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“WE ARE NOW IN HEAVEN”

The *Mundus Imaginalis* and the
Catastrophe of Materialism

It is only the things that we don't understand that have any meaning.

—C. G. Jung

THIS STATEMENT OF Carl Jung's is a psychological as well as a metaphysical pronouncement, and I invoke that ambiguity at the outset. It is in this spirit that I want to think about matter. Because as a culture we don't understand it, our intuitions about it are confused, and we don't at all know what to make of it. Our modern approach to material reality is limited, constricting, confused, and dangerous, and the results of this are increasingly invasive and pervasive in our lives. For these reasons we are in danger of disappearing.

THE MUTABILITY OF EXPERIENCE
AND THE HISTORY OF STUFF

My first encounter with the idea that there is a history of perception occurred when, as an undergraduate, I attended the classes of the historian F. Edward Cranz.¹ He claimed, and it seemed shocking to me at the time, that over the course of Western European history from the ancient Greeks to the modern world there have been fundamental shifts in our perception of the relations between ourselves and the world. Thus, the experience of encountering and of knowing something, and correlatively the experience of consciousness and the

self are historically variable. And further, there is nothing in particular to guarantee privilege to our modes of experience.

One important source for his thesis is Aristotle's *Peri Psyche*; in Latin, *de Anima*; in English, *On the Soul*. Cranz asked that we read the texts as if they mean what they say. So, when Aristotle says that "the soul *is* somehow, all things,"² and that in knowing something, we are somehow conjoined or united with it, we must not dismiss this as archaic foolishness. We must not assume that if Aristotle had read David Hume he would have got it right. But the experience that Aristotle describes, of some kind of union with the objects of knowledge, is clearly not ours. We know things by having accurate ideas of them somewhere in our heads. The things are, of course, "out there" and we are, somehow, "in here." Dr. Cranz called the former kind of knowing *conjunctive*, and the kind of self that experiences the world this way an *extensive* self. Our kind of knowing is *disjunctive*, and we are *intensive* selves. In the *Meditations* Descartes provided the paradigmatic example of the intensive self, sure of nothing but its own thoughts, and relying on God to provide the miraculous connection between the Soul and Matter somewhere deep in the pineal gland.

On Cranz's account, the textual evidence allows a surprisingly clear chronology for a shift from texts that suppose an experience of conjunctive knowing to those that assume the disjunctive mode. In Western Europe, the change occurred around the year 1100. In the twelfth century in any case. Although the subsequent history of this new sense of human being is complex and not well understood, the long-term consequences of the disjunction include, among other things, the modern experience of subjectivity and objectivity, and the modern conception of language as a system of human meanings.

I can quite clearly recall being very uneasy about all of this. I liked it because it seemed to hold out the promise of a kind of psychic emancipation which would be very liberating. But I was bothered too by the suggestion that our sense of objectivity is not normative, or perhaps even very common. Surely there are things "out there" about which we have "ideas." We need only look and there they are. I remember asking anxiously, "But Doctor Cranz, what about rocks?!" My recollection is that he smiled his wonderful smile and said that he was a historian and didn't know about rocks.

In language that I've learned since, this is the history of what the French call *mentalité*, and this shift in the relation between the subject and the object involves a "withdrawal of participation." Many people have discussed this phenomenon from a variety of viewpoints. For instance, you can analyze the Neolithic transition in terms of a kind of disjunction between humans and nature: outside the walls of the city lies the Wilderness, within them, the Tame. It has been argued that by a similar process, the immanent, female deities of Earth were severed from the remote and transcendent masculine gods of the Heavens.³ Another disjunction, another loss of participation, accompanies the transition from oral to literate society. For European history the crucial transition occurs in Greece roughly

between Homer and Plato. The techniques of alphabetic writing and reading forever changed the relation of humans to language and to the nonhuman world.⁴ Socrates was very concerned about this new technology, and was afraid that it signaled the death of real thinking, and that education would suffer irreparably. In fact the great sweep of Western history as a whole has been read as a story of withdrawal and the progressive "death of nature," and the birth of a mechanistic cosmology based on abstract materialism.⁵

It was most interesting to me, with my background in Craz's work, to notice that many scholars concerned with this history of our selves have also found the twelfth century to be of particular importance for us. They include Ivan Illich and Henry Corbin. It is Corbin's version of the story that I want to discuss here.⁶

Henry Corbin was a French philosopher, theologian, and scholar of Islamic thought, particularly Sufism and Iranian Shi'ism. It was Corbin's contention that European civilization experienced a "metaphysical catastrophe" as a result of what we might call the Great Disjunction. This was signaled by the final triumph of the Aristotelianism of Averroes over Platonic and neo-Platonic cosmology championed by Avicenna. To the defeat of that cosmology is coupled the disappearance of the *anima mundi*, the Soul of the World. The catastrophic event that gave rise to modernity is the loss of the soul of the world.

