



The Gaze Nicholas of Cusa

Michel De Certeau; Catherine Porter

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TEXTS/CONTEXTS

THE GAZE NICHOLAS OF CUSA



MICHEL DE CERTEAU*

*Estoy dentro el ojo: el pozo
donde desde el principio un niño
está cayendo, el pozo donde cuento
lo que tardé en caer desde el principio . . .*

*I am inside the eye: the well
where from the beginning a child
is falling, the well where I count
the time I took to fall from the beginning . . .]*
Octavio Paz, *Pasado en claro*

“Here, then, dearest brothers, are the explanations I promised you on the facility of mystic theology.” Scholar, mathematician, diplomat, perpetual traveler, Nicholas of Cusa writes from the Tyrol, from Brixen, to be precise, or Bressanone (half German, half Italian, as he is). Appointed bishop in 1450, he was given the assignment of reforming this mountain diocese strategically positioned between the Germanic sphere of influence and the Italian principalities. He clashes with most of the clergy—they are hostile to this foreigner, a Rhinelander imposed by the Pope—and also with the forces of Count Sigismund of Tyrol, by whom he is to be taken prisoner in 1460. In October 1453, then, he sends the monks living on the banks of their beautiful lake Tegernsee, in the Bavarian Alps, the treatise he has promised them and which

*Editors' note. *The late Michel de Certeau kindly offered this essay to Diacritics more than three years ago. The fact that it is not only by far the longest, but also the most resolutely erudite essay ever to appear in this journal testifies to the depth of our respect for Michel de Certeau's monumental learning, his scholarly originality, and his stunning powers of insight and argument. Because his untimely death—depriving us of his assistance—occurred while the process of translating and editing the text was still in its early stages, the task of preparing the essay for publication has been unusually protracted and arduous. We beg the reader's indulgence for such deficiencies in translation and scholarly notation as we have been unable to overcome.*

Diacritics wishes to thank the Cultural Services of the French Consulate in New York for subsidizing the translation of the text. We also wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Gretchen Schultz, a Ph.D. candidate in French Literature at Cornell, who reckoned with innumerable gaps and obscurities while preparing the list of works cited. Arrangements for publication and translation of this text were made by Dominick LaCapra and Richard Klein; Philip Lewis coordinated the project and prepared the manuscript for printing.

he himself calls *The Image* or *The Picture* (*Icona*), but which is known as *De Visione Dei sive De icona*.¹

A memorable year. To the West, the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) between France and England has ended. A period of nations is beginning. To the East, the Eastern Roman Empire is collapsing as Constantinople is taken by the Turks (1453): Nicholas of Cusa, who had been there in 1437, has just brought the frightful news back from Rome, and amidst the rumors of horrors, violence and blood everywhere, he wrote, a month before *Icona*, his *De pace fidei* (faith as the basis for peace), an anti-Babelian "vision" of a heavenly "theater" in which, one after another, a delegate from each nation gets up to bear witness to the movement which supports it. Greek, Italian, Arab, Indian, Chaldean, Jew, Scythian, Gaul, Persian, Syrian, Turk, Spaniard, German, Tartar, Armenian, and so forth, each one comes to attest in the language of his own tradition to the truth which is one: this harmony of "free spirits" answers the furies of fanaticism [O. O. II, ix–xiii and chapters 1–6, 19]. One history is dying. Another is to be born with the utopian dawning of this new international. These are the years when printing makes its debut (1450); Leon Battista Alberti is perfecting his *De re aedificatoria* (1452); Piero della Francesca is painting his *Legend of the Holy Cross* in San Francesco D'Arezzo (around 1453). A new way of seeing is giving rise to a way of constructing. Such is the question Nicholas of Cusa poses in *Icona*: what does it mean to "see"? how can a "vision" bring a new world into being?

Science and politics

For about ten years (1451–60), the *Icona* is the focus of a regional debate. Between the Upper Trentin, southern Bavaria, and Lower Austria, texts circulate according to the rhythm of the seasons and the associated tasks.² They go up the Brenner, down the Inn or the Danube and constitute a network of places: the abbey at Tegernsee, a seed-bed of remarkable men (Aindorffer, the abbot, and Geissenfeld, Waging, etc.), fervent partisans of Cusa, who stops there in early June, 1453; the abbey at Melk, near Sankt Pölten, on the right bank of the Danube, home of a reform movement which reached across all of southern Germany (and Tegernsee itself, in 1426) and which diffuses Rhenish mysticism; the young Carthusian convent at Aggsbach (on the left bank of the Danube) whose prior, Vincent, a prolific author of manuscripts that will also end up in Melk, is engaged in an endless polemic against Gersonian or Cusan intellectualism; the Faculty of Theology in Munich where the "powerful and well-read" Marquand Sprenger is professor and dean [see Vansteenberghé 1915, 66–77]. A local network imposes its own framework of presuppositions, alliances, and struggles on the outsider Nicholas of Cusa: his treatise follows upon a request from Tegernsee concerning mystic theology; his letters are in response to questions or irritations. This style of correspondence is dependent upon "dialogue," which is favored in the Cusan treatises; but here mountains and rivers separate the interlocutors and make visible the nature of the relationships, even those within the same region.

A place is constituted by conflicts as well as by connivances. These proliferate around the *Icona*. Already in 1448 Nicholas of Cusa was challenged, and his major treatise *De docta ignorantia* (1440) was ridiculed by a good conciliary theologian, Johannes Wenck, in an ironic pamphlet whose title, *De ignota litteratura*, might be translated "On forgetting Nicholas of Cusa." This professor from Heidelberg, an assailant of the "blind" Aristotle

¹Unfortunately neither *De icona* nor *De visione Dei* has yet appeared in the great edition of Nicholas of Cusa's works [Opera omnia, noted in our references with the initials O.O.] that was initiated by the Academy of Heidelberg in 1932. Nor do they appear in the *Philosophische Schriften* [here noted as P.S.] of 1949. For my discussion of *De icona*, then, I refer to the *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* [noted as T.S.] of 1964–67. On occasion, I also have recourse to the *Opera* [noted as O.] edited by J. Lefèvre d'Étaples in 1514, as well to the translations indicated in the list of works cited. When Nicholas of Cusa refers back to his treatise, he calls it the *Icona* [for example in *De possest*, O.O. XI, 2, 69–70], whereas all of the early editions give the title *De visione Dei sive De icona*.

²Thus, on July 14, 1454, Geissenfeld (from Tegernsee) writes to Weilheim (at Melk) about the treatise: "I shall make a copy of it during the time I have left for writing and will send it to you at harvest time" [for this letter and a large portion of the documents relative to discussions about *De icona*, see Edmond Vansteenberghé's *Autour de la Docte Ignorance*, 105–220].

and the “opaque” Plato, sent a remonstrance to his adversary concerning what a “good” theology has to be and on what authorities it is to be based [see Vansteenberghe 1910 and Haubst 1955]. A university debate, not a monastic one. A Rhineland setting, not an Alpine one. In his reply, *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449), an intellectual autobiography in the form of an interview given to an Italian disciple scandalized by the “insolent” professor, Nicholas of Cusa, while showing off the bright lights of his erudition and the vast horizon of his investigations (from Plato to Meister Eckhart), attempts to define what he calls the philosophic “hunt” (*venatio*)—a key word which reiterates throughout his work the themes of haste and desire. No, he is not one of those “theologians” who, immured of a few “authorities,” are satisfied to reproduce them without thinking them through: “They think they are theologians when they know how to repeat the work of others whom they have made ‘their’ authors” [O. O. V, 274]. What is opposed to him, around 1448, is a positive theology; around 1453, it will be an affective theology. The Cusan enterprise, which has rightly been identified as a “theosophy,” seeks to position itself between these two ways of hypostasizing a place or a particular experience—the Faculty or the monastery, the literality of selected “authors” or the sentiments of a certain “devotion.”³

The German theater of these “affairs” also affects the theory. Weakened within and without, the “Holy Roman Empire” is becoming regionalized. It is detaching itself definitively from the pontifical investiture which had marked its “universal” character. At the beginning of the century, the official reference to the “German Nation,” added to the traditional title, delimits and affirms a nationalism of the *Reichsvolk*, in regions where Latin has long been replaced by German in administrative and juridical texts. For the Germanic scholars, a national consciousness in search of its own legitimacy was exacerbated by the Italian humanists’ prejudices against Germany, against its “barbarian” customs, its “jargon” (or *gèrgo*, as the Italians called it), or its lack of speculative capacity, as well as the manuscript raids in which they indulged in the Bavarian or Rhenish monasteries [see Ridé, vol. 1, 79–191 and Folz 16–84]. Tacitus’s *De Germania* will provide this search for an identity with the reference-point and the language for an autonomous patrimony. A great expert in archives that are “mistreated and lost in the cupboards” of unwitting possessors,⁴ Nicholas of Cusa is “the first man of the modern era” to have knowledge of this still-unknown text whose discovery Humboldt will compare with that of America: he recopies it in part and, it seems, as people used to steal relics, he purloined it from the abbey of Fulda in order to pass it on to Poggio Bracciolini, an erudite collector and secretary of the Roman Curia, to whom he regularly brings rare manuscripts, in 1427–29 [see Pralle; the letters of Poggio in Gordan 135, 138, 160; and on Cusa’s reception in Rome, see Rotta]. Whom is he serving, or betraying, by making off with this “lost” treasure and procuring for it in the process, by way of Italy, a role of national catalyst in Germany? He is playing on several regions. He does not identify himself with the law of one place.

He does not deny that law, either. He asserts his belonging to the German nation. He stresses solidarities: thus Hugh of Saint Victor is for him “our German,” “our eminent Saxon” [*De concordia catholica* II, chap. 29, and III, chap. 39]. To be sure, Mosan by birth, he is a Lotharingian first. As a student, he signs his notes on Gerson’s *Mystical Theology* and Proclus’s commentary on *Parmenides* as “Nicholas of Treves” [see Vansteenberghe 1928, 275–84, and Haubst 1961, 9–11]. His early training, his study of the “arts” in Heidelberg, his teaching of law in Cologne, his activity as dean at Koblenz, even his reading of Meister Eckhart in Mayence [*Apologia* V, 291; cf. Wackerzapp], all this experience is Rhenish, haunted by the ever-present Rhine (*stabiliter*), turbulent or transparent (*jam turbulentior, jam clarior*), a permanent presence that traverses all the provinces of his work [P.S. 188].

³This reappropriates the expression already used by Bernard de Waging (of Tegernsee) in his *Defensorium Laudatorii Doctae ignorantie* (1459). For Waging, Cusa’s work was a “mystic theosophy” [Vansteenberghe 175].

⁴Cf. the preface of *De concordia catholica*: “With great care I have gathered a large number of originals (originalia) in the reserves (armaria: cupboards and bookcases) of old monasteries where they had been lost because they had long been treated badly. . . . Everything here is taken from antique originals . . .” [O.O. XIV, 1,3].

After his first sojourns in Italy, he thinks of himself and speaks of himself as “German” (*Germanus*). In the preface to *De concordia catholica* (1433), he apologizes for a “style” far distant from the elegance of the “Italians,” who are, he says, Latin “by nature” and related to the Greeks. “We Germans, even if no discordant stellar configuration determines that we are so inferior to the others in *mind* . . . , it is not without extreme effort (*labor maximus*) that, doing violence as it were to the resistances of nature, we succeed in *speaking* Latin correctly.” Still the language of the university, until recently the norm of “culture,” Latin is leaning in the direction of a Mediterranean “nature” and genealogy. It is becoming nationalized. The work presented to the “other nations” by a German must therefore not be judged according to the criteria of its conformity to local rules and elegance, that is, to the customs of a “nation,” but rather according to the “mind” that is expressed in a style “without art” (*incultus*) and “without pretense” (*absque fuco*): “The meaning is most striking where the manner of speaking is most unobtrusive” [O.O. XIV, 1, 2–3]. Behind the irony of the emigrant who has to use a foreign tongue is affirmed a difference between the universality of the mind (*ingenium*) and the ethnic diversity of languages (“positive entities”). The Cusan *humile eloquium*, if it is still inspired by the Augustinian concept of a *sermo humilis* in the service of the spirit (*spiritus*) [Auerbach 25–81], already refers to relations of power among nations identified with their languages. “A nation, in the Middle Ages, is first and foremost a language” [Guenée 117]. On the threshold of a book devoted to the political conditions of a “Catholic concord,” and thus to the institutions that would permit a universal *populus*, the particular nature of the Italian or German *natio* is carved out. The *populus*, a “political” concept in the fifteenth century, is to the *natio*, as an *ethnic* entity, what the “mind” is to language. The work to be pursued in the book derives from this tension.

To Cusa’s “German” activities is added the Italian or foreign experience: studies of law and mathematics at Padua (from 1417); participation in the Council at Basel (1432); diplomatic missions to the Hussites in Bohemia (1433), and to the “Basileus” and the Eastern Patriarch in Constantinople (1437); a Cardinalship in Rome (1448); missions as Papal Legate throughout Europe (from Austria to the Netherlands) (1451); later, responsibilities as Administrator General of the Pontifical Estates (1462–64). His tasks bring him to measure the contradictions between regional forces and the Babelian wearing-away of unitary institutions. A world is coming apart: struggles between Popes, or between Popes and Councils (the Great Schism, 1378–1449); the awakening of hostile nationalisms (for example, the epic of Joan of Arc, burned at the stake in 1431, or the Hussite movement, up to 1434); the emancipation of the cities; the diversification of languages; the breaking-up of doctrines; the birth of a new individualism. Through his immense erudition, which “runs,” as he says, from the Greeks to the Koran, from law to mathematics, from the depths of archives to astronomical calculations, or from any number of technical “curiosities” to the great philosophers, as well as through his countless voyages, Nicholas of Cusa seems to want to overcome the dissemination of a universe. But he accepts as a postulate the *irreducible* character of these “positive” differences, and he thus introduces the new paradigm of a “modern” philosophic undertaking. To find and put into practice a principle that articulates this dispersion without being able to reduce it to unity: this is the *labor maximus* which, throughout his agitated existence, never ceases to “do violence to the resistances of nature.”

This work is oriented in two particular directions: the one, institutional, gives rise, in the procedurally backward ecclesiastical field, to the *political* philosophy of *De concordia catholica*; the other, speculative and involving the relations of the mind to the multiplicity of languages, opens onto the *scientific* figure of the *Docta ignorantia* (1440). These two major texts, opposed in method and object, echo each other through the movement that directs them. The first develops an as yet unknown way of managing division and proposes models for tempering a hierarchy of sacramental “orders” with a system of election by the people and of democratic representation [see Sigmund]. The second produces a theory of dialogic relations between the “contradictions” identified by philosophical analysis and of the elusive principle to which these heteronomous viewpoints refer the mind [see Cassirer]. This double task, associating the career of the diplomat-administrator with the investigations of the researcher, is based on the two essential reference points of his scientific

interests, law and mathematics. Already Leibnizean by virtue of this ongoing project and of the multiform modalities of its execution, the Cusan work ceaselessly intermingles political concern and scientific speculation.

This is manifest at the level of general theoretical strategy alone, with the key concepts that specify the operations of the mind amidst the antinomies where analysis has to recognize the very site of the work of thinking. "Consensus" is the mainspring of the entire institutional organization presented in *De concordia catholica*, just as the "coincidence of contraries" is the infinite point around which is organized the philosophy of *Docta ignorantia*. In the one case as in the other, the principle of movement cannot be identified with any one of the elements put in play, nor does it hold them at bay through a process of abstraction; it presupposes, within opposed unique entities, an internal mainspring capable of actualizing them through mutual relations. In this perspective, each particular positive entity is no longer defined by its status in an ontologically hierarchicized cosmos (a "stairstep" cosmos, a cosmos of "degrees"), but it is the direct witness to an absolute, such as a "point of view," at once "total," "singular," and irreplaceable, whose relation to others manifests infinite potentiality. Within a modality that is sometimes juridical, sometimes speculative, the individual has a value of infinity, whose very "impulsion" puts him into relation with others. As Cassirer has shown, Nicholas of Cusa inaugurates a "modern" conception of the individual. He does this because he set out to conceive of potentiality in terms of positions defined by a reciprocal determination. The two points, equally fundamental, also connect juridical hermeneutics with a geometrical speculation which already bears some resemblance to topology. In any event, since, in a space of social or theoretical sites, oppositions constitute the necessary and unsurpassable condition of a unifying reciprocity, the decisive moves of this thought have a relation to the "political" that characterizes not only their connection with that space but also their formality itself.

