

## TRADITION

There are certain terms which, for reasons no longer discoverable, have taken on an emotional force which impels people either to admire what they seem to stand for or to dislike it. Among such terms are the temporal and the eternal, the dynamic and the static, the unified and the multiple, the universal and the local. At the present time to say that a work of art, for instance, has been "universally admired" is presumably also to say that it is better than one which is admired only in France or Italy or the United States. To say that courage or truthfulness or charity have always been "highly esteemed" is also to say that they are inherently nobler qualities than, for example, originality or wit, which are highly esteemed only in certain epochs. It is this curious aura of emotivity which Professor A. O. Lovejoy in one of his ingenious terminological inventions once called "metaphysical pathos." "Metaphysical pathos" is not merely the name for the power which terms have of stimulating pleasant emotions, of making men feel that the things they name are good. It may also be of an unpleasant sort. It may induce dislike as well as admiration. Where one man speaks of the dynamic with something approaching awe, another calls it "aimless striving" or "spiritual restlessness," forgetting that only a hundred and fifty years ago the German Romantic philosophers could think of no nobler end of man than striving for striving's sake. Hence it is always useful and

for the most part necessary to look closely at those abstractions by means of which we justify our programs. It is for this reason that it may be well to examine one of our own sacred words, "tradition," which seems to have replaced even that perennial favorite of the poets, "nature."

It is one of the peculiarities of terms from which emanate waves of metaphysical pathos that both those who admire and those who dislike what they stand for seldom ask whether they stand for anything whatsoever. "Nature" and its derivatives have been shown to have over sixty-five meanings, and, consequently, when one uses this word, one might be expected to specify in just which of the many senses it is being used. To say that something is "natural" may mean almost anything, from its being something expressive of human as distinguished from animal nature to its being something which has not had to be learned, being innate. It may refer to that which is the peculiar character of one individual as distinguished from all others, and it may also mean that which is held to be commonly and universally present in all men.

In a situation of this sort it will be found that the forensic power of a word varies directly with its vagueness. For, to justify or condemn some act as "natural" or "unnatural," "eternal" or "temporal," "creative" or "mechanical," "organic" or "material," will turn out to be futile as soon as someone asks in precisely what sense such terms are being employed. Indeed, a little experience in argument will show that the demand for clarity will on the whole so annoy one's adversary that he will withdraw from the conversation, charging one with sophistry, splitting hairs, or simple bad faith. To those who are seduced by the metaphysical pathos of a given term, it is unthinkable that anyone else should be unresponsive to its charm. Similarly, a man who admires the frescoes of Piero della Francesca or the *Mass in B-Minor* thinks not only that everyone else admires them but that everyone else should admire them. If he thinks that Fouquet's portrait of Étienne Chevalier is one of the greatest pictures ever painted, he cannot understand how other people can rank Largillière's portrait of Louis XIV above it. And woe to the peacemaker who would attempt to point out that both Fouquet and Largillière were great painters and that their differences were differences in aesthetic conception; that each work of art is an individual being and that it should not be judged as a member of a homogeneous class. He will be set down at once as a fuzzy-minded eclectic; a man without standards, discrimination, or taste. In much the same way, the man who

uses the term "immortal" in praise seldom if ever asks himself why the immortal should be any better than the ephemeral, nor does he even dream of asking just how many years a thing must endure to be honored with the sacred adjective.

Though I am no believer in ages, one can say with some justice that every period has its favorite words. In Greek such words as "nature," "autarky," and the "one" were of almost magical power. In modern times the seventeenth century saw the rise of the "rational," the eighteenth saw "enthusiasm" gaining ground, the nineteenth went in for the "vital" and the twentieth for the "creative." When one is dealing with the past, one can make some guesses about why certain terms won adherents; but, when it is a question of the present, the answer is hard to find. We are now, for instance, seeing "tradition" emerging as something to be praised, but no one knows why as yet. We have papers on, and propaganda for, the scientific tradition, the Hebraic-Christian tradition, the classical tradition, and the humanistic tradition. We have the Graeco-Roman tradition opposing the Teutonic tradition, the occidental tradition opposing the oriental, the humanistic tradition opposing the tradition of empirical science. In the United States there is much talk of something called the "American way of life," and one of the most popular books in that country has been entitled *The Greek Way*. No one has yet been able to define just what the former consists in, and the only reason why the latter made any sense is that the paucity of records eliminated complexity. Happy the historian who has but one text to go on! With Diogenes Laertius as our only guide, it is easy to write a history of ancient philosophy. And how simple it would be to write a history of France from the 18 Brumaire until Waterloo if one had only the *Memorial de Sainte-Hélène* as evidence of what took place! But what revelation have we that reality is more simple than appearance, that the unity which we attribute to our historical facts is not projected into them by our very method of research, and that the satisfaction which we feel when we have achieved an intellectual unification of diversity is more than the scholar's personal gratification?

