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Initiation and the Crafts

We have often said that the "profane" conception of the sciences and the arts, such as is now current in the West, is a very modern one and implies a degeneration with respect to a previous state where both presented an altogether different character. The same can also be said of the crafts; moreover, the distinction between arts and crafts, or between "artist" and "artisan," is also specifically modern, as if it were born of this profane deviation and had no meaning outside of it. For the ancients, the *artifex* is indifferently a man who practices either an art or a craft; but in truth he is neither artist nor craftsman in the current sense of these words, but something more than either, for, at least originally, his activity is related to principles of a far more profound order.

In every traditional civilization all activity of man, whatever it might be, is always considered as essentially deriving from principles; by this it is as if "transformed," and instead of being reduced to what it is as a simple outer manifestation (which, in short, is the profane point of view) it is integrated in the tradition; and for the one who accomplishes it, it constitutes a means of participating effectively in this tradition. Even from a simple exoteric point of view this is the case: if, for example, one looks at a civilization like that of Islam or the Christian civilization of the Middle Ages, it is easy to see the "religious" character which the most ordinary acts of existence assume. There religion is not something that holds a place apart, unconnected with everything else, as it is for modern Westerners (those at least who still consent to acknowledge a religion); on the contrary, it pervades the entire existence of the human being, or, better yet, all that constitutes this existence; and social life in particular is included in its domain, so much so that in such conditions there cannot really be anything "profane," except for those who for one reason or another are outside of the tradition and whose case is then a simple anomaly. Elsewhere, when there is nothing to which the name of religion can properly be applied, there is nonetheless a traditional and "sacred" legislation which, while having different characteristics, exactly fulfills the same role; these considerations can therefore be applied to all traditional civilizations without exception. But there is something more: if we pass from exoterism to esoterism (we use these words here for the sake of greater convenience, although they do not equally suit every case),

we notice very generally the existence of an initiation bound up with and based on the crafts. These crafts are therefore still susceptible of a higher and more profound meaning; and we would like to point out how they can effectively furnish a way of approach to the initiatic domain.

What allows the above to be better understood is the notion of what the Hindu doctrine calls *svadharma*, that is to say the performance by each being of an activity in conformity with its own nature, and it is this notion, or rather its absence, that most clearly marks the shortcomings of the profane conception. According to the latter a man can adopt any profession, and he can even change it at will, as if this profession were something purely exterior to him, without any real connection with what he truly is, with what makes him himself and not another. In the traditional conception, on the contrary, everyone must normally fulfill the function for which he is destined by his very nature, and he cannot fulfill any other function without a resulting grave disorder, which will have its repercussion on the whole social organization to which he belongs. Even more than this, if such a disorder becomes general, it will have its effects on the cosmic realm itself, all things being linked together according to strict correspondences. Without dwelling further on this last point, which, however, could be quite easily applied to the conditions of the present time, we will note that the opposition of the two conceptions can, at least in a certain connection, be reduced to that of a "qualitative" and a "quantitative" point of view: in the traditional conception, it is the essential qualities of beings which determine their activities; in the profane conception, individuals are considered as interchangeable "units," as if in themselves they were without any quality of their own. This last conception, which is obviously closely connected to modern ideas of "equality" and "uniformity" (the latter being literally against true unity, for it implies the pure and "inorganic" multiplicity of a kind of social "atomism"), can logically lead only to the exercise of a purely "mechanical" activity, in which nothing specifically human subsists; this is in fact what we can see today. It must therefore be well understood that the "mechanical" crafts of the moderns, being but a product of the profane deviation, can in no way offer the possibilities of which we intend to speak here; strictly speaking, they cannot even be considered crafts if one wishes to preserve the traditional meaning of this word, which is the only meaning with which we are concerned here.

If the craft is something of the man himself, and like a manifestation or expansion of his own nature, it is easy to understand that, as we were just saying, it can serve as a basis for an initiation, and even that in most cases it is what is best adapted to this end. Indeed, if initiation essentially aims at going beyond the possibilities of the human individual, it is equally

true that it can only take this individual such as he is as its starting-point. This accounts for the diversity of initiatic ways, that is to say of the means implemented by way of "supports," in conformity with the difference of individual natures, this difference subsequently arising ever less as the being advances on its way. The means thus employed can be efficacious only if they correspond to the very nature of the beings to whom they are applied. Because one must necessarily proceed from the more accessible to the less accessible, from the exterior to the interior, it is normal to take these means as the activity by which this nature is outwardly manifested. However, it goes without saying that this activity can play such a role only inasmuch as it really expresses the inner nature; it is thus truly a question of "qualification" in the initiatic sense of this term. In normal conditions this "qualification" should be a necessary condition for the very exercise of the craft. At the same time this touches on the fundamental difference which separates initiatic teaching from profane teaching: what is simply "learned" from outside is here without any value. What is in question is the "awakening" of the latent possibilities that the being bears in itself (and this is basically the true significance of Platonic "reminiscence").

