

THE INVISIBLE OBJECT

In 1948 Alberto Giacometti made a sculpture of a slim nude woman. With slightly bent knees she is reclining somewhat uncomfortably against a kind of high stool. On her face there is a horrified look and her mouth is half open. She seems to be holding something but the nervous hands with the wide-spread fingers are empty. The sculpture is called 'the invisible object'.

In 1943 the Hitlerites invited me to come to Germany in order to help them in their war effort. Not being friendly disposed toward their regime I declined the invitation but in consequence I had to disappear, for the time being, from the surface of this earth. I left my home and after some wanderings I found a shelter in the heart of the province of Brabant, with a peasant family that received me as the prodigal son, although they had never heard of me. And there, all of a sudden, as if by magic, I found myself transported back into 'the world we have lost'. It was a small and insignificant village where I lived for a year, not more than a cluster of houses around the Neo-Gothic church. But our farm-stead stood at a distance of half an hour's walk from this centre. It formed part of a tiny hamlet of three farms and the signal-man's home. For the great east-west trunk of Brabant ran along our home; beyond it, the endless moors and heaths of Campina stretched southward, till far into Belgium. It was a safe spot, and idyllic too, in the eyes of a city-dweller like me. Most of the time the war seemed very far.

We lived an extremely simple life there. The farms nearest to our hamlet, on both sides, were three quarters of a mile away. From there only a sand-path led to us. We had no electricity, no gas, no streaming water, no wireless, no telephone. The farmer read only a local paper, he and his family were not interested in politics. To them it was equal who oppressed them for oppressed they had always been. But they opposed the occupation regime because they knew that the nazi ideology was deeply pagan and anti-christian. Surely they were not educated people, in the sense, that we, sophisticated academics, attach to this expression. But this does not mean that they were uncivilized, on the contrary, they had

a culture of their own.

However, several important cultural values possessed quite another significance there than they have in our view, time for instance. None of them had a watch, in the kitchen an old clock was ticking but nobody ever looked at it. It only served once a week to tell them that it was time to go to church. I remember that I once asked the farmer what time it was. He smiled ironically at me and said: "Why do you want to know that?" The exact clock-time meant nothing to them. But was time, therefore, an 'invisible object' to them, something non-existing? No, surely they lived in an order of time just as we do but their time-sense was different from ours.

They got up very early in the morning in order to milk the cows but they did not need an alarm-clock; when we were working in the fields, we went home for dinner merely because our stomachs told us so. Their lives were governed by the rhythm of the week - Sunday being the day of rest and of church-going - and the turn of the seasons. They did not indicate the years by means of dates - 1939, for instance - but of labels: "in the year when our Miet received Holy Communion for the first time we had a good harvest". But don't be mistaken, all this does not mean that they lived in a nebulous universe. On the contrary, they had expectations of the future, they had a clear knowledge of the past, although their historical past - that of their own region, for instance - was mainly mythical. And above all, their sense of the present was very solid. For it was marked by the regular things they had to do. Every day and every week and every season had its own fixed points, and every great moment in life - birth, marriage, death, the 'rites de passage' - was surrounded with time-honoured customs, hallowed since they stemmed from a mythical past.

I need not explain that our sense of time is completely different, I already did so in these columns. What I mean to do is to describe how very far-ranging changes are going on all the time profoundly altering our feeling for time (but we historians do not pay much attention to them). In former issues of our periodical I already mentioned several of them. Now, however, I want to point out that these changes do not lead

us back to the venerable and real time-sense of my peasant family. I believe that the sense of the 'clock-time' - the arithmetical time - is almost imperceptibly waning but no 'natural' sense of time will be substituted for it. In an earlier essay I said that the use of drugs is a means to escape from the constraints of arithmetical time; not for nothing the euphoric state they cause is called a 'trip' - a trip into a Nirvana without clocks but also without past, present and future. Here every kind of time has become an invisible object.