Turning now to the word "tradition," we find first that, like all such terms, it is used both in a descriptive sense and in a normative sense. Descriptively, it may assert that there has always been complete uniformity in the things and acts which compose the tradition; but sometimes it may assert that the uniformity "underlies" the obvious diver-

sity. Between these two extremes there is a variety of shades of meaning depending on how much diversity one is willing to admit as not destroying the “essential” unity. Since the only completely homogeneous acts of human beings are those which are essential to life, such as eating and breathing, no one whom I have ever read on the subject—and this includes Joseph de Maistre, the Vicomte de Bonald, and their disciplines—denies that traditions are not absolutely uniform. But, relying on a metaphor which Herder made popular in the eighteenth century, the plant, they assert that traditions grow. If traditions grow and one knows what one means by growth, and if it is better to grow than not to grow, then one can accept a certain kind of change and also preserve the normative sense of one’s word. If growth were not admitted, then a tradition would be nothing more than a simple repetition of the same acts, words, gestures; and it is clear that cultural history shows constant diversification rather than persistent repetition. Yet, etymologically, the word denotes the act of passing on something which one already possesses, and both Littré and the *New English Dictionary* give as the primary meaning of the term the legal meaning of handing on, as to one’s heirs, one’s property. Though one can prove little by pointing to the original meaning of terms, it is likely that part of the pathos of the word “tradition” is a residue from its legal meaning. This prayer that I say, this coat of arms which I bear, this house in which I live, these books which I read—all these have come down to me from my ancestors, generation after generation. In that fact resides no small emotional force, even if what has been handed down is nothing more than the Hapsburg chin or the Bourbon lip.

The notion of growth is, as I have said, far from clear. It involves change; that is certain. But it must be change of a peculiar kind. As Bergson would have pointed out, we do not speak of a snowball’s growing when we roll it about to build it up except in a figurative sense—figurative, if the growth of a plant or an animal is the literal sense. But in the case of plants and animals there are two factors which we have to consider: (1) all members of the class change in the same way, following the same course, and (2) there is a terminus to the series of changes. All hens’ eggs develop in twenty-one days into chickens and into nothing else, unless someone interferes with their development and boils or fries them. All eggs, once they have reached the point of being chickens, have reached the end of their growth. (If one prefers, one can

## *Tradition*

substitute the dead hen or cock for the chicken; the argument is the same.) It is, however, clear that one cannot use the term "tradition" in this sense when we are speaking of cultural history. For there are no classes of similar traditions to compare with each other in order to permit us to form a generalized and homogeneous group of things. There is only one Hebraic-Christian tradition, one classical tradition, one humanistic tradition. But where one has only one object, anything that it does may be called either accidental or self-determined. And in all probability if one could explain how any one of these traditions had developed, half at least of its charm would evaporate. For one likes to think that each tradition develops in accordance with an entelechy the behavior of which is a bit mysterious. After all, who knows why a hen's egg turns into a chicken instead of into a duckling?

Not only is there no sheaf of similar traditions by comparing which one could anticipate the growth of any given tradition but in the very nature of things no tradition has a terminus. Consequently, one can never know what it is growing into. Civilizations, in spite of Spengler and Toynbee, or for that matter, Volney, do not die unless the people who made them are exterminated. They change. Fewer people read Greek now than read it fifty years ago, but thousands read the Greek tragic poets in translation, at least in the United States. If this seems implausible, does anyone think that the publishers of the famous paperbacks print them for sport? It needs no proof from me to show that parts of ancient civilizations get absorbed into modern civilizations. Most Occidentals still observe the rituals of some Asiatic religion, and many still are disciplined by a modern form of Roman law. But, as I say, this is a commonplace. Does it lead us to assert that the tradition of Roman law grew into the law of the state of Louisiana? Or that the Greek poetic tradition grew into English translations made by a professor of Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania? If ever there was a rhetorical question, these are rhetorical.

