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A Portrait of Civilized Man

OUR RAGE TO RID THE HUMAN SCENE of everything irregular, unexpected, or mis-shapen, borders on indecency. It may of course be deplorable that certain tribes take pleasure in eating their over-supply of old people, but never will I agree that such picturesque gourmets should be exterminated; after all, we should remember that cannibalism is the very model of a self-sufficient society as well as a practice well suited to appeal one day to a packed planet. However, my aim is not to bemoan the fate of cannibals, harried though they are, living in terror, the great losers in today's world. Let's admit it: their case is not exactly impressive. Anyway, they are on the decline; a hardpressed minority stripped of self-confidence, unable to plead their own cause. The situation of illiterates, on the other hand, is entirely different—that considerable mass attached to its own traditions and privileges, warred upon with an unjustified virulence. Is it an evil, in the end, not to know how to read and write? In all honesty, I do not think so. I will go even farther and say this: when the last illiterate has disappeared, then we can put on mourning for man.

The interest which civilized man takes in the so-called backward peoples is more than suspect. Since he cannot stand himself any longer, he unloads on them the surplus of evils that crush him; he urges them to taste of his miseries, entreats them to tackle a destiny he can no longer face alone. When he thinks how lucky they are not to have "evolved," he resents them with the resentment of a desperado who has been balked and put to rout. What right have they to stay on the sidelines, outside the process of degradation he himself has endured for so long, from which he cannot extricate himself? Civilization, his product and his folly, seems a punishment inflicted on him and he wants to inflict it on others who have so far escaped it. "Come share my calamities; let's be jointly responsible for my hell": this is the meaning of his concern for them, such is the ground of his meddling zeal. Worn by his defects and even more by his "enlightenment," he cannot rest until he has imposed them on people who are happily exempt.

This is the way he acted even at a time when he was not yet "enlightened" nor weary of himself; he surrendered to his own greed, to his thirst for adventure and infamy. The Spaniards, at the height of their power, must have felt as much oppressed by the demands of their faith as by the strictures of the Church. The Conquest was their revenge.

Are you working to convert someone? If you are, it is not to bring about his salvation, but to make him suffer *as you suffer*, so that he will be exposed to the same ordeals and undergo them with the same irritation. Do you watch and pray, torment yourself? Then let the other do the same, let him sigh, howl, thrash about under the same tortures as you. Intolerance is the condition of ravaged minds whose faith derives from a more or less self-inflicted torment which they hope to see generally practiced and institutionalized. Concern for the happiness of others has never been a driving force nor a principle of action; it is fetched up to salve the conscience or to provide a cover of noble excuses: for no matter what action we undertake, the impulse toward it and its completion is almost always shameful. No one can save another, he can save only himself; and he can do it all the better if he disguises as conviction the misery he wants to give away in such abundance. However wondrous it may appear, the urge to proselyte derives none the less from a dubious generosity, worse in effect than patent aggression. Nobody wants to endure such punishment alone, even though it is willingly accepted, nor by himself sustain the yoke he has agreed to wear. The desire for revenge shows beneath the cheerfulness of the missionary and the apostle. People set about converting others not to liberate but to shackle them.

Let somebody be trapped by a conviction and from that moment he will envy you your indecision, your resistance to dogma and slogans, your blissful incapacity to commit yourself. Blushing in secret for belonging to a sect or a party, ashamed of being in possession of a truth and enslaved by it, he resents, not his declared enemies, the prisoners of another truth, he resents you, the Uncommitted, guilty for not chasing after some truth or other. To escape the kind of slavery he has fallen into, perhaps you take refuge in whim or in vagueness? Then he will do everything in his power to stop you, and to keep you in a servitude analogous and, if possible, identical with his. This phenomenon is so universal it goes beyond the province of conviction to include that of fame