These last considerations can further help us understand how initiation, taking the craft as its "support," will at the same time, and inversely, as it were, have a repercussion on the exercise of this craft. The individual, having fully realized the possibilities of which his professional activity is but an external expression, and thus possessing the effective knowledge of what is the very principle of this activity, will henceforth consciously fulfill what had hitherto been only a quite "instinctive" consequence of his nature. Thus, if for him initiatic knowledge is born of the craft, the latter, in its turn will become the field of application of this knowledge, from which it can no longer be separated. There will henceforth be a perfect correspondence between the interior and the exterior, and the work produced will no longer be only the expression to a certain degree and in a more or less superficial way, but a truly adequate expression of the one who will have conceived and executed it, and it will constitute a "masterpiece" in the true sense of this word.

As can be seen, this is very far from the so-called unconscious or subconscious "inspiration" in which moderns wish to see the criterion of the true artist, while considering him superior to the artisan, according to the more than contestable distinction that normally applies. Artist or artisan, anyone who acts under such an "inspiration" is in any case only a profane person. No doubt, he shows by his "inspiration" that he carries within himself certain possibilities, but as long as he has not effectively become aware of them, even if he attains to what is fittingly called "genius," this changes nothing. Unable as he is to control these possibilities, his success

will be so to speak accidental, which, moreover, is commonly recognized by saying that the "inspiration" is sometimes lacking. All that can be conceded in order to reconcile the case under discussion to that in which true knowledge operates, is that the work which, consciously or unconsciously, truly flows from the nature of the one who performs it, will never give the impression of being a more or less painful effort which, because it is something abnormal, always leads to some imperfection. On the contrary, such a work will draw its very perfection from its conformity to nature, which implies directly and so to speak necessarily that it is exactly suited to the end for which it is destined.

If we now want a more rigorous definition of the sphere of what can be called the craft initiations, we will say that they belong to the "lesser mysteries," referring to the development of the possibilities that belong properly to the human state, which is not the final aim of initiation, but at least constitutes the first obligatory phase. This development must first be accomplished in full, so as then to allow the surpassing of this human state; but beyond this, it is evident that individual differences which these craft initiations emphasize disappear completely and no longer play any role. As we have explained on other occasions, the "lesser mysteries" lead to the restoration of what the traditional doctrines designate as the "primordial state." Once the being has reached this state, which still belongs to the sphere of human individuality, and which is the point of communication between it and the superior states, the differentiations which give rise to the various "specialized" functions have disappeared, although all these "specialized" functions also had their source there, or rather by this very means, and it is really a question of returning to this common source so as to possess in its plenitude all that is implied by the exercise of any function whatsoever.

If we view the history of humanity as taught by the traditional doctrines in conformity with the cyclical laws, we must say that since in the beginning man had full possession of his state of existence, he naturally had the possibilities corresponding to all the functions prior to every distinction of these latter. The division of these functions came about in a later phase, representing a state already inferior to the "primordial state," but in which every human being, while having as yet only certain determined possibilities, still spontaneously had the effective consciousness of these possibilities. It was only in a period of the greatest obscuration that this consciousness became lost. From this point initiation became necessary to enable man to regain, along with this consciousness, the former state in which it inhered; this is the first of its aims, at which it aims most immediately. For this to be possible what is implied is a transmission going back by an unbroken "chain" to the state to be restored, and thus, step by

step, to the "primordial state" itself; yet initiation does not stop there, for since the "lesser mysteries" are only the preparation for the "greater mysteries," that is to say for the taking possession of the superior states of the being, it is necessary to go back even beyond the origins of humanity. In fact, there is no true initiation, even to the most inferior and elementary degree, without the intervention of a "non-human" element, which, as we have already explained in other articles, is the "spiritual influence" regularly communicated by the initiatic rite. If this is so, there is obviously no place to search "historically" for the origin of initiation, a search which now appears as bereft of meaning, nor, moreover, for the origin of the crafts, arts, and sciences viewed according to their traditional and "legitimate" conception, since by means of multiple but secondary differentiations and adaptations they too all derive from the "primordial state," which contains them all in principle. In this way they link up with other orders of existence beyond humanity itself, which moreover is necessary so that each according to its rank and measure can contribute effectively to the realization of the plan of the Great Architect of the Universe.

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