If a given tradition has no ascertainable terminus, all that can be said about its growth is that it increases in size. That seems to be what is meant when the church speaks of "tradition." It is pointed out that certain beliefs which are not found in the Bible were nevertheless held by a great number of people; these beliefs one by one became accepted dogmas of the church, and thus the Catholic tradition grew. No previously held dogmas are rejected, so that the total number of dogmas in-

creases as time goes on. It is also assumed that no new dogma is inconsistent with the total mass of dogmas. This concept of tradition preserves the etymological meaning of the term and at the same time permits change. But usually proponents of tradition are reluctant to admit change in any sense of the word which is not growth. One wants as much permanence as possible. The question in a world where time is admittedly real is, "How much permanence is possible?" The child remains within the man, if the Freudians are right, but he rarely emerges as a child. And, when he does, the man consults a psychiatrist.

One of the ways to retain the past and yet accept change is through the use of the concept of potentiality. The distinction between the potential and the actual is too well known to require explanation here, but it may be well to point out that one knows what is potential only by observing the actual occurring as its end term and occurring so frequently as to be called "inevitable." The nature of a thing, said the inventor of the distinction, is that which it is on the whole. Sometimes he was willing to grant that things go wrong, but that there was a determinate order in natural events he refused to deny. But here again one is frustrated for the simple reason that a single tradition cannot be observed in a number of instances. It is, as we suggested above, the only instance which we have. How can one predict on the basis of observing the first term in a series what the later terms are going to be? This is true even in arithmetic. Is one to say that the dogma of the Corporeal Assumption of the Virgin is potential in the Resurrection of her Son or that the doctrine of universal suffrage is potential in the theory of natural rights? And, if one does say that, does one mean that one has observed a number of cases in which the mothers of incarnate gods were translated into heaven as the Greek heroes were translated into the Islands of the Blessed? Does one mean that universal suffrage is implied in the theory of natural rights as a theorem in geometry is implied in the definitions, axioms, and postulates? When it is a question of what is potential in a belief or set of beliefs, one is indeed usually talking about what is supposed to be implied in them. But in the examples cited the tradition of the Assumption was admittedly the repeated assertion by different people at different times that they believed in its occurrence. And during the ceremony of pronouncing the new dogma, the Holy Father was petitioned three times to declare this belief a dogma not on the ground that it was implicit in any other dogma

but on the ground that it had been believed over the centuries. In the second example the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—to use American illustrations—imply in no sense of that vague term the right of every adult to vote. In fact, it might just as well be argued that the one assurance of preserving these rights is the presence of a benevolent tyrant. I am far from denying that some ideas are implicit in others and that they are inferred from them in the course of history. It might prove difficult to find instances of this happening but surely not an *a priori* impossibility.

The techniques of applying the metaphors of growth and potentiality to tradition serve to let us retain both permanence and change. Another way of doing this is by introducing the concept of levels. Thus one speaks of, let us say, the “classical tradition” as being one and immutable in what is called a “deeper sense,” while growing and therefore changing on the level of perception. It is not difficult to illustrate something like this. It is, for instance, impossible to write a declarative sentence in an Indo-European language without using the subject-attribute form. This form has as its metaphysical model the permanent “thing” with attributes which come and go. Therefore we can say that even Aristotle and Rousseau were in fundamental agreement in that they both believed in what might be called the “metaphysics of the thing.” Moreover, there will in all likelihood be a certain harmony among all writers, regardless of the language they use, for inevitably they write either about the world of their experience or about an imaginary world modeled upon it, though perhaps beautified, aggrandized, diminished, reconstructed, or otherwise modified. In both cases we can say, if we wish, that we have discovered an “underlying unity” in the thoughts of a number of different people. I confess to not understanding why this unity should be called “deeper” or “underlying,” for it is found on the same level as the diversity. But we need not argue about terminology. Such words as “deep,” “profound,” and “internal” are very gratifying to some minds, and, as long as one does not take them seriously, they are harmless.

It is not hard to see how one can find such an underlying unity in a group of writers. Take, for instance, the classical tradition in philosophy. Here one might select such writers as Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, with whom it is prudent to stop. We then point out that Heraclitus made the distinction between the world of perception, the Flux, and the world of the Logos, the

permanent reality; that Plato pointed out that the former is inhabited by temporal copies of the realities in the latter, the Ideas; that Aristotle bridged the gap between the two worlds with his concept of the immanent forms; that Plotinus introduced a graded hierarchy of reality, goodness, and beauty into Aristotle's world and thus made the passage from appearance to reality more comprehensible; that Augustine took over from Plotinus his hierarchical cosmos, made the Ideas of Plato thoughts in the mind of God in accordance with which he created the world; and that Thomas, identifying the God of the Bible with the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle, brought the whole tradition to a culmination in his theology.

