

PREFACE: THE GAP BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

Notre héritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament—"our inheritance was left to us by no testament"—this is perhaps the strangest of the strangely abrupt aphorisms into which René Char, French poet and writer, compressed the gist of what four years in the *résistance* had come to mean to a whole generation of European writers and men of letters.¹ The collapse of France, to them a totally unexpected event, had emptied, from one day to the next, the political scene of their country, leaving it to the puppet-like antics of knaves or fools, and they who as a matter of course had never participated in the official business of the Third Republic were sucked into politics as though with the force of a vacuum. Thus, without premonition and probably against their conscious inclinations, they had come to constitute willy-nilly a public realm where—without the paraphernalia of officialdom and hidden from the eyes of friend and foe—all relevant business in the affairs of the country was transacted in deed and word.

It did not last long. After a few short years they were liberated from what they originally had thought to be a "burden" and thrown back into what they now knew to be the weightless irrelevance of their personal affairs, once more separated from "the world of reality" by an *épaisseur triste*, the "sad opaqueness" of a private life centered about nothing but itself. And if they refused "to go back to [their] very beginnings, to [their] most indigent behavior," they could only return to the old empty strife of conflicting ideologies which after the defeat of the common enemy once more occupied the political arena to split the former comrades-in-arms into innumerable cliques which were not even factions and to engage them in the endless polemics and intrigues of a paper war. What Char had foreseen, clearly anticipated, while the real fight was still on—"If I survive, I know that I shall have to break with the aroma of these essential years, silently reject (not repress) my treasure"—had happened. They had lost their treasure.

What was this treasure? As they themselves understood it, it seems to have consisted, as it were, of two interconnected parts: they had discovered that he who "joined the Resistance, *found* himself," that he ceased to be "in quest of [himself] without mastery, in naked dissatisfaction," that he no longer suspected himself of "insincerity," of being "a carping, suspicious actor of life," that he could afford "to go naked." In this nakedness, stripped of all masks—of those which society assigns to its members as well as those which the individual fabricates for himself in his psychological reactions against society—they had been visited for the first time in their lives by an apparition of freedom, not, to be sure, because they acted against tyranny and things worse than tyranny—this was true for every soldier in the Allied armies—but because they had become "challengers," had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear. "At every meal that we eat together, freedom is invited to sit down. The chair remains vacant, but the place is set."

The men of the European Resistance were neither the first nor

the last to lose their treasure. The history of revolutions—from the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest—which politically spells out the innermost story of the modern age, could be told in parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure which, under the most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions, as though it were a *fata morgana*. There exist, indeed, many good reasons to believe that the treasure was never a reality but a mirage, that we deal here not with anything substantial but with an apparition, and the best of these reasons is that the treasure thus far has remained nameless. Does something exist, not in outer space but in the world and the affairs of men on earth, which has not even a name? Unicorns and fairy queens seem to possess more reality than the lost treasure of the revolutions. And yet, if we turn our eyes to the beginnings of this era, and especially to the decades preceding it, we may discover to our surprise that the eighteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic possessed a name for this treasure, a name long since forgotten and lost—one is tempted to say—even before the treasure itself disappeared. The name in America was "public happiness," which, with its overtones of "virtue" and "glory," we understand hardly better than its French counterpart, "public freedom"; the difficulty for us is that in both instances the emphasis was on "public."

