

*Paul Veyne*

# CONDUCT WITHOUT BELIEF AND WORKS OF ART WITHOUT VIEWERS

It is said that reality is stronger than any description we can make of it, and we must admit that atrocities, when we see them, go beyond any idea we may have had of them. On the other hand, when it is a question of values and beliefs, the contrary is true: reality is much less than its representation and the ideas it professes. This loss of energy is called indifference. Madame Bovary believed that in Naples happiness was as firmly rooted as the orange trees and as strong as stone. The wisdom of nations knows that that is not the case: "We hope for Paradise but as late as possible," affirms a Christian proverb. This indifference poses a problem or an entire series of problems (Georg Simmel's work could be considered from that point of view) unless it arises from all our errors, spontaneous or scientific, concerning man and society. I do not know where I read, or dreamed, the story of a young ethnologist who went to study a tribe that was said to believe that the world would come to an end if the priests let the sacred

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

## *Conduct Without Belief*

fire go out. He assumed that the priests were as anxious as though they controlled the detonator of an atomic bomb. Admitted into the temple of the fire, he saw the peaceful religious going about routine tasks. Reality is rarely emphatic. Rites and customs, for example, reflect the beliefs of a society. Paintings and sculptures show what the society believes or serve to make it believe what it sees. Sculpture in cathedrals were the bible of the illiterate. Is that really certain? We notice that most often people perform the rites without believing in their significance and, in any case, without interest in them,<sup>1</sup> because the liturgy is not a means of communication giving information. They do not look at the images. (How many Parisians have looked at the Napoleonic bas-reliefs on the Vendôme column?) and if they tried to do so, they would not be able to decipher their iconography or even see them: placed too high, the images are often undecipherable. So it is necessary to sketch out a sociology of art in which the art work, far from conveying an iconography and an ideology, is a decor that we do not even look at, that we can hardly see and that is however very important. The study of all these insufficiencies would be a vast program. Here we will confine ourselves to art.

Not far from the Forum in Rome, Trajan's Column raises its shaft thirty meters. Spiraling around it is a sculpted frieze whose 184 scenes and one thousand figures illustrate, like a cartoon strip, the conquest of Dacia by Trajan. Except for the first two spirals, viewers cannot make out these reliefs. Archaeologists study them with binoculars. Moreover, nobody would want to itemize this repetitious swarm or try to follow the account of military campaigns declaimed by the conquest of barbarian villages<sup>2</sup> whose

<sup>1</sup> G. Bateson, *Naven*, Stanford University Press, 1936, ch. IX: "The ritual significance of the ceremonies is almost completely unknown and the emphasis is exclusively put on their function as a means of celebrating something. One day when a ceremony relative to fertility and prosperity was being held, when a new floor was being installed in the ceremonial house, the majority of my informants told me that the ceremony was being held "because of the new floors." The men who had full consciousness of the ritual meaning of the ceremony were rare, as were those who took an interest in it. And those who did were not interested in the magical aspects of the ceremony but in its totemic origins, which is of highest importance for the clans whose pride in nobility largely rests on the detail of their totemic genealogy."

<sup>2</sup> On the "geographical" level of the Column's frieze, see F. Bobu Florescu, *Die*

name or place on the map was unknown. Historians explain Trajan's Column as a work of "imperial propaganda". That shows how much a shortsighted rationality, one that cannot distinguish between expression and information, keeps its prestige even to our day, when it brings something to "society" or states what this thing is assumed to "bring to society". We may however doubt that the Romans of Trajan's time looked very much more at the reliefs, materially invisible, than today's Romans and that they rushed to this spectacle to go around the Column twenty-three times with their noses in the air. The Column does not inform people; it simply lets them see the evidence of the greatness of Trajan faced with time and the weather. In the same way, at the summit of the Behistun Rock, Darius the Great had a monumental inscription engraved in three languages to the glory of his reign. This inscription was not meant to be read: it is located at the top of a peak, and only eagles or mountain climbers suspended on their ropes could read it.

The Column expresses the glory of Trajan, just as the heavens (which it is useless to itemize star by star) express the glory of Jahweh. In both cases there have to be far too many stars and far too many sculpted scenes. The expression of a superiority is only undoubted when it is excessive. To explain the Column, art history must not be satisfied with studying in detail the composition of the different scenes, their iconography, the continuity of the story, the bird's-eye perspective, rapports with the idealized realism of Hellenistic friezes, and so on. It should first of all declare that the Column is essentially a dual quantitative record, through the number of square meters of bas-reliefs and the height of the construction. The Column is derived from an "architecture of obelisks," enjoyed as much in Rome as it was in London or Paris in the 19th century. It was as high as the tallest Roman buildings, but it is true that the Colosseum, at 48 meters, is 10 meters higher. However, obelisks are like cypress trees with regard to other trees that spread out horizontally; the rectilinearity of the cypress, straight as a candle, gives a greater impression of the vertical and

*Trajanssäule*, Akademie-Verlag, Bucharest, 1969, pp. 52-56; Werner Gauer, *Untersuchungen zur Trajanssäule*, Berlin 1977, p. 14, which states that the images of these villages are not faithful or picturesque representations but conventional images.