There is of course a certain truth in this superficial sketch. But it is obvious that this truth is attained by eliminating from the philosophies in question all disagreement. It is simply not true that Heraclitus had any "world" of the Logos at all in the sense that the Platonists had a world of Ideas. There are, in fact, few concepts in philosophy the meaning of which is so disputed as that of the Logos of Heraclitus.<sup>1</sup> Its very obscurity permitted later philosophers to use it as they would. Moreover, it is unlikely that Heraclitus would have insisted on the existence of the Logos if he had not been also impressed with the existence of the Flux. Hence it is wiser to locate the conflict between permanence and change in the heart of his philosophy rather than either of the conflicting beings. As far as Plato is concerned, it is questionable whether he is more interested in developing a theory of two worlds or in combating the relativism and skepticism of the Sophists. As for Aristotle, the historians do indeed award to him the credit for "bridging the gap" between the two worlds; but, when one goes back to his text itself, one finds that something called *Physis* seems to take the place of the permanent order of things—an order never perfectly exemplified in the world of experience. In fact, Aristotle is as critical of what he believes to be Plato's theory of Ideas as he is of the pre-Socratics. If what I say has any justification, the historian interested in traditions would do better to admit that it is he who creates the tradition by selection and organization and not the men about whom he is writing.

Aside from all other considerations, one can write the history of Greek philosophy from the point of view of the adversaries of Plato and Aristotle, the Sophists and the Sceptics. One can write it from the point

1. See, among other works, Clémence Ramnoux, *Héraclite* (Paris, 1959), Index, *s.v.*



of view of the Hedonists and the Cynics. If it is usually written from the point of view of the Platonists and Aristotelians, that is presumably because the Christian Fathers could use their works to greater advantage than they could use the works of the other Greek philosophers. What might be called the "Platonistic theme" is not any more Greek philosophy than sophistry or skepticism or hedonism or cynicism is. The Stoics and Epicureans were also Greek and also very influential Greeks. One could say with some justification, though not without incurring the criticism that one was indulging in a *boutade*, that the outstanding Greek tradition in philosophy was to agree with no one as far as possible.

In intellectual history one must expect that a man's thoughts are usually developed to combat someone else's thoughts. Much of what we think is thought because we disagree with someone or other. We attempt to fortify the truth as we see it because it is under attack. Even in the Middle Ages, though there might be agreement on the name which would be given to the truth, there was far from unanimity on just what the truth was. Intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, mysticism and fideism, rationalism and voluntarism, trinitarianism and unitarianism—all were in a flourishing state, and each was as it was because of its adversaries. One can speak of Christian philosophy, as Professor Gilson does, only if one first accepts the official definition of what is Christian. But in that case neither Roscellinus nor Abelard nor Johannes Scotus Erigena are Christian philosophers. Yet they themselves were preoccupied with supporting what they believed to be Christian dogma. If one refuses to include those of their ideas which were condemned when one writes a history of the Christian philosophical tradition, one does so in order to create a homogeneous and consistent tradition. But, if homogeneity and consistency are the differentiae of a traditional set of beliefs and practices, then the goal should be the constant repetition of the same beliefs and practices in exactly the same form. The Japanese who destroy the Temple of Ise every twenty years and then rebuild it precisely as it was before would be the perfect traditionalists.

It is obvious that there will be in any set of historical events a certain similarity. This is inevitable, for it is impossible for a human being to depart entirely from the way in which he has been educated. In fact, even if he deliberately sets out to be entirely original, he will plot his course in exactly the opposite direction from that in which he has grown

up. But this is submitting to the past also. Moreover, the very fact that we are human beings will give rise to a similarity of needs, desires, and aims. Everyone is conceived, born, fed, and educated; everyone has some kind of economic and sexual appetites; most people marry and have children; the children have to be reared; the dead have to be disposed of; all people seem to feel the need of communicating with others. Thinking of such things, the ethnologist—and, alas, also the philosopher—discovers uniformity in space and time and becomes eloquent on the subject of the universality of human values. But the moment he proceeds beyond this point and looks into the manner in which a given society will permit such needs to be fulfilled, he finds that the universality is fractured. All people talk to each other. But some people, for example, Japanese women, have to use a form of speech when talking to a man which is used by inferiors talking to superiors. Is that a trivial difference? All people have incest taboos. But in some societies the mother's family is taboo but not the father's. Such examples are commonplaces, but their importance has been overlooked. The more one studies such things, the more one is convinced that there is no need, drive, or appetite the satisfaction of which is not disciplined and controlled by society. When the violation of a taboo may lead to capital punishment and international war, the taboo is not trivial. It is all very well to say that eating is universal, but a man cannot just eat in the abstract: he has to eat something. The searcher after universality should consider not merely the desire but the desire plus its object. Homosexuality is frowned upon in most countries and punished severely in some. Are we frowning upon the existence of a sexual appetite or upon a manner of satisfying it?

