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F O R E S T S

THE SHADOW OF CIVILIZATION

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achieve what he called “mastery and possession of nature.” One of the ways in which this dream of mastery and possession becomes reality in the post-Christian era is through the rise of forest management during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Forests become the object of a new science of forestry, with the State assuming the role of Descartes’s thinking subject. Predictably enough, modern forestry reduces forests to their most literal or “objective” status: timber. A new “forest mathematics” goes so far as to measure them in terms of their volume of disposable wood. Method thus conspires with the laws of economy to reappropriate forests under the general concept of “utility,” even in those cases where utility is conceived in aesthetic terms: forests as recreational parks, for example, or as “museums” of original nature.

Needless to say, we have by no means gotten beyond such conceptions. Enlightenment remains our dominant cultural heritage. Still today, in other words, we argue for the preservation of forests on the basis of their numerous uses and benefits. Why should we preserve the tropical rain forests? Their abundance of unique plant species, scientists argue, may one day prove useful for science and medicine. This concept of utility is more insidious and historically determined than appears at first glance, and part of the burden of the present chapter is to account for its origins.

In this sense, as well as others, the chapter goes beyond the well-known story of the subjection of nature to programmatic control and exploitation. As in the previous chapters, we will find that, here too, forests represent an opaque mirror of the civilization that exists in relation to them. In this case the various ways in which forests are conceived, represented, or symbolized will give us access to the shadow of Enlightenment ideology—its fantasies, paradoxes, anxieties, nostalgias, self-deceptions, and even its pathos. What we find in that shadow is the ghost of irony. From tragedy to comedy we now move decisively to irony as the trope which, in its several versions or declensions, holds sway over the post-Christian era as a whole. Irony is the trope of detachment. In what follows we will see in how many ways the real as well as imaginary forests of the new era reveal its darker enigmas.

THE WAYS OF METHOD

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche recounts the parable of the madman who rushes into the marketplace at high noon with a lantern in his hand and

shouts the news: "God is dead!" We have been in that marketplace before, with Zarathustra. "*We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers," declares the madman. As the people make a mockery of his pronouncement, the madman says to himself, "I have come too early . . . deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves" (*Gay Science*, ¶125).

Suppose we stopped this madman, calmed him down, and asked him: "When and where did God die?" And suppose he were to answer: "In 1637, in part 4 of the *Discourse on Method*!" A madman, after all, can afford to be precise about such matters.

Part 4 represents a critical section of Descartes's most famous work, without doubt. It is where he reaches the conclusion: "I think, therefore I am." Before reaching it Descartes had decided to doubt the veracity of everything he ever took to be true; yet the self-evidence of this fact—"I think, I exist"—is so persuasive that it will serve as the *fundamentum inconcussum*, or unshakable foundation, for the new edifice of knowledge which Descartes wants to erect. On the basis of its certainty Descartes presumes to prove the existence of God. That is precisely where God's demise takes place, the madman might say. The certainty of the subjective existence of the *cogito* becomes the ground for the certainty of God's existence, not the other way around.

Descartes salvages a role for God in his philosophy, to be sure, since God now functions as the metaphysical guarantor of the true correspondence between my clear and distinct ideas and the external objects that those ideas represent to my mind. But such a God is no longer the Christian God of faith. He is not a God I can pray to, appeal to, kneel before, seek salvation from, or worship. Descartes's God is already cold with rigor mortis—with metaphysics. (Blaise Pascal clearly saw the demise of the Christian God in Descartes's philosophy and expressed his anguish over it throughout the *Pensées*.)

In the background of Descartes's decision to doubt the veracity of all he ever took for granted lies the Copernican revolution in astronomy, which had made a mockery of sense perception. It was a revolution in irony—irony in its most devastating version. Irony, says Vico, "is fashioned of falsehood by dint of a reflection that wears the mask of truth" (*New Science*, §408). This was the sort of ironic consciousness that became ineluctable once geocentrism was revealed as an illusion of the senses. The reliability of sense perception had of course been doubted since the very beginnings of ancient astronomy, to say noth-

ing of Platonism, yet there was clearly something unprecedented about the Copernican revolution. All of a sudden the visible world became a deliberate delusion, a great cosmic hoax, an ironic veil of deception.

