

The unique character of modern civilization has made obsolete, among other things, the idea of Progress.

The Past and Future of Western Thought

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TO HAVE A CLEAR IDEA of what is happening to us today with respect to the past and the future, we need only compare our situation with that experienced in the last third of the nineteenth century by Western man—that *fin de siècle* gentleman in his tail-coat, with his head crowned by the imposing architecture of the top-hat, the gentleman with the starched wing-collar and the boiled shirt-front. Whether rationalist and free-thinker or a Christian of one or another confession, this man had an indestructible faith in the idea of progress—an idea invented by one of the most delicately venerable and brilliant personalities of modern times and one whom no European with a real knowledge of his continent can contemplate without emotion: I mean Monsieur de Turgot. It may indeed be that the most glorious hour Europe has so far known was that brief period, which I shall call by the same name, the name that appears now and again in the French memoirs and private letters of a few years later to designate the time, at once soft and luminous, dawn and midday, “when Monsieur de Turgot was at the Sorbonne.”

This idea that man journeys into the future in an inevitable progression, like a star following its orbit, was developed by

his disciple Condorcet. On the 8th of July, 1793, the Marquis de Condorcet was denounced by François Chabot, an ex-Franciscan monk and an utter scoundrel and imbecile, who had previously been found guilty of peculation. Condorcet was denounced as a “proven plotter against the unity and indivisibility of the Republic.” Chabot and those who helped him in this denunciation and who sentenced Condorcet to prison, where he died nine months later, were the eternal imbeciles of politics who did not know what was the Republic, nor what was unity or indivisibility. Seeing himself condemned, Condorcet hid himself away in the house of a Madame Verdet, and there in his little corner he wrote his *Sketch of a Historical Table of the Progress of the Human Spirit*. This book was the Gospel of a new faith: the faith in progress. The idea of progress had been rigorously formulated by the great Turgot, Condorcet’s teacher, in 1750. It is the great idea that two centuries have lived off. According to this idea, the progress of mankind is ineluctable; it is bound to lead to ever more satisfactory and perfect forms of life. Never had so important a segment of humanity—the entire West—felt itself with a surer future before it. The idea of progress, like the Equitable Life, was a

philosophical insurance company. It was in this same faith that my own generation was brought up.

As this idea seemed to find ever greater confirmation throughout the nineteenth century, it is understandable that it should have sunk deep roots in the minds of men. Faith—or to put it in other words, absolute, direct conviction—is always blind. It is not an idea, but a belief, undiscussed and undiscussable. Any faith worthy of the name is a chimney sweep's faith.

Thanks to this faith, the *fin de siècle* period of the last century was, of all the periods that we are closely familiar with, the one in which the future presented itself to man in its least problematic guise. Life thus lost all dramatic tension. The only phenomenon that was at all disturbing, though not menacing, was the rise of the labor movement. But at this date this redoubtable fact, which was shortly to turn into a historical catastrophe, was—most of the time, at any rate—no more than an academic topic. It was referred to as “the social question”, and it was discussed lengthily and dispassionately to determine whether it really existed, and if it was an economic or moral question, a pedagogical or violent one. The future offered itself to these Europeans in the guise of a sloping curve marked by slight indentations representing the petty problems of the moment. These being minor and quite inessential problems, the *fin de siècle* European could look back at the past and find it teeming with models of solutions that seemed to suffice amply to solve his own problems. Whence the indulgence, the morose delectation with which these men contemplated the past!

What a delight to be able to lean comfortably back on a world so rich in diverse ways of being a man, so full of apparently exemplary forms of life! Men felt themselves to be the inheritors of a vast fortune of vital models. They still believed firmly in the exemplary value of Greece and Rome. Athenian democracy, rediscovered two generations earlier by the banker

Grote, was for them a model of democracy, simply because they believed in democracy as one believes in the Virgin of Lourdes. They were even incapable of grasping the fact that Athenian democracy never had anything to do with the contemporary democracies of the West. They believed likewise in traditional philosophy — in Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes. Those who needed a philosophy had only to delve into the stock-room and come forth with carefully preserved, resplendent, ready-made models from the past. They had only to try them on. The result was neo-Kantianism, neo-Fichteism, neo-Thomism. The same was true with the arts, with letters, and with the sciences. Physics was thought of as *the* system of physics, the unique, perfect, unassailable physics of Galileo and Newton. Mathematics was the imperishable marvel of the perfect and unchanging truth. And so on.

