

The Inevitability of Tradition

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ON THE BEAUTIFUL Beaux Arts façade of the Clements Library at the University of Michigan, a library devoted to manuscripts and rare books in American history, the following inscription establishes the purposes of the library. "In the darkness dwells the people which knows its annals not." The architects did not find the inscription in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* or in *The Oxford Book of Quotations*; rather it was concocted by a local historian. Its obvious truth strengthened its rhetorical resonance.

History, which is objectified tradition, makes possible individual and collective self-awareness; makes the discernment of selfhood possible. We are, indeed, our traditions, the distillation of our experience in the written word. It is for this reason that when the past is lost, when tradition is abrogated, the individual and the collective self are lost or distorted, culture is impoverished, and the humanity of the individual is diminished. The experience of hundreds of millions of human beings living under the domination of ideological totalitarian systems in the last half century bears out this observation. The personal, the political, and the historic past is expunged and ideology presents a substitute reality, a substitute self, and a substitute history to replace the organic cultural tradition which developed over millennia of time. East

and central Europeans often do not know who their ancestors were. They kept no personal papers or correspondence for fear that family connections, personal experience, communal attachment, social and political evaluation might, if known to the political commissar or the secret police, prove fatal to them. The past, cultural tradition, and sense of self were to be buried in the files of the *Stasi* or some other police agency.

As we have observed following the decay and collapse of totalitarian ideological regimes, the surviving culture resembles a clear-cut forest floor, and the restoration of traditional cultural forms and a traditional sense of the self is a slow and difficult development not unlike the restoration of an ecological system. The ultimate destruction of tradition and the emptying of the self as depicted in dystopian novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) have, to date, never succeeded, and that for the very good reason that both nature and culture make nearly impossible the complete destruction of tradition.

As much as modernity respects change and innovation, nature and "nature's God" protect and foster permanence. The genetic code is a living record of the experience of the race. Certainly variety and uniqueness are insured by nearly

infinite combination, but the basic pattern always remains intact even in the face of radical variation. It must be added that most variations prove lethal to the organism or at least constitute a reproductive dis-incentive. One is impressed with the remarkable stability of the human type since the appearance of Cro-Magnon man. The biological physical type maintains its integrity.

Equally important, the world of symbol and language, the basis of the cultural tradition, maintains its integrity and continuity. Long before the advent of cognitive science, the mystery of the ability of the child to learn the complex linguistic and grammatical structures which make speech possible puzzled scholars. Sometime between 1868 and 1885 Jacob Burckhardt wrote the first four chapters of *Reflections on History*. In chapter II, "The Three Powers," Burckhardt observes:

The spearhead of all culture is a miracle of mind—speech, whose spring, independently of the individual people and its language, is in the soul, otherwise no deaf-mute could be taught to speak and to understand speech. Such teaching is only explicable if there is in the soul an intimate and responsive urge to clothe thought in words.

Burckhardt continues in a passage which links mind to culture and emphasizes the stability and continuity of culture.

Further, languages are the most direct and specific revelation of the nations, their ideal image, the most perdurable material in which they enclose the content of their spiritual life, especially in the sayings of their great poets and thinkers.

This awareness on the part of Burckhardt of "the miracle of mind" has at the end of the twentieth century been reinforced by "cognitive science," which posits on the basis of increasing evidence the existence in the mind of tacit

or unconscious grammars and logical structures which make the world of symbolization and speech possible. These neuron structures are biological in character and are the inherited property of all human beings regardless of sex, race, or class location. They are the permanent basis on which culture rests. They are incapable of transformation by revolutionary ideology.

It is of course true that culture is not biological, but like the genetic code culture develops on the basis of human experience; it is the distillation of experience and its realization in concrete form. Tradition exists and is handed on from generation to generation because it is life-enhancing and life-preserving. It does not possess quite the same durability and stability as the genetic code but its patterns move in the same fundamental direction. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish, especially in the lower animals, genetics from culture, as becomes increasingly clear from a review of the nineteenth-century debate concerning instincts and the much more sophisticated exploration of animal behavior by the ethnologists and the socio-biologists. Territoriality may, for example, be instantiated in very elaborate human cultural forms but has the same biological basis that we observe in animals without a sentient culture. It is not at all clear that culture can be easily, or without severe damage to the human organism, transformed.

It is well to note, moreover, that the path of biological and cultural development is unidirectional. Once cultural change has taken place, once the traditional pattern has been altered, there is no returning to a previous stage of development. Whales may be mammals that have returned to the sea but they do not become fish nor are they even like fish. Time's arrow is unidirectional in its flight, and development is a one-way street. As Boris Pasternak points out in the second

chapter of *Dr. Zhivago*, once Christ had entered time the history and culture of mankind was transformed; there was no turning back to earlier religious, ethical, or cultural forms. The notion of Federico Fellini in his film *The Satyricon*, that he would return to the forms of a pre-Christian consciousness, is as ridiculous as the film was unsuccessful in the achievement of its objective.

