Tradition of the Individual

Milton Hindus

IF TRADITION is defined as Edmund Burke's avowed aim of making the experience of the past a living force upon the present, it is easy to see why the word should raise the hackles of an independent-minded American and inspire in him an instantaneous and almost instinctive aversion. It goes against his grain and rubs him the wrong way, since it reminds him of what he would rather forget: that, as a social animal, he has been entered willy-nilly into the human compact that has always existed between the generations that have preceded him, the one to which he himself belongs, and those which are destined to succeed him.

The whole effort of the American—whatever his origin—is directed towards the fashioning of his own persona. Scott Fitzgerald's Gatsby was typical in that he had sprung from his own Platonic conception of himself. He did not need Schopenhauer to inform him that "nations are mere abstractions; the individual alone is truly real." His ancestor appears to him to have been never more than half a ghost and half a creature of hope that was the substance of things unseen.

Nothing has been more natural for the American boy than to identify with Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn in his rejection of settled civilization and in his restless search for his own identity in the frontier territory beyond its pale. T. S. Eliot could not have been more untypically American than in his early and lasting concern with tradition and in his quest for it away from the frontier where he had been born and back toward the Europe from which his ancestors had escaped. His presumable mentor in this respect, Irving Babbitt, was much more profoundly American, even if he remained something of a spiritual expatriate as well. For his striving, like Walt Whitman's (as he would have been sorry to hear), was not toward Europe but to something like world citizenship. Not the kind of world citizenship that is a progressive's romantic or Utopian dream but a world citizenship that allowed imaginative penetration of the most distant past of mankind in which he might be enrolled in the company of Socrates, the Buddha, and Confucius.

If piety, as Santayana has suggested, is not reversion to but reverence for the sources of our being, then perhaps America is the most impious of all countries upon historical record. Yet all this rebelliousness, contempt for, and condescension to the past (which Carl Sandburg once equated with "a bucket of ashes") is likely in time itself to pass away. A sign of its departure may be read in the rejection of the superficial ideals of contemporaneity and assimilation implic-

it in Israel Zangwill's image of America as a melting-pot (in the popular melodrama of that name once publicly hailed in Washington by Theodore Roosevelt as "a great play"). Of course, this has been followed by an equally silly extreme in what is described as a search for "roots" and the succeeding menace of multiculturalism that is unfortunately still with us. But these objectionable phenomena are perhaps mere growing pains in the process of developing a more mature and balanced point of view about the past, befitting a great and influential civilization.

Casting my mind back over some six decades to the early 1930s, I become aware of certain patterns in those troubled years as I never could be while living through them and attempting to emerge from my teens into an area of peace and stability. That this problem necessarily involved ideas, I was dimly aware, but I was hampered by a very limited notion of where I was to look for them. It is only now, in retrospect long afterwards, that the contours of the terrain, then obscured by clouds of contemporaneity, come out clearly into view. While I was only too keenly conscious of the conflicts raging between various sects of Marxists, I missed the more important battle between Marxists of all persuasions and the American Humanists, or, to put a more personal face upon these abstractions, between two of those who should have been my revered seniors, whom I did not begin to read till later on, though their influence was all around me unknowingly in the climate of the time. The first was Edmund Wilson, twenty-one years older than I was, the second Paul Elmer More, thirty-one years older than Wilson.

It is only recently that I have been refreshing my memory of one of More's New Shelburne Essays—the one on Marcel Proust—which I had missed when it made its initial appearance in *The American Review* in April 1933. It was perhaps the last long essay of More's read by his friend Irving Babbitt, as he lay dying that year. "Proust: The Two Ways" is a kind of belated response to Wilson's cruel "Notes on Babbitt and More," published in C. Hartley Grattan's *Critique of Humanism* in 1930. The thirty-five year old Wilson had engaged his almost septuagenarian adversaries on their own classical ground of the ancient Greek classics, notably Sophocles. More responded by taking on the younger generation on the subject of one of the most fashionable French modern authors, who had recently been a major figure in Wilson's book *Axel's Castle* (1931). The rudeness of Wilson's tone to the venerable Humanists may have been inspired by Marx and Lenin, whom he was also studying at the time. More did not answer in kind but overwhelmed his antagonist with courtesy.

As I was to discover a few years later, when I came to read Proust's text for myself, More, despite his advanced age and distaste for modern authors, had labored to some purpose in mastering that text. He was, if anything, too deferential to the interpretation of Proust by a younger and more enthusiastic generation, which included Edmund Wilson. I cannot help wishing—vainly—that he might have lived long enough to have read some of my own corrections, years later, of those interpretations. If More had let himself be guided more confidently by his own literary instincts, he may have discovered those conservative and moral aspects of Proust, the existence of which he only vaguely suspected and was puzzled by.