## *Conduct Without Belief*

altitude than they do. As for the sculpted frieze, its role is only decorative, although it is figured and narrative. The best we can do with this kind of construction is not to give the decoration in detail but to go above it. Iconology according to Panofsky is of little use here. In Paris the Vendôme Column and the Bastille Column arise from the same architecture of vertigo. In the last century, the visit to and scaling of these two constructions were on the program of tourists and popular weddings (as in Zola's *Assommoir*). "If you were on the Vendôme Column would you dare jump off?" asks a character in *Peau de Chagrin*. We do not know if the inside stairway of Trajan's Column was accessible to the Romans. It does not matter. The Column expresses the vertiginous glory of Trajan.

A preconception, wrote Robert Klein,<sup>3</sup> has us believe that the reason for a work of art is what that work has to say. From this comes the success of iconology. The circumstance of the reception of the work by its viewers has only recently been taken into consideration. Very few archaeologists have thought to ask themselves about the curious problem of the nonvisibility of the bas-reliefs of Trajan's Column. Those who have,<sup>4</sup> show some embarrassment. Lehmann-Hartleben states this fact and imputes it to a lack of coordination between the foreman and the principal sculptor. Richard Brilliant sees in it an artistic failure but recognizes that the important thing was that the spectator "grasped it all at once from whatever view he had". Bianchi Bandinelli sees in it a consequence of the artist's liberty, who found satisfaction in creating, even though the fruit of his work was hardly visible. Werner Gauer noted that the frieze, unrolling in a spiral, presents vertical correspondences between superimposed spires so well that the work must also be viewed from above. An article in *Prospettiva* (1981) thought to solve the problem of non-visibility: the reliefs

<sup>3</sup> Robert Klein, *La forme et l'intelligible*, Gallimard 1970, p. 234.

<sup>4</sup> We quote: Lehmann-Hartleben, *Die Trajanssäule*, Vol. I, p. 1; R. Brilliant, *Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine*, London, Phaidon 1974, p. 192; R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Dall'ellenismo al medioevo*, Milan 1978, p. 123: "*La Colonna Traiana, o della libertà dell'artista*,"; W. Gauer, *Untersuchungen...*, p. 45; *Prospettiva*, no. 26 July 1981, p. 2 (with interesting precisions, no. 11, on the polychrome of these reliefs, which completes G. Becatti, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der röm. Welt*, II, 12, *Kunst* 1, p. 550).

were intended to be viewed from the high terraces of the buildings that surrounded the Column. The author of the article adds that the explanation of Bianchi Bandinelli arises from a bourgeois idealism... The idea of a half-way-up view does not even deserve discussion (whether we are on the ground or higher up, only one or two spires are clearly visible, and in addition we would have to move around the Column) but that shows the embarrassment in which the non-visibility plunges the historians of ancient history. Either they do not think of the non-visibility, or they see it as accidental, or an apparent oddity that should be corrected.

In Paris there is a work, the Vendôme Column, a very faithful Napoleonic imitation of Trajan's Column<sup>5</sup> that has the same non-visibility. But since it is a modern work, historians regard it with a less-knowing and less-troubled eye. They so calmly admit its non-visibility that after its erection the sculptor Ambroise Tardieu published a book with engravings of the reliefs (*La Colonne de la Grande Armée, gravée par Tardieu*) and explained in his preface that, the reliefs not being visible, he thought his book would be useful. Those who look at the 23 spires of the Vendôme Column cannot distinguish very much (but they feel that if they were better located they could, which is important, as we shall see). They confusedly recognize military scenes, marshals' hats and in some places the legendary small hat of the Corsican dictator. They can also read the Column vertically: in whatever place one is, if one looks from below to above one can always perceive the famous small hat, visible from all sides.

Thus it suffices to accept the evidence that one finds oneself before a work that does not belong to a past or foreign civilization. It is an unexpected application of the evangelical parable of the mote and the beam. Each civilization finds itself natural, none is surprised at itself. Problems or their solutions begin with the other. Or rather, when we cross a spatial or temporal frontier, we change our criteria. At home we apply a social grid, for example, and when we are in a foreign country a national grid. What a French citizen will feel in France as a bourgeois oddity will seem to him in

<sup>5</sup> Salvatore Settis has just made a brilliant study of the imitation of Trajan reliefs by the sculptors of Napoleon.

## *Conduct Without Belief*

America an American oddity, imputable to all of America as such.

From this also comes the illusion of the “good old days” and the *laudatio temporis acti*. We read the present through news items and the past through the norm. If modern bas-reliefs are not visible, it is because it is normal that it should be that way. We do not trouble ourselves about it. At least we gain by this not to pose the problem in the wrong way, as has been done with Trajan’s Column.

The poor visibility of works of art is so frequent that it is normal. It suffices to wander into St. Peter’s in Rome, lifting one’s eyes toward the vaulted ceiling, the dome or the top of Bernini’s baldaquin to realize it. Decorative effect and museographical rationality become one. At St. Mary Major the mosaics of the nave are small pictures, a little more than a meter long and placed several meters high. We can distinguish nothing; we cannot even count the number of figures. If we want to study their content, we must look at the reproductions in Wilpert’s publication. Moreover, the average spectator is unable to know what many of the biblical scenes represent. To visual non-visibility is added the obscurity of the iconography. But as Peter Brown says,<sup>6</sup> what does it matter? In the scene showing Jacob’s benediction by Isaac, the spectator sees chiefly green hills, cypresses, a paradisiacal image that is less mystical than idyllic. Early Christianity presented the joys of paradise to the senses, as Islam did at about the same time.