The details of this history hinge on the fate of the Aristotelian *nous poi-etikos*, which became the Agent or Active Intellect in medieval Western philosophy. This Active Intellect operating through us was sometimes equated in Islamic thought with the Holy Spirit or Angel of Revelation, the Angel Gabriel. The realm of being to which this intellection gives access is the place of vision and symbol, what depth psychology calls the world of the psyche and of the imagination. Corbin called it the *mundus imaginis*, the imaginal world, to underscore the fact that it is not *imaginary* or unreal. Through the agency of the active imagination we have access to an intermediate realm of subtle bodies, of real presences, situated between the sensible world and the intelligible. This is the realm of the *anima mundi*.

Lacking this tripartite cosmology we are left with a poisonous dualism of matter and spirit. "Stuff" is severed from Intellect, and both are incomplete and disoriented because the ground of their contact is gone. On Corbin's view all the dualisms of the modern world stem from the loss of the *mundus imaginis*: matter is cut off from spirit, sensation from intellection, subject from object, inner from outer, myth from history, the individual from the divine.

There are, then, a number of ways of talking about the history of consciousness, and something like a disjunction, a withdrawal of participation has been detected by various people in different modes at various times and places. One must wonder whether they are all talking about the same thing, and if so, why this withdrawal or severance seems to appear in such a variety of guises. I believe they are all talking about roughly the same kind of thing, and that the

reason it keeps appearing is because it is an archetypal phenomenon. This withdrawal is *always* present as a possibility. We are victims of a continuous withdrawal. But this implies the ever-present possibility of conjunction, of Return.

DUALISM AND NON-SENSE:
WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH TRANSCENDENCE?

One of the most fundamental and pernicious effects of the polarized cosmology we've inherited is our inability to discriminate among various kinds of subtle realities. We think things are simple. Or, we think they are merely complex. Our senses for the subtle have atrophied. We recognize as fully real a very limited range of phenomena. We have no feeling for depth, no sense of the positive realities of mystery and enigma. Thoughts have no body; bodies have no animation. We are unable to understand either matter or mind, let alone their relations. This unknowing ignorance is catastrophic.

For instance, we tend to confuse, conflate, and identify truth, abstraction, transcendence, and the spirit. The history of mathematical physics illustrates these confusions. The scientific revolution begins with mathematical physics and it inaugurates the "reign of quantity." It was early established as the paradigmatic science, and has been for four hundred years the standard against which would-be "hard sciences" are measured. As the biologist Stephen Gould has quipped: all the other sciences have "physics envy." On this view, mathematics is the language in which God has written the universe, and the framework of the material world is laid bare in language that is timeless, abstract, universal, and formal.⁷ Newton's $F = ma$, Einstein's $E = mc^2$, Schrödinger's wave equation—all these, understood as true statements about reality, have been, and still are, regarded as "Ideas in the Mind of God." Truth, abstraction, formal universality, and the transcendent God are all lumped together in one undifferentiated bundle.

The consequences of this are disastrous. To attain to a true vision of the world we must leave most of it out of account. Understanding requires absence. The truest ideas are the most abstract. The closest approach to God is via the timeless and the universal. The marginalized categories include the timely, the particular, the local, the vernacular, the concrete. These are unintelligible in themselves.

