

TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM

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Except from The Reign of Quantity and Signs of the Times

THE falsification of everything has been shown to be one of the characteristic features of our period, but falsification is not in itself subversion properly so-called, though contributing fairly directly to the preparation for it. Perhaps the clearest indication of this is what may be called the falsification of language, taking the form of the misuse of certain words that have been diverted from their true meaning; misuse of this kind is to some extent imposed by constant suggestion on the part of everyone who exercises any kind of influence over the mentality of the public. It is a case of something more than the mere degeneration alluded to earlier, whereby many words have come to lose their original qualitative meaning, keeping only one that is purely quantitative ; it is more a question of a " diversion ", whereby words are applied to things which they do not fit in any way, and sometimes in a sense directly opposed to their normal meaning. This is one of the most obvious symptoms of the intellectual confusion which reigns everywhere in the present world ; but it must not be forgotten that this very confusion is willed by that which lies hidden behind the whole modern deviation ; this thought obtrudes itself particularly in view of the simultaneous appearance in many different quarters of attempts to make illegitimate use of the very idea of " tradition " by people who want improperly to assimilate its significance to their own conceptions in one domain or another. Of course there is no question of suspecting the good faith of any particular party, for very often it may be a case of mere incomprehension and nothing more; the ignorance of most of our contemporaries about anything possessing a truly traditional character is so complete that this need cause no surprise. Nevertheless it must also be recognized that such errors of interpretation and involuntary misconceptions serve the purpose of certain " plans " so well that it is permissible to wonder whether their growing diffusion may not be due to some of the " suggestions that dominate the modern mentality, all of which lead ultimately to nothing less than the destruction of all that is tradition in the true sense of the word.

The modern mentality itself, in everything that characterizes it specifically as such (and this must be said once more, for it is something that cannot be too often insisted on) is no more than the product of a vast collective suggestion, which has operated continuously for several centuries and has determined the formation and progressive development of the anti-traditional spirit, and in that spirit the whole of the distinctive features of the modern mentality are comprised. Nevertheless, however powerful and clever the suggestion may be, a moment may always come when the resulting state of disorder and disequilibrium becomes so apparent that some people cannot fail to become aware of it, and then there is a risk of a " reaction " which might compromise the desired result. It certainly seems that matters have to-day just reached that stage, and it is noticeable that this moment coincides exactly, by a sort of " immanent logic ", with the moment at which the merely negative phase of the modern deviation comes to an end, the phase represented by the complete and unrivalled domination of the materialistic mentality. This is where the falsification of the traditional idea comes in with great effect ; it is made possible by the ignorance already mentioned, itself but one of the products of the negative phase; the very idea of tradition has been destroyed to such an extent that those who aspire to recover it no longer know which way to turn, and are only too ready to accept all the false ideas presented to them in its place and under its name. Such people may have become aware, at least up to a point, that they had been deceived by openly anti-traditional suggestions, and that the beliefs imposed on them represented only error and deceit ; that is certainly a change in the direction of the " reaction " alluded to, nevertheless no effective result could accrue if nothing further were to happen. This is clear enough from the growing quantity of literature containing the most pertinent criticisms of our present civilization, but contemplating measures for the cure of the evils so rightly denounced that are, as indicated earlier, curiously disproportionate and insignificant, and often more or less infantile: such proposals can be said to be " scholarly " or " academic " and nothing more, and there is anyhow nothing in them that gives evidence of the least knowledge of a profound order. This is the stage at which the effort made, however praiseworthy and meritorious it may be, can easily allow itself to be turned aside towards activities which will, in their own way and despite

appearances, only contribute in the end to the further growth of the disorder and confusion of the " civilization ", the reinstatement of which they were intended to bring about.

The people just referred to are such as can properly be described as " traditionalists ", meaning people who only have a sort of tendency or aspiration towards tradition without really knowing anything at all about it ; this is the measure of the distance dividing the " traditionalist " spirit from the truly traditional spirit, for the latter implies a real knowledge, and indeed in a sense it is the same as that knowledge. In short, the " traditionalist " is and can be no more than a mere " seeker", and that is why he is always in danger of going astray, not being in possession of the principles which alone could provide him with infallible guidance; and his danger is all the greater because he will find in his path, like so many ambushes, all the false ideas set on foot by the power of illusion which has a capital interest in preventing him from reaching the true goal of his search. It is indeed evident that this power can only maintain itself and continue to exercise its action on condition that all restoration of the traditional idea is made impossible, and more than ever so when it is preparing to take a further step in the direction of subversion, subversion being, as explained, the second phase of its action. So it is quite as important for the power in question to divert searchings tending towards traditional knowledge as it is to divert those concerned with the origins or real causes of the modern deviation, and thus liable to reveal something of the true nature of the said power and the means of its influence; these two devices are both necessary and in a sense complementary, and they could fairly be regarded as the positive and negative aspects of a single plan of action having domination as its objective.