The details are difficult to see, to understand and to study. It suffices that the viewer from the floor on which he is standing sees enough to be sure that these details, even though they escape him, could nevertheless be seen if he were better positioned. In other words, if the artist had not spared his pains and the commissioner his money. The rationality of the expression (“What greatness is mine, oh Heavens!”) is not that of information and propaganda (“Know that I am great”).

An expression that is too calculated loses its effect. True greatness must not be sparing; it must flow abundantly. So we must distinguish between an art that we look at and, as Gombrich says,<sup>7</sup> another art to which we do not pay attention and which is called

<sup>6</sup> P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, Univ. Calif. Press 1982, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*, Oxford, Phaidon 1979, p. 116.

“decorative”. The Parthenon frieze could hardly expect to be deciphered: it was only regarded in passing. As Leroi-Gourhan says,<sup>8</sup> “the criterion of decoration is more in the intention put into it than in the elements themselves. In a sanctuary the great edifying frescos are elements of decoration no more and no less than the leafy garlands”.

No doubt, but is it really art we are looking at? Would it not be better to speak of spectators who look at art and are not satisfied with a lateral and global view? In fact, individuals do exist who are called connoisseurs, amateurs, and who do discern. They exist even in “primitive” peoples who, according to some ethnologists, are as able as we are to estimate that the music played during the tribal festival of the year is more beautiful than that of the previous year. At the same time the same “primitives” believe that this fine music is the very voice of the ancestors, and they listen to it with religious emotion.<sup>9</sup> Thus it is less a matter of different species of individuals than of different attitudes toward creative work, and we can plausibly say, for instance, that Greek statues were formerly idols and that they are works of art only for us. They were already works of art for the Greeks and they were also a third thing at least: representations and portraits of what occurred in the divine world and the aspect of divinities. They gave information on heavenly activities just as television lets us see the political world and its participants. Finally, their decorative beauty expressed the power and piety of the devout who had created them or of the clergy in the sanctuary.

A plurality of attitudes, often in one sole spectator, and correlative plurality in the function of art: each work has its own, one or more. If we want to study Trajan’s Column as a work of art, to say what characterizes and distinguishes it, we must, before getting lost in details, ask if the frieze was intended to give informative illustration (as did famous paintings of a gladiatorial match),<sup>10</sup> if it was a work to be enjoyed or a simple triumphal decor

<sup>8</sup> A. Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole*, Albin Michel 1965, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment*, Univ. Pennsylvania Press 1982, which I know thanks to Jean Molino.

<sup>10</sup> Ancient testimony relates that these paintings of matches were carefully and eagerly regarded.

## *Conduct Without Belief*

full of warlike feats, certainly appropriate but somewhat mechanical. As for a detailed study of the frieze, it will not bring much to the characterization of the Column itself. On the other hand, it will be instructive for further chapters on the history of Roman art (iconographical tradition of the workshops, history of continuous narration, etc.) which will be beneficial for the eventual characterization of other works. Likewise, when an ancient mosaic represents a little-known and esoteric mythological legend, the iconography of the legend brings precious information on the diffusion of mythological knowledge, at least within the world of the ateliers or their sketchbooks of models. But the characterization of the mosaic itself poses quite different problems: was the buyer (himself different from the artist) interested in erudition, and did he know what the mosaic represented? It could be that he only saw a pretty picture or even less a decoration that would enhance the social esteem he enjoyed because the decoration was very expensive. A Florentine buyer demanded that Ghirlandaio, from whom he had ordered a fresco, "give precise information" on the life of John the Baptist, his patron saint (this is the subject of a famous work by Aby Warburg). We do not know what Ghirlandaio did about it and what the ordinary Florentine saw in it. Perhaps a pious decoration that one did not scrutinize too much. But in the 17th century a connoisseur who bought a *Le Nain* certainly did not do so because the gentleman had kept his attachment to the country, as Anthony Blunt rather clumsily assumed.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps instead he liked the beautiful painting, art for art's sake. Or did he piously and poetically dream before the diversity of conditions that God has made with man, before the formidable differences in destiny of the many children of the Almighty, who in this way reveals his mystery and glory? It is in vain that a painting has an entire iconography: it is not bought for its iconography, at least not always.