We would encounter the same phenomenon were we to go back another century and examine, for example, the situation of a Goethe with respect to the past and the future. Only for this last, who was a great innovator, the definition will have to be a little more complicated. Goethe, strange to say, was blind to the future, or, to put it another way, the future existed for him hardly at all. Even the French Revolution caused him little anxiety. It must be said that this was also the case for many people of his generation. The possibility of its future repercussions did not upset their lives, something which proves — and this proof can be sustained in detail — that the great revolution did not in its principles represent a *peripetia*, a peripety in the Greek sense of the word, that is to say, it represented no effective upheaval of life, no authentic revolution. The political and social transformation it entailed left intact the established convictions, the profound structures of life and morality, the anatomy of society, and the accepted values. Beneath the raging melodrama of politics and the tireless guillotine the foundations remained untouched. The principles of

what was called European Civilization were still in full vigor, and they seemed more imperishable than ever.

We have here a case similar to the preceding one, and it allows us to raise the following observation to the rank of a historic "law": to wit, that the less problematic the future is, the easier it is for man to lean on a past rich in still living values, in exemplary propositions, in valid models of behavior. Man feels himself relatively calm vis-a-vis the future precisely because he feels himself to be the inheritor of a magnificent past. And that *par excellence* was what Goethe was: an inheritor — the inheritor of the entire past of the West, beginning with Homer and Praxiteles and culminating in Spinoza and Cuvier. Whence the motto he offers us: "What you have inherited from your fathers, that you must conquer to possess." Curious, is it not, that this man is so little interested in the future, so little aware of it as a challenge that the enterprise he recommends us is the capture of the past! It reminds me of that battle between the Spaniards and the Portuguese in the seventeenth century, in the course of which the Spanish army, in flight before the Portuguese, decided to take its own camp by assault.

The idea of progress, as I have said, appeared in 1750; that is, just one year after Goethe's birth. It was thus an idea which was contemporary to him and which he carried within him with far greater force than the members of my own generation. Throughout his life he lived with this belief, without ever seeing the specter of possible catastrophes lift its grim head over the horizon. In the age he lived in, nevertheless, there were catastrophes that were relatively as great as those we have been living through, yet thanks to the foundation of security which the faith in progress gave him, they had for him only a superficial value.

Goethe was persuaded that beneath the surface of the storm-swept sea, a mighty calm continued to reign in the depths. But

when he stopped abandoning himself simply to life and, coming face to face with his beliefs, he sat down to think, he turned his back on the idea of progress, without really knowing how to go about it. The idea of progress is perhaps the first great vision of human life as historicity, as process, as constitutive change. It is the dawn of the "historical sense." But, as I have said, Goethe was blind in the face of history, and this blindness reveals to what extent he was tied to the eighteenth century, and particularly to the first part of it. Goethe came out against the idea of progress, as a constitutive law of history, as expounded by Turgot, Price, Priestley, and Comte; and he did so, not because he had discovered another, more authentic physiognomy to the historical process, but because, like Descartes and the pure rationalists, he refused to see a process in human life. On the contrary, he attempted to consider it as something which, in its essentials, remains invariable. Thus Goethe saw in man not only an invariable "nature", unsubjected to the ebb and flow of time and as though eternal, he even preferred to see it transsubstantiated. Here we touch on the origin of his Hellenist mania. I have not the time to dwell here on this famous Hellenism of Goethe's, which his own compatriots have treated in such a ridiculous manner. But here we have discerned its true source.

Greece, like the Renaissance, offered a perfect model. These were forms of the past that helped Goethe, and many of his contemporaries, to confront the future. Simply because the future at that time offered a minimum of insecurity and danger, they could help themselves abundantly to examples from the past.

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But now let us imagine an opposite condition of life: one in which the future presents a more than problematic physiognomy, in which it appears as an infinite danger, in short, one in which life is, in a radical sense, *futurition*. Problems hitherto

unknown in their depth and scope now rise up like menacing constellations never previously beheld. The stablest things, the things that were for man the very *terra firma* on which his feet were planted, suddenly become uncertain or else reveal themselves to be errors, Utopias, or pious dreams.

Then man, once again, turns his power of attention backward and looks to the past to find the arms, the instruments, the modes of conduct that will enable him to confront a more than problematic future. And what, in fact, does he find in the vast attic that is the past? The problems are so radically new, affecting as they do the very structure of what are called the "principles of civilization," that nothing that has been accomplished or experienced in the past can serve us in our attempts to solve them. Nothing that history reveals has meaning for a future with such a strange silhouette. The past can no longer offer up valid models. And so the future, with its colossal charge of problematic elements, effaces the past, as far as its exemplarity is concerned. Man will inherit the past, but he will not accept it; it will be, as the Roman jurists used to say, a heritage *in-adita, sine cretione*.

