The Overcoming of the Superman

Julius Evola

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Translated by Bruno Cariou

The facility with which ideas lacking any real consistency sometimes acquire an evocative force, to the point of becoming a sort of alibi for the passions, is amazing: those who have held them to be true, experience them as such so vividly that they end up believing they have found confirmations of them in their own deepest experiences.

This can be said, for example, of evolutionism and Darwinism. The theory of the descent of man from the beast, and of the selection of the species through the affirmation of the strongest over the various conditions of the environment, through adaptation and hereditary transmission of acquired characters — this materialistic and anti-aristocratic myth of the scientism of yesterday — there isn’t anyone, now, who sees it as anything more than a wavering hypothesis, which has had its day, and which, as time goes by, is progressively stripped of its presumed ‘positive’ bases. Nevertheless, this theory, until yesterday, appeared to a whole generation almost as a revelation: not as an hypothesis among many others, to be considered and tested within the strictly scientific field, but rather as a new and certain vision of the world, an illuminating discovery, and a new consciousness acquired once and for all by mankind.

And here we find art such as that of Jack London, a typical example of the passionate alibi which we referred to. Jack London often makes us really live the theory of evolution and natural selection. Serving as the basis for his general conception of life, in a whole series of personages, vicissitudes, descriptions and episodes, it seems true, indeed obvious, to us. The evocative force of art makes it seem as if a world really existed, in which biological heredity, the instinct of conservation, and the struggle for existence were indeed the fundamental driving forces, and the supreme human type appears more or less as that of the magnificent beast, the animal which, in the fullness of all its energies and of all its vital instincts, has prevailed over everything, has resisted everything, moreover, as sum of a series of heredities transmitted to us through the dark ways of blood, from the primordial times of the savage dweller of forests and icy deserts, if not even of ferocious pre-humanity.

The atmosphere in which the myth of the ‘superman’ has taken shape and developed is not very different. This is due in part to Nietzsche himself. We say, in part, because the philosophy of Nietzsche is made up of elements which are much more heterogeneous and varied than most people realize. It is however undeniable that the evolutionist superstition, with its biological appendices, has greatly influenced one aspect of Nietzschean thought, which is far from peripheral, and which is naturally the worst. And it can be said that, until yesterday, what has been most widely understood in Nietzsche is generally this aspect, precisely because it was the one which was most directly connected to ideas prevalent in our time.

The Nietzschean theory of the ‘superman’ is an appendix of naturalism, and, as such, is something which belongs by now to the past, and, taken as it is, could only succeed in diverting the aspirations of the best of the new generation — to the extent that it begins and ends in the ‘religion of life’ or, better, in the ‘superstition of life’. This is how we think we should describe a conception at whose center lies pure vitality, in its simply biological meaning — which natural scientists consider from the outside, with the same methods as those they apply to matter, while ‘voluntarists’, ‘intuitionists’ and ‘actionists’ try instead to know it in the form of direct feeling, of the immediate data of consciousness. But, either way, this principle is purely animal, instinctive, pre-personal life, it is the root and the deep will of that in us which is merely body and nature.

Now, it seems that the conceptions of which we are speaking cannot see anything else in man, or that, if they do discern something else, they see it only as secondary and derivative with respect to ‘life’. The ‘I’, for them, is not a supernatural principle, it is not the expression of another reality, but is more or less the feeling of the vital force, a feeling which can be increased or diminished, fortified or exhausted.

It is solely from this that the famous Nietzschean concept of the “reversal of all values” — Umwertung aller Werte — and the consequent theory of power, originate and derive their meaning. A whole system of ethical, social and religious conceptions, according to this theory, conspired for centuries against ‘life’, and favored an ominous mis-selection, by exalting as value and spirit all that mortifies and emasculates instinct, that veils or lowers the feeling of the vital force. These conceptions are the values of ‘decline’ and ‘resentment’ announced by the slaves, the weak, the underprivileged, the outcasts of nature, who, through them, have overcome the basis on which, in strong and sound times, the superman, and the right of the superman as master of men, depended, and have prevailed. Nietzsche proclaims the revolt against these “values of decline”, unmasks their poisonous nature, and offers as principle of a new judgment the criterion that only what confirms the vital instinct, what justifies the vital instinct, what strengthens the vital instinct, whose maximum expression is for him the will-to-power, can be said to be true, moral, legitimate, spiritual and beautiful; that which detracts from life, limits life, condemns life and chokes off the will-to-power, is false, immoral, bad and subversive. A new religion of the will-to-power is proclaimed by Nietzsche, as prelude to the advent of a new age of the superman.