The artist himself paints or sculpts through love of iconography or, perhaps more often, he does not lend it much importance. Usually, the artist works for the ideal viewer, analogous to the "ideal reader" whose ghost present-day semiology correctly raises

<sup>11</sup> A. Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France, 1500 to 1700*, Penguin Books, 1953, p. 157 (it is true that he adds, "but this is pure speculation").



on the horizon of each literary work. In Phidias's day, the statues on Greek pediments were as well done on the farther side, against the tympanum, as on their visible side. The sculptor wanted to satisfy the ideal spectator (who saw everything with his mind's eye), and first of all himself, who had his ideal of a work well done. Perhaps also the gods, who loved scrupulous workers. When this ideal spectator, who is generally a double of the artist, is incarnated, he has the name "connoisseur," the man who espouses the point of view of the creator and understands his intentions.<sup>12</sup>

What mistakenly leads us to believe that iconography is of the greatest importance is that it is the most conspicuous element, and with reason. Images are a description, not a language. As Jean-Claude Passeron says, the image is not a language because it cannot say "yes" or "no" or "almost" or "perhaps" or "tomorrow" and because if it brings with it conventions, on the other hand it is not coded (the only images that are truly coded are modern geographical maps). On the contrary, if it is a question of showing how a complicated machine or earthly paradise is made, images are irreplaceable. Their descriptive power makes them appropriate to show, if not to give information in the exact meaning of the word (images do not have "shifters"). Let us suppose that the sculpted or painted decoration of churches has always been visible, that it has been understandable for the average spectator and that he took the trouble to look at it. Even in this case, a church was not the "catechism of the illiterate" that they say. Its imagery was for pleasure rather than instruction. It played the part that news photographs play today, pleasing readers by making them see how the queen's coronation was, alongside the reporter's article giving information on the coronation. Such is the origin, or one of the origins, of naturalist art in Greece or Gothic Italy.

Images cannot exist without describing, without telling "how it was." But we are not always interested in knowing how it was. This is why, with the exception of news photographs, pictures are not looked at closely. We hardly look at them, unless we are connoisseurs. We most often lend them what Gianni Vattimo calls

<sup>12</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 1963.

## *Conduct Without Belief*

a lateral and distracted attention<sup>13</sup> unless the picture is intended to shock. If not, everything would be limited to the feeling of the presence of a picture (“look, it’s decorated”; “look, it’s pretty”; “look, it’s a painting and not a poster, so it must cost a lot”) and to the summary classification of that picture (“it’s a religious painting;” “it’s a nude;” “it’s abstract art for snobs”),<sup>14</sup> historically variable attitudes (“it’s so well done you would think it was real”) but equally mediocre. Thus we must not overestimate the importance of art in the mentality of an epoch. History, or at least general history, must remember that works of art only function at ten percent of their capacity. Here again we refer to Peter Brown.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, art has little importance in history? Not so fast. There are intense functions and strong attitudes that play a minor role. If, on the other hand, we consider the weakest attitude (global and distracted attention) and the weakest function (decoration, genre) nothing equals the importance men have given to art throughout their history, not even religion. We know that almost all the surplus of ancient societies went into buildings, columns and statues, so violent is the need for self-expression. Let it be said in passing that the admission that there is an entire scale of degrees of intensity in art, far from tyrannizing us must put us at ease. The curator of a museum is perhaps not forced to obey sociologists and serve the lowest order, that of the history of taste and fashion...

The art that matters, in spite of its feeble intensity, or perhaps because of it, forms the urban decor and no one pays attention to this theater of social drama. To any sociological interpretation that makes art an ideology it is legitimate to object: “who has ever looked at the Vendôme Column? What citizen of Marseilles ever glanced at the reliefs on the Porte d’Aix by David d’Angers?” (reliefs, for that matter, better than most of the too-famous

<sup>13</sup> G. Vattimo, *La fine della modernità*, (trans. Alunni, *La Fin de la modernité: nihilisme et herméneutique dans la culture post-moderne*, Editions du Seuil 1987, pp. 89-91).

<sup>14</sup> See Raymonde Moulin on the subject of the market for “croûtes”: *Le marché de la peinture en France*, Editions de Minuit, pp. 70 and 409 *et seq.*

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

“historical reliefs” of ancient Rome). An indifference that does not contradict the destination of these monuments, which are erected in front of time rather than in front of men; monuments that are not messages to someone else nor the ideal expression of humanity, even less the visage of society. They express the power that made them rise from the earth. As the authors of political tracts and militant graffiti written on walls are less to address readers than to express what overflows from their hearts and also to manifest their existence.

Nevertheless, a university wall covered with graffiti that no one bothers to read has the merit of not being cold like the lobby of a bank and of living in a small world of its own. No one itemized Trajan’s Column either. Just the same, simply seeing it, everyone felt that space was occupied by a strong power using a language that was not heard but that passed, like the wind, over one’s head, offering a discourse that was only generally understood. Because the pompous nonsense or the set speeches are the right and the sign of the gods, oracles and masters. What the Column bears as ideology is the right it claims to exist, just as, in a country submitted to an authoritarian regime, loud-speakers diffusing official discourse in the streets count more for their omnipresence than for what they broadcast. Trajan’s Column is propaganda of a sort but not because of its imagery. It is such for its presence and for the power expressed by its redundancy.

We could say the same for natural productions, *physis*. Art proves the existence of a social force, comparable to that which raises mountains. By that, expression is a non-intended communication: it is the mark of its author and it cannot be otherwise, even when it refuses. An architect, follower of Mies van der Rohe, received one day an order to build a bank. His esthetic taste and political convictions obviously would not permit him to treat a bank as a temple of capitalism and sculpt columns, statues and pediments. He erected a bare, austere skyscraper without the least trace of ideology. Unfortunately, the edifice proved to what point capitalism dared to be transparent, sure of itself and dominating, scornful of self-justification and embellishment. Through his taste for functional nudity, the architect made the high-rising bank self-evident, and his building impressed the passers-by.