No, this man cannot feel himself an inheritor in the same sense as Goethe. He is, on the contrary, a disinherited soul without an effective past behind him. It is not a past that projects itself adequately over the future, because the latter is out of harmony with it. It is a useless past, that he can neither respect nor admire. It might well be said that the past is like the tail of the comet—that which procures stability. Whence the radical instability of our own times. For such, quite simply, is the situation of contemporary man. This man of the West who is so old, having lost his past, finds himself transformed at one blow into a primitive—in the good as well as in the bad acceptance of the word. This is our situation today.

Those who every day repeat to us with touching bigotry that Western civilization

must be saved seem to me like taxidermists laboring to revive a mummy. Western civilization is dead, dead of a beautiful and honorable death! It has died of itself; it is not its enemies that have killed it. It has itself been the force that strangled its own principles in making them give everything "they had it in them" to give, and in proving, in the end, that these principles were not principles at all. That is why this death does not entail a disappearance. Like the Provost of Paris at the death of a French King, let us cry: "Western civilization is dead! Long live a new Western civilization!"

Even if I had the time to let my thoughts trot on at length, it would be a tedious endeavor to run through each of the great sectors of life, the intermeshing of which make up a "civilization," to show how today these principles are bankrupt. But fortunately every civilization has an organic structure, and its different functions, its parts, and thus its principles support each other and form a single hierarchy. This enables us to concentrate on the fundamental function in our civilization of science.

In no civilization more than in that of the West has science played so constitutive a role. Save for that of Greece, no civilization has known a like dimension of what we term "scientific knowledge," and even in Greece, where it was first conceived, never did it succeed in constituting the fundamental, "visceral" element of Hellenic civilization; or, to put it in more energetic terms, never did Greece live *off* science. Right up to the end of its historical existence, a few Greeks of the first rank, a mere handful at that, thought that the salient characteristic of the Hellenic peoples, setting them off from other civilizations, was what they called "culture"—*paideia*. This was shortly before Greece succumbed as a normative historical figure. But this *paideia*, considered as a fact and not simply as a *desideratum*, was not a constitutive organ of the general life of the Hellenic peoples; nor was this *paideia* based on the discipline of science, but rath-

er on the discipline of rhetoric. A few solitary groups—the Platonic Academy, above all—did maintain that culture, as an ideal, was basically science. But we have only to read the great promoter of the idea of *paideia*, Isocrates, to realise that in the Greek sense science never really succeeded in becoming a basic reality of its “culture,” and still less of its civilization. The fact that science interests us so much has given rise to an optical illusion according to which we have been led to suppose—thereby committing an obvious error—that it was deeply and widely interesting to the Greeks. But it was only when Hellas had ceased to be alive and was no more than a shadow of its former self, it was only when its inhabitants had become a sad, half-mummified people anxious to live off its professors in order to attract foreigners, that Athens, that perpetual rebel and enemy of thinkers, became a kind of Vichy of philosophy and the other *mathemata*.

It is no less arbitrary and false to call Western civilization formally Christian. Christianity is not an exclusive principle of our civilization, for it has been active in other civilizations. Furthermore, the people of the West have not lived exclusively from faith in God, but still more from another faith, which has worked them in a manner radically different from and independent of religious faith, that is to say, the faith in science, in reason. The *trivium* and *quadrivium*—the “lower” and “higher” of the “liberal arts” during the Middle Ages—were based from their first appearance on a cult of reason.

Now the sciences form a hierarchy, supporting and leaning on each other. But the two basic sciences of modern times have been physics and logic. If some grave accident affects the principles of these sciences, it is clear that it will also affect Western civilization. Its gravity will not immediately assume a melodramatic aspect, visible to all. Thus the layman who looks at a drop of blood through a microscope fails to detect the disease that lurks

in it. But for anyone at all skilled in diagnosis, there can be no doubt that the present situation of physics and logic is the symptom of a crisis in our civilization far deeper even than that provided by all the catastrophes of war or politics. For these two sciences were until recently the “safe” in which Western man kept the stock of gold that permitted him to confront life with confidence.

