

these faceless and homeless terrorists hell-bent on collective suicide.

They say that in the United States law professors have been arguing, for some little time now, that 'if torture is the only way to avoid the explosion of an atomic bomb in Times Square, it is licit.'<sup>16</sup>

After all-out deterrence, the extension of the torture chamber is thus once more on the agenda for the day, the last day . . . For if everything is allowed in order to avert the end of the world, then it is the end of everything!

The end of law, including the law of the fittest, trumped by the law of the maddest: what is required is to urgently reopen the camps, all the camps, not only the camp at Guantanamo Bay, but those of Treblinka, Auschwitz and Birkenau, in order to finally get ready for what André Chouraqui used to call, not so long ago: the 'planetary shoah'.<sup>17</sup>

## 10 The Dromosphere

A quarter of a century ago, in 1978, Federal Germany road-tested a revelatory experiment: removing all speed limits on the autobahn. Organized conjointly by the government, the car manufacturers and the car clubs, this series of tests and sundry investigations was designed to get past old hat analyses of the causes of car accidents. Everyone suddenly put forward factors that had been overlooked: the state of road surfaces, atmospheric conditions, and so on and so forth. These private and public bodies suddenly seemed to join forces to deny that speeding was directly responsible.

According to this lot, speed was neither the sole nor even the main cause of road accidents and their seriousness; other factors carried greater responsibility in the carnage caused by automobile transport.

As we might suspect, the real reason for such an about-face lay elsewhere. According to the German car makers, 'To condemn vehicles designed to travel at 150 km or 200 km an hour to do only 130 is to condemn technical progress and thereby the position of German industry on the foreign markets, thus opening the floodgates to unemployment.'

In the face of this speech for the defence, the federal government decided to 'free up the autobahn'. Even though drivers were recommended not to exceed 130 km per hour, doing 200 km or 250 km per hour was not to be penalized any more, car drivers' self-discipline was to suffice . . .

Anxious French car makers of the day were to come up with a complementary argument: 'On the highway as in

competition, the more a car is built to go fast, the more reliable it is. When you can do more, you can do less.'

As it happens, competition on the foreign markets, notably in the United States where German cars sell extremely well, is not about speed, which is strictly limited. What counts is reliability, which is a function of the maximum speed even if this is rarely used. Germany having deliberately opted for 'a few more dead today, fewer unemployed tomorrow' competitiveness, declared the French car makers, is driving us down the same road.

We know what ensued as far as mass unemployment goes, in Germany as in France and elsewhere. What is revelatory about this period, though, is the acceptance of the notion that road victims are victims of progress. From that moment, every car driver becomes a sort of 'test pilot' of cutting-edge technologies. Those who risk their own lives and the lives of their fellows can know that they are putting them at risk in order to ensure the reliability of the product, the smooth running of the national firm – in other words, security of employment.

Since the advance of the car industry appears assured and guaranteed by excessive speed, to risk your life for the security of speed is equivalent to risking your life for the employment of time and no longer, as in days gone by, for the homeland, in defence of the employment of the national arena.

With this form of time management, which is curious, to say the least, and which is shored up at once by social security and civil security which list the work-place accident and the accident to and from work under the same heading, it is no longer a matter, as it was in the past, of covering up an accident or failure, but indeed of making it productive, psychologically speaking.

This process aimed at triggering a sort of deregulation of behaviours already heralded the coming age of full-scale deregulation in which we now live, following the

self-regulation of traditional societies and the regulation of institutional societies.

Like the Russian people once called on to make sacrifices to ensure the 'radiant future' of a scientific communism, the technical progress of capitalist societies was to be indexed to the sacrifice of consumers.

Strangely, in those not so distant days of the 1970s, when technoscientific progress was assimilated to the risk of driving a fast vehicle, the French government of Raymond Barre insisted, only the day after the Three Mile Island catastrophe of 1979, on the need to speed up construction of French nuclear power stations, thereby moving in the direction of this eschatological perspective.

From that moment, were we really to seriously envisage the rise of an officially cynical, meaning purely sadistic, power? The advent of a 'suicidal national state', not so much political as transpolitical, which would soon be exemplified by the Chernobyl catastrophe with the implosion of the Soviet Union?

It might now be useful to dust off an old short story of Ursula Le Guin's: 'Direction of the Road' (which appeared in France precisely in 1978 under the title of 'Le Chêne et la Mort' – the oak and death).<sup>1</sup>

In this fictional tale, the author gives voice to a tree more than two hundred years old that grew up with the accelerated gallop of horses pulling diligences and, shortly after that, the acceleration of cars, right up to the fatal accident that brings the tree's first-person narrative to a close.

