FORWARD DREAMING

The Culture Issue

…for in every one of us a mad rabbit thrashes and a wolf pack howls, so that we are afraid it will be heard by others.…

—*Czeslaw Milosz*

It would be easy to work up an essay on the theme, "We live in very unspiritual times." Just make a few references to mass culture, widespread chemical dependency, Grand Theft Auto, the knavery of political life, and the continuing break-up of the family. The point being? Either that we must return to an earlier time, when such-and-such prevailed, or that we must hold true to our little cells of enlightenment or faith, weather the storm, and promulgate our message for the future, whatever that might happen to be.

It would also be pretty easy, though it would require more technical expertise, to devote an essay to the theme of how far we've come as a civilization, how alive with possibilities the present age is, and how truly transplendent things will soon be—if such an era has not dawned already.

Just now I saw a swainson's thrush out in the garden in the midst of the drizzle. He's been out there all day. I've been watching him.

Gaspar de la Nuit is sometimes referred to as Maurice Ravel's pianistic *tour de force*. Extremely difficult to perform, it consists of scintillating waves of sound in a hyper-Listzian manner, designed to evoke the Black Magic described in the poems of an obscure French writer named Bertrand Louis (1807-1841) from which it draws both its name and its themes.

Have you ever tried to whistle the first movement?

That may sound like a facetious question, considering how thorny and diaphanous I've just described the music to be, but the melody that drifts through the middle of all those atmospheric effects is simplicity itself. I sometimes find myself whistling it. I suppose it rises to consciousness less often than the opening themes from Ravel's earlier *Mother Goose Suite*. But it's there.

I will be the first to admit that my version, though pitch-perfect, lacks something of the texture of Ravels' original, and I suspect that my wife Hilary would immediately and adamantly agree with this assessment. All the same, it's a nice tune. And I would hazard that if the tune hadn't been in there, singing out, the piece would long ago have descended to the realm of complicated works by Scriabin, Messiean, and others—ecstatic, meaningful, modern, and so forth—which the experts champion and the virtuosos strive to master, even though very few music-lovers choose to listen to them very often.

France has developed a reputation over time as a black hole of mediocre rock and pop music. The French "Elvis," Johnny Halliday, is famous largely for being so consistently unexciting. All the same, it's interesting to note, in this age of consumer electronic media, rock, pop, rap, and metal, that as the twentieth century came to an end, the most successful French musician, measured in terms of song-writing royalties, recording sales, and the whole works, was Maurice Ravel.

Ravel once remarked about his compatriot Francis Poulenc's music, "What I like is his ability to invent popular tunes." Ravel's tunes don't sound like popular tunes. They are part and parcel of his rarefied harmonic palette, full of ninths and elevenths. But they do sing. The complexity sustains the atmospheric effect, while the tunes themselves remain simple, lyrical, and romantic. The two elements are deftly interwoven, in *Gaspar* and other works—*Miroir*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, *Sonatine*—so that we take them in whole, luxuriating in the atmosphere while being drawn along by the tune. Well, I guess that's what music is all about, even the simplest.

In life, too, simplicity is a valuable quality. Yet without that background of atmospheric "charge" the simple life soon becomes monotonous, uninteresting, and even deadening. I know what you're thinking. "Don't I wish *my* life were that simple." Often the problem is that the atmosphere of our lives doesn't support the tune. It's not shimmeringly complex, like a Ravel piano piece, but brutally chaotic, like a tape-loop of a busy urban intersection—something to endure or to escape from.

We don't need Whitman, Hegel, or anyone else to tell us that spirit is everywhere. But there is some degree of confusion as to what this "fact" entails. The dumbstruck lover, as he treads down the avenue toward his girlfriend's house, sees radiant beauty in the sign advertising the Muffler-replacement service. But the jilted lover sees blackness everywhere, and finds it inexplicable that people all around him have come up with a reason to live. Is the spirit, then, in the ecstatic visage of hopeful youth? Only that?

For myself, I love the new growth on the yew bush under the living-room window. I love the voice of Duquende at an exciting moment in a *soleá*. I love it when Hilary calls to tell me that she'll be home from work early and expresses an interest in sharing a frozen pizza by candle-light while seated on the kitchen floor. That really sets me to chopping the onions and peppers.

