

History, Toynbee and the Modern Mind: Betrayal of the West

FREDERICK D. WILHELMSSEN

*The devotees of Progress and
Futurism among the historians,
Mr. Wilhelmsen writes, hack at
the roots of our civilization.*

OPEN CONTROVERSY in the field of ideas is an intellectual exercise rarely indulged nowadays. Because of this, Mr. Douglas Jerrold's brilliant critique of Professor Toynbee's *The World and the West* was a double triumph: not only was the Toynbee thesis destroyed, but the destruction was executed in the best traditions of English polemical writing. (*The Lie about the West*, Sheed and Ward, 1954.)

Mr. Jerrold put his finger on what is perhaps the deepest danger to the western mind today, when he accused Toynbee specifically, and liberal humanism at large, of preparing the way for the assault on the citadel of the West by inviting all of us to view history from a universal point of view. From this bird's-eye view we can see, it is supposed, that the West is feeding upon the world as a parasitic organism feeds upon a parent body. As organisms grow, decline, and die, so too did the West grow and decline, and so must she now die; but this destruction of our civilization will be no real catastrophe (from the universal point of view) because the decline follows the law of challenge and response: "a dialectical view of history which sees each civilization offering a challenge to those outside

its orbit, and by this challenge engendering a response." Jerrold went on to locate this doctrine within the general context of the progressivism of the liberal tradition. Since the dialectical movement of the historical process is upward, since the response is spiritually superior to the challenge, we are asked to give our allegiance, not to an historical heritage, but to the historical process itself. Putting the matter more concretely, we are told to commit ourselves to a process inevitably moving away from the religious and cultural traditions of Christian civilization.

The position is by no means peculiar to Professor Toynbee, nor does it customarily achieve the high level of conceptualization achieved in his own work. The doctrine is held everywhere, if not as a philosophy, then as a prejudice; its tenets are insinuated into the most typical art of the moment; its pretensions are paraded by the most representative members of the contemporary intelligentsia; an adherence to its platform guarantees a hearing in more than half the halls of learning of the day, but disagreement, even the most tempered, brings the weapon of ridicule or the sanction of neglect. The leading characteristics

of the doctrine at hand are well known: the investing of the present direction of history with an aura of necessity; the suggestion that an attempt to struggle against the powerful forces moving toward collectivism is futile; the abandonment of traditional ways of life beloved to our historic West; the sanctification of naked power in the name of "history."

This conception of history is, of course, fundamentally dialectical; it supposes that there is an intrinsic "meaning of history," that this "meaning" is identified with the flow of time, and that it is capable of being known by the human mind, if not in all its details, at least in the broad sweep of its direction. It is this philosophy of history that I should like to explore and challenge in the present essay. The doctrine in question reaches back to old style British Liberalism, and beyond, to that mingling of the Enlightenment and the English temper that gave birth to the Whig conception of history. Paralleled and challenged on the continent by Hegelianism and eventually by Marxism, Liberalism had in common with its totalitarian enemies a theory of history necessitating the wearing-away of traditional political and religious institutions by the dynamism inherent to the historical process. At first "the meaning of history" was some Utopian future toward which the law of progress inevitably tended. In time, this "meaning" was sophisticated to the point where progress to a fixed goal was dropped, and history was reduced to sheer change. From this point of view, Professor Toynbee would appear slightly out of date: he still hopes for better things to come. Most of his contemporaries, moved by the frightening events of the last fifty years, have dropped the earlier "meliorism," and have simply surrendered to the sheer mobility of the historical process.

In any event, the attempt to place the essence of history in time, *taken as sheer change*, tends toward a double rejection of the western heritage: one political and cultural, and the other philosophical. First, to identify "the meaning of history" with

the flow of time results inexorably in the rejection of any intelligibility that is traditional, because a tradition, although it grows in time, itself endures, and therefore blocks any dialectic thought to be immanent to time as such. As the past gives way to the present, and the present to the future, if there be an inner teleology to change as such, it must be at odds with any heritage transcending or resisting this death of the past in the fleeting life of the present. For example, the western heritage of law and justice was not built, it is presumed, in order to wash away in the stream of becoming; but if "the meaning of history" is contained within the changing process as such, then this tradition is doomed. The rooting of human intelligibility and historical rationality within the law of change is a betrayal of the whole culture we have inherited from the past: a betrayal extending to the highest ideals of liberalism itself, because if everything obeys the dialectic of time and is overcome by the future, why should not liberty suffer the fate of all history?

There are really only two paths out of this dilemma, and both of them are dead ends: to equate freedom with an alienation from the restrictions of historical tradition, is to fall into an absurdity; for where is this liberty cherished by all liberals, if not within the fabric of the classical Christian inheritance? If, on the contrary, liberty is equated with mere action or an automatic response to a challenge, then what is left but the word? Secondly, the philosophy of the primacy of the historical process must entail the rejection of the Christian claim that man's deepest finality is trans-historical: beatitude with a God who is not only immanent to time, but transcendent as well. Man owes a duty to God that is by no means fulfilled simply by entering into the stream of historical becoming. It is not the God of the future who commands my allegiance: it is the God of the present who elicits from me a decision in the now, even though that decision demand that I stand against the world.

Athanasius contra mundum. This is the Christian vision of man with his back against the wall; and to ask him to surrender to the "forces of history" under the guise of meeting "the challenge of the times" is to ask him, frequently enough, to abandon courage and to betray that sense of honor that was born on the Cross two thousand years ago.