also. The world of Letters, appropriately enough, furnishes a most painful illustration. What writer who enjoys a certain notoriety does not end by suffering from it, by experiencing the uneasiness of being known and understood, of having a public, however small? Envious of his friends who loll in the comforts of obscurity, he does his best to drag them out, to stir up their peaceful pride so they too will suffer the mortifications and anxieties of success. To him, any maneuver seems legitimate to accomplish this, and from then on their lives are nightmares. He torments them, urges them to produce and exhibit themselves, thwarts their aspiration to a clandestine fame, that great dream of the sensitive and the will-less. Write, publish, he repeats with fury, with effrontery. And the unhappy victims do it without suspecting what lies in store for them. He alone knows. He stalks them, praises their timid efforts violently, extravagantly, with the frenzy of a madman, and, in order to dump them into the abyss of the present, he finds or invents disciples for them, gets them a following of readers, a mob of assassins who are ever present and invisible. His job done, he calms down and disappears, gratified by the spectacle of his protégés in the clutches of the same torment and shame as his, shame and torment summed up perfectly by I forget which Russian writer: "You can go mad at the very thought of being read."

Like the writer stricken and contaminated by celebrity who does his utmost to infect those who aren't yet tainted, so the civilized man, victim of an exacerbated conscience, struggles to pass on its horrors to peoples who resist being split apart as he is. How can he accept their refusal of this self-division that torments and undoes him, how accept their lack of curiosity, their rejection of it? Using all his guile to bring them around, to make them resemble him and undergo his calvary, he entices them with his civilization whose marvels end by so dazzling them that they cannot sort out the good in it from the bad. And they imitate its harmful side only, everything that makes it a preconcerted and systematic curse. Have they been, up till now, inoffensive and carefree? From now on, they want to be strong and menacing, to the great satisfaction of their benefactor who knows that in fact they will become, following his example, strong and menaced. He takes an interest in them, "gives them aid." How comforting to watch them embroil themselves in the same problems as his, as they move off toward the same fate!

All he asks is that they become complicated, obsessed, unhinged. Their youthful fervor for machinery and luxury and the lies of technology reassures him, floods him with pleasure. They swell the numbers of the condemned, of the unhopd-for fellow sufferers who can "aid" him in return by assuming a part of the burden that crushes him, or at least carry as heavy a load as he. He calls this "advancement," a word well chosen to camouflage both his treachery and his wounds.

Shreds of humanity are still to be found only among peoples who have been out-distanced by history and are in no hurry to catch up with it. Staying in the rear-guard and untempted by what other nations are doing, they cultivate their out-moded virtues, make a duty of being out-of-date. "Backward" they surely are, and they would persevere willingly in their stagnation if only they could manage to stay there. But this they are not allowed to do. The plot that the others, the "advanced," hatch against them is too cleverly contrived to be evaded. Once this process of degradation is set in motion, they turn to, with the brashness of the beginner, so as to hurry it up; furious that they can not stop it, they adopt and even compound its horror, in accordance with the law by which a new evil prevails always over an old good. And they want to get up-to-date, if only to show that they too know how to "fall," that in this matter of decline and degradation they can even surpass the others. Why should we be astonished or complain about this? Don't we see counterfeits prevailing everywhere over the essential, and agitation replacing repose? And would we not seem to be witnessing the death-throes of the indestructible? Every step forward, every form of dynamism carries with it something satanic: "progress" is the modern equivalent of the Fall, the profane version of damnation. And those who believe in it and are its promoters, all of us in short, what are we if not an army of the damned, predestined to the Monstrous, to these machines and these cities which we can escape only by an exhaustive disaster? Such a disaster would at least give our inventions a chance, once and for all, to prove their usefulness and re-establish themselves in our eyes.

If "progress" is so great an evil, why don't we stop it, this very instant? But do we really want the good? Isn't it our lot, rather, not really to want it? In our perversity, the "best" is what we want and pursue: ill-starred pursuit, contrary in every way to our felicity. We neither "improve ourselves" nor progress with impunity.