These feelings, I believe, are manifestations of a rapport between inner and outer life. Not a correspondence, mind you, and certainly not an identity, but a rapport.

"Rapport" comes from a French word rooted in the idea of "carrying back," or "carrying again." It's a noble concept, and it becomes more significant as we age, because we have more places and things and people to return to. But perhaps we risk being led astray by etymology here. The word "rapport," after all, refers to a comfortable, pleasant relationship, less often talked about than felt, between two or more things that exist NOW. It's a good in itself, though not an end in itself. For even in the midst of a beautiful rapport, we still feel ourselves called upon to *do* things. Unlike love of the romantic type, which has a narrative arc, and involves the individual in mirroring, interdependence, and the pursuit of an ideal of union, rapport consists in mutual esteem and affection within the comfortable environment of which the individuals involved pursue ends that may not be precisely the same, though they sometimes are.

The spirit that is everywhere is the one that sustains rapport. It inspires people to write poems, among many other things—and also to read them.

The universe is interesting in the same way that a campfire is interesting: It's active, ever-changing, dangerous, mysterious, and you can stare at it as long as you want to without worrying that it will start up a conversation, or turn away, or stare back. But a fire has many advantages as a focus of reverie. You can stare into it from a comfortable position, either standing or sitting, without craning your neck. Its intricacies, though less dazzling, perhaps, are more absorbing, its alterations more rapid and musical—and to top it all off, there is the fact that you made it yourself.

And then there is the smoke.

I think highly of the Italian writer Primo Levi. Primo Levi thinks highly of the French writer Rabelais. But I don't like Rabelais. That bothers me.

Among the wise folk who were active during that golden zone of world consciousness when religions were being formed—Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Pythagoras, Moses and all the rest—the one who consistently receives short shrift is the Greek thinker Heraclitus. This may be because Heraclitus never founded a sect.

But perhaps that's the point. His views were not of the type that people become inspired by or devoted to. Nor are they intentionally nonsensical, in the manner of a Zen koan. They are simply brief enigmatic expressions of the way things are.

I made a broadside once, using cold type, of Heraclitus's twelve finest sayings. I don't know where that thing went, but I rmemeber several of the one-liners I included:

The sun is the width of a man's foot.

You never step into the same river twice.

It is difficult to hide our ignorance, especially when relaxing with friends over wine.

The fire, in its advance, will consume all things.

He who would be wise must acquaint himself with a great many particulars.

All things come to pass through the compulsion of strife.

One or another of these sayings returns to me from time to time, like a tune I heard long ago and subsequently forgot.

The difference between the scientific and religious approaches to experience, in a nutshell, is this. Science has the proper tools at its disposal—reason, investigation, observation—to get at the truth, but it's constitutionally incapable of asking the Big Questions. Religion asks the Big Questions. In fact, it exists for the sole purpose of satisfying our desire to know why we're here and how we should live; and it does a pretty good job of satisfying those desires, by means of myth, tradition, and ritual. Its reliance on these sources of imaginative insight come at the expense of reason, investigation, and empirical observation, however, and that's too bad, because these are the tools best suited to exposing the truth.

Metaphysics combines the best elements of these two disciplines. It makes use of reason and observation—the tools of thought—to answer the Big Questions. Yet all too often the answers arrived at by the metaphysicians don't satisfy us either. In the first place, they can only rarely be sighted in the midst of an ocean of arcane verbiage that's being employed, consciously or subconsciously, to mask the embarrassing simplicity of the principles being ennunciated. And when those answers do occasionally rise to the surface, like an oxygen-starved whale, we're likely to find them unsatisfying anyway, because they too closely resemble the folk wisdom of the ages.

My own explorations of this realm have led me to the conclusion that the single most important thing we can learn from metaphysics is to come to grips with CONTRARIES.

A remark made by Aristotle, in his charmingly matter-of-fact way, may be to the point here.

> *It is plain, then, that [all thinkers] in one way or another identify the contraries with the first principles. And with good reason. For first principles must not be derived from one another nor from anything else, while everything has to be derived from them. But these conditions are fulfilled by the primary contraries, which are not derived from anything else because they are primary, nor from each other because they are contraries.*

But what are "the contraries"? We might take up the One and the Many as an example. The One and the Many are contraries. The One is unified, the Many are all over the place. Could anything be more obvious?