To ground the meaning of history within some law thought to be consubstantial with the flow of time is certainly a denial of the ethical and religious drama of the moment, but it is even more a denial of the unique dignity of human personality. This follows quite naturally from the rationalization of time inherent in the dialectical conception of history. As time has a past, present, and future, so too has "the meaning of history"; since existence is always in the present tense, so do we always stand in the center of history's meaning, looking back on the first stage now completed, and looking forward to the third stage still to come. From this follows, not only a sense of condescension and superiority to the past, but also a hatred of present existence, a resentment of the given. If we stand at the present moment of time, itself destined to give way to the future, and if the meaning of history is the very process of the destruction of the present in the victory in the future, then "the meaning of history" can never be found in present existence; it must always be projected into the future, whether that future be thought of as fixed and knowable, or as undetermined and unknowable. Therefore an act placed in time by a man must be viewed exclusively as an instrument, a means, to the future fulfillment of the dynamism inherent in reality itself. Here is a curiously vicious conception of ethics: not only is man commanded to live in the future, not only is he cautioned against preserving those traditional values he has inherited as a legacy from the past, but the very morality of his actions is measured, not by human nature, not by the needs of living men and women, but the supposed future direction of the his-

torical process. Not only can Marxism enslave and murder millions with a perfectly good conscience, but the heirs to liberal humanism, the latter-day secularists, can lecture the rest of us on our duties to an historical dynamism which would sweep away the civilization that has alone made life bearable for man because it has shown him his soul. No wonder Gabriel Marcel has cried out against "this crowned ghost, the meaning of history."

Although the advocates of historical determinism and "futurism" disagree widely with one another on the actual direction of the historical process, they are all united in holding that this direction is away from our western origins, not merely as a fact, but as a law: cultural alienation is of the very essence of history. Even where the theory of an inner dialectic to history is rejected as a law of nature, it is reintroduced as an ethical imperative. For example, Mr. Karl R. Popper in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* rejects any scientific penetration into the meaning of history; he rejects the historicism of Professor Toynbee; he has no patience with Hegelianism of any kind; he declares that "history has no meaning," but he really doesn't mean it! He takes it all back when he tells us that "we can give history meaning," and the meaning we give it is the "democratic process." Upon closer inspection, Mr. Popper's "democratic process" (equated with the march of history) turns out to be an ethical abandonment of all trans-temporal absolutes: non-commitment, cultural alienation, dedication to the future conceived as the death of our religious and cultural heritage—this is Mr. Popper's "open society." The Platonic-Aristotelian achievement in ethics and politics is rejected because it struggled against the "open democracy" of Pericles, Socrates, and Democritus; but this "open democracy" reveals itself to be an irrevocable opponent of the whole classical-Christian conception of man as a person, owing allegiance both to God and to the common good. Mr. Popper's own brand of anti-historicist historicism

seems to have little to distinguish it from the Blanchard theory of history as an ever-widening extension of the equalitarian principle, moving to a secularist paradise wherein everyone will be as equal, and as equally trivial, as everyone else.

The "open society" of undedicated men closely resembles the way in which Mr. David Riesman has read the meaning of history (cf. *The Lonely Crowd*). Despite his avowed pragmatism and his suspicion of conceptual frameworks, the dialectical philosophy returns in his own trinitarian symbolism: until the Renaissance, western man was "tradition-directed," motivated by religious and ethical absolutes; from the Renaissance until the close of the nineteenth century, western man was "inner-directed," "fashioned by the interiorized voices of ancestors"; in our time, we stand at the threshold of the "other-directed"—man purged of faith, ethics, and history. The historical process makes sense, it has meaning, when it is seen as a *progressive* stripping of every dimension of existence, save that of the visible. There will be no room within this new barbarism of the playground for a commitment to an absolute ethic or to a transcendent God. Nobody will suppress our heritage; it will merely wither away, because the inner logic of history would seem to dictate such a destruction.

Mr. Riesman's society admirably fits the way in which the philosophers of the "managerial revolution" have read historical intelligibility. The real revolution giving point to history, sweeping away every traditional hierarchy, uprooting ways of life beloved in the East as well as in the West, is the work of mass production, represented and forwarded by the new business elite. The coming society will be neither capitalist nor socialist, as we understand those terms today. It will be an order dominated by technicians, scientists, educationists, intellectuals, and psychologists; the new order will reach hitherto unimagined goals of industrial production; small independent businesses will give way to a mul-

titude of "service" industries dependent on, and subservient to, gigantic corporations whose arteries will be fed yearly by the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of young men educated at the expense of the state. Independent farming will yield to agricultural factories. What was once a capitalist system will be so closely linked with governmental control that an observer would not be able to categorize the new order. I confess freely that I am filled with dismay when I contemplate the "new order" supposedly being born from the womb of history. A society headed by men, in the words of Mr. Russell Kirk, who are "schooled beyond their proper worldly prospects or, indeed, beyond their intellectual capacities, lacking property, lacking religious faith, lacking ancestors or expectation of posterity, seeking to gratify by the acquisition of power their loneliness and their nameless hungers"—such a society of white-collared barbarians is held up before us, not only as the fulfillment of history, but as the *fiat* of Nature.

No one denies, I should imagine, that the West is drifting in the very direction indicated by these propagandists for an equalitarian future. Only a man blind could fail to see that the United States and Great Britain today, perhaps France and Canada tomorrow, are headed toward a consumers' society, dominated by engineers, technicians, advertising artists, and the like: men who, although good enough in themselves, are nonetheless cut away from the larger rhythm of Christian civilization; men so "open" to all "values" that they would lack the spiritual toughness needed to meet the challenge of Marxism. The point is not that the West may betray itself: the point is that the West is invited to betray itself in the name of an historical determinism.