## *Conduct Without Belief*

Art belongs to conduct that has no end, no *telos*,<sup>16</sup> that is not understood by its end and not measured by its result. It is not a means of communication, because it is not a means. It is explained by its origin. It expresses itself just in order to express itself, like a fire that burns just to burn and then stops, not when it has obtained a result but when it has exhausted its energy. Expression in itself cannot measure its effects, it can only exhaust itself, from which comes the quantitative importance of art in history, filled with expressions both disinterested and efficacious: pyramids, capitals, ceremonies and tracts. And each one is sensitive to the force expressed if not to the meaning the expressions imply.

In the first note to this article we quoted a text by Bateson from which this results: in New Guinea or Papua, in a village on the river Sepik that is famous with collectors of Oceanic art, there is a ceremony. Our historians of religion who would pay particular attention to the significance of this liturgy see in it a ceremony intended to favor fertility of the soil. In a history of Oceanic religions, the ceremony would thus be described in a chapter relative to the fertility rites. The participants in the ceremony, who are after all the most interested, see nothing of that but only a solemnity celebrating the occasion for which it is performed, that is, the inauguration of a public building. A group of virtuosos or snobs assume an attachment, not to this banal occasion nor to the esoteric text of the ceremony but to a third element: it so happens that in order to stimulate fertility the ritual occasionally commemorates certain mythical ancestors of the present clans. Those pretentious people who descend from these clans ignore the fertility and pretend to ignore the inauguration of the building so as to attach themselves to the commemoration of the old noble names. What is therefore the “true” function of the ceremony, and will we dare catalog it as a “fertility rite” as in the day of James Frazer? In France the *Marseillaise*, a warlike hymn, serves to enhance the inauguration of day-nurseries. The Papuans do the same, in their way. Their strangeness crumbles away then and becomes mediocre.

What we have said about works of art may be repeated about

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Plotin, Traité 38*, Editions du Cerf 1988, p. 69.

rites and ceremonies. Their multiplicity of meaning and the feeble intensity of the meaning most generally received make these ceremonials a behavior that functions at only about ten percent of their energy and that meaning is not the one involving their content and what their creator intended. It is not the words of the *Marseillaise* that matter, when the day-nursery is inaugurated with music. The Papuans have theologians, mythographers, who have elaborated those fertility rites that serve to inaugurate a public building. Most of the ceremonials are thus behavior that is not intended to affirm the belief they contain. At this moment, French Catholics generally feel that the liturgical reform of their church was badly conceived. If that is true, the error perhaps was to take a ceremonial for a proclamation of faith, through an excess of intellectualism. The analogy between works of art and ceremonials is well-founded: ceremonies are art, like a painting or a poem. Military parades also, as well as the gratuitous complication of table manners in the West. And we could say the same for myths, that oral literature meant to entertain. There are societies, sometimes called "primitive," in which ritual creation has as great an importance as musical or plastic creation in others. Ceremony is the principal art of these societies. Liturgy is an art. Now, an art is not a means of communication, propaganda and instruction but a celebration. The Mass said in Latin is not more absurd than the invisibility of Trajan's Column.

The plurality of the functions of the same custom leads to a frequent error: we judge our own customs by one of their functions and foreign customs by another. The foreign custom thus takes on a false originality. We affirm that our Olympic Games are first of all a spectacle, while the Olympic contests of Antiquity would have been a religious ceremony, or that Japanese wrestling (*sumô*) was formerly a rite. In the *Holzwege* Heidegger claims that "no one went to Olympia telling himself it was something to see once in a lifetime." According to him, the Greeks were attached to their collective and religious life, and he finds that good. Unfortunately, he was wrong. The Greeks went to Olympia as to a spectacle, were enthusiastic about the competition and the winners and did not give any more importance to the religious aspect of the contests than we ourselves give to the ceremony of the Olympic flame that opens our Games. Martin Nilsson, who is an expert, almost

## *Conduct Without Belief*

dispenses with speaking of Olympia in his history of Greek religion. Let us not cede here to the legend of a purer origin; let us not claim that an original ritual meaning has become lost during the years. It was lost at its origin, ever since Homer, who described the funeral games in honor of Patrocles as a spectacle that was less funerary than it was a sports event.

The difference between Antiquity and us, because this difference does exist, is not to be found there. In ancient societies a custom that served no practical purpose and was only an amusement was therefore consecrated to the gods so as to be an end in itself and remove aggressive futility from pleasure. We ourselves prefer to legitimize this futility by attaching pleasure to a ministry of leisure or free time. In Antiquity religion was also a means of establishing obligations. The Olympic contest was celebrated every four years, on a certain date, because this date was ritual, customary and sacred, while we ourselves celebrate it on a fixed date because it is necessary to agree on a date and when it is fixed adhere to it. In the same way automobiles keep to the right or left on a road as fixed by a national code, because one side must be decided on, while in Antiquity we would have kept to the right because the left was considered unlucky and a bad omen.