In the days of horses, claims the oak, 'they [the horses] did not used to be so demanding. They never hurried us into anything more than a gallop, and that was rare.' But then the first motor car appeared, and then another: 'a new one, suddenly dragging me and the road and our hill, the orchard, the fields, the farmhouse roof all jiggling and jouncing and racketing

along from East to West. I went faster than a gallop, faster than I had ever gone before. I had scarcely time to loom, before I had to shrink right down again.'

Building on this dromoscopic vision, our oak goes on:

But have you ever considered the feat accomplished, the skill involved, when a tree enlarges, simultaneously yet at slightly different rates and in slightly different manners, for each one of forty motorcar drivers facing two opposite directions, while at the same time diminishing for forty more who have got their backs to it, meanwhile remembering to loom over each single one at the right moment; and to do this minute after minute, hour after hour, from daybreak till nightfall or long after?

For my road had become a busy one; it worked all day long under almost continual traffic. It worked, and I worked. I did not jounce and bounce so much any more, but I had to run faster and faster: to grow enormously, to loom in a split second, to shrink to nothing, all in a hurry, without time to enjoy the action, and without rest: over and over and over.

Our venerable oak sets himself up as 'an oak of the law':

For fifty or sixty years, then, I have upheld the Order of Things, and have done my share of supporting the human creatures' illusion that they are 'going somewhere'. And I am not unwilling to do so. But a truly terrible thing has occurred, which I wish to protest.

I do not mind going in two directions at once; I do not mind growing and shrinking simultaneously; I do not mind moving, even at the disagreeable rate of sixty or seventy miles an hour. I am ready to go on doing all these things until I am felled or bulldozed. They're my job. But I do object, passionately, to being made eternal.

There then follows a detailed description of an accident in which a driver crashes into the oak: 'I killed him instantly [...] I had to kill him,' the tree freely admits.

What I protest, what I cannot endure, is this: as I leapt at him, he saw me. He looked up at last. He saw me as I have never been seen before, not even by a child, not even in the days when people looked at things. He saw me whole, and saw nothing else — then, or ever.

He saw me under the aspect of eternity. He confused me with eternity. And because he died in that moment of false vision, because it can never change, I am caught in it, eternally.

As the philosophical oak explains, by way of conclusion:

This is unendurable. I cannot uphold such an illusion. If the human creatures will not understand Relativity, very well; but they must understand Relatedness.

If it is necessary to the Order of Things, I will kill drivers of cars, though killing is not a duty usually required of oaks. But it is unjust to require me to play the part, not of the killer only, but of death. For I am not death. I am life: I am mortal.

Exhuming this text that is more than quarter of a century old may seem anachronistic today, but that would be a mistake or, rather, an optical illusion produced by the acceleration of the real.

Indeed, at the beginning of last century, three million plane trees, maples and poplars still lined the roads of France, but now there are only 400,000 of them left, and these are held responsible for 750 deaths a year.<sup>2</sup> The notion of fate that still prevailed half a century ago was superseded by the principle of collective responsibility. And so the concept of the 'unforgiving road' was born.

At the Department of Roads, the statisticians calculated that there was four times the risk of dying in an accident running into a tree than in any other type of accident.

The way they put it, the magnificent leafy monarchs of the plant world have become a potential minefield in terms of

human lives, whence their sacrifice, tabled in a 1970 circular urging their systematic eradication.

In 2001, the Minister for Agriculture, Jean Glavany, was still hoking into plane trees as public menaces.

Of course, there are those who dare to assert that 'it is not plane trees that cross in front of cars,' but what can you say to those who go as far as rescinding the abolition of the death penalty in order to justify the felling of lateral obstacles, considered aggravating factors in any road accident? 'Certainly,' they say, 'every driver should remain in control of his vehicle. But, all the same, death is too heavy a price to pay.'

The die has been cast. Between yesterday's fiction and today's accelerated reality, the difference has disappeared and, with it, all reason. As an admission of helplessness, one regional councillor even came up with this: 'What do you want us to do? We'll never get them to slow down!'

Speed suppresses not only Relatedness, as Ursula Le Guin so acutely explained, but also Reason. This is what must finally reveal the importance of the accident in contemporary thought, in other words: the accident in the circulation of knowledge between 'being' and 'place', this backdrop to life that comprises not only the animal realm – that of the being's movements – but the plant and mineral realms, that is, the realms of stability, fixity and, finally, the persistence of sites.

How long before we see the elimination of hills and cliffs, the definitive levelling of the world's relief?

How long before we see the abolition of the waves of the high seas, of this set of collateral obstacles that still put the brakes on the acceleration of technical progress?

When you run into a table, should you do away with it or learn to avoid it?

