

centuries and each time it's worse as though we learn nothing."

In the distance I noticed Adele stretch for her pen and paper.

"Give my regards to posterity", I said, and felt like a man from another age, hidden in the folds of an unfashionable cloak.

Adele wrote. The teenagers ate. Jerome sat. Joshua cursed and struggled with his plug. Angus stroked his smooth face. Jim grunted and broke the silence: "'member that time in Singapore."

He was deliberate. He knew I'd stopped him once. He was determined to take up his story again. I was determined he shouldn't.

"When you caught herpes", I said, and felt like the crude man I thought he was.

"No, don't be like that."

There was warning in his voice as though he assumed he was the ultimate deterrent like a nuclear warhead.

"I am like that", I said, "I'm me, you're you. I'm sick to death of the Far East."

Things happen quickly sometimes and are hard to put into sequence even if you use a collage technique afterwards. Jim and I stared into each other's eyes. We were both embarrassed. After a while his tattooed fist shot across the little cane table between us, and he gave me a more than fairly hard punch on my upper arm where I bruise quite easily.

"You're all right, Paul", he said.

It occurred to me that I'd never in my life returned a courteous punch. Carefully, because I wasn't used to it, I returned the blow equally hard I thought, bearing in my mind my lighter weight and Jim's greater size.

"You're all right too, Jim", I said.

I still wasn't sure what madness had been set in motion but I felt strangely free as if I'd been hibernating beneath stones and had finally come out into the sun just because it was the time.

Jim half got out of his friendly bamboo and, as though I were nothing and he was playing with a frisky kitten, he leaned over me and threw a few scattered blows which might have hit me if he'd had a mind to.

"This is pathetic", I said, and stood up as soon as he sat down again with a big grin on his face. I did the same to him: cat dabs, just missing.

Angus was shaking his head from side to side as though he'd seen all this before but somehow didn't want to stop it because sometime in the future it might be: "'member that time in London?" Someone was making "tch-tch" sounds. I think at this point I was ready to laugh, but it takes all types to be friends with Adele and as I sat down in my chair Jim did a very unexpected thing. He brought a bottle of wine down on the side of my head. I was surprised that it broke and I was surprised at the new blood which dripped instantly into my new beard. I looked around to find something of equal weight to return the courtesy but found I was stumbling over blocks of hidden air. Adele shrieked, a strange sound, and everyone else was making a collage of things like:

"You bloody fool . . . get a towel . . . phone an ambulance . . . lie down . . . unbutton his shirt. . . ."

I WALKED TO THE AMBULANCE with a pink turban round my head. Adele got in the back with me and I lay down. She fretted anxiously over me.

"Oh Paul, why did this happen? Angus says he's getting worse . . . schizoid. . . ."

"Alone at last, Adele."

"Oh Paul, darling, we'll always be friends."

"There's room on my bunk for two."

We kissed fondly, lingering. The moment inspired me. I shot up from the bunk in a swim of stars.

"Don't suppose you have a pen and paper, Adele."

Adele surprised me too. Out came a pen and a square of paper. I seized them gratefully like a medical prescription.

"Bread and butter, salt and pepper."

She murmured something like that but I hardly heard her. My pen was galloping. Words were racing like wild animals from a forest fire. I glanced at Adele. She had a square of paper on her knee. Across it her pen moved in sure fine strokes. I was surprised at myself: I was happy. We wrote on and on until finally we reached the hospital, where no doubt further character and copy awaited us with instruments finely tuned for these unruly days.

Triolet

The poets gather in the room,
Watching the looks on every face.
They feel the close approach of doom,
The poets. "Gather in the room!"
The hostess cries, "I'll have no gloom!
Art and pleasure, fill this place!"
The poets gather in the room,
Watching the looks on every face.

Derwent May

Modernity on Endless Trial



IF WE ARE TO BELIEVE Hegel, or Collingwood, no age and no civilisation is capable of conceptually identifying itself. This can only be done after its final demise and even then (as we know too well) such an identification is never certain or universally accepted. Both the general "morphology of civilisations" and the description of their constitutive characteristics are notoriously controversial. They are heavily loaded with ideological biases, sometimes expressing a need for a self-assertion by comparison with the past, or a malaise in one's own cultural environment and a resulting nostalgia for the good old times. Collingwood suggested that each historical period has a number of basic ("absolute") presuppositions which it is unable clearly to articulate; and these provide a latent inspiration for its explicit values and benefits, its typical reactions and aspirations. If so, we might try to locate and to uncover those presuppositions in the life of our ancient or medieval ancestors and, perhaps, build on this basis a "history of mentalities" (as opposed to the "history of ideas"). But we are, in principle, prevented from revealing them in our own age, unless, of course, the owl of Minerva has already flown—and are we, then, living in the twilight, at the very end of an epoch?

Let us, therefore, accept our incurable ignorance of our own spiritual foundations and be satisfied with a survey of the surface of our "modernity" (whatever the word might mean). Whatever it suggests, it is certain that modernity is as little modern as are the attacks on modernity. The melancholic "Ah, nowadays . . . there is no longer . . . in olden days . . ." and similar expressions contrasting the corrupted present with the splendour of the past are probably as old as the human race. We find them in the Bible and in the *Odyssey*. I can well imagine Palaeolithic nomads angrily resisting the foolish idea that it would be better for people to have permanent dwellings, or predicting the imminent degeneration of mankind as a result of the nefarious invention of the wheel. Mankind's history conceived as a degradation belongs, as we know, to the most persistent mythological themes in various parts of the world, including both the symbol of the Exile and Hesiod's description of the Five Ages. The frequency of such

myths suggests that, apart from other possible social and cognitive functions, they voice a universally human, conservative mistrust of changes: a suspicion that "progress", on second thoughts, is not really progress at all; a reluctance to assimilate transformations, however beneficial in appearance, of the established order of things.

Change goes on, none the less; and it usually finds a sufficient number of enthusiastic supporters. The clash between "the Ancient" and "the Modern" is probably everlasting; and we will never get rid of it, as it expresses the natural tension between structure and evolution, and this tension seems to be biologically rooted. It is, we may believe, a characteristic of life as such. It is obviously necessary for any society to have the forces both of conservation and of change; and it is most doubtful whether any theory will ever work out reliable tools whereby we could measure the relative strength of those opposite energies in any given society, add and subtract them from each other like quantifiable vectors, and build on this basis a general schema of development, endowed with the predictive power. We can only surmise what gives some societies an ability to assimilate rapid changes without falling apart. What makes others satisfied with a very slow pace of movement? In exactly what conditions does development or stagnation lead to violent crises or to self-destruction?

Curiosity, i.e. a separate drive to explore the world disinterestedly, without being stimulated by danger or physiological dissatisfaction, is, according to the students of evolution, rooted in specific morphological characteristics of our species, and thus cannot be eradicated from our minds as long as the species continues to remain itself. As Pandora's most deplorable accident and the adventures of our progenitors in Paradise testify, the sin of curiosity was the main cause of all calamities and misfortunes that have befallen mankind; and yet it was unquestionably the source of all its achievements.

THE EXPLORATION IMPULSE has never been evenly distributed throughout various civilisations. Generations of scholars have asked the question: Why has the civilisation which emerged out of joint Greek, Latin, Judaic and Christian sources proved so uniquely successful in promoting and spreading rapid and accelerating changes in science, technology, art and social order? Why have many other cultures survived for centuries in conditions of near-stagnation, affected only by barely noticeable changes, or sunk into slumber after short-lived eruptions of creativity?

There is no good answer. Each civilisation is a contingent