Everyone knows that Motion is heresy. That is precisely why we throw ourselves into it and, irremediably depraved, prefer it to the orthodoxy of repose. We were made to vegetate, to blossom in inertia, and not to ruin ourselves with speed and with a hygiene that is responsible for the crop of disembodied and aseptic beings, this anthill of phantoms where everybody wriggles and nobody lives. Since a certain dose of dirt is indispensable to the organism (physiology and body filth are interchangeable terms), the prospect of such cleanliness on a global scale is cause for real alarm. Lousy and serene, we ought to be satisfied with the company of beasts, lying down at their sides during the millennia to come, breathing the odor of the stable instead of the laboratory, dying of our maladies and not of our remedies, turning round about our nothingness and settling down in it, gently. *Vacancy*, which ought to have been a duty and an obsession, has been replaced by action; and each act cuts into us and corrodes us because it occurs at the expense of our equilibrium and our endurance. The more our future contracts, the more we let ourselves sink into what ruins us. Civilization, our drug, has so poisoned us that our dependence on it is an addiction, a mixture of ecstasy and curse. Being what it is, it will finish us off, there is no doubt about that; as for giving it up, freeing ourselves of it, we cannot, today less than ever. Who could fly to our aid and deliver us from it? An Antisthenes, an Epicurus, a Chrysippus? All three found their own civilization too complicated. What would they think of ours, and which among them, transplanted to our cities, would have a core hard enough to preserve his serenity? The people of antiquity, saner and more stable than we in every way, could have got along without wisdom, but they developed it nevertheless. What unfits us forever is that we have neither the desire for wisdom nor the capacity. Is it not significant that the first among moderns to denounce strongly the evils of civilization, and he did it out of idolatry of nature, was the very contrary of a wise man? We owe the diagnosis of our ills to a lunatic more marked and tainted than any of us, to an avowed maniac who was the forerunner and model of our delirium. No less significant seems the recent arrival of psychoanalysis, a sadistic therapeutic devoted to aggravating rather than soothing our ills, and one singularly expert in substituting for our naïve anxiety a malaise that is subtle and over-refined.

By steering us toward the surface of life in order to conceal its

depths, our wants confer value on that which is worthless and could never be anything else. Civilization with all its apparatus is founded on our inclination for the unreal and the useless. If we would consent to reduce our wants and satisfy only our needs, civilization would crumble at once. For, to survive, it must create new wants and multiply them without end, since the general practice of ataraxia would carry with it far graver consequences than a war of total destruction. By adding gratuitous irritations to the inevitable and natural inconveniences, civilization makes us suffer doubly, diversifying our torments and intensifying our weaknesses. Let nobody try to tell us again that we have been cured of fear. In fact, there is a clear correlation between the multiplication of our wants and the growth of our terrors. Our desires, the source of our wants, create in us a constant apprehension, less bearable by far than the fear felt of a passing danger in the natural world. We no longer tremble occasionally, it is true; we tremble all the time. What have we gained by this transformation of fear into anxiety? And who would balance an occasional panic against one that is permanent, diffused? The security we are so proud of covers up an uninterrupted anxiety that poisons our every moment both past and future, cancelling out the one and making the other inconceivable. As our desires mingle with our terror, happy is he who feels none! For, hardly have we felt one before it produces the other, in a succession lamentable and pernicious. Let us rather strive to submit to the world and consider each impression we receive as an impression *imposed* on us from the outside that does not concern us, and that we endure as if it were not ours. "Nothing belongs to me that happens to me; nothing is mine," says the *I* when convinced it is in the wrong universe, that it is a stranger here and has only one choice, between impassiveness and imposture.

