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Beyond Manichean poetics

Towards a new form of syllogistic thinking

I

THE TITLE OF OUR CONFERENCE, “God’s back with a vengeance,” alludes to a banishment that precedes a coming back. The return explains how “faith” has manoeuvred its way back into the discursive practices of political society. Manoeuvring connotes war, and all wars are marked by subterfuges. Thus time and the passing of time are implied. The title, I take it, does not however mean that representations of God have ever been absent from the personal and collective consciousness of any people. What the title of our conference implies, rather, is the fusion of the public and personal domains in such a way that faith has come to play an important role in shaping public policies.

In the west, as in the rest of the world, the end of the Cold War has ushered in a new reality. The new reality engenders narratives of transition, which are, more often than not, marked by fear, consternation, and angst. Such narratives attempt to account for the dramatic collision between self and history. In the process the collision produces “an unhappy consciousness,” to quote from Hegel. Apocalyptic stories become the staple diet of people with such consciousness. Ironically, the new reality represents the future in reverse. We are back to the future. Our responses to the new reality also resemble those of the past. We find

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solace in paths already trail-blazed by others before us. Let me cite an example with an anecdote.

A man is seen on stage looking for something in a well-lit spot. A policeman joins the man, and asks him what it is he is looking for. "The key to my house," he answers. The policeman then joins in the search. After a while and with no key in sight, the policeman asks, "Are you sure you lost it here?" "No," says the man, and pointing to a dark corner of the stage: "Over there." Bewildered, the policeman then asks the man, "Then why are you looking for it here?" "There is no light over there," says the man.

When subjected to overt interpretations, anecdotes lose their lustre and crispness, but bear with me for a second as I flush out some points by violating the sanctity of the joke. A man loses the key to his house/home, with all that it connotes: coziness, comfort, security. The key is lost in a dark, unlit place, yet the search for it takes place in a well-lit spot. This is what I am driving at. The anecdote registers in us the need for mustering courage in looking for the lost key, and by extension, for answers to our troubled world in places unlit by early epistemological expeditions. We have come to an epistemological dead end. To get out of this dead end, we must re-examine and rethink the terms and assumptions that dot the landscape of our syllogistic propositions. These terms and assumptions define, consciously or unconsciously, our perceptions of the world. Here I propose the following:

First, there is no single ontological model, a master narrative that explains all other narratives.

Second, history does not have a single telos whose desired end product is the replication of western modernity.

Third, the modern world—the Renaissance—is, to quote from Menocal, "not a beginning but an end, and a lamentable closure." The Renaissance brought to an end a human experiment, a universal endeavour to inaugurate "a highly productive hybridity."¹

Fourth, secularism does not mean the absence of religion. Rather, it denotes the separation between religion and state. The secular state was put in place in order to end all wars.

¹ Maria Rosa Menocal, *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 19.

Fifth, fundamentalism is not a universal movement. It is a movement that started in the US in the 1870s. From its very inception, the movement emphasized the infallibility of scriptures and the shoring up of eschatological beliefs—resurrection from death and the second coming of the Christ. The Scopes “Monkey Trial” of 1925 dealt a blow to the spread of the movement in the US. In the Muslim world, there is a debate over the relevance of the term in describing the activities of Islamist movements. Muslims do believe in the infallibility of the Qur’an and in eschatology. *Al-Usuliyya*, the Arabic word for fundamentalism, means different things to different people. Islamists prefer to call themselves *al-Islamiyyuun*, defined by a leading Islamist as “ideologically motivated Muslims.” What’s in a name? Labels such as resurgent Islam, political Islam, Islamic extremism, radical Islam, etc., reveal the slippery nature of the thing being described.

Sixth, contradictions abound in all societies. Contradictions also sustain life. Totalizing or essentializing concepts do not add to our understanding of the world. There is not a monolithic west or a monolithic east. Thus Huntington’s “west versus the rest” reformulates a neatly packaged formula that fits the schema of a fable: we/they; them/us; good/evil, etc. Such binaries are shorn of historical grounding. Incidentally, al Qaeda in Arabic means both “the formula” and “the base.” No doubt that Huntington’s essentializing differences between civilizations ignore that

- knowledge is made;
- the emergence of all forms of knowledge is implicated in historical/empirical factors; and,
- identities are constructed.

That being said, our world is indeed ailing and is in need of sober diagnosis. An African proverb has it that “a sick person is showered with a hundred prescriptions.” Every passerby plays “doctor” and almost always proffers suggestions. What our world needs, I propose, is a new language, a new theory. It needs a language that

- takes cognizance of the existence of others, with different and differing values and mores, and understands how constructions of alterity and otherness are produced and sustained;
- doesn’t view nation as a terminal concept. We must remember that a nation is a nation only because of other nations. We must aspire for something bigger, loftier, more inclusive, and more ironic; and,

- problematizes constructions of history and the way history is disseminated, as well as the genealogy of experiential existence.

It is all too human to seek solace from a devil that's known rather than an angel in the abstract. After all, we find comfort in what Heidegger calls "care structures" that mediate between the self and the world. These structures give meaning to our perceptions of the world. They also give solace and comfort. We must be able to think outside the box, outside the cave of the tribe. To do this, we must engage in what Hannah Arendt calls "pearl fishing," searching for the oyster that we know is in the ocean, but whose exact whereabouts we do not know. Search implies quest; quest connotes questions. A saying of the prophet Muhammad tells Muslims that to the believer, wisdom is a stray animal. One doesn't know where to look. We must look for the lost keys to our individual and collective—literal and metaphoric—houses in dark, unlit places.