1. The All-Seeing

It is in these operations that a scientific and technical style can be located. In spite of the diversity of techniques to which Nicholas of Cusa has recourse (erudite collation, juridical hermeneutics, geometrical demonstration, etc.), his ways of proceeding are subject to a common problematic. There are quite recognizable Cusan "gestures," even if they are produced in different fields. Better still than the concepts which result from them, these discursive practices inscribe, in the immense geography of his travels, his own peculiar way of thinking.

The relation that his *placement* as a German speaker bears to his *use* of Latin, the language of the church and the university, provides a first example of this "style." He "Germanizes" (*alemannizare*), he says of the German immigrant who arrives in Italy [Cassirer 9]. And indeed, Germanisms haunt his Latin. They are the ghosts of a particular place (Rhineland, or Germany) in a different place, Latin, a language supposed to be "universal" but in fact limited to a particular region and genealogy. They are at the same time traces in the present of a local speech pattern in an inheritance received from the past. Some Italian humanists attempt to suppress this contradiction by making Latin conform to the model of the ancient *elocutio*: in so doing they are substituting for the geographical or ethnic diversity of languages the hierarchical privilege of a language of the elite (scholarly Latin) over "vulgar" ways of speaking. Nicholas of Cusa takes a different tack. He makes the transition *from one to the other* by an operation which consists in placing two qualitatively heterogeneous entities *one within the other* (German which specifies an ethnic identity, and Latin which allows an intellectual communication). His treatment of Latin is a coincidence of contraries. The linguistic practice already has theoretical value.

It is noteworthy, furthermore, that these transfer operations give rise to lexical creations, sometimes striking ones, which often mark the decisive moments of thought; in such cases the linguistic act itself becomes the *sign* of the theory. These expressions or turns of phrase are ways of "turning," of displacing and remodeling the vocabulary by the different *usage* made of it. They give the Cusan style the enigmatic or "obscure" appearance for which it has often been reproached by critics who classify it in the suspect category of what is

“rare” (*rarus*).⁵ They are nevertheless inscribed in the perspective that Alberti is developing at Mantua during these same years with his *De Trivia* (around 1460) and according to which “the word will no longer be the immutable sign of an idea, but a provisional approximation, the support of an ever-renewed creation” [Francastel 230; and see Zevi]. For Nicholas of Cusa, this creation sketches the very movement of the “concept,” that is, of what it conceives and produces (the *conceptus*). When he does not let himself get carried away by his own verbal virtuosity and by his (very contemporary) taste for the rich surprises of meaning that language offers owing to alliteration, homophony, and more generally speaking to phonetic play,⁶ his turns of phrase are gestures of thinking with and between two languages. “Very often, with *one word*, with a well-wrought term, all the speculative profundity of fundamental problems is found to be illuminated in a flash.” The *Blitz*, that lightning-flash within discourse, defines at once a “way of speaking” (the theory of which is about to become the focal point of mystic science) and a way of conceptualizing the coincidence of contraries. It is not surprising that Latin words are frequently used according to German grammatical rules (the infinitive taken as a noun, deponents conjugated as passives, the terms *aliud* or *duo* used as invariable forms, countless specific constructions, such as the dative after *participare*—*teilnehmen*—and so on), or constructed according to German lexical models (such as *epilogatio*, *improportionaliter*, *inunibilis*, *possest*, and so on), or conceived in terms of analogous German words (such as *explicatio* in the sense of *Auslegung*, *complicatio* in the sense of *Zusammenlegung*, *conjectura* in the sense of *Mutmassung*, and so on).⁷ They represent the passages from one particular entity to another, but passages which do not obliterate the terms of the opposition. Two antinomic languages, each defined by a “nature,” a race and a genealogy, are drawn into points of coexistence: these words mean what they do; they articulate a discourse of coincidence at the same time that they are bringing about that coincidence of two languages; they are ways of thinking Oneness within linguistic duality.

This use of language gives us an indication of what the Cusan “praxis” is. This device does not presuppose a language proper to theory, an autonomous metalanguage that would provide a distinct linguistic space for speculation—no more than the Cusan philosophy would presuppose a superior essence that would surpass at a higher level the antinomies of a lower level. A task relative to each singularity liberates, as it were, and develops (*explicat*) the “impulsion” which is internal to each and which is revealed to be infinite by the very impossibility of finding a hierarchical unity among singularities. Awakened by the shock between contraries, the philosophical “praxis” passes from one positive entity to another, as from one perspective to another, by “explaining” thus the “seed of infinitude” which animates each of them. It is *translatio*, transference.

This type of operation conforms, but on a larger scale, to the way in which Nicholas of Cusa treats the scholastic tradition. It is characterized by new ways of dealing with a received corpus. It does not proceed on the basis of a break, or a detachment, which would allow the construction of a different system. “The mass of thought (*Gedankenmasse*) of scholastic philosophy . . . is not set aside, but caught up in a movement of thought that is entirely new” [Cassirer 20–21]. This movement is carried out *within* that “mass,” as a function of the contradictions that oppose certain elements to others, internal or external (Platonic, Arab, etc.). Vigilance in looking for these oppositions in the undefined field of available knowledge stimulates the gaze to which, in a “flash,” their coincidence is revealed.

⁵Johannes Wenck was among the first to address the reproach to Nicholas [see Vansteenberghe 1915, 22], for whom the “rare” is rather a stimulant for thought (“*Rara quidem, et si monstra sint, nos moere solent*,” he says concerning his Germanisms at the beginning of *De docta ignorantia* [O.O. I, 2, 4]) or a cause for admiration (“*Pulchra atque rare narras*,” says the interlocutor in the *Idiota* [O.O. V, 14, 16]). On the pejorative sense of *rarus*, see Wackerzapp 14 n71.

⁶The closeness of sounds to one another underlies, for Cusa, an interplay of meanings; this poetic esthetics, whose flavor is very much that of the fifteenth century, would be a worthy object for a major study. The same is true for the interplay of letters—for example, on the *i* and the *n* of “*in*,” or on the repetition of *e* in “*posse*,” “*esse*,” and “*nexus*” (the *e* being to language what God is to the world), in *De possest* 54 [O.O. XI, 2, 65–69].

⁷See the editor’s preface, by R. Klibansky and J. H. Senger, to *De ventione Sapientias in O.O. XII*, xxi–xxii; see also H.G. Senger 95–97. I am indeed interpreting certain Cusan *asperas compositiones* as effects of speaking German in Latin.

The two ways of "seeing." A mathematical aesthetics.

An unending erudition, relative to the "positive elements" of knowledge, is thus combined with the instantaneous vision that grasps their relationship. The one offers the other the limitless field of particular realities in which to recognize, owing to their very oppositions, the modalities of a dynamics of infinity. In order to explain the intensity of the visual experience for Nicholas of Cusa, we should rather speak of a combination linking observation and intuition. The first "develops" in an insatiable quest, picks up on all sorts of everyday curiosities (beryl, the game of bowling, tops, a wooden spoon, a clock, and so forth)⁸ as well as on all the regions visited and on the innumerable books or archives. This observation makes a *space* for the discourse that often puts objects (beryl, bowling, image, picture, etc.) in its *titles*, as if the object "formed" the place of reflection, in the absence of any other formative agent, and as if the perception of the thing (at this level of observation or depiction) "stood in" for the seemingly indeterminate authorities who should have created this place. On the other hand, intuition is "concentrated" in the distinctness of the "views of the mind" (*visus mentis*). These two forms of "seeing" constantly intersect. Their point of coincidence lies in the visible figure in which the gaze grasps the invisible element active within the figure. This instrument for the passing (*transsumptio*) from one "seeing" to the other is the *mirror*. Mounted inside the texts, it is the equivalent of poetic quotations in the mystic treatises of the sixteenth century. For the mirror is to the visual what the illuminatory "word" is to the verbal. It scans the prose of discourse with abrupt points of intersection between several spaces.

For van der Weyden, Van Eyck (the portrait of the Arnolfini, 1434), or Robert Campain of Flémalle (the portrait of the canon Werl, 1438), who are roughly the Cusan's contemporaries, the mirror is a place located *inside* the painted framework and often decorated as the monstrance or reliquary that circumscribes the appearance of another world. Inside, it makes visible an *outside*—another time (death), another dimension (mourning, vice, etc.)—that cannot be seen in the scene represented by the painting and that is, however, *already* at work in it. The mirror is the revealing agent (or the hallucination) of a history that is hidden but present, the visibility of what cannot be seen *there*. For Nicholas of Cusa, a concrete object revealing what already animates it, on one side or the other of its appearances, is a "mirror." In the jewel-case of explanatory prose, things are suddenly illuminated as "mirrors." So the wooden spoon is transformed into "every sort of mirror, concave, convex, straight, cylindrical—straight at the base of the handle, cylindrical in the lower part, concave in the bowl of the spoon, convex on its back"—when the invisible forms are recognizable in the perceptible image [*De idiota* III, chaps. 2, 5]. The spoon is perfected as a mirror, as a jewel for the mind, when, going beyond meticulous observation, the spectator grasps in it a splendor that the eye cannot see. Then one "seeing" gives way to another. The vision of dusk becomes that of dawn (*ut aurora*). By the light of another day, it sees what comes in the object, transformed into an "angelic" figure: it announces [see Gandillac 1941, 446, and Giordano Bruno's distinction of the two views in *Les Fureurs héroïques* 218].

An intellectual intuition has transformed all things into possible mirrors. This is noted at the end of the *Docta ignorantia*, in the final address to Cardinal Cesarini, in the extra-textual form of a *forward*: outside the text, neither conclusion nor proof (the treatise is self-sufficient), it is a signature, like a received name, the indecipherable of the proper. The evocation is brief. It is nevertheless the inaugurating intuition, like the vision of Ostia for Augustine, but it is born of and in division itself. The scene takes place at sea. The diplomat is bringing back from Constantinople the Patriarch and the Emperor in preparation for a meeting with the Pope (Spring 1438): "In maris ex Graeci rediens." Between East and West,

⁸"The beryl is a shiny, white, transparent stone that is hewed into both concave and convex form" [*De Beryllo*, chap. 2]. Like painting for *De icona*, it is the object that occasions the treatise of 1458 that bears its name. The same is true for the game of bowling in *De ludo globi* (1463), for the top or trochus in *De possest* (1460) or the spoon made by the "layman" in the *Idiota* (1450). Concerning the clock, see *De icona*, chap. 11; clocks in public places had recently been installed throughout Italy [see Rose 7].

those two contraries, and in the act of passing from one to the other, he “believes,” he writes, that he has been “led,” in a voyage paralleling the navigation at sea, “by a gift from on high, from the father of light . . . , to embrace in an incomprehensible fashion the incomprehensible things in learned ignorance (*ut incompraehensibilia incompraehensibiliter amplecterer in docta ignorantia*), while transcending the incorruptible truths that human knowledge can attain.” Despite his desire, he was not able to reach, by “the various paths of the doctrines,” this blinding principle of a coincidence of contraries, dazzlement at the heart of the un-knowing (*non-savoir*) [*De docta ignorantia* III, chap. 12]. What he “conceives” is given to him all of a sudden: if he expresses it in Augustinian formulas that already designate the manner in which the Spirit renders our “ignorance” “learned” [cf. Gandillac 111], he will transform them into the conception that will govern his entire work.

When Johannes Wenck indicts the “learned ignorance” for drawing on sources judged compromising (Dionysius Areopagita, Eckhart, etc.) and sees in his adversary’s text something like the repetition of positive expressions that an erudite eye can recognize, Nicholas of Cusa makes a correction, before defending the incriminated works: “It is not Dionysius or any other ancient theologian that I saw (*vidisse*) when I received the concept” of learned ignorance from on high. Nevertheless he did indeed, he says, “run” avidly, like a “hunting dog,” towards the writings of the doctors (“*avido cursu me ad doctorum scripta contuli*” [*Apologia*, T.S. 282–83]), but the “view” of which he speaks is not reduced to what the documents present to a critical eye: quite to the contrary, it discovers in their visible positivity that which, within them, comes from afar. This view is not incompatible with the tireless “race” of erudition, but it turns the texts and curiosities that the researcher never ceases to inventory into “mirrors” of what animates them without being visible in them. The observing and collecting “hunt” (*venatio*) continually supplies new places in which the alchemy that transforms one form of “seeing” into the other, like lead into gold, is reproduced.

Between the two forms of *videre*, the Cusan mathematics constitutes a space of coincidence—a geometry. The sort of mental operations that define it begin with the composition of visible places: “Imagine a pyramid . . . ,” “think of a triangle . . . ,” “given a circle . . . ,” etc. But in this “perceptible image” offered to “the eye” [*Conjecturia*, O.O. 140], the mind sees formal relations and their possible developments. Geometry joins observations or optical constructions to rational evidence. The “seeing” of the mind here coincides with the “seeing” of the eye; an intellectual intuition, with an ocular perception; the universality of a “form,” with the concrete singularity of a figure. Conversely, he who can see in one way but not the other is no mathematician.

Geometry thus supplies the model of a *scientific order* in the very moment in which (or rather: to the very extent to which) it is detached from its former ontological function. With the exception, perhaps, of what concerns the “one” (whose ambivalence, for want of the zero, never ceased to pose a problem for Nicholas of Cusa), this mathematics is no longer the revelation of forms or truths organizing the universe. It is not epiphanic. Just like painting, it is a “construction” of the mind (a *conceptus*) inscribed in the problematics that Tasso will soon, in his *Giudizio sopra la sui Gerusalemme da lui medesimo reformata*, aptly name *fabbrica della mente*. Insofar as it orders coherent series of “exercises” on elementary figures (point, straight line, curve, etc.) and as it no longer has the status of a discourse manifesting the structures of being, it becomes capable of formulating and of governing the productions of the mind in all disciplines. It acquires the value of a privileged language, protected from the ambiguity or polysemy that allows unforeseeable inventions to occur in other languages, and thus capable of controlling and developing, as in a laboratory, the intellectual undertakings applicable to all regions of knowledge. “In our science, nothing is certain but our mathematics,” and nothing “great” has been said “which has not been based on the model of mathematics” [*De possesset*, O.O. XI, 2, 54; cf. *De docta ignorantia* I, chap. 11]. For each specific research task it presents schemas of construction and transformation to be carried out on different “positive” entities.

