

The Birth of the Modern Self

The modern self began to emerge, with astonishing force and speed, just over five hundred years ago. There is scarcely a major figure or idea in the preceding cultural and intellectual history of the West that did not contribute to the formation of the modern self, nor has there been any aspect of our existence subsequently untouched by its unique character and potency. One can date the period of its emergence in many ways, but it is illuminating to see that historical epoch as framed by two definitive, symbolically resonant events, Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* in 1486 and Descartes's *Discourse on Method* in 1637—that is, the extraordinary century and a half that extends from Leonardo, Columbus, Luther, and Copernicus to Shakespeare, Montaigne, Bacon, and Galileo—climaxing, in a sense, in the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am.” We could extend this crucial window, this threshold of transformation, by precisely another fifty years to encompass the 1687 publication of Newton's *Principia*, by which time the full foundation had been laid for the modern world and the sovereign confidence of the modern mind. Not just a revolution had occurred but a new Genesis. Thus Alexander Pope's telling epigram for the Enlightenment:

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:
God said, Let Newton be! and all was Light.

But the dawn had already begun to break in Pico della Mirandola's *Oration*, the Renaissance manifesto for the new human self. Composed for the opening of a great gathering of philosophers invited to Rome by Pico himself, the *Oration* described the Creation in a characteristically Renaissance synthesis of ancient Greek

and Judaeo-Christian sources, combining the biblical Genesis and Plato's *Timaeus* for its mythic narrative. But Pico then went further, in prophetic anticipation of the new form of the human self about to be born: When God had completed the creation of the world as a sacred temple of his glory and wisdom, he conceived a desire for one last being whose relation to the whole and to the divine Author would be different from that of every other creature. At this ultimate moment God considered the creation of the human being, who he hoped would come to know and love the beauty, intelligence, and grandeur of the divine work. But as the Creator had no archetype remaining with which to make this last creation, no assigned status for it within the already completed work, he said to this final being:

Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have We given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.

Thus the brilliant Pico, twenty-three years old, gave the prophecy. A new form of human being announces itself: dynamic, creative, multidimensional, protean, unfinished, self-defining and self-creating, infinitely aspiring, set apart from the whole, overseeing the rest of the world with unique sovereignty, centrally poised in

the last moments of the old cosmology to bring forth and enter into the new. In the decades that followed, the prodigious generation that emerged immediately after this prophetic declaration brought forth the decisive moment that in childbirth is called “crowning”—that dramatic stage when the head of the new child begins to appear. Within the time span of a single generation surrounding the year 1500, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael created their many masterworks of the High Renaissance, revealing the birth of the new human as much in da Vinci’s multiform genius and the godlike incarnations of the *David* and the Sistine *Creation of Adam* as in the new perspectival objectivity and poetic empowerment of the Renaissance artist; Columbus sailed west and reached America, Vasco da Gama sailed east and reached India, and the Magellan expedition circumnavigated the globe, opening the world forever to itself; Luther posted his theses on the door of the Wittenberg castle church and began the enormous convulsion of Europe and the Western psyche called the Reformation; *and* Copernicus conceived the heliocentric theory and began the even more momentous Scientific Revolution. From this instant, the human self, the known world, the cosmos, heaven and earth were all radically and irrevocably transformed. All this happened within a period of time briefer than that which has passed since Woodstock and the Moon landing.

It was of course no accident that the birth of the modern self and the birth of the modern cosmos took place at the same historical moment. The Sun, trailing clouds of glory, rose for both, in one great encompassing dawn.