Since a rite or ceremony is a work, instantaneous or elaborated down through the centuries, individual or collective, it follows that it does not convey what a society thinks. It is not its physiognomy. It expresses what its creator knew or thought. We must therefore be careful not to infer from the ceremonial of coronation of kings, for example, what monarchy is and what is thought of it and to bring grist to the mill of the ideological analysis of symbols. This ceremony does not show us the real visage of monarchy: it is merely a portrait by a court painter. The subjects of the king in all probability think something different of the monarchical regime. Even more probably, they think less of it: every portrait painter embellishes, interprets and defines the features of the model.

The function of a rite being to celebrate, to solemnize, not to symbolize and inform, it is almost impossible to infer from a ritual custom the belief to which it corresponds. The funeral rites of ancient Rome are more and more understood, thanks to excavations, without our knowledge of funerary beliefs being increased. What should we think of the fact that at times food was

placed near the deceased? That the contemporaries of Cicero or Marcus Aurelius believed that the tomb was a house where the deceased continued to live and take nourishment? To see more clearly, let us go from the ancient Romans to the Chinese. A century and a half ago Father Huc wrote:<sup>17</sup> “The Chinese have the custom of offering food, and sometimes splendid banquets, to the dead. They are served in front of the coffin while it is in the family home or in front of the tomb after burial. What do the Chinese think about this practice? Many people have written and believed that in their opinion the souls of the dead liked to come and enjoy, in some way, the most subtle and delicate parts of the dishes offered to them. It seems to us that the Chinese are not so deprived of intelligence that they carry the ridiculous that far. One day we asked one of our mandarin friends, who had just put a sumptuous meal before the coffin of one of his deceased friends, if he were of the opinion that the dead needed such food. “How can you suspect me of such a thought?” he answered with astonishment. “Who would be so foolish as to believe that the dead need to eat? Is my intelligence thus limited to the point of not seeing that it would be foolishness? We honor the memory of our relatives and friends, show them that they are still living in our memory and that we still like to serve them as if they existed.” The mandarin, it is true, added this, which proves that the problem of belief is not simple: “Among the common people they tell many fables, but who does not know that ignorant and rough people are always credulous?” Perhaps, but however rough they may be they incarnate a problem: what degree of reality did the belief of the uncultured people in the survival of the dead, and their need for food, have?

In addition to the plurality of attitudes, in addition to the multiplicity of functions, a third aspect of the disintegration into indifference appears: the diversity in ways of believing (belief in the immortality of the soul, however strong it is, has never really changed man’s idea of death). Radcliffe-Brown relates:<sup>18</sup> “An inhabitant of Queensland met a Chinese who was putting a bowl

<sup>17</sup> Rev. Fr. Huc, *Souvenirs d’un voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet et la Chine*, Edition d’Ardenne de Tizac, Vol. IV, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure et fonction dans la société primitive*, p. 232.

## *Conduct Without Belief*

of cooked rice on his brother's grave. The Australian, in jest, asked him if he thought his brother would come to eat it. The Chinese answered, "No, we offer rice to the dead to express our friendship and affection. But, as to your question, I suppose that in Australia you put flowers on the grave of a dead person because you believe he will like to see them and smell their perfume."

Undoubtedly, the only error with the Chinese was in being a child of his century and milieu and as rationalist as the Australian who was questioning him. At that time enlightened thought in China was the same as in Europe. After China seen by the West, here was the West seen by China. In 1898, after the attempt at reform of the Hundred Days against the Empress Tseu-Hi (Cixi) an important modernist mandarin wrote, "although the Europeans do not make oblations or sacrifices on graves they still have the habit of visiting them. The act of placing flowers on graves is considered by Europeans as a mark of respect toward the dead who are buried there. And so the Europeans really have and respect the relationship that exists piously between the father and the son."<sup>19</sup>

Such was the opinion of advanced minds. Why do they refuse to believe that the dead continue to live in their graves? Because this idea of after-life seems contradicted by the evidence of the corpse. This is to forget that there are many ways of believing, many modalities of belief and that in a certain state of mind no social or personal censure prohibits a sincere belief in comforting conceptions. "We hope for Paradise, but as late as possible," says a proverb, because the belief in Paradise and corpses is different, even when it is strong.

The same behavior (placing some nourishment or domestic objects for the use of the deceased in the tomb) would be, according to the society or social group considered, a ceremonial of homage deprived of all belief or an act of consolation in which the actors, without really believing, behave as actors in a play. A

<sup>19</sup> Tchang Tche-T'ong, Viceroy of Hou-Koang, *Exhortation à l'étude*, translated from the Chinese by J. Tobar, Shanghai, 1898, p. 5. On the funerary beliefs of the West around the same period, see R. Linton, *De l'homme*, Editions de Minuit 1968, p. 391. "The average American Protestant at the beginning of the 19th century, could be deeply disturbed by a sermon on the Last Judgment, speak of his loved parents as waiting for him in Heaven and feel a dread of cemeteries after nightfall."



true belief but one that does not abolish other beliefs that apparently contradict it. In Southern Italy, a Christian territory if there ever was one, fifty years ago an ethnologist collected the *lamento* pronounced by a wife: "And now I must tell you, you who were the treasure of your wife, what I have put in your grave. Two shirts, one new and the other mended, a towel for you to wash your face in the other world and then I put your pipe, since you always had such a passion for tobacco! And now how can I send you cigars in the other world?"<sup>20</sup> Here we are in the presence of a sort of dramatization where the living pretend to believe in a fiction and carry the game as far as tobacco and cigars.