Geometry deals first of all with the operations relative to “seeing,” since it is wholly deployed in that element and since it treats the visible as the very field of intellectual visions. In this respect, it presents not only the formality of procedures applicable *also* to the visual experience; it has the value of a model for a science of “seeing.” That science

is in itself an *aesthetics*. Hence its status as an enigma: “It is an enigma for having set out in search (*venatio*) for the works of God.” And so one must “enigmatize mathematically” [*De possesset* 71]. This art aims not at “seeing the visible,” but at “seeing the invisible in the visible” [*Non aliud*, O. 189] by a movement of the mind that the painting of Van Eyck or of Compain exercises as well [see Panofsky 1971, 149–204], and that Nicholas of Cusa establishes by referring not to Proclus but to St. Paul: “Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate” [I Cor. 13, 12; cf. *De docta ignorantia* I, chap. 11, and *De Beryllo*, chap. 1]. “Enigma” in the “mirror” of its figures, geometry becomes a science of the mirror, but to the extent that it consists in seeing something invisible in a visible place, to the extent that it is a practice of that sort of “seeing.” Such is in fact the characteristic of Nicholas of Cusa, the geometer, which he extends to philosophy. He proceeds on the basis of theoretical excesses: conceptual “flashes” outrun, overflow, and disrupt the formal course of the reasoning; they have the capacity of bringing surprise into the analysis and thus of renewing it; they do not obey the principle of non-contradiction and thus cannot be subject to a verification. An inventive genius, Cusa belongs to the category of mathematicians who, to borrow David Hilbert’s words apropos of Georg Cantor, open up to mathematics a “paradise” or a “theology” that are not refutable. The productivity of the inventive imagination is measured only by the coherence of its effects. Nicholas of Cusa “sees” first of all. It is in the formalization or demonstration that he proves to be weaker, often too hasty, or carried away by what he “conceives.” Thus he has been judged in contradictory fashion, according to whether the critic was privileging the mathematical inventiveness (Moritz Cantor) or the rigor of the reasoning (Pierre Duhem).

An art of “seeing,” or of honing figures into mirrors, Cusan geometry thus conducts the exercise that must also be practiced in reading authors or in observing physical objects. A visual language and a conceptual practice, geometry teaches the recognition—in readable texts and visible objects just as in “perceptible images—of a thousand kinds of mirrors—and a multitude of possible mirrors—that form the mobile worldview of the “most gifted” and most “inventive” mathematician of his time.⁹

The preface of De icona

Nicholas of Cusa is fifty-two years old when he drafts his treatise. In the calmness of its style, the *De icona* appears at first like a limpid mirror in which appears, as Cassirer has already shown [32, 34, 38–39; see also Alvarez-Gómez 59 ff.], the focal point of the Cusan speculation. From the outset it takes as its program the “facility” of mystic theology. A typical program, not only because it defines the style of numerous Cusan texts, conceived as logical sequences of simple operations; or again, already a more central aspect, because, in this domain as in mathematics, one “sees” or one “does not see,” so that it is not a question of effort; but especially because the treatise postulates a “seeding” of infinity in each of its readers. It gives a language to what is already there. It offers words for knowledge the addressees already hold somewhere, so that they can be content with responding: “How true. That’s it exactly.” The truth is already there, one has only to see it—thus begins *De Beryllo*; wisdom cries out in public places, one has only to hear it—so begins the *Idiota*. The clerics who with their quibbles block the access of the “layman” (the *idiotus*) to the true scandalize Nicholas of Cusa; to chase them out he has mocking aphorisms whose style will reappear in Rabelais: “A dialecticis libera nos, Domine” (Deliver us from the dialecticians, Lord [*Apologia*, T.S. 288]). “Facility” designates an experiment freed from long scholarly preliminaries and based on the “drive” of every free spirit.

The preface of the treatise *On the Image* or *On Pictures* aims precisely at opening up for the treatise a space which escapes both from the indefinite preliminaries of a technical

⁹This is the opinion of a good judge, Moritz Cantor [cited by Cassirer 63]. Pierre Duhem, by contrast, devotes 100 pages [see vol. 10, 247–347] to explaining Cusa’s “verbal tricks,” plagiarisms, and mathematical errors—ultimately so as to be able to see in him a worthy precursor of “Fichte, Hegel and their ilk!” As for Giordano Bruno, he refers to “the divine Cusano,” the “author of the finest secrets of geometry” [*Dialogue* 5]; and Kepler, to *divinus mihi Cusanus* [see Koyré 336].

competence and from the privilege, in the last analysis positivist, of “experience.” Analogous to the geometrical “comparison” (the sphere which is one and plural) that leads, in the case of Theresa of Avila, to the new discourse of the *Moradas* [see *La Fable mystique* I, 257–63], it serves as basis for all the chapters that follow. It is the zero degree of the treatise. It precedes and permits speech: *prae-fatio*. It is presented as a “perceptible experimentation” (*sensibile experimentum*) which, by dislodging its addressees from their prejudicial position, “makes way” for the Cusan theory. It is a question of an “exercise” (*praxis*). A *doing* will make possible a saying. This propedeutics is moreover customary in spiritual development and in the relations between master and disciple: “Do it, and you will understand afterward.” It also has the import of a laboratory observation whose theoretical interpretation will come later. It plays on the double register of a “spiritual exercise” and a scientific experiment. Here then is the entire text of that preface (except for the last two lines):

Preface

If I truly wish to lead you by human paths to divine things, I must use a comparison (*similitudo*). Among the human productions, I have found nothing more appropriate to my intention than the image of an all-seer (*imago omnia videntis*), whose face (*facies*) is painted with an art so subtle that it seems to look at everything in the vicinity. There are many of these, very well painted: that of Sagittarius, on the Nuremberg Square; the one that the great Roger [Van der Weyden] produced in a most precious painting that is found in the Tribunal in Brussels;¹⁰ that of Veronica, in my chapel at Koblenz; that of the Angel who is holding the arms of the Church, in the castle of Brixen, and many others elsewhere. So that you should lack for nothing in an exercise (*praxis*) that requires the perceptible figure that was at my disposal, I am sending you a painting that shows that figure of the all-seer, which I call the icon of God (*icona Dei*).¹¹

Set it up somewhere, for example on the north wall. You, brothers, place yourselves at equal distance from it and look at it (*intueri*): from whatever side you may examine it (*inspicere*) each of you will have the experience (*experiri*) of being as it were the only one to be seen by it. To the brother who is to the east, it will appear (*videbitur*) to be looking (*respicere*) towards the east; to the one who is located to the south, it will seem to be looking towards the south; and for the one who is at the west, towards the west.

You will be astonished (*admirari*), asking yourselves at first how it can be that this figure is looking at the same time at each and every one. For the one who is at the east, it is impossible to imagine that the icon is turning its sight (*visus*) in another direction, for example towards the west or towards the south. Then he will go place himself at the opposite side, and he will have the experience of having it fix (*figere*) its gaze on him, as it was doing at the east. Knowing that the image remains fixed and immobile, he will be astonished at the movement of this immobile gaze. If he fixes his eyes on it (*figere obtutum*) and walks from west to east, he will discover that the image continually keeps its gaze fixed on him and that it does not leave him either if he walks in the opposite direction.

He will be astonished that it moves immobilely (*immobiliter*) and it is equally impossible to his imagination to grasp that the same type of movement is produced with a brother who is walking in the opposite direction. If he wants to make the experiment, he will arrange for a brother to be going from east to west without taking his eyes off the image, while he himself goes from west to east: he will question his partner to find out whether the image continues to turn its sight on him too, and he will learn from his ears that the gaze moves in the same manner in the opposite direction; then he will believe it. If he did not believe it, he could not grasp that it is possible.

¹⁰Van der Weyden’s painting, a self-portrait, has disappeared, but a copy of it is preserved on a tapestry in the Berne museum [see Panořsky 1955, 392–400, and 1971, 248]. The self-portrait is located in the right side of one of the “examples of justice.”

¹¹The paintings of Nuremberg, Koblenz, and Brixen have not been identified. As for the all-seeing “figure” available for Cusa’s use, he writes from Tegernsee, September 14, 1453, that he “has a painting of one” at home and that he “has a painter” whom he will ask to make a copy of it for the recipients of the treatise [Vansteenberghe 1915, 116].

Owing to the revelation made by the witness (*revelatio relatoris*), he succeeds in realizing that the face abandons none of the walkers, even when their movements are contrary. He thus experiences the fact that this immobile face (*immobilis facies*) moves at the same time towards the east and towards the west, towards the north and towards the south; that it is directed simultaneously toward one place and towards all; and that its gaze follows an individual movement as well as all the movements at once. If he observes (*attendere*) that the gaze leaves none of the persons present, he will see (*videre*) that this gaze is concerned with each one with as much care as if it were the only one to have the experience of being followed, to the extent that the one who is being looked at cannot conceive that another might be the object of the same attention. He will see that this gaze watches with extreme care over the smallest creature (*minima*) as over the largest (*maxima*) and over the totality of the universe.

Starting from this perceptible phenomenon (*sensibilis apparentia*), I propose, most loving brothers, to raise you up by an exercise of devotion (*praxis devotionis*) to mystic theology. [P.S. 5, 94–98]

A fantastic

The preface imposes the atmosphere of a place. In its lexicon, verbs that have to do with looking proliferate (see, seem—*videri*—look, examine, observe, follow with the eyes, fix one's gaze, and so forth). These multiple visual activities are extended little by little to all the actors, resulting in the progressive constitution of a labyrinth not of things but of gazes which meet, astonished or sustained, immobile or traveling, instantaneous or continuous. A fantastic of the gaze haunts this enclosed place, with its accompaniment of surprises, of what is unimaginable and unbelievable. This forest of eyes recalls many ancient visions, including the famous Rhenish one of Hildegard of Bingen, struck by the sudden appearance of a body covered with eyes [see Saint Hildegardis and Schomer]. The gaze fixed on the spectator also has the cultural value of a miracle. Thus for the feast of the "invention of the Holy Cross [May 3], the *Legend of the Saints* (or *Golden Legend*) makes the gaze the reward granted by heaven to a young "secretary" (*notarius*) who resisted the devil using the sign of the cross (a sign traced, moreover, by the composition of the Cusan place). Some time after this quasi-sacramental gesture, while master and secretary are standing before an image of Christ in the church of St. Sophia, the master notes that the image has "its eyes fixed" (*oculos fixos*) on the young man; he has the young man move in turn to the right, then to the left, several times, but the image "turns its eyes" in the direction taken by the secretary and "keeps its eyes fixed upon him" [Jacobus de Varagine 241]. The Cusan exercise closely resembles this miracle of the *Golden Legend*, even in the relationship of the master with Nicholas of Cusa, who orders the movements of the scene and is also spectator of these movements of looking. The exercise is inscribed in fact within the framework of a long fantastic, mystic, or miraculous tradition. It stands out in an aura of mystery and secrecy which is enriched by a hundred other stories of devotion, of ghosts or of the evil eye. The initiatory operation unfolds in the mythical climate of a historically fundamental experience.

The examples of "all-seer" quoted in the text (which here resembles a collector's or archivist's catalogue) add an autobiographical dimension to all the gazes that organize space and appear as the ghosts of ancestral visions. Nuremberg [see Obrist 104, 282], Brussels, Koblenz, Brixen: these places are landmarks in the career of Nicholas of Cusa; in these places he has had, or still has, his residence. A gaze seems to have followed him across Germany, from north to south, from east to west, in spite of the diversity of its faces: Sagittarius, the centaur shooting the arrow that unites earth to heaven in the Zodiac; the self-portrait of Van der Weyden, a three-quarter view turned toward the spectator, amid a crowd gathered in the right panel of "The Justice of Trajan"; the "holy face" that St. Veronica shows, or Veronica herself;¹² the Angel bearing the ecclesiastical blazon, in the

¹²Thus the "Calvary" by Roger Van der Weyden (Vienna Museum) has on the left side of the triptych a Veronica holding the linen on which a "holy face" of Jesus looks at the spectator (see also the "Veil

castle (Sigismund's?) that dominates Brixen; finally the very painting that he himself possesses, at home in the Brixen bishopric, and of which he had a copy made by a painter to send to Tegernsee. Not only are the places multiple, but the figured species (centaur, man, woman, angel) and the professional or symbolic sites (the public zodiac, the tribunal of justice, the private chapel, the military castle, the ecclesiastical palace) as well. These would be the successive and diverse appearances of a gaze, always the same, that "does not leave him." In this case, the scene constructed for Tegernsee recapitulates, as in a mirror, successive appearances. Just as it introduces into a traditional visionary experience an already "modern" optical observation, it seems to weave a whole series of personal events into a technical exercise. It brings about the coexistence of multiple scenes. Heterogeneous places are brought into coincidence around this ubiquitous gaze which no longer has a name or face of its own. (The text gives us no details here; while further on, in chapter 9, referring to Jesus it does invoke "this painting of your face," the detail seems to derive from a discursive development—a review of the forms of the divine gaze—and not to deal with the painting itself.) The space that this gaze organizes thus has a depth of obliterated histories; plural, made up of visual strata that play one on the other, it is an anonymous theater of memory.

The density proper to the image is manifested, finally, in the relation that the painter entertains with discourse. A dialogic structure. The exercise, according to the Preface, "requires" the image. In a classic geometric demonstration, the utterance presupposes the figure; similarly here the text demands the painting. The one cannot be without the other. Seen together, the discourse and the painting constitute by their very difference the dynamics of the praxis. The three rational "moments" that order the experimentation bring back, increased each time, the fantastic of the image; and each time an *admiratio*, visual surprise, marks this return. But from the one to the other, from the verbal to the iconic, the relation reverses itself in the course of the exercise. At the beginning, it is the painting—the necessary condition—that generates at first a space (the half-circle of the spectators). At the end, it is an oral testimony (the *revelatio relatoris*) that alone makes it possible to "believe" what escapes sight, so that the ears allow to be heard what the eyes cannot see; the image henceforth "requires" the discourse; in the space that the former has opened up for the latter and which makes possible the project of "recounting miracles" (*enarrare mirabilia*), the treatise will be developed in twenty-five chapters. But from this point on, what does this long discourse never cease talking about, what holds it captive, if not the image, always *there*, which takes away from the eyes what it allows the mind to see and which remains, or even becomes, more and more, in the center of these words woven tightly together, a presence of absence?

2. The geometry of the gaze

The image never stops becoming the other of the text: this begins when the image *appears* imperceptible. The experimentation has to ensure this beginning. It aims at "converting" one way of seeing into another. It is a "translation" in conformity with the Cusan method, which consists in changing, *within* the received space, the operation which is being undertaken there. The exercise occurs within a visual proliferation, but in order to mark off in it another spatial *practice*.

It stems from geometry. Nicholas of Cusa spells this out in a letter dated September 14, 1453 [see Vansteenberghé 1915, 116], in which he explains to Aindorffer the future *De icona*: a "mathematical figure" will be the object of transformations which extend its import all the way to "theological infinity" (*theologicalis infinitas*). The "experimental procedure" (*praxis experimentalis*) which he intends to develop, he adds, is "very elegant"

of Veronica" by Quentin Metsys, or the "Volto sancto" disseminated by the merchants of Lucca). We also have, by the same Van der Weyden, women's faces that look upon the spectator (e.g., the "Woman's Portrait" in the Berlin Museum). Nordic painting presents numerous cases of "all-seers." Generally, at this time, it seeks after "an effect that seems to include within the represented space the person looking at it" [Panofsky 49].

(*pulcherrimus*) and “very clear” (*clarissimus*)—qualities of a mathematical demonstration. According to this same letter, *De icona* was first a “chapter” of the *Complement* attached to the *Mathematicis complementis* that Nicholas is currently addressing to Pope Nicholas V, the benefactor and instigator of the humanist and mathematical renewal in Rome [see Rose 36–44]. Thus it belongs to that cascade of *complements*, applications of geometry to theology. Detached from the *Complementum theologicum figuratum in complementis mathematicis*, where it no longer appears, the “chapter” was developed independently; but entirely separate though it is when it is finally sent in 1453, it remains defined by the program of the *Theological Complement*: “I shall strive to make the figures of this book [the *Mathematical Complements*] theological, in such a way that, with God’s help, we may see with the sight of the mind (*mentali visu intueamur*) how the true, sought in all knowable things, shines in the mathematical mirror not only without [it being necessary to use] similitudes, but in a glittering proximity. . . . In fact theological things will be better seen with the mind’s eye than they can be expressed with words” [*Complementum theologicum*, chap. 1; O. 1107]. Hence the privilege of “seeing” as means of access to the true, but through the “mathematical mirror”: this conviction that marked the last twenty-five years of Nicholas of Cusa’s life, from the *Docta ignorantia* (1440) onward, establishes the objective for *De icona*, and for the preface that introduces it, its scientific status.