You might think that unless you are a mathematical physicist you can ignore all of this, but it applies to all of us because it determines the orientation of much of modern science and technology. It is a curious fact that the less subtle, and the more abstract our language becomes, the more literal and nakedly powerful it is. We are deluded into believing that knowledge reveals and illuminates the clear and distinct ideas of Truth; that it brings power and control. We persist in not understanding that the blinding clarity of transcen-

dent abstract ideas both requires and produces the light of the fireball over Hiroshima, and is, as Blake foresaw, the Single Vision of Newton's Sleep. The limitless energy in matter, conceived in abstraction, confronts us with apocalypse as both a bang and a whimper: in the deadly illumination of the fire ignited at Trinity, and in the slow decisive poison which we try to conceal by naming it Waste, and which we can find nowhere to bury. The earth will not receive it.

For a while I tried to escape into biology. Here at least we do find attention to the particular, the timely, the local. Biologists must confront individuality and historical contingency in a way that physics can seemingly avoid. For traditional physics, all the interesting *history* happened in the first three minutes after the Big Bang, and it's been thermodynamically downhill ever since. But biology is less and less Natural History, as nature dwindles to a few isolated preserves bordered by parking lots and its seemingly intractably complex mysteries begin to yield to the very real powers of abstraction.

The major metaphors of theoretical biology are today derived from systems science. Biological objects are conceived in terms of dynamical systems theories which when coupled to Darwinian natural selection provide the framework for the eventual unification of the science. The order that we see is explicable as an emergent property, which appears as the crystallization of order from simple, local rules governing the interaction of system elements. The elements may be molecules, genes, neurons, organisms, species. The search is on for formal rules that apply across all scales and serve to unite all the various branches of the biological sciences. Animals no longer look for food: they engage in optimal foraging strategies. Cognition is understood as maximally adaptive neural network processing of sensory input. And so it goes.⁸

Theory in biology has become wholly continuous with the technologies of power in a way that we take for granted in the physical sciences. As physics is required for engineering, so now genetics is required for bioengineering. We are perhaps on the verge of technologies that will enable us to control matter in extraordinary ways, but as before in our history, this knowledge is founded upon an act of abstraction. It is, I think, crucial that we recognize that the metaphors that govern our discourse, both public and private, scientific and personal, are increasingly dependent upon and derived from that most abstract of all technologies, digital information processing. Computational language, the machine language of 0 and 1, is wholly logical, entirely formal. The embodiment of the language does not matter at all. You could, in theory, build a computer out of paper clips and rubber bands. What matters is the sequence of logical relations among the units. Premise: Genes encode information; Brains process information; Organisms are like computational devices. Premise: Discovering abstract laws is our highest, most god-like activity and we should do more of it. Conclusion: We should become computers. This may seem absurd. I hope it does. But it is the clearly stated position of Marvin Minsky at MIT

and, I think, of a host of others less clear in intent and in their assumptions about the nature of humanity.⁹ It is the logical outcome of modern materialism. We are matter in space. Exceedingly complex without a doubt, but matter in space nonetheless. And what kind of matter doesn't matter. We should remake ourselves into something more durable. We can then continue our inevitable evolutionary ascent toward the summit of Abstract Universality. It is not often that you hear this viewpoint explicitly adopted, but it underlies much of modern technological culture.

There is an extreme dualism at play here: Matter is demonized, and a confused hodgepodge of Abstraction-Transcendence-Spirit is enthroned, toward which we are morally obligated to progress. The world disappears into ecosystems or fluxes of energy, and persons disappear into information processors, cognitive processes, evolutionary processes, or historical-political processes. We may be materialists, but it is a funny materialism. We are mute about matter, about that which makes sense. Matter does not figure in our categories of truth and meaning. It appears as apocalyptic light, accompanied by the irrepressible Shadow that we cannot entomb. Or, it disappears into "information." Either scenario announces the impossibility of the existence of persons.

Dr. Cranz said thirty-five years ago that the existence of persons required transcendence, and was incompatible with what he called "public reason." It is only now that I begin to understand what he meant. But what can we mean by transcendence, with our long history of the withdrawal of participation, with the Bomb and with the World Wide Web?

THE ROCK AND THE DREAM

I've tried to suggest some of the ways in which a stark contrast between spirit and matter produces non-sense and incoherence. We are dumb about matter, and we are hopelessly muddled about things spiritual. The realm of Intellect and Spirit is abstract, distant, bloodless, and vague. Technological metaphors and technical literalisms are undermining the very possibility of experiencing ourselves as persons. We rush headlong into the oblivion of Progress.

