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The Snares of Wisdom

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E. M. CIORAN

The Snares of Wisdom

ONCE WE REALIZE TO WHAT DEPTH appearances are credited by the normal consciousness, it becomes impossible to endorse the Vedantic thesis according to which "non-distinction is the soul's natural state." What is meant here by natural state is the state of being awake, which, as it happens, is anything but natural. The living man apprehends existence everywhere; directly he wakes up, directly he has ceased being *nature*, he starts detecting falsity in the apparent, appearance in the real, and ultimately entertains doubts about the notion of reality itself. Gone are all distinctions, and with them go tension and drama. When viewed from too great a height, the kingdom of diversity and of the many vanishes. On a certain level of knowledge, only non-being can hold up.

We live only out of ignorance. As soon as we gain awareness we feel at odds with everything, but while we are benighted, appearances thrive, and clinging to them is a scent of the inviolable that moves us to love or to hate them, to come to grips with them. How could we level off against phantasms? Yet that is what they become once we are disabused of their claim to rank as essences. Knowing, or being awake rather, opens between them and us a rift that, unfortunately, represents no conflict; if only it did, we would have no complaint. But no, it is, rather, the silencing of all conflicts, the dire abolition of the tragic. . . .

Contrary to the affirmation of Vedanta, the soul is by nature inclined to multiplicity and to differentiation. It flourishes only in the midst of semblances; if it unmasked them, it would cut itself from the stalk and wither. In waking up, it forfeits its power to release, let alone sustain, any creative impulse whatever. Deliverance being at the farthest remove from inspiration, to seek it would, in the case of a writer, be tantamount to a resignation, more than that, to suicide. If he hopes to produce, he must follow his bent, for good and for evil alike, especially for evil. By liberating himself from it, he becomes estranged from himself:

his reverses are strokes of luck. He could find no surer way of wrecking his gifts than placing himself above success and adversity, pleasure and pain, life and death. Through his desire to be done with them, he may, one fine day, discover that he is beside himself and the world, with just enough vigor left to conceive some project, but at his wit's end when it comes to executing it. This phenomenon has a bearing on the world at large: whoever means to make his mark must completely divorce living from dying, must set all such couples of contraries at sword-point, wantonly multiply their irreducible differences, wallow in antinomy; he must, in short, remain on the surface of things. To produce, to "create," means denying oneself clear-sightedness, having the courage or good fortune not to perceive the lie inherent in diversity, the deceptive nature of the multiple. A work can be created only if we blind ourselves on appearances; as soon as we stop attributing to them a metaphysical dimension, we are bereft of all our resources.

Nothing stimulates us more than inflating trifles, setting up spurious antitheses, spying conflicts where none exist. To refrain from doing this would bring about universal sterility. Only illusion is fertile; it alone can *originate*. Through its agency we are able to give birth, to engender (in every sense of the word), to merge ourselves with the dream of diversity. The gap between us and the absolute may be and is, in fact, unreal; nevertheless, this unreality, which enthusiasts of action do not view as unreal, is our very existence. The faster we hold to appearances, the more productive we are: to create a work means embracing all these incompatibilities, these trumped-up antagonisms in which lively minds revel. The writer should know, better than anyone, what he owes to these mirages, these sleights-of-mind, and beware of losing his curiosity about them; if he neglects them, or denounces them, he will have cut the ground from under his own feet, discarded his materials, and find himself practicing in a void. Should he then turn to the absolute, what he will find there, at best, is gratification in stupor.

Only a god hungering for imperfection within and outside himself, only a harrowed god could have imagined and brought forth the creation; only a man made in his image can aspire to an enterprise of the same order. If wisdom figures foremost

among the causes of sterility, that is because it does its utmost to reconcile us with the world and with ourselves. No greater misfortune could befall our ambitions and our talents; it *wisens them*, which amounts to saying that it kills them, it afflicts our innermost self, our secrets, persecuting what sinister qualities we are lucky enough to have; it undermines us, submerges us, it compromises all our defects.