There is nothing peculiar about the privilege of the eye over the ear: during that period, sermons were satiated with it [see Baxandall 41ff. and Arasse 131–46]. But the exercise that is to permit the transformation of the “perceptible” visual experience into a theory of mystic vision is for Nicholas of Cusa a mathematical operation. It rejoins the research of the fifteenth century which, from Alberti to Piero della Francesca (while waiting for Leonardo da Vinci), closely associated mathematical theory with a theory of art. Mathematics is not only a condition of certainty in knowledge, but the methodical way of decoding or of organizing scientific “observations.” A school for rigor, it is at the same time a science of seeing (a hermeneutics of figures) and an “architectural” science (an art of constructing reasoned and demonstrative experiments). In the new scientific order, which is essentially visual, it takes the place that logic held in medieval science, which was essentially linguistic. But leaving aside these links with contemporaries, it suffices to emphasize that Nicholas of Cusa conceives as would a mathematician the exercise that the monks have to perform not with a compass but with their legs; they do so in a ceremony which no doubt is a further extension of the “games,” mimes and “juggling acts” that were long-standing traditions [dating from the tenth century: see Bruyne 179] in the abbey of Tegernsee, but which manifests the strange audacity of replacing the liturgy by a geometrical ordering, and in particular the altar and the Book by a painting.

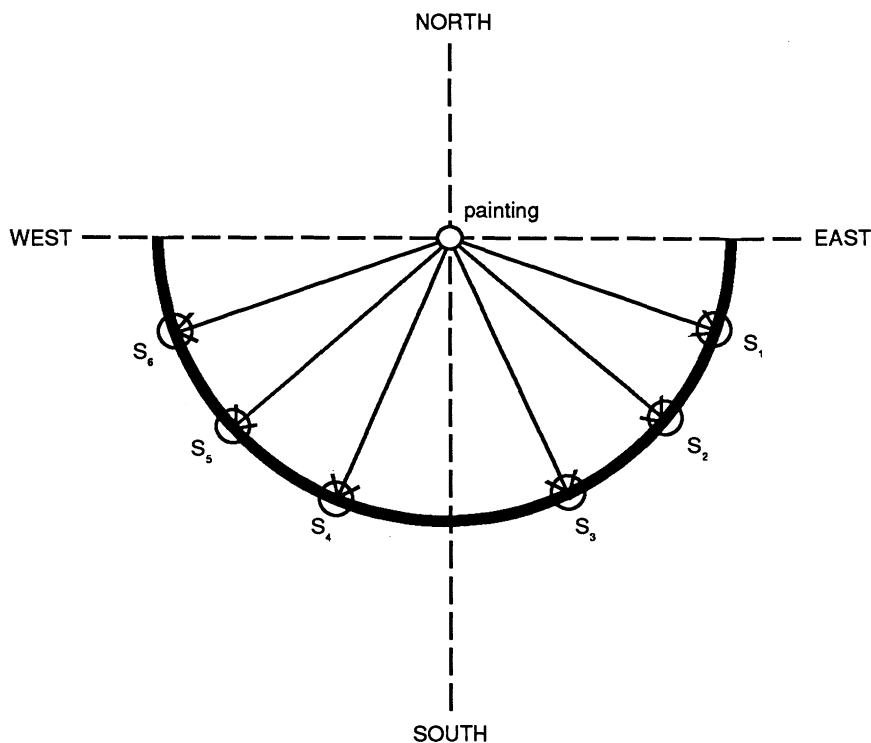
This mathematical liturgy brings into play a space divided into places by a system of differences among single entities constituted by their reciprocal positions. It seems to correspond to the *geometry of position* whose necessity was so rightly stressed by Buffon four centuries later: “Everything that has an immediate relation with position is absolutely lacking to our mathematical sciences. That art that Leibnitz called *Analysis situs* has not yet been born, and yet that art which would let us know the relations of position among things would be as useful to the natural sciences as—and perhaps more necessary than—the art that has only the greatness of things as its object” [Buffon 73; see also Petitot 171–234 and Deleuze 309–11]. Unknown to Buffon but not to Leibnitz, Nicholas of Cusa invents in his own way a geometry of relations of position, the forerunner of a topology, and he applies it to the seeing-seen relation. He constructs his experimental demonstration in three phases that he distinguishes with precision.

A simultaneity of stupefactions

The gaze of the painting constitutes a *point*. According to the constant theory of Nicholas of Cusa as he takes it up again in the *Theological Complement*, the point is in itself a “quasi-nothingness” (*prope nihil*), but it is endowed with an infinite “fecundity”; it is “at once” next to nothing in an analytic perspective, and nearly everything in a dynamic perspective [*Complementum theologicum* Chap. 9; see Gandillac 1941, 156, 159, 504–

07, 420–21]. It is inseparably, as the simplest unity, the epistemological principle of the geometric definition, and via its fecundity, the genetic principle of the spatial construction. Thus there is *generation of a space* owing to the equal lines drawn starting from the point. Equidistant from the painting, the monks represent that property. They make up a semi-circle. They construct, from the standpoint of mental operations, the “mathematical figure” which is also, from the standpoint of bodily displacements, the theater of an exercise.

The figure is at the same time a map, relative to the four cardinal points, according to an arrangement that is not subject to a cosmographic symbolism (where, for example, the center would be the Orient), but to an abstract framework presupposed by a geographical construction. Himself author of a map of central Europe (the *Tabula cūsana*) later discussed by Sebastian Münster, Nicholas of Cusa gives his composition the aspect of a world atlas, but it is a world whose center (the gaze) may be, arbitrarily, placed at the north as well as in any other place, so that behind the figuration frozen for an instant around this point for the purposes of an experiment, there is the Cusan vision of a universe whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere [see *De docta ignorantia* II, chaps. 11–12]. Organized by positions independent of the substrata but realized in these latter, one and the same place thus functions at a triple level: as “figure,” in a geometric space; as scene, in a theatrical space; and as map, in a geographical or cosmological space. Its genesis affects it with a polyvalence. It is a *play of spaces* that are qualitatively different. This first moment can be represented schematically:



The scene: a stratification of spaces and a relation of positions.

Foreign to the contemporary studies on colors and chromaticism, on varieties of light (irradiating, reflected, etc.) and thus on the eye as reflecting surface [see Gombrich 1964, 826–49], the problematics of the gaze grow out of a geometric perspective. The gaze is a vector—a line and an action in space. Like an arrow, it implants itself in each of the spectators. It thus gives “perceptible” form to the theory of the point, a relation between what it *contains* in a “quasi-nothingness” (this is the *complicatio*) and what *develops* from

it in the line (this is the *explicatio*). This mathematics of the point is in concordance moreover with the anthropological conception which, in the tradition of Euclidian optics, from Guillaume of Conches up to Ficino or even Bramante, considers the gaze as the effect of “natural spirits” emitted by the eye and “going out” toward things¹³—a conception which is maintained, in an increasingly hesitant and ambiguous way, up to Descartes’s *Dioptrique*.¹⁴ But in the Cusan preface, if the traditional movement remains, its terms are reversed: the supposed object (the painting) looks, and the subjects (the spectators) make up the tableau. During this first moment, the scene is immobile: the characters are fixed in various points of the semi-circle; the observing eyes are hypnotized by the gaze; the space is fixed in a pure coexistence of relative positions at the center and without relations among themselves.

Fifteen years later, in his *De Amore*, Marsilio Ficino will evoke a gaze that “deranges”: abstracted from the opaque and beautiful body that sustains it, the gaze of the other “strikes” the lover who is approaching and who “remains there” [Ficino 254–56]. This would be the sudden shock of the passer-by’s look that Walter Benjamin [*Illuminations* 168 ff.] evokes in discussing Baudelaire’s poem “A une passante.” A dazzling flash, removed from the quick or slow time of sight traveling over bodies and things. The Cusan composition, by using a painting, subtracts the body that would leave the spectators’ eyes to their movements and their hunts. It retains only the gaze. But it does not isolate a dual relationship. It brings into coexistence *all* those eyes, each of which is captured by *one* gaze. It stages the birth of a space (a multiplicity) in the instant in which it surprises all its occupants. To speak like Ficino, what “deranges” is not being exiled from social spaces and ties by a gaze; it is the space itself—the coincidence of seizures that wear away the collective consciousness of believing oneself in a common space, the simultaneity of singular stupefactions.

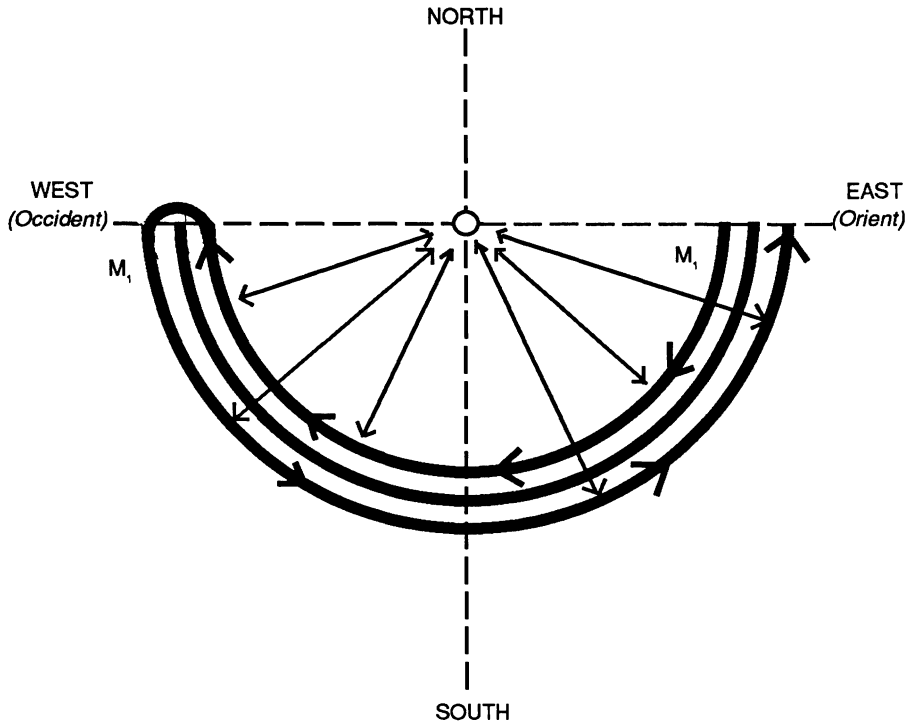
The twisting of space: movement

Marked by the astonishment (*admiratio*) that foment and imparts rhythm to the entire Cusan meditation, the exercise passes to a second stage, which creates movement in this atomized space. An actor has to experience the fixedness of the gaze by changing position. His moving about also introduces a duration. The test, still solitary and mute, confronts the gaze with a succession of actions, with back-and-forth movements from East to West, or from the Orient to the Occident, physical and itinerant figures of a narrative temporality.

The gaze “follows” the walker everywhere. While dominating all these movements, it is not external to them as if it were something “other”; it is immanent to them without being identical with them. Moreover, these successive travels are haunted by the *same* gaze even though they go in *opposite directions*. The discursivity that they institute, made up of sequences traced successively on the same place, is reversible. These lines, each one charged with a meaning, evoke (Nicholas of Cusa himself makes the comparison, in chapter 8) the image of a book that one might read just as well from right to left, like Hebrew or Arabic, as from left to right, like Latin or German—or certain Nordic paintings, for example Compain’s *The Marriage of the Virgin*, intended to be read starting from the right as well as starting from the left, and thus referring to a space not governed by the coherence of a visual apparatus [see Francastel 244–45]. To this co-possibility of two meanings, of two writings or of two narrativities which are *opposites*, one might also find

¹³On Guillaume of Conches, see Bruyne, vol. 2, 112–13 and 255–79, especially concerning the possibility that the eye can recognize abstract “forms”: “Formae vero oculis possunt discerni in opere” [262]. The Chartres school also accorded a decisive role to the thought of Nicholas of Cusa, and Thierry of Chartres even more so than Guillaume of Conches [see Duhem 269–72]. In opposition to Euclidean theory, the Stoic theory—resurrected by Alhazen in the twelfth century, mentioned and rejected by Conches—held that the forms of things come to the eye; this thesis slowly became dominant during the sixteenth century, beginning with Jean Pélerin’s *De artificiali Perspectiva* [see Brion-Guerry]. Cusa’s awareness of Alhazen is demonstrated by a reference in the *Apologia* [T.S. 282–83].

¹⁴“The objects of sight can be perceived, not only by means of the action which, being in those objects, tends toward the eyes, but also by means of the action in the eyes which tends toward the objects” [Dioptrique 183].



The twisting of space.

equivalents in the palindromes and “juggling tricks” or feats of linguistic prestidigitation that proliferate in the fifteenth century, “forbidding” linear reading and multiplying the different, even contrary, meanings, through the interchangeability of the paths of decoding [see Zumthor 1975, 25–88, and Zumthor 1978, 244–81].

These practices consist in thwarting the temporal succession (a nonreversible discursivity) that confers a single meaning on a sentence or text. By transgressing the order of succession, they undermine meaning. Hence they substitute for the law of a single *meaning* a problematic of the equivocal *place*. When they incurvate, invert, and multiply the possible paths where the meaning depended on the selection of a single path, they create a proliferation which is polysemic and, in the extreme case, contradictory in a text which *becomes an image*. The space traced by but irreducible to a meaning is in effect an image. The Cusan experiment, in this stage, proceeds toward the same annulling of discursivity, and thus of meaning, through the reversibility of trajectories (physical or narrative), but its aim is to expose that space as unreadable—outside of meaning and outside of text—insofar as it is *one*. What robs the trajectories—and the picture that they paint—of meaning is the unicity itself, or the center (which can be situated anywhere at all). In other words, the gaze is neither an object, nor an image, nor a concept, and, to use Lacan’s phrase, it “is missing (from) its place (*manque à sa place*),” it is everywhere and nowhere [see Petitot 201]; the gaze is an operator which makes “one” by rendering all the paths meaningless. This moment is that of the anti-narrative. The voyage is practiced here as proof that it changes nothing and that its time, far from creating points of no return, always comes back to the same since each point repeats the same unthinkable movement and since to the east or to the west, in one direction/meaning or another, it is all the same. Under the gaze, time is annulled and movement itself becomes unreal.

A loss of object is also an effect of the gaze. There is no longer a *seen object* for

whoever is *being seen*. The abnormality of this persistent gaze brings about the disappearance of the possibility of grasping it as one object among others, before or after others. The observer thought he was seeing. Changed into the observed, he enters into an “astonishment” which is not accompanied by any representation. The experience of the gaze is a surprise without an object. The gaze of the other excludes the possession of an image. It deprives of sight, it dazzles sight, it blinds. Conversely, to perceive an object is thus to defend oneself against one’s capacity for looking; it is to exorcise its power to bewitch sight. If, as Nicholas of Cusa specifies further on, *being* itself is an *observed subject*, then the seen object becomes the alibi of the observed being; it serves to deceive a gaze; it diverts and protects the subject from it. Or else it fills in for a lack of gaze, it is the gaze’s ersatz and its expectation, as if the multiplication of seen objects could represent that absence. The seen objects thus reintroduce a history and a narrativity, those of diversions, of delays or expectations; they relate, they spell out in an interminable myth the distancing of a gaze. At this stage in the Cusan exercise, if the gaze is the loss of the object, the story is born from the loss of the gaze.