My own introduction to Proust did not occur by way of the criticism of either Wilson or More. My approach was more direct, and it was due to the fact that, in my neighborhood library, he was an unpopular and neglected author. This aroused my sympathetic curiosity, but the shock that awaited me could not

have been greater than it was for any Humanist. Not knowing the order in which the various titles by him were to be read, I stumbled, by a sort of reverse serendipity, upon the first forty-page essay which introduces the segment to which he had affixed the names of Sodom and Gomorrah, the infamous biblical "Cities of the Plain" that fixed the reader's attention balefully upon the phenomenon More delicately describes as "the anomalous passions" of homosexuality and lesbianism. When, after some unbelief, I grasped clearly what he was writing about, something that in my sheltered Jewish upbringing I had never been confronted with before, I became literally sick to my stomach. What kept me reading on was not only the power of the writer or the beauty of his style, though these were considerable, but my sense that the revulsion I felt at the unsavory subject was somehow shared by the writer himself. This is something that not all readers have grasped; I find little evidence in *Axel's Castle* that Wilson did. But More clearly understood and pointed it out:

> Proust's attitude towards this topic is curious and, it must be admitted, not consistent. On the one hand, it evidently arouses in him an instinctive feeling of indignation, connected with a residue of traditional morality from which he has not entirely liberated himself. It is even here and there castigated as a vice—whatever a vice may be to a professed amoralist—and he has not reached the stage of frank justification held by a Gide. He often speaks of it as a left-over from an outworn civilization, and as a curse by which a few abnormal persons are plagued.

Unfortunately, as More's dangling syntax suggests, this was only a passing thought which he did not care to develop or explore, and he soon falls back into the conventional misreading of Proust as a moral nihilist and a chronicler of what Wilson termed "the Heartbreak House of bourgeois civilization." Had More trusted his own perceptions, he might have discovered that Proust did not deserve his strictures against decadent authors who "divorce art from life by exorcising the phantom of conscience." Such a failure deserves the criticism of Stephen Tanner who observes "that in his limited and rather quaint perception of Dostoyevsky we can see one of More's significant limitations. As perceptive as he was in getting at the ethical core of literature, he was blind to the merits (and these merits were often moral) of most modern writers."

Had More explored more deeply the contrast between Proust and Gide, he might have recognized the important distinction between the aggressive, flaunting, or proselytizing homosexual advocate who has no hesitation in "outing" those he calls hypocrites—because he is convinced that his preference is not only natural but a sign of spiritual election—and the more reserved, retiring, and shamefaced members of the fraternity, like Whitman, who not only never confessed his taste but also actively denied it, covering his tracks with claims of heterosexual experiences and multiple paternity; or Proust, who thought his preference "an incurable malady" for which he was prepared at most to claim the compassion, charity, and indulgence due to the ill (certainly no reason to deprive them of their legitimate civic rights); or Plato, who denounced it in his late work *Laws* as an unnatural practice demoralizing to those Greek cities that had adopted it and hardly tolerable in an ideal or healthy society.

But Proust's depiction of his sensational subject, which in itself gave offense to those who preferred that it should continue to be passed over in silence even though the manner in which he depicted it, as he had anticipated, gave offense to homosexuals themselves, is only one example of an attitude which

sustained his description of his own work when he submitted it to the *Nouvelle revue française* (which rejected it) as one that was characterized by "a metaphysical and moral outlook." Proust was as morally sensitive as those great Victorians, like John Ruskin, whom he translated and took as a model. In fact, without quite toppling, he trembled on the very edge of philosophical and religious affirmation of a higher order of reality and of immortality to reward the deserving and punish transgressors. One of the best known and latest of his avowals occurs in a passage of *The Captive* (1913-1927):

> Everything is arranged in this life as though we entered it carrying the burden of obligations contracted in a former life. All these obligations which have not their sanction in our present life seem to belong to a different world, founded upon kindness, scrupulosity, self-sacrifice; a world entirely different from this, which we leave in order to be born into this world, before perhaps returning to the other to live once again beneath the sway of those unknown laws which we have obeyed because we bore their precepts in our hearts, knowing not whose hand had traced them there—those laws to which every profound work of the intellect brings us nearer and which are invisible only—and still—to fools.