Yet it's worth pointing out that if there had always and forever been only one thing, the idea of One-ness would never have occurred to that one thing. The expression "unified" requires multiplicity. A single undifferentiated thing cannot be said to be unified, it's simply, purely itself. One-ness is the dream of the many, not the one.

The reverse is no less true, however. For the idea of the Many suggests that a collection of disparate things are being considered together as a group. At least theoretically they make up a single whole, incohoate though it may be.

In short, the concepts of the One and the Many, though they are opposed to one another, are logically meaningless outside their association with one another.

This kind of language drives most people up the wall, I know, but the thrust of the argument should be clear: Because the one and the many are logically inseparable concepts, neither unity nor individuality will serve us well as ideals. On the other hand, a concept like Harmony brings order and proportion to the dynamic opposition of the one and the many. In family life, in art, in community participation, in all things, what we actually seek is a stable harmony within which individual exuberance and development can thrive in the context of a broader personal and social ethos, atmosphere, or rapport.

In actual life, the Many is an ever-present reality, while the One remains a theortical ideal—except for those deeply enlightened individuals who can actually see and feel it.

The attempts by physicists to uncover a theory for Everything is rather vain, and it also tends to obscure the fact that we actually know very little about anything.

Similary, the pronouncements of theologians about how their God encompasses, overrules, knows about and subsumes *everything* must be recognized for what it is—empty rhetoric, resembling the expressions used at a high school pep rally to insire the school body with enthusiasm for an upcoming athletic contest. But metaphysicians are no less prone to hyperbole, as any student of Hegel should recognize. Hegel exposed and analyzed the logic of contraries more fully than anyone before him, and in so doing, became the most important thinker of the modern age. But he spent an awful lot of time fleshing out an Absolute that has no place in his brilliant theory of dialectic.

In short, the desire to be done, once and for all, with the complexities and vagaries of life by submitting to, or discovering, a unifying force, (which will also be a point of rest), is understandable, but it's also spiritually dubious. The universe is made up of many things and they are *never* at rest. What we ought to be exploring is how that collection of things is arranged, and how we ourselves, who are just one further item amid the sea of the Many, relate to all the rest of it. It might also be worth determining how the various parts of which *we* are made relate to one another, and how we can arrange them more harmoniously.

One of the many defects of the idea of monotheism is that it deprives the diety of conversation with equals. Lacking that source of stimulation, he becomes withdrawn, morose, and irritable.

Maybe Hegel got it right after all: *Monotheism of reason and the heart, polytheism of the imagination and of art, that is what we need.*

"The infinite qua infinite is unknowable," or so Aristotle says. On the other hand, E. M. Cioran observes—

> *…nihilism is neither a paradoxical nor a monstrous position, but rather a logical conclusion wrecking every mind that has lost intimate contact with* mystery *(mystery being a prudish term for the* absolute.*)*

There is no contradiction here, however. It is one thing, after all, to develop a formula proporting to predict the behavior of "everything," or a doctrine describing omnipotence in excruciating detail; and quite another to sustain intimate contact with the absolute.

Children often meet up with the absolute at an early age, when they begin to ask themselves why there is something rather than nothing, or "Why am I me, and not you?" The frisson generated by such thoughts is powerful, and it's worthwhile for us to keep this pathway to the absolute open as we age, because it provides that invaluable point of perspective of which Cioran speaks, if I read him right. For the lucky few, this perpective becomes engrained, and every aspect of experience takes on the luminous shine of a MIRACLE.

By the way, we stand at the opposite end of the realm, here, from the point at which Camus remarked that suicide is the first, and perhaps the only real philosphical question. He could not have been more wrong. Suicide is the last dreadful question, arising from a point of despair that most people never reach (not to be too glib about it), simply because they've got more interesting things on their minds.

