

Tradition and the Mechanical Eden

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IT IS TEMPTING to imagine tradition and contemporary life like two unequal blocks, one a huge monolith, the other a thin layer laid on the first but not quite of the same material. Or we may see in tradition a superimposition of (past) "modernities," and in contemporary time we may see the most recent of the series, already superseded by the next one, called perhaps post-modernity. We may obtain yet another spatial and temporal concept if we consult former generations—through their memories, literature, arts, and law—whether they too believed they were living through a monumental change from their tradition to their modernity. Was the passage from Greco-Roman paganism to Christianity, from Romanesque to Gothic building styles, from kingship to revolution and republic, as momentous, as traumatic, in today's parlance, as the change-over from horsedrawn carriage to steamship, then to jetplane and spaceship, and the corresponding ways of life?

The testimony of former generations does not signal any brutal transformation of sensibilities; it seems the permanence of nature and the structural constants of life—family, community, hierarchy, the sacred and the profane—gave tradition a self-assurance that easily assimilated the sporadic fragments of modernity. Nor do we have documents to

suggest a feeling of increased rapidity, except by those who first boarded the train or the car. Drama, whether of Sophocles or of Shakespeare, had the same internal rhythm, set and measured by rules, and legal systems were structured according to the ageless perception of class differences, magnitude of the crime, innocence or guilt. In short, only with our modernity do we find that modernity has become not a mere transformation balanced by permanences, but a new and willed creation, a drastic separation from tradition, an attitude of ignorance and contempt *vis-à-vis* the past. Our modernity is not only a contentment with and glorification of the present, but also a project of divesting the past of significance, filing it away as opaque and dead, in fact as something laughable, naive, embarrassingly *passé*.

Since examples abound everywhere, let us take them from various areas. Why issue catechisms, ask a number of theologians of the Roman Catholic Church, why not the free flight of faith? Why should young artists study and draw the human body, asks the board of judges of the National Endowment of the Arts, when such an exercise humiliates their right to independent creation? Why the family? asks Joseph Fernandez, former superintendent of schools in New York City, why not teach children that some have "two

mommies" who share one bed, others "a father with a male roommate"? Why should a Bulgarian "artist," Christo, not wrap the Reichstag building in Berlin, after he had wrapped the Pont Neuf in fifty thousand meters of silverpaper, and thus produce a work of art? Why should universities teach about decrepit old civilizations, why not grant exclusive curricular rights to politically correct discourse and genderless speech and writing? Thus, many hold, things stand on their heads: the length of tradition does not prevent it from becoming fragmented and dispensable in retrospect; modernity, in turn, has for it its present, thus the evidence of its superiority. In sum, the gap between tradition and contemporary life intimidates the keepers of the first; while modernity, like Pascal's infinite universe, is not even aware that it crushes them.

We may now ask the pertinent question: Just how modern is contemporary life which believes it has so completely isolated itself from tradition that a meta-historic new has now begun, a cultural Big Bang, another cosmos? Let us state the obvious, something that our contemporaries rarely allow to be brought to their attention: We live in a machine world—in mechanized homes, elevators, subways, automobiles, and airplanes; our businesses and banks are run by mechanized communication systems; we eat and heat with the help of mechanisms, learn languages in laboratories, receive packaged and televised news and entertainment, partake in packaged culture from museum to zoo, read and study microfilms, walk and jog with a machine attached to the ears, stay during vacations in box-like hotels with rooms air-conditioned, decontaminated, denicotinized. The corollary of this mechanization is that we hardly visit anything but a packaged nature (parks, golf courses, recreation centers, reservations), are hardly ever in contact with live animals.

During our travels for business or leisure, the smells, the tastes, the tactile sensations are hardly allowed to intrude upon us. The roads or air-routes that our vehicles follow have nothing to do with self-cleared or animal-cleared paths; they are programmed by traffic lights and air controllers directed by yet other machines. The skyline of our home-and-work town reproduces the contours of a gigantic machine, its geometrical shapes and volumes turn the impression into that of an industrial exhibit, especially at night when the lights emphasize the glitter of the machine and its polished parts.

As Jean Brun writes, modernity's commandments may be summed up in the idea that man must manufacture himself according to a rational program, as an engineer of his own self. This is then, the philosopher adds, what is today called freedom and autonomy. As this statement suggests, modernity does not stop at our environment, it undertakes to shape us biologically at birth, to shape and to replace our organs, and will soon select our approved character traits. What remains of "internal life" is handled by myriad experts, therapists, analysts, counselors, and lawyers, all of them looking for the standard human product and steering us in the direction of robots.