Let me be explicit about what I intend. First: What we think of as reality is a restriction, an immense constriction of existence. Second: Scientific materialism is non-sense, and acceptance of its premises leaves us insensate. We must be willing to accept the reality of depth psychology's *psyche*, of Corbin's *mundus imaginalis*, of the Soul of the World. Or, if that seems too exotic, recall Blake and Coleridge and the Romantic claims for the primacy of the imagination.

If we want to make sense of the cosmos, of rocks and persons both, we must make moves that seem ridiculous to modern, hard-headed materialists. To recover our senses, our sense of what matters, to breathe once more the life of the world, we must move not toward Matter as we have come to con-

ceive it, as its Masters, but, seemingly, away. We've been pushing matter around for a long time now. It pushes back apocalyptically. We should sense something wrong. We should do something else. So, let us meditate on matter by moving for a few minutes into the spaces of psyche. We need to reconsider the act of Creation.

One of the most damaging illusions of the materialist vision is the sense that the present moment is merely the necessary connection, occupied momentarily, between the causal past and the resulting future. For instance: Genesis—4004 BC for Bishop Usher, or ten billion years ago if you are Stephen Hawking. Both stories are identical in essentials. What follows Creation is the history of matter in space: furniture rearranging on a cosmic scale, punctuated for the bishop by the occasional miracle.

On the mythic view, or the psychic view, shared with many mystics, Creation is continuous. Jung writes, "The psyche creates reality every day."¹⁰ But this psyche is not localized inside our heads. Rather, we exist in it. The present moment is pregnant with creation. The soul of this world we experience through a sense of interiority, as the availability of the world to imagination, as a kind of reciprocal imaginative interaction, a sympathy between self and world. We move here in a different space. This is not the universe of matter; it is more nearly a cosmos of qualities, presences, and harmonies. This present is not transitory. It is not going anywhere. We are close to the origin here, close to the primordial distinctions. Space itself is substantial, qualitative, generative.

In the *Timaeus* Plato speaks of that out of which all things are generated: the nurse, the receptacle "that we may liken to a mother" or a womb, "that partakes of the intelligible [but] is yet most incomprehensible." Timaeus says: "[O]f this receptacle and nurse of all creation we have only this dream-like sense, being unable to cast off sleep and determine the truth about it." It exists only as "an ever-fleeting shadow." Ivan Illich comments: "In these delightful lines Plato still speaks of the image-pregnant stuff of dreams and imagination, as one who still has the experience of living in pre-categorical, founded space."¹¹ That is, in the space of the extensive self, the pre-Cartesian, pre-Newtonian space of qualities.

Matter and space are generated together. Plato's phenomenology of creation situates us in the present of myth. As Patricia Berry has written, matter, so conceived, is both the most concrete and the most lacking.¹² We uncover here in mythic space, in psyche, the primal conjunction of the concrete and the uncertain; the fecundity of the void. It is just here, at this origin, where mystery and certainty coincide, where the waters and the earth divide, where the symmetries are broken and the metaphoric and the literal separate, where we cannot keep our balance—it is here, in the realm of the inhuman, both divine and demonic, where meaning is born. This is the *mundus imaginalis*.

And we *cannot* keep our balance. Myth gives way to Reason. Revelation to Orthodoxy. We must dance or go mad.

And here then is where empiricism must begin. This empiricism demands an attention and a sensibility for subtleties that we have largely lost. It demands a sense for qualitative spaces, not quantitative; for presences, not motions; for forms, not explanations. This participatory empiricism is based on *pathos*. It reveals the world of Corbin's Creative Imagination, Blake's Jesus the Imagination, Coleridge's Primary Imagination.

The multiple levels of attention called for are requisites for us to know where we are and who we are. But such attention is not easy. In our anesthetized, rationalized age we tend to assume that knowledge just lies out there waiting for someone to "access it." Our democratic ideals tend to become muddled with notions of knowledge as commodity or as information. But we are a long way from capitalist or digital metaphors here.

And also, this empiricism is not particularly "safe." There are mirages and illusions and demons here. Henry Corbin has said that the imaginary can be innocuous, but the imaginal never is. But materialist empiricism is if anything more dangerous, because it pretends to be safe, controlling. It is the world that is not safe. In any case, we have come to the end of materialism. We have no more places in which to dwell, only spaces in which to move.