Out of such doubts, however, certainty was to emerge. In parts 2 and 3 of the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes tells the story of how he arrived at this insight. He describes the time in his life prior to his discovery of stable foundations for knowledge—the time when he was still lost in a world of unreliable opinions and beliefs, without knowing how to discriminate effectively between truth and falsehood. He had already been persuaded by the efficacy of “algebraic geometry” as a method for seeking truth, but the method still lacked a metaphysical foundation. He decided, therefore, that until such time as he found a foundation for his mathematical method he would observe a “provisional code of morals” in his practical life, remaining firm and resolute in his temporary course of action, no matter how doubtful that course may have seemed:

In this I would imitate travelers who, finding themselves lost in a forest, ought not to wander this way and that, or, what is worse, remain in one place, but ought always walk as straight a line as they can in one direction and not change course for feeble reasons, even if at the outset it was perhaps only chance that made them choose it; for by this means, if they are not going where they wish, they will finally arrive at least somewhere where they probably will be better off than in the middle of a forest. (Descartes, 13)

Although it refers specifically to following a course of action with resolution, we could say that this analogy stands in the same relation to Cartesianism as the analogy of the cave stands in relation to Platonism. It maps out, as it were, the ways of method. Method (from the Greek *meta-odos*, or along the way) means literally the “path,” hence the analogy of following a path through the forest is particularly appropriate in a treatise on method. Descartes’s analogy of course brings other scenes to mind—Dante’s dark forest, for example, where the “straight way” is lost and cannot be pursued. In Descartes’s analogy the forest is likewise a place of error and abandon, but unlike Dante, Descartes appears confident that there is indeed a *way* to walk in a straight line through the forest.

This confidence comes from the reliability of method itself.

Dante's pilgrim depended on divine assistance to get out of the forest. It came to him in the figure of Virgil. But once it finds its foundation in the *res cogitans*, Descartes's subject of knowledge can rely strictly upon its own resources to escape the realm of randomness and error, thanks to its adherence to the linear path of mathematical analysis. Descartes's analogy of walking in a straight line through the forest is, as Michel Serres has noted, "isomorphic" with the method of algebraic geometry itself (*Le système de Leibniz*, 2:452n). Mathematical analysis follows the way of numbers and more numbers in a linear series until it reaches its final result. The triumph of method in a forest of doubt implies the ability to hold to the straight line of mathematical deduction.

But there is even more to Descartes's analogy, for the forest is a broad analogy for all that goes by the name of tradition, which for Descartes means the accumulated falsehoods, unfounded beliefs, and misguided assumptions of the past. Descartes takes his stand against tradition the moment he decides to doubt its authority and to rely upon his own personal resources in the quest for truth. This detachment from the ways of the past, and Descartes's presumption to become methodically self-reliant in matters of action and knowledge, point to the post-Christian phenomenon that goes by the name of Enlightenment. In the next section we will look at what is at stake in such detachment in more depth. Meanwhile there are good reasons to suppose that Descartes's forest refers, among other things, to tradition, or to everything that has grown up over time not by rational design but by custom. For the forest analogy in the *Discourse* distinctly recalls another analogy in the same text which compares the proper exercise of reason to the rational, geometric planning of cities. In part I of the *Discourse* Descartes complains that

these ancient cities that were once merely straggling villages and have become in the course of time great cities are commonly quite poorly laid out, compared to those well-ordered towns that an engineer lays out *on a vacant plane* as it suits his fancy. And although, upon considering one by one the buildings in the former class of towns, one finds as much art or more than one finds in the buildings of the latter class of towns, still, upon seeing how the buildings are arranged—here a large one, there a small one—and how they make the streets crooked and uneven, one will say that it is *chance more*

than the will of some men using their reason that has arranged them thus. (Descartes, 6)

Just as Descartes prefers towns conceived in the mind of a single architect to those that grow up diversely over time, so too, he says, the “simple reasonings” of one individual (himself) are preferable to the knowledge one may gain from tradition and books, or the accumulated opinions of diverse people over time. These ancient cities that have grown up diversely over time, with crooked streets and uneven buildings, are the citadels of culture. For Descartes they are the results of chance, diversity, and randomness. In short, they are the forests of confusion in which Cartesian rationalism finds itself alienated, or better, “a-lineated.”

If Descartes finds himself alienated in the forest—or the historically embodied world as such—it cannot surprise us that he finds himself at home in the desert. The desert in this case means the “vacant plain” of the engineer’s mind, where the straight lines of geometry suffer no obstacles. It means the mind’s abstraction from history—its material and cultural disembodiment. The *Discourse* in fact recounts Descartes’s decision to abstract himself from his native country, to leave behind his friends and to retire in the foreign police state of Holland in order to pursue his philosophical work. Of his new abode, Descartes declares with satisfaction: “I have been able to live as solitary and retired a life as I could in the remotest deserts” (17).