The noteworthy thing is the smoothness with which Western man has accommodated his refashioned self, not noticing the epochal transformations which have first displaced him from the center of creation, then from the focus of the solar system, and finally from the core of his own identity. The reason for this relative neglect may be that tradition has kept little secret lines open to man's deepest self. The Soviet commissar, the astronaut, and the deconstructionist philosopher go home after work to their furniture, paintings, sentimental objects; they speak the language of everyday, have tradition-shaped ambitions for their children, read books and like

good food. In other words, we live two lives. In private, many attitudes, feelings, and gut reactions take place according to the old model. We are even told, disapprovingly, that one half of our brain is responsible for our aggressiveness and passions, and that the other half is the location of intelligence, peaceful motives, rational judgment. The objective of science is to abolish, or at least to channel, the first, and let us acquire domination by the second. Arthur Koestler, and in their own way, B.F. Skinner, Ashley Montague, Irenaeus Eibesfeld, Edward O. Wilson, rush mankind toward the ideal of a mechanically produced character change. They contribute, together with the geneticist, the technocrat, the biomanipulator, to life's anti-traditional dimension and direction.

We live largely according to traditional precepts, although increasingly with a bad conscience as surviving members of a species sentenced to die out like dinosaurs and displaced mammals, or at best like archaic tribes clashing with civilization. At practically every turn, we tend to adopt the modernist view, like timid spokesmen of tradition in whose mouths tradition has become just another slogan, an object of a rear-guard skirmish, the debris of the evolutionary process. As Teilhard de Chardin wrote, the cosmic danger is that many of us miss the train of biological/moral progress. And the inevitable Nietzsche said that we have killed God, by which he meant old-fashioned metaphysics—and by which Freud meant the Tribal Father. The normal insertion of tradition in contemporary life—normal, that is, if we did not confront modernism as an ideology—is thus vastly counter-balanced by an artificially constructed intellectual world which has been exponentially growing since Bacon and Descartes. By now this world casts its shadow on generations like the savants' Laputa on regions it flies over in *Gulliver's Travels*. The second

reality thus constructed has taken over salient aspects of contemporary life: in pedagogy, in all the arts, in family structure, in moral discourse.

Our predicament is as follows: Impinging on every point of life, politics, culture, and personal conduct, there is a mechanically constructed superstructure which gives systematically the lie to our intellectual and moral foundations, that is, to our tradition. Foundation is the key word here because modernism denies divine and human nature, the permanent ontological structure, the world of constants and set meanings. The history of modern philosophy consists of a succession of theories each of which aims at proving the rootlessness, indeed, the non-existence, of man, his coherent mind, his intelligence of things and other human beings, and the validity of institutions, moral codes, purposeful behavior. As always, art replicates best this nihilism with the abolition of man in painting, literature and architecture. Philosophy, too, does its part by shifting from the criterion of truth to the criterion of linguistic and grammatical consensus. Since there is no truth, writes Jacques Lenoble, "the idea of truth as the correspondence of intellect and its objects loses its legitimacy, and no discourse may pretend to say the universal, that is, the valid."¹ Only interpretations remain, but in democratic/pluralist societies, adds our philosopher from Louvain, every interpretation is a subjective statement; we must seek the consensus of the community of interpreters. Every subjective statement, and as we saw there are no others, is valid only from the angle of the person who enunciates it.

The terrible novelty of our modernism, terrible if compared with former "modernisms," is its basic negation of reality for which it substitutes a network of arbitrary denials. Depending on this or that philosophical school, these denials appear under the label of phenomenolo-

gy, hermeneutics, structuralism, atheistic existentialism, deconstructionism, but all cast the veil of radical doubt and non-existence—exactly the Hindu veil of Maya—on all judgments and their expression. Karl Marx was only one initiator of this philosophy of unmasking: man's actions are mere cover-ups for his hidden interests, and the words which are nothing but conventional signs follow this double life of the actions. This is also the philosophical impact of Freud's system: human actions, gestures, dreams, and slips of the tongue are cover-ups for the sexual libido. Once we are on this road, we may, of course, doubt the cover-up and inquire why this particular cover-up, or mask, why not another. The game continues without any conclusion other than what the "father of structuralism," Claude Levi-Strauss, drew: man is without meaning, he is a physico-chemical compound, naked.