The pattern that emerges from an examination of typical social and political theorizing today is grimly repetitious: allegiance is neither to our cultural, nor to our Christian, legacy; loyalty is to history, not as to an immemorial tradition summing itself up in a man and giving direction to

his destiny, but as to a sheer process conceptualized in a dozen different ways. Perhaps John Dewey's suggestion that we rewrite our history every time we act is the most frightening proposal yet advanced by those men who would rationalize the temporal process. This proposal, undoubtedly advanced in all innocence, looks as though it could have come from the world of Big Brother, wherein yesterday's news is rewritten to fit today's crisis. History's meaning would seem to dictate her destruction.

A most significant and sophisticated defense of the dialectical conception of history as an impersonal force, grinding to pieces all values inherited from the past, appeared recently in *The Partisan Review* ("The Myth and the Powerhouse," Nov.-Dec., 1953). Mr. Phillip Rahv pointed out the tension between myth and time in contemporary letters. Myth, kept perpetually before the corporate consciousness through its reenactment in rite, represents the timeless, the eternal; it promises "to heal the wounds of time." Myth is thus at odds with history which is "that powerhouse of change which destroys custom and tradition in producing the future." This drive toward the traditionless future results in "the disenchantment of reality carried through by science, rationality, and the historical consciousness." Except as a literary device, Mr. Rahv would have the man of letters drop his preoccupation with myth, and accept the challenge of historical time. Perhaps in some future social order, says the author, the "paradox of progress will be resolved," but "a conquest so consummate will take place not within our civilization but beyond it, on the further shores of historical necessity." The fulfillment this dream promises "is the hope of history . . . and its redemption."

Mr. Rahv's essay is extremely significant, not only because of the high level on which he develops his thesis, but also because his conclusions illustrate, not only the meliorism of the whole school of historical alienation and determinism, but also the moral prejudice that seems to buttress the tradi-

tion of Liberal Humanitarianism. First, granting that an escape into myth is an ineffectual way of meeting the challenge of the times, does it thereby follow that the only alternative is total allegiance to the historical process, in the desperate hope that "the further shores of historical necessity" will offer us temporal and spiritual salvation? Second, why does Mr. Rahv commit himself ethically to "science, rationality, and historical consciousness," and why does he discard so cavalierly the "customs and traditions" of a people? Does he imagine that science has any more title to existence, any *more right to be*, than the customs and traditions of a civilization? Clearly enough, both have a place in any good society, but if it came to a choice between them, I have absolutely no doubt where the greater good would lie. If the customs and traditions of a people serve their needs, if they preserve the family hearth, if they shelter faith in God and shore up common human decency, then neither "science" nor "rationality," nor what the author calls "historical consciousness" has any right to touch them: they are inviolable: they are sacred. Should they be tampered with, not only will the corporate soul be torn and wounded in its very essence, but powers and passions hitherto kept in check by the good sense of a civilized people will be unleashed, and future generations will feel the impact and will suffer the bitterness and the loneliness brought about by this initial tinkering with the spirit of a nation, and with the structure of a society, in the name of "science."

Mr. Rahv speaks of the "disenchantment of reality caused by science." I presume throughout this entire discussion that he refers to the nature of post-Cartesian science, which aims not at knowing, but at controlling and making. The science in question, good in itself, is not a disinterested contemplation of things as they are, but is a mathematicized instrument capable of total power over, and transformation of, the physical cosmos; in the hands of secularists—drunk with the future—this

science would not only make the weight of the world easier to bear (which is its chief ethical value), but it would substitute a new mechanized world for the organic creation God gave us. It would transform the face of the earth, uproot older ways of life everywhere, and blot out the historic memories and the hallowed pieties of those countless obscure people in fields and towns all over the West: men who desire nothing more than to live their lives as did their fathers before them, to bequeath to their sons a patrimony maintained in its fullness, to hand on a way of life bound up with poetry of possession, the integrity of service, and the dignity born of Christian freedom. Where these things have been destroyed by technologized science, man is undoubtedly disenchanted; anyone would be, were he given a cheap copy for the real thing. The principle of the complete rationalization or "humanization" (so goes the euphemism) of the universe has removed too many men from any but the most obvious contacts with reality as it is. Contemporary society, wherever it has been thoroughly technologized, moves through its communal life surrounded by, and formed in the likeness of, a world of images and flickers—mechanized illusions—created by the "scientific spirit." This vast and complicated world of artifacts and machines is looked upon exclusively in terms of use. The remnants of a raw nature, the frontiers of the new field of vision, exist simply as a distant quarry of stuff, to be mined, disciplined, and then absorbed within the universe of utility. Existence has value for this advance-guard of the future only in so far as it can be worked. A thing as it is—a zone of unrepeatable actuality, unique and irreplaceable—is an affront to the technologized mind, or at best, it is a challenge to be met and conquered. Thus we squander our substance while the dream of total exploitation corrupts the heart. It is no wonder man is "disenchanted," bored, altogether without mystery and reverence, stripped of that piety for things that should fill all life with the sense of poetry.

