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The True is the Made and the Not Made

Jacques Ellul's *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (1954) is an analysis of technique (technology) as a form of mentality and sociality that began to clearly emerge around 1750 in the Western world.¹ Historians like Kranzberg and Pursell² discuss the material developments of technology in a list of objects and processes as if they were morally and intellectually neutral —just stuff. By contrast, Ellul presents an historical and anthropological account of the development of technique from know-how in technical operations present in all cultures to the technical phenomena of a technological culture as the presence of a new mentality. As translator John Wilkinson points out, Ellul's work is dramatic and dialectical in the spirit of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*.³ This technical intention is behind the administrator's smile and limp handshake as a room is sized up for staff cuts with artificial intelligence and algorithmic acrobatics. Conflicts and confrontations play out with the incursions of this mentality—a type of being in the world— as it attempts to transform and perfect the natural and the social worlds in mathematical and logical terms. The technical phenomenon is the machine in its new suit.

It is a commonplace to regard God as omniscient and omnipotent who would make all things by knowing them and would know all things by making them. Making, perfection, and being were identical. From Ellul's biblical perspective humanity

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, (New York: Aolfred A. Knopf, 1970), 42, hereinafter cited as *TS*.

² Melvin Kranzberg and Carrol W. Pursell Jr., *Technology in Western Civilization* ed George Bugliarello and Dean B Doner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979).

³ *TS*, XIV-XV.

separates from God's perfection in Paradise where work was not labor and where animals could be named truly by humans. There was no struggle with otherness or destiny or any disparity between meaning and message (image and word). Story aside, and whatever the cause, the human city in its flawed making is no paradise. Struggles with destiny in garbled and incoherent language abide in failures to curb wars, famine, and pestilence. Without God's omnipotence, we make by manipulating appearances in order to be with symbols and words that extend from God's goodness and that open to the dimension that surrounds the here and now. A return to paradise or a pure nature is impossible. But with memory and imagination a self knowledge is possible that moves beyond the present mindedness held fast by the images and gaze of technique. Nature and God's goodness, grace, and power no longer appear as necessities.

Human making, Ellul states, has a material side and a spiritual side from the beginning in magic and myth. Symbols mediate and, thus, mean more than they appear to mean. Our making and being with symbols and words are, by definition, matters of appearance. Technology seeks to abolish these mediations with technical phenomenon that are embodied concepts of understanding informed by a limited sense of reason. What is is, what is not is not, regardless of appearance. A sense of a reality seeking the true in a beyond is put on hold. The propaganda that makes the "reality" of technique possible is the result of turning fact to fiction, the twenty-four hour labor of fake news and much social media. The true is now and only now; it is what is said and shown at the moment: no time, no distance, no context. And that is peddled as truth. Common human sense tells us that appearance and being are worlds apart. We know that we are and are not what we appear to be. We know that time is a factor in being and making. The human, however, must adapt to this world in which technical phenomena proliferate and become the world in which not being is not allowed. We pretend to be gods unable to not make the ignorance and malice we bear.

In this essay I will bring the Hegelian dialectic and the importance of not making and not being with the labor of a negative that enables any hope for a meaningful freedom and choice in relation to the new necessity of technique, our current god. I will revisit Giambattista Vico's insights on the first human making to facilitate a return to

origins with metaphor and the imagination. Making in the technological society is both made and unmade, is both true and false, and that is true and false. The true is the whole, like it or not.

I

La technique is examined in terms of what it is and what it is not in Hegelian fashion. Typically, technology is equated with science, organization, order, and progress.⁴ Although technique is present in these domains, disorder and catastrophe often result, with pollution, the depletion of non-renewable resources, and the proliferation of apocalypse quality weaponry as evidence. Technology first appears in the human's attempts to find a home in nature with technical operations that involve methods and means to produce specific ends: chopping a tree, baking a cake, programming a computer, reading a book, casting a spell etc. Technical operations usually reflect the sensibilities and traditions of the operators and are culture specific. Spontaneity and individual choice are disciplined by consciousness and reason.⁵ A sense of homelessness may accompany the displacement of the human body and the bodies of nature as the human becomes "other" to itself.⁶ The body is the human's initial home. With a technical intention all means are subjected to mathematics-like methods in the pursuit of efficiency as an absolute in the attainment of a "one best way." The human body and its physical and spiritual extensions are corralled and corrected according to these mathematical and logical standards. Tools and human actions become devices and procedures that can chop more trees, bake more bread, and perform more complicated calculations than the individual human can. The concepts enabling improvements are embodied in chain saws, mixers, and computers, in endless possibility. Each piece of wood can be nearly the same as the next to build bakeries and fast food conglomerates with a dizzying sameness and mind-numbing regularity. With the computer all manner of systems can be combined. The clearing of

⁴TS, 3-22.