Have we done violence to our desires, molested and stifled our attachments and our passions? If so, we shall curse those who gave us the necessary encouragement, above all the sage in us, our most redoubtable enemy, who is to blame for curing us of everything, except nostalgia for the maladies he cured. There is no limit to the turmoil of someone who yearns for his bygone enthusiasms and, inconsolable for having conquered them, feels himself succumbing to the poison of quietude. Once we have perceived the nullity of all desire, it takes superhuman powers of obfuscation, it takes *saintliness*, to experience desire anew and yield to it unreservedly. The detractor of wisdom who also happened to be a believer would repeat endlessly: "Lord, help me fall from grace, help me wallow in error and crime, give me words that will scorch you and consume me, that will reduce *both of us* to ashes." Someone who has never felt a craving, almost beyond endurance, for purity, cannot know what it is to crave the abyss. When one has dwelled too much on paradise and made a haunt of the hereafter, they begin to pall. Disrelish for the next world leads to an amorous obsession with hell. Without this obsession, religions—in their equivocal aspect—would be incomprehensible. Aversion to the elect, attraction to the outcast: such is the dual movement of all who dream of their former follies and would commit any sin just to stop treading "the path toward perfection." They note, with despair, the progress they have made in becoming detached, whereas, by temperament, they were not suited for that calling. In *Milinda's Questions*, King Menander asks the ascetic, Nāgasena, what distinguishes the passionate man from the dispassionate man: "My lord! The passionate man, when he eats, tastes the flavor and the passion of flavoring; the dispassionate man tastes the flavor but not the passion of flavoring." The whole secret of life and of art, everything *here below*, resides in the "passion of flavoring."

When we no longer experience it, we are left, in our destitution, with one last resource: an exterminating smile.

Becoming progressively detached means foregoing all our motives for acting, it means losing the dividends of our defects and our vices, with the result that we sink into that state of mind known as *down in the dumps*—a void following the disappearance of our appetites, anxiety which has degenerated into indifference, submersion in neutrality. If in being wise we place ourselves above life and death, in being down in the dumps (understood as *stunted* wisdom) we fall beneath. It is there, underneath, that appearances are leveled, that diversity is invalidated, with frightening consequences, especially for the writer who, in a world where everything is on a par, has no reason to lean toward one aspect of it rather than some other; thus it is impossible for him to choose a *subject*—which can he prefer if objects themselves are interchangeable and undistinctive? Even *being* is banished from this absolute desert, as something rather too picturesque. We are in the very heart of the undifferentiated, of the glum and flawless One where, in place of illusion, we see, spread before us, a *prostrate* illumination disclosing everything, but this disclosure runs so radically against our grain that we yearn to forget it. In a state of awareness, no man can move forward, least of all the man down in the dumps; he lives in the midst of a *ponderous* unreality—the non-existence of things weighs upon him. To fulfill himself, merely to breathe, he must cast off the fetters of his *own* knowledge, which leads him to conceive of *non-knowing* as salvation. That he can attain only by hurling defiance against the spirit of impartiality and objectivity. A judgment which is “subjective,” partial, unfounded serves as a source of dynamism: on the level of acts, only the false is fleshed with reality, but when we are condemned to have an *exact* view of ourselves and of the world, what then can we adhere to, what can we still uphold?

There used to be a madman lurking in us; the sage routed him. When he disappeared, so did our most precious possession, that which made us accept appearances without ruining them as we now do by our practice of discriminating, at every turn, between the real and the illusory. So long as he was around, we had nothing to fear, nor did appearances, which continuously

wrought the miracle of changing into things before our very eyes. Once he disappeared, they relapsed into bankruptcy. He added spice to existence, he was existence. Now there is nothing to engage our interest, and we have no vantage point. True delirium is the absence of madness.

To fulfill ourselves, we must religiously intoxicate ourselves on the multiple. Where the One is concerned, nothing counts, except the One itself. Let us be done with it, then, if we intend to break the spell of indifference, if we wish to see an end to monotony within and outside ourselves. Whatever shimmers on the surface of the world, and goes by the name *interesting* is the fruit of intoxication and ignorance. As soon as we sober up, we make out nothing around us but barrenness and tedium.

Diversity, born of blindness, falls apart on contact with the sensation of being down in the dumps, which is *blighted* knowledge, a perverse fondness for identity and dread of the new. When this dread takes hold of us, making every change, whatever its nature, seem rooted in mystery and farce, making every event seem at once unfathomable and trifling, we have our eyes fixed not on God, but on the deity, on the immutable essence which does not deign to create, nor even to exist, prefiguring, by its vacuity, that moment, indefinite and unsubstantial, which symbolizes our stalemate. If, as antiquity has it, Fate likes to bring low whatever rises, the dumps would be the price man pays for his elevation. But the dumps undoubtedly beset (if less severely than man) every living creature that somehow or other deserts its origins. Life itself, when it slows its pace and the frenzy sustaining and animating it abates, falls prey to it. What is life, in the final analysis, if not a *phenomenon of rage*? A blessed rage, to which it is essential we surrender ourselves. Directly it seizes us, our unappeased drives come alive: the more they were contained, the more they give vent to themselves. The spectacle we then present does, in spite of its distressing side, prove that we are restored to our true condition, to our nature, despicable and odious though it be. We are better off effortlessly abject than "noble" by imitation or persuasion. An innate vice being preferable to an acquired virtue, we cannot help but feel ill at ease with people who do not accept themselves, with the monk, the prophet, the philanthropist, with those who bend backwards—