Things were looking pretty grim on the European scene when Camus was writing. The German thinker Ernst Bloch, writing at about the same time, struck to the root of its cause when he wrote:

> *Our current habituation to nightmare is not only a safeguard…but also an adherence to the "reality principle." In Fruedian terminology, we have come of age. But at a price. We have lost a characteristic élan, a metaphysic and technique of "forward dreaming."*

No age can accurately be characterized as entirely this or that, however. At more or less the same time that Europe was going to rack and ruin, and intellectuals like Bloch were disecting the malaise with poetic exactitude, their contemporaries were hot on the trail of Big Game. Ortega y Gasset, for example, was spinning an elaborate theory of "Who am I?" the long and the short of which can be stated briefly:

—I identify myself with my past—I am the individual who has designed the local water tower, fathered these three children, and voted Democrat is every recent election.

—Yet who I am is *actually* my project, the things I am consumed with the desire to do soon, my aspirations, my way into the future. This is what Bloch refers to as "forward dreaming."

The notion of identity as "project" or aspiration has always had its critics, and it has been under severe attack for at least half a century now. We are advised at every turn to divest ourselves of our anxieties and preoccupation and learn to "be in the moment." That's not a bad idea. It's also a good idea to take a shower every once in a while. But it would not be an impressive show of wisdom, I think, for us to *live* in the shower. Once again we run up against a pair of inseparable contraries, and the tension that we maintain between them determines the quality and flavor of our daily lives.

I referred a while back to the embarrassing similarity we often find between metaphysics and folk wisdom—embarrassing to the metaphysicians, that is. Ortega detailed his theory of 'identity as project' in several of his works—*History as a Sysyem*, *Man and Crisis*, *Concord and Liberty*? I don't remember which—and the nuances he provides are certainly worth exploring, but the same theory was more trenchantly expounded by the Argentine poet Antonio Porchia (1886-1968).

> *He who has made a thousand things and he who has made none, both feel the same desire: to make something.*

Here are a few more of Porchia's aphorisms:

When I do not walk in the clouds I walk as though I were lost.

The void terrifies you, and you open your eyes wider!

It is a long time now since I have asked heaven for anything, and still my arms have not come down.

I love you just the way you are, but do not tell me how that is.

Speaking of miracles [see page 9], Pierre Mabille, in his classic surrealist text *Mirror of the Marvelous*, sets out a very useful contrast between the miraculous, the marvelous, and the magical. No need to elaborate it in detail, you can figure it out for yourself simply by analyzing what the words mean. But at one point he writes:

> *Despite the miracles it surrounds itself with, despite the fantastic elements it employs, a religion always begins as a reaction against an earlier paganism that it exposes as fantasmagorical and childish. It triumphs because of its rational usefulness. It tends to limit the field of the marvelous by providing answers to fears, security based on dogmatic assertions, and a more complete examination of the universe. The marvelous, on the other hand, proposes fewer solutions in favor of exploring unknown territory. The true believer ignores the unknown as soon as he possesses faith. Thus there's an equilibrium at work between the domains of the religious and the marvelous. The later never disappears entirely. Even during periods when orthodox mysticism is the most strict, popular stories survive.*

I have long been a fan of fairy tales, and I often find myself tossing a volume into the suitcase when packing for a trip. My favorites from the Pantheon series are the French tales adapted from the work of Henri Pourrat (1887-1959), though many ethnologists find them too "literary." I also like the Arab set translated and edited by Inea Bushnaq. The Northern Tales are OK, though I find both the Grimm set and the Swedish tales edited by the Blechhers to be too cloddy and mean-spirited to enjoy fully. On the

other hand, *Jewish Tales of the Supernatural* exhibits a fascinating blend of Old Testament didacticism, Eastern European ghetto atmosphere, and Caballistic magic. Calvino's book of Italian tales has many fine moments too, though the language can harbor an annoyingly feverish quality. It can be interesting to go back to the original from which Calvino drew much of his material, the *Pentamerone* of Giabattista Basile. This book, first pubished in 1674, has been called the oldest collection of European folktales in existence, and also the richest. It was written in a Neapolitan dialect, however, and remained outside the mainstream until Benedetto Croce translated it into Italian early in the twentieth century.