Now I invite you, whether you like it or not, to seat yourself in front of the tv-screen and turn on the British 'Music Box' or some other program of pop music. You shall observe that the music is interspersed with a great number of 'videoclips' - short films of a 'psychedelic' character. With this I mean that these films cannot be located in time and space, they have no clearly defined subject, they do not tell a story or proclaim a message. Compare them to commercials that, however short, always tell a story and have a message. Videoclips have no demonstrable relation to the foregoing and following ones. They do not show a sequence. We can observe the same lack of interest in sequence and meaning when we see youngsters using the remote control to switch constantly from channel to channel. This means that none of the categories that Aristotle thought essential to human understanding can be applied to productions such as these: substance, time, space, relationship. Or expressed in less philosophical terms: there is no present, and therefore no point, in them. I wonder what the effect is on youngsters; not a few of them are watching videoclips for hours. But such 'clips' - clipped from every real context as they are - must exercise a profound influence on their perception of time, including that of historical time.

It would be wrong to suppose that the sudden eruption of the videoclip-phenomenon is something entirely new. The depreciation of the present has been going on for a long time. Take for instance evolutionism. Till far into the eighteenth century the history of the human species was perfectly surveyable. We all descended from Adam and Eve and human history did not span more than six thousand years. There were scholars who knew exactly when the world was created, some of them were even

able to mention the exact day of the year of creation. Now we no longer know from what being - human or animal - we sprang. And the stretches of historical, or rather biological time have grown so immensely long that they loose all meaning to us. The past of our race has become nebulous to a degree.

This is all the more important since evolutionism is essentially a science of the past, one feels inclined to say, a 'historical' theory. This factor makes it different from other branches of science - physics, for instance - that need no past; for science history is of no use because it only contains what has been rejected or overtaken. But in evolutionism it is fundamentally important since even in its earliest stages all the tendencies and developments are already given that will shape future existence. Every actual state of affairs is only a moment in that development. Darwin was perfectly consequent when he did not want to hear of 'finality' - this being an aspect of the future it would destroy the whole idea of evolution. For finality would always mean that there is some force or power outside the evolutionary process that is steering it. But in stating this he reversed the trends of nineteenth-century thought. For, to quote the Dutch philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven, "in the view of the Ancients history always was an attempt to reinstate an ideal of the mythical past, in the modern view it is an attempt to reach an ideal in the mythical future".

No wonder that later theoreticians of evolutionism had their troubles with Darwin's consistency. In his inaugural address of November 3, 1967, the famous French biologist Jacques Monod introduced the term 'teleonomy', and he added: "This is the word one could use if, for reasons of objective prudery, one would like to avoid 'finality'". Teleonomy thus becomes a 'pre-programmed finality' or a cause that originated in the past. In this view the past remains as important as ever but pointers to the future arise. In Monod's view there was, however, no room for a steering power, in or outside evolution; the origin of life and the process of evolution (with its products) are the result of chance and of nothing else.

To many people this did not seem satisfying at all. It meant to them that they came from nowhere and that life has no purpose. Most of us

cannot stand this idea. It was Teilhard de Chardin who equipped the evolution theory with the fundamental notion of 'finality'. He did this in his well-known book 'Le phénomène humain' (1955). Permit me to repeat what I wrote in this periodical some time ago (1985/2): "The history of the world was presented by Teilhard as a 'cosmogogenesis' during which all lines and tendencies were steadily mounting until they would finally converge in an 'omega point' where all distinctions of matter will be dissolved and love will be all in love". One of the main attractions of this immensely popular idea was that it definitely re-introduces the notion of finality into the evolutionary process. In Teilhard's view there exists a conscious directive power in this process. Another alluring element is that past, present and future are connected with each other in a meaningful way. Nevertheless, it remains true that in Teilhard too the centre of gravity, the pith of the matter, lies in the past. There, somewhere at the cosmogenic origin of all things, long before humanity came into being, the point of departure from which everything originates and starts to develop is to be found. This diminishes the significance of the present considerably since it does not seem to exist in its own right but is hemmed in between the determining past and the radiant future.

We may observe more or less the same phenomenon in Marxism. In Marx' philosophy of history there is also a long development from past via present to future in which the present is nothing more than the stepping-stone to the next phase. In marxist dialectics too history represents a mounting process. We all know that Marx borrowed this idea from Hegel but narrowed down the development theory of the Berlin professor to the field of history, more in particular the history of society. First there is a 'thesis' - for instance the ancient slave-holding societies - with an incurable tension in it - here that between masters and slaves -, and this tension is the 'antithesis'. Finally such a society breaks down under the strain but from its ruins a new one arises - here the medieval society - which again shows an unhealable opposition between its two main social groups (viz. the landed proprietors and the serfs). After the destruction of the capitalist society by the great revolution of the labourers, the final synthesis will be the classless society which, possessing no

classes and, therefore, no basic tension, will prove to be everlasting - paradise on earth.