the miser to spend, the ambitious man to be resigned, the arrogant man to be deferential—with all who mind their manners, including the sage, who keeps himself in check, who is never *himself*. Acquired virtue is a foreign body: we like it neither in others nor in ourselves. It is a triumph over self that nags us, a feat that weighs us down and makes us suffer even when we take pride in it. Let us be content with what we are: anyone who longs to better himself must really revel in torture and misery.

If a book is uplifting or, for that matter, cynical, it is certain to stress the havoc wrought by anger—that performance, that crowning glory of rage. When blood rushes to the brain, and we begin to tremble, the effect of days and days of meditation is annulled. There is nothing sillier and more degrading than such a fit, which is inevitably out of all proportion to whatever prompted it; still, the pretext for it being forgotten once it has subsided, a stifled fury keeps rankling us until we draw our dying breath. It's the same with humiliations which we have borne "with dignity." If, in answer to an affront, we first think about our reprisal, wavering between a slap and murder, that wavering will not only make us lose precious time but, in so doing, seal our cowardice. Such vacillation has grave consequences; it is a lapse we cannot forgive ourselves, whereas an outburst, even if its consequences are grotesque, would have consoled us. Painful as well as necessary, anger prevents us from falling prey to obsessions and spares us serious complications: it is a fit of madness that reprieves us from madness. So long as we can count on it, on its regular appearance, we are assured of our equilibrium, as well as our shame. That it stands in the way of spiritual progress no one will deny; but as for the writer (since it is precisely his predicament we are considering here), it is not only not good, it is dangerous for him to govern his petulance. He should do his utmost to nurture it, or the penalty will be literary death.

When angry we feel alive; since it is, unfortunately, only a passing mood, we must be content with its by-products, ranging from backbiting to contumely, any one of which offers us greater scope than disdain—so frail, so abstract, lacking the warmth and breath of life, and unlikely to give us the least satisfaction. Once we have turned away from it, we discover, to our delight,

what keen pleasure besmirching others can bring. At last we are on equal terms with them, we are struggling, we are no longer *alone*. Formerly, we would study them for the intellectual titillation of finding their weak point; now we do it to strike home. Perhaps we should mind our own business: it is abasing, ignoble, to pass judgment on others. That, however, is what everyone does; by refraining, we ostracize ourselves. Man, splenetic animal that he is, never offers a commentary on his fellow men without disparaging them. Not that he is unable to speak well of them; but speaking ill of them gives him a far bolder sensation of pleasure and of strength. If he humbles and executes them, however, it is not so much to do them harm as to save the remnants of his anger, the remnants of his vitality, to escape the debilitating effects of long practice in disdain.

The slanderer is not the only one to benefit from slander; it is at least as beneficial, if not more so, to the slandered, provided he feels cut to the quick. If he does, his ideas as well as his muscles will be invigorated in a way he never thought possible; it will incite him to hate. Now hatred is not a feeling but a force, an ingredient of diversity which allows beings to thrive at the expense of being. Whoever holds to his status as an *individual* must strive to put himself in situations where he will be forced to hate; the best of these being slander, he may call himself a *victim* of it, but in so doing, he uses an improper expression, or else fails to recognize the advantages it holds in store. The abuse we receive, in words as in deeds, has some virtue only if it wounds us, if it smarts, and awakens us. Are we so unfortunate as to feel nothing? Then we shall fall into a state of calamitous invulnerability and forfeit the favors men, and even fate, do us when they deal their blows (whoever rises above slander will find it easy enough to rise above death). If we were deaf to the opinions noised about us, what reason would we have to slave at a task that craves the approbation of others? Is it even conceivable that a work could have some perfectly autonomous creator? By injuring ourselves, we blot out nearly all the sensations that come of living in common with others. The more immersed we are in solitude, the more we long to lay aside our pens. Of what and of whom can we talk if others no longer exist, if no one deserves to be dignified as an enemy? To have stopped reacting to opinion

is an alarming symptom, a fatal superiority, acquired at the cost of our reflexes, which puts us in the position of some maimed divinity delighted that he need not stir because he finds nothing worth the effort. At the other extreme, we feel alive in doting on things obviously doomed to pass away, in making a cult of insignificance, and perpetually fussing inside a sphere of inanity, in flying off the handle for no reason.