By making us step outside our essence, each desire, interested only in appearances, nails us to a new object and limits our horizon. And our desires allow us, in the same degree that they grow more intense, to detect the morbid thirst from which they emanate. Are they no longer natural? Do they derive from our civilized condition? Fundamentally impure, they disturb and dirty our very substance. Everything that increases our fundamental imperatives, everything that deforms and troubles us unnecessarily is vice. Laughing and even smiling are vices. On the other hand, everything is virtue that leads us to live against the stream of our civiliza-

tion, that invites us to compromise and sabotage its progress. Happiness, if the word means anything, consists in aspiring to the minimum and the inefficient, in making our *limits* the basis of our lives. Our only recourse: to renounce not only the fruit of our acts but the acts themselves, to limit ourselves to nonproduction, to leave unexploited a good part of our energies and our opportunities. Guilty as we are of wanting to realize ourselves beyond our capacities and our merits, ineffectual *through over-exertion*, inept at true accomplishment, worthless because of tension, great only in using up and squandering our resources, we spend ourselves without taking account of our true powers and limits. From this comes our weariness, aggravated even by the effort we have expended to adapt ourselves to civilization and all it includes of over-refined corruption. Nature itself is corrupt; that we cannot deny. But its timeless corruption is an immemorial and inevitable evil to which we adapt automatically. The corruption of civilization, the result of our own work and whim and the more crushing because it seems fortuitous, carries with it the mark of choice or of fantasy, of premeditated or arbitrary fatality. Right or wrong, we believe it did not have to happen; that we could have kept it from happening, which makes it seem still more odious than it really is. We are inconsolable for having to endure and face up to the subtle miseries that flow from it when we could have contented ourselves with the crude and, all things considered, bearable miseries nature has generously provided.

If we were ready to root out our desires, we would at the same time free ourselves of our destiny; superior to beings, to things, and to ourselves, stubborn against blending any further with the world, by sacrificing our identity we would achieve liberty, joined as it is to anonymity and to abdication. "*I am nobody!*" I have vanquished my name!" he exclaims, the one who will not abase himself further to leave his mark on the world, who tries to follow the injunction of Epicurus: "Conceal your life." We always go back to the men of antiquity when the art of living is in question, an art we have been robbed of by two thousand years of supernature and convulsive charity. We go back to them, to their deliberateness and their moderation, whenever we emerge from this frenzy Christianity has instilled in us; the curiosity they awake in us marks a receding of the fever, a step back towards health. And we go back to them again because the interval separating them from the universe being

vaster than the universe itself, they offer us a kind of detachment not to be found among the saints.

In making frenetics of us, Christianity prepared us in spite of itself to beget a civilization whose victim it has now become: did it not create in us too many needs, too many wants? These wants, these needs, interior in the beginning, gradually became degraded and turned outward, as if the fervor from which so many prayers rose was suddenly suspended and, since it could not disappear nor remain unemployed, put itself at the service of makeshift gods, and invented symbols as empty as they. Here we are, handed over to counterfeits of infinity, to an absolute without metaphysical dimensions, plunged into speed for want of being ecstasies. This panting junk, reflection of our fidgets, and the spectres that manipulate it, this parade of hallucinated automatons, where are they going? what are they looking for? what wind of madness drives them along? Every time I feel inclined to absolve them, when I doubt the legitimacy of my aversion or my terror, I have only to think of country roads on Sunday for the image of those motorized vermin to harden my disgust or my fright. The use of legs being abolished, the walker appears to be an eccentric or an outlaw among these paralytics on wheels; soon he will be taken for a monster. There is no more contact with the soil: everything about it has become foreign and incomprehensible to us. Cut off from all roots, unfit to mix with the dust and the mud, we have achieved the feat of breaking not only with the core but even with the surface of things. Civilization, at this stage, would seem to be a pact with the Devil, had man still a soul to sell.

Is it true that these engines were invented "to save time"? More deprived, more alienated than the troglodyte, civilized man has not one moment to himself; even his leisure is feverish and oppressive; he is a convict on leave who succumbs to the boredom of the *dolce far niente* and the nightmare of beaches. Those who have frequented regions where idleness was the rule and everybody excelled at it, find it hard to adapt to a world where nobody recognizes it or knows how to enjoy it, where nobody breathes. Is a being shackled to a clock a human being? And has he the right to call himself *free* when, as we know, he has shaken off all kinds of servitude except the essential one? At the mercy of the time that he feeds, that he fattens with his own substance, he exhausts himself, bleeds himself to assure the prosperity of a parasite and a tyrant. But he

