mediaeval" topic as *liber mundi* in the works of such a conventionally "modern" philosopher as George Berkeley (1685–1753). The solution of this "paradox" lies, as I shall try to show, in considering Berkeley as a kind of *liminal philosopher* between the mediaeval and the modern, as a surprising intellectual bridge between these two worlds, or even as a mediaeval latecomer on the stage of modernity. Methodologically, in doing it I have preferred that my historical approach to *liber mundi* be retrospectively pre-determined and confined only to some of its aspects by the particular way in which this topic appears in Berkeley; so that many other important cultural implications of *liber mundi* have only been mentioned

---

in footnotes. As a matter of fact, my paper consists of two parts: 1) a brief history of the development of the *liber mundi* topic (St. Paul to modern times); and 2) a "case study": the presence of the topic in Berkeley's philosophy itself.

1

Liber mundi represents one of the most fascinating cultural-philosophical topics of the mediaeval universe. It is such a kind of prevailing metaphor that eventually comes to mirror the whole of a civilization. Interestingly, its Christian foundational principle may be stated, at the same time, in both St. John (i, 1–14) and St. Paul (1 Corinthians. xiii. 12–3), and this "double grounding" will be preserved and easily recognizable along all the subsequent developments of the topic. As the idea of *liber mundi* necessarily requires two elements (a *text* to be read and a *reader* to do it), let us consider, on one hand, St. John's grounding as containing *liber mundi* "text perspective" and, on the other hand, St. Paul grounding's as containing *liber mundi* "reader's perspective". Let also add that these perspectives are not opposite at all, but, on the contrary, they are fully complementary.

Firstly, from a strictly theological point of view, we find in St. John's Gospel the proper ground on which *liber mundi* is based: "In (the) beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things received being through him, and without him not one (thing) received being which has received being. [...] And the Word became flesh". There is, in this short passage, a surprisingly fruitful ambiguity, since the word "Word", as it is presented in John's Gospel, is the translation of the Greek word *logos*, meaning both

"word" (*verbum*) and "reason" (*ratio*). As a result, from a Christian standpoint, the Incarnation made the world not only "readable" (since the Word "penetrated" and "inscribed" it), but also "ration-able", comprehensible (since God as *ratio* came the world into being).[1] That would represent a crucial premise of the European civilization as one "obsessed" with the knowledge of world. The world is considered "thinkable" since it essentially contains "reason" (*logos*), that is, the process of knowledge of the world is a process of "self-recognition" by which our reason (as a faculty of knowledge) recognizes itself in the very essence of the world (as one which came into being by the Supreme Reason). One symptomatic proof for such a perennial characteristic feature of the European civilization is that provided by the fact that it is easy enough to see that St. John's saying: "All things received being through him, and without him not one (thing) received being which has received being" (1, 3) would be, many centuries after that, "re-issued" by this rather cryptic statement of G. W. F. Hegel: "What is rational is real and what is real is rational". Consequently, it is allowed to say that there is, in our Christian civilization, a *real continuity of thought* as regards the essential premises of the knowledge of world.

St. Paul's grounding of *liber mundi*, on the other hand, seems especially concerned with its soteriological and "existential" implications: "For we see now through a dim

---

[1]It must also be noted that the theological grounding of *liber mundi* is very similar to that of the icon, because, dogmatically speaking, the icon is not simply a "painting" and, therefore, a piece of idolatry. The icon can "grasp" God's image because, by Incarnation, God has decided to make Himself visible to our poor, earthy eyes. The icon is not made only by wood and paints, but it also contains a "hidden" part: God's image as a spiritual unseen reality. Thus the icon has a double nature, just as Christ has a dual nature. – Just as, of course, the book of the world itself has: *signans* and *signatum*.

window obscurely, but then face to face; now I know partially, but then I shall know according as I also have been known." (V*idemus enim nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem; nunc cognosco ex parte, tunc autem cognoscam, sicut et cognitus sum.*) Thus – supposing this "obscurity" the *highest possible form* of communication between ourselves and the transcendent – the whole world becomes a great divine system of signs and messages; no one of its parts is insignificant or accidental, each of them is a letter, a *gramma*, and the whole frame of things constitutes this most interesting "book", that we are actually faced with. We only need know *how* to "read" it. And such an act of "reading" – in St. Paul's view – contains a *praeparatio*, an "initiating phase" as a form of waiting for our real life (*tunc*).[2] This idea of St. Paul implies, as mentioned above, the "reader's perspective" on *liber mundi*: that is his/her inner needs to be "saved", his/her spiritual "benefits" and "progresses", or other intimate interests in reading it. Such a perspective essentially intends, in St. Paul, to transcend the mere and imperfect act of reading (*nunc cognosco ex parte*) and to associate the "reading" to a process of *ascensio coeli* as salvation, in order to reach a state of perfect ultimate transparency (*tunc cognoscam, sicut et cognitus sum*). Of course, we do not meet in this text by St. Paul such words as "letter", "book", "reading", and so forth. Nevertheless, there is at least one reason to believe that it is possible to use such an interpretation. This reason regards the existence of a general hermeneutic "pattern of identification" between the idea of mirror (*speculum*) and that of book (*liber*). Both of them suggest very "comprehensive" objects implying virtually unlimited contents. And it is almost superfluous to say that the

---

[2]Let us also mention that, in the same way, in Plato's *Phaedo* (61D), the function of philosophy is just to be a "preparation for death": *melethé thanathoû.*

idea of *speculum* plays a central role in St. Paul's fragment, as well as in the entire mediaeval civilization.[3]

The "existential" feature of this topic ("reader's perspective") would be developed to a significant extent by Saint Augustine in, among other works, his *Confessions*:

