

Tradition—the radical option?*

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A recent issue of the architectural journal *Perspectives* carried an editorial entitled "Tradition, the radical option." The general drift of the piece was that things have gone rather badly in recent decades, not only in the architectural world, but in the built environment in general. Something, the editor argues, has to be done to improve matters. The point of the piece was to suggest that, having tried more or less everything and having got nowhere, perhaps it was time to reconsider the role tradition has played and might yet again play in determining and fructifying our efforts to build a culture and a society that we could not only be proud of but that would prove to be the sort of environment that would nurture and sustain the highest in man.

However, the editorial uses the term tradition with such elasticity that in the end it becomes difficult to see exactly what is being referred to. It speaks of tradition being destroyed, of the tradition of life, of familiar traditions, of radicalizing tradition, of its having reactionary overtones, of tradition as a resource and, finally, and perhaps most misleadingly, of *re-inventing* tradition.

The editorial certainly makes an important point in suggesting that tradition might yet play a constructive role in any attempt to improve a situation increasingly seen to be in need of reform. But a vital question goes unanswered. Which is: precisely why might tradition supply the

redeeming element to any future attempt to improve our overall cultural situation? — a situation in which, it seems, such matters as custom, habit, expediency, pragmatism, economic opportunism, and the like, have failed to provide the kind of environment to which men and women can feel they are empowered by them to give of their best.

Both the editorial and the question it implicitly poses but leaves unanswered suggest that we might usefully examine the root meaning of tradition — tradition in its universal and principal sense — as a preparation to going on to consider what such a meaning might entail at the level at which we conduct our daily lives. We should first note that this work of re-examination must take place against the background of the fact that we live in abnormal times. That is to say, we live in an intellectual atmosphere that, for the last 400 years or so — and in contrast to virtually the whole of the rest of the history of the human race — we have endeavored to live not only as if the extent and limit of reality is circumscribed by the phenomenal world of time and space, but also, and as a consequence, we have pretended that the sole purpose of human intelligence is to measure and quantify that world. We have done this, building up a considerable and imposing edifice of factual information, only to discover that something vital has been left out of our account. The ongoing debate in the architectural world is, of course, only one aspect of our discovery that man, after all, cannot live by bread alone. There are signs that we are waking up to the fact that man is spirit as well as body and, as seems increasingly likely, and against the current of most of our calculations, spirit must take precedence. All of which is another way of saying that our environmental crisis is, *in essence*, one we have engineered by refusing to recognise an order of knowledge and reality that goes beyond the sphere of the human as such.

In what follows, we will draw upon a universal and perennial wisdom — a wisdom underwritten by acceptance of the fact that it is both natural and logical for the human intelligence to seek the ultimate beginning and end of things. From such a perspective, nothing could be more absurd than to seek the origin and meaning of phenomenal reality in the phenomenal world itself. To such a wisdom it is self-evident that the origin of this world of appearances, of objects, of events in time, must reside in a domain where such things are as yet unmanifest. That is to say, and to put it at its simplest, phenomenal things exist in virtue of a noumenal reality, and it is the purpose of human life to discern the dif-

ference while attaching oneself, according to ability, to the greater, intuitive reality that goes beyond the closed circle of empirical data and its mental analysis.

The word “tradition” is merely one of many words one might nominate as having had their meaning gradually eroded simply because, in being allowed to mean almost anything, they come inevitably to mean almost nothing. But in the case of tradition the difficulty is compounded by the fact that the concept of tradition contains a super-abundant richness of connotations such as to make a neat and tidy definition all but impossible. It is the case with tradition as it is with all things whose origin must be traced back to Revelation. The problem — or better say task — is one of grasping the ontological mystery of the passage from essence to manifestation.

From the point of view of that perennial, metaphysical wisdom where we find the notion of tradition at its richest and most comprehensive, the nature of the Real is Sacred. Just as nothing can fall outside the Real as such (the Real is by definition always itself, the unreal being only the *possibility* of the absence of the Real), so nothing falls outside the theophany of the created reality within which we live. The profane is not an opposite and equal principle to the Sacred but falling away from the greater ineffable vision of the Sacred — a vision that is inherently spiritual. Such a vision has always challenged men and women to seek and fulfil their highest aspirations. The secular is an impoverishment of the numinous content of this divine vision. All spirituality and all traditional culture attest to this.

The word “tradition”, from the Latin *traditio*, indicates a transmission, a handing over, a handing down of something received. Clearly such a transmission must involve a language of some sort, whether written or pronounced, verbally or visually. The *content* and the *mode* of this language comprise the primary dimensions of tradition. Now if we are to avoid confusing the content of this transmission with the merely customary and the habitual we must see that tradition involves the vertical descent of an integrative, trans-human principle — something that comes from beyond the sphere of human contrivance. And if we are to rescue the mode of this transmission from the processes of temporal cause and effect, we must also see that tradition implies a continuity that transcends the horizontal, cumulative passage of historical evolution.