We may now turn to the second question—that of the normative value of traditions.

It cannot be denied that a man who never has to change his manner of living is less beset by problems than one who is constantly confronted by new situations. For problems arise precisely because novelty is before one. One would like to use yesterday's solutions to today's problems, but they usually will not work. In times when the social structure is stable there are no famines, no floods, no earthquakes, or other natural catastrophes; when the population shows no alarming increase or drop, when there are no wars, no financial crises, one can get along from day to day in a jog-trot way, repeating the past indefinitely. For the difference between past and future is simply chronological, not qualita-

tive. This is a perfect situation for the lover of tradition. The only novelty which might arise would be created by those recalcitrant individuals who are found in every social group. But they can be easily squelched, since their problems are not those of the group as a whole, and hence their answers are irrelevant to any questions of importance.

If our ways of living have been developed to meet needs which once were real and if they survive in part because some of those needs continue to be felt, then, when traditions are violated or set aside, it may well be because they no longer satisfy any needs. This statement has to be qualified, since few things are ever lost in a society simply because they are no longer useful. In truth any institution, such as the army, metallic money, handicrafts, and magical rites, which may have been originated as useful practices, will survive as good-in-themselves. They may be given new names, but they themselves will live on regardless of the name they bear. The importance of this is seen in the justification of our obsolete practices. One can be sure that the moment an institution is justified on the ground that it is good-in-itself, has what some philosophers call "terminal value," it has lost its utility and is being kept alive as *objets d'art*, ancient monuments, and sterile fruit trees are kept alive: they are beautiful. They are not always called "beautiful"; sometimes they are called "sacred." They are traditional institutions or ways of behaving in the sense that they are retained from the past by what might be called the "inertia of custom."

It is easy to ridicule this, but it is the principle by means of which the fine arts arise from the useful art and religious ritual from magic. The inertia of custom gives stability and hence psychological security to a society. The resistance to change is probably an excellent brake upon too rapid changes. A change may be too rapid when it will create new evils to replace those which it has eliminated. And, annoying though it be to have one's proposals for change analyzed and discussed by committees and the like, the delay in accepting a reform may turn out to be prudent. But there happen to be times when the total situation confronting an individual or a society is so novel that no precedents can be found for solutions to the new problems. I should like to suggest that the middle twentieth century is one such time. If one compares the state of the sciences, physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology today with what it was in 1900, one sees at once that an intellectual revolution has occurred. But the same thing is true in the arts. What would Monsieur Ingres have said to Matisse or Jackson Pollak, he who could

not control his temper before a Delacroix? What would Gounod have said to Schönberg, not to mention Krenek, he who shrugged his shoulders in contempt when he heard the English horns in Franck's *Symphony in D-Minor*? What would Flaubert have said to Joyce, Balzac to Sartre, Mérimée to Kafka? Fifty years ago no one would have predicted the Communist revolution in Russia and China; it was supposed to occur first in industrialized countries. But to recount all the fundamental changes which have occurred since 1900 to upset our preconceived notions about social organization, science, and the arts is unnecessary, for no one likely to read this article is unaware of them. On the basis of what tradition can one judge the truths of nuclear physics, the beauty of a non-objective painting, the efficacy of an economic program? The answer is obvious.

I should like to conclude by pointing out that if a tradition, such as the study of the classical languages, to take but one example, is allowed to die out, that is not because of sin. It is probably because only a few people find that it responds to any need which they feel. Sometimes, I realize, people's needs are excited by propaganda and that form of psychological warfare known as advertising. How far this can go I do not know, and it may be true that through an advertising campaign men may be induced to cut their throats and to marry ugly women out of a spirit of Christian charity. But such things are unusual, and generally traditions are not killed but die. They die of inanition and in spite of the common desire to preserve the past as long as possible. We know, for instance, that, in the United States, Greek and Latin were kept in the curriculum as long as the majority of university students could be assumed to be studying for the ministry. And even today when a man is thinking of becoming a clergyman, he studies Greek and Latin, regardless of what others may do. He studies them because he feels it essential to be able to read the Vulgate and the New Testament, not because these languages train the mind or are an integral part of the Western tradition or inform you about the original meaning of a number of modern English words. If the great mass of university students in the United States could be convinced that they needed to know what is written in Greek and Latin and furthermore that they could not read it in translation, they would begin the study of those two beautiful languages. But it would be hard to convince people who face the second half of the twentieth century that the classics are more important than the natural sciences.