⁵ TS, 19-22.

⁶ See David Lovekin, "Technology and Culture and the Problem of the Homeless," XXIV, no 4 *The Philosophical Forum*, Summer 1993,363-374

a forest can become a global concern as can the distribution of food almost as real as its advertisements. Number is the name of the game in what Ellul calls the stake of the century. Nothing else counts. There will be techniques of economy and organization, of science and education, of swimming and friendship, and of entertainment and burial as the technical world becomes increasingly rationalized, Technique, however, begins in magic and in symbolic constructions that starkly contrast with reason's embodied conceptions and ends in a magic cut off from its symbolic origins.

II

Ellul states that, "primitive technique . . . begins in absolute mystery: how is invention possible . . .? Each primitive operation . . . implies the bridging of an enormous gulf between instinct and the technical act that a mystical aura hovers about all subsequent development."⁷ Invention appears in a reverential subjectivity before what it does not know. Technique unfolds on a material path of homo faber and a spiritual path, notably with magic.⁸ In the world of magic all is of a piece and is approached with the greatest care: the gods must be respected and urged to allow intervention. These techniques, which aim at the infinite, do not develop but typically die with the culture in which they were born. Material techniques may develop but remain tied to specific practices and traditions. They point to a world of things, images, and present tasks while spiritual techniques express symbols, words, and rituals that open to dimensions that surround. These two separate paths remain separate but not perfectly so. Subjective and objectivity are at one in a "cosmic vestment," able to manipulate surroundings to an advantage where adversaries become allies.⁹ Sometimes rain does not follow the ritual dance, although the ritual is not blamed. Magic and nature are unified in opposition. By contrast the efficient "magic" of *La technique*, succeeds in denial and co-option, a forgetting of origins and opposition in what Ellul calls "lethotechny."¹⁰ Irrational, spontaneous, threatening and

⁷ *TS*, 23-24.

⁸ *TS*, 24.

⁹ *TS*, 25

¹⁰ *TS*, 27

unpredictable, nature is rationalized as a technical phenomenon, a new nature. The rain dance becomes a dam or techniques of irrigation that strain aquifers. Technique is “the made” out of the “not made,” the natural. Technical subjectivity becomes objectivity in the new sacred disconnected from the natural that is sublated in denial. Technique in its opposition to the sacred and to what it is not becomes what it is not: a contradiction. I recall asking a waitress if the whipped cream was real, if it came from cows. She said she didn’t know but knew it tasted real good.

The history of technique is a history of opposition as Ellul explains. The ancient Greeks preferred rational lives of self control, balance, and harmony to rationality ill applied in crafts and traditions.¹¹ For the Romans, techniques of social life were embodied in laws that respected individual human initiatives and value with the end of a equilibrium that eschewed abstract violence and force.¹² Material techniques stagnated while law flourished, Christianity was an obstacle that asked whether God would approve of a technique or a social change, Its educational techniques moved slowly in a sluggish scholasticism of the Middle Ages that never triumphed. Although nature became secularized, a pure technical intention did not appear.¹³ In the sixteenth century printing, the nautical compass, and gun powder contributed to civilizations’ advance in travel In the broadening of knowledge and experience but also to its decline in conquests and warfare. The Gutenberg press might produce some scientific works that had no pagination, no indices, no tables of contents. An author was allowed great self expression echoing the oral tradition and authorial individuality in works written to be read and not consulted and thereby scientifically suspect.¹⁴ By the eighteenth century, “The principles established by Descartes were applied and resulted not only in a philosophy but in an intellectual technique.”¹⁵

¹¹ TS, 29

¹² TS,30-31

¹³ TS, 32-38.