Whatever their source of origin—and very good African, South American, and Japanese volumes are also available, though I've never seen a Spanish one—fairy tales dispense with emotional nuances and sociological details to take us directly into the heart of things, where animals play important roles, fairies and genies upset the natural order of things, fools more than occasionally turn out to be wise, and naive but pure-hearted individuals triumph, in the end, over the deviousness and wickedness of their petty and scheming relatives. You may observe that in"real life" animals don't talk, wishes aren't granted very often, and cleverness usually wins out over sincerity. On the other hand, one of the most prominant, and dangerous myths of "real life" is the notion that we are in complete control of our personal destiny, everything happens "for a reason," and if things don't work out its because we failed to discipline ourselves, calculate accurately, or explore our conscience in search of an explanation for why a tree just fell on the house. No, life is full of surprises, few of which are fully explicable. And in any case, why would we want to explain them all?

Naiveté is a fine quality, I think, though it isn't one that we can cultivate. By definition, naiveté doesn't know itself. One thing we can do, I suppose, is avoid putting on airs, and be frank about the fact that we like grilled-cheese sandwiches and experience a child-like thrill every time we see a robin splashing around in the birdbath.

Schiller writes, speaking of the appeal of nature, bird-songs, waves, stars, etc:

> *It is not these objects, it is an idea represented by them. We love in them the tacitly creative life, the serene spontaneity of their activity; existence in accordance with their own laws, the inner necessity, the eternal unity with themselves. They* are what we were. They are what we should once again become.

I suppose there is some truth to this remark, but reading it over it seems to me that Schiller simply *didn't get it*. For, on the one hand, if we did once again enter into that unreflective "state of nature," we would not be able to recognize or appreciate the condition. And in any case, this "idea" of nature of which Schiller speaks is entirely false. What is a bird call, after all, except a love call, or a defense of territory? An expression of yearning, in other words, or of fear, defiance, or possessiveness. There is no unity to speak of here, no law. Nature is, in fact, just like us, and we are a part of it. We have our own territory, our own calls, of which we're perhaps hardly aware. Our love of nature—the dappled light, the cool air, the chattering squirrel at the birdfeeder and the mounds of purple clover on the highway embankment—is natural, instinctive, and also aesthetic. There are no ideas involved. Ideas are what stand in the way of that pleasant symbiosis.

As if to dig himself as deeply into error as possible, Schiller continues:

> *For what could a modest flower, a stream, a mossy stone, the chirping of birds, the humming of bees, etc. possess in themselves so pleasing to us? What could give them a claim even on our love?*

No, our satisfaction in nature, he contends, "is not aesthetic but moral; for it is mediated by an idea, not produced immediately by observation; nor is it in any way dependent upon beauty of form."

Yet it seems to me that what pleases us in nature is precisely the form. (In using the word *pleasing* Schiller ruins his argument. Ideas aren't pleasing; forms are pleasing.) Our response to nature is aesthetic—the

form of a stream, a flower, a white pine, a heron. It's a matter of texture, diversity, proportion, a balance of shapes and weights and movements.

Yet although Schiller has made one misstep after another in his analysis, there is one aspect of it that is worth examining more fully. The mediating idea of which Schiller speaks is innocence or naiveté. Nature, he feels, is innocent, and that's what makes it so appealling.

I think he's hit on something important here. Nature seems opaque to us. It seems not to have much of an *inner life*. The birds, the flowers, even the rocks—they do what they do, and nothing we can say or do has much of an effect on them. It's peaceful and relaxing to associate ourselves with complex, mute beings who have no interest in us. Furthermore, every crow we see could be the same crow—though we know it isn't—and this engenders an atemporal, perhaps almost totemic field of associations to which we grant a spiritual quality. It may be insulting to the crows that we think this way, but we don't really care.

Schiller refers to this quality of naiveté or innocence as a moral one, which is not quite the case. After all, when the grizzly mauls a camper we don't describe the act as *moral*. That's simply how a bear sometimes acts. When the ranger shoots the aggressive bear we accept the act as morally justifiable, perhaps, but at the same time something inside us cries out, "Mr. Grizzly didn't deserve that. He was only doing what he does, you know. Being himself." The moral realm is a human realm. A realm of weighing alternatives, of *evaluating*. The natural world largely lacks the interiority required to develop such concepts. At least we see little evidence of it, though mothers do care for their babies, etc. Yet it is precisely this pre-moral naiveté that makes the natural world somehow meaningful, and even sacrosanct.