It must be recognized that, by “will-to-power”, Nietzsche does not mean solely the will to outer dominion, but intends also inner dominion. The superman is not only the dominator of men, but also the one who knows to render his own instincts, developed up to an elementary, frightening vehemence, subject also to his own absolute mastery, and yet not in the sense of choking them off, but rather of holding them, almost like wild animals, ready to release whenever he so desires. However, in both cases, that is, as dominator of himself, as also in the domination of the exterior world, in the aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy which we consider here, the whole thing always ends up being reduced to mere feeling. The value of the will-to-power, arduously developed through the paths of both good and evil, through the most extreme tests, bounded only by the most insane limits, ruthless both towards itself and towards others — this value is always that of an increased and exacerbated feeling of ‘life’, and of an ‘I’ which draws its self-consciousness and its self-confirmation from nothing else but this wild feeling itself.

The wave swells, but does not find outlet, does not find transfiguration. Exasperation, basically, runs in neutral; asceticism is dark, almost ‘diabolical’, enjoying itself, devoid of superior meaning.

One commentator on Nietzsche, George Simmel, has spoken about vicissitudes in which the extreme intensity of life transforms itself and almost changes into a different quality, a ‘more-than-life’. But, in the world of the Nietzschean Superman, the premises for this to achieve reality are missing: there is lacking an idea, a point of reference, which acts, so to speak, as transformer in the circuit of life, and which actualizes it as ‘light’, as ‘super-life’ — as revelation and affirmation of everything supernatural. Apollo, that is, the Olympian principle, the Olympian superiority, interpreted by Nietzsche as a symbol of exteriority and unreality, always remains for him a danger, the enemy of Dionysos, that is, of life, the uncontrollable impulse of life, which gorges itself on itself, says ‘yes’ to itself, and does not want to be different from what it is, considering every after-life as an illusion and as an escape for impotent and sick people. The circle remains closed. And we remain convinced that, since he evoked, even though unconsciously and on the speculative plane, an apex of life to whose intensity only a supernatural point of reference could be adequate, and since he did not possess such a point of reference, so that this intensity, forced back in itself, so to speak, caused a short-circuit — we remain convinced that this situation was what really led Nietzsche to a tragic end, to madness.

If “man is something that must be overcome”, if “man is a bridge which leads from the beast to the Superman”, this overcoming, this passage, is illusory, unless one works from the premise of the existence of two opposite natures, two opposite worlds, and if one continues instead to consider ‘life’, and ‘life’ alone, in its various forms and intensities, as everything.

Today, racism seems to build upon the worst aspect of Nietzsche’s heritage, in that it tends to reduce every value to a biological basis, to make life, blood, and race the measure and condition of every spiritual form, and thus falls into a distorting reductionism which quite simply closes off the path towards true overcoming and true super-humanity.

What we consider to be the basis of value, and what was always traditionally considered to be such, is that ‘life’ is not spirit and spirit is not ‘life’, but that spirit gives shape to ‘life’, and that what in ‘life’ shows a truly superior and dominating character does not originate from ‘life’, but is a manifestation, through or by means of ‘life’, of spirit, that is, of everything supernatural. Once the true center is recognized in these terms, clearly the first pre-condition for any true overcoming is the gradual shift of one’s self-consciousness, one’s sense of one’s own ‘I’, from the pole of ‘life’ to the pole of ‘spirit’. Now, the various voluntarist, actionist, purportedly racist tendencies at work today are striving in precisely the opposite direction: by strengthening, using all possible means, the purely physical and ‘vital’ feeling of the ‘I’, they simultaneously strengthen the prison of the latter, and create a hardening, an insolence, an exasperating and materialistic perception of will, individuality, health and power, all of which represent so many obstructions to inner emancipation. And the circuits then remain closed. The point of reference for the ‘self-transformation’ of the ‘intensively lived life’ into ‘more-than-life’ is lacking. The Superman does not go beyond the “beautiful domineering beast” or the “demon” of Dostoevsky — this is the reductio ad absurdum of Nietzsche. Devoid of outlet, every evoked intensity cannot but give rise to a lacerating hypertension, internally — to the dumb tragedy which the ‘titan’ always bears in himself.

The true type of the Superman is, rather, Olympian: a calm greatness which expresses an irresistible superiority, something which terrifies and at the same time compels veneration, which prevails and disarms without fighting, establishing suddenly the feeling of a transcendent force, completely under control but totally capable of release, the wonderful and frightening sense which antiquity associated which the concept of the numen. Supra-life — that is, spirit, totally realized in its supernatural aspect — which permeates and governs absolutely everything which is ‘life’, is the substance here. But this type, the true Superman, cannot be treated merely as a construction of the thought of today. There is no great tradition of antiquity, whether of the East or of the West, which did not possess it. The tradition of the ‘divine right’ of the legitimate Kings, because they were the virile bearers of a force from above, is its last echo. To conceive the sudden re-emergence of this ancient conception, in a world where every great horizon was dead, where, to serve as immediate ideological substance for its incarnation, there were only the profane and opaque myths of evolutionism and natural selection, and a confused need for force and liberation — to conceive this is also to understand the invisible genesis of the theory of the Nietzschean Superman, its limit, and the path which can lead beyond it.

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