We detect in this theory the characteristics of many 19th- and 20th-century utopian schemes; some hidden but obviously conscious power steers the whole process firmly in the direction of the radiant future. And here too the development process starts far back in the past where evidently some kind of 'cosmic error' took place the consequence of which is that human history always is the product of tensions. And here again the present moment is not lived for its own sake, as the momentary fulfillment of human existence, but as a passing phase that leads on to a new and inevitably higher one. Finally - and this is in accordance with the relative unimportance of the present - the directive force is not singularly interested in human co-operation, for although men may hasten or slow down the process a little it follows inexorably its own impetus.

Proceeding along the same road - and the distance is not so great as it seems - we encounter another famous 19th-century philosophy, Freud's theory of psycho-analysis. Here too the burden of proof in human existence rests with the past. Somewhere in earliest infancy something fatal happened - the human equivalent of the cosmic error - which determines the whole future of the individual. He lives in a state of neurosis or even of psychosis which means that the present for him is crushed, even obliterated by his past. Only the past has a meaning, the present has none. And here again we meet this quasi-impersonal steeringforce, for the patient does not know what it is that dominates him; often he does not even know that he is dominated.

The art of the psycho-analyst is to lay bare the old sore spot in the patient's youth. This is extremely difficult and a long and painful process since the patient has no conscious insight into his problem. If the attempt of the psychiatrist miscarries, for instance because he misjudges the situation, the patient relapses into his former condition and is much the worse for it. Freud's first great cure, the much advertised healing of Anna O. - which became the foundation-stone of his fame -, was in fact a complete failure, because the symptoms of the young woman's illness, a paralysis of the arm, returned soon afterwards. But

Freud was careful not to disclose this!

Finally, modern sexuality must play its role too in our considerations. In this respect there undoubtedly exists a great difference between the opinions of former generations and ours. We might say that for the people of the (not so long ago) past sexuality was mainly functional, it served for the procreation of children and for the dissolution of physical and psychical tensions. This is not to say that other aspects were completely absent, that of mutual love for instance. For sexual intercourse between marriage-partners meant - or was meant to be - a historical moment, it could become the beginning of new human life.

During the last decades the emphasis has steadily shifted from the functional to the affective and also to the hedonistic aspects of sexuality. Whilst the procreative function lost much of its importance, the psychological factors of the direct and exclusive love-relationship between the partners and the importance of lust came more and more to the fore. Paradoxically enough, the significance of the present moment, in this intimate relationship, was greatly diminished. It was Nietzsche who said it succinctly (in his 'Also sprach Zarathustra', 1882 - 1885): "Alle Lust will Ewigkeit", all lust wants eternity. In the intensity of the highly individual sexual encounter (for there is no thought of a possible child) the authentic present moment becomes, at best, an 'eternal moment' into which all time seems to have been dissolved. But perhaps we must rather say, with the American novelist Walker Percy, that the well-defined present moment dissolves here not into eternity but into infinity. He expresses his meaning in these words (in his novel 'Lancelot', 1977): "There is only one kind of behavior which is commensurate with anything whatever, in both its infinite good and its infinite evil. That is sexual behavior. The orgasm is the only earthly infinity. Therefore it is either an infinite good or an infinite evil". Five times in these few sentences the word 'infinite' recurs!

Must not our conclusion be that, to all intents and purposes, in our time the present, the real, fully lived moment, has become an invisible object. All the main philosophies and tendencies of our own days tell people that it is of no importance. This means that the ground under

the feet of modern man is washing away - a thing that may explain much of modern uncertainty, helplessness and insecurity, with all its tragic consequences. There is reason enough to ask ourselves, as the guardians of history teaching, whether our discipline has, in this respect, a therapeutic and countering value or that it is rather drifting away on the stream of the time.

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Lese Frucht

"Treue ist auch eine Form der Askese. Die Verliebtheit schwindet - und es bleibt die Treue; das Reizvolle verschwindet - und es bleibt etwas, was sehr wichtig ist im Leben; Freundschaften, eine lang andauernde Liebe, Loyalität. Das sind Werte, die wir uns häufig gar nicht bewußt machen, aber auf denen die ganze Kultur beruht."

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in: Die Zeit 33, 8.8.1986