A good deal more could be said on this subject, but the long and the short of it is this: Innocence is not quite the right word to describe what it is that we respond to in nature. Naiveté is a better word, though we must keep in mind that it derives from, and means hardly more than "native" or "natural." To say that nature is natural is not saying much—though Hume once observed that the natural can be opposed to the un-natural, the supernatural, and the artificial, in each case taking on different shades of meaning as a result. It's not in the moral realm, in any case, but in the world of aesthetics—form, matter, content—that the roots of our marvelous association with our surroundings lie.

Is it merely a coincidence that religions often come out of the desert? Probably. Yet there is something about *clutter* that seems to obscure the gravity and significance of things.

Is it merely a coincidence that we love the rustle of leaves, the sound of wind racing past our ears, the mesmeric lapping of waves against the shore? I don't know.

Majestic mountains, winding rivers, trees—these things are often pleasing to us because they exhibit harmonious forms. Mere coincidence? A matter of taste? I don't think so. Scientists can calculate the proportions of a seashell or the pattern of seeds on a sunflower to prove that Pythagoras was on to something with his "music of the spheres," but it may be more germain to observe that the interaction of wind and rock shapes mountains; that water gnawing at earth makes rivers. The clinging root and the grasping leaf give shape to the plants. When we stand in awe of a graceful island of sumac bushes that has spread itself across the side of a hill, we are admiring the harmony that's developed between opposing elemental forces. There is nothing symbolic about it, and the math merely reinforces what we already feel and know.

On the other hand no one would deny that some mountains are more pleasing than others, some animals more graceful, some birds more stunning. For example, the sloppy green-gray mounds of earth due west of Hanksville, Utah, are little short of disgusting, while the staggering red cliffs of Capital Reef a few miles down the road are sublime. Or so it seems to me. How are we to explain it? We must never overlook or discount the role of *accident* in the formation of things.

We compliment someone by saying "Well, you were certainly in fine form today." But we criticise him or her by remarking "Your behavior was rather formal this afternoon." This contrast high-

lights the fact that form is *of the essence* of value—yet it is not to be valued in and of itself. An infatuation with "form itself" invariably leads to uninteresting expressions of "mere form," which sometimes go by the more flattering but no less empty name of "pure form."

What "pure form" lacks, of course, is content. It is an abstraction derived from genuine forms, and as such it is just one more example of the desire for absolutist escape we discussed earlier. In fact, Form and Content, like the One and the Many, are inseparable contraries. They always appear together, they tussle with one another, and occasionally they arrive at a point of energetic equipoise. It is at this point that the going gets good.

When Pilate asked Jesus if he was King of the Jews, and Jesus replied, "So you say," was he exhibiting good form?

When Rollo the Norman kicked the king of France in the face and then observed that it was the customary greeting among his people, was he exhibiting good form?

I don't know the answer to these questions, though I suspect that Rollo was simply being a jerk.

Discussions of form often center on the analysis of more or less static works of art—vases, statues, paintings. I bring up these famous episodes from history and folklore as a way of suggesting that form is an aspect of action. Tennis players, cellists, and talk-show hosts can be in good or bad form.

The French philosopher Maurice Blondel once remarked that metaphysics is the logic of action. Along the same lines, I might suggest that Form is the shape of action. This is no less true of a work of art than of any other act. The great merit of art is that it brings greater durability to the forms of action.

There are some areas of life—the Japanese Tea Ceremony may be taken as an extreme case in point, if my understanding of it is accurate—where actions have been formalized to the point where their static and art-like qualities are painfully obvious. Yet most of our social interactions are driven by formal considerations of which we're often only dimly aware. The degree to which our behavior is guided by such forms may be suggested by the fact that few qualities are sought more eagerly nowadays than those of authenticity and sincerity—as if we had lost sight of what *genuine* living actually entails. (Perhaps Schiller's infatuation with the naiveté of nature arises from the surmise that animals and plants live their lives with uninhibited artlessness. In point of fact the natural world is "hard-wired" to a much greater degree than the human one.)

The drive of young people to escape from form may be criticized as immature, but it exposes the content of living with refreshing emotional candor, and that exposure often comes to us in new forms that are lively, sound, and appropriate to the content.