People who yield to their passions or to their whims, people who are forever emoting, stand out of harm's way (only Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians, who are afflicted with a sense of decorum, set store by psychoanalysis; it holds no attraction for Latin peoples). To be normal, to preserve our health, we should model ourselves not upon the sage, but upon the child, and kick and scream whenever the urge comes upon us. What could be sorrier than wanting to and not daring? For having unlearned to cry, we are at a complete loss—needlessly stuck to our eyes. In antiquity people used to cry, and later on as well, in the Middle Ages and in the seventeenth century (the king, according to Saint-Simon, was quite good at it). Since then, apart from the Romantic interludes this, one of the most effective remedies man possesses, has fallen into discredit. Is it a momentary eclipse, or are we dealing with a new conception of honor? What does seem certain is that one whole portion of the infirmities that plague us, all our diffuse, insidious, nagging ills, may be laid to the injunction which restrains us from making a scene of our rages and afflictions, and of giving way to our most primordial instincts.

We should have the right to howl for fifteen minutes a day, at least; in fact, howl-houses ought to be created for this purpose. "Don't words," someone will rejoin, "give us sufficient relief? Why revert to such outmoded practices?" Conventional by definition, and deaf to our crying needs, words are empty, stale, out of touch with our innermost self: not one emanates from it or goes that deep. If, at the beginning, when they first made their appearance, they might have been of some help, now even those which have been turned into curses are devoid of tonic properties. They have outlived themselves: theirs is a slow and pitiful decay. The principle of anemia which they harbor continues, nonetheless, to work upon us with poisonous effect, whereas the

howl, which is blood speaking out, uplifts us, fortifies us, and sometimes cures us. When we have the good fortune to release a howl, we straightway feel close to our remote ancestors who must have roared incessantly in their caves, all of them, including those who doodled on the walls. Now, as far removed as we can be from those happy days, we are reduced to living in a society so wretchedly organized that the one place where a man can howl with impunity is the insane asylum. Thus we are forbidden our only means of dispelling the odium of others, and the odium of ourselves. If at least we have books of consolation! There are very few, for the simple reason that there is no consolation and cannot be any so long as we wear the fetters of lucidity and decency. The man who holds himself in, who never lets himself go in an encounter, the "distinguished" man in short, is a potential lunatic. The same applies to anyone who "suffers in silence." If we insist upon a minimum of equilibrium, let us start screaming again, let us do it with a passion, at every opportunity, proclaiming our minds at stake. Moreover, rage, which brews in the gut of life, will come to our aid; don't be surprised that it plays a conspicuous role during periods in which health is tantamount to convulsion and chaos, during periods of religious innovation. Religion and wisdom are totally incompatible: religion is militant, aggressive, unscrupulous. It plunges ahead, leveling all obstacles. The admirable thing about it is that it deigns to sanction our lowliest sentiments, without which it would not have the strong grip upon us that it does. So far as it is concerned, one can really go the limit, in any direction. Impure for being leagued with our vital forces, it invites us to indulge ourselves in every way, and mitigates neither our bliss nor our downfall into God.

Wisdom, because it can offer none of these advantages, has a deadly effect on anyone who wants to assert himself, to exploit his gifts. It is a process of continual self-plunder, requiring that we jettison our irreplaceable stock of good and evil; it has no outlet, it is an impasse exalted into a discipline. What can it pit against ecstasy, which whitewashes the evils of religion? Wisdom: a system of capitulations: namely, reserve, abstention, withdrawal not only from the world but from all worlds, a mineral-like serenity, a craving for petrification, out of fear both of pleasure

and of pain. Compared to an Epictetus, any saint, christian or otherwise, seems a raving *fanatic*. Saints have febrile, histrionic temperaments that seduce you and carry you along; they flatter your weaknesses by denouncing them so violently. Moreover, one has the impression that it would not be hard to *get along* with them: a bit of extravagance or skill would suffice. Sages, on the other hand, will stand for neither compromise nor adventure: they consider rage odious, they reject it in all its forms, they see it as a source of vagrancy. Rather more a source of energy, thinks the man down in the dumps, who embraces it, knowing that it is positive, dynamic, though he may become its victim.