However that may be, it is the namelessness of the lost treasure to which the poet alludes when he says that our inheritance was left us by no testament. The testament, telling the heir what will rightfully be his, wills past possessions for a future. Without testament or, to resolve the metaphor, without tradition—which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is—there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it. Thus the treasure was lost not because of historical circumstances and the adversity of reality but because no tradition had foreseen its appearance or its

reality, because no testament had willed it for the future. The loss, at any rate, perhaps inevitable in terms of political reality, was consummated by oblivion, by a failure of memory, which befell not only the heirs but, as it were, the actors, the witnesses, those who for a fleeting moment had held the treasure in the palms of their hands, in short, the living themselves. For remembrance, which is only one, though one of the most important, modes of thought, is helpless outside a pre-established framework of reference, and the human mind is only on the rarest occasions capable of retaining something which is altogether unconnected. Thus the first who failed to remember what the treasure was like were precisely those who had possessed it and found it so strange that they did not even know how to name it. At the time this did not bother them; if they did not know their treasure, they knew well enough the meaning of what they did and that it was beyond victory and defeat: "Action that has a meaning for the living has value only for the dead, completion only in the minds that inherit and question it." The tragedy began not when the liberation of the country as a whole ruined, almost automatically, the small hidden islands of freedom that were doomed anyhow, but when it turned out that there was no mind to inherit and to question, to think about and to remember. The point of the matter is that the "completion," which indeed every enacted event must have in the minds of those who then are to tell the story and to convey its meaning, eluded them; and without this thinking completion after the act, without the articulation accomplished by remembrance, there simply was no story left that could be told.

There is nothing in this situation that is altogether new. We are only too familiar with the recurring outbursts of passionate exasperation with reason, thought, and rational discourse which are the natural reactions of men who know from their own experiences that thought and reality have parted company, that reality has become opaque for the light of thought and that thought, no longer bound to incident as the circle remains bound to its focus, is liable either to become altogether meaningless or to rehash old verities which have lost all concrete relevance. Even the anticipating rec-

ognition of the predicament has by now become familiar. When Tocqueville returned from the New World, which he so superbly knew how to describe and to analyze that his work has remained a classic and survived more than a century of radical change, he was well aware of the fact that what Char called the "completion" of act and event had still eluded him; and Char's "Our inheritance was left to us by no testament" sounds like a variation of Tocqueville's "Since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity."² Yet the only exact description of this predicament is to be found, as far as I know, in one of those parables of Franz Kafka which, unique perhaps in this respect in literature, are real *παροιμοίαι*, thrown alongside and around the incident like rays of light which, however, do not illuminate its outward appearance but possess the power of X rays to lay bare its inner structure that, in our case, consists of the hidden processes of the mind.

Kafka's parable reads as follows:³

He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment—and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet—he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.

The incident which this parable relates and penetrates follows, in the inner logic of the matter, upon the events whose gist we found contained in René Char's aphorism. It begins, in fact, at precisely the point where our opening aphorism left the sequence of events hanging, as it were, in mid-air. Kafka's fight begins when the

course of action has run its course and when the story which was its outcome waits to be completed "in the minds that inherit and question it." The task of the mind is to understand what happened, and this understanding, according to Hegel, is man's way of reconciling himself with reality; its actual end is to be at peace with the world. The trouble is that if the mind is unable to bring peace and to induce reconciliation, it finds itself immediately engaged in its own kind of warfare.

However, historically speaking, this stage in the development of the modern mind was preceded, at least in the twentieth century, by two, rather than one, previous acts. Before the generation of René Char, whom we have chosen here as its representative, found itself thrown out of literary pursuits into the commitments of action, another generation, only slightly older, had turned to politics for the solution of philosophic perplexities and had tried to escape from thought into action. It was this older generation which then became the spokesmen and creators of what they themselves called existentialism; for existentialism, at least in its French version, is primarily an escape from the perplexities of modern philosophy into the unquestioning commitment of action. And since, under the circumstances of the twentieth century, the so-called intellectuals—writers, thinkers, artists, men of letters, and the like—could find access to the public realm only in time of revolution, the revolution came to play, as Malraux once noticed (in *Man's Fate*), "the role which once was played by eternal life": it "saves those that make it." Existentialism, the rebellion of the philosopher against philosophy, did not arise when philosophy turned out to be unable to apply its own rules to the realm of political affairs; this failure of political philosophy as Plato would have understood it is almost as old as the history of Western philosophy and metaphysics; and it did not even arise when it turned out that philosophy was equally unable to perform the task assigned to it by Hegel and the philosophy of history, that is, to understand and grasp conceptually historical reality and the events that made the modern world what it is. The situation, however, became desperate when the old metaphysical questions were shown to be meaning-