is calculating in spite of his foolishness, and fancies that his own cares and tribulations will diminish if, under the guise of a "program," he can bestow them on those "under-developed" peoples whom he blames for not being "in the know," that is, caught in the maelstrom. The easier to push them in, he inoculates them with the poison of his anxiety and holds onto them until he observes the first symptoms of its effects. To carry out his dream of a breathless humanity, distracted and minute-conscious, he roves over continents always in search of new victims in order to shed on them the overflow of his feverishness and his inner darkness. In contemplating him we see the very nature of Hell: for is Hell not the place where, throughout eternity, man is condemned to time?

We have subjugated and appropriated the universe in vain, in that by not triumphing over time we have remained slaves. That victory is won by renunciation, but our conquests have made us incapable of that; the more we conquer, the more we are bound. Civilization teaches us how to get things when it ought to initiate us into the art of letting them go, for neither liberty nor "real life" is possible without an apprenticeship in dispossession. When I take possession of an object I imagine I am its master; in fact I am its slave, and slave equally to the instruments I fabricate and manipulate. There is not one acquisition that does not mean one chain the more, nor any instrument of power that is not a cause of weakness. Our very talents contribute to our bondage, and the mind that rises above others is even less free than they; riveted to his abilities and ambitions, prisoner of his talents, he cultivates them at his peril, develops them at the price of his own salvation. Nobody liberates himself if he strives to become someone, or something. All that we possess or produce, all that is superposed on our being or that issues from it, denatures and suffocates us. And as for our Being itself, what a wound to be joined to existence when we could belong, unfragmented, to the virtual and the invulnerable. No one recovers from the evil of being born, capital wound if ever there was one. We accept life and put up with its afflictions only in the hope of someday curing ourselves. The years pass, the wound remains.

The more civilization becomes diversified and complicated, the more we curse the bonds that attach us to it. According to Soloviev, it will come to its end (which, said the Russian philosopher, will be the end of all things) at the high point of the "most refined

century." This much is certain, never was it as menaced nor as detested as at the moments it seemed most firmly established. Witness the attacks on it at the peak of the Enlightenment, on its manners and its wonders, on the conquests it took such pride in. "During cultivated centuries, a kind of religion is made of admiring what was admired in cruder times," notes Voltaire, who was hardly one, we must admit, to understand the reasons for so just an enthusiasm. In any case, it was during the epoch of "salons" that the "return to nature" appeared, just as ataraxia could have been conceived only at a time when minds that were weary of digressions and systems preferred the delights of a garden to those of the agora. The appeal to wisdom always comes from a civilization grown weary of itself. Curiously enough, we find it difficult to imagine the process that led the ancient world to satiety, a world which compared with ours seems, at whatever moment of its existence, the ideal object of our regret. As for that, any other epoch whatsoever seems blessed compared with our unspeakable world. By straying from our true destination, we will enter (if we are not already there) the period of the end—a period eminently refined (*complicated* would be the exact word), where we will be, on all levels, the exact opposite of what we should have been.

The evils fixed in our condition have prevailed over what is good, but even if they were in balance our problems would not be resolved. We are here to struggle with life and with death, and not to evade them as our civilization, that enterprise of pretense and glossing over the insoluble, invites us to do. Since our civilization lacks any principle of duration, its advantages, which are so many impasses, help us neither to live better nor to die better. Even if it were able, with the aid of a useless science, to sweep away all our afflictions or, as enticement, award us other planets by way of recompense, it would succeed only in increasing our distrust and exasperation. The more our civilization rushes about and swaggers, the more envious we are of those periods whose privilege was ignorance of the facilities and marvels it endlessly showers on us. "With some bread and a little water, we can be as happy as Jupiter," that sage who counselled us to conceal our lives, loved to repeat. Is it only a fad to keep on citing him? But to whom can we go, of whom can we seek advice? Of our contemporaries? Those frenetic pushers who are guilty of deifying confession, appetite, effort; of making us into lyrical puppets, insatiable and exhausted?