> You have extended like a skin the firmament of your Book, your harmonious discourses, over us by the ministry of mortals [...]. Let the angels, your supracelestial people, praise your name. They have no need to look upon this firmament, to know through reading your word. For they always see your face, and read there without the syllables of time your eternal will. They read, they choose, they love. They are always reading [...] the changelessness of your counsel. (Augustine, 1963: book 13, chap. XV, § 16–8)

Augustine strengthens the separation and gap between the two levels (the celestial and the earthly), by stating the existence of a huge ontological difference between "angels" and "mortals". But, paradoxically, his approach is at the same time intending to point out also the only way of as well as the supreme purpose for *reducing* such a difference. And it is namely within this ontological interval where the human beings are able to genuinely discover themselves and their world by comparison to the celestial

---

[3]For instance, relative to the Mediaeval encyclopedic books one modern author wrote: "Encyclopedias [...] are also called mirrors because, as Vincent (of Beauvais) says, mirrors induce speculations and imitation..." (Mazzotta 1993: 4) Let us also quote, to illustrate, some titles of Mediaeval encyclopedic books: *Speculum quadruplex* (Vincent of Beauvais), *Speculum humanae salvationis* (Hugues of Saint-Cher), *Speculum humanae conditionis,* and so forth.

"archetypes" and by finding out essential, solving similitudes to the celestial world. For

> as Augustine assumes a distinction between heavenly and worldly books, his own passage illustrates the value of meditating on their similitude, and his procedure corresponds perfectly with the broad exhortation of the fathers of the church who instructed mediaeval readers to clarify and explain the mysterious purpose of the divine Word within the revealed words, such us the Bible and the Book of nature." (Gellrich 1985: 29)[4]

Let us note that such ideas are central to the Augustinian doctrine, and the capital significance of Saint Augustine in the history of *liber mundi* has been generally recognized by the modern writers who paid attention to this topic. For example, Umberto Eco says: "The Middle Ages would borrow from Augustine the idea of a perfect language, that is not a language of the words, but one of the things, a language of a world which is – as later it would be called – *quasi liber scriptus digito Dei.*" (Eco 1994: 11)[5]

It is a matter of common experience that such a topic as *liber mundi* could appear in a fully explicit manner within a "religion of the Book"[6] only. And it was namely the

---

[4]I wish to express my grateful thanks to Prof. Giuseppe Mazzotta (Yale University) for having indicated me Gellrich's book, as well as for other suggestions related to the *liber mundi* topic.

[5]Interestingly, this idea of the "invisible hand" would represent a central concept in Adam Smith's economic theory. Of course, in Smith's view, the "invisible hand" is not a direct manifestation of God, but, symptomatically for the modern *Weltanschauung...* of the laws of free market.

[6]That is why this topic appears also in the other "religions of the Book". For instance, as

central role which the *Bible* played in Christianity[7] that made this topic significant to a so great extend within the mediaeval worldview: "In its simplest form, the idea of the Book begins in mediaeval readings of the Bible." (Gellrich 1985: 32) It is easy to observe that within the mediaeval *Weltanschauung* the Bible represented a universal divine "prototype" of all possible human knowledge, and the celebrated, inimitable model of every (religious or not) kind of writing. The Bible "fascinated" the mediaeval people to such an extent that eventually it came to belong to a kind of "*a priori* cultural pattern" by means of which the surrounding world was pre-perceived and comprehended. In short, the mere fact of the "centrality" of this sacred text determined almost all the subsequent meditations on the book *qua talis.* On the other hand – and in addition to the Christian prestige of the Book itself (as a "revealed" or "divinely inspired" text) – the book, at the time when Christianity emerged, was already a "cultural product" generally received as the most important means for preserving, teaching and enhancing human knowledge: within a conveniently limited space it was possible to store an enormous amount of information. The book was then considered an "object" governed by some strict constructing and functioning rules, and therefore an autonomous and self-sufficient entity, a determined "device" whose functionality and usefulness could be easily controlled. In other words, the book had numerous theological, historical and technical premises as to become a fully

---

regards Muslim civilization, Mohhyddin ibn-Arabi considers that "this Universe is an immense book". (Chevalier and Gheerbrandt 1969: entry "Book")

[7]"The old traditional religions of the Greeks and the Romans were not embodied in sacred books. Judaism and Christianity and, later, Mohammedanism were religions of the book. The name, Bible, may come from *biblion*, papyrus rolls, or from Byblus, a town in Syria famous as a papyrus market; as we have it, the Bible was written down between 1000 B.C. and A.D. 150." (Artz 1980: 39–40)

convenient and useful metaphor within the mediaeval worldview.

On the other hand, it must be noted that, by its own religious and cultural suppositions, the mediaeval civilization did seriously imply the belief in an ordering and organizing principle as an earthly imitation or "shadow" of the heavenly order.[8] But "the belief in a revealed theological-symbolic universe is the premise making possible the representation of the totality and unity of knowledge". (Mazzotta 1993: 5) The ideas of "unity" and "totality" of knowledge are constant and essential characteristics of the mediaeval scholarship and cultural forms. To the mediaeval mind such a concept as the "infinity of knowledge" with regard to human capacities sounded heretical or even inconceivable. Hence a general scholarly tendency that embodied all along the Middle Ages in "the commonplace attempt to gather all strands of learning together into an enormous Text, an encyclopedia or summa, that would mirror the historical and transcendental orders just as the Book of God's Word (the Bible) was a speculum of the Book of his Work (nature)". (Gellrich 1985:18) That is why, given the historical considerations above mentioned, the idea of book conveniently represents the idea of a central principle organizing and structuring the whole knowledge of the world. Thus, by paraphrasing Thomas of Celano's words, the book of the world would eventually be a book in which the total is contained (*liber in quo totum continetur*). (Gellrich 1985: 32)