less; that is, when it began to dawn upon modern man that he had come to live in a world in which his mind and his tradition of thought were not even capable of asking adequate, meaningful questions, let alone of giving answers to its own perplexities. In this predicament action, with its involvement and commitment, its being *engagée*, seemed to hold out the hope, not of solving any problems, but of making it possible to live with them without becoming, as Sartre once put it, a *salaud*, a hypocrite.

The discovery that the human mind had ceased, for some mysterious reasons, to function properly forms, so to speak, the first act of the story with which we are concerned here. I mentioned it here, however briefly, because without it the peculiar irony of what was to follow would be lost on us. René Char, writing during the last months of the Resistance, when liberation—which in our context meant liberation from action—loomed large, concluded his reflections with an appeal to thought for the prospective survivors no less urgent and no less passionate than the appeal to action of those who preceded him. If one were to write the intellectual history of our century, not in the form of successive generations, where the historian must be literally true to the sequence of theories and attitudes, but in the form of the biography of a single person, aiming at no more than a metaphorical approximation to what actually happened in the minds of men, this person's mind would stand revealed as having been forced to turn full circle not once but twice, first when he escaped from thought into action, and then again when action, or rather having acted, forced him back into thought. Whereby it would be of some relevance to notice that the appeal to thought arose in the odd in-between period which sometimes inserts itself into historical time when not only the later historians but the actors and witnesses, the living themselves, become aware of an interval in time which is altogether determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet. In history, these intervals have shown more than once that they may contain the moment of truth.

We now may return to Kafka, who in the logic of these matters, though not in their chronology, occupies the last and, as it were,

the most advanced position. (The riddle of Kafka, who in more than thirty-five years of growing posthumous fame has established himself as one of the foremost writers' writers, is still unsolved; it consists primarily in a kind of breath-taking reversal of the established relationship between experience and thought. While we find it a matter of course to associate richness of concrete detail and dramatic action with the experience of a given reality and to ascribe to mental processes abstract pallor as the price exacted for their order and precision, Kafka, by sheer force of intelligence and spiritual imagination, created out of a bare, "abstract" minimum of experience a kind of thought-landscape which, without losing in precision, harbors all the riches, varieties, and dramatic elements characteristic of "real" life. Because thinking to him was the most vital and the liveliest part of reality, he developed this uncanny gift of anticipation which even today, after almost forty years full of unprecedented and unforeseeable events, does not cease to amaze us.) The story in its utter simplicity and brevity records a mental phenomenon, something which one may call a thought-event. The scene is a battleground on which the forces of the past and the future clash with each other; between them we find the man whom Kafka calls "he," who, if he wants to stand his ground at all, must give battle to both forces. Hence, there are two or even three fights going on simultaneously: the fight between "his" antagonists and the fight of the man in between with each of them. However, the fact that there is a fight at all seems due exclusively to the presence of the man, without whom the forces of the past and of the future, one suspects, would have neutralized or destroyed each other long ago.

The first thing to be noticed is that not only the future—"the wave of the future"—but also the past is seen as a force, and not, as in nearly all our metaphors, as a burden man has to shoulder and of whose dead weight the living can or even must get rid in their march into the future. In the words of Faulkner, "the past is never dead, it is not even past." This past, moreover, reaching all the way back into the origin, does not pull back but presses forward, and it is, contrary to what one would expect, the future

which drives us back into the past. Seen from the viewpoint of man, who always lives in the interval between past and future, time is not a continuum, a flow of uninterrupted succession; it is broken in the middle, at the point where "he" stands; and "his" standpoint is not the present as we usually understand it but rather a gap in time which "his" constant fighting, "his" making a stand against past and future, keeps in existence. Only because man is inserted into time and only to the extent that he stands his ground does the flow of indifferent time break up into tenses; it is this insertion—the beginning of a beginning, to put it into Augustinian terms—which splits up the time continuum into forces which then, because they are focused on the particle or body that gives them their direction, begin fighting with each other and acting upon man in the way Kafka describes.