Such errors must be rectified if we are to understand that tradition is the assimilation of a divine order of knowledge and reality to the contingent circumstances of the time and place of human motivation and action. That is to say, in the attachment of the human to the Divine that is the ambient world of traditional meanings and values, both the descent of the Divine and the ascent of the human are a consubstantial and supra-sequential process that takes place in a timeless dimension of reality. In this, its trans-human and trans-historical dimension, a tradition is always “in the beginning” — that is, in the first principle. In this way tradition extends, to the whole domain of human activity, just this first principle — it is a channel of grace by means of which the specifically human is enabled to discern and assimilate the Divine origin of the things and their ultimate destiny.

This should be sufficient to indicate that tradition is far above being simply the accumulation of human endeavor and invention, even if tradition does, in a sense, have a “history”. We can certainly recognise that the external characteristics and the formal expressions of a tradition are colored by, and to some extent reflect, the passage of time. But that should not lead us on to ignore the fact that a tradition is only valid in so far as it reflects a supra-formal essence in the name of which it remains free of any determination of the conditions and properties of this world. The ambient world of a tradition prepares and fosters and act of internal witness whereby the expression of the truth of a tradition is never simply reducible to the contingencies of time and place. In doing so it preserves that Truth, knowledge of which, in the words of the Fourth Gospel, “will make you free”. It is one of the primary purposes of tradition to provide the objective criteria by which so called “historical necessity” is redeemed from the funeral cortège of time that is the “archives” of the past. The supra-human criteria of tradition wrests man from the impotence and deception of being measured by what he himself creates — of being continually lost among the detritus of his past productions, whether they be tangible or intangible artefacts or philosophies. Only by means of the metaphysical context a tradition provides in order to nurture the inherently spiritual ontology of the soul’s perceptions, can man cheat that inner death that insists that his life can never have any significance beyond the passage of his temporal existence. For tradition entrusts to the soul a kind of knowledge which is at the same time a sacred state of

being. In the light of this knowledge the necessity for it to preserve itself against whatever profane forces might threaten its very existence, tradition itself is no longer experienced as the defending of an historical practice. This knowledge, this state of being, penetrates beyond the world of time and space so as to transmute empirical experience in order to disclose the domain of its meaning. In that disclosure is the realization that our perception of the things of this world by our senses does not reveal the meaning of things, but only that they are registered in our consciousness as existent.

Here, we are surely at the heart of what is meant by tradition. For to speak of vigorously disassociating tradition from all that promises to lose it among the contents of history is another way of saying that tradition is capable of preserving an objective criterion. That is, a standard or a measure by which man can know *who* he is apart from what is merely *of* him. And since being comes before doing, only in so far as man *is* can he think or act. Any attempt to define man in terms of his “thinking” and his “actions” remains inadequate since such a definition must inevitably shelve the question as to *who* the ultimate agent is who thinks and acts. It is the nature of this ultimate agent which must define the human subject. The subject may have some conscious recognition of the name and the nature of its psycho-physical existence, but it is a metaphysical absurdity to imagine or pretend that the agent can be an object of knowledge for the psycho-physical self. Are we to conclude then that man cannot know objective truth and that every act of intelligence, every intellectual conclusion, is doomed to be no more than a provisional hypothesis? That would seem to be contrary to the very nature of intelligence, which is to secure a certainty that stands objectively over against the subject.

All intellectual effort takes place against the background of the unspoken assumption of the possibility of being free of the subjective process that is thought itself, in order to arrive at an objectivity that is free from error. And what is implied in this freedom is the sapiential function of intelligence — an access to the transcendent principles of the noumenal realms of knowledge and reality. This is the ultimate purpose of tradition: not to give direct access to truth but to provide a sanctuary for the intelligence to function in rapport with the sacred in order to energize and direct the intelligence towards Truth — that is, to effec-

tively abolish the cognitive distance between thinking and Truth, between existence and reality.

If the ontological status between Truth and intelligence is to be protected and maintained, then the diversity that is the pattern of subjective, individual thoughts must be reconciled to a single objective principle, namely, the Divine Intellect—the *Nous*—a transcendent consciousness without plurality, which each individual intelligence reflects and embodies. All traditions teach how the many individual dispositions of mind are essentially consubstantial with a supra-human intellect that transcends the “separateness” of individual minds to provide the true and ultimate ground of understanding in common. All effective intellectual communication is due to the fact that each individual mind literally “stands under” the trans-conscious principle of the Divine Intellect.