One does not kill oneself out of inertia, but in a fit of anger with oneself (Ajax remains, to this day, the exemplary suicide), in a frenzy of feeling that could be defined as follows: "I can no longer stand being disappointed by myself." This last ditch uprising in the depths of self-disappointment, even if it rarely seems impending, keeps haunting us, though we may have *decided*, once and for all, not to do away with ourselves. If, for many years, a "voice" assured us that we would not make an attempt upon our own lives, that voice, as we grow old, becomes less and less audible. So it is that the further we advance, the more we are at the mercy of some *explosive* silence.

He who kills himself proves that he could just as well have murdered, and even felt the impulse to do so, but turned it against himself. And if he has a furtive, *underground* look about him, that is because he is following the meanderings of self-hatred, and meditating, with perfidious cruelty, the blow to which he will succumb, though not before he has reconsidered his birth, damning it out of hand. It is our birth we must call to account if we wish to cut out the blight at its source. It stands to reason we should revile it, but that is difficult and not commonly done. We rise up against death, against what must come to pass; birth, an event even more irreparable, we leave aside, we pay it little heed. It seems to each of us as remote as the first instant of time. Only he who dreams of abolishing himself revisits it; it is as if he cannot manage to *forget* the unmentionable mechanism of procreation and strives, through appalled hindsight, to destroy the seed from which he sprang.

Inventive and enterprising, the rage of self-destruction is not

content to shake individuals from their torpor; it takes hold of nations as well, and allows them to renew themselves by making them commit acts in flagrant violation of their pasts; a given nation that seemed to be growing sclerotic was actually heading toward catastrophe, and found guidance in the very mission it had assigned itself. By doubting the necessity of disaster, we resign ourselves to consternation, we make it impossible for ourselves to understand the vogue that fatality enjoys at certain times. The key to all that is inexplicable in history may well lie in self-directed fury, in the dread of satiety and of repetition, in the fact that man will always prefer the bizarre to the humdrum. This phenomenon equally pertains to whole species. Can we seriously contend that so many of them disappeared because of a mere climatic quirk? Isn't it more likely that after millions and millions of years, the great mammals were fed up with traipsing over the surface of the earth, their weariness having reached the exploding point when instinct, like consciousness, starts warring with itself? Everything alive affirms and denies itself in frenzy. Allowing oneself to die is a sign of weakness, obliterating oneself a sign of strength. What we should be afraid of is slumping into a state where we cannot even imagine the desire to destroy ourselves.

It is paradoxical and perhaps dishonest to arraign Indifference, after pressing it, over the years, to grant us the calm and incuriosity of a corpse. Why draw back now when, at last, it is beginning to oblige us and still enjoys, in our eyes, as much prestige as ever? Is it not a betrayal, assaulting the idol we once venerated above all others?

There is no doubt but that we derive some sort of pleasure from about-faces: they quicken our spirit—*recantation keeps us young*. Since our strength can be measured by the sum of beliefs we abjure, each of us should wind up his career a deserter of all possible causes. This is precisely why Indifference, for all the fanaticism it once aroused, frightens us in the end, and seems intolerable: by halting our run of desertions, it sabotages the very principle of our being, it arrests our growth. Could it be that its essence is a negation which we did not know enough to distrust, until it was too late? In adopting it wholeheartedly, we

could not help but suffer the throes of extreme incuriosity, which alter their victims beyond recognition. Whoever has had the merest intimation of them will no longer aspire to resemble the dead, to have their absent gaze, eyes fixed on something else, on anything, anything but appearances. He will want to return to the world of the living, and, in their company, resume his former woes, which he trampled underfoot in dashing toward detachment.

The person who is not a sage goes astray following in the footsteps of one. Sooner or later he will grow weary of it and leave him, or break with him, if only out of love of breaking; he will declare war on him, as he does on everything, above all on the ideal he failed to attain. When someone has for years invoked Pyrrho and Lao-tse, can he justifiably betray them when he is imbued, more than ever, with their teachings? But is he seriously betraying them, and can he presume to consider himself their victim when his only reproach is that they are in the right? He is in an acutely awkward position, the man who, having entreated wisdom to free him from himself and from the world, comes to detest it, to see in it just another shackle.

[Translated by Frederick Brown]

Notes on Contributors

The Evil Demiurge, by E. M. CIORAN, will appear in an early issue of this Review.

ROBERT HAZEL* is the author of two novels, *The Lost Year* and *A Field Full of People*. A book of his poems, *Who Touches This*, is to be published in 1967.

MAY SWENSON's new book of poems, *Half Sun Half Sleep*, is to be published by Scribner's this winter.

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The poet and critic CHARLES HIGHAM, who lives in Sydney, is at work on a book on film directors.

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Asterisk indicates a new contributor.