Without distorting Kafka's meaning, I think one may go a step further. Kafka describes how the insertion of man breaks up the unidirectional flow of time but, strangely enough, he does not change the traditional image according to which we think of time as moving in a straight line. Since Kafka retains the traditional metaphor of a rectilinear temporal movement, "he" has barely enough room to stand and whenever "he" thinks of striking out on "his" own "he" falls into the dream of a region over and above the fighting-line—and what else is this dream and this region but the old dream which Western metaphysics has dreamed from Parmenides to Hegel of a timeless, spaceless, suprasensuous realm as the proper region of thought? Obviously what is missing in Kafka's description of a thought-event is a spatial dimension where thinking could exert itself without being forced to jump out of human time altogether. The trouble with Kafka's story in all its magnificence is that it is hardly possible to retain the notion of a rectilinear temporal movement if its unidirectional flow is broken up into antagonistic forces being directed toward and acting upon man. The insertion of man, as he breaks up the continuum, cannot but cause the forces to deflect, however lightly, from their original direction, and if this were the case, they would no longer clash head on but meet at an angle. In other words, the gap where

"he" stands is, potentially at least, no simple interval but resembles what the physicists call a parallelogram of forces.

Ideally, the action of the two forces which form the parallelogram of forces where Kafka's "he" has found his battlefield should result in a third force, the resultant diagonal whose origin would be the point at which the forces clash and upon which they act. This diagonal force would in one respect differ from the two forces whose result it is. The two antagonistic forces are both unlimited as to their origins, the one coming from an infinite past and the other from an infinite future; but though they have no known beginning, they have a terminal ending, the point at which they clash. The diagonal force, on the contrary, would be limited as to its origin, its starting-point being the clash of the antagonistic forces, but it would be infinite with respect to its ending by virtue of having resulted from the concerted action of two forces whose origin is infinity. This diagonal force, whose origin is known, whose direction is determined by past and future, but whose eventual end lies in infinity, is the perfect metaphor for the activity of thought. If Kafka's "he" were able to exert his forces along this diagonal, in perfect equidistance from past and future, walking along this diagonal line, as it were, forward and backward, with the slow, ordered movements which are the proper motion for trains of thought, he would not have jumped out of the fighting-line and be above the melee as the parable demands, for this diagonal, though pointing toward the infinite, remains bound to and is rooted in the present; but he would have discovered—pressed as he was by his antagonists into the only direction from which he could properly see and survey what was most his own, what had come into being only with his own, self-inserting appearance—the enormous, ever-changing time-space which is created and limited by the forces of past and future; he would have found the place in time which is sufficiently removed from past and future to offer "the umpire" a position from which to judge the forces fighting with each other with an impartial eye.

But, one is tempted to add, this is "only theoretically so." What is much more likely to happen—and what Kafka in other stories

and parables has often described—is that the "he," unable to find the diagonal which would lead him out of the fighting-line and into the space ideally constituted by the parallelogram of forces, will "die of exhaustion," worn out under the pressure of constant fighting, oblivious of his original intentions, and aware only of the existence of this gap in time which, as long as he lives, is the ground on which he must stand, though it seems to be a battlefield and not a home.