"The prose of the world", as Michel Foucault would later call it (Foucault 1971,

---

[8]It is not difficult to see that a certain "Platonic" dimension is present in this principle of imitation. According to some authors, such an imitative trend seems to reach its maximum in the thirteenth-century: "The perception of the earthly society as an ordered structure reflecting the greater harmonies of the universe was [...] a basic pillar supporting the thirteenth-century world view." (Barber 1993: 475)

chap. 2), is a significant texture of *the things themselves* and a writing of an un-human author. "Learning to read the signs of that Book was a process not of inventing' or creating' *sententia* for the sentences' in the Bible or nature, but of coming to comprehend a writing" (Gellrich 1985: 34) that was, as it were, *objective*. Since this writing is not a human product at all, but belongs to the "things themselves", it arises the necessity of searching for its proper "author". Such a compelling necessity was remarked and considered by all those who have been concerned with this kind of problems. Jacques Derrida, for instance, considers this writing as one transcending itself in trying to find its own "eternal" author. This writing is comprehended

> [...] within a totality, and enveloped in a volume or a book. The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. (Derrida 1976: 18)

As to Jesse Gellrich, he seems at this point rather "alerted" by a so to say *confusio linguarum* between the two levels of writing: celestial and earthly:

> This summary by Derrida points to the inevitability of the idea of the book' in the Middle Ages as soon as a signifying system – words in Scripture, things in nature – became a metaphor for divinity: the entire preexistent totality' of God's plan was potential in the signifying means. Although Augustine began with a distinction between writing and the celestial Book, mediaeval reflections on the boundary line between them seem fascinated by the presence of one in the other. (Gellrich 1985: 35)

As a matter of fact, in order to avoid such a unfruitful deadlock it seems reasonable to suppose that this *confusio* is rather a necessary and desirable "meeting point" of the two complementary perspectives assumed above ("the text perspective" and "the reader's perspective") than a disorganizing agent or even a piece of metaphysical *hubris*. Because the very statement of the ontological difference paradoxically supposes also a way of reducing it: the "reading" of the world text necessarily causes an *elevatio animi* inside the "reader", and he/she is therefore closer and closer to the Author of the world book, retrieving – in religious terms – his/her "natural" place in the realm of the Heavens.

From a philosophical standpoint, it must be said that St. Bonaventura (1221–1274) is one of the most important mediaeval thinkers who develops deeply and throws a light on this topic. In Bonaventura's view,[9] by looking carefully at the world around us (*natura* or *creatura*), we would be able to discover also something about the nature, the laws, and the ways of God Himself as a *Creator*. The knowledge of "this world" is the first stage of an ascending epistemic process by which the human is approaching God (*elevatio animi*).[10] This first stage (*theologia symbolis*) supposes the consideration

---

[9]Set forth especially in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum, Breviloquium, De reductione artium ad theologiam, Commentaria* [...]. ("As a bachelor he lectured first on the Scriptures (1248) and then (1250–52) on the *Sencentes* of Peter Lombard.") (Wippel and Wolter 1969: 298)

[10]This process is, of course, much more complex than presented here, the "reading" of *liber creaturarum* being just a first stage. As a matter of fact, "this elevation is marked by three main stages. The first one consists in finding again God's traces within sensible world; the second one consists in searching for God's *image* in our souls; and the third one consists in transcending all created things and finding the mystical delights of the knowledge and adoration of God ." (Gilson 1986: chap. VIII, § 2)

of the sensible world as a system of signs (*vestigia*) revealing God: "Like through a mirror, we can contemplate God within the sensible things, not only since they are signs, but by themselves, as *essence*, *power* and *presence* [of God]" (*Sed quoniam circa speculum sensibilium non solum contingit contemplari Deum* per ipsa *tanquam per vestigia, verum etiam* in ipsis, *in quantum est in eis per* essentiam, potentiam *et* praesentiam.); "And these are the signs by means of which we can meditate on [our] God." (*Haec autem sunt vestigia, in quibus speculari possum Deum nostrum.*); "Thus, everything we are able to know [...] indicates obviously by itself that we can, like throw a mirror, see the eternal generation of the Word, [as] Image and Son of God, the eternally generator Father." (*Sic ergo omnia cognoscibilia [...] manifeste proclamat, quod in illis tanquam in speculis videri potest aeterna generatio Verbi, Imaginis et Filii a Deo Patre aeternaliter emanantis.*) (*Itinerarium...*, chap. 2) Let us finally say that the certainty and efficiency of this theological approach are assured by the very fact that a knowledge of this kind is very similar to a process of *reading*. For, in another work of his, Bonaventura considers "the creature of the world as a book illuminating the creative Trinity" (*Creatura mundi est quasi quidam liber in quo relucet [...] Trinitas fabricatrix*). (*Breviloquium*m, II, chap. 12).[11]

But a lot of other mediaeval scholars and theologians must also be considered as belonging to this way of thinking: Scottus Eriugena, Guilelmus of Auvergne, Raymundus Lullus, Raymond Sebond and so forth. Raymond Sebond, for a sample, wrote a massive volume entitled *Liber creaturarum, seu Naturae, seu Liber de Homine propter quem sunt creaturae aliae*. In the Prologue to this interesting work, Sebond tries to expose a "science of the book of creatures". This is a book that every Christian must

----

[11]This last Bonaventura quotation is also used in Curtius' work cited above.

know, in order to be able to defend it and, if necessary, to die for its sake. Raymond Sebond also argues that such a science makes possible the unmistakable knowledge of the whole Catholic faith and the proof of its truth (*et per istam scientiam tota fides catholica infallibiliter cognoscitur et probatur esse vera*). This science is a complete and self-sufficient one, it does not need any other complementary sciences or books. For the only two books which God gave to us are, undoubtedly, the book of nature and the book of Scriptures: [...] *duo sunt libri dati a Deo, scilicet liber Universitatis creaturarum seu liber naturae, et alius est liber sacrae scripturae.* (Gilson 1986: chap. VIII, § 2)