¹⁴ TS, 40-41

¹⁵TS,43

Descartes, the founder of analytical geometry where all numbers can be given geometrical shape, sought to, ground knowledge in the clear and distinct, in that which cannot be doubted without contradiction. *Je pense, donc je suis, I think therefore I am* is his conclusion but his meaning is *I think therefore I think*.¹⁶ This is no argument but an intuition that counters the possibility of an evil genius, an all-deceiving force. Descartes invokes the laws of thought of identity and non-contradiction that cannot be proven. They are the conditions of proof, the incantations of logic. Descartes is also attempting to demonstrate that he is in essence a thinking being and that some of his ideas like his idea of God and his idea of an extended body are clear and distinct, undeniable without contradiction. Ellul is clear: reason's reflections are always nearby and are not unwelcome until they become automatic and reduced to the schemas of logic as the technical phenomenon and the new magic. For Ellul God is not available to logic and can only be known through the word as a being both infinite and finite. The body resists logical declension as well, as the history of the technical phenomenon shows. The body keeps me from being understood as a sacred.. With the body we both are and are not.

II

Technique that begins in mystery, in the hover of the fundamental aura of invention makes something from otherness, from what it does not understand. This was the function of the symbol for Ellul who observed in his *L'Histoire des Institutions* that Rome was built upon a "sacral ground." He wrote, "The Roman sacred is at the same time both religious and magical. It is religious in that it worships the transcendental powers and it is magical in that it utilizes these powers which are immanent."¹⁷ The ground is not merely earth but is symbolically related to earth through stories, myths, and words that each point beyond themselves. These stories are not true because they are factual but are true because they involve the making of the fact and the recollecting of that making in meaningful oppositions. Jupiter was the

¹⁶ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol II.*, trans John Collingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1094), par 25-27.

¹⁷ Jacques Ellul, *L'Histoire des institutions*, 234-235.

god of light and the god of trees, as well as the god of Roman law. Mars was the god of war and strife who established the military. Quirinus was the god of fecundity, the god of earth, water, and plants who established agriculture. These gods are true symbols in the sense of having double and triple significance that situate and justify Roman civilization.¹⁸

These stories justify humanity in images and words that are both transcendent and imminent. Images are whatever is before us in sight. Technique is at home in the room that cannot both be what it is and what it is not in the Cartesian apartment. Words can both be what they appear to be and also what they are not in multiple meanings. Words can meaningfully contradict and in poetry they must. “Tell the truth but tell it slant,” Emily Dickenson demands. A god can be a god and also the thundering sky. Words are what we use to fix those images, to give them dimension and situation as symbols. The oral word, arguably where myths begin, is the paradigmatic symbol. It is a puff of wind—material and spiritual at once— coming from an individual to someone about something. Mind, body object and world are at one in opposition and difference. The true is the whole but a complicated one. Ellul writes that the written word strangles meaning like a mummy.¹⁹ Technique also produces words that are images out of metaphors like cliché. Cliché originally was a word that enabled the printing process as pieces of lead to be struck that also suggests the sound that was made—cliquer²⁰. The word in its contrary sense is the metaphor that originally meant to throw against. Words are thrown against images to situate meanings in symbols that refer. Technique fights the word that makes it possible. The word inhabits the domain of the true and the metaphor; the image decorates the dimension of the “reality” of sight and logic in identities without difference. The image

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 46-47.

²⁰ David Lovekin, *Techniques, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1991), 208-209. See my full discussion of the cliché and technique 188-220. Hereinafter cited as TDC

provides the furniture of reality. Many studies of technology amount to moving furniture but not building a home.

III

Ellul's characteristics of the technical phenomena are as follows: rationality, artificiality, automatism, self-augmentation, monism, universalism, and autonomy. Rationality is the foundation. All flow from it.

This rationality, best exemplified in norms, and the like, involves two distinct phases: first, the use of "discourse" in every operation [under the two aspects this term can take (on the one hand, the intervention of intentional reflection, and, on the other hand, the intervention of means from one term to the other)]; this excludes spontaneity and personal creativity. Second, there is the reduction of method to its logical dimension alone. Every intervention of technique is, in effect, a reduction of facts, forces, phenomena, means and instruments to the schema of logic.²¹

Every technical operation is before us to which we apply a word that refers to a reflection, to our awareness of it, and then to our transformation of it in the schemas of logic. Our awareness of this awareness becomes objectified in the technical phenomena.. The objectified intention is artificial by definition and not by the inventions or imitations of non-mathematical forces. Otherness is denied. Decisions that embody this rationality are made automatically. More is better than less: this applies to butter, poison, pollution. Technical phenomena proliferate geometrically rather than arithmetically and often unpredictably. Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out that nineteenth century train travel produced the paper back, impressionist painting,