To avoid misunderstandings: the imagery I am using here to indicate metaphorically and tentatively the contemporary conditions of thought can be valid only within the realm of mental phenomena. Applied to historical or biographical time, none of these metaphors can possibly make sense because gaps in time do not occur there. Only insofar as he thinks, and that is insofar as he is ageless—a "he" as Kafka so rightly calls him, and not a "somebody"—does man in the full actuality of his concrete being live in this gap of time between past and future. The gap, I suspect, is not a modern phenomenon, it is perhaps not even a historical datum but is coeval with the existence of man on earth. It may well be the region of the spirit or, rather, the path paved by thinking, this small track of non-time which the activity of thought beats within the time-space of mortal men and into which the trains of thought, of remembrance and anticipation, save whatever they touch from the ruin of historical and biographical time. This small non-time-space in the very heart of time, unlike the world and the culture into which we are born, can only be indicated, but cannot be inherited and handed down from the past; each new generation, indeed every new human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew.

The trouble, however, is that we seem to be neither equipped nor prepared for this activity of thinking, of settling down in the gap between past and future. For very long times in our history, actually throughout the thousands of years that followed upon the foundation of Rome and were determined by Roman concepts, this gap was bridged over by what, since the Romans, we have

called tradition. That this tradition has worn thinner and thinner as the modern age progressed is a secret to nobody. When the thread of tradition finally broke, the gap between past and future ceased to be a condition peculiar only to the activity of thought and restricted as an experience to those few who made thinking their primary business. It became a tangible reality and perplexity for all; that is, it became a fact of political relevance.

Kafka mentions the experience, the fighting experience gained by "him" who stands his ground between the clashing waves of past and future. This experience is an experience in thinking—since, as we saw, the whole parable concerns a mental phenomenon—and it can be won, like all experience in doing something, only through practice, through exercises. (In this, as in other respects, this kind of thinking is different from such mental processes as deducing, inducing, and drawing conclusions whose logical rules of non-contradiction and inner consistency can be learned once and for all and then need only to be applied.) The following six essays are such exercises, and their only aim is to gain experience in *how* to think; they do not contain prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold. Least of all do they intend to retie the broken thread of tradition or to invent some newfangled surrogates with which to fill the gap between past and future. Throughout these exercises the problem of truth is kept in abeyance; the concern is solely with how to move in this gap—the only region perhaps where truth eventually will appear.

More specifically, these are exercises in political thought as it arises out of the actuality of political incidents (though such incidents are mentioned only occasionally), and my assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings. Since these exercises move between past and future, they contain criticism as well as experiment, but the experiments do not attempt to design some sort of utopian future, and the critique of the past, of traditional concepts, does not intend to "debunk." Moreover, the critical and the experimental parts of the following essays are not sharply divided, although,

roughly speaking, the first three chapters are more critical than experimental and the last five chapters are more experimental than critical. This gradual shift of emphasis is not arbitrary, because there is an element of experiment in the critical interpretation of the past, an interpretation whose chief aim is to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distill from them anew their original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the very key words of political language—such as freedom and justice, authority and reason, responsibility and virtue, power and glory—leaving behind empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts, regardless of their underlying phenomenal reality.

It seems to me, and I hope the reader will agree, that the essay as a literary form has a natural affinity to the exercises I have in mind. Like all collections of essays, this book of exercises obviously could contain more or fewer chapters without for that reason changing its character. Their unity—which to me is the justification of publishing them in book form—is not the unity of a whole but of a sequence of movements which, as in a musical suite, are written in the same or related keys. The sequence itself is determined by content. In this respect, the book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the modern break in tradition and with the concept of history with which the modern age hoped to replace the concepts of traditional metaphysics. The second part discusses two central and interrelated political concepts, authority and freedom; it presupposes the discussion of the first part in the sense that such elementary and direct questions as *What is authority? What is freedom?* can arise only if no answers, handed down by tradition, are available and valid any longer. The four essays of the last part, finally, are frank attempts at applying the kind of thinking that was tried out in the first two parts of the book to immediate, topical problems with which we are daily confronted, not, to be sure, in order to find definite solutions but in the hope of clarifying the issues and gaining some assurance in confronting specific questions.