The funerary dramatization is very common and leads to a real belief. We often speak of the tragic nature that the "Etruscan soul" had, the somber color of the "funeral beliefs" of Etruria, with its frightening demons. We too quickly forget that this demonology was chiefly the product of a superfluous expressionist invention to which the Etruscan stone-cutters who sculpted these tombs were prone. We could almost dare to say that the Etruscans pretended to be afraid with their funerary imagery, just as, at times, Americans pretend to be afraid of their own films. But we also know that playing that way one ends by really being afraid and believing in demonology. The variety, the complexity and wealth of funerary ceremonials throughout the world allow the supposition that the tombs were the chosen place for this process of dramatizing belief. However, some societies are hostile to any form of dramatization, through a sort of puritanism.

The reality of a belief is not measured either by its non-contradiction or by the practical applications made of it. The faith that does not act is often a sincere faith. We may believe in a survival of the deceased in the grave, while seeing with our eyes that they are only dust. We may continue to believe that they nourish themselves without drawing material consequences from this belief (food is not renewed on the grave but put there only once, the day of the funeral). What shakes a belief is not the shock of reality but a social or personal censure. In fact, a kind of internal sense allows us to distinguish between the different modalities of

<sup>20</sup> De Martino, *lamento* found in Lucania and published in *Società* in 1954.

## *Conduct Without Belief*

our beliefs, just as we know what the position of our members is at every moment. The consolation of ceremonial modalities of belief are thus marked by a sign that characterizes them, one that disillusioned beliefs do not have. This interior sentiment of the way of believing allows us to control and censure our thoughts in the same way that we control the style of our remarks (we may also, for elegance or modesty, react against an inclination we might have to speak emphatically and to multiply prosopopeia and metonymy: we eliminate these figures of rhetoric without, perhaps, having ever learned what a metonymy is.) Now it happens that in some societies, one of which is our own, a censure falls on consoling beliefs, as it could on relaxed postures or emphatic remarks. Not to believe so as to console oneself is an imperative of intellectual dignity. To believe that the dead are nourished with the dishes that are placed before them then changes from a true belief to a simple act of homage to which no belief corresponds.

We may wonder if it is psychologically possible to believe that the body of a dead person is decomposed and at the same time believe that this body continues to receive nourishment. We must reply that it is quite possible. The time-machine taught me this. In fact, one day I heard the poet René Char let himself go in his mythic and personal reverie and explain that the great ideas are deposited by the tide on beaches and that they are discovered at the bottom of pools of water that the ebb-tide leaves on the shore. He himself had discovered this fact during a walk on the beach at Varengeville, where he had been invited by Georges Braque. What this myth means is that great ideas are deposited on the margins of our consciousness by the coming and going of small events that the Eternal Return churns up in the ocean that is the cosmos and that we discover them in the pools of reflection that are formed in our daily meditations. Char did not say (and did not think) that the reflections were *like* pools of water. He thought of *real* pools of water (at least when he was daydreaming, which as a poet he often did). However, he had not dug the pools on the beach at Varengeville with his own hands. The symbolic and mythical thought always functions that way. For example, the founder of Manicheism thought that the elements of the cosmos were purified by being lifted up into the air in the buckets of a cosmic noria whose three wheels were air, water and fire. He did not say and

did not think that the process of purification was *analogous* to a noria; he thought that it *was* a noria. However, when he lifted his eyes to the sky he did not expect to see this noria (and was not disappointed when he did not see it). Symbolic and mythical thought is in accord with itself: it knows its own contradictions and is careful not to collide with them.

Dramatization, mythical programs of truth, half-beliefs, plurality of functions and attitudes: all this disintegration is explainable. Cultural creations, beliefs, religions, art, consecrated touristic itineraries, are a sort of institution, "objective spirits." They are important things that exist in themselves, that each of us tries to reach and that no one fully realizes. Certainly, every hour of our daily life has some small amount of religiosity that is unrecognized or an ignored esthetic pleasure. But there is an abyss between individual experience and a religion or a work of art.<sup>21</sup> The happiness in Naples that Madame Bovary dreamed of could not exist on a daily basis but only as an objective, like the list of tourist sites to be visited and the sentiments to be felt there.

When beauty or the divine have become art or religion everyday life is no longer on the scale of objectivity; Bayreuth is no longer the matter of a few hours of esthetic pleasure for some hundreds of individuals. What is then produced is an object relationship, an "investment," just as individual capital is invested in a public company. Esthetic pleasure itself, having become admiration and love, goes to dwell elsewhere, in its object. It is no longer an intimate excitement; it becomes the fact that a symphony appears radiant. The sacrifices that pious or esthetic individuals make to their objective spirits are not at all paid in daily benefices (religion takes hardly an hour or two out of the day of the most pious man) but in the importance attached to the object. Never does an individual become of himself an objective spirit. From Hölderlin to Heidegger, the dream of an ancient Greece is only a chimera, which proves how much Heidegger was confused.