The Augustinian "existentialist" dimension (or "the reader's perspective") of *liber mundi* considering the "reading" as a process of *elevatio animi* would be significantly strengthened and developed by such writers of "wisdom literature" as Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471) and Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682). In fact, it seems there is a special affinity between this type of literature and the *liber mundi* topic. Besides, by that moment the topic had already enjoyed an extremely wide spreading and various developments, so that these writers of "wisdom literature" had at their disposal an enormous heritage to valorize. For instance, in his all-famous *Imitatio Christi* Thomas à Kempis says: "If thine heart were right, then every creature should be to thee a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine" (*si rectum cor tuum esset, tunc omnis creatura speculum vitae et liber sacrae doctrinae esset*). (Thomas à Kempis 1943: 175)[12] The topic had become so to say "internalized". On the other hand, Browne's *Religio Medici* contains a much wider exposition of the cultural-scientific implications

---

[12]Let also remember the special hermeneutic relationship between mirror (*speculum*) and book (*liber*), as mentioned before.

of the topic:

> Thus there are two Books from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of His servant Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the Eyes of all; those that never saw him in the one, have discover'd Him in the other. This was the Scripture and Theology of the Heathens: the natural motions of the Sun made *them* more admire Him than its supernatural station did the Children of Israel; the ordinary effects of Nature wrought more admiration in *them* than in the other all His Miracles. Surely the Heathens knew better how to joyn and read these mystical Letters than we Christians who cast a more careless Eye on these common Hieroglyphicks, and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of Nature. (Browne 1943: 337)

Interestingly, we can see that such a fragment is fully symptomatic for an emerging "epistemic attitude". This attitude was already considered a serious and *equal* alternative to the strictly theological knowledge: namely knowing the Creature in the way in which the Ancients also did it: "those that never saw him in the one, have discover'd Him in the other. This was the Scripture and Theology of the Heathens".

As a first conclusion, in this tradition of thinking, the knowledge of nature, of "God's creatures" has – besides its specifically gnoseological, cognitive function – a "soteriological" dimension by supposing a secondary process of *elevatio animi*. This closed connection between *knowledge* and *faith* (*id est*, world knowledge was a definite part of daily religious experience) as a characteristic feature of the mediaeval worldview would represent an essential premise of the outstanding scientific developments in

modern Europe. Moreover, it is reasonable to suppose that a civilization in which the study of nature as *liber creaturarum* constituted an essential part of the adoration of God (as a *Creator*) is a civilization characterized by a so to say "drive to knowledge". And it is precisely the religious content of the mediaeval starting point that confers an extraordinary strength and depth to this secular "drive".

As a "master metaphor", *liber mundi* is without a doubt present not only in mysticism, theology and philosophy, but also in the other cultural forms of the mediaeval universe.[13] Let us, for a sample, take a look at poetry. In poetry, the cultural topic of *liber mundi* reaches undoubtedly its maturity in these famous lines by Alanus ab Insulis (d. 1203): *omnis mundi creatura / quasi liber, et pictura / nobis est, et speculum. / Nostrae vitae, nostre mortis, / Nostrae status, nostrae sortis. / Fidele signaculum.*[14] These rather "joyful" considerations are taken seriously by Giuseppe Mazzotta and regarded as

> a useful, if vague, description of the most general principles on which the poem's encyclopedic structure, its inclusive, expansive representation of the heterogeneity and totality of the world, may be rooted. For Alan's most quoted verse reflects the sense that the whole of creation is a harmonious totality and a symbolic construction of things and words, a book and

---

[13]Gellrich's book, cited so many times in this paper and to which I am so much indebted, is particularly concerned with the idea of book and with the many "cultural forms" (language theory, mythology, fiction, manuscript painting, sacred architecture, music, and so forth) of the Middle Ages (Gellrich 1985).

[14]Quoted partially by Jesse Gellrich (Gellrich 1985: 34). Let us note, one more time, the same special relationship between "mirror" and "book", as mentioned above.

a mirror, whose alphabet can be deciphered, whose arcane signs can be distinguished and classified, and whose secret allegorical images can be revealed as a faithful representation (*fidele signaculum*) of our condition. (Mazzotta 1993: 17)

As a fully symptomatic "cultural form", the mediaeval poetry thus contributes to the further consolidation of a general concept of book as symbol. As if one more "validation" of this "master metaphor" were necessary by applying it particularly to the field of poetry. As a matter of fact, this "validation" strengthens the "universality" and general "applicability" of the topic. Besides, Giuseppe Mazzotta is also that who successfully places Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) in the long tradition of using this metaphor within the Western Christian civilization. Thus, he finds Dante representative to a great extent both for what *liber mundi* philosophically means and for the encyclopedic traditions of the Middle Ages. For this purpose Mazzotta quotes the following marvellous fragment from *Divina Commedia*: "At the end of the poem the pilgrim's vision of the whole cosmos as a volume whose leaves are scattered through the layers of the material world – *Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna / legato con amore in un volume / ciò che per l'universo si squaderna: / sustanze e accidenti e lor costume / quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo / che ciò ch'io dico è un semplice lume* (*Par*: XXXIII, 85–90) (In its depth I saw ingathered, bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe: substances and accidents and their relations, as though fused together in such a way that what I tell is but a simple light) – merely confirms both Dante's notion that creation is a book and his imaginative impulse of conflating and reconstructing into a unity the rich, unfolding variety of creation." (Mazzotta 1993: 18)

Finally, the general importance of this "master metaphor" might also be revealed by the anecdotal fact that sometimes even simple letters (in a proper physical sense) were considered... "sacred". This is, of course, an extreme attitude, but we can still clearly "read" in it the strength and the general cultural significance that this metaphor had come to attain at a given moment during the Middle Ages. It was recorded, for example, that the "letters themselves were intrinsically sacred to Saint Francis de Assisi, who is said to have collected and saved every shred of parchment that he found during his travels because *litterae sunt ex quibus componitur gloriosissimum domini Dei nomen* (letters are the things from which the most glorious name of God is composed'). (Gellrich 1985: 35)[15]