Still, Mr. Rahv maintains that this onward march of "science and rationality," which he equates with the historical process and which he maintains is the final meaning of history, has resulted in a growth of "historical consciousness." But how can he say this when the rationalizing and technologizing of society has resulted in the very destruction, not only of religious and cultural traditions, but even of family memory? Although not often noted by social scientists, the loss of family history since the mid-nineteenth century has been overwhelming. It is the most striking historical blackout in the Western World. We are rapidly producing a race of men without grandfathers. The "historical consciousness" of a small class of alienated intellectuals seems beside the point in this context; I am concerned with the history of families, the very seed plot of history itself. Where modern man is most fully himself and least western, where he is most fully the creature of the new world of demiurgical science, *i.e.* in the giant housing units, the shabby tenements and the fashionable suburbs of the American city, in the New Towns of Great Britain, history has ceased to be a category of the human consciousness.

In all probability, Mr. Rahv would accuse me of equating history and its "meaning" with remembered tradition. On his own premises and on the premises of those who equate historical intelligibility with alienation from our past, the accusation is perfectly correct. The point is that I deny the premises. But before turning to a defense of that thesis, let me pose the question I think is decisive on the level of concrete political and cultural action. What values would emerge if we did succeed in finding an intrinsic intelligibility within the historical process? Where would this historical law take us? Where is it taking us now? Only a Marxist would answer that question with any degree of certainty, but if the question is posed negatively, it can be answered by everyone maintaining the primacy of the historical process: what

western values will be overcome by the "new civilization" that is supposed to be unfolding from the womb of time? If the civilization "on the further shores" of history is *really new*, if it is not western, then it will be foreign to those characteristic marks that stamp the historic West and cause it to be the thing it is. I turn again to Mr. Douglas Jerrold, this time for a description of the essence of the civilization that time is supposed to be destroying:

"Christian civilization is not just one among many; it is, and the world today provides overwhelming evidence of the fact, the only civilization built on the rights of the human personality, rights which derive from the belief in the immortality of the soul of man. . . . The doctrine of man's fall and redemption, of the equality of all men before God, of the ability and obligation to win salvation, and consequently of the sanctity, dignity and responsibility of the individual personality, these doctrines changed the face of the world. They gave a wholly new direction to human activity. . . . The 'rights' which are deducible from these doctrines are today universally recognized by all who are heirs to the traditions of Western European civilization, even by those who deny in whole or part the doctrine from which they have derived."

To the above I can only add the following supplementary comments: man free under a law, rooted, not in the vagaries of the majority principle, but in the very fabric of human personality; the free family, the free Church, the free society headed by the legitimate state: these are the marks of the Christian heritage. Deducible from them is the conviction that political freedom is an illusion unless linked to economic freedom; that power—both economic and political—should be vested, so far as possible, in the human person; that a decent society admits of the widespread distribution of property, so that private ownership sets the tone of the whole community; that personal and social peace necessitates a living continuity of the present with the

past—a continuity carried forward first of all within the family, extending naturally to the region and its traditions, and finally to the nation itself; the respect for privacy, and the perennial watch against uniformity and collectivism; above all, the supremacy of the spiritual over the temporal, of the ethical over the economic, and of the economic over the technical; the enchantment of reality.

The West honors analogy and suspects univocity; the West lies on the side of diversity against dead-levelling, quality against quantity, the valley before the world, the shrine against the cosmos.

To penetrate the heart of the world that was once Christendom, the world that is the very strength of the West today, a man must make an imaginative thrust into the very soul of that culture which is our own. Few men, if any, have captured the poetry of Christian civilization with more power and sympathy than the late Hilaire Belloc. Writing of our common patrimony, he summed up the essence of the West under two points:

"The City . . . and what we have come to call chivalry . . . these two are but aspects of one thing without a name; but that thing all Europeans possess, nor is it possible for us to conceive of a patriotism unless it be a patriotism which is chivalric. In our earliest stories, we honour men fighting odds. Our epics are of small numbers against great; humility and charity are in them, lending a kind of magic strength to the sword. The Faith did not bring in that spirit, but rather completed it. Our boundaries have always been intensely sacred to us. We are not passionate to cross them save for the sake of adventure; but we are passionate to defend them. In all that enormous story of Rome, from the dim Etrurian origins right up to the end of her thousand years, The Wall of the Town is more sacred than the limits of the Empire." ("The Men of the Desert," *Hills and the Sea*.)

These things make up the culture of the Christian West. Whether that civilization

be looked at theologically, politically, or imaginatively, it adds up to one unique Thing: "the standing grace of this world." It is a culture sealed only in the sense that it has achieved the Absolute: its freedoms are relative to nothing but God their Author. It remains an open question whether this culture was largely created by Christianity (Dawson), whether it was transfigured in the fires of Christianity (Belloc), or whether it is the human face of Christianity (Eliot). Perhaps these three distinguished defenders of the traditions of Christendom are saying the same thing in different ways. In any case I shall not attempt to deal with the issue here. However the delicate relationship between culture and faith is finally decided, the answer will never alter the massive fact: the classical-Christian tradition raised up an edifice that gave man dignity under God, and freedom within the law. If the "new conservatism" rising in the United States today is to prove effective, it must go into the market-place to defend this very patrimony. On the practical level of political and social action, should the "logic of history" demand the suppression of this heritage, then so much the worse for logic.