The antinomy between sight and the gaze, which movement brings into the open, is accompanied by an opposition between two types of space. The voyages of the eye from East to West and from West to East *ought* to transform the perceived landscape: the spectator, modifying his “point of view,” the painting, as he perceives it, is subject to proportional anamorphoses in the successive places that he occupies. The landscape moves. But the gaze, for its part, does not obey the law of that visual reciprocity that defines a landscape. It “follows” the movements *and* it remains immutable. Its ubiquity unifies an *immobile* space where the displacements of the eye ceaselessly change the painting. The circulations of the spectator differentiate two types of space, that of the eye and that of the gaze, which contradict each other in the same space. More precisely, they impress a twisting or torsion onto a space in which the fixedness of the gaze defies the law of the landscape. The work of this contradiction affects equally two historical moments of vision: in the very framework of the renescent aesthetic, in which the analysis of points of view, relations between moving points, is imposing little by little a problematics of perspective (tied to what I call the landscape),¹⁵ the Cusan exercise maintains a medieval problematics of the gaze, universal and stable, which overhangs all things and each particular thing. The spectator’s shifting about, by generating a combinatorial of real movements and apparent movements, manifests both the opposition and the coincidence of two visual practices of place—practices which correspond to two historical and anthropological “visions.” The mobility maximizes the fantastic of seeing, in the way that Chirico, in his *Lassitude de l’infini*, opens up his landscape to a qualitative difference of space through an internal tension between two types of vision.

The social space of the gaze

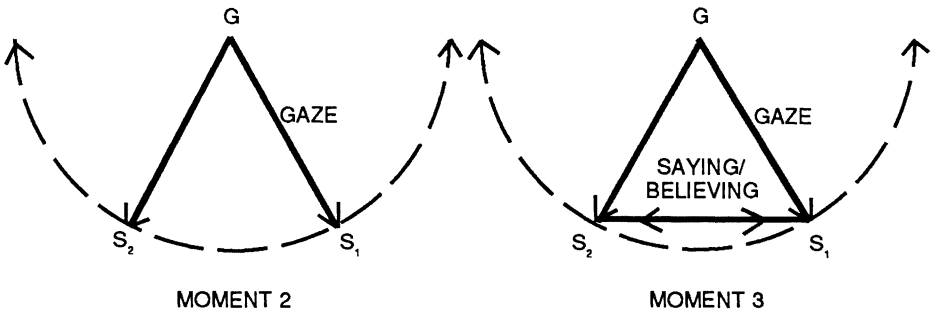
Marked once again by an astonishment (*admiratio*), the third moment guarantees the passage from the visual to discourse. It does so at first by excluding the possibility that the imagination might make up for the insufficiency of sight. The unimaginable (*neque poterit imaginatio capere*), furthermore, prolongs the *admiratio* and makes its “nature” explicit: deprived of a representable object, astonishment becomes the gesture, at once ethical and poetic, of responding to an excess by turning toward the imperceptible. The domain of surprise will be the birthplace of discourse. The absence of a visible or imaginable object serves as a prelude, still without content, empty, to the necessity of believing the speech of the other. The guide-text thus impugns imagination but, on the other hand, it appeals to the “will.” *Experiri volens: if you will* pursue the experience and continue to seek, then the possibility of a displacement that is no longer physical but intellectual will appear—that of another path that is no longer in the continuity of visual perception, but the path of *admiratio* itself, an imageless surprise, an opening to the unknown.

¹⁵Landscape in the broad sense of a reciprocity between places (and not in the strict sense of an autonomy of the background in relation to the figures of the painting, a later and originally Nordic phenomenon) is analyzed by E. H. Gombrich in Norm and Form [107–21].

The threshold of the social order appears with the recourse to a partner. There is indeed a repetition of movements foreseen in the previous stage, in one direction by the actor, in the opposite direction by his colleague, but the articulation between these two opposing circuits takes place in a social sphere, first in a coordination in *action*, then via an agreement at the level of *speech*.

In having his partner do what he has accomplished himself in conformity with the manual (the preface), the first actor socializes the scene. He introduces into it a transmission and a cooperation. What happens is something like Friday's entrance into Robinson's island habitat. In the Cusan theater, the itinerary of a single silent man pursued by a gaze is transformed into the genesis of an association. *There are* individuals, but how do they form a group? How do they *make one*? This is the Cusan question. This micro-utopia concerns the problem that will come to obsess "modern" social thought: with what model are we to envisage the origin of human society, while taking the existence of individuals as a given? In this preface, the model is no longer biblical: the collectivity is not based on sexual difference, that is, on a situation in "nature" (whose divine origin Nicholas of Cusa recognizes but whose import he relativizes, each human being having both masculine and feminine characteristics¹⁶); it results from a contract of cooperation and from a division of labor; it is itself the first of the *opera humana*, even if its principle is the infinite that animates each individual. From a theological schema privileging sexual difference, the thinking shifts to a model of political economy, placed under the aegis of production: a community is constructed on the basis of willful actions, differentiated or opposed, but coexisting and coordinated. This model subtended the mechanisms of representation and cooperation earlier presented by the *De concordia catholica*. It is "modern" in its individualist postulate and in its productivist perspective, although it is traditional in its theological or mystical foundation, a "seed" of infinity in each and all.

The style of this cooperation already sketches in the form that speech receives when it finally emerges: a dialogue, the form given to the majority of Cusa's works. It supposes the irreducibility of each speaker with respect to another: for want of a common vision, the one has to believe the other. The protocol of a verbal agreement between them is made up of successive acts (but opposing and reciprocal ones), ordered in the production of a common *sentence*. The text sums them up in a "canonical" *conversation*, a temporal series, as if it were presenting a juridical formalization of conversational procedures: the *interrogatio*, the *revelatio* (the deposition and revelation made by the witness-interlocutor), the *auditio* (a hearing as much as an audition), and the assent (*credere*) which makes it possible to "grasp" (*capere*) what one cannot see. At the end, the experience of the gaze consists in believing without seeing, thus in living in society, in "understanding each other."



From seeing to saying/believing. The gaze is for each spectator, at moment 2, what believing is between them at moment 3.

¹⁶There is, he says, masculine in the feminine, and vice versa, even when one is dealing with the signs of sexual difference. By nature the individual is a sort of monad. [See *De conjecturis II*, chap. 8; T.S. 172.]

The conclusion is abrupt. The looked-upon being has as its only adequate language the *ex auditu*, that is, what it learns or hears from another. In the course of the third phase of the exercise, how has one passed from the *non-knowledge* that marks its beginning to the *knowledge* that is its end? This passage is first accomplished through a transposition of the non-knowledge/knowledge relation into a relation between an initial astonishment ("I don't believe my own eyes") and a final assent ("I believe what the other is saying"). On this base, certain elements are decisive:

(a) A *desire* marks the threshold of an access to another mode of operations, carried out by several people and no longer by just one; it makes possible a qualitative change of space, by allowing the introduction of a social field within the visual field. "I want to experiment," "I want to do more," or "I want to go all the way": these possible transcriptions of the *volens experiri* substitute a "wanting to know" for the current status of the "knowledge," refer a state of knowledge back to the *desire* that is its mainspring, and appeal to the basic dynamics which, at the very root of knowledge, conjoins the desire to know (I want to know) with the courage to do (I want to do). By manifesting the ethical (or ascetic, or "spiritual") movement which undergirds a research, this first element already prepares the form of active hospitality that "believing" will be. It is no longer stupefaction that responds to the gaze, but desire.

(b) A *torsion* or crisscrossing between doing and saying characterizes the site induced by this "wanting the other." The scene of this third moment combines two opposed activities which consist, for the partners, in each one *doing* the *opposite* of the other (inverse trajectories) and then in *saying* to each other the *same thing* ("You too?" "Yes."). The "doing" stems from a contradictory plurality: the "saying," from a unifying coincidence. In the mode of a temporal communication (and no longer only of spatial trajectories), we find once again the *torsion* that created, in the second phase, the relation between the *motions* of the landscape traversed by traveling eyes and the immanence of the same gaze to all these trajectories. These *motions* can no more be reduced from the "doing" to the "saying" than they can be reduced to the unicity by which they are obsessed: in these two spheres of operations, the plural ("all and every") is not suppressed by the "one." In the social space, the "doing" is to the "saying" what, in the visual space, the eyes are to the gaze, so that within human relations, "saying" has a function analogous to the gaze.

(c) "*The gaze speaks.*" From the beginning, Cusa introduces the question of the other, the blind spot of the sight that grasps objects. This gaze that fixes him and follows him everywhere is for the supposed spectator a question without an answer: "What does it want of me, then?" No visible or imaginable object can be put in the place of that question. The gaze abolishes every position that would guarantee the traveler an acceptable [*traitable*] place, an autonomous and sheltering dwelling, an individual and objective "home." Basically, the gaze *is a saying* that organizes the entire space. "Your gaze speaks," Nicholas of Cusa comments [*De icona*, chap. 10]. It is *enunciative*. But no one knows nor can know *what* it means to say. Nothing articulates or distributes in "articles" and in thinkable objects that unknown intention.

Antecedents for this enunciatory conception of the icon could be found among medieval aesthetic theories [see Bruyne, vol. 3, 58 ff.], or in Ockhamist philosophy, which exempts from discourse "absolute Power" and the divine will, for which there is no possible truth-speaking. In any case, the all-seeing icon grounds the distinction between an *operator-sign*, the index of a will unconnected with any actual place or any "substratum," and *object-signs*, visible images ensconced in a landscape. It institutes the question of the subject by an alogical gaze, or by an absolute will that "makes a hole" in representation [see Petitot 209].

(d) The gaze is inscribed in discourse and in the social order by a "believing." Disembodied and placeless, it "deranges." But the Cusan exercise, in its final stage, allocates to it a dialogical and social body that stems from communication, which has as its basic mainspring a relation of subject to subject: if you do not believe the other, you remain within the impossible and the meaningless. The believing responds, between these two interlocutors, to what the gaze is for each of them. Their contradiction is irreducible, since each step carries in itself the solitary secret of its relation to the infinite. No interchangeable element can pass from one to the other. No transformation code can, as by means of a

coin, encompass their private exchange in a general system of equivalence. What each one can say, in the capacity of a subject obsessed by the gaze, cannot be seen by the other, but only believed. This would be the case for love, or insanity.

The adhesion to the "saying" of partners multiplies the relation that each one, alone, maintains with the gaze. It articulates the gaze in reciprocal enunciative experiences. From this angle, belief *socializes the meaningless*. The "insanity" of the gaze becomes (almost) corporal; that does not make it subject to mastery, however, but it is the generator of exchanges that set into motion the initial stupefaction and that change the solitary *admiration* into the productive work of a group. Belief is thus the moment, to be repeated indefinitely, by which the insanity of the gaze is transformed into discourse and into history.

3. *Circular discourse: "all and each one at once"*

From the preface to the twenty-five chapters of the treatise, there is also the passage from a "doing" to a "saying," from a common exercise to a discourse that asks to be believed by its hearers. But a still more brutal break marks this passage. The scene of "perceptible experimentation" closes with a reminder of its status as only the staging of an "appearance." The "praxis" is of the order of "appearing," and thus removed from discourse that states the "truth." It stems from an optical illusion whose effects, production techniques (for example, the painting of a three-quarter face image) and psychological effects as well ("we always believe that a gaze is seeking us out") were doubtless well known at the time [Gombrich 1971, 346 ff.]. Apparently the fictitious nature of this framework made possible an operation already similar to the "imaginary actions," or, as Mach will call them, the "thought experiments" practiced by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scientists. (For want of technical means of experimentation and for want of adequate instrumentation, these consisted of imagining, for the elements under consideration, conditions of complete isolation [see Koyré 224–71 and Clavelin 389–459]. Nonetheless a transfer—from the "semblance" that affected the theater of the gaze to the "truth" that the discourse has to tell—clearly takes place. It is carried out, globally, as a result of two transformations of the site. On the one hand, the didactic text of the preface (which is a sort of manual), addressed to the actors of Tegernsee and supplying stage directions, is replaced by a meditative text (a "soliloquy," its recipients will call it [see, for example, a 1454 letter from Geissenfeld to Weilheim, in Vansteenbergh 1915, 219]) addressed to God and moving through the cycle of Christian mysteries. On the other hand, the anonymous and faceless gaze of the painting (*who* is it? we do not know) is replaced by the proper names of a theology (God, Jesus, and so on), and thus the polysemy of an elusive figure is replaced by the linguistic determinacy of a referential cluster. Whereas the preface leads up to the act of believing, the chapters that follow specify what must be believed, and how. The articulation between these two parts and the relation of the second to the first will finally reveal the Cusan conception of "seeing." I shall recall just a few of its aspects.

(1) "Suitability"

The discontinuity that separates "praxis" and theory does not exclude their "suitability" (*convenance*) for each other, but suitability of a particular type that is designated, in the Cusan vocabulary, the phenomenon of "coming with," of "going together" (*con-venire*), or of "happening at the same time" (*simul*), and which is attached, through a spatial metaphor of coexistence or conjunction, to the concept of the "coincidence of contraries." This *convenance* intervenes in the text at two strategic moments destined to spell out the relationship between the preface and the discourse that follows: the first time, at the beginning of the preface, after the foreword that defined the object of the treatise, in order to assure the passage from "divine things" to "human" painting ("I have found nothing more suitable [*convenable*] . . ."); the second time, at the beginning of the first chapter, in order to ensure the return of "appearances" to the utterance of the "truth" (the "property of seeing at once all and each one . . . cannot be less truly fitting [*ne pourra pas convenir*

moins véritablement] with truth than apparently with the image or appearance"). In the two contrary directions—from divine to human, and from appearances to truth—the passage is achieved in the name of suitability (*convenance*). This latter is accompanied by an absence of proportion (an "improportionality," ch. 1). It does not designate a homology and does not refer back to the ontological analogy (the *analogia entis*). It stems rather from a *proximology*, in the sense in which Nicholas of Cusa spoke of "a brilliant proximity of the mathematical in relation to the true. In a gesture peculiar to the Cusan style of thinking, it is earmarked by the comparative: one element is more or less "suitable" for another, it comes more or less close to it, up to an unthinkable "maximum" that thus provides no stable reference point for hierarchization and which is coincidence. Terms *approach each other*, more or less, *without resembling each other*: as, for example, with the polygon and the circle, the straight line and the curve, or the two interlocutors of the exercise. Suitability is treated as a relationship between positions, in a sort of topology in which the comparative governs the "comparison."

The relationship—*convenance* and comparison—between the gaze of the painting and the gaze of God is spelled out, in the beginning of the first chapter, by a very elliptical *praesupponendum* (a flash) that nonetheless aims to define the functioning of "true" discourse. "We must presuppose in the first place," Nicholas of Cusa reckons, that "nothing appears in the gaze of the painting that is not *more true* (*verius*) in the true (*verus*) gaze of God." The "apparent" and the "true," the observable phenomenon and invisible existence constitute two levels of being without proportion or resemblance between them, but "in" one as "in" the other there is present a remarkable "property" (or *perfectio*), the coincidence between all and each one—*simul omnia et singula*—that it is "more true" (a category relative to speaking the truth) to affirm about existence than about the phenomenon. Even though, through a word play characteristic of the quick Cusan wit, in the same sentence, the same term, *verus*, receives in turn an ontological value (true, veritable) and an epistemological value (more true), the thought is clear: it is by virtue of their status as remarkable properties that they each attest (like the interlocutors of the exercise) that two dissimilar levels of being (the apparent and the existent) are brought together. But unlike the two interlocutors, who represent two viewpoints that are heteronomous but at the same level and of which neither, as a result, is "more true" than the other, here the comparative attached to true speech refers back to a movement of thought that in Nicholas of Cusa takes on an essentially mathematical form and that is inscribed within a philosophical tradition to which Anselm's "argument" (belatedly considered "ontological") already bore witness: a property (or *perfectio*) is all the *more true* to the extent that it *disappears*; the more it escapes from view (that of the eyes, then even that of the intelligence), the more it approaches the "true," in such a way that at the extreme it is in a blind dazzling of the eyes of the body and of reason, in a point where the visible vanishes, that it can be the object of a *true telling* identical to a non-seeing or to a *believing*.

Suitability grows with invisibility. It has to do with the emergence of the same property at two different levels, of which "we must presuppose" that the one, less visible, is more true than the other. The experimentation is thus not the basis for an induction, nor is it the proof or the verification of a property. It only discloses what another "view" permits us to recognize in it. Take, in geometry, a noteworthy property, for example the fact that the sum of the angles of a right triangle is equal to two right angles (a property that can be extended to every sort of polygon, as Bouligand has shown): it establishes the relationship of various concrete representations (or figures) among themselves and with the statement of the property; moreover, it defines what the outline of a particular figure will also make perceptible to the eye. In the Cusan text, the "property" that has been "isolated," in an artificial and experimental manner, by the exercise of the preface, has this double task: it establishes a relationship between two disproportionate orders, "physical" *perception* (*apparener*) and the "true" *utterance* (*veraciter*); it defines, as simultaneity between *all* and each *one*, the *formal relation* that this exercise brings to light.

In this connection, "seeing" already takes on two meanings. In the first place, to see is to *recognize suitability*, that is, to uncover *one* single thing in *several* heterogeneous places. This first view already comes close, tendentially, to another one. For fundamentally,

seeing is the act through which *singularity coincides with totality*, that is, the very property of the gaze. This seeing is “more true”—more sayable—of God, even if (or rather: to the precise extent to which) it is still less thinkable. “In fact,” the text adds in going back to an etymology that Cusa cherished and that was borrowed from Dionysius the Areopagite (*theos*, “God,” would come from the Greek *theôrô*, “I see”),¹⁷ “God is called *theos* because he sees everything”—*all and each one* at the same time.

(2) *The visible and the sayable*

The text plays subtly upon three elements: figure, statement, and property. The first of these is visible; the second is true; the third is not thinkable. The figure makes visible the geometrical relation between the point (or the center) and the circumference—this is a constant reference of Cusa’s thinking and the basis for the scenic construction presented in the preface. The true statement declares the property, the simultaneity of “one” and “all.” In short, what is *seen* as a relation between the center and the circumference is *stated* as a relation between one and all. But this relation itself, allogical, cannot be thought. It eludes visual perception as it eludes rational discourse.

In other words, the true *statement* is not the truth; it is only a positivity, a true one to be sure, but one we must be able to “see” before we can accede to the truth. Only an appropriate practice, which Nicholas of Cusa calls “seeing,” will permit the transformation of the visible figure or the true statement into “mystic theology.” The procedure he uses thus consists in a *mutual reference* of visual perception to true statement and vice versa, in such a way that they are led to a point of coincidence which in no way diminishes the difference or the contradiction between them. If the exercise finally transforms this circulation within the visible into a dialogic exchange, or the travels of the eye into belief responding to speech, conversely, once discourse is inaugurated on the basis of the bifurcation that separates it from appearance, it never stops reconnecting with the “icon,”¹⁸ in conformity with the declaration of the *Theological Complement*: “Theological things will be better seen with the mind’s eye than they can be expressed with words” [O. 1107]. In itself, the statement of the true is no more the truth of the image than the image is the truth of the discourse. What counts, rather, is the movement through which they come to “fit” together, like two different points of view, or like the two actors, in a coincidence without positivity, that cannot be “held” in any visible or sayable place.

No doubt we might add, with respect to that difference between them, that the visible gives the *form* (center-circumference) of which the sayable indicates the *level* (it is not “perceptible,” or localizable). In this connection, to borrow a manner of thinking (A is to B what C is to D) that is habitual with Cusa and common among the “*calculatores*” of the era, the figure is to the structure what the discourse is to the symbolic. But the essential point lies elsewhere. It is played out in the *encounter*, or the coincidence, between the visible and the sayable, in a way that makes them “bear witness” to what is neither seen nor known, just as the actors of the exercise, having been divested of every owned object that they might exchange, have to believe in each other: “You too?” “Yes.”

The combination of the preface (perceptible experimentation) and the twenty-five chapters that follow (true discourse) thus composes a scene analogous to the one that the third phase of the exercise organized. In the treatise, *the juncture* between its visual moment

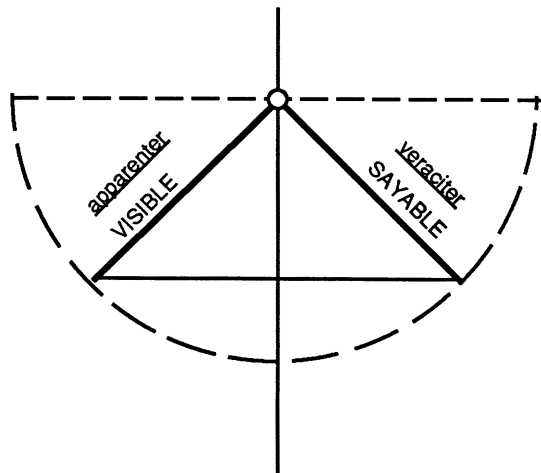
¹⁷This etymology recurs in *De icona itself* [chap. 8]; in the *Complementum theologicum* [chap. 13; O. 1119]; in *De quaerendo Deo* [O.O. IV, 1, 22], where it also takes the form of an alternative between a “seeing” God and a “wandering” God: “*Theos dicitur a theôrô sive theô, quod est video et curro*” (15); in *De Deo abscondito* 14, 1 [T.S. 207]; and so forth [cf. *Dionysius Areopagita* XII, 2, 969 C].

¹⁸The treatise is punctuated with returns to painting (in chapters 4, 9, 10, 15, 22) of the type “the painting I now have in sight . . .” [chap. 9]. This movement corresponds not only to the capacity of the image to “generate discourse” and induce developments, but also to a necessity in discursive expression, which must rediscover the unity of these developments and their intuitive totalization in the figure.

(a doing) and its discursive moment (a saying), marked by "suitability," is *the effect of the gaze* to which they attest differently. Like the two spectators in front of the painting, these two "parts" of the text form by their encounter the discourse of a gaze that "follows" them everywhere; they constitute a "tableau" with respect to that "one" that never leaves them throughout all of their individual and contrary procedures. The breach that separates them traces the flash, the *Blitz* of that gaze. It is not the gaze itself, which has no place, but its textual effect, a literary equivalent of belief: a presence of absence, the "hole" of the operator.

(3) *The discourse of coincidence or metonymy*

This encounter brings to light here the way in which Nicholas of Cusa constructs a "mystic" theology, that is, a discourse organized by a gaze. It supposes that there is suitability (*convenance*) between two systems of expression that trace two opposing paths, and that one might represent graphically by the two sides of a right triangle whose apex would be the "hole" of the text:



[reconstruction, E.Y.]

These two domains of expression, the one in the mode of observable phenomena (*apparenter*) and the other in the mode of the true statement (*veraciter*), are the two mirrors of the same gaze. Because of this, there must be in the discourse, too, something that corresponds to the torsion generated by the gaze in the visual experimentation. In the field of this gaze, the sequence of true statements can no more be limited to the linearity of a rational order than can observation be limited to the coherence of a visual pattern. In fact, just as the spectator sees without seeing (he sees himself seen), the speaker of the chapters says without saying (he speaks in the other's place). Relative to a *practice of discursive space*, that is, to the very manner of situating oneself within discourse, a *torsion of the text* concerns its enunciation: *who* speaks, and *how*? I shall retain only the focal point, the functioning of the "I" (*ego*) throughout these twenty-five chapters.

From the first to the last, they are written in the first person. Thus they have been understood as a "soliloquy," a solitary meditation, a prayer addressed to God. But this "I" is not one single person: it changes along the way. The first three chapters introduce the characters of a pedagogical scene: we witness the entrance of "I," the master [ch. 1], of "you," the disciple [ch. 2: the familiar "toi" is used here, rather than the formal "vous"]

of the preface], and of “we,” mankind [ch. 3]. We are still dealing with theoretical postulates and practices preliminary to “truth speaking.” Chapter 4 is a turning point. After a brief reminder about the experiment, still directed at “you, brother,” the first paragraph turns abruptly around: “And you (*tu*) will say: ‘Lord, in *your (ton)* image. . . . If *you (tu)* do not leave *me . . .*,’ and so on. Here begins the “truth speaking,” which will consist entirely of quotation of the other. Henceforth, and right up to the last line of the treatise, the “I” (*je*) is the addressee, the “you” (*tu*) is God. The “soliloquy” is presumed to be uttered by the brother, who is presumed to be addressing the true Seer (*le Voyant véritable*). We have one “ego” in the place of the other. “True” discourse is entirely dominated by this fictitious “I.” This discourse as well is thus the staging of an “appearance,” and it stems from an enunciatory illusion just as the “praxis” was the development of an optical illusion.

To be sure, to this “ego” that replaces him the author lends memories or feelings of his own, for example his oratorical experience, the impressions he got in the Brixen mountains or among the trees, his meditation in front of the clock, and so on. But the same holds true for every fiction, and the exercise in the preface also had an autobiographical aspect. Nicholas of Cusa’s work no doubt offers numerous antecedents to this manner of speaking in the other’s place, from the use of language itself (the German speaks in Latin) to the structure of those numerous dialogues or “trialogues” (*trialogui*) in which, as in the *Idiot*, the “other,” the “layman,” tells the “truth” to the “philosopher,” and in which, consequently, the author is enunciated in the position of his addressee.

A biographical element heightens the paradox of this situation. It has to do with the mystic theology whose “facility” the foreword of *De icona* claims to seek to explain. In a letter written September 22, 1452, to Gaspard Aindorffer, whom he met at Tegernsee on June 1–2 of the previous year, Nicholas of Cusa confides that he himself has not known the mystical experience: “Someone may well point out to others the path that he knows to be true thanks to the teaching he has received (*ex auditu*), even if he has not taken that path himself. But surer still is the one who has seen it (*visu*) through having practiced it. As for me (*ego*), if I write or say something about it, it will be all the less sure in that I have never tasted (*gustavi*) the full sweetness of the Lord” [Vansteenberghe 1915, 113; see the comparable assertions in the *Apologia*, T.S. 283]. The allusion is clear: the biblical quotation to which Cusa refers traditionally designates mystical experience: “Gustate et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus” [Psalm 33:9]. Cusa goes back to it, moreover, in *De icona* itself, when in order to demonstrate the identity of “seeing” and “tasting,” he describes precisely that of which he has no personal experience: “To taste your sweetness itself is to apprehend in its foundation, through experiential contact (*experimentalis contactu*), the sweetness (*suavitas*) of all delectable things” [*De icona*, chap. 5, and cf. chap. 17].

The autobiographical “I” of the letter is *limited* to a particular place; it *depends* on others in order to reach the true (*ex auditu*) and it is *separated* from the *gustus* that would create both the subject’s “delectation” and the “certainty” of his discourse. On the contrary, the “I” of the treatise, speaking about a fictitious place that is neither his own nor that of his addressee, may believe, and make believe, that he *is saying the same thing* as his interlocutor, a “true” discourse for both, including his description of the “paradise” where he finds certainty and delight: “I am beginning to see you without veils and to enter the garden of delights . . .” [Chap. 12]. The first “ego” is linked to a story whose “paths” diverge and separate when they are not in direct contradiction; it belongs to the domain of disjunction (*disjunctive*) which is that of *doing*. The second “ego” is lodged in the non-place of statements relative to what a speaker may believe but not see of the other, and, thanks to that belief that is uttered in the name of the other, it speaks of the “gaze” that generates contradictory trajectories; it is uttered in the name of a conjunction (*copulative*), or rather of a coincidence in a center that is “everywhere and nowhere”: it specifies the field of *saying* itself. The first one is narrative; it stems from *relatio*; it tells of solitary travels, situations of dependence, and stories of separation. The second one is mystical: it characterizes the “fable,” that “saying” of the belief that makes a “suitability” possible.

A similarity with the mathematical “model” is doubtless unavoidable: what is the “I” that is speaking in a geometry proof? But even more enlightening, in the attempt to grasp the articulation of the two “egos” in “mystic theosophy,” is the way in which Nicholas of

Cusa relates his experience of the “gift from on high,” at the end of *De docta ignorantia*. Like the *revelatio relatoris* of the partner in the exercise, his personal testimony about the gaze is situated at a crossroads, in the moment when, the treatise finally completed (“... Deus . . . qui est in saecula benedictus. Amen”), the author seems to make a three-quarter turn to address the Roman Cardinal Biuliano Cesarini (1398–1444), his former “master,” three years older than he, a lawyer trained like himself in Padua, also a legate, emissary to the Hussites, also present at the Council of Basel over which he presided, a conciliarist converted to Papal primacy like the Cusan and like him engaged in the union of the Greeks and Latins in Florence. Evoked in passing in that “peroratio” that serves as *hors-texte* and *envoi* for *De docta ignorantia*, the “gift from on high” is not presented as a “vision,” still less as a “taste.” Nicholas of Cusa repeats this in several personal texts [in his *Apologia*, P.S. 282–83; also in the aforementioned letter to G. Aindorffer], it is a “concept” (*conceptus*) or a transcendental “principle”—the “learned ignorance” that makes it possible to think without being thinkable itself and which, in conformity with the Cusan epistemology, remains a production of the mind, but a “generation” by means of which the mind produces outside itself the intimate surprise of its own infinite movement, just as the interlocutor of the exercise expressed the interruption of his solitary progression by a gaze: “Yes, I too.”

This concept cannot be identified with either one of the opposites whose coincidence it posits outside of any rational grasp but in the mind. Inaccessible by the “various paths of the doctrines,” it makes it possible to hold their “co-localization” in a point that escapes all intellectual localization. It resembles the maritime site of its advent. A concept straddling two worlds, East and West, it is the meeting of two opposing histories, each of which accedes to the concept only through belief in what the other says of itself: a gaze never leaves me; I too am pursued by it. This was in 1438, two years before the treatise was finished. While at sea, returning from “the place of the Greeks” with the *basileus* and the patriarch of Constantinople on the way to a “synod” with the Pope of Rome in Florence, Nicholas of Cusa receives the concept of what may be the “meeting” of those two long hostile traditions of the same Spirit, if, on each side, there is belief in what the witness from the other side says about his own history.

At the beginning of *De docta ignorantia*, the dedication, which is also an *hors-texte*, provides a counterpart to the final address. It is similarly devoted to a meeting, which this time does not involve East and West but rather “the German” (*Germanus*), with his “wild extravagances” (*Barbaras ineptias*) and his “perhaps entirely extravagant concept” (*fortassis ineptissimum conceptum*), and on the other hand Giuliano, Cardinal of Rome, a distinguished Latinist and even a Hellenist: Nicholas of Cusa hopes that the “astonishment” (*admiratio*) that is the “source of philosophy” will allow the Roman to “believe” in “something” that “secretly inhabits (*latitare*)” the “German’s” philosophical enterprise [in the dedication of *De docta ignorantia*]. On the rhetorical register of the “dedication to the prince,” we have here a different version of the very movement that, from the beginning of this treatise to the end, concerns the concept received while at sea.

What is important here is not the comparison of biographical facts, but the homology of gestures which, in very different historical, literary, or speculative ways, allow us to recognize the style of a shared way of thinking. In this connection, the dedication to Giuliano Cesarini is comparable to the letter to G. Aindorffer, even if the one contrasts the “barbaric” German with the humanist Roman, and the other separates the intellectual trained by teaching (*auditus*) and the Benedictine who has passed through the *schola affectus* (the way of *gustus*). The explanation of what separates two positions allows each of them to state its truth in the name of the speech of the other. This procedure, presented in the micro-laboratory of an exercise, works as well for the juxtaposition of Byzantium and Rome, and, toward the end of his life, in the *Cribatio Alchorani* (*The Screening* [or critical examination] of *the Koran*, 1461), Nicholas of Cusa extends it beyond the Christian frontiers to a confrontation between Islam and Christianity in which, after an ardent search for sources and witnesses, he himself has the Muslim speak. Here again, the coincidence is neither a similarity nor an assimilation; it presupposes a “contradiction” between religions, each of which comes to understand its own relation to the infinite by believing the

testimony of the other. A chart may summarize the various cases encountered so far and show their “conceptual” coherence:

	THE ONE	THE DISCURSIVE MARK OF COINCIDENCE	THE OTHER
<i>De concordia cathol.</i> , dedication	German language	BELIEVING WHAT THE OTHER SAYS  SPEAKING IN THE NAME OF WHAT THE ONE BELIEVES ABOUT THE OTHER	Latin language
<i>De icona</i> , structure	The visible phenomenon		True statement
exercise, ph. 3	One-way trajectory		Opposing trajectory
discourse	The biographical “I”		The addressee
<i>De docta ignor.</i> , dedication	The “barbaric” German		The Roman humanist
peroration	The Christian West		The Christian East
<i>Cribratio Alchorani</i>	Christianity		Islam

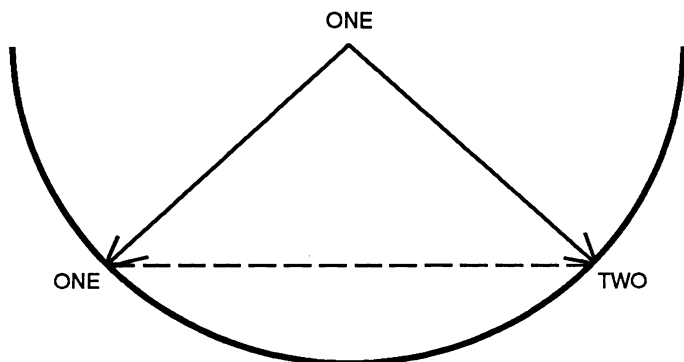
Everywhere, the coincidence between “the one” and “the other” is marked by an empty place which is at once, in each case, the vanishing point of its undertaking (a “surprise,” a “hole”) and, between them, the breach of a “believing.” The discourse of the “concept” or of coincidence is constructed on the basis of that empty place. It causes what the belief in the other introduces to flow along a particular path. The “mystic” (the fable of saying) converts the “narrative” (the “relation” of operations proper to a path). From this angle, the fictive “I” of the treatise is the inscription, in the text, of what a belief changes in the understanding of the itinerary appropriate to the biographical “I.” It is not an eclecticism, as if, in order to call attention to the other, it were enough to insert a few *more* utterances, those of the other, into discourse itself—as if the coincidence were of the order of an addition of an (interminable) acquisition and obeyed the logic of “also.” This coincidence is played out in a believing, that is, in a relation of *subject to subject*, the one irreducible to the other. It challenges *enunciation*, which is central in belief, a relation between speakers and not between utterances [see de Certeau 1983]. Thus the “I” has a strategic position in the discourse of coincidence. How is it possible to speak in the name of what I believe about the other? The fictive “I” of the text answers that question. It is an *effect of belief* in the position—or in the viewpoint—of the enunciating subject. That subject generates a new practice of the path that is peculiar to the author. More precisely, it represents in the text that effect of the gaze that is recourse to belief: it is a literary effect of that *effect of the gaze*.

This discursive or conceptual “I” is thus neither the autobiographical one of the letter to G. Aindorffer, nor that of the addressee. Strictly speaking, it does not speak in the name of the other, but *in the name of what he believes about the other*. In this respect, Nicholas of Cusa remains faithful, in his treatise, to what he writes, in his own name, to the abbot of Tegernsee. In his letter, does he not base “true” knowledge on the “ex auditu”—on what he has heard and believed? But for him the “auditus” does not designate submission to textual authorities or to the utterances of a privileged author (he recalled this in regard to J. Schenk); it is a way of hearing and of believing, on the part of others, the testimony concerning the relation of their undertakings to a “gaze.” Then, no doubt, “taste” itself, which does not belong to the personal experience of the author, may be presented, *ex auditu*, by the fictive “I” of the treatise.

This conceptual or “speculative” functioning does not eliminate the rhetorical aspect of the device. The technique is familiar. Pascal was to use it often, incorporating into his own discourse the presumed statements of the other: “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me” [Fragment 206; see Marin 215–38 and 343–51]. In itself, the art of “speaking the other” has well-noted uses: it secures the involvement of the reader, who identifies with this “I”; it turns the text written on behalf of that “I who is another” into the novel of the author and his desire; and so forth. It is practiced in a variety of genres, especially in novels of the fantastic, which aim precisely at disturbing, through an unexpected third party, the division of space into real facts and “imaginary” facts. The ruses and virtuosities of this device may also be linked with the flowering developments of rhetoric during the fifteenth century. All this is present in Nicholas of Cusa, who moreover has his novelistic and fantastic side, but one that is caught up in the rapidity of the speculative imagination. The problem cannot be presented in terms of an alternative between theory and fiction (“either one or the other”), or in the form of a theory overcome by weakness and falling into “literature.” It seems rather that “coincidence” is the “concept” of “saying one in the place of the other” and that, since this device is fundamentally that of metonymy, one finds along with its conceptual discourse a *logic of metonymy*. From this perspective, the reflection inaugurated by coincidence is at once a “metonymic” theosophy and a theory of metonymy. However this may be (and this question will come up again), the discourse of Nicholas of Cusa gives itself, through a rhetorical device, the means of *carrying out the operation* of which it *states* the theory in terms of “learned ignorance,” and of thereby transforming writing itself into a conceptual practice.

(4) Dialogic circularity

The relation of the *one* to the *other*, as it appears in the exercise or in the discursive construction of *De icona*, has the form—an elementary one—of a dual relationship: the first actor and the second, the author and the addressee, that is, *one* and *two*. In principle, it is possible to extend this model to the entire sequence of numbers: 3, 4, 5, 6, and so on. The text proceeds toward this generalization, but a preliminary difficulty arises. In its binary form, the ambiguity of the term “one” poses a problem of writing. In fact, in the Cusan texts, the term “one” designates either a unit that *belongs* to the series of numbers and that is followed by 2, 3, 4, etc., or else the principle that *generates* the sequence and that therefore “precedes the number” [*De docta ignorantia* I, chap. 8; it is the same with the point, or the gaze, the generative center of the circumference]. Nicholas of Cusa does not have two different signs for distinguishing these two positions, doubtless because in the fifteenth century he did not have at his disposal an adequate algebraic notation and because he lacked a theory of the zero [see Todorov 113–30]; he only evokes the zero with his concept of the “quasi-null” or “near-null” point [see Cajori, Guitel, and Menninger]. However, as a geometer he sees this unwritten distinction as the relation of the center with the points of the circumference:



The term "other" has the same ambiguity. Either it is the second with respect to a first point of the circumference, or else it is the entire circumference with respect to a center that generates it; in the latter case, "we call *other* that which is not one" [*De icona*, chap. 14], and "alterity," in opposition to unity [see *De conjecturis*, I, chap. 11], designates "diversity," or the state of that which is distinct. When there is a passage from the number 1 to the numbers 2, 3, 4, and so on, the entire sequence remains "alterity" or "other" with respect to the one (or the center). In a philosophy of the One, such as that of Cusa (for whom the One is superior to Being), the question is particularly important and refers moreover to an ancient tradition. Plotinus had already attempted to define the non-quantitative "one," which "does not reside in a multitude" and "is not a minimum" [*Enneades* XI, 6]. Conversely, inscribing the "one" in a "common genre" and taking as self-evident that "nothing can be said to be *one* and *unique* unless some other thing has previously been conceived of that goes with the first," Spinoza was to write: "Whoever declares God *one* and *unique* shows either that he does not have a true idea of God or that he is speaking about him improperly" [Spinoza 1250; see Breton 19–35]. The ambiguity of the term, the dangerous coincidence between the two functions, spurs Cusa on to venturesome speculations. In order to note the "one"-principle, he would have needed a sort of zero-term, an index-symbol designating an absolute "delocalization" of reference.¹⁹ Language has its own logic.

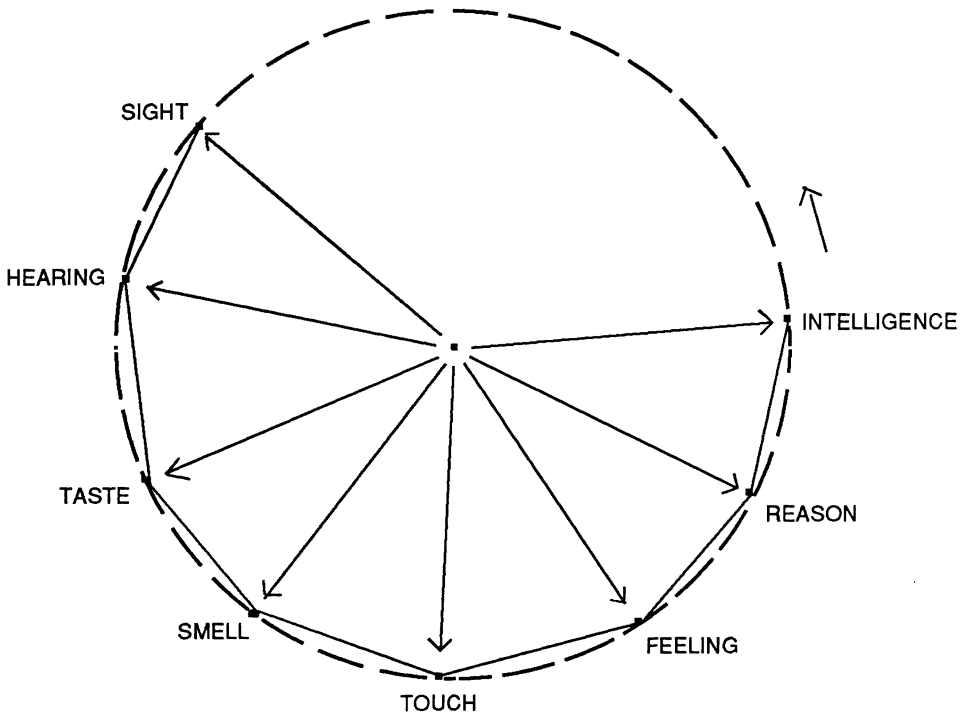
It is in relation to the "one"-principle (*unitas*) that the dual relation of the one to the other can be generalized to an indefinite series placed under the sign of "alterity." The first example provided will give an idea of the method. It concerns the names that theology attributes to God. "All theology is circular," or "formed in a circle (*in circulo posita*)," says Cusa, designating in this way a form defined by "positions." Indeed, he adds, of these names "the one is affirmed by the other (*unum affirmatur de alio*)" [*De icona*, chap. 3]. The expression itself is ambiguous. It might signify that Unity is affirmed by all that constitutes its alterity. Indeed, here, "one" and "other" refer to the predicates attributed to God: "sight, hearing, smell, touch, feeling, reason, intelligence, and many other points of view (*rationes*) distinguished by the meaning of each word."²⁰ This list seems to put on the same level different degrees of being: the senses, reason, and so forth. In reality, its order is not that of an anthropological or ontological hierarchy. It follows the *semantic distribution* effected by language, but with an *operation* on the listed items in view. The list corresponds to a *spatialization of meaning through language*. All these heterogeneous "points of view," distributed and separated in the linguistic space, contraries in relation to one another owing to the developments proper to each, must through theology be "affirmed one by the other," according to the model that held for a dual relationship.

Each of these points of view, irreducible to the others and unfolding in a procedure relative to the infinite that animates it, has from then on a relation with the others that is homologous with that of the first actor with his partner, or the author with his addressee. Comparable to the trajectory of an autonomous undertaking, its own development (for example, in the perspective of "reason" or "intelligence") relates with another development (for example, in the perspective of "taste" and the "affective") by dredging up from its own movement the surprise that constructs it and that can be "believed" or recognized from a different position. It is in that sense that "the one is affirmed by the other," or that each point of view pursues its own logic, but in the name of what it believes about the others. While being generalized, the circulation retains the initial dialogic form, of the type " 'You too?' — 'Yes.' " As Nicholas of Cusa often said, this theology is not "negative," nor is it "apophatic": the particular point of view is not denied; it is changed from within, or rather revealed to itself, restored to the "impossible" that inhabits it, while recognizing that other undertakings are being constructed around the same secret. This dialogic and

¹⁹See also Petitot's suggestions concerning the Lacanian signifier [214–25]. In Lacan's work, moreover, we find pages concerning the gaze that are close to the Cusan analysis ["*Du regard comme objet petit a*" in *Les quatre concepts* 63–109].

²⁰In the *De icona*, *sight* (*visus*) participates in the ambiguity of the one: the term designates sometimes the gaze or look (the principle, which is *videre*), and sometimes one of the viewpoints (*rationes*) on the principle, such as hearing or taste.

transcendental process also defines, for Cusa, the form taken by his practice of translation (the passage from one system to another, or from one language to another), the method that inspires his interpretation of different doctrines, periods, or religions (passages from discursive or historical figures to others), or his idea of social order.



Geometrically, the dialogic figure remains polygonal. The growth in the number of sides and the extension of “transfers” from one to another, multiplying the number of angles, nevertheless brings the polygon closer and closer to the form of the circle, which would be, finally, the totalization of the contraries generated by the center. Does a “maximum” then make it possible to cross the qualitative threshold that separates the polygon from the circle? This would produce a mathematical model for thinking “the resolution of all in one.” That is the squaring of the circle. The problem fascinates many minds of the day, painters like Piero della Francesca (who contrasts the polygon of the pavement, in his *Flagellation*, with the circle haloing Christ’s face [see Wittkower and Carter]) as much as mathematicians such as Toscanelli, Regiomontanus, and so on. Nicholas of Cusa deals with it at great length and, during the years when he is writing *De icona*, he devotes two treatises to the problem: *De quadratura circuli* (1452) and *Caesarea circuli quadratura* (1457), which moreover do not seem to have convinced the friends to whom he sent them, the great Florentine mathematician Paolo Toscanelli and, through him, the Austrian astronomer G. Peurbach, an old master earlier known in Nuremberg [see Rose 91–94]. For Cusa, “there must exist,” in the geometrical order, a way of conceiving “a circle made up of infinite angles,” and thus of passing from the angular to the “nonangular,” or from a straight line to a curve [the perfect *curvitas*; see Gandillac 1941, 91–94]. Given the “shining proximity” of mathematics to truth, there must exist in geometry a demonstration that makes visible, in its “mirror,” the immanence of the Infinite to all parts of the finite. A risky position, but “inventive,” Moritz Cantor would say. Once again, the mathematician and philosopher does not proceed by reasoning or induction; he starts from a theoretical “excess” (a sort of belief also) of which he seeks to develop effects that are consistent among themselves. Eyes do not lead to the gaze. It is the gaze that may find eyes.

Leaving behind the squaring of the circle, it suffices to recognize in it the ideal and maximal geometric form of the “concept” that constructs a “circular” discourse on the

basis of opposing points that bear equal witness to the infinite. That circularity establishes a discourse that is capable of “recounting marvels (*enarrare mirabilia*) whose revelation surpasses all perception by the senses, reason, or the intellect” [*De icona*, forward]. A novelistic program? The “recounting” is punctuated by the breaks that “believing” introduces between the contradictory parts of the narrative, and these “empty places” insinuate everywhere a gaze effect that transforms the parts into “marvels” for each other. This discourse *recounts a gaze*. Through a ceaseless relation of each undertaking with its “opposites,” it assures a becoming, thus the possibility of a narrative for the immanence of the infinite. The mystical is articulated as narrative. A discursive *time* is given to the original stupefaction.

Jean-Luc Godard recently said that “images come from the night of the ages.” For Nicholas of Cusa, the setting into coincidence of the contradictory moments that compose it (“one and all at once”) make it possible to see in the image the coming of that night from the depths of the ages. He calls it “cloud (*caligo*),” “darkness,” not knowing.²¹ Such is his mystical theology. But the climate that reigns in this speculation born of the *admiratio* and breathed in through the dynamism of another day has to bear a more “auroral” emblem. This theology is sustained by a surprise that transforms time. In it the *Blitz*, the flash of the gaze, becomes duration. This discourse “recounts” René Char’s phrase: “L’éclair me dure” (“the flash endures for me”). Either that is “easy” and imposes itself, or else that does not exist.

“The idiot”

In *De icona*, the exercise does not present the position of the second actor any more than the chapters envisage the position of the addressee in whose name they speak. Does the second actor receive the testimony of the first, and similarly does he reach the point of “grasping that it is possible?” For their part, do the “brothers” of Tegernsee respond reciprocally to the author by “listening” and by believing the text that he sends them? These are questions relative to the reception of the treatise. To the question that Nicholas of Cusa directs to his addressees—and that, according to his own theosophy, he cannot avoid asking them: “You too?”—what answer did they give and what effect does this reception have in turn upon the theory?

The discussion which, from 1451 to 1460, orchestrated the elaboration and the circulation of *De icona* can serve as a test. The emotional climate of adherence or rejection is striking. No doubt one has to take into account personal temperaments, controversies of the era, and the aggressiveness aggravated by instability. But the theory itself provoked these reactions. Nicholas of Cusa eludes all problematics of identity. He stirs up the “positive” experience, whether erudite or emotional, that a method would fix in place: he “infinetizes” it by confronting it with other, contradictory experiences. Nor does he propose a new system: in the name of “learned ignorance,” his conceptual operations expose a “necessary impossible” at the origin of each doctrine [see *De icona*, chaps. 9, 13, 17, and the letter to Aindorffer, where Cusa invokes “tasting necessity in impossibility”]. Cusa also lacks a stable base—he never mentions the places where his successive missions have located him—that would provide him, as the monastery does the monks, the postulancy, the support and the oversight of a purposeful institution: he is everywhere an outsider, an emigrant, a diplomat—a passer-by who is concerned with being “received.” His philosophy does not presuppose the silent assurance of an order that would be its pedestal; on the contrary, it has to take responsibility itself for the “dialogic” construction of a social order, which stems moreover more from communication than from community. In all these ways he withdraws the possibility of an identification from his readers, he deprives them of a “sure” reference point, at the very moment when the degradation of the medieval cosmos

²¹Cusa reappropriates insistently the Dionysian vocabulary of shadows, clouds, and so forth, in order to characterize learned ignorance, and in this connection he points out his indebtedness to and admiration for Dionysius Areopagita in the Apologia.

is everywhere giving rise to the institution of new social, political, or religious units in quest of identity.

Thus it is not by chance that Cusa has, so to speak, no “disciples,”²² and that, much later, only a few original thinkers will be seduced at long range by the stimulations his works offer them, thinkers such as Giordano Bruno, Charles Bovelles, or the early Lefèvre d’Étaples [see Yates 124, 244; Victor 15–25; Gandillac 1982; Bedouelle 60–70]. However flashy it may be, or even because of its rapid pace, Cusan thought is baffling. It is never there where one expects to find it. Its enthusiasts establish locations and meeting-places for it that do not belong to it. In Tegernsee, the *Laudatorium Docte ignorancie*, written “with love (*amorose affectus*)” by Bernard de Waging in 1451, takes “learned ignorance,” “the science of sciences,” for experience itself, or the “mystical theology” of the Dionysian tradition—an excessive assimilation that the generous monk will continue to support, nine years later, in his *Defensorium Docte ignorancie* (1459) [in Vansteenberghe 1915, 163–88]. Often Nicholas of Cusa seeks to offer correctives. No, I am not here; no, I am not that. For example, in his letter to G. Aindorffer, in connection with the mystical “taste.” It is the same with adversaries, for example with Schenck, the theologian from Heidelberg, a staunch conciliarist, as firm in his ecclesiological convictions as he is precise in his professional techniques and who, already suspecting in the conversation of his jurist compatriot a betrayal of papal authority, and sniffing out illuminism in this work, does not acknowledge in it any legitimate treatment of the doctrinal texts. No, replies Nicholas of Cusa. In vain. He does not succeed in getting rid of the confusion that accompanies the diffusion of his texts.

To this mathematical theosophy that is so coherent, and even repetitive, in its *movement*, but that does not offer any *object* to be grasped, the ultimate response is either hatred or love. It is too narrowly articulated around the question of the subject, and its style is too “passing” and personal, not to be caught up itself in the relations of *subject to subject*. Through its reception the theory is moreover brought back to what it does not cease to say itself. Fundamentally, even though it is not to be believed (as a belief would be), only an act of *belief* makes it possible to *think* it. An excess without object, an “impossible” that one can “grasp” in itself only by believing it also of another, such is the point from which its own logical rigor originates. In the practice of reading, this “postulate of belief” is relative to the author, and it often takes the form of confidence or suspicion toward him.

Characteristic of this relation is the vindictive vehemence with which the Carthusian Vincent d’Aggsbach attacks *De icona* in his *De mystica theologia* (1453) and in *Impugnatorium laudatorii* (1454), a text directed against the Cusan apologists, especially Bernard de Waging. As he does Gerson, d’Aggsbach reproaches Nicholas of Cusa for “allying” (*concordare*, an eminently Cusan term) mystic theology with the “philosophers” and for thereby ruining “the species or act of devotion” (*quedam species vel actus devocionis*) that is mystic [in Vansteenberghe 1915, 189–201, with this citation from 195; see also Vansteenberghe 1913]. He mixes in a bit of everything, taking “coincidence” for a concordism, and Cusa’s “intellectual movement” for the contemporary Scholastic *ratio*. He does not know very well, either, how to define affective mysticism, but he knows what *place* it comes from. He is not mistaken about what is at stake, the very problematics of identity, when he once again erects the boundary that protects the affective against the rational and when he defends the Carthusian tradition of the *schola affectus*, a region protected by the monastery walls. The *concordare* is hateful to him. The target is the Cusan gesture of “passing,” if it is treated only in terms of content.

In sum, the theory does not control its own reception. It has the same destiny as the divine “face” described by *De icona*: scornful viewers see its scornfulness; lovers, its love; the young see a youthful figure; the old, a senile representation; the lion sees a leonine image while the cow sees a bovine one [*De icona*, chap. 6]. The work likewise becomes the mirror of its readers; it offers them an object in conformity with what they expected

²²At the end of the *Apologia*, Nicholas of Cusa does mention a few “studious spirits” throughout Italy with whom his “fervent” interlocutor could have very “fruitfully” cultivated the “admirable spreading” of learned ignorance [T.S. 299]. The fact remains that the source of this rare case is an Italian intermediary.

or believed of it. This mobility betrays a weakness, to the extent that the theory ought to impose itself on its own, as Spinoza wanted his *Ethics* to appear without him, without his name, without institutional support, shining forth like a jewel by its truth alone. Paradoxically, Nicholas of Cusa undergoes the opposite fate. The misunderstanding surrounding the work has as its reverse side the promotions awarded to the man: diplomatic missions, legateships, a cardinalate, the general administration of the pontifical Estates. To a certain extent, the fragility of Cusa's theory and the success of his career have a common explanation: the subtle mobility, the inventive curiosity, of the author.

In his professional activity, an even more important contradiction is added. Whereas his theory is conciliarist, his practice, starting in 1437, serves the papacy. He supported the superiority of the council over the pope for reasons that always remained fundamental. In 1433, in *De concordia catholica* [especially in Book II, based on the Roman and canonical juridical notion of "consent" or "consensus"; see Sigmund], he makes the "people" the source of the designation of power, and election the regular procedure for filling any "presiding office," including the papacy. "It is in fact in the people," he writes, "that all the powers (*potestates*), spiritual as well as temporal and corporal, potentially (*in potentia latent*) reside" [*De concordia catholica* II, chap. 19; O.O. 205]. The necessity of reform—a permanent Cusan conviction—and the creations of institutions guaranteeing the representation of the people are bound together in a theory that is consistent with the entire movement of the work. But under the circumstances, it is unacceptable. By participating in the Council of Basel, Nicholas of Cusa notes the uselessness of the conciliarist project, encysted in interminable internal quarrels. The assembly of Basel is no longer for him a council *in concordia et consensu*. This is when the about-face comes. He leaves for Ferrare where he rejoins the minority supporting Eugene IV and he puts himself in the services of pontifical authority, the only chance, the last chance, for reform. By his work he supports the traditionalist conception from then on, but it is a conception *from then on* relative to the internal schisms of the Church and to the disintegration of medieval Christianity.

"Radicalism in theory and conservatism in practice" [see Sigmund, especially 226–28, and Meuthen 19–33; also Biechler 5–21]. In spite of the doctrinal adjustments that it calls for, his activity follows opposite paths from those of the theory. In fact, the pope becomes the "conjectural" and historical substitute for the conciliar Church of which the treatise presents the ideal, and always ideal, model. The pope is thus also the (historically absolute) criterion of administrative tasks that retain the religious meaning of being placed in the field of unity and of promoting it in a provisional but possible mode. In this way, finally, he furnishes a reference point, a "center," for the wanderings of the reformer-diplomat. The theory still formulates a sort of divine politics, but the practice has been detached from it to obey the imperatives that arise from the prevailing circumstances. The one becomes *utopian*, the other *ethical*, even if they remain within the same religious horizon. From the *one* to the *other*, there is no consistency, nor even a compromise that would find something in common between them, but rather a coincidence of contraries of a new sort, eluding the theory, which is only one of its terms, but remaining in conformity with the antinomies that the Cusan reflection is attempting to think through. In this relationship of theology to politics, the former becomes a "mystical" theology—a fundamental and founding speculation but one that states an essential only in the manner of a setting aside and of secrecy, or of a poetics dislocated from social reality. In this respect, Cusan theosophy articulates the theory around *failure*, that is, around a new, autonomous, form of history, and that relationship no doubt defines the "modern" status of philosophy.

The theory thus introduces rather a "derangement" (*folie*) into the practices. It marks this derangement from the very start of the intellectual movement, not only with the stupefaction that is at its origin, a void, but with the threshold that makes its discourse possible. If you do not believe in the other, the preface said, you will not be able to grasp that it is possible. This condition, necessary for emerging from the initial mutism, is the derangement that makes possible the theory. An irrationality institutes something rational. Nicholas of Cusa does not hesitate to stress this: "It is madness (*stultitia*), they assert, to believe that possible" [*De icona*, chap. 22, with respect to the coincidence of contraries in Jesus Christ]. And he is able to recognize this madness not in an *object* to be believed, but in the very act of believing, an act that posits the possibility of thinking, and that one

might take to be, for Cusa, the *epistemological* form of an *ethical* act, that is, an act that does not depend upon the possible. In the same way, the “not possible” object of this believing (“You too?” “Yes.” “Not possible!”), its statement, is only the inscription of this act in discourse; the believed object is *the metaphor of a metonymic act*, or of a change of space, of a displacement of order.

This act is not played out only in the relation of the one to the other; it also concerns all the others, the multitude. How? A Cusan story, yet another, will suffice to show how. It is told at the beginning of the third book of the *Idiota* [T.S. 321–22]. The year is 1450; Nicholas of Cusa is in Rome for the Jubilee. A “famous philosopher” from far away,²³ a “pale-faced” individual with a “long toga,” thus an exotic character and “wild” in the setting of the City, has stopped on the bridge of Rome in the middle of the crowd: he is “astonished by the passers-by.” A learned professional orator accosts him and asks him “for what reason he is held fixed (*fixus*) to the spot.” “Astonishment (*admiration*), he says.” Not from objects, but surprise itself. After a moment, he explains: “When I see passing by in great haste numberless populations from virtually all latitudes, I am astonished that here is a single faith of all in such a great diversity of bodies.” A personal reminiscence of the Jubilee, that crowd of pilgrims on the Roman bridge, like a real river, a Rhine of human beings. The surprise is the same one that froze the experimenters in painting: all and each at once, witness to the changeless “gaze.” “As for me, continues the philosopher, I have traveled the world without stopping and I have visited wise men” (with respect to the pilgrimage to the sanctuary, these are travels in the opposite direction), so as to become “more certain” that thought (*mens*) is “conjoined (*conjuncta*) with divine thought, but up to now I have not yet found by reason an enlightenment as perfect as this ignorant people has by faith.” The philosopher has to *believe* of the multitude what he does not see, in order to get out of his own uncertainty and to comprehend that the coincidence of all and each in “one” (a gaze or a faith) is “possible.” The “layman” or “idiot,” who is in the process of whittling a wooden spoon in a neighborhood street stall will explain it to him. Thus, *to believe in what others say* is what gives access to a *thought of the One*. This initial derangement makes theory possible. Conversely, the theory turns out to be affected, and its social functioning determined, by the madness that authorizes it in the name of a belief in the crowd. To be sure, the echo of others that is brought to the intimate experience of each individual by the testimony of the crowd—an oceanic rumor of “me too”—changes the private hallucination into a thought of the infinite; but the infinite is not “visible,” it is only “audible,” so that that thought, restored to its own infinite by what it believes of the others, has as its discourse a theoretical utopia (or “atopia”) separated from the historical “positivities” in which it nevertheless traces the madness from which it was born.

That the Cusan theosophy may be in the last analysis the discourse of a derangement was already suggested by the fantastic aspects of *De icona*. But by going back through it from that starting point, we see the entire work bringing to light the strange consciousness on the author’s part of a madness with which he punctuates his texts, as if he were anticipating an end of non-acceptance. I shall limit myself here to the works we have already encountered. In addressing *De docta ignorantia* to Cardinal Cesarini, he insists on the “awkwardness” of his “barbaric” language and on the “completely eccentric” character of his very “concept.” To the readers of *De concordia catholica*, he stresses the “uncultivated” and wild style of his treatise. To G. Aindorffer, the addressee of *De icona*, he specifies that he lacks the experience (*gustus*) that would entitle his text to be taken as “certain” and accredited by the monastery of Tegernsee. I do not think, either, that we may attribute only to a pedagogical tactic, nor reduce to the character of the nonspecialist (that of the “profane” and unlettered individual), the “idiot” (*pauper idiota*) in whose name Nicholas of Cusa exposes his own thought in the “dialogue” of the *Idiota*—a place then inseparable from references, at first Rhenish ones, to Christ’s fools and to the illuminated

²³This “famous philosopher” is probably George of Trebizond, sometimes called the “prince of Aristotelians,” who in that year resided at Bagno di Romagna until July, and thereafter at Florence [see Monfasani 36 ff.]. Later, in Rome, Cusa, who had met him in Florence, will protect him and place several translations of Plato (the *Parmenides* and the *Laws*) under his direction [Monfasani 162, 167–71].

state of the unlettered.²⁴ By all the indices with which it is strewn, the text recounts its own relation to an obscure center circumscribed by an incapacity, a deficit, a derangement.

That black sun haunts the discourse, the solitary experience of a traveler's gaze. A striking detail: in the preface in which he stages it, Nicholas of Cusa recognizes in that gaze the lightning flash ("at once all and each") which never ceases to be his own surprise; what he "sees" is his own madness, is himself. Or rather, as he explains in connection with that "pre-existing" (*antecedens*) gaze [*De icona*, chap. 6], he is himself only an "image" (*imago*) of that "model" (*exemplar*). He is the space that this madness gives itself in him. His mind is only the mirror where it appears. For that self-imposing experience, which is thus "easy" yet impossible, unthinkable, Cusa seeks all his life "foils" who, taking paths opposed to his own, will make the experience "apprehensible" for him. Thus in a work placed under the sign of "facility," he gives himself credit for just one thing, in his prefaces or his letters: his "immense labor," from archive to archive, from observation to observation, from doctrine to doctrine or mission to mission, in order to "hear" what other witnesses have to say and to attempt in that way to open up to that folly a path in history.

Translated by Catherine Porter

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²⁴The *Idiota* is a dialogue between three (in books I–II) and then four (in book III) interlocutors. Among these four is the author's "I," but as in *De icona*, he serves as the introducer of the speech of the "idiot," in whose name Cusa addresses the reader. On the Rhenish story of the "Friend of God" or idiotus in the fifteenth century, see La fable mystique 321–29.

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