II

"The time has come, the walrus said, to talk of many things," to quote Lewis Carroll. Together with little Alice we will slip past the smooth, cold surface of the looking glass and find ourselves in a wonderland, where everything is at once so familiar and recognizable, yet so strange and uncommon.

We are indeed in a wonderland. To explore the contours of this land, let me seek help from an unlikely source, the vice president of my adopted country, the venerable Dick Cheney. In an article entitled "Whither Cheney," *Inter Press Service* writer Jim Lobe talks of a Christmas card purportedly sent by the Cheney family to close friends and supporters. The card reads, "And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"² The card gives a religious interpretation to the war in Iraq and beyond. It seems to suggest that the war effort has God's blessing. To quote from Bob Dylan, "You never ask questions/ When God's on your side." Ironically, Cheney's purported words differ little from those of his Islamist opponents. They, too, believe in an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God. The Qur'an tells us:

2 Jim Lobe, "Whither Cheney," *Inter Press Service*, 27 December 2003.

Not a leaf does fall but with His knowledge: There is not a grain [seed] in the darkness of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry, but is in a clear Book.³

Nothing exists outside the purview of God's plan. That's one thing that both Cheney and the Islamists agree upon.

Let me conclude, then, with an African fable.⁴

Once a farmer went out to his garden to dig up some yams to take to the market. While he was digging, one of the yams said to him, "Well, at last you're here. You never weeded me, but now you come around with your digging stick. Go away and leave me alone!"

The farmer turned around and looked at his cow in amazement. The cow was chewing her cud and looking at him.

"Did you say something?" he asked.

"It wasn't the cow who spoke to you," the man's dog said. "It was the yam. The yam says leave him alone."

The man became angry, because his dog had never talked before, and he didn't like his tone besides. So he took his knife and cut a branch from a palm tree to whip his dog. Just then the palm tree said:

"Put that branch down!"

The man was getting very upset about the way things were going, and he started to throw the palm branch away, but the palm branch said:

"Man, put me down softly!"

He put the branch down gently on a stone, and the stone said:

"Hey, take that thing off me!"

This was enough, and the frightened farmer started to run for his village. On the way he met a fisherman going the other way with a fish trap on his head.

"What's the hurry?" the fisherman asked.

"My yam said, 'Leave me alone!' ..."

"Is that all?" the fisherman asked. "Is that so frightening?"

"Well," the fisherman's trap said, "did he take it off the stone?"

"Wah!" the fisherman shouted. He threw the fish trap on the ground and began to run with the farmer, and on the trail they met a weaver with a bundle of cloth on his head.

3 6:59; my translation.

4 Harold Courlander and George Herzog, *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947).

“Where are you going in such a rush?” he asked them.

“My yam...”

“That’s nothing to get excited about,” the weaver said, “no reason at all.”

“Oh yes it is,” his bundle of cloth said. “If it happened to you you’d run too!”

“Wah!” the weaver shouted. He threw his bundle on the trail and started running with the other men.

They came panting to the ford in the river and found a man bathing.

“Are you chasing a gazelle?” he asked them.

“My yam...”

“Is that why you’re running?” the man in the river asked.

“Well, wouldn’t you run if you were in their position?” the river asked.

The man jumped out of the river and began to run with the others. They came to the chief’s residence, and began to “recite their troubles.”

The chief listened to them patiently, but he couldn’t refrain from scowling.

“Now this is really a wild story,” he said at last. “You’d better all go back to your work before I punish you for disturbing the peace.”

So the men went away, and the chief shook his head and mumbled to himself, “Nonsense like that upsets the community.”

“Fantastic, isn’t it?” his stool said. “Imagine a talking yam!”

The story underlines the importance of transcending the prison house of constricting assumptions. It introduces a new way of looking at things by endowing a dog and several inanimate objects with the power of speech. Yet the power of the erstwhile “mute” to speak renders the humans in the story speechless. How do they validate or give legitimacy to their experiences when there is no linguistic possibility to render those experiences in human terms? The human characters in the story find themselves in an unenviable situation: before them is a chief unwilling to give credence to their story; behind them, the talking miracles. The chief calls their experience “nonsense.” It is an experience, he intimates, that has the potential to fragment, to usher in communal rupture. Yet the story is silent on a crucial piece of information: the chief’s reaction to the words of the stool, his own stool. (The stool in the story refers to the royal stool, the symbol of authority in

Asante tradition.) Did the chief hear the stool speak up? Did he understand its words? Indeterminate endings force audiences to reflect on issues and to imagine solutions. In traditional African story telling sessions, the performer is asked by the audience to “see, so that we may see.” The audience’s exhortation forces the performer to “sniff the air” and give shape to that which is to come. The exhortation reminds us of the importance of theory in understanding the world around us. The etymology of the term “theory” is from the Greek root *thea*, to see. The performer is asked to see, so that the rest of society may see. But seeing is an act of interpretation. And interpretation is a transitive act. Such a transitive act is perhaps best understood through the Chinese proverb: “To know and not to act is not to know.”