If commitment to our religious and cultural traditions as opposed to an allegiance or surrender to the historical "process" is the practical issue dividing thinking men in the free world today, it must be affirmed, nonetheless, that the theoretical question goes much deeper. Is there some law or necessary principle governing the flow of time? Does this law *demand*—as an imperative of the structure of reality itself—that our civilization be swept away in the stream of becoming? To a Christian the law governing time is eternal, but this eternal law englobes time itself; history is not a check signed in advance by Divine Providence; God's Will encompasses the freedom of man. We are not playing out our parts in a scenario written in advance: we are not puppets; we are Christian men, which is to say that we are free men, and that *we alone* are blessed with the certitude

of our own freedom. An appeal to the Will of God to justify the collectivist trend of the times would be a monstrous presumption and a betrayal of our own responsibility. The question of historical intelligibility must bear on a law—a finality,—immanent to the temporal order, and therefore capable of being discovered by the mind of man, and rendered an object of secular science.

The attempt of Anglo-American liberalism and continental Hegelianism and Marxism to discover an inner intelligibility to the flow of time fails both extensively and intensively: extensively, because, as Professor Eric Voegelin has pointed out in his *The New Science of Politics*, "the course of history as a whole is no object of experience . . . the meaning of history, thus, is an illusion . . . created by treating a symbol of faith as if it were a proposition concerning an object of immanent experience." The only certain conclusions we can make about history concern the past: civilizations have died; that they had to die because some law dictated their death is a deduction from a dialectical framework that can never be abstracted from the facts themselves, facts that are inextricably entangled both in the mystery of human freedom and in the unknowability of existential contingency. Intensively, the hunt for "the meaning of history" is buried in the theoretical collapse of positivism, and of that positivistic "social science" that copied the methods proper to the physical sciences. The issue needs elaboration:—

The characteristics of scientific rationalism are known well enough that it suffices merely to list them: the reduction of qualities to quantities; the patterning of the universe after the dead dynamism of the machine; the mechanization of causality; the suppression of the richness of concrete existence; the ideal of a horizontal and featureless cosmos; the postulate of an impoverished universe. The modern mind has been called "sensate." On one level the judgment is true enough; but on a deeper level modern civilization has a profound distrust and contempt for sensation, be-

cause sensation presents a universe that contradicts, point for point, the world according to the gospel of scientific rationalism. The senses yield to the human intelligence a world peopled by unique concentrations of richly endowed actualities—underived, uncontrolled, unproduced: a world of things that are simply *be-ing*, and causing, through this primitive action, the assent of the mind to their existence.

By theoretically denying, and by practically ignoring, the irreducibility of existence, modern science found it was possible to unite all things under the concept of quantity. Since quantity is the measurable, and since the measurable can be controlled, the quantitative can be predicted. This method worked so efficiently in physical science that it became the ideal of the new social science. Social science set before itself a goal that was both empirical and logical: social scientists were given the duty of reducing to logical order massive blocks of political and historical phenomena, objectively controlled by principles that would permit deterministic prediction of future events. The future course of history could be understood, so these men thought, provided the facts were rationalized. In this way the goal of total political power was given a theoretical basis.

This program required a self-conscious alienation from history as a cultural tradition within which a man situates himself. Non-commitment to a national or to a religious heritage was the ascetical price exacted for the promised mastery. It is here that the positivist dream failed, and still continues to fail. The dream of scientific historical "objectivity" perverts the very reality of the historical act: an act placed in time by a man is not a bit of refuse lodged in the consciousness of a scientist. In a very profound sense the historical act is not "objective" at all. It is an act issuing from the depths and the densities of subjective personality, proceeding forth from the center of a soul wounded with the responsibilities and the dignity of freedom. It is an act of the spirit of man, and it

cannot be reduced to the counting house, let alone to the dialectical slide-rule. To pretend that an "objective" scientific grasp of an historical act as it faces experience is the same as an understanding of that act is both an affront to common sense, and an insult to the sacredness of human personality.

The theoretical failure to come to terms with the over-all course of historical time and with the uniqueness of human freedom has been masked, because the apostles of historical determinism are really nothing but apologists for powerful forces operative within history, forces which are at odds with the main stream of Christian civilization.

To face the problem of history we must locate it historically. Throughout the long life of the West—classical, Christian, and post-Christian—three distinct attitudes have divided men on the nature of history: history is time invested with an inner law or intelligibility, which law dialectically overcomes the past in favor of the future: history is time, but time is unintelligible, and therefore we can know nothing at all but history; history is a cultural tradition enduring and progressing through time, and although time as such is unknowable, the enduring tradition itself carries whatever intelligibility man has succeeded in salvaging from the darkness. The first conception is post-Christian and contemporary as indicated; the second is Greek; the third is Roman, and this last has penetrated the entire Christian world, and is still operative in the minds of all men who have not surrendered to any dialectical philosophy of time.

Unless we go back to the Myth of the Cave, the classical locus for the Greek philosophical conception of history is the Aristotelian corpus. For Aristotle, the scientific necessity found within any thing was located in the order of universal essence—form—the measure of the mind and the source of rationality. Whatever lacked this essential necessity was hidden within the darkness of matter and the unknowableness of time: the realm of change itself. The

universal and the necessary belonged to science; the particular and the contingent to history. Eventually history was given back to time, or to those inscrutable deities—Fate and Fortune—that brooded blindly over the world, dispensing favors and wreaking vengeance, reducing to a harsh comedy the plans and schemes of men.

There is no doubt about the sincerity of Aristotle's belief in Fortune; nonetheless his reduction of history to the mythology of Fate and Fortune masked a philosophical tragedy; the inability of reason to cope with the historical fact precisely as existing and as individual. In yielding to historical knowledge the order of existence, history was banished from the vision of speculative Wisdom. It is small wonder that history tended to break down under the task, and to content itself with the modest role of the chronicler, recording facts and maintaining a prudent silence about their meaning.