Not long ago I was talking to the greatest of contemporary physicists. I told him how much I admired the courage he had shown in deciding to formulate the “principle of indeterminacy.” This principle is, no doubt, a principle of physics, and as such, it expresses a fundamental fact in the order of so-called “material” phenomena. If it were no more than that, it would simply be another step forward in physical science, a new truth added to those already acquired. But it happens that this principle turns at the same time against the whole body of physics and destroys it, not as a new theory in physics customarily replaces the less rigorous one that preceded it, but in that it shatters the physiognomy of physics as far as knowledge itself is concerned. The implicit basis of physical knowledge heretofore was that the researcher limited himself to observing the phenomenon and to defining it in strict formulas. But the principle of indeterminacy proclaims that the researcher, in observing the phenomenon, creates it, that observation is production. Which is utterly incompatible with the thrice millennial idea of “scientific knowledge.” This amounts to saying that physics, *as far as knowledge is concerned*, and given the traditional meaning of this term, has ceased to exist.

What new form, what form more admirable than the past and traditional one will now arise to take its place, we still do not know; but what we are witnessing is, neither more nor less, the volatilization of physics.

“But if what you have discovered is so serious,” I added in the course of our conversation, “what is now happening to log-

ic, the ultimate and fundamental mortar of our civilization, is even more serious." The physicist looked me in the eyes, surprised, perhaps, that I should be familiar with what is still almost a secret, by virtue of its exceedingly abstruse character and recent rigorous formulation. "You are referring to Gödel's theorem?" he asked me. "Of course. I am referring to this theorem which gives a definitive expression to what had vaguely been felt for some time in the field of logic."

Gödel's theorem means that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as logic; that what we so called up to now was only a Utopia, and that one believed in logic because, ever since Aristotle, it was a *desideratum*, a program. But in the last fifty years, since Russell and Whitehead on the one hand and Hilbert on the other, attempts have been made to *realise* logic, and it was found to be impossible; be-

cause, strictly speaking, logic does not exist. Aptly enough, the original meaning of logic was "strictly speaking."

Our civilization knows that its principles are bankrupt—dematerialized—and that is why it has doubts about itself. But it does not seem that there ever was a civilization that died, and of a full death, from an attack of doubt. I seem, on the contrary, to recall that civilizations have perished for the contrary reason—from petrification or arteriosclerosis of their beliefs. All this clearly means that the forms hitherto honored by our civilization—or, to be more exact, by the people of the West—are exhausted and dried up, but for that very reason our civilization feels itself pressed and compelled to invent and invent in every order. One could hardly offer oneself a more delicious task. We must invent! And so I say to the young—both boys and girls—: Go to it!

The Light in the Window

MARGARET COIT

WHEN LLOYD CAME BACK from the woods, the echo of Lydia's words was still beating in his numbed brain. He tried to believe them; he could not believe them; he would not believe. Then he heard the roar of the motor, and the hot breath of the exhaust fanned his legs as the old taxi jerked past; and looking up, he saw the pale blur of Jimmy's face peering at him from the rear window.

Suddenly the images swung into focus. Again he saw Lydia, as he had seen her that morning before he flung himself away, down the stairs and off for the woods. He saw her standing there on the other side of the un-made bed, a pair of Jimmy's socks clenched in her hand. Now he heard her. Now the words sounded again, as if for the first—and the last—time. "I'm not coming back, Lloyd. This time, I'm not coming back."

Lloyd turned. The white storm-door had been thrown open against the house; like an empty tooth-socket, the hallway gaped blankly ahead. Lloyd plunged inside, slamming the door behind him. He raced through the house and, two steps at a time, up the back stairs to their bedroom. Swiftly, he began to strip the room of every vestige of evidence that a woman

had once lived there. Not much was left but the usual disorder and litter, some "run" stockings in the waste-basket, a few dusty *Good Housekeepings* under the bed, and on the cherry dresser the blue enameled compact that he had won at the County Fair, wide open now, its shattered mirror focussing the rays of the mid-morning sun. These, he bundled together, along with some run-down shoes, a Maxfield Parrish print, which he tore from the wall with a vicious rip, and the torn and greyish house-dress which had been white and lavender the first year of their marriage, and which Lydia wore now every morning, dumping it on over her nightgown and trailing around for hours.

Stripping the case from her pillow, he jammed everything in, plunged for the stairs, then hesitated, and flinging open the door of the opposite room, hurled the bulging pillow-case across the floor. For a moment, his eyes circled the chamber, the rusting crib between the two small-paned windows, the imprint of Jimmy's body still visible on the stained sheet, and the dent in the mattress like a tiny grave. He saw the over-sized baseball mitt on the hearth, and the worn-out pajamas still in a heap on the floor at the foot of