



“The Captain”: the travelogues and twisted science of Thorstein Veblen

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Abstract

Purpose – Thorstein Veblen, though recognized as a “classic” author, has been since his death in 1929 virtually ignored by the public (academic and otherwise). In light of the fact that he may possibly have been the most important social scientist of the modern era, such neglect is a shame that needs to be erased. This article, a conceptual paper, aims to focus on the particular philosophical view that supports the whole edifice of Veblen’s social frescoes.

Design/methodology/approach – The article argues that the extraordinary tenor of Veblen’s economic investigation stems from a semi-hidden fascination of the author with “occult agencies,” that is, with the invisible realms of idolatry, devout belief, and national “genius.”

Findings – Veblen, the article maintains, is the first modern, unconfessed, explorer of the spiritual world, whose uncharted domains he mapped for laying the foundations of economic analysis. A radical, unique turn in the history of thought, whose effects, however, have suffered the most profound incomprehension owing to a certain queerness of style: this strangeness was the tormented combination of Veblen’s confessed atheism with his instinctive draw towards the praeternatural.

Originality/value – This fundamental question surrounding the inner mechanics of Veblen’s beautiful political economy – the only social scientist Einstein would read – is presented coherently in this article for the first time.

Keywords Philosophy, Sociology, Social sciences, Social theories

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Indeed, it shall not be bootless to remind the West that its greatest social scientist is without any doubt Thorstein Veblen. The West though, torn and confused as ever, has shown but little desire to tribute the highest honors to such a firebrand, whose books are indeed reprinted as “classics,” yet are only read by a few, and savored in their native essence by fewer. He’s been much the misunderstood genius. For one, he criticized contemporary society too well, too intelligently, and with scientific detachment into bargain – and for all that he’s not been forgiven: nearly a century after his experience, the theories of Veblen have resisted the test of time, suffering no erosion whatever. But the other, no less decisive reason for his tacit excommunication from the “venerable” circle of western tradition lies in the peculiar make-up of Veblen’s analysis: he himself made it difficult for others to wade their way through his unconventional chronicles of social transformation – and that was the case for, in truth, they represented the odd work of a fanatical materialist obsessed with spiritual drifts. His narratives are a triumph of surreal imagery, a creative mixing of incompatibles: Veblen thought he could construe *supernatural agency* as the main pulsion of all social action; he thought he could ascribe collective life to the subterranean work of nonmaterial entities, which he obscurely identified as “geniuses” or “spirits,” without however



giving full credence to the actual existence and material efficacy of such intangibles. In all his explorations, no sooner did he raise such specters than he exorcised them vehemently in the subsequent phase of the argumentation, seemingly embarrassed by the puerility of his introductory assumption. Positing the drive of a barbarous, aggregate animus on the one hand, yet decrying the senselessness of religious idolatry in the other, Veblen invoked systematically working hypotheses whose reality he then rejected with a fervor no less intense than that of the believers. Thus, he boxed himself in the rectangular, and contradictory dreams of a “religious atheist,” who forever deprived himself of the pleasure to share his potent visions with many others – religious or otherwise. In fact, despite Veblen’s academic skepticism and ample resort to evolutionism in accounting for the West’s dramatic mutations in the modern era, his scholarly production may be easily read as a Manichean parchment in which dark forces – barbarism and savage truculent worship – give battle to mankind’s lofty expressions – workmanship, peace and dispassionate science. To Veblen the latter form a compact code of exemplary behavior – the unique source of the true, the beautiful and the good – which, in a curious anthropological diversion, he sees, embodied in the genetic heirloom of the northern races. This uncouth sequence of esoteric, racial and scientist contortions would naturally mate poorly with the screaming obtuseness of the modern audiences, and condemn therefore his works to semi-obliteration. Notwithstanding, Veblen still stands, for his abiding strength and fascination resides *precisely* in the selective combination of this twisted esoteric conjuration with a genial perceptiveness and an iron logic that brought him to say things, true ones, which no one had uttered before. If it is acknowledged that the complex strangeness of Veblen’s epic stems from an ill-digested concoction of the sacred and the profane, one may then readily appreciate that the testament of this powerful mind does abide in the recognition that social science is indeed impossible without accounting for the divine.

What follows herein is a brief account of the formidable fruits issued from this jumbled, though genial synthesis of timid esoterism and institutional economics. It is the story of one of the very few scholars that had the honesty and courage to put his ship to sea and, as her captain, chase the Truth across utterly unfamiliar waters.

2. The narrative of Thorstein Bunde Veblen of Manitowoc County

... He would be sure to keep me awake until almost light, telling me stories of the natives of the Island of Tinian, and other places he had visited in his travels. At last I could not help being interested in what he said, and by degrees I felt the greatest desire to go to sea. . . (Poe, 2001a, p. 662).

And so at last, taken with a fascination for the travelogues of latter-day anthropologists – a fascination far exceeding the boundaries of mere scientific curiosity – Thorstein Bunde Veblen of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, the son of immigrant Norse, hoisted jib and mainsail, kept full, and started boldly out to sea. While the professionals of economics indulged on firm land their simulated circumnavigation round capes of futile taxonomy, flanking reefs of hedonistic indeterminacy[1], and running aground of shoal “maxims for the conduct of business,”[2] he secretly set about planning his own voyage.

[Veblen's] mind was formed on the Norse sagas and on the matter-of-fact sense of his father's farming and the exact needs of carpenterwork and threshing-machines (Dos Passos, 1966, p. 809).

As Pym before Veblen had been bound to discover, it most assuredly was not within the boundaries of any sane imagination to foreknow the concatenation of events, and the accompanying load of perplexity, that would have taken both seafarers to the southward, pulled as they were by strong gales and blind enthusiasm.

In the voyage, Man was the ocean, and the sparse landmasses comprising the unknown archipelagoes eagerly sought after by the explorer were Man's spiritual appetites. The rigging of Veblen's ship was a loose apprehension of Darwinian analysis coupled with the rich narratives of the Historical School – themselves an account of an endless adventure at sea, suffused with an open-endedness that is typical of man's amazement at the workings of his own manifold spirit-guides – a charm that never fails to send captains adrift. They mistake a constellation for another, and continue the course under starless heavens, till they lose themselves, despair, and finally steer into what seemed the original tack, but is not – they have “found” themselves again, but they are *elsewhere*, unawares.

Because “[Man] is not simply a bundle of desires that are to be saturated by being placed in the path of the forces of the environment, but rather a coherent structure of propensities and habits which seeks realization and expression in an unfolding activity” (Veblen, 1993, p. 139), Veblen understood that economics must be a science of evolution – a study of dynamics, of human *motion*. Why not look upon our species after the fashion of ethology – with the icy meticulousness of entomology, against the historical detailing of the *Kathedersozialisten*?

[The circumstances of temperament] are the products of [Man's] hereditary traits and his past experience, cumulatively wrought out under a given body of traditions, conventionalities... His methods of life today are enforced upon him by his habits of life carried over from yesterday and by the circumstances left as the mechanical residue of the life of *yesterday* (Veblen, 1993, p. 139).

And so the stage was set to construe the life of the individual and the compassing collectivity as the unfolding, collective, maneuver of an anthill of sorts. Before our eyes thus unfurl a dome of dirt, or a wax-pillared hive of myriad hexagonal loculi, tenanted by their incumbent queens, drones, warriors, industrious ants and busy bees. The human analogue comes immediately to mind: our species too does feature classes of suzerains, fighters, parasites, and laborers. Now the model demands motive, purpose. What is the purpose of the “human anthill”? The furtherance of the well being of the group, seems to be the obvious answer. But there is the rub. If birds, ants and bees, barring the callous intruding of predators and the untimely discombobulating of natural cataclysm, go about their earthly existence peacefully, insouciant of despotism, propaganda, usury, and devout oblations, the same cannot be averred of humans. With a view of making the idiosyncrasies of the human anthill a special case of its animal counterpart, Captain Veblen put his ship to sea. The premises appeared simple enough: what drives animals must likewise drive us humans, one need only account for a few special behavioral twists – e.g. ceremonial deliriums, epidemics of fancy, patriotic fads, geometrical displays of martial order, and the like, all of which are a trademark of human action; none but Man can claim paternity of such doings. But to Veblen, the

matter seemed but one of degree, not of kind. Or so it appeared in the beginning, when his brig was still being fitted for the voyage.

Shortly after this period I fell into a state of partial insensibility, during which the most pleasing images floated in my imagination; such as green trees, weaving meadows of ripe grain, processions of dancing girls, troops of cavalry, and other phantasies. I now remember that, in all which passed before my mind's eye, motion was a predominant idea. Thus, I never fancied any stationary object, such as a house, or a mountain, or anything of that kind; but windmills, ships, large birds, balloons, people on horseback, carriages driving furiously, and similar moving objects, presented themselves in endless succession. . . (Poe, 2001a, p. 706).

Veblen's argumentation seems to intimate that Man carries to excess the ordinary traits contradistinguishing the beastly kingdom.

The life of man in society, just like the life of other species, is a struggle for existence, and therefore it is a process of selective adaptation. . . The progress which has been and is being made in human institutions and in human character may be set down, broadly, to a natural selection of the fittest habits of thought and to a process of enforced adaptation of individuals to an environment which has progressively changed with the growth of the community and with the changing institutions under which men have lived (Veblen, 1979, p. 188).

To Veblen, the game of life is thus a struggle, as it is for felines, mammals and every other species. The breeds evolve and the law of variations – the drift of mutation – is unquestionably Malthus's postulate of food scarcity – a putative and ungracious forbearance on the part of Nature in the face of need during the savage state of human affairs. Survival here belongs to predators, perforce.

“Yesterday.”

If a man's makeup, economic and spiritual, is fashioned by the customs and institutions of yesterday, the habits and thought-processes of the man of yesterday must be shaped in turn by those of the day before yesterday, and so on. Thus we regress to the initial breathing of life and are left speechless before the unknown. To undevout skeptics like Veblen, such a line of reasoning would defeat the very purpose of investigating collective economic behavior. The “beginning” is not the unfathomable beginning of time, but the remote age that witnessed the rudiments of collective human interaction – prehistory broadly defined. Though the social sciences to this day proceed from a similar viewpoint and perforce ignore creation and the deeper questions surrounding the origin of life, Veblen drifted off onto a different course. His beginnings are those of a self-professed agnostic, wishing to portray society as a sophisticated anthill, subject to the shifting fortunes of an intricate reticulation of mores, permutation, heredity, change, speech, and alternative patterns of organization amongst the collective hordes making up the social whole.

If a natural anthill may be confined in thought and observation to being but a marvelous unfolding of Nature's pangs in organized fashion – a live geometry of instincts and impulses, so to speak – a human anthill presents far greater difficulties. Difficulties which an honest inquiring mind cannot afford the luxury not to attack.

The *mind* governing a human anthill appears far more shifty, tricky, ominous, formidable, and inspired than that animating the indisputable wonders of flocks, packs, schools, gaggles, anthills, hives and honeycombs.

...The birds proceed, with one accord, and actuated apparently by one mind, to trace out, with mathematical accuracy, either a square or other parallelogram...of just sufficient size to accommodate easily all the birds assembled, and no more – ...Nothing can be more astonishing than the spirit of reflection evinced by these feathered beings, and nothing surely can be better calculated to elicit reflection in every well-regulated human intellect (Poe, 2001a, pp. 730, 731).

Whose mind's at work? What are these forces? Are they the creation of Man? Obviously not, or else we would not have sought the service of a Veblen to explain to us why the lady of high breeding and the proletarian lass alike are so keen on wearing, say, high heels, without their being capable of accounting for their desire to be thus shod (Veblen, 1964d, pp. 56-77, and 1979, pp. 167-87). But if they are not the creation of Man, though they “speak” through him, whose fabrication are they?

And so it was, that Veblen, who quietly inveighed against superstition, eschatological retribution and fanatical ecstasy, who sneered at the Most High, Levitical purity, monotheism, Hell's Fire, and the Christian system of sin and atonement, and who could never bring himself to countenance a sober acknowledgment of the “praeternatural” in its own right, became *de facto* its most ardent affirmer. The “unutterable” was never channeled *apertis verbis*, but the innuendo in his books was too conspicuous to be confounded with something else. As mentioned earlier, by attributing all such manifestations of allegedly devout blindness to “spirits,” or “geniuses of the race” as he called them, and spending thereafter the rest of his life tilting in earnest at these solid demons, Veblen achieved a number of things. First, the Captain instantaneously lost the consideration of the academic establishment past, present and future, which, by the bye, never ranked very high in his list of affections, for, as is known, he had already classed such a group of self-possessed, myopic, petty, shadowboxing middlebrows under the deprecated rubric of the “leisure class.” In a sense, he fooled no one: he made a mockery of fanatics, but then engrossed himself to the point of self-oblivion with spiritual manifestation, so much so that he too slipped half-way down the ditch of fanaticism – a fanaticism of the opposite sign however, like that shared by another, far less irresolute and therefore perfectly doomed, master of the seas: captain Ahab. Second, he turned his books into newfangled hybrids, surrealist frescoes wherein the yawns and roars of such spirits slither through seamless paragