



NAKED MAN

I want to ask the reader—and I admit that this is a difficult exercise—to leave aside for the moment all traditional schemas and try to describe and evaluate the human being.

A FRAGILE CREATURE

An Ungainly Being

This heading may seem shocking, but it is the result of archaeological, textual, physical—I was about to say zoological—observations based on bodies found intact, gripped in ice or encased in mud: mummies of holy men or great personages; skeletons, entire or partial, recovered from a necropolis; the remains of clothing or tools in which places, dates, and conditions of conservation are but anecdotal details. Iconography, painted or sculpted, differs from these indisputable remains only in the care it takes to highlight a detail: a gesture, stature, a gaze. Reasonably, the variations between these men and our contemporaries are negligible. They

may be a bit shorter, if we can judge by the equipment of daily life, but with more muscular vigor, as illustrated by the surprising exploits of the warrior or the woodsman. Is this a question of alimentation? Or perhaps of lifestyle? Besides, in the cemetery, who is capable of distinguishing the tibia of a vigorous serf from that of a sickly lord?

Let us stop contemplating ourselves with delight, as we have done for thousands of years, the female sex even more than the male, and say with brutal clarity that man is an ugly and weak creature. To be sure, we might grant some grace to curves or rounded body parts, at least according to our own criteria of beauty, but how many ungraceful, if not downright ridiculous bodily elements we have: our feet with their useless toes, our rumpled and immobile ears, our heads much too small for the rest of the body (something that Greek sculptors, as friends of harmony, attempted to correct), man's genitals or woman's breasts! Is this purely a question of aesthetics? There is worse, however. Bipedal and plantigrade, man walks, runs, and jumps much less well than the quadrupeds; his lower members are quite atrophied and so weak they would make any carnivorous animal laugh; his fingernails are useless, and what remains of his teeth are not much better; the hair on his body is little protection from rain and snow; copulation forces him into grotesque postures (a defect that he shares, it is true, with many other mammals); with old age his stature shrinks, his flesh sags, his organs betray him. Still worse, his senses are extraordinarily weak: he cannot see very far and not at all at night; he perceives only a small part of the noises and sound waves that surround him; his sense of smell is completely null, and his tactile sense mediocre. His flesh is said to be tasteless and too salty, his smell is stomach-turning, or at least that is the point of view of other animals, those, precisely, whose grace, suppleness, sight, and perception astonish and charm us: the bird gliding on high, the fish swimming with the stream, the feline about to pounce. If we stopped admiring ourselves one thing would be clear. Man is a creature to which Creation was unfair. And yet ...

And yet, how can anyone deny that man has planted his mark deeply on the emergent portions of the planet. He must have been given some particularity to compensate for the mediocre baggage with which he began. If we posit that man is an exceptional creature willed by the Supreme Being, no explanation is necessary. In the Middle Ages no one worried about the question. That there are in the world “white people,” “black people,” and “yellow people,” small and tall people, the good and the bad, geniuses and idiots, and even Christians, Jews, and Muslims was all a part of a superior design the aims of which escaped man’s understanding Here Below and might perhaps be revealed to him On High. As a result, there is no trace, during those centuries, that anyone sought (and, for even greater reason, found) the two criteria, one positive and one negative, that make man an exceptional zoological case, whereas today there are very few—even among those of deep spiritual conviction—who will not accept the notion. Man is the only mammal who can oppose his thumbs to the other fingers of his hands, a condition that is unique to him and is indispensable for seizing, transforming, and using tools or for the manipulation of fire. This skill, necessary for everything from chipping flint to building and operating a computer, is the indisputable base of man’s superiority over the other animals. The master of fire and the master of the object, man is also, on the other hand, the only mammal, if not the only animated being, who destroys and kills out of hatred or for pleasure, without being pushed to it by fear, hunger, or some sexual impulse. He is the most dreaded and the most pitiless of predators.

Fairly Content with Himself

Persuaded that they were what God willed, men of the medieval centuries necessarily attributed the ugliness and weaknesses that they saw in those around them to that same divine will, but as an alteration of God’s original work. Physical or moral imperfections bore the stigmata of divine discontent. If someone had a despicable

soul, bodily sufferings, or a heavy conscience, it was because he or she had sinned, and such a one was inevitably described or painted as “ugly” or infirm. Iconography and profane literature leave no doubt about this: Jews, “Saracens,” and the crippled were, in principle, “ugly,” with grimacing expressions, misshapen bodies, members out of proportion, repugnant skin lesions, a hairy body and a red face, and with abnormal or disturbing nose, eyes, and ears. The effect of such traits was to discourage charity or understanding. The medieval world had little pity for the unlucky and the *disgraciés*, in the root sense of the word. The blind man’s mistakes were laughed at, the sick were excluded and the weak scorned. No one sought to understand either the Jew or the infidel. At best, they were feared and people fled from them; at the worst, they were exterminated, “thrusting the sword into the stomach as far as it could go,” as the saintly King Louis put it. Not that there were no movements in the direction of mutual aid, especially from the Church, but charity only rarely included recognition of others. At best, it was the alms of a slight pity or indulgence. Such modest signs of opening up to the other were always stained by a bit of hesitation, even remorse. This was because such victims of the divine anger were surely guilty either of not seeing where true faith lay or of having slighted it. Salvation did not pass that way, but by an utterly personal life of faith and hope. It was better to give a vineyard to the Church than a kiss to a leper. This rejection was not uniquely moral; it was social as well. As written works or paintings were done for “the right people,” which meant exclusively the aristocracy until the end of the twelfth century and the “bourgeois” as well after that time, the cowardly knight, the depraved cleric, or the vulgar peasant were “ugly” or at best ridiculous.

The ideas of Good and Evil, the Beautiful and the Ugly are by no means universal. Anyone who does not understand that evident truth risks many disappointments, today more than ever, when we are confronted with other cultures and other systems of thought. These different scales of value expose us, and probably the others as well, to serious errors of evaluation, hasty condemnations, and

fearful disorders. For Christians of the Middle Ages in the West, long enclosed within a limited and fairly homogeneous geographical framework of populations of Indo-European, Celtic, Germanic, or Mediterranean origin, the notion of the Beautiful might easily have been uniform. There were only differences of detail between the Celtic horseman and the Roman legionnaire, the Greek Aphrodite and the Germanic Virgin. The canons of Praxiteles or Apelles are quite close to those of the painters of the pre-Renaissance or the Gothic of Amiens: stature in general shorter than 1.75 meters for a man; a head measuring one-seventh of the body's height; an oval face with deep-set eyes, a strong nose, but fine lips; a light skin more rose than brown; thin fingers, moderate body hair, but abundant hair on the head. Naturally, I am well aware that people tended to be bigger to the north of the continent than the south, browner in the south than in the north, and that there were more round skulls in the west and the south than toward the east or the north. In my opinion, all of these "ethnic" nuances are negligible variations in comparison with Semites, Asiatics, or blacks of all sorts. It is striking to note that the prototypes praised by the poets of the *langue d'oc* and the authors of romances of the *langue d'oïl* or depicted in frescoes and miniatures actually do have these traits, to the point that, at times despite reality, they are applied indifferently to specific models, which the painter or writer refuses to see.

Beauty is what God has willed, and given that he made man in his image, man will have what are presumed to be his features; the angels, John the Baptist, and Jesus all resemble one another, as do the Virgins from century to century. This means that we end up with a curious contradiction: No one is unaware that, according to Scripture, it was amid the Jews that God the Father chose to become incarnate; that the prophets, the apostles, and Paul himself were Jews, which means that they were "ugly," according to Western criteria. However, none of the representations of them that were made bear Semitic features—not the Christ, or the twelve apostles, or the archangels or the precursors. Local models wiped

out reality, or else it was generally admitted that all those figures were no longer Jews and no longer ugly, given that they recognized the Messiah.

But Are There Nonetheless Nuances?

If a man of those times ventured out of his universe of white-skinned Christians, he immediately lost his critical spirit. This does not mean that he failed to find virtue in someone like Saladin or Avicenna, or even in a learned rabbi, but that he saw only moral traits in such men. Viewed from the outside, all of them were “black men” because black pertains to the night, the unknown, and danger. Turks, Saracens, and Mongols were thought to have black skin, but not the Jews, because they had struck an alliance with God, even if they later killed God. Also, they all had a human appearance. But beyond them, all of the beings sculpted by the artist of Vézelay, imagined by Mandeville in his room in London, or whom Pian del Carpini or Marco Polo encountered on the routes of central Asia are monstrous, a veritable human bestiary. They are deformed, and certain parts of their bodies are hypertrophied or stupefying: their skin, horns, ears, feet, “marvelous” faces are the result of a mixture of Western phantasms and Persian, Indian, or Chinese legends.

When the Christian described these men on his return to his familiar world, he was not indifferent to the nuances I have referred to, nor was he blinded by the prototypes, but his observations were only rarely descriptive and physical. The *langue d’oc* poet and the *langue d’oïl* romancer, the warrior author of the sagas or of the *chansons de gestes* took note of people’s stature, hair, and complexion, but they seldom escaped reproducing the topoi; a beard is “flowing,” hair is “of gold,” lips are “scarlet,” the complexion is “like a rose,” muscles are “supple,” a man is “tall and slim,” and when a young man jumps on his horse or the sweet young thing offers a flower to her lover, the admiring circle of “friends” is not surprised and offers noisy approbation. Obviously, as the rustic

at the plow or the weaver at his loom is never described, the historian usually says nothing about them. Exceptional circumstances are needed in order to arouse curiosity, such as the fabulous exploits of the companions of Roland or the searchers for the Holy Grail, which go far beyond all verisimilitude, even granted an exceptional sportive vigor. But these tours de force that undoubtedly set youthful warriors atingle may have been created as instruction, not as description.

Finally, attention seems to focus on the general comportment of the individual. One might even stretch things a bit and say that vision was sociological rather than physiological. For example, if the obesity of a king was noted and deplored, it was not in order to allude to his off-kilter diet or out of concern for his health; it was because the function, here a public one, and the activity, here equestrian and warlike, of the king were being flouted, in which case obesity is a sin, a fault, a "disgrace." Much attention was paid to people's gaze, the mirror of the soul; it bore witness to the sentiments that animate the man who is being described or depicted, much more than was true of acts, gestures, or costume. An artist's times impose certain requirements on him. It has been observed that hardly anyone laughs in Roman frescoes and statues, just as if an anguish of the present weighed on the times. In medieval art, eyes are often shown bulging or fearful, as a sort of reflection of those old "terrors of the year 1000" that some people today try so violently to deny or disguise. Peace, to the contrary, can be read in the reposed features of depictions of the *Beau Dieu* or on the unwrinkled faces of people in thirteenth-century miniatures. The "Reims smile" is not the product of the genial chisel of an inspired artist. It comes from his models.

Still, a chronicler who wanted to "place" his heroes had to find something that set them apart. As he usually cared little for form, he sought a comportment in which the physical supports or enlightens the moral. And without always knowing that he is doing so, he falls back on Galen or Hippocrates. Man has a "temperament," a "humor" that is the result of unequal combinations,

within his body, of the four principles of life admitted by ancient, and later Arabic, medicine. He is phlegmatic, melancholic, choleric, or sanguine. The poet leaves it to the physicians (*physici*) to seek the causes of this; he himself is only interested in its effects in daily life or in social relations, as seen in alimentation, activities, moral or physical reactions, and an entire range of virtues or faults.

A final domain, blood, is more under control today. That blood flowed as freely in those centuries as it does today (and perhaps more freely) is unimportant. What matters is that the spectator of those years seemed unmoved at the sight. Artists multiplied severed heads from which blood spurted, the gaping wounds of Christ, body parts strewn about the battlefield, leaving a red tide of blood, cuirasses out of which blood gushes like a fountain. The poet was not far behind, with broken skulls, severed arms, pierced stomachs, and more. Was this due to ignorance, or partial ignorance, of the role of blood in life? Does it show less sensitivity to the pain of the wound? Or resignation before a death that was close, probable, and inevitable? There was nothing resembling the emotion that flowing blood prompts today, at least in certain parts of the world (happily, those in which we live, for elsewhere it is a different story). It is not that blood did not matter to men of those times, but rather that they saw in it an element of the transmission of life, even of virtues. The Germanic custom of drinking the blood of a warhorse in order to fill oneself with his courage and strength may be pure invention on the part of a startled chronicler. On the other hand, the importance attached to the woman's menstrual cycles is clear in the first blood carefully conserved in the home, the solemn publicity given to the renewed cycle in the churching of women, and the prohibition of sexual relations during menstruation.

Serology has made enough progress today for biologists to seek connections between the various blood groups and the ability of the individuals within them to withstand aggression from microbes or viruses. In the Middle Ages people noticed it when a certain man (unfortunately, only those of high rank were ob-

served) presented signs of being affected when his neighbor was not, and in times of epidemics these facts were even more evident. In the midst of a contaminated household certain groups seemed untouched, and for no apparent reason. In this connection, the pandemics of plague in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (to which I shall return) present a striking case in point. There were small groups of healthy people in the middle of an ocean of contagion. Unhappily for the historian, such observations were rarely specific or numerical; still, they may explain the undisputable diversity of estimates that researchers have offered concerning human losses on such occasions. I myself was long unaware, for example, that individuals of the B blood group are not receptive to the plague bacillus, and where that group was in the majority—in Hungary, for example—the disease had many fewer victims. Blood groups have been so mixed in the intervening centuries that any satisfactory estimate of their distribution in the Middle Ages is out of the question. Hypotheses have not been lacking, however, some of them perhaps hazardous, such as those offered in Great Britain to explain the movements, conditions, and stages of Saxons as they populated the British Isles.

BUT A THREATENED CREATURE

Does Man Really Know Himself?

Our societies, which think of themselves as “evolved,” have fallen into a sort of cult of the body. Seized by panic before aging and imbued with reverence for the remedies that crowd our medicine chests, we crowd establishments for “getting into shape” and even sue physicians whose art has not kept its promises or fulfilled expectations. The Mediterranean world—that of antiquity and our own—is more strongly inclined in this direction than any other. But today we have available a store of knowledge about pathology and we have highly skilled caregivers who dissipate our fears and our ignorance—at least in theory. Historians, swept along for

about a century by that nosologic wave, have provided a number of studies on the medieval body, searching for traces of illnesses, sounding their psychological effects, and even promoting some of them (the bubonic plague, most obviously) to figure as factors—demographic ones primarily, more than economic and even social—in the evolution of the medieval centuries. In this way, they have thrown a good deal of light on the illness of the great of that world, on mass epidemics, and on Judeo-Greek and Arabic science, and they have catalogued the signs, written and unwritten, of diseases, offered serious diagnoses, and sketched out their evolution. And all of this labor is admirable.

Admirable, but superficial, for in those days as today, although people were and are under “stress” (a term that dates to 1953 in this usage!) from bouts of the plague or the brutal progress of AIDS, little is known about corns on toes, a runny nose, or a lazy colon, those “minor miseries” that nonetheless destroy the body’s harmony. I cannot answer the question that heads this section for our own times, but for the Middle Ages, the response is categorically negative. Besides, how could those men have had access, before the twelfth century, to the medical treatises that arrived from or were soon to be written or translated in Cordova, Palermo, Salerno, and Montpellier? We are not even sure that the monks who followed Peter the Venerable in the mid-twelfth century or the princes who were advised by *physici* were truly aware of the demands and the weaknesses of their bodies. As for the others, how could they have raised questions about what was evidently a reflection of the will of God? The stillborn baby, the child born with defects, and the chronically ill, but also the deaf, the blind, and the dumb were the price to pay for God’s wrath. These were all quite naturally punishments for a sin committed by such people or by their parents, for transgressions that were inherited, as was the condition of servitude. There was no remedy and no appeal to that judgment. As for violent death in combat, at the turn of a forest path, or by accident, it bore a defamatory condemnation: no confession, no salvation.

Still, the Christian found it difficult to accept this dogmatic “double or quits,” and he sought recourse, without making too much display of rancor toward arbitrary decisions that might come from On High. First of all, there were intermediaries to which one had access to soften the rigor of the Judge. The veneration of relics and pilgrimages to holy places expanded along with the influence of the Church. As was often the case, at least in Western Europe, the Church was skilled at seizing interested devotional practices, many of which predated it: a minor healing god, a stone, or a thaumaturgic spring were embraced and placed under the guidance of a saint, real or invented, who was reputed to have healing powers. Each of these saints had his “specialty” connected with the details of his life or martyrdom. One healed pimples, another specialized in fever or pain, his efficacy proven by miracles that were sought avidly. Some scholars have even investigated the recrudescence of these cults in the eleventh century and later. Could they be used to evaluate the spread of a particular disease? In any event, the miracles that took place, as simply described in a large number of texts, offer a panoply of the more current afflictions that reflects more illnesses due to dietary insufficiencies than to wounds or organic diseases. As for the Virgin, whose cult grew exponentially after 1150, spurred on by the Cistercians, she was more useful for healing the soul than the body, and prayers were addressed to her more as a mother than a miracle worker. It is true that the Church never dared to allow the cult of the Virgin to develop to the point where she became a mother goddess, a Christian Cybele. She was a virgin, and thus could not serve as the emblem of fertility.

Pilgrimages and offerings were works of piety, and the monks rejoiced in them. But were their prayers efficacious? Would it not be better to address oneself—but in secret, of course—to powers that were expert in the art of interrogating the stars, which could only have an effect outside of time, or instead to concoct remedies outside the limits of an infernal etiology? Magicians or sorcerers are particularly appreciated today by all historians proud of their acquisitions in anthropology or sociology, and the “inverted”

world delights all of the disciples (be they close or not) of Freud, Mauss, or Lévi-Strauss. Moreover, the innumerable trials that were held, between the fifteenth century and the nineteenth, to judge those who were the masters of “maleficent” forces provide fodder for thick commentaries. It is true that, in general, we have only the dossiers of the prosecution in such trials. In the thirteenth century the *exempla* of the Dominicans, who obviously condemned such practices (kinesthetic gestures and chiropractics, repetitive formulas and invocations, rites founded on vegetal substances or on the virtues of water) show that their place, at the heart of the rural world at least, was generally admitted and of capital importance. Efforts to heal the body were much more frequent than those touching the soul, and because the Church did not admit that such efforts could alter the divine will, those who claimed to take the place of God in combating the ills that he set loose had to be condemned and even burned. If need be, an accusation of heresy justified the pyre for the sorcerers, although in reality more bonesetters were burned than evil spirits.

The Dominicans’ *exempla* and the *fabliaux* also gave women, old women in particular, a role as intermediaries between this dark world and bodily failings. They were the ones who seemed quickest to respond to practices that have elicited laughter from the finely tuned “scientific” minds of the age known as “modern.” Today, however, disguised as “medicine lite,” phytotherapy, cures to restore youth, and a recourse to “natural” remedies are all the rage, and creams, ointments, infusions, purgatives, massages, or kinestherapeutic manipulation rival “psychological aids” and “restorative cells” in appealing to a grotesque degree to our bewildered ego. We are told to follow a certain diet or consume a particular plant; what is more, most of the recipes that we know from the Middle Ages were found in medical treatises.

If women are in the front rank here it is because Eve was half-way to being a sorceress, and any mother knew recipes to cure her children. Men, more observers than traditionalists, contributed experience gained from their herds and flocks and, more rarely,

their travels. There is one exception, however: the Jews. They went from one village to another, street by street, carrying sachets, phials, and amulets; they were skilled in examining urine, purging and bleeding, placing splints correctly, setting cupping glasses, and taking a pulse. They had accumulated that knowledge and practical experience thanks to their thousand-year history in Mediterranean and Eastern cultures. They had assimilated the synthetic hypotheses of Greco-Roman medicine and the analytical experience of Hindu and Iranian physicians, and throughout the Islamic world had carried their store of knowledge from one community to another. The most learned among them translated Avicenna and Galen and wrote commentaries on Constantine the African; they followed Maimonides and taught Averroes. It was the Jews, modest representatives of science, who cared for the sick. It is true that they soon paid a price for their efforts. Because they had knowledge, because people consulted them at every turn, their destiny was bound with their success. Should they fail to cure patients during an epidemic, it was thought that because they were familiar with the disease, they must have unleashed it.

In order to cure the sick with other weapons than “old wives” recipes, one had to know how the body was made. This was beyond the expertise of the commonality. The soldier had seen stomachs slashed open and bleeding wounds; the peasant had some idea of the skeleton of the animals that he butchered; all women were gynecologists. But no one had an overall view or guessed the role of the heart or the brain. Even when an epidemic struck, no one grasped the idea of contagion, thus no one seized (or combated) the idea of a transmitting agent. Besides, that ignorance, which was defeated by popular medicine only in the nineteenth century, was not total, given that—either by experience or intuition—a number of therapeutic practices were known: trephination, cauterizing wounds with fire, the reduction of fractures, plasters, opiates, tourniquets, cupping glasses, and emetics achieved their aims and give proof that some accurate observations were made about blood, bones, and skin. It is true that a *physicus* or a *mire* was

often called on to intervene. In 800 some more learned practitioners even managed to draw up a list of medicinal plants in a capitulary, but theory long remained at the level of that of the humors of Hippocrates, Galen, and Oribasius. Persian contributions, via Salerno or Montpellier, to what was known about the harmony of organic function, the circulation of the blood, the role of spinal marrow, and even the idea of hereditary qualities, came from Spain and the Balearic Islands in the late twelfth century, but they ran afoul of the Church's prohibitions, in Troyes in 1163, for example, and in the Lateran Council of 1215. The very idea of putting a scalpel to a human body was condemned; it was equated with "black magic." At the same time, however, animal cadavers were not only carved up by butchers but also used for scientific purposes. Beginning at what date were human autopsies performed? Clandestinely, on disinterred bodies, perhaps around 1190 or 1230 in Venice; on the dead bodies of condemned criminals a little later, also in Italy. Emperor Frederick II, a great innovator in this as in other fields, advised and encouraged dissection in Sicily after 1240, and after 1290 it was authorized in Bologna and Padua. Moreover, scholars in northern Europe in particular (a fact that deserves comment)—Albertus Magnus, Neckam, Cantimpré, and Roger Bacon among them—rushed to sample the delights of experimental science. This break with the older empiricism is a new chapter in the history of thought. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the birth of a new scientific medicine. But where did ordinary people stand in all this?

"Abnormal" Assaults on Man

Bombarded by medical jargon that gives us the illusion of knowledge, we are quick to lose sight of the primitive form of illness. In our own disordered societies, popular diagnostics point to allergies to everything and to nothing; to stress, which is a convenient excuse for any illness; or to a mutant virus when those who should know have nothing useful to say. In daily life, a cold, a stomach-ache, an itch, "kidney trouble," or headaches are our common lot.

We hardly speak of them: how could people of the Middle Ages have done so, in a society that was more accustomed than our own to the blows of fortune? Terms like *flux de ventre*, *catarrhres*, *langueur*, *pestilence*, or *fièvres* did not have a clear medical definition. Infirmities, inborn or acquired, went untreated and were not talked about. The weak used a stick to walk, the deaf used a hand as a trumpet, and mockery greeted the gesticulations of the mute. As for the blind, doubtless the low and flickering light of the hearth or the candle increased their numbers, but their confusion was met with laughter, and nothing was done to aid the myopic between Nero's first-century amethyst and Bacon's thirteenth-century magnifying glass.

Behavioral anomalies are more striking. When they affect the great of this world they are noted, but they are not corrected. The chronicles stigmatize obesity at every turn and laugh at the knight whose girth makes it difficult for him to ride a horse, but they say nothing about his gluttony. They note complacently that men were well aware of their corpulence, as when Louis VI and his enemy William the Conqueror teased each other for it. Drunkenness was, please pardon the expression, drawn from the same barrel. Humble or great, many drank too much, to the point of passing out. What is known about the amount of wine or other alcoholic beverages absorbed by adults of both sexes, at all social levels, and of all ages—from a liter to a liter and a half on a daily basis (although the alcoholic content is unclear)—explains the phenomenon. Moreover, in lands in which grapes were cultivated, opinion was always indulgent toward drunkenness when it did not result in dishonorable conduct. It is well known that John Lackland drank too much, as did his enemy Philip Augustus, and that their behavior was related to cirrhosis of the liver; it is also known that, somewhat later, Charles the Bold, who was drunk one day out of two, died an absurd death because of his addiction. Saint Louis, who was known for his austere piety, forced the closure and emptying of the taverns of Paris in the evening, but was he obeyed elsewhere?

Excessive eating and drinking led to other excesses that were attributed to weakness of character and were deplored with a smile. Sexual attitudes and sexual practices, to which I shall return, also caused physical ills that were encouraged by an abusive use of aphrodisiacs. But such effects were not categorized as illnesses any more than was excessive eating. In contrast, there were behaviors that today are explained psychosomatically and that at the time seemed to compromise the Hippocratic harmony. One of these—drugs, with all of their psychic, nervous, and organic effects—has now become a widespread social scourge. Unhappily, the loss of self-possession that the use of drugs brings with it was considered, in those distant times, a submission to the forces of evil, which means that drug use was more likely equated with sin and vice—which were not talked about openly—than with a physical addiction that could be combated. Drug use, not denounced, was thus not described or much investigated. It is clear that it was present, however. In the Frankish states of the East or in the nearer lands of Islam, the mastication or smoking of Indian hemp was certainly practiced more widely than just among the Muslim sects of Lebanon or the Atlas Mountains. In Europe itself, powders made from poppies picked in Asia were known in Italy before 1200 or 1250, and were transported in bundles of “spices” or in medicinal phials. The strange visions, psychedelic impressions, and cerebral troubles brought on by the consumption of such substances were beyond the powers of description of a user, but when he could hold a brush, the result was the fantastic visions of Hieronymous Bosch. Opium can be absorbed without any desire to draw troubled inner illumination from it, and some scholars today feel that ergotism can be connected with involuntary drug use. The sources speak at length of it, and although no one had any idea of the origin of the illness or its remedies, the epidemic nature of the *mal des ardents* and the *feu saint Antoine* (Saint Anthony’s fire) struck people’s imaginations and aroused the chroniclers’ emotions. Attested to as early as 872 in northern Europe, in the tenth century in central France, and by the end of the eleventh century throughout

Southern France, the disease came, without any possible doubt, from the hallucinogenic effects of ergot, a microscopic fungus somewhat like a morel mushroom, invisible to the naked eye, that lived in the ears of grains, rye in particular, entire fields of which it contaminated. Everyone who ate the rye fell sick, and opinion saw maleficent contagion at work. The symptoms were dizziness, confusion, delirium, followed by a burning sensation and a intense fever, which, taken together, give the impression of a drug or an epidemic disease. In all times and all places ergotism, which was not always deadly, accompanied rye, the use of which declined at the end of the Middle Ages; the disease disappeared when nitrate fertilizers were introduced.

Just as ergotism was taken to be an epidemic plague and using hashish considered a punishable offense, the origins of cerebral asthenia—the complex mix of anguish, paralysis, frustration and fatigue that plagues almost all of our own contemporaries under the name of stress or nervous tension—were similarly misunderstood. The terms used in medieval times show that sick people were more likely to be depressed than abnormally excited. The words used to describe their suffering were *langor*, *stupor*, and *indolentia*. Naturally, noise, agitated movement, and overwork seem to us reason enough for a breakdown of nervous resistance. In the centuries of the Middle Ages, when these were obviously less, people looked to character to explain depression. Someone inactive was simply useless. Moreover, there was no such thing as vacations, leisure time, or retirement homes. The idle person was rejected, even scorned; he was not an invalid to be cured or a weak person to be supported. Leisure was a luxury for the powerful or a vocation for the monk.

The Illness That Lies in Wait

Nonetheless, not all medieval men and women were cripples, drunkards, drug addicts, or depressives; still, they suffered from illnesses just as we do—more precisely, though, not the same illnesses. Oddly, cancer, which nibbles at our subconscious when it

is not attacking our organs, is never mentioned. Its basic cause, which is the disturbance of cellular life, hence a direct attack on the principles of harmony inherited from the ancient world, should have struck both the scholars and the common people, but no: total silence! Obviously, some signs are reported that might be or certainly are indications of cancer. The word “tumor” and even the word “cancer” appear in the sources, but in the sense of a swelling or of pustules. The notion that it spreads from one organ to another (which we call metastasis) was denied, as was the corruption of one body by another, perhaps, where the learned were concerned, because of what Aristotle had to say on the topic. There is no mention of cancer and, no less curiously, no allusion to the respiratory system, for catarrh can be many things. The handkerchief was a medieval “invention,” but there is no mention in the sources of blowing one’s nose, spitting, or coughing.

In the final analysis, the common man seems to have paid attention only to what he could plainly see, which was his skin; to his stomach, which worried him; and to a fever, which he took as a preliminary sign of illness. What was known as *flux de ventre* was one of the most frequently mentioned causes of the death of an important personage, and probably of more humble ones as well. What did it include? Was it a simple intestinal or gastric disturbance? In the fifteenth century, the sources speak of purgatives, plasters, imbibing oils, and, with a touch of reality, polluted waters, or the bad air of the streets. But people were also aware that there were more serious forms of the complaint that might be judged contagious. Did anyone isolate the symptoms of dysentery, typhoid fever, or scurvy? A high fever, diarrhea, thirst, and “malignant” pains were noted and—correctly enough—attributed to insects or the ingestion of or simple contact with tainted foods or impure liquids. By its effects the disease was thought to be contagious, because it struck entire groups of people who lived in unhygienic environments, such as poor people in the cities, soldiers on the battlefield, and starving peasants. Some went so far as to speak of an epidemic. The presence of *flux de ventre* was widely noted

in the sixth century and in the twelfth century in the armies of Italy, Aquitaine, and wherever famine ruled. Thirty thousand people may have died of it in England in 1406. But the size of these and other statistics are proof of the chronicler's fears more than of the real extent of the disease. People were treated with bleeding and purging, which aggravated the illness, or with unguents and pulverized herbs, which were better but did not save either Saint Louis or John XXII.

Fever was just a symptom, and it was quickly noted. But when it was intense, chronic, or the source of pain or vomiting, it could be the sign of a specific disease. At the time, *fièvre jaune*, *quarte*, *miliaire*, or *suette* (yellow fever, quartan ague, miliary fever, sweating fever)—all manifestations that today's medical science differentiates—were seen as simple variants of the *peste des marais*, or malaria, the *paludisme* of hot, humid, and unhealthy climates. It is probable that a connection was established between these various forms of the disease and the sting of insects, but the repetitive nature of the bouts of fever or hepatic deficiencies meant that the disease was treated only superficially by compresses or opium-based potions, and many people, from crusaders in the Levant to peasants who lived by the sea, died of it. On the other hand, grippe, which is viral in origin and the symptoms of which are a cough, a headache, and a high contagiousness, was seldom identified. There is notice of waves of the grippe in 972, of two or three other occurrences in the twelfth century and of more in the fourteenth century, but nothing distinguishes it from a "classic" fever except for fits of "catarrhal" coughing. The *hoquette* that the Bourgeois de Paris complains of in 1420 because it interrupted sermons was probably whooping cough.

A man can conceal his pains and bring down his fever, but he cannot hide skin lesions. I have already spoken of the importance (even if only symbolic) of that fleshly envelope, which is and has always been the reflection of a person's good health, wealth, physical beauty, and even moral stature. Powders and creams were invented to cover the injuries of age and the imperfections of one's

traits. On this level, the Middle Ages would have few lessons to learn from the frenzied publicity we are subjected to today. Unfortunately it does little good to hide wrinkles and revive one's complexion when disease is plainly visible. Pimples, pustules, and red discoloration did not escape the painter, and not only when a taste for realism guided the paintbrush in the fifteenth century. But it is leprosy that remains the emblem of the Middle Ages in the common subconscious. How many images there are, and how many narrations that evoke the leper, covered with repugnant crusts and ugly scales (*lepra* in Greek), in rags, shaking a rattle, and constrained to take refuge alone in a dreadful lair, far from all normal life. Lepers accounted for from 2 to 3 percent of the population, the historians learnedly tell us; in France alone around 1300 there were more than four thousand asylums to receive them—*lazarets*, *maladreries*, *léproseries*, and hospices—and from the ninth century on, innumerable laws dictated that someone suspected of leprosy be isolated and that his house, his clothing, and all the movable goods that he may have touched be burned. Today there is ample doubt about these measures, as the illness is still current in Asia and its various aspects are better known. In the Middle Ages lepers went into the city, gave witness in legal documents, received and managed wealth; some of them had a function at the court or in commerce, to the point that one of their number, Baldwin IV, was king of Jerusalem. At a certain moment, leprosy declined. It may have given way to the tuberculosis bacillus, with which it is incompatible and which was not mentioned until the late fourteenth century. It is true that a few *cagots* remained isolated from society up to the seventeenth century, but these were more likely to be outcasts than sick persons. What are we to think? The exterior signs of leprosy are well known: patches of darkened skin, buboes and ganglions, nodules that eat away at the joints and the cartilage of the hands or the nose, bouts of fever, even gradual paralysis. But all of these signs, which can lead to death, are far from being attested everywhere. Was leprosy perhaps confused with other highly visible dermic infections such as erysipelas, eczema, psoriasis, naevus

(birthmarks, moles), none of which is contagious? One might well wonder whether the terrible reputation of leprosy is not based in large part on its psychological significance. Repulsive, subject to uncontrollable sexual impulses (the possibility was raised of delivering Iseut over to them), bearing their probable faults on their faces, accused of poisoning wells and infecting grains and even farm animals, lepers were the “untouchables” of the Christian West, symbols of Evil, of Sin, and of the Impure. Thus they must be excluded and kept away from the faithful.

Of all of these afflictions, men of antiquity and of the Middle Ages mention one only in a whisper and we are still struck by its extranatural aspect. A man—or a woman, for that matter—speaks and acts normally amid others when, suddenly, he stiffens, turns white, drops to the ground, is seized by convulsions, then falls into something much resembling a coma. After an hour or two he gets up and has no memory of the crisis. He has clearly been “possessed” by the Holy Spirit. This was the *haut mal*, the *mal sacré*, that picked its victim as an instant receptacle of a superhuman power. Before the nineteenth century made progress in medical science regarding the nervous system, epilepsy was taken for a sign of divine favor and the epileptic for a messenger from the Other World. He was not pitied; he was not subjected to treatment; he was respected and feared, whether he was Caesar himself or a poor laborer.

The Black Death

These days, when human life weighs less when it is that of the poor or the inhabitants of “undeveloped” lands, we react differently to demographic disasters. Besides, our means of information—our “media”—take great pains to make this so. The “developed” world is moved when two soldiers are killed in a surprise attack, two hundred die in an attack, or two thousand are crushed when a tower collapses, but when seven hundred “indigenous persons” kill each other with our weapons or thousands perish in an earthquake, we are hardly touched—if it all occurs far from where

we are. We ought to judge disasters equally and use words such as “genocide” with prudence. The two abominable and stupid world wars of the first half of the twentieth century produced some 50–60 million dead in five years, which may be modest, all things considered, in the face of the 120 million natives killed with alcohol, smallpox, and measles by the “glorious” conquerors of Mexico and South America. It is true that in the world wars those who died were supposedly defending a land or an idea, and that in Central and South America those who remained received the true Faith. But what can we say about those who died of the “Black Death”—the 20 to 25 million Christians who lay in the streets swollen with black buboes and who had demanded and received nothing?

We need to look more closely at the plague. So much has been thought, studied, and written about this scourge that I can hardly hope to say anything new. Just about everything provided by the sources is known. This means that I will concentrate on a few aspects that could be judged secondary. First of all concerning the nature of the plague. The persistence of points of concentration of the disease in central and eastern Asia has permitted us to study it in depth, beginning with the works of Yersin at the end of the nineteenth century. The two contagious forms of the disease—the pulmonary, which is 100 percent fatal, and the bubonic, from which one out of four persons can hope to escape after four days—have neither the same gravity nor the same exterior signs. The first form was dominant in the fourteenth-century epidemic (but not in later occurrences), which explains the terror inspired by its approach, as it was incurable and its incubation period was only a few hours or days. However, to the extent to which contemporaries noted such nuances, it was the “black” plague (the word was first used only in the sixteenth century)—the less deadly form with inflamed buboes, the survivors of which were immunized against recurrences—that was the most often described and feared. It was also the variety that recurred up to the late fifteenth century, leaving behind an increasing number of survivors.

Next, the conditions of contagion. People were persuaded that, like other maladies thought to be contagious, only the touch of the sick person or his clothing transmitted the disease. This means that fire was seldom used to destroy the clothing and the objects of the dead person, and no one dared to go so far as to incinerate cadavers in a Christian society that prohibited cremation. Identifying the agents of propagation was a complete fiasco. The common people blamed astral conjunctions, poison thrown into the wells by the Jews, or, more simply, divine fury; the learned themselves—at least those who held a pen—saw nothing, never noticing the rats who carried contaminated fleas, or even flea bites. Hence all the therapeutic measures that were imagined were just the opposite of what should have been done. Bleeding the victim and lancing the buboes only aggravated the symptoms of the disease and contaminated the caregivers; opium compresses or plasters made of bird organs had no effect on the humid breath of the patient, the source of pulmonary contagion. As for crowding into the city to flee a plague-ridden village, it was obviously the opposite of what should have been done.

Thanks to defective observation of the disease and useless prophylaxis, the epidemic of 1348–51 swept away something like 30 percent of the population of western Europe. What happened next is often neglected. First, the historian is struck by the extreme inequality of the damage from one region to another, which in fact poses a number of problems. Although our sources are fairly well distributed geographically, their authors are unaware of what was occurring in adjoining territories. Here and there the disease did not strike at all. No one thought of taking any precautions (even though the bacillus crossed the Channel in less than ten days!). Some have sought local causes to explain why certain areas escaped the plague—fewer roads, waterways, or cities—even though contrary examples abounded. Today scholars tend instead to look to specific and individual resistance. In fact, the recurrences of the epidemic in 1372–75, 1399–1400, 1412, and up to the end of the

fifteenth century, were less spectacular, hence were less often noted, in spite of an equal virulence of the disease. We have the impression that this was because recurrences chose their victims: children, old people, and pregnant women. Beyond a degree of simply getting used to attacks of the plague, as seen in the maintenance of economic activity and a rise in population rates, certain individuals may have escaped contagion through a serological immunization, and, as I have already mentioned, people in the B blood group seem to have had a natural resistance to the plague bacillus, which means that its predominance in populations of pure Celtic or Asiatic origin (Hungarians, for example) may perhaps explain the “white spots” on the map of the plague.

Let me add two further observations. First of all, if the arrival of the plague and its lightning-fast propagation were striking for their swiftness and prompted unreasoning panic, it is far from true that the high number of deaths was due only to the virulence of the bacillus. Contemporaries hardly remarked on contagion at the time. They sought an explanation in unfavorable astral conjunctions, which may have been connected with climatic variations. Historians today find other causes in archival documents. Disquieting demographic statistics or financial accounts, a changing economic situation, and an accumulation of social difficulties make the period from 1310 to 1340 a phase of depression with a background of natural calamities and political troubles. The only detailed demographic document that has come down to us—an extraordinary relic—is a register of births and deaths in the small village of Givry in Burgundy, south of Dijon. This famous document attests to a death rate that was growing beginning as early as 1320, even if it increases by leaps and bounds with the arrival of the plague. Morbid manifestations in art or in deviant religious customs also preceded the plague, and a number of Jews were massacred before those dates. In any event, the plague struck men who were already weakened, if not already sick. Inversely, the gradual decline of the Black Death was not only due to a lessened virulence of the bacillus, but also to an economic recovery and a population increase that led

to the reoccupation of abandoned lands and hamlets. Throughout the West, that recovery occurred between 1430 and 1480, according to region, but the disease continued for some time to come.

A second remark pertains to a fact that is too often neglected, which is the relative abundance of sources that throw light on the plague of the fourteenth century. This abundance minimizes earlier assaults of the disease, in classical antiquity and above all in the sixth and seventh centuries, when it ravaged the coasts of the Mediterranean. Although we know next to nothing about these epidemics, scholars today agree that they were the point of departure for the profound and durable political and economic decline of the southern flank of Christianity in its younger years, which may partially explain the brutal expansion of Islam over ruined terrains and weakened men, a highly important phenomenon in the history of the world. This means that we need to pose a similar question regarding the epidemic of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. What is usually stressed is the leveling off of the relative overpopulation of Europe, the reshaping of the rural habitat, strong variations in prices and wages (not necessarily in a negative direction), or the woes of the feudal system. If we look closer at the situation, the social upsets, a thirst for gold, and the redistribution of wealth that came after the epidemics lasted much longer than the period of the biological decline of the disease. Just as the plague that is foolishly called Justinian must be one of the pillars of the Muslim phenomenon, so the plague of the late Middle Ages lies at the origin of the colonial expansion of Europe of the sixteenth century. The presumed “rebirth” of classical antiquity had nothing to do with it.

Can Those Men Be Counted?

I have not yet attempted to estimate the number of men and women I am trying to survey. As Marc Bloch pointed out, we cannot judge the daily life and the work activities of past populations when we lack basic figures. Unfortunately, we do not know the numbers, or,

rather, our data are few, sparse, disputable, and late; before the fifteenth century at the least, they defy all certitude. The reason for this lies not only in the archives, although it is true that here, as in other domains, the losses have been immense. Worse, in all of the centuries of the Middle Ages, figures were not given their real arithmetical values except in ecclesiastical computation. That “turn of mind” probably had psychological causes, for example, a clear indifference to exactitude in accounting that is not found in other cultures, notably Oriental or Semitic. Figures had only symbolic value. One, three, seven, and twelve were God, the Trinity, or figures found in the Bible; and as for six and its multiple six times six, they were the sign of what cannot be counted with the fingers of one hand, thus, what surpasses immediate understanding, whether what was in question was the dead or the living, years of age, or degrees of kinship. This disdain for figures affected measurement as well. Someone would sell “a wood,” bequeath “his land,” and give “what he has.” Even when a number appears, the historian’s despair remains because he does not know how to interpret “a wood of one hundred pigs.” Are there actual pigs in the woods? Is this an evaluation of how much land will feed a hundred pigs? Even games of dice, which persisted throughout the Middle Ages, are given over to the intervention of chance, hence of God, and their outcomes are more psychological than actuarial. In the domain that I am reviewing a certain indifference with regard to the number of individuals can be justified, since any need for precision—for fiscal reasons, for example—is lacking. What is more, men are ceaselessly in movement. They do not know how old they are and cannot name their cousins. As late as 1427, we can find Florentines who do not know how many children they have. It was perhaps only the powerful who kept track, but only out of a familial, fiscal, or political interest, not out of a spirit of geometry. The researcher has few tools with which to pierce that wall of ignorance. There are no serious lists, and in particular no complete ones, of tenants, taxpayers, or conscripts, especially in the countryside or before the fifteenth century. The best we can do is to survey a series of witnesses,

the genealogies of lords or princes, and fragmentary chronicles, and try to glean from them pieces of a broader picture. And even then, how many unknown persons will be left out: the newborn, those absent for the moment, the extremely old, or the miserably poor? As for the female sex, the “male Middle Ages”—to make use of a totally exaggerated formula—thrusts women out of economic or political texts, which are men’s work, and out of articles of law, which are sexless. The same male viewpoint is capable of leaving women out completely, as in certain phases of “machismo” that require explanation, for example, in northern France between 1100 and 1175.

This means that a demographer has little to go on. The situation is better than it was a few decades ago, when scholars had to be content with vague adjectives or adverbs and took refuge behind a few famous documents whose reputation came from their very rarity. Among these are the *Domesday Book* from eleventh-century England, a text filled with uncertain data; the *État des feux* of 1328, which never clearly defines just what is meant by a “fire”; and the Tuscan *Catasto* of 1427, which cannot without exaggeration be called a typical example of a census. Still, we can attempt to enumerate questions and analyze responses. The overall evolution of the population first. Except for some regions that I shall not examine, the curve was ascendant, with a population that tripled between the years 1000 and 1300. This datum is uncontested, but historians debate about the chronological framework. A large majority of them hold for a strong rise in population in the seventh and eighth centuries, if not from the late sixth century, and another rise at the end of the Carolingian age. Others, among whom I count myself, see in this rise only a recuperation, probably even only a partial one, from the decline of the third to fifth centuries. These historians search in vain for capitularies noting births and worry about ambiguous or disappointing archaeological information. All scholars agree, however, regarding the years following the year 1000, when there was a sure but uneven rise in human population, weakening after 1250 or 1270, with an average (completely

theoretical, of course) annual growth of 0.7 percent. This figure is low, and quite inferior to the growth rates of a number of “developing” regions today and even to the growth rates attained in France in recent years. This was no “baby boom,” but a movement of remarkable duration: three hundred years.

This may well explain contemporaries’ indifference to the question of population figures. There are indeed a few chroniclers who speak of the human tide, but for the most part these are city people, where a population increase may have been more visible, thanks to in-migration more than to a rising birth rate. Even within the aristocracy, about whom we have more information, we can detect no sense of a disquieting numerical increase. Although the marriage of younger sons had for some time been blocked, this was done in order to avoid the division of wealth, not because the lordly dwelling risked becoming too crowded. Moreover, in the thirteenth century, the door was unbolted. This neutral attitude toward the number of the living carried over to the dead. Any attempt to count the elements of a given family structure almost always encounters large groups: six, seven, or ten children at the least, and girl children are often left out. That large number of offspring ought to have increased the growth rates noticeably, and if it failed to do so, it was because at least a third of those children died, even among the great, who had a right to expect better care: Blanche of Castile lost five of her thirteen children. That fearful infant mortality lasted throughout the thousand years of the medieval period, an issue I shall return to. As late as the fifteenth century, 42 percent of the ground space in Hungarian cemeteries was taken up by the graves of children under ten years of age, not including the stillborn, who offer a totally different theme for meditation.

The reasons for the decline in births at the end of the medieval age are quite evident. War and contraceptive practices had little to do with it; the famines that struck before the plague weakened men more than killing them off; the breakdown in family structures and its effects on relations of mutual aid counted for something. But we arrive inexorably at a basic reality. Even without the intervention

of three of the “four horsemen of the Apocalypse”—war, famine, and the plague—the birth rate declined. This leads the historian to look back in time to see what had made it rise in the first place. The answer is easy to see. A richer diet reinforced man’s natural defenses and brought down the death rate, particularly in infant mortality; family structure evolved at a faster rate in the direction of the isolated, child-producing conjugal couple; the practice grew of putting out babies to a wet nurse, thanks to the large number of women capable of feeding another woman’s child; liberated from the amenorrhea that accompanies breast-feeding, a woman could become pregnant again sooner, thus reducing “generational intervals.” How can we be sure that this does not reflect, if not a “fashion,” at least a convenience, a comfort, rather than a “natalist” determination? A deliberate desire to generate children appears only with the development of privileges of primogeniture, which encouraged the search for a male heir or the desire to replace one. But this puts us in around 1050–80 and can be applied only in the lordly world. Hence our a posteriori explanations lead us to the threshold of the initial cause. If we eliminate the notion of a sudden divine tenderness for a truly weak portion of God’s creation—an explanation that was considered sufficient at the time, and still is today for those of a certain turn of mind—we will have to turn to what escapes man and come back to the “natural” causes that I have already mentioned. Even if they display some hesitation, today’s historians do not evade an appeal to the forces of the climate and to the history of the Earth. The “optimal” phase that has been observed after 900 or 950 lasted until around 1280 or 1300, but signs of a tipping point can be seen after 1150, when some lucid chroniclers noted unexpectedly strong tides, increased rainfall, or the retreat of a glacier. But no one could have seen in these the effect of a powerful movement of nearby ocean waters—and I am no more capable than they were of explaining it—but that slow reversal of the biotic high point of the tenth to the thirteenth centuries may easily provide an explanation for the phenomena of demographic stagnation mentioned above.

I have at times alluded to the female sex, so poorly treated in the texts. The moment will soon come to approach the woman in her dwelling. For the moment, what is important is rather to discern the ratio, or numerical relation, between the two sexes. In the animal world (or at least for terrestrial species), the reproducing male is in the minority, perhaps because he is sometimes physically eliminated when his job is done. This occurs among the insects, for example, and among certain mammals. Among humans, demographers are in agreement in estimating that the two sexes are numerically equal at birth, leaving aside surges of temporary inequality, the origin of which still escapes us. Among adults and even at puberty, however, the female sex seems to have been in the minority, particularly in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, at a ratio of eighty to ninety females for every one hundred males. The written sources (which, admittedly, concern the more favored levels of society) show clearly a certain hunt—I was about to say “fair”—for women, who were relatively rare, hence expensive. A daughter could be married off at fifteen, and often she was “promised” even earlier; she was, in fact, the nub of the family’s wealth, the jewel that commanded a certain price. Young men participated in tourneys to win her, while others walked the roads and scoured the farms. After the Church authorized remarriages, in the age of Saint Louis, widowers, who could not compete with younger men, were satisfied with the girls who were left and cost less. Women who reached the age of twenty or twenty-five and had found no takers or had successfully rejected the convent remained under the authority of their father or their brothers and provided domestic help as *fileuses* in France and “spinsters” in England. The numerical inferiority of women was abnormal. It posed problems. Some have noted that the texts say little or nothing or are capricious when it comes to women, but that is an easy way out. Others have spoken of the systematic infanticide of the weakest females, but that is technically absurd and would concern only the early Middle Ages, about which we know very little in reality. A high mortality rate due to repeated and closely spaced births—every eighteen months

on the average—quite obviously would not apply to barely nubile girls, besides which, the physical resistance of the so-called weaker sex is superior to that of males. This was already noted in those days, when in fact young widows were numerous. Until something better comes along, we remain today with the idea of less care given to girl children: premature weaning, overly restricted diet, lack of medical care. But these explanations are unsatisfactory.

A final problem: I shall return in good time to the question of family structures involving both sexes and several generations, but I cannot leave the demographic domain without speaking of the *feu*, or “hearth.” It is its arithmetical signification that is important here. Most of the documents that bear numerical data regarding the population express those data in terms of the *feu*, and at times even *feu fiscal*, or unit for the perception of taxes, rather than the *feu réel*, taken as a group of individuals. Vehement quarrels still divide historians in this context. Is the *feu* the basic cell of the couple and the four or five children who live under their roof, thus five or six persons who live together? Or is it rather a larger group with lateral or ascendant prolongations or even including domestic servants, according to local structures governing family groupings (and it has been estimated that up to ten or twelve individuals lived in a Jewish “hearth”)? And what about the aged and isolated widow? How were newborns counted? Did the scribe who did the counting use the same calculation methods everywhere? Given that the idea of a disinterested census was foreign to those times, were exact figures furnished to the scribe according to the interests of the household? For example, if the survey was fiscal or military, did families attempt to avoid a tax or a requisition or, to the contrary, obtain a food supplement? The example of the survey of 1328 is well known for Paris: did the city have 80,000 or 200,000 inhabitants?

Thus all that we have on which to estimate population density, in various places and at various times, is the number of *feux*, which means that any attempt to translate such figures into “inhabitants per square kilometer” or square mile is problematic. It is out of the

question and well beyond my aim to sketch out here a geography of human implantation and its variations. There are a few elements that seem sure, however. If we look at the years around 1300, the high point of population growth, we can see that the population of rural areas was, in France for example, roughly equal to that of 1900 and much higher than that of 2000. The reason for this is the growth of cities, which rivaled, equaled, and then swallowed up the rural population beginning in the seventeenth century and especially in the twentieth century, reversing the relationship of country dwellers and city dwellers and pushing the latter from 10 percent to 60 percent of the total population. The problems posed today by crowding in the cities and the rural exodus are well known, but they are beyond my interests here. When historiography considers tradition, it has long given western Europe, France in particular, the reputation of stability, if not immobilism, and “the old peasant traditions” and the “immutable serenity of the fields” are often attributed to the centuries of the Middle Ages. This is a serious error. In those centuries, to the contrary, if the countryside was in fact just about all there was, it was animated by what Marc Bloch called a sort of “brownian movement.” Men did not stay in one place. Alone or in small groups, they came and went ceaselessly. And these were not only younger sons in search of girls, pilgrims, merchants, or soldiers, but also peasants who, from one generation to another, went to settle in another clearing, left the shore for the heights or the heights for the shore, as if impelled by some sort of material or mental discomfort. The historian is struck when he plunges into the heart of this confused mass, whether he studies a village or a seigneurie, and finds perpetually changing census surveys. One result of this is that in the few regions that remained isolated—narrow valleys or unfertile lands where people did not mix or move about much—homonymy became the rule, in those days as in our own.

These observations on population shifts open up two fields of study that are clearly distinct but well defined. Anthroponymy, the study of personal names, is today the object of growing interest as

a tool for prosopography in the study of families and as proof of social or economic status. It is true that we have to wait until the twelfth century at the earliest to see the ancient Roman custom of naming an individual with a given name followed by the name of his *gens*, or clan, and perhaps with a personal surname as in "Caius Julius Caesar." Next came the Germanic and Christian use of the baptismal name followed only by an indication of filiation: Jean fils de Pierre. It was in order to distinguish among all the many repetitions of "John, son of Peter" that the surname reappeared, first among men of war: "Jean Bel oeil, fils de Pierre et chevalier." Next, the byname won greater acceptance and filiation began to disappear: "Jean le grand, fils de Pierre" became just "Jean le Grand"; then, thanks to a recognition of geographical provenance made necessary precisely because of the habit of incessant moving about: "Jean le Grand, de Paris." At that point the "de" became the *particule* used by the aristocracy to distinguish the family's place of origin or principal fief. After the thirteenth century this anthroponymic switch was fully accomplished: "Jean Bel oeil" was recognizably a commoner and "Jean de Paris" an aristocrat. The commoner often took as his last name a term corresponding to his trade or his appearance, such as "Le fèvre" (like the English "Smith") or "Le gras" (the Fat Man). We would have to wait until well into the fifteenth century, however, before he would transmit that name to his heirs, who might in fact be thin and never strike an anvil. As for what the French call a *prénom* and the English call a first name or a given name, studies have pointed to regional influences, changing notions of piety, family relations, and even fashions, as well as local cults, devotional practices, and recall of ancestors.

I might note one last domain of studies in the incessant comings and goings within the population: what place should be reserved for the stranger, the person who comes from elsewhere, be it only the next village? The assimilation of the "other" is certainly more psychological than it is juridical. It touches on the domains of the heart and the mind. Hence I shall return to it. But I can suggest, even at this point, that in a society not yet enclosed within strict

rules for life in common, the welcome shown to the newcomer was probably carried out without major difficulties. In France, where later arrivals made the population strongly composite, the eventual homogeneity is striking. The future may have another opinion.

Thus I come to the end of this first and external look at the human being: what is his body and what he knows about it, the care that he takes of it, and population numbers. The next step is to insert that human being into his natural environment and follow him in the ages of his life.