2

As regards the "longevity" of this topic, Jesse Gellrich showed that "while it (the idea of Book) prevails in learned traditions from Augustine to Chaucer, it is not a transhistorical concept but is determined and stabilized by the unique homogeneity of mediaeval learning. It represents an episteme' that changed radically by the time of Francis Bacon, and consequently the Book studied in these pages is a definite mediaeval idea." (Gellrich 1985: 20) *Liber mundi* is undoubtedly a "definite mediaeval idea", but, as I shall try to show below, there are some firm grounds to believe that (at least) George Berkeley, a conventionally "modern" philosopher, may be regarded as

---

[15]For an almost exhaustive exposure of the problems of the book in the middle ages see also chap. XVI ("The Book as Symbol") in the famous work of Ernest Robert Curtius, *European literature and the Latin middle ages* (Curtius 1963: 302–347).

an important and significant *exception* to this general scheme.

Symptomatically enough, it happened that among the few modern thinkers who clearly recognized this ancient topic in Berkeley's thought were two French philosophers. It occurred by the beginning of this century. First, in 1911, in his very influential *L'Intuition philosophique*, Henri Bergson wrote that: "It seems to me that Berkeley considers matter as a *thin transparent film* situated between human and God. Matter remains transparent as long as the philosophers are not concerned with it, and thus God is immediately manifest." This is why he basically thinks that the most proper manner of understanding Berkeley's philosophy is to consider matter as "the language that God speaks to us". On the contrary, he goes on, the "materialist" philosophies, by emphasizing each syllable and stating it as an independent entity, "divert us from the meaning" and "prevent us from following the divine word". (Bergson 1911) It was not later than 1922 when Étienne Gilson would write about a certain relationship between Berkeley's philosophy and the Middle Ages worldview. More precisely, Gilson considers that there is a resemblance, with respect to *liber mundi*, between Berkeley's thought and the philosophy of a mediaeval Irishman, Scottus Eriugena: "We should not betray Scottus Eriugena's thought in saying that for him [Scottus], just as for Berkeley, Nature is the language that its Author is speaking to us. Let us dedicate this connection to Taine's memory: both Berkeley and Eriugena were Irishmen." (Gilson 1986: chap. 3, § 2)[16]

In trying to prove the presence of this ancient topic in Berkeley's philosophy, the

---

[16]Let us, in passing, note that there are writers who considers Berkeley's Irish period [1685–1713] as "the most important phase of his career" (Cf. David Berman, *George Berkeley. Idealism and the man* [Oxford, 1994: 7]).

main works I have chosen for my research are especially his early ones, those which drew his contemporaries' attention to him and made him famous. Thus, in section 147 of his first important work, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709) Berkeley writes:

> Upon the whole, I think we may fairly conclude that the proper objects of vision constitute an universal language of the Author of Nature [in the first edition: *the universal language of Nature*], whereby we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies, as also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive of them. It is by their information that we are principally guided in all the transactions and concerns of life. And the manner wherein they signify and mark unto us the objects which are at a distance is the same with that of languages and signs of human appointment, which do not suggest the things signified by any likeness or identity of nature, but only by an habitual connexion that experience has made us to observe between them. (Berkeley 1989: 51–2)

It is obvious, I suppose, the specific way in which what I have previously called "the reader's perspective" appears in this fragment. At a first glance, that century strikingly seemed to having forgotten any impulses to *elevatio animi*. The ultimate aim of the "the reader of the world" is, in Berkeley's view, the "preservation and well-being" of his/her body, and "to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive" to it. As it were, the world book had become a mere, humble survival text-book. The old Christian – "existentialist" component of the *liber mundi* topic (or "the reader's

perspective" as presented in this view), had radically changed and had gotten new, dramatic aspects. The "salvation" of the human at that moment meant only a still and passive existence, at a good distance from the many "hurtful things" of the world, a passing through the difficulties of this world as discretely as possible. And it is this dramatic transformation that seems to externalize a certain state of "spiritual tiredness" and "metaphysical disappointment" characterizing that age, which is sometimes expressed by a feeling of nostalgia for the "fortunate times" of the Middle Ages (a so to say *ubi sunt* mentality). This is why we might find out a general secular "uneasiness" (Hazard 1961: IV, chap. 5) and a troubled human condition, converted philosophically into such a course of thinking as the one contained by Berkeley's texts.

But, at the same time, paradoxically, it is easy enough to discern in this fragment by Berkeley an emerging "pragmatic" attitude to the "external world", an approach in terms of utility, efficiency and control, which would eventually become paradigmatic for the whole Western civilization. This rather "optimistic" and self-confident pragmatism, easily recognizable throughout in modern thought, sentiments and mentalities, consists essentially in answering this question: "How can I use the world around me in the most efficient and profitable way?" And, more or less surprisingly, in answering such a question George Berkeley directly employs one of the most prestigious topics of the Western mediaeval civilization: "an universal language of the Author of Nature whereby we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that..." Hence his capital significance in founding and constructing some modern "mind attitudes", as well as the ground based on which I previously considered him an "intellectual bridge" between the mediaeval and the modern.