We have spoken of the relationship between tradition and the individual intelligence. But what about the relation between tradition and art, for art is the most familiar territory in which we encounter the formal expression of a tradition ambience. Considered metaphysically, tradition eludes precise formality as such. It does its work indirectly. On the other hand art is itself inseparable from a formal language of some sort. In a traditional context the forms of a sacred art offer a support for contemplation of the inherent spiritual riches of the tradition in question. Its forms recall and recapitulate the unfolding of the Divine Principle from its highest ontological source, causing the archetypal reality to re-verberate in the human soul.

This gives us a clue as to the importance of forms in art, for it must be understood that to any form whatever, a given quality of being is inescapably attached. Which is nothing more than to say that forms take shape under the scrutiny of an intuitive intelligence and so have the capacity to embody truth or falsehood — to *reveal* or *veil* truth. For this reason, and this reason alone, the symbolic language that is the integral expression of a tradition is not conceived according to the arbitrary impulses of the artist’s personality, but is formed on the basis of the artist’s immersion in the spiritual conventions and practices transmitted by the masters that come before him. This is not a matter of copying outward shapes or procedures but of learning to breathe the “living breath”, or intuitive spirit, in harmony with the symbolic mode of the traditional ambience that nurtures his inspiration. The artist, whose practical meth-

ods are none the less contemplatively based, proceeds to realise, in outward works, certain spiritual possibilities within himself. But the forms he creates are not the expression of his individuality. Arising from the depth of his being, and because of the obvious continuity between human sensibility and the forms of the natural world, these forms become the symbolic vehicle of that knower or agent who is the objective witness of the individual subject. In this way, the individual artist is able to surmount the limited means of his ego to give expression to a level of reality that transcends what is merely personal. And because of the integral spirituality of a tradition, the artist is able to transfigure his worldly environment with an atmosphere and an order of being that reflects and recalls the primordial economy and unity of the Divine Artist — the Creator. Each act of creation in a traditional context establishes a formal correspondence between the cosmic and human worlds. And since the human world is without value and meaning when set apart from the cosmic and sacred context in which it is embodied, an art that adequately expresses a traditional vision serves as a continual reminder of the primordial orientation of man towards a physical/metaphysical bipolarity of experience.

So what has emerged from this attempt to recover the essential meaning of tradition? We have seen that tradition is not truth as such but is the ambient mode by which truth is received. We have seen that the Sacred is the source of tradition even as transcendent truth is its very life. From this it follows that tradition nurtures the sacred character of intelligence, not through the function of any dialectical or causal demonstration but by means of the intuitive witness of the soul's responses to beauty, order, harmony in the experience of life. Which is to say that tradition is not the external chain of events that is history, but is that which precipitates an internal event in the soul. As such tradition is the light that illuminates the inner witness of truths that are themselves ultimately bound to transcendent principles. It is an ontological illumination by which the amplitude of the Divine Principle irradiates all things in the manner of a light at the center of all cognition. By means of this light the sacred nature of intelligence is empowered to recognise what is immutable from what is transient. And if we can say that the Sacred is the *root* of Tradition as such, then we can say that a tradition is the *heart* of each religion. And in the fact that the word "religion" comes from the Latin *religio* —

meaning “to bind back” — we recognise that tradition offers the means to secure attachment of the will to what is real and permanent.

So we come full circle. From what has been said, we can perhaps see that it is both natural and logical for men to look to tradition to provide some saving element in their affairs. But perhaps we have also been able to see something of what any recourse to tradition properly entails. Even, perhaps, to dispel the illusion, very prevalent in our time, that tradition is either, on the one hand, something that we can disregard as we would something that is outmoded and has been surpassed, and on the other hand, that tradition can be appealed to as a means of guaranteeing the formal success of any endeavour we might make in the face of the cultural crisis we inhabit. What, above all, I hope we have seen is that tradition is the intrinsic mode of a specific body of revealed truth. Like all metaphysical knowledge, tradition takes account of the inexpressible—the silence that permits the word—the void that permits all manifestation. Which in turn explains why tradition, as a mode of cognition, permits intelligence to hold a mirror to the infinite in order to recognise, in accordance with cosmic principles, its affinity with it. What, finally, we have to acknowledge and accept in turning to tradition is that it cannot be improvised merely by recourse to whatever human aspiration we choose. For outside of the light of tradition it is not even possible for man to determine *who* he is. And in that particular darkness are hid the seeds from which have grown the crisis and the problems that prompt us in the first place to ask whether tradition might yet be a force to reckon with. The way in which we answer that question will determine whether or not all is lost.