When and if any Greek historian *did* attempt to find some meaning within historical time, he was faced with the intolerable tension between the free act of a human being faced over against a blind nature controlled by necessary and universal laws. The laws were understandable by science; the free historical act, as well as the full course of time, blocked rational penetration. Every time a Greek historian rationalized this dual mystery, he dissolved human freedom within the order of nature and her laws: a nature controlled, disciplined, wheeled about cyclically, spinning forever in a circle that was really a chain. It was better to let Fortune alone, and exclude her from the order of science. To admit her to the Temple of Athene, as did Herodotus, was to destroy human freedom by reducing liberty to the laws of nature: "That which is destined to come to pass as a consequence of divine activity it is impossible to avert. . . . Of all the sorrows which afflict mankind, the bitterest is this, that one should have consciousness of much, but control over nothing." (Herodotus, ix, 16.)

Aristotle's theory of history escaped this bleak pessimism because he refused to con-

sider history intelligible. His refusal saved the unpredictability of the free historical act, but man's freedom was saved only because Aristotle failed to come to grips with history on its own terms. All knowledge began in the sensation of existing things, but scientific causal certainty was achieved only when the concrete individuality of the existing thing was left aside. Even poetry was closer to science than was history, because poetry looked to the universal through a particular that mirrored essential perfections. "Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singulars." (*Poetics*, 1451a36-1451b8.)

Despite the recognition of the philosopher's duty to society, salvation for the Greek mind was achieved only by a flight from time, contingency, the darkness of matter, and the world of opinion. Human perfection was not found within the historical order (although man had a duty to that order), nor could history give to men a meaning to be found only in those eternal essences that singular things can but shadow forth, seducing the mind into the kingdom of the abstract—a kingdom beyond existence. The Good of Plato and the One of Plotinus are the loftiest expressions of a spirit that hungered for release from the prison of history; this is the same spirit that carved forever an ideal of serenity and peace, universality and beauty, unspoiled by the vagaries of time and matter. The soul of Hellenic Greece can be seen at its best by contemplating that sculpture that remains to this day a marvel and a testimony to the classical spirit. The Greeks—at the apex of their glory—never painted men: they sculptured Man.

It is not accurate to think of Plato and Plotinus leaving the world to an Aristotle who kept his feet resolutely on the ground. The Greek philosophical spirit was all of one piece. For Aristotle, history serves political theory. Political theory ministers to ethics. Ethics teaches that the good life must be sought in the highest part of man.

The highest part of man is the soul. The highest part of the soul is the intellect. The highest act of the intellect is the act of philosophical contemplation in which the Truth is known purely and simply for itself. Among the order of contemplative acts there is one which is the end of all the others, and this act is the end of man, whose end is the end of the universe. This is the act of philosophical contemplation, Wisdom, the understanding of the First Cause of all things in the order of finality. This First Cause is the perfection of Thought thinking Itself. Contingency and time and the things that pass may never enter the temple of the eternal, a god too good for providence, a god who neither creates the order of time, nor knows the things that are. Man's highest end is the contemplation and the imitation of this Pure Intelligibility. Human life would be very good indeed were there no history to know. History is the tragedy of human existence.

I am convinced that this was the essential attitude of Greek philosophy toward history. That some of the Greek historians flirted with the temptation to reduce history to science can be attributed, perhaps, to the perennial need man feels to organize the concrete richness of historical existence into a rational pattern. Among all such experiments, that of Polybius is crucial for an understanding of the profound abyss separating the Romans from the Greek philosophers on the question of history and its meaning.

The thought of Polybius wavers between historical description and historical theorizing, and his analysis of the facts of the Roman constitution could never be made to fit his own variation of the "science of history." Borrowing heavily from the political theories of Plato and Aristotle, Polybius constructed an historical science his masters would have rejected with contempt. The traditional doctrine of the three good forms of government and their three evil opposites, worked out as logical possibilities by the early philosophers, appeared

to Polybius to be something of greater than merely speculative import. The six forms were ordered in historical time in such a fashion that one kind of government necessarily followed another, until the cycle, now completed, began anew. Kingship degenerated into tyranny; tyranny was overcome by aristocracy; aristocracy corrupted into oligarchy; oligarchy gave way to democracy; democracy sank back into mob rule; mob rule was suppressed by monarchy, and thus the cycle commenced to wheel about once again. For Polybius, the cycle was neither a shrewd guess, nor was a highly likely possibility, nor was it a logical deduction from some abstract science of ethics. It was an historical fact that could be understood rationally because it partook of the principle of necessity; the law was as necessary as the laws governing the angles of a triangle. Polybius concluded his analysis with a declaration of independence for history: "Such is the cycle of political revolution, the course appointed by nature in which constitutions change, disappear, and finally return to the point from which they started" (Book VI, 9.10). The cycle was "appointed by nature." This is the key: for the Greeks, "nature" was always the order of law and necessity. If history had been subsumed under the order of nature, history had finally become a science. Even the Roman Republic, then at the zenith of its glory and power (so thought Polybius) was destined nonetheless to undergo a "natural decline" and thus "change to its contrary" (9.14).

But the theory of cycles that made history a science could not be made to fit the history of the Roman people. No matter how hard Polybius tried, he never really succeeded in pressing Rome into his own Procrustean bed.