Since we have, seemingly, erased distances, it remains to eliminate the resistance of materials, of lithospheric or hydro-spheric elements.

Just as we were able in the recent past to go beyond the whole set of atmospheric elements, thanks to the velocity of escape from gravity, from terrestrial weightiness, we must now eliminate what still subsists of material opposition to advancement, to the dromospheric race of automotive devices.

After the silk weavers of Lyon and the machine-wrecking Luddites of Britain, the time of those motorists bent on systematically felling the greenery, bringing down the shade with it, replaced as it now is by motor vehicle air conditioning, is now upon us . . . How long before the four seasons are eliminated and replaced by the single temperate climate of a general planet-spanning air conditioning system? How long before the meteorological atmosphere is put under glass or, rather, under sequestration, thanks to this sphere or, more precisely, this dromosphere, in the race of a progress that is nothing more than a third type of inflation, not so much economic as eschatological, since with it the acceleration of reality once and for all shunts all historical accumulation aside?

'By dint of wanting to possess, we are ourselves possessed,' noted Victor Hugo two centuries ago.

No point looking any further for the origin of this hyper-violence that is now unfurling all over the world, for speed has become the very quintessence of such violence, eliminating one by one any markers, not only any 'temporal' markers but also any factual limit.

Take the example of statics and of the resistance of materials that are the basis of any construction: since last century, for instance, we have been going faster and faster to achieve the durable, the durability of those buildings and structures of very long duration that condition the permanence and stability of our societies.

As an architect put it after the collapse of the Roissy airport terminal in May 2004: 'Building sites have to go faster and faster, technical performances have to be more and more

precise, to the point of verging on extreme complexity. We could even talk of an "ideology of speed" and of performance.'

No, dear colleague, it is not even a matter of some passing ideology any more, as it was at the beginning of the industrial age, but of dromology. And this is worse, since it conditions the whole of technically-oriented civilization, just as the historian Marc Bloch told us it would.

Speaking of which, it would perhaps be appropriate to shift the concept of surrealism as heir to the domains of art and literature, and apply it to the field of politics. Sylvie Guillem, the dancer, does this, for example, when she declares: 'You have to dance, not over-dance.' In other words, content yourself exclusively with choreographic feats.

Actually, as soon as these feats, these technical, scientific or industrial achievements, are wholly conditioned by the acceleration of the real, one can just as easily over-build as over-destroy.

Whence the all-out spread of a surveillance – over-vigilance – that surpasses the 'state of vigilance' of those not so distant days 'when people looked at things,' as Ursula Le Guin helpfully reminded us. And this merely anticipates the imminent, or practically imminent overdone or *super*-humanity that the apostles of Progress are cooking up for us in the secrecy of the laboratories of transgenic genesis.

'People bewail effects, but make the most of causes,' wrote Bossuet. Paraphrasing another giant of critical writing, we might echo: 'If science wants nothing to do with its effects, ignorance will get hold of it.'

These days, curiously, the sphere of acceleration of reality tends to reverse the principle of responsibility.

With the tree that kills, the reality of guilt is transferred from the guilty to the innocent, the innocence of a vegetal fixity that creates an obstacle foiling the automobility of a vehicle which is more often than not, now, driven with the assistance of a computer.

Here, the dromoscopy – this optical illusion of flashing past that reverses the direction of the road, with its trees that look like they are hurling themselves at the windscreen before vanishing in the rear mirror whereas, in reality, it is the reverse that is happening – affects the whole gamut of our perceptions and muddles our judgement to the point where the victim suddenly becomes the designated guilty party.

Strangely, too, this phenomenon of dromoscopic transfer today affects our legal system without this worrying the authorities too much. I'm talking here about the transfer of guilt that is overturning a number of trials in the criminal courts where the victim of the crime statistic subtly morphs into the guilty party. This permutation is, doubtless, an indirect consequence of the too-great mobility of viewpoints in the endless acceleration of our social behaviours.

Look at what is happening, for example, in the corporate firm subject to economic globalization: as soon as employers have a serious problem, they transfer, relocate, and the more delicate the commercial situation appears, the faster they tend to act. This even involves the phenomenal expatriation that is turning corporate life on its head.

If perception eclipses the reality of the moment to that extent, this is because there is no more intermediary financing, no more extensions of time, no more intervals of intervention.

Reducing to nothing the space-time of our actions and our interactions, acceleration suddenly upends the reality of the facts. And so, the dromosphere induces everywhere at once an illusory reversal of our know-how and our acquired knowledge, whereby temporal compression of our activities illustrates very precisely what Aristotle called 'the accident of accidents'.

For instance, what happens during acceleration of automobility, that is, where what stays put appears to flee while the interior of the vehicle seems immobile, is reproduced today in the media perception of televised reality.