These great cultural mutations survive only if they are congruent with the essential structural patterns which manifest themselves in the tacit and unconscious traditions and the basic biological givens of the organism and its society. The change is one which affirms what is already present; which gives life and gives it more abundantly.

It is to be noted, moreover, that both stability and change, the formation of tradition and culture, are not the consequence of ratiocination and abstract reasoning. They are the consequence of what Edmund Burke described as "prejudice."

By "prejudice" Burke meant custom, unreasoned habit; very nearly, indeed, what a sociologist or historian means by culture, "the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of the moral imagination which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies habits which are communicated by the circumstances of civil life."

Prejudice, Burke argued was a "second nature." This "nature" manifests itself in unconscious action and is not the result of reasoning. It is an action as spontaneous as breathing and is not the consequence of thought and abstract analysis. Which is not to say that "prejudice" is unreasonable or anti-rational. Prejudice constitutes and manifests a higher rationality which is the distillation of human experience. It is a social derivative as essential to the common life of mankind as language to which it is closely related. Private reasoning, espe-

cially the abstract reasoning of the philosopher, is subject to error, indeed is very apt to be in error. The unconscious reason of the many is far more apt to be congruent with reality than private reasoning or the reasoning of the few. Men are apt for their own convenience or interest to reason falsely, to rationalize a line of action which is in error. Of course, many men acting on prejudice, even all men, are apt at times to fall into error, but this is less apt to be the case with the many than it is with the few or the individual.

What Burke describes as "prejudice" is tradition. Its power is so great and pervasive because it is a "second nature," because it is unconscious, and because it is the distillation of human experience. Like language it is a convention, but it is a convention rooted in nature. It is the outer face of that quiddity which is humanness. It is for this reason that it is so difficult to abolish or to transform tradition. The great effort of ideological totalitarianisms, using all the means of terror, corruption, propaganda, lies, and hatred, has been unable to expunge the self, to eradicate tradition, to rewrite history, or to transform the language.

Language is the great fortress against which the waves of revolutionary ideology break themselves. It is for this reason that the commissars and the poets are inveterate enemies. The poets are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," but even Shelley, the greatest of revolutionary poets, could not fashion a language which was itself revolutionary nor even a sensibility which broke decisively with the past, for language is the most conservative of all cultural artifacts. What the poet does is to fashion from the language of the past a vocabulary which will give meaning to mankind's inchoate dreams, longings, and perceptions. The language itself and the meaning which it symbolizes are as old

as mankind. The language the poet uses is dipped from the wellsprings of primitive human utterance and shows forth the images of the aboriginal soul. It is for this reason that the Romantic theorists of language and literature came to believe that poetry was the original literature of mankind and that the age of prose, of analysis and reason, was the sorry cob from which all the kernels of the spirit have fallen.

Beginning with the French Revolution ideologists have sought to secure a transformation of human behavior by revolutionizing language. The new order, it was believed, could not be successful until the souls of men had been changed, and the transformation of language was the key to that change.

Both the Bolsheviks and the Nazis debased and corrupted the language in the belief that the revolution had first to take place in the souls of the people. This is the most profound meaning of Orwell's invention of "Engsoc" in *1984*. It is the meaning of that strange language of Marxist-Leninists called, derisively, "party-Chinese."

Stephen Spender in his splendid but now forgotten book, *The Struggle of the Modern* (1963), points out the futility of such efforts at linguistic transformation. "Language of its own nature repudiates a complete break between past and present. A 'revolution of the word,' in the sense of words changing completely their sense and becoming something else, is one kind of revolution that is impossible, a revolution in human nature being perhaps another."

Language is innately conservative. The "mother tongue" drunk in with the mother's milk reaches back across the centuries to those grids of logic, symbol, and meaning through which we construct an ordered cosmos out of the booming, buzzing chaos of experience. The destruction of those fundamental orders

introduces the nightmare world of anomie.

Does this mean that the spiritual world of culture, tradition, language, symbol, and value cannot be lost; that all efforts at revolutionary transformation must fail? To this question the historian must answer both "yes" and "no."

There has been in the historic past the collapse and destruction of cultures and their traditions such as the destruction of American Indian civilizations. It is possible that, as in the case of Egyptian civilization, this destruction can only occur when the culture is severely flawed or when it has ceased to be a creative and developing culture and has lapsed into cultural petrification.

Evolutionary transformation rather than revolutionary change is the more usual, one might say, the predominant pattern. There is a real sense in which the culture of ancient Greece and Rome lives on in the contemporary civilization of the Western world. It often strikes one that we can understand our own cultural situation well only to the degree that we become the cultural contemporaries of the ancients. It is slow and unconscious change rather than ideological revolution which is the great danger to the integrity of tradition in the contemporary world. The erosion of tradition in the way in which a stone is worn away by the steady drip of water is the great danger in our age. It is not that new traditions, new language, take the place of the old, but rather that there is an impoverishment, a leveling off of life. We can resist this only if we live beyond the world of easy and meretricious sensation, only if through language, religion, and art we remain in contact with the world of "prejudice," of unconscious spontaneous action, the deeper rationality which derives from the experience of the community over long periods of time.