Further, related to the same problem of a "universal language of the Author of

Nature", Berkeley raises another ancient[17] philosophical question, namely *nominatio rerum*, the appropriate relationship between things and words. The issue had been variously treated all along the Antiquity and Middle Ages,[18] and it also contains the essential roots of modern linguistics. As for Berkeley, his fully modern attitude is toward a "conventional" relationship between words and things. And it is especially this "conventional" approach that enables him to consider the external world in pragmatic terms. Thus, by avoiding any scholastic speculations on the "occult nature of things", he thinks that our pragmatic control over the surrounding world is instituted *by learning*, degree by degree, since "our first entrance in the world": "It must be confessed that we are not so apt to confound other signs with the signs signified, or to think them of the same species, as we are visible and tangible ideas. But a little consideration will shew us how this may be without our supposing them of a like nature. These signs are constant and universal, their connexion with tangible ideas has been learnt at our first entrance in the world; and ever since, almost every moment of our lives, it has been occurring to our thoughts, and fastening and striking deeper on our minds." (Berkeley 1989: 50–1) With regard to this question, let also add that Michel Foucault considers that Berkeley's theory of the "universal language of nature" represents a true "turning point", namely it means at the same time the end of an old world and the beginning of a new *episteme*. For him (Foucault 1971)[19] Berkeley's

---

[17]Sophists were those who, for the first time in European philosophy, concerned with this issue and used the distinction between "nature" and "convention" in naming things. See also, for the same problem, Plato's *Cratylos*.

[18]In the Middle Ages, particularly in immediate connection to "the myth of Babel". See, for this problem, chap. 5 in the last book (published posthumously) by Paul Zumthor (Zumthor 1997).

[19]Especially chap. III, § 3 ("Representation of sign").

"conventionalism" supposes a strange mixture between the "sure" and the "probable" in the process of signifying: "The certitude of the link: a sign may be so constant that we are sure about its fidelity; but [also] it may be only probable".

Soon enough, in his second important work, *The Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), a book related to the same idea of the world as a "universal language", Berkeley would emphasize it and also add some essential aspects:

> [...] my answer is, first, that the connexion of ideas does not imply the relation of *cause* and *effect*, but only of a mark or *sign* with the thing *signified*. The fire which I see is not the cause of the pain I suffer upon my approaching it, but the mark that forewarns me of it. In like manner, the noise that I hear is not the effect of this or that motion or collision of the ambient bodies, but the sign thereof. (Berkeley 1989: 97)

Thus, on one hand, such a "theory of signification" displacing the usual idea of causality throws a new and interesting light on the "novelty" of Hume's theory of causality.[20] On the other hand, the fragment above quoted implies another spectacular emergence, even if at an "anecdotal" level, of "the reader's perspective" as Berkeley understood to (re-)institute it. By merely following and analyzing the practical examples he employs for illustrating his philosophical ideas we can again "read" the same frightened, scared "mind attitude" to the external world: "the fire which I see [...] the cause of the pain I suffer upon my approaching it"; "the noise that I hear [...]

---

[20]David Hume (1711–1776) composed his famous work *A Treatise of Human Nature* during the years which he spent in France (1734–7) and published it in three volumes between 1738 and 1740. (see Copleston 1994: V, 258–9).

collision of the ambient bodies".[21] Such a "reader" of the world book seems to be an unadapted and "scared" one: a mediaeval "reader" lost in full modernity, a latecomer on the stage of modern times. It is a certain feeling of *alienation* that emerges in fragments like these. In fact, an old Platonic-Christian idea is allusively suggested by this attitude: namely, the human existence as an existence "in passing", our life as an temporary earthly exile. (Nevertheless, it is also possible that the use of these rude examples be unconsciously a kind of secret "philosophical rite" of reconciliation and "taming" of the *rudeness* and *wilderness* perceived in the world around. At a deeper level, these *exempla* are possibly playing a certain "accommodating" role in mind's confrontation with the *strangeness* of the external world.)

The ultimate goal of Berkeley's analytical approach is the generation and intimate constitution of our knowledge of the external world. (Not to say, this is a fundamental characteristic – a true "obsession" – of almost every British modern philosopher.) And only by considering the external world as a text or language, he thinks, we are assured of the certainty and efficiency of this knowledge. Shortly, it is easier and more profitable to consider things "only as marks or signs for our information" than to endlessly speculate about "corporeal causes" and to loose oneself in fruitless disquisitions. But, above all, such a "materialistic" manner of explaining things "seems to have too much estranged the minds of men from that active principle, that supreme and wise spirit":

---

[21]Starting from the significance of these local *exempla* it would be very interesting to conceive of "a history of philosophy" based *exclusively* on the examples and anecdotal facts which philosophers use in order to verify and to illustrate their theories, and to deduce their various mind and existential attitudes only from the type and nature of these examples.

Secondly, the reason why ideas are formed into machines, that is, artificial and regular combinations, is the same with that for combining letters into words. [...] Hence it is evident, that those things which under the notion of a cause co-operating or concurring to the production of effects, are altogether inexplicable, and run us into great absurdities, may be very naturally explained, and have a proper and obvious use assigned them, when they are considered only as marks or signs for our information. And it is the searching after, and endeavoring to understand those signs instituted by the Author of Nature, that ought to be the employment of the natural philosopher, and not the pretending to explain things by corporeal causes; which doctrine seems to have too much estranged the minds of men from that active principle, that supreme and wise spirit, *in whom we live, move, and have our being.*" (Berkeley 1989: 97)

The last (italicised) remark is, in fact, a quotation from St. Paul. And it is at this moment extremely important to note that Berkeley's philosophy must necessarily be situated in the long tradition of Christian apologetic philosophies.[22] For, in his view, philosophy is not an intellectual discipline like any other, but above all a sort of "religious exercise" (*askesis*). The first aim of philosophy consists in providing us "the sublime notion of a God, and the comfortable expectation of immortality". (Berkeley 1989: 132) Also, as we have just seen, the "endeavoring to understand those signs instituted by the Author of Nature, that ought to be the employment of the natural

_____

[22]The subtitle of his very important *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* contains this significant phrase: "in opposition to Sceptics and Atheists". See, for this problem, G. Brykman, *Berkeley: philosophie et apologétique* (Brykman 1984).

philosopher". All the rest seemed to him unessential and insignificant. As one modern religious philosopher said:

> To understand Berkeley's own attitude towards his philosophy, we must bear in mind his concern to prove the existence and providential activity of God and the spirituality and immortality of the soul. He was convinced that through his criticism of the theory of the material substance he had deprived materialism of its chief support. [...] In order to see Berkeley's philosophy as he saw it, it is essential to remember his religious, apologetic and moral interests." (Copleston 1994: V, 256)

And it is this essentially religious function of philosophy, much emphasized by George Berkeley, that enables us to situate him in a genuinely mediaeval tradition.