The Roman Constitution broke the cycle. By combining the three possible good forms of government, Rome had overcome the supposed "natural" necessity of a state's decline into its logical opposite. The Roman Constitution was an instrument that was a tension created by the intersection of mon-

archy, aristocracy, and democracy. Since the very essence of this state was the tension itself, Rome transcended each of the three forms taken separately. Hence Rome escaped the very real dangers inherent to any single unmixed form of government—the dangers that had engendered the theory of the cycle. The Roman consuls together formed a political instrument monarchical in structure; the Senate, composed as it was of the nobility of the City, was by nature aristocratic; the *comitium* represented the people acting and voting in a body, and was thus essentially democratic. The evils germane to any one of the three governing arms were checked by the powers of the other two. "It was impossible even for a native to pronounce with certainty whether the whole system was aristocratic, democratic, or monarchical" (VI, 11.11). The system of "checks and balances" keeping any one part of the constitution from dominating the others and thus resuming the cycle, forced Polybius to conclude that the Roman State was sufficiently powerful and elastic to meet all emergencies; possessed of powers adequate for the suppression of abuses, the "mixed" state provided the proper equilibrium for continued political existence. The Romans broke the cycle, not by inventing new political forms, but by synthesizing the old forms recognized and tried by the Greeks. In so doing, the Romans implicitly accepted the Greek political theory concerning the six possible forms of government, but the Romans succeeded in locating the three good forms *simultaneously* in time. Abuses inherent to any good governing arm did not necessarily lead to an opposite evil order, itself destined to give way in time to the contrary good order.

Behind the Roman mind on this issue reposed an implicit rejection of the whole Greek attitude toward time and history. Polybius understood this on the level of politics. There is no evidence that he or any other Greek understood its full profundity: a rejection implying a new conception of historical existence.

For the Greeks, the problem of history was the problem of time. If time was unintelligible (Plato and Aristotle), history was unintelligible. If time was intelligible (Herodotus and Polybius), history was intelligible. For the Romans, the problem of history was the nature and the meaning of tradition. Accepting the philosophers' doctrine of the unknowability of time, the Romans rejected their theory that time was history. Although the historical act is an act placed in time, posed between two hypothetical eternities, destined never to be repeated, man achieves himself historically by overcoming the exigencies of time through perpetuating the order of law and virtue in a tradition transcending death itself. This is the meaning of the Roman Constitution. Whether it be a law or not, time would seem to dictate the death of every cultural order, but only if this cultural order and the state representing it be conceived of as part of the physical cosmos. Sink back into nature, and man suffers the fate of all things; rise out of nature, and man can perpetuate his inheritance. By locking the three types of government into one, the Romans hoped to raise political and corporate life above the flow of natural life. Rome would become itself by surmounting the law of death.

The late Professor Collingwood has noted what I choose to call the dramatic quality of Roman historical writing. The imagery of Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius was dramatic—the imagery of the theatre. Rome was talked of as though she were a person, a Character: Rome was a she: a heroine. Roma steps, mature and fully clad, into the arena of history as though she had just come on stage from behind a backdrop. She plays the leading role, and if we push the figure a bit, we might say she soon steals the show. Rome marches through history from the burning of Troy to the burning of Carthage, but she comes through unharmed and erect. Menaced by wars, by age and decay, she emerges from out of the chaos and dust of the centuries, triumphant, and herself. Aeneas carries father Anchises

out of burning Troy, and the saving of the household gods assures the perpetuation of the fatherland. From the fabled age of Romulus, and even beyond to the "glory of the Antonines," Rome is conceived by the Latins as though she were some one Thing, carried forward by a people whose very immortality is bound up inextricably with the destiny of the City. The modern man has met history when he has changed with the times; the Roman felt he had met history when he had mastered the times. History wasn't the times; history was the City of Man.

Collingwood and others have complained about what they call this "substantialist" or "static" theory of history permeating the Roman mind. Rome failed, so goes the complaint, to grasp the nature of the historical process; Rome never understood the dynamism inherent to history. When a Roman acted, Spengler once wrote, he acted as though the full brunt of all the forces of history went into his present decision; when a Roman acted, wrote Ortega y Gasset, he clothed himself, not only in the virtues, but in the garb of his ancestors. This attitude of mind has been condemned as "static," but the complaint falls to pieces when we face the overwhelming truth that this "failure" made the western world. Christian Rome succeeded, as Jerrold points out, not because of the fall of the Empire, but in spite of it. The staying power of the Roman spirit was rooted deeply in the conviction that if a man builds, he builds against the ravages of time, or he simply does not build at all. To have told a Roman that he was part of a dialectic soon to overcome his "moment" in history, would have been as absurd as it is to ask anybody to build a house *in order that it might collapse*; true enough, the house may collapse; true enough, it probably will, but if it gets built at all, it goes up because a man feels he is, in some measure, the master of time. The dialectical conception of history, no matter how good it looks on paper, is fundamentally at odds with common sense, and if the Greek heritage of science and

ethics is enshrined in the West today, it is because the Romans were essentially a practical people, who refused to be seduced into an historical determinism by the vagaries of a pseudo-metaphysics.

The poetry of Rome points to something deeper than myth; it points to the conviction that human society, both familial and corporate, is a spiritual unity, linking together all generations. For this tradition of the comradeship of all men—be they dead, living, or yet to come—for this tradition to exist, it must, by definition, resist the rhythm of generation and corruption intrinsic to nature.