Returns to origins are therefore vain. Origins are daily things. The religiosity of origins, preferable to our barbarous secularization,

<sup>21</sup> G. Simmel, *Philosophische Kultur*, Wagenbach, Berlin, 1983, p. 37.

## *Conduct Without Belief*

exists only in the nostalgia of edifying philosophers. Far from being riddled with lacunae, history is made up of struggles against the everyday, of educative efforts, or rather, to call a spade a spade, of training, for better or worse, for Bayreuth or Verdun. When a society resembles its ideal, whether Greece seems esthetic or the Middle Ages can pass as Christianity, is not a return to authenticity but the effect of a difficult and always imperfect training? An army is not the same thing as a gathering of men each of whom has the need to defend himself. Our libraries have more books than we can read and contain many that will never be opened.

This is what Georg Simmel calls the tragedy of culture.<sup>22</sup> By that he does not mean a painful drama but a slight continual shifting between everydayness and objective spirits. This shifting inspires some with chimeras, who take for everydayness the origins of formerly objective spirits and in others it inspires a hatred of culture. Through his lucidity and integrity Rousseau hated the sciences and art. Through deception in love Ruskin hated a culture that its lovers would never succeed in possessing. René Char considers that “civilizations are fat” and that it is necessary to “clean off the obesity,” because often individuals with a strong interior life hate the objective minds that force the soul to come

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 195-218. The response of E. Cassirer, *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften*, Darmstadt 1961, ch. 5, repudiates Simmel's thought which does not deplore the fact that the objective mind blocks individual spontaneity but on the contrary that the individual never succeeds in assimilating his objective creations. It is true that the tragic pluralism of Simmel is contrary to our natural inclination to conciliation and optimism. Simmel believes in the irreconcilable plurality of values and the internal discord of the individual himself (*Einleitung in die Morawissenschaft*, Scientia Verlag 1983, Vol. II, pp. 360-426). In the same way, the ambiguity between instinct and higher aspirations, a confused reality that for want of something better he calls “life” (his *Fragment über die Liebe* is characteristic: see *Das Individuum und die Freiheit*, Wagenbach 1984, pp. 19-28). Here we are far from Bergson, in spite of what has often been said. What Simmel calls “life” is the mixed nature of all reality, where essences, functions or orders are mingled or contradictory. Love is neither one essence nor a composite of impulses and ideals but an indissoluble mixture: “eine unlösbare Aufgabe” (p. 25). On the individual not being able to assimilate all the objective spirit (and, for example, fully profiting from the institution of museums) see *Das Individuum und die Freiheit*, p. 90 *et seq.*

out of itself.<sup>23</sup> Seneca found that the possession of a library was against nature.

Values are usually located outside the individual. We live or die for them, we do not see them, we do not feel them, we profess them more than we believe in them. The lines Apollinaire wrote in 1918, "France beats in the soldier's heart" are conventional and false. Nothing like that beats within the heart. "I wanted to paint grayness," Flaubert wrote of *Madame Bovary*. There is a mediocre and indifferent tragic that is not born of conflicts between values of incoherency of reality with itself, because the world is not badly made, it is not made at all.

The real drama of *Madame Bovary* is thus that this woman could not achieve objectivity. If she had been able to, she would have found her fulfillment. Her torment is the same as that of Flaubert himself. How to find a completion of existence in the existence itself?<sup>24</sup> It is clear that a library that could read itself, a work of art that would be its own spectator or a behavior that believed in what it was doing would be complete entities. And even divine beings, since in them the known would know itself and, as the Greeks said, intelligence and the intelligible would be the same thing. But since they are not, there is always a hollowness in our souls. In vain does the poet have the feeling of creating something imperishable in his poem; there is still the regret that the intelligence of his poem depends on each reader. The poem would be divine if it could read itself. What is not divine is every day, that is, everything else.

To sum up, three examples suffice to show the difference between simple experience and objectivity. The first is sensitivity to the landscape. It is not a matter of an "evolution of sensitivity" but a change of category. In Molière's day one *saw* the landscape: "The country is not very flourishing this month," says a character in *Tartuffe*. Beginning with Chateaubriand, sensitivity to the landscape became an art, with its vocabulary and its obligation to feel what should be felt. Consequently, the difficulty in guaranteeing

<sup>23</sup> René Char, *Oeuvres complètes*, Bibl. Pléiade 1983, pp. 466 and 55; G. Simmel, *Das Individuum und die Freiheit*, p. 203.

<sup>24</sup> Simmel *Philosophische Kultur*, p. 150.

*Conduct Without Belief*

the diffusion of the arts among the people was that it did not suffice to put them at the people's disposal. It was primarily needful to give them the feeling that it is noble to make the effort to initiate oneself to this objective spirit that art is. Because culture, like sports, is a pleasure that requires an effort. Finally, we spoke of the contradiction between the reality of the corpse and the belief in the survival of the dead who required food in their graves. The contradiction may be easily accepted simply because the experience of the corpse is an "experience," while the belief in the after-life is much more elaborated, namely, an objectivity. Now since objective spirits are always at a distance, we only half-way subscribe to these beliefs, through duty and, at times, in jest.

Paul Veyne  
(Paris)