The rhetoric here dovetails with that of the passages of quasi-religious imagery describing the death of the great writer Bergotte, whose final thoughts are self-reproach for not being as conscientiously pure in his devotion to his art as the painter Vermeer, at an exhibition of whose works he suffers a fatal heart attack: "They buried him, but all through the night of mourning, in the lighted windows, his books arranged three by three kept watch like angels with outspread wings and seemed, for him who was no more, the symbol of his resurrection."

More shows a fine understanding of the Proustian vision of the world when he suggests an analogy between it and a passage in Marcus Aurelius: "All things are in flux; thou thyself art undergoing a perpetual transformation and, in some sort, decay, as is the whole universe." But More does not sufficiently realize something which is emphasized in my own book *The Proustian Vision* (1954): "It is probably his very notion of the instability of social groups as well as of the individual personality that makes Proust value so highly a principled consistency of conduct and to ground this consistency upon the secure base of habit." From the very opening scenes of the book, the narrator's mother and grandmother, his exemplars of all goodness, strive to strengthen his willpower by a steadfast adherence to a right plan and principle of discipline, while the less sensitive father treats him more whimsically and undercuts the discipline they seek to impose. His method is a mixture of mysterious and contradictory injunctions and indulgences, either too lenient or too harsh, the result of which is to spoil and ruin the willpower and character of the child, who grows up to let himself be governed by transports of emotion, which he labels unreliable "intermittences of the heart." Thus, he insensibly slips away from the fixed rules, law, principle, which his beloved maternal parents—in defiance of the stereotypical role of their sex—had striven to inculcate, and his authoritative paternal guide sought unwittingly to destroy:

> For Proust, as for Aristotle, the secure base of the moral life is in habit. A bad man is a man of bad habits, and though he may be moved on occasion to be good, his "intermittences of the heart" are not to be relied on. The human heart, of which Proust is so consummate an analyst, is anarchic in its motions. It is not to be trusted. The real tragedy of most of the characters of the book, including the narrator's own, is that they do not realize this, or realize it too late, or are unable to act on their realization of it.

In the end, Proust appears to me to have been an individualist *à outrance*, who spent a lifetime working his way back to the affirmations of his Hebraic and Christian ancestors. Formerly, he belonged, like his father, to the Catholic Church, which baptized him at birth and buried him at his death, but he found most sympathetic his unconverted Jewish mother and he retained a filial feeling for all his Jewish ancestors, whose graves he was the only one in his family to visit regularly each year. He is best described, I think, as a moral rentier as well as a financial one, who lived off inherited ethical as well as other capital.

It is hardly surprising that my first long published article, "Proust and Society," appeared in the pages of *The New Republic* in 1941. It was, in large part, a refutation of the view of Proust propounded by Edmund Wilson in *Axel's Castle*. I indicated that Proust was the very opposite of a collectivist and that, by speaking of a long line of Princesses de Guermantes in the future, he communicated his conviction that the aristocratic society he depicted was destined to survive in its basic lineaments against all leveling ideologies, because it suited better with the facts of human nature. It is no accident that he went out of his way in his last volume to express his sympathy for the victims of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, especially the dispossessed nobility who were turning up in Paris during the last years of Proust's life. Proust was the sort of man who prided himself upon having been among the first of the Dreyfusards (in opposition to his own father) but was turned by the indiscriminate anti-clerical reaction that followed into a defender of the Church.

At the same time as I was setting the record straight about Proust, I was also turning away completely from all the sects of Marxism-Leninism, which were busily defending the indefensible action of Stalin's Russia, which, after making a deal with Hitler's Germany, had carved up Poland and was making war upon 3,000,000 Finns, who were supposed to be threatening 180,000,000 Russians. These various phenomena did not appear to be related at the time, but in retrospect I see that they are.

The individualism of Proust helped prepare me for the Humanism of Irving Babbitt. Coincidentally, both drew the epigraphs of their initial books from the pages of Emerson. All three weaned me from the collectivist panaceas of the twentieth century. I learned to appreciate Hayek's assertion that democracy's value is merely instrumental, as a means to an end, while individual liberty is an end in itself. Proust's independence certainly contributed to making him the modern writer unsurpassed in arguing for tolerance towards the infinite varieties of mankind and in holding up for the admiration of his readers qualities such as charity, justice, benevolence, and sensitivity.

His reverence for the best of what his ancestors have contributed to his development is contagious. The burden of obligations which he speaks of is the one fortunately bestowed upon him by the generations that went before him. Thus, he prepares us to partake of what Burke calls the compact of eternal society. After fifty years, I appreciate more than ever the fact that Proust was never one of those irresponsibles whom Plato would have excluded from his Republic.