During the next period of his life the idea that the whole visible world is the language that God ("The Author of Nature") speaks to us became so important in Berkeley's view that, many years later (in 1733), when he had to write an apology to his earlier work on vision, it was entitled: *The Theory of Vision – or Visual Language shewing the immediate Presence and Providence of a Deity – Vindicated and Explained.*[23] As a matter of fact, this apology resumes and strengthens the main aspects of his "optic language" theory set forth in the previous works:

---

[23]Published in answer to a newspaper criticism against *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision.* (Dublin, 1709). Adam Smith described this short work as "one of the finest examples of philosophical analysis that is to be found, either in our own, or in any other language". (cited in Berman 1994: 136).

I shall therefore now begin with that conclusion, that *vision is the language of the Author of Nature*, from hence deducing theorems and solutions of phenomena, and explaining the nature of visible things and the visive faculty. [...] A great number of arbitrary signs, various and opposite, do constitute a language. If such arbitrary connexion be instituted by men, it is an artificial language; if by the Author of Nature, it is a natural language. Infinitely various are the modifications of light and sound, whence they are each capable of supplying an endless variety of signs, and, accordingly, have been each employed to form languages; the one by the arbitrary appointment of mankind, the other by that of God Himself. A connexion established by the Author of Nature, in the ordinary course of things, may surely be called natural; as that made by men will be named artificial. (Berkeley 1989: 241)

Let us, finally, take a rapid look on some fragments of *Alciphron or The Minute Philosopher* (1732), a rather controversial work to many commentators, but at any rate "Berkeley's longest book and his most extensive statement of religion" (Berman 1994: 134). In the fourth dialogue, for example, we may find some important re-statements and new detailed descriptions of the *liber mundi* topic in the specific form of "Natural" or "Optic Language":

God speaks to men by the intervention and use of arbitrary, outward, sensible signs, having no resemblance or necessary connexion with the things they stand for and suggest; by innumerable combinations of these signs, an endless variety of things is discovered and made known to us; we are

> thereby instructed or informed in their different natures; we are taught and admonished what to shun, and what to pursue; and we are directed how to regulate our motions, and how to act with respect to things distant from us, as well in time and place. (Berkeley 1950: 149)

It is such a fragment that amazingly reveals the immediate *complementarity* of the two perspectives defined before – the worldly, *objective* "écriture" ("text perspective") is not a self-sufficient, autonomous entity, but it plays a crucial role in forming and instructing the human *subject*, in his/her *inner* developments ("reader's perspective"): "we are thereby instructed or informed", "we are taught and admonished" and so forth. As a comprehensive conclusion of this part of the dialogue, Berkeley goes on:

> Upon the whole, it seems the proper objects of sight are light and colours, with their several shades and degrees; all which, being infinitely diversified and combined, form a language wonderfully adapted to suggest and exhibit to us the distances, figures, situations, dimensions, and various qualities of tangible objects: not by similitude, nor yet by inference of necessary connexion, but by the arbitrary imposition of Providence, just as words suggest the things signified by them. (Berkeley 1950: 154).

Or, even more directly:

> you cannot deny that the great Mover and Author of Nature constantly explainth Himself to the eyes of men In consequence, you have as much reason to think the Universal Agent or God speak to your eyes, as you can have for thinking any particular person speaks to your ears. (Berkeley 1950: 157)
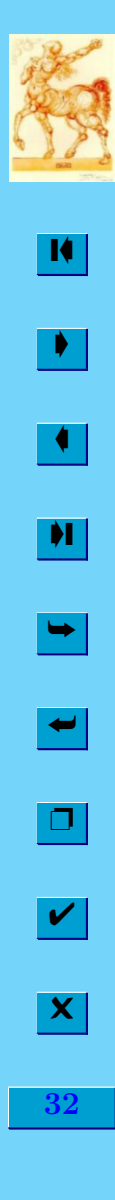
It is clear enough by now that for George Berkeley the world *is* a book ("a universal language") in an explicit and fundamental way (that is, the world is a text *esentialiter*). For him "the whole system of Nature is a system of signs, a visual divine language, speaking to our minds of God" (Copleston 1994: V, 248). Of course, a good part of the many mediaeval implications of the topic are not so manifest in his thought, but the main premises which *liber mundi* suppose are obvious. Because his explicit manner of postulating *liber mundi* implies the existence of an *author* who has "written" or rather "spoken" the world ("the Author of Nature"), and the presence of an *author/subject* relationship[24] between him and the world (in our case the relationship is one of *signifying*), and, of course, the existence of a "reader" who transcends the "sign" (*signum*) to the "signified thing" (*signatum*). The two perspectives ("the text perspective" and "the reader's perspective") deciphered in St. John's and St. Paul's texts are also present, even if in very specific forms. In other words, on the one hand, the world is widely unfolding in front of the humans as a "universal language" or a "system of signs" instituted by a divine Author, and, on the other hand, humans are "existentially" implied in deciphering them *at least* in order to attain the "preservation and well-being" of their bodies, and "to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive" of them.

In opposition to George Berkeley, most of his outstanding contemporaries (such as Kepler, Descartes, Newton, Gassendi, etc.) use this topic only as a *rhetorical* device.[25]

---

[24]Of course, from another point of view, in terms of power and "divine law", this relationship may also be regarded as one of *authority*, but such a matter is out of the explicit purpose of present paper.