All misuses of the word " tradition " can serve this same purpose in one way or another, beginning with the most popular of all, whereby it is made synonymous with " custom " or " usage ", thus bringing about a confusion of tradition with things that are on the lower human level and are completely lacking in profound significance. But there are other and more subtle deformations, all the more dangerous because of their subtlety; but all have as a common characteristic that of bringing the idea of tradition down to a purely human level, whereas on the contrary there is nothing and can be nothing truly traditional that does not contain some element of a superhuman order. This indeed is the essential point, containing as it were the very definition of tradition and all that appertains to it ; this is also therefore the very point which must on no account be allowed to emerge if the modern mentality is to be maintained in its state of delusion, and still more if it is to have yet other delusions imposed on it, such as will not only suppress any tendency towards a restoration of the super-human, but will also direct the modern mentality more effectively towards the worst modalities of the sub-human. Moreover in order to become aware of the importance assigned to the negation of the super-human by the conscious and unconscious agents of the modern deviation, it is enough to observe how all who lay claim to be " historians " of religion and of other forms of the tradition (and they anyhow usually mix all these forms together under the general title of " religion ") are eager above all to explain everything in terms of exclusively human factors ; it matters little whether, according to school of thought, these factors are psychological, social or anything else, the very multiplicity of the different explanations facilitates the seduction of a greater number; common to all is the well-defined desire to reduce everything to the human level and to retain nothing that surpasses it ; and those who believe in the value of this destructive " criticism " are thenceforth very ready to confuse tradition with anything whatever, since there is nothing in the ideas inculcated into them such as might enable tradition to be distinguished from that which is wholly lacking in traditional character.

Granted that nothing that is of a purely human order can for that very reason legitimately be called " traditional ", there cannot possibly be, for instance, a " philosophical tradition " or a " scientific tradition " in the modern and profane sense of the words, any more, of course, than there can be a " political tradition ", at least where all traditional social organization is lacking, as is the case in the modern Western world. Nevertheless such expressions are in common use to-day, each in its way denaturing the idea of tradition; and it is obvious that if the " traditionalists " referred to above can be persuaded to allow their activity to be turned aside towards one or other of these domains and to confine their activity to it, their aspirations will be " neutralized " and rendered perfectly harmless, and may even sometimes be used without their knowledge for a purpose exactly contrary to what they intend. Indeed it sometimes happens that people go so far as to apply the word " tradition " to things which by their very nature are as directly anti-traditional as possible : thus they talk about a "humanist tradition ", and a " national tradition " despite the fact

that humanism is nothing if not an explicit denial of the super-human, and the formation of "nationalities" has been the means employed for the destruction of the traditional civilization of the Middle Ages. In the circumstances it would not be surprising if people began one day to talk about a "Protestant tradition" or even a "lay tradition" or "a revolutionary tradition" or if the materialists themselves ended by proclaiming themselves the defenders of a "tradition", if only in their capacity as the representatives of something already belonging in a great measure to the past! Most of our contemporaries have reached such a state of mental confusion that associations of the most manifestly contradictory words bring about no reaction on their part and do not even provide them with food for thought.

This leads at once to another important observation when a few people have become conscious of the disorder of these days owing to the all too obvious effects of its present stage of development (more particularly since the stage corresponding to a maximum of "solidification" has been left behind) and when these people try to "react" in one way or another, the best means for making their desire for "reaction" ineffective is surely to direct it towards one of the earlier and less "advanced" stages of the same deviation, some stage in which disorder had not yet become so apparent, and was as it were presented under an outward aspect more acceptable to anyone not yet completely blinded by certain suggestions. Anyone who considers himself a "traditionalist" must normally declare himself "anti-modern", but he may not be any the less affected, though he be unaware of the fact, by modern ideas in a more or less attenuated form; they are then less easily detected, but they always correspond in fact to one or other of the stages passed through by these same ideas in the course of their development; no concession, even unconscious or involuntary, is admissible on this point, for from the very beginning up to the present day, and beyond that too, everything holds together and is inexorably interlinked. In that connection, this much more must be said: the work which has as its object to prevent all "reaction" from aiming at anything farther back than a return to a lesser disorder, while at the same time concealing the character of the lesser disorder so that it may pass as "order", fits in very exactly with the other work carried out with a view to securing the penetration of the modern spirit into the interior of whatever is left of traditional organisations of any kind in the West; the same "neutralizing" effect on forces of which the opposition might become formidable is obtained in both cases. Moreover something more than mere "neutralization" is involved, for a struggle must necessarily take place between the elements thus brought together as it were on the same level and on the same ground, and their reciprocal enmity is therefore no more than an enmity between the various and apparently opposed productions of one and the same modern deviation; thus the final result can only be a fresh increase in disorder and confusion, and that simply amounts to one more step towards final dissolution.

As between all the more or less incoherent things that are to-day in constant agitation and mutual collision, as between all external "movements of whatever kind they may be, there is no occasion to take sides", to use the common expression, whether from a traditional or from a merely "traditionalist" point of view, for to do so is to become a dupe. Since the same influences are really operating behind all these things, it is really playing their game to join in the struggles promoted and directed by them; therefore the mere fact of "taking sides" under such conditions is necessarily to adopt, however unwittingly, a truly anti-traditional attitude. No particular applications need be specified here, but it must at least be made clear in a general way that in all this agitation principles are always and everywhere lacking, despite the fact that "principles" have surely never been so much talked about as they are to-day on all sides, the word being commonly applied more or less regardlessly to things that are least worthy of it, and sometimes even to things that imply the negation of all true principle. This particular misuse of a word is again highly significant of the real trend of the falsification of language already well exemplified by the perversion of the word "tradition"; that example has been specially stressed because it is most closely connected with the subject of this treatise, in so far as the latter is intended to give a picture of the last phases of the cyclical "descent". It is not in fact possible to stop short at the point which represents most nearly the apogee of the "reign of quantity", for what follows that point is too closely connected with what precedes it to allow of any separation being made otherwise than quite artificially; no "abstractions" are therefore admitted here, for they only represent a particular form of the "simplification" so dear to the modern mentality; on the contrary, the object is as far as possible to present reality as it is, without omitting anything that is essential for the understanding of the conditions of the present period.