Descartes composed the *Discourse on Method* (which at one point he calls a “fable”) as a hagiographical tale that ends with the saint’s solitary retirement into the desert. Yet an irony pervades the fable, for the straight lines of algebraic geometry, which are at home in the deserts of abstraction, finally circle back to the material world from which the Cartesian *cogito* abstracts itself. At the end of *Discourse* Descartes reveals the true ambitions of his method. Referring to certain “general notions” he had acquired from physics, he writes:

[T]hese general notions show me that it is possible to arrive at knowledge that is very useful in life and that in place of the speculative philosophy taught in the Schools, one can find a practical one, by which, knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, just as we understand the various skills of our craftsmen, we could, in the same way, use these objects for

the purposes for which they are appropriate, and thus make ourselves the masters and possessors of nature. (33)

The knowledge that Cartesian rationalism seeks by way of method is not merely of the speculative sort, as in the traditional schools. It has an active and practical ambition. It is not knowledge for knowledge's sake, any more than the craftsman's technical know-how is. The ways of method promise neither salvation nor wisdom but rather *power*. They lead to the mastery and possession of nature, that is to say toward an appropriation of the power traditionally assigned to God. Reason, method, and technical craftsmanship come together at the end of the *Discourse* in a secular confession of the will to power.

The goal of mastery and possession of nature represents the highest form of practical activism. The new philosopher is more of an engineer than a saint, nor does the "vacant plane" of the engineer's fancy, where reason projects its designs, remain vacant for long, since a geometric city springs from its desert. Likewise the forests do not remain places of random confusion once mastery and possession become the agenda of the era. As we will see in the following section, when method finds a way out of the forest it returns to subject them to the rigors of method itself.

By way of conclusion we can remark that Descartes dies in 1650. In 1657 Fabio Chigi becomes Pope Alexander VII. During his eleven-year reign the pope transfigures the ancient city of Rome that had become over the course of time the sort of "straggling city" Descartes had complained about in the *Discourse on Method*. Where before there had been a labyrinth of streets, winding alleyways, historically diverse edifices, local neighborhoods, and polycentric clearings in the midst of all this, there is now the master clearing of the Piazza del Popolo with its three radically linear avenues stretching south for several miles. The master avenue in the middle, connecting the Piazza del Popolo with the equally triumphant clearing of the Piazza di Venezia, would be misnamed had it any other name than "Via del Corso." Via del Corso: the way of ways; the tautology of method; the course of the *Discourse*. How a Roman pope in the seventeenth century caught the contagion of Cartesian rationalism remains an enigma, but Richard Krautheimer's book, *Roma Alessandrina: The Remapping of Rome Under Alexander VII*, tells the full story of this urban transfiguration. Thus we return to our madman and ask him a final question: "How does

one walk in a straight line through the forest?" Answer: "Methodical deforestation."

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT? A QUESTION FOR FORESTERS

In a 1784 essay entitled "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" Immanuel Kant gave a brief but notorious answer to the question. He defined Enlightenment as the coming of age of an age. To come of age meant, for Kant, to appeal to the law of reason as the highest legislative authority in secular affairs. But what does that imply? That Enlightenment is a historical event that at some point takes place? That it is an ideological revolution? The reform of the political constitution? All of these? Let us leave Kant's essay aside for a moment and propose our own answer to the question.

Enlightenment is a projective detachment from the past—a way of thinking which detaches the present from tradition and projects it forward into an ideal secular future ideally governed by the law of reason. The future remains Enlightenment's true heritage, while the present lags behind its republic of reason. Since the present has yet to accomplish all the social and political reforms dictated by reason, Enlightenment relates to its present age critically. Enlightenment is that which has already happened and not yet happened. It has happened to the extent that one dares to affirm the law of reason—"dare to know!" as Kant said—but it has not happened to the extent that the future must still fulfill its dictates. Enlightenment is always underway. It is an unending labor to come of age. To adopt the ambiguous metaphor used in reference to the cultural heritage of the United States—Enlightenment is the "child of Enlightenment."

The historical present of Enlightenment thus remains ambiguous. The authority of tradition continues to hold sway over the present, yet it also slowly gives way to the pressure of reason's forward march. This view of Enlightenment allows us to understand why Vico speaks of an "age of reflection" to which belongs the mode of consciousness called irony. As the trope of detachment, irony implies a critical relationship to the past. From an "enlightened" perspective, the ways of the past appear erroneous, self-deceived, and steeped in superstition. What tradition held to be true Enlightenment sees as false. (The sky was once believed to be an animate substance, but "we know better.") At the most fundamental level, then, irony demystifies the dogmas of