It's difficult to sustain a discussion of "form" for long without resorting to gassy generalities, however, because forms vary as do the materials of which they consist. The "classical" forms that were pleasing to Wincklemann in the eighteenth century differ greatly from the Gothic forms of an earlier age, and also from the campy post-modern forms of today. You and I may be attuned to all of these "styles," or to none of them. Yet every thing we come upon in life displays marks of proportion, balance, fiber and texture, motion, and incidental detail, to a greater or lesser degree. Our familiarity with these things pleases, stimulates, and also elevates us. In this way forms differ radically from norms. Norms underscore and promote mediocrity—that is to say, the middle. Forms underscore and promote excellence, excitement, inspiration—that is to say, the heights.

Fine forms? I already mentioned several—*Gaspar de la Nuit;* Capital Reef. The pelican has a fine form, especially in flight, though it's admittedly strange. Then we have the basswood tree in my front yard. The Grand Canyon. *La Regle de Jeu.*

It seems to me that this poem by Li Po has very fine form.

AFTER AN ANCIENT POEM

We the living, we're passing travelers:
it's in death alone that we return home.

All heaven and earth a single wayhouse,
the changeless grief of millennia dust,

moon-rabbit's immortality balm is empty,
and the timeless fu-sang tree is kindling.

Bleached bones lie silent, say nothing,
and how can evergreen pines see spring?

Before and after pure lament, this life's
phantom treasure shines beyond knowing.

The form I'm referring to here extends beyond the pleasing motion of the couplets to the balance between a deep disallusionment that shatters the force of all symbols of immortality, and the unmistakable shine of this life's treasure—a shine that's also being undercut by the word *phantom* and the mysterious phrase "beyond knowing."

And what about those folktales that Marbille was referring to a few pages ago? [See page 5] A story can have a fine form, even if it ends in disaster. No harm in ending well, either, if there's plenty of turmoil to keep our interest up in the mean time. Then again, there are pastoral tales that move along as bently as a murmuring brook. How about *A Storyteller's Holiday* by George Moore? Or the last days of Socrates, as set to music by Eric Satie?

…When an adventurer carries his gods with him into a remote and savage country, the colony he founds will, from the beginning, have graces, traditions, riches of the mind and spirit. Its history will shine with bright incidents, slight, perhaps, but precious, as in life itself, where the great matters are often as worthless as astronomical distances, and the trifles dear as the heart's blood.

These lines appear in *Shadows on the Rock*, a novel by Willa Cather set in the city of Quebec during the earliest days of the French regime. As I read them it occurred to me that we're all journeying to a remote and savage country—the future—and we all carry our gods with us, not quite knowing, sometimes, precisely who or what they are.

Do we, then, have graces, traditions, riches of the mind and spirit? I think so. Others may find them ill-formed, jejune, or lacking in long-hallowed ritual practice and doctrinary rigour, but that ought not to concern us overmuch. Our traditions are as rich and expansive as civilization itself. And our practices range from taxing journeys through the wilderness to conversation with friends at a sidewalk cafe, with perhaps a visit to the library now and then in between.

Civilization is another concept we've been trained to be suspicious of, and narrowly conceived it can certainly become a instrument of oppression.

Our friend Cioran writes:

Each civilization believes that its way of life is the only right one and the only one conceivable—that it must convert the world to it or inflict it on the world; its way of life is equivalent to an explicit or camouflaged soteriology.

This isn't necessaily the case, however. Modern western civilization takes an interest in the wider world to a degree never before seen on this planet, and its openness, in fact its genuine hunger for exposure to other forms of life, is of the essence of its own dynamic nature.

You may find my take on the matter somewhat naive. It would appear to leave unexplored the imperialistic activities of capitalists looking for new markets, for example. Yet I see no reason to define modern life-ways exclusively in such terms. These are norms, after all, not forms. In fact, I find the soteriology—the theory of salvation—implicit in our civilization attractive, though it strikes me that curiosity, rather than conversion, is its proper instrument. Yes, Christ refers occasionally to "the sword" and Heraclitus enigmatically asserts that "the fire in its advance will consume all things," yet few of us, I think, believe that the Kingdom of Heaven, whether real or imagined, is anything other than *civilized*.