The dramatic imagery of the Roman poets and historians did not fade away in the dust and confusion of the centuries dividing the Empire from the high Middle Ages. The conception endured and is the heritage of the entire western world. It is by no means so antiquated or provincial as a number of academicians might imagine. When a twentieth-century American, unencumbered by the baggage of what has become a latter-day scholasticism, looks for a symbol of the history of his country, he does not choose some "dynamic" or "static" imagery from the electrician's trade. He draws a picture of Uncle Sam. So too the Englishman has his John Bull, and the citizen of the old Germanies had his *alter Michael*. If the historical symbol was taken from physical nature, as the Scots took the thistle and the Frenchmen of the old regime took the *fleur de lis*, the symbol was stylized and thus humanized. All the black and gold riot of heraldry emblazoning our western past suggests an attitude toward history fundamentally Roman. History was thought to belong, neither to nature nor to dialectical laws, but to an order essentially capable of transcending the ravages of time because it partook of the dignity of spirit. Rome brought in our common patrimony of civic loyalty, and it was not loyalty to any "powerhouse of change producing the future."

This attitude, an historical fact itself, is so imposing that it cannot be brushed aside

as mere folk-lore. Society was looked upon as a circle of light incarnating traditions of living and dying inherited from the past, and destined to be projected into the future. Society was not one dimensional: it included the past, and looked toward the future. History was what added depth and being to what would otherwise have been a mosaic of mechanical and abstract principles, devoid of human associations, altogether lacking in that civic poetry without which patriotism can never flourish. Men looked back with gratitude to those from whom they had inherited, and they looked forward with dedication to those to whom they would give. Committed to a patrimony whose very being was enshrined in history, history was a gift received and an inheritance transmitted. This sense of history as a corporate Thing, an unfinished story, within which the existing person finds himself, ran through all arteries of life: the farm, the estate, the town, the city, the region, the nation, the West itself. Nor did such a conception prevent progress; if progress be conceived as a flowering from roots reaching back into history, then the condition of progress is the perpetuation of the heritage of the past. The above, of course, is a figure for a reality that is essentially spiritual, and the spiritual advances, not by destroying itself, but by becoming itself.

It is with Rome, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out, that the reality of tradition entered for the first time into the western consciousness. History was no more the order of sheer mobility and unintelligibility. What lay beyond the City and the Imperial Order was the chaos of barbarism: the barbarism of men who had not yet fully entered into history. The citizen did not identify his destiny with the cosmic order, nor did he consider himself the representative of a supposed law of nature as did the oriental masses of the Eastern Empires, as do most primitive people today, and as do all intellectuals touched by the spirit of Hegel and Marx.

To put the issue precisely, let us say that

the Greek philosophical discoveries concerning the nature of man, the good life, and the rule of law, would have remained largely ineffective had they not been linked with the Roman sense of tradition. In order for that tradition to endure, the men within the community had to become committed to the tradition. This dedication extended to the fathers who gave the law, as well as to the law itself. In order to *be* at all, an absolute must become a family heirloom. The famous Roman *pietas* was the instrument perpetuating the classical mind.

Of course this is reading history after the fact. The Roman sense of historical tradition was not a philosophical deduction; it was a psychological necessity to a nation of peasants. The family is knit together by blood and a common land turned over by hands that have received their patrimony from a line of ancestors stretching back to the youth of the race. The dusk falls on the back of each man as he retreats down the road of time; but as he has received from the past, so has he given to the future; and as they lived in him, so shall he live in them. And this is promised him by the household gods, and even when he no longer believes in his gods, he keeps them, because they are the badge of his service, and the pledge of his immortality.

This immortality was corporate and political: *fatum* perpetuated by *labor* and *pietas*. Essentially incomplete, the Roman vision subordinated the individual to the community. The ideal of the common good at the expense of personal perfection was pagan, and it was corrected and transcended by the Christian emphasis on the unique dignity of the human person. The doctrine of the Incarnation shattered the course of history once and for all, and the debt owed time was paid by Eternity. This redemption has always filled the West with a sense of awe before the human person, because he is an absolute: destined for beatitude with God, he comes into his eternity, while still a wayfarer within a world that passes.

These truths may not be believed by many today, and indeed the destruction of

Pelagianism by orthodoxy attested to the Christian conviction that they cannot be believed without the grace of God. But if any man—be he Christian or not—does not see in them the source of his freedoms, he is without any sense of history. These Christian rights make up the legal traditions of the West, and they inform the rich and diverse national traditions subsisting within the lands penetrated by the cross and by the mitre. They bring me back to where I began. Not long ago a man wrote that it was “natural enough that liberals, with their faith in reason, should today accept science and its method as the highest development of mind. It is just as natural that conservatives, with their faith in tradition and precedent, should emphasize history and law” (Ralph Gilbert Ross, “The Campaign Against Liberalism, Cont.” *Partisan Review*, Sept.-Oct., 1953.) I forgo comment on the remarks concerning science: I trust I have made my attitude on

that score clear enough. I am concerned here with the supposed conservative emphasis on history and law. I should imagine *all* men of letters genuinely concerned about safeguarding personal rights would take a lively interest in conserving the traditions of freedom and decency that are the patrimony of the West. If they do, I suggest they drop their futile search for an inner “meaning to history” which could only result in a still further academic betrayal of our heritage. I invite them to see history, not as a “powerhouse of change which destroys . . . tradition in producing the future,” but as the full inheritance of civilization to which we all owe a sacred allegiance. Still further, I invite them to stop talking about “the open society,” the City without walls, prostrate before the barbarian flood. Finally, I invite them to join us in defending the citadel. Should they do, they may recover, not only the poetry of limits, but the sense of chivalry.