This modernism does not add to our fund of culture a new style, or a new meditation, but reduces it to interpretations. What we call contemporary life is assaulted in its essence: the positing of values based on truth, their continuity and renewal. True, modernism manifests itself as a philosophy to end all philosophies; nevertheless, there is no doubt that such a distancing — we may call it "alienation"—from life and reality could become influential in an age of mechanization in which the real is an object of denial, derision, suspicion, doubt.² When the human being becomes philosophically expendable in favor of a huge and everpresent network of machines and mechanistic coordinates, it is no wonder that his fragility is transcribed in paintings like Picasso's and Dali's, in novels like Kafka's, in cities turned into gigantic office buildings. As contemporary man learns to distrust himself, he turns to the computer, the recording machine, television, statistics, publicity, and propaganda, that is, to various versions of the

machine. When, too, he finds that those whom he has taken for human beings repeat slogans (frozen, mechanized utterances), he discovers that everyday life is better lived as a machine, and that the reward for his concessions to modernism is that he becomes part of a super-mechanism which feeds him in exchange for his identity.³

Two tasks remain for us to accomplish on these pages. One is to present the objective of modernist ideology for which the machine and the mechanized way of life are still only way-stations toward a final state of affairs. Only then can we return to the discussion of tradition and its possibilities of influencing and shaping contemporary life. The other task is to explore exits from our predicament since if we conclude that there are no exits, we subscribe *ipso facto* to the truth of mechanization which accomplishes, in a rationalized way, what has allegedly been destined for humanity since the beginning of history, or perhaps life.

It is said (by Goetz Briefs, who related it to me) of the young assistant professor Martin Heidegger, that standing by the side of a pool on campus, he tried to keep the fish away from its edges. "Nobody should feel certain of a place of rest," he said. "This is also the core of my teaching: to remove the feeling of intellectual comfort." This is also the project of modernist ideology, achieved by the removal of certitudes about God, about the correspondence between word and thing, about the permanent structure of existence. The strategy is to cut the channels to our foundation, show them to be masks for abject interests, and finally to demonstrate our abandoned condition, its loneliness and reason for despair. The project has been operational at least since Nietzsche, on whose themes contemporary thinkers and literati have played variations. There is no reason replaying them here; their more or less diluted

versions are poured out by college textbooks, television programs, art manifestos, political and business propaganda.

Which means that it would be futile and a sign of empty activism to dream of reforming all this. Contemporary life is so constructed that a counter-project would merely adopt the contours of the one it tries to oppose. In our dichotomy, contemporary life versus tradition, we miss the salient point that our modernity has deeply and irreversibly permeated the texture of our existence, so that resisting it would be the equivalent of resisting ourselves. No doubt, some individuals and small, severely cohesive groups are able to withstand the unceasing assaults of modernity, but entire societies completely adjusted to it cannot undertake a conscious evaluation and critique.

The reason for such an inability should be sought, again, in the machine world and—cause or consequence—in mechanistic habits of mind. If former civilizations did not face similar crises it is because they did not experience the machine and its peremptoriness.⁴ Formerly, people could hide from machine-induced fear and anguish, provoked by mechanization's ubiquity, rapid liquidation of the past, and tempting offers of utilization. The hiding places used to be numerous: in nature (whether for poets, painters, lovers, or hermits); in the rareness of towns and people; in the scarcity of objects, words, and images; in the naturalness of human relations (which does not mean peaceableness but personalness), in the class-hierarchy which served self-identification, thus distance from, or closeness to, others.

The machine brought with it a new world (forget now that the theoretical postulates of technology were inscribed in several of Aristotle's works) whose aggressiveness proves irresistible everywhere, from the nursery to the artist's atelier, from government planning to lei-

sure and relaxation. No area is left untouched or unmolded. Marinetti's Futurism insisted on burning down Rome and filling the space with Le Corbusier-type phalansteries. Of the latter only a few were constructed (in Marseille), but the Bauhaus was more successful. Norbert Wiener's cybernetics claimed to take over the government of the world in order to refashion human relations. A kind of industrial aesthetics rules our taste and directs our vision of art. Let us also face the fact that, in the democratic age, people have an attachment to the machine and the mechanized way of life, the attachment of their ancestors to natural objects, trees, rivers, animals, and trading at markets or caravan routes. Today, even our effort to save animal species is scientific and mechanical, with electronic monitoring devices, the drawing and inoculation of sperm, air transport to safe havens. Modernity crowds out tradition, and also nature. Peasants feel pity for the old folk whose life they judge to have been nasty and brutish because of the absence of machines. In short, this generation, like past ones, feels at ease in its mechanical skin and it would not change it with any time-slot of the past. Its sense of tradition, if any, is at best selective.

Clearly only the cultured man is interested in tradition because he alone nurtures a discriminating taste and has a choice of documented imagination among periods, cultures, and ways of life. Note that revolutionaries who usually idolize a certain moment of the past—Caesar and his court, Jesus and the Apostles, the "natural state of man"—are the only ones to be dissatisfied with the present. Their future plans are copied from past situations. It is they, intellectuals and/or revolutionists, who are ready to restore either a building or a paradisiacal state, either communism or the monarchy.