²¹ *TS, 78-79. In brackets I have inserted my translation left out of Wilkinson's*

and life insurance independent of any choice or need but from a technical necessity.²² Technical development proceeds regardless of moral, political, or economic question (or any question). That which can be done will be done. Weapons made are used. Technique knows no geographical or political boundaries as technology becomes more systemic and global, of necessity. Outside of technique choice is gone. The internet, social media, computers, and artificial intelligence preside. And, at this point technology is the sacred. Subjectivity and objectivity are identical. Technique now is Hegel's "bad infinity."²³ There is no stopping point in this infinite series, the summation of which would be a contradiction. Nothing is beyond it, defines it, or explains it: just one more moment endlessly with an empty class concept outside of the moments. God is dead along with all other transcendentals. No words suffice for this list with no story.

IV

Like Ellul eighteenth century philosopher Giambattista Vico lamented the triumph of Cartesianism of logic over words that eschewed traditional wisdom based in rhetoric and classic literature. Vico stated: "The true is the made," knowledge that came to him in his study of ancient language. *Verum* and *Factum* were convertible. *Verum esse ipsum factum*, the true is the made, applies to God's making that is the result of His knowing.²⁴ The mind can best know what it has made, Vico assumes. Therefore, only God can really know the natural world that natural science professes to know.²⁵ The human can know what it has made in language and stories that produce civil institutions. Vico tells the story of the first humans, *gigantic*, who fear and worship the thundering sky. The "noble poets" among them stand before this wholly other,

²² Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2014).

²³ See my extensive discussion of the characteristics of the technical phenomenon and the bad infinity in TDC 152-187.

²⁴ Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, Intro. L. M. Palmer (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988)45-47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48-53.

shake, and shout *pape*.²⁶ Word and image come together in what Vico called an imaginative universal. This making occurs in the presence of what is not known. The first metaphor is made in ignorance by the taking in of the images and transforming them in a wisdom that is self-extension, by what the humans best know: the body.²⁷ This is not the Cartesian clear and distinct but is like Ellul's beginnings of technique in an epiphany of aura a primal symbol founding a sense of place.

Vico understood that each society has its "eternal history" found in their literature: an age of gods, of heroes and of men. Each age has its defining trope: metaphor for the gods; metonym for heroes; synecdoche for men, and irony for the decadence that follows the age of men.²⁸ The metaphor as a unifying power loses its strength as words separate from object and finally come lose in irony, where people grow mad and waste their substance in luxury and decadence.²⁹ The metaphor is made by an imagination that takes in past moments, gives them a unifying shape, and then arranges matters accordingly. The intelligible universal takes over in the age of men. An object is beheld and spirit understands it by locating similarities with other like objects through a process of abstraction. Thus, the concept appears in the Cartesian attempts to know: mind thinks, bodies are extended, and God organizes, ideas that are formed by reason's powers of abstraction. Myths are no longer needed in the shadows of the laws of thought. Making is made in unmaking, in denigrating the other. Vico reports that that a P. Perot built a boat according to exact Cartesian dimensions that sank immediately when placed in water.

Vico notes two kinds of barbarism: the barbarism of the senses where the word is conflated with its first awareness and a barbarism of reflection where the concept replaces both word and thing. Jove as god and the thundering sky as metaphor is

²⁶Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico, Revised translation of the Third Edition. (1744), Trans Thomas Goddard Bergen and Max Harold Fisch* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), pars 377 and 488.

²⁷ See David Lovekin, "Giambattista Vico and Jacques Ellul: The Intelligible Universal and the Technical Phenomena," *Man and World* 15, 407-416.

²⁸ *New Science*, 400-435. a

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1071-1074

replaced by the technical phenomenon, an embodied concept—the machine in its new suit— is a barbarism of reflection. Like Hegel, Vico and Ellul look at history and do not smile at tragic human making where humans pretend to be gods, where the balance and tensions between images and words decline before lists and production standards; where the true is no longer the made. Humanity then is faced with the problem of being other to itself but an otherness that it has made in its own image that it does not know without tracing its origins. The otherness of nature is no longer a guide.

are only the conditions of proof. I will consider this Ellulian dialectic
Inspired by Hegel and anticipated by Giambattista Vico, who saw a Cartesian
barbarism of reflection on the eighteenth century horizon.