Ivan Illich calls the modern space of highways, urban sprawl, and daily life "indiscrete, homogeneous, commercial space; bulldozed space." He says: "In this bulldozed space people can be located and given an address, but they cannot dwell. Their desire to dwell is a nightmare." He goes on to relate a tale from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*:

[Calvino] tells of Marco Polo's visit to the court of Kublai Khan. Polo tells his host about the stuff of the towns through which his imagined travels have led him. Calvino has Marco Polo describe the sickening helplessness that he experiences as a man accustomed to traveling in three dimensional space, when led through dreams of cities, each generated by a different "stuff." Polo reports to the Khan on dreams of space with a pervasive taste of "longing," on space made up of eyes, of granular space that jells into "names," of space that is made up of "the dead," space that constantly smells of "exchanges," or "innovation." Marco Polo reports on these nightmares for the benefit of the host and ends with the following entry: "Hell—if there be such a thing—is not tomorrow. Hell is right here, and today we live in it; together we make it up. There are only two ways to avoid suffering in this Hell. The first way out is easy for most people: Let Hell be, live it up, and stop noticing it. The second way is risky. It demands constant attentive curiosity to find out who and what in the midst of this Hell is not part of it, so as to make it last by giving space to it."¹³

Illich concludes: "Only those who recognize the nightmare of non-discrete space can regain the certainty of their own intimacy and thereby dwell in the presence of one another."¹⁴

Aristotle accused Plato of confusing space and matter.¹⁵ I want to persist in that confusion, and engage in what Giambattista Vico called "imaginative metaphysics." In the *New Science* Vico writes, "As rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them, imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them, for when . . . he does not understand he . . . becomes them by transforming himself into them."¹⁶

Consider the following triad of First Principles: Mythos, Topos, Logos. Mythos: The function of myth is to open, to reveal depth, complexity, mystery, and enigma, and the connections to the nonhuman. Topos: Place. The pre-Socratics associated any kind of being with spatial existence—all being has place. Logos: This is speech, a rational account, a true account, distinguished from myth.

Myths, or mythic moves, open spaces. Rational accounts limit them. This is necessary. Both are necessary. But we live after the Enlightenment. We live amidst the wreckage of the split between the Rational and the Irrational. When Reason is your God, the repressed returns, monstrous, titanic. The wreckage of Reason, its burned-out skeleton, is the logical device: rubber bands and paper clips.

And education. We go to school to learn about the world. And we do, most of us. We learn the world we have made. The burgeoning industries based on virtual reality merely make explicit, and are the logical extensions of an education based on technique, on public reason, on orthodoxy. Virtual realities are realities without the gods, without the transhuman—realities based on illusions of human power and control. Socrates saw it coming: The rise of literacy would mean the end of education—people would stop thinking, *memoria* would fade, dialogue would wither.

It has been a long time since most of us have experienced the world. We experience instead a constriction, a selection. We step cautiously out, checking our selves at first, against What Is Allowed, What Is Known To Be True. We constantly throw a world out ahead of ourselves and move safely into it. Heidegger calls this "enframing."¹⁷ We are weak creatures and we soon forget we are doing it. The poet Robert Duncan is strong here:

Modern man . . . has erected an education of sensibility, class spirit or team spirit, argument and rationalization, designed to establish himself in a self-protective world of facts and problems stripped of their sympathies, in the real business of making money, serving and protecting the system of private property and capital or public property and capital, and exploiting the profitable waste, substituting his own person for soul, until the whole bag of swollen vulture's wind and meat threatens to consume our lives.¹⁸

Almost without exception education as we have come to know it makes this worse. "We know how things are and we will tell you." Knowledge crushes down, suffocating. To relieve the suffering and make it easy and fun, we let machines distract us and dominate the process. This is the world we are educated

into. We have come to accept education not as initiation into mystery, but as training and as technique. If we learn this way, if we live this way, our lives have been lived already, and as we move we are merely occupying spaces laid out for us in advance. Merely rearranging the furniture. And living this way, we think we are empiricists, pragmatists, hard-headed realists. When in truth we completely ignore an enormous range of potential experience, to the point that most of us are insensate and numb most of the time.