Can tradition, in turn, penetrate mo-

ernity? Paradoxical as it may seem after what has just been said, the so-called pre-modern impulse is rather strong. The successive revolutions of our century in society, in the state, in churches, in schools, in tribunals, in the family, have at times lost their sharp edge through the silent resistance of groups, even of majorities—not through the voting booth or committee meeting, but through the mysterious workings perhaps of the paleo-cortex: as if there were, deep in the human being, unshakable attachments and revulsions. Man usually ends up with a compromise. If attachment to tradition is part-nostalgia and part-routine, we are blocked in our predicament; but this is not the whole story since modernity is fragile, too. We have been witnesses to the collapse of gigantic super-mechanisms, whether a political party, a planet-wide bureaucracy, heavy-limbed empire, or a sweeping fashion and its crazed supporters.

In other words, there is always a choice to be made between dead-end streets and possible beginnings. At the threshold of "our" modernity, in the seventeenth century, there took place a great confrontation which foreshadowed the present. The debate went on between the two principal spokesmen of basic philosophical orientations, Descartes's *geometrical ideal* (the blueprint of modern technology and mechanization) and Pascal's *tragic sense of inner man*. The main issue between the two, and one which cast its light and shadow on posterity, was chronicled at great length and with profundity in the *Pensées*, the Pascalian critique of the Cartesian principles. Descartes had replied, as it were, in advance in several of his works. Is man to be summed up in his *reason* alone which then neutralizes all the other faculties and achieves victory over nature, passions, and self, or is he a *tragic* figure, alienated from his own being, finding rest in God alone?⁵ In every century,

before and after the quasi-dialogue of Pascal and Descartes, the questions are renewed in different words and in a different style, but (and this is reassuring) they are the same questions with changing interlocutors. It is thus conceivable that the mechanist world view which seems to block our horizon, in short, the Cartesian thesis and its permutations throughout the centuries of modernity, collapses because its outcome, now no longer veiled from us, threatens to be the final robotization of man. Systems, classifications, the dossier, and the filing cabinet (the computer is only a refinement of the latter) are the beginning of a process which ends in the Faustian project of solving the human equation through a super-calculus, the human robot, the actualized Golem, the phalanstery, the recipes for rational, programmed living.

Thus far Descartes. However, like Pascal, we may risk a wager that the project will misfire—not through the cannonshots of tradition, but through the structure of being—and that we shall be relieved of our nightmare. We have indeed discovered in this century that the project managers themselves have miscalculated:⁶ no new gods appeared, as Heidegger adumbrated; science and faith could not be reconciled, as Teilhard de Chardin insisted; no cyclical renewal (Eliade, Evola, Spengler, Guénon) brings back the golden age; humanities and science (C.P. Snow, Norbert Wiener) have not produced a New Culture. There is no New Age.

Tradition is not able in our time, in our civilization, to confront modernity. The latter's chief advantage is not its newness but our contemporaries' zealous absorption of what modernity offers: the insane drive towards desacralization and dehumanization. There are no absurd and vulgar things that our industrial democracy (by now a tradition?) would not seize upon in spite of hypocritical pro-

testations that it is for our good, our enlightenment, our expanded humanity. Descartes, not Pascal, has had legions of followers. And yet more important than numbers is the wisdom of civilizations. Undetected on the surface, where it thrives, modernity is inherently fragile. The mechanical Garden of Eden has its own apple, hidden on a tree. Its name is soul. The time of robot-man's expulsion may be near.

1. Jacques Lenoble, "Repenser le libéralisme: au-delà des critiques communautariennes et post-modernes," *Cahiers de philosophie politique et juridique*, Université de Caen, no. 20. 1991. 2. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, Ed. du Seuil, 1969. 3. Cf. Tocqueville's prophecy that the democratic state will spare us the burden of thinking. Meanwhile, as prophecy became a threat, then a reality in our century, writers have gone far beyond what Tocqueville hardly dared to foresee. The Russian writer-engineer, Evgeny Zamiatin, painted in 1920 a more dreadful picture of mechanical uniformization in his anti-utopian satire, under the title *We*. Fifty years later, another Russian, a mathematician-engineer, Alexander Zinoviev, published several works of fiction and non-fiction in his exile in Munich, arguing that communism is the final stage of the mechanized man-robot who accepts the regime which regulates his life and feeds him. 4. This does not mean that the passage from one to another civilization was not experienced by a minority or an elite as suffering. The Senator Symmachus and his small group symbolized such a transition when in 384 he petitioned Emperor Gratian to restore the statue of victory in the Senate chamber. It was the last pagan act against conquering Christianity. The emperor refused. 5. We should not underestimate the Jansenist (quasi-Protestant) influence on Pascal's thought, and consequent devaluation of reason in favor of faith. 6. The insane, Chesterton wrote, is not the one who lacks reason, but the one who dismisses all his faculties except reason.