[25]For instance, let us take a look at Descartes' case with respect to this almost exclusively "rhetoric" dimension of *liber mundi*. It is true, in his *Discourse on Method* we can read: "I resolved to seek no other knowledge than that which I might find within myself, or perhaps in the great book of nature"

They consider the metaphor of the book only by its rhetorical prestige and "literary" advantages this old metaphor could draws for the philosophical discourse. To them, instead, in a tradition that might be traced back to Girolamo Cardano or Leonardo da Vinci,[26] rather than a severe, immobile and rigid book that humans must discover and understand, the world is a very precise and wonderful *machine* that endlessly amazes and delights them. All human knowledge should serve to finding the functioning rules and principles of this divine, most interesting *machine*. They are not so interested in searching for the *Author* of this machine, but rather in discovering, describing and enjoying the *machine itself*. Humans are so fascinated by the "constitution", "movements", laws, principles, "predictability", "inner parts" of this marvellous *machine*, that they fail most often to question its "birth" and "origin". (Hence probably the various deistic currents and anti-metaphysical positions that characterized the beginnings of the European philosophical modernity.)

Generally speaking, it would no doubt be very interesting and fruitful to look for and to analyze the various "master metaphors" which were used by scholars and

---

(Descartes 1956: 6) But, on the other hand, in another important work of him, *Principia Philosophiae*, he wrote much more precisely: "I have described the Earth and the whole visible universe in the manner of a machine..." (book 4, § 188) and "The only difference I can see between machines and natural objects is that the workings of machines are mostly carried out by apparatus large enough to be readily perceptible by the senses (as is required to make their manufacture humanly possible), whereas natural processes almost always depend on parts so small that they utterly elude our senses." (book 4, § 203) (Descartes 1954: 229, 236).

[26]For Leonardo da Vinci's mechanics, as well as for the specific relationship between it and Descartes's mechanical conceptions, see, for instance, the fascinating book that Paul Valéry wrote about Da Vinci (Valéry 1957).

philosophers who lived in various epochs in order to understand, explain, control and "tame" the world around them: the world *as a book*, the world *as a machine*, the world *as theatre*, etc., etc. For each of these "master metaphors" has certain *existential* implications, and contains a set of cultural-metaphysical suppositions that expresses one *Weltanschauung* or another. Choosing a particular "master metaphor" for examining the world around you rather than any other is to show yourself as a particular, proper mode of being in history. Such a choosing is not at random, but it rigorously reveals the deepest cultural anthropological structures of one civilization or another.

Finally, let us also note a certain "peculiarity" of our times: in our pluralistic, sophisticated and – so to say – "mannerist" civilization, it appears that we could not be satisfied with a *single* metaphor, however "master", for understanding or taming our world. It would be a painful limitation to our dreams and inner perspectives. We need to study and often we get fascinated by *all* the metaphors which were employed before us as different modes of being in history. This is because our own mode of being in history is most probably *history itself*.

References

Artz, F. B. (1980) *The mind of the middle ages A.D. 200–1500. An historical survey* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press).

Augustine, A. (1963) *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York and Toronto: New American Library).

Barber, M. (1993), *The two cities: Mediaeval Europe, 1050 – 1320* (London and New York: Routledge).

Bergson, H. (1911), "L'Intuition philosophique" in *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale* 19, 809–827; reprinted in *La pensée et le mouvant* (Paris: Éd. Félix Alcan) (1944).

Berkeley, G. (1950), *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, Volume III ("Alciphron or The Minute Philosopher"), Edited by T. E. Jessop (London, Edinburgh, Paris, Melbourne, Toronto and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd).

Berkeley, G. (1989), *Philosophical Works, including the works on vision*, Introduction and notes by M. R. Ayers (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd).

Berman, D. (1994), *George Berkeley. Idealism and the man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Bonaventura, (Saint) (1911), *Tria opuscula Breviloquium, Itinerarium Mentis in Deum, De reductione artium ad theologiam*), (Florence: Quaracchi).

Browne, Th. (Sir) (1943), "Religio Medici" in *The Consolation of Philosophy* (New York: Random House).

Brykman, G. (1984), *Berkeley: philosophie et apologétique*, (Paris: Éd. Vrin).

Chevalier, J. and Gheerbrandt, A. (1969), *Dictionnaire des Symboles* (Paris: Éd. Robert Laffont, S.A.)

Copleston, F. C. (1993–1994), *A History of Philosophy*, vols. II–V (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday).

Curtius, E. R. (1963) *European literature and the Latin middle ages*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harper and Row).

Derrida, J. (1976), *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

Descartes, R. (1956), *Discourse on Method*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (New York: The Liberal Arts Press).

Descartes, R. (1954), *Philosophical Writings*, A selection translated and edited by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach, With an Introduction by Alexandre Koyré (The Open University)

Eco, U. (1994), *La recherche de la langue parfaite* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil).

Foucault, M. (1971), *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Éd. Gallimard).

Gellrich, J. M. (1985), *The idea of the book in the middle age* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press).

Gilson, É. (1986), *La philosophie au moyen âge* (first edition: 1922) (Paris: Éd. Payot).

Hazard, P. (1961), *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715* (Paris: Éd. Fayard).

Mazzotta, G. (1993), *Dantes's vision and the circle of knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Thomas à Kempis (1943), "The Imitation of Christ" in *The Consolation of Philosophy* (New York: Random House).

Valéry, P. (1957), *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci* (Paris: Éd. Gallimard).

Wippel J. F. and Wolter A. B., O.F.M. (1969), *Mediaeval Philosophy: From St. Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa* (New York: The Free Press & London: Collier-Macmillan Limited).

Zumthor, P. (1997), *Babel ou l'inachèvement* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil).

Table