The only excuse for their frenzy is that it derives not from fresh instinct or sincere efforts, but from panic in the face of a blocked horizon. Many of our philosophers who look into the future with fright are only at bottom the interpreters of a humanity which, feeling the minutes escape, tries not to think about them—and thinks about them all the time. Their systems offer, in sum, the image and the discursive unfolding of that obsession. Likewise, History had not roused their interest until a moment when man has every reason to doubt he is still a part of history, that he continues to be its agent. In fact, everything comes to pass as if, history too escaping him, man is beginning a non-historical career, brief and convulsive, which will doubtless reduce to insignificance all the calamities that hitherto he had thought so important. His foothold in Being crumbles with each step forward. We exist only in recoil, by the distance we take from things and from ourselves. To rush about is only to give ourselves over to the false and the fictitious, to discriminate without justification between the possible and the funereal. Restless as we have become, we have ceased to be masters of our acts or of our fate. A negative providence presides over them without any doubt; a providence whose intentions become less and less impenetrable as we approach our end—intentions that would reveal themselves clearly to the first comer if he would deign to stop and step out of his rôle in order to contemplate, if only for an instant, the spectacle of that horde, winded and tragic, of which he is a part.

Everything considered, the period of the end will not be the most refined nor the most complicated; it will be the most hurried, when Being has dissolved into movement, and civilization in a supreme thrust toward the worst, will disintegrate in the vortex it has set in motion. Since nothing can keep it from being engulfed, let us give up exerting our powers against it and learn to distinguish, among the excesses it wallows in, something inspiring that will enable us to moderate our indignation and re-examine our contempt. These spectres, these automatons, these hallucinated ones will then be less detestable if we reflect on their unconscious motives, on the profound reasons for their frenzy. Do they not feel the delay granted them diminishing day by day and the dénouement taking shape? And is it not to thrust aside this idea that they throw themselves into speed? If they were sure of *another* future, they would have no motive to flee nor to flee from themselves; they

would slow down and settle without fear into an expectant indefiniteness. But for them there is no question of one future or another; they have no future. Out of the racing of their blood rises this obscure unformulated certitude which they dread to face, which they try to forget by hurrying faster and faster, refusing to spend even an instant with themselves. But hidden in this certitude is the ineluctable; and the very speed which, to their minds, should be taking them away from it, brings it closer and closer. Machines are the consequence, not the cause, of so much haste, so much impatience. They do not push civilized man toward his destruction; he invented them because he was already on the way; they are the means, the auxiliaries to get there more quickly, more efficiently. Not content to run, he must *ride* there. In this sense, and this only, can machines be said to allow man to "save time." He distributes them, imposes them on backward peoples, the late-comers, so that they can follow and even out-distance him in his course toward disaster, in the establishment of a universal and mechanical amok. To make sure it comes, he works furiously to level everything, to standardize the human scene, to efface its irregularities and outlaw its surprises. He does not want anomalies to prevail; he wants *the anomaly*, an anomaly monotonous and routine, converted into a rule of conduct, into an imperative. He charges those who escape it with obscurantism or extravagance, and he will not give up until he has driven them back to the straight and narrow path, to his own mistakes. Illiterates, above all, are reluctant to take on these mistakes, but he forces them, obliges them to learn to read and write so that, caught in the trap of learning, not one of them can manage to escape the common misery. His mind is so befogged he cannot even conceive that they might choose a kind of derangement different from his. With no respite for the exercise of self-irony, to which he should be impelled by the simplest insight into his own destiny, he is thus left without recourse against himself. He can become only the more ruinous to others. Aggressive and pitiful at the same time, he arouses a certain pathos. Seeing him inextricably caught, we understand why we hesitate to denounce and attack him, since it is always in bad taste to castigate an incurable, however odious he may be. But if bad taste stops us, how can we make the least judgment on anything whatever?

[*Translated by Marthiel Mathews*]