The world *is* too much for us. Rationality as we have come to know it works by ignoring most of experience: laws are arrived at by selective abstraction. The optimal number of variables must be small . . . ignoring friction . . . ignoring the observer . . . under ideal conditions . . . Newtonian fluids that don't exist . . . in the absence of perturbation . . . and so on and on.

James Hillman draws our attention to an idea from Jewish mysticism: *tsim tsum*, Retreat, Withdrawal. "Since God is everywhere, the existence of the universe is made possible by a process of shrinking in God. . . . God crowds out all other kinds of existence. He must pull back for the Creation to come into being. Only by withdrawal does God allow the world."¹⁹ Our move has been to take that creation and constrict it still further until it is almost not there at all. And we call that understanding. As Hillman suggests, the proper move for us might mean letting the creation expand, letting genesis occur by moving out of the way. Withdrawing our human control and letting the world shine forth. Creation by retreat.

It is the mythic experience, the mythic imagination that opens, reveals depth and mystery, which places the human in the context of the nonhuman, and so, *forces* retreat, humility, and awe, in the presence of spaces beyond our will.

I want to make a gesture now in the direction of that source in which lies the origin of the three categories in our imaginative metaphysics: mythos, topos, logos. Our myths and our spaces with the matter they generate, and our language, all are created together. When our connections with mythic, symbolic imagination are constricted, so are our spaces featureless, our matter dead, and our speech empty.

In trying to reimagine, to move toward a connection, a participation in the world that we have lost, being the kind of person I am, I want to talk about Thinking. Someone else might speak more easily of Dancing, or Loving, or Prayer.

Imagine that thinking, dancing, loving, and praying are primary forms of life; that each provides access to nonhuman realms by allowing openings to appear in our virtual realities, by allowing withdrawal, retreat, of the intensive self. We conceive of thinking as subjective, internal, in our heads; it depends for us on human meanings in languages that we make up. It is abstract. And too, ideas are not really real—everyone knows that intellectuals don't live in the real world. Idealism versus Realism. And as we have seen, increasingly ideas are held to be "nothing but" neurophysiology, or preferably, in a cleaner world, the logical physiology of the digital device, for which the matter doesn't matter.

Our thought, whatever else it may be, is always, also defensive. Robert Duncan again:

Wherever life is true to what mythologically we know life to be, it comes full of awe, awe-full. . . . The shaman and the inspired poet, who take the universe to be alive, are brothers germane of the mystic and the paranoid. We at once seek a meaningful life and dread psychosis, "the principle of life."²⁰

We have found our way into a closed world and mistaken it for the infinite universe. We do not know our place, and we do not know our peril.

What manner of thinking is appropriate to our place? Imagine this: We don't "have" ideas—we do not make them up. *They* come to *us*. And we struggle with language to hold them, to make them keep still—but we manage to capture only fragments—they are from other places, not here. We are not attuned to them. We try to "think" them. We don't try to dance them, love them, befriend them, or move into the worlds they portend. Hillman says that ideas are gods. I prefer to say that ideas are openings onto other worlds, tangential to ours. They demand the attention of the whole person; they demand attention to subtleties we have almost wholly forgotten.

Henry Corbin, in his presentation of the doctrine of continuous creation in Ibn 'Arabi, writes that the divine descent into the forms of creation never ceases, nor does their simultaneous rise. There is a twofold intradivine movement of Epiphany and Return. He writes, "That is why the other world already exists in this world; it exists in every moment in relation to every being."²¹ Corbin recounts a conversation with D.T. Suzuki, the Zen Buddhist: "I can still see Suzuki suddenly brandishing a spoon and saying with a smile 'This spoon *now* exists in Paradise. . . . We are *now* in Heaven."²²

Jung tells of a conversation he had in 1925 with the chief of the Taos Pueblo in northern New Mexico. Ochwiay Biano is talking to Jung about the strange Europeans who have come west into his world. He says:

See how cruel the whites look. Their lips are thin, their noses sharp, their faces furrowed and distorted by folds. Their eyes have a staring expression; they are always seeking something. What are they seeking? The whites always want something; they are always uneasy and restless. We do not know what they want. We do not understand them. We think that they are mad.

Jung continues:

I asked him why they thought the whites were all mad. "They say that they think with their heads," he replied. "Why of course. What do you think with?" I asked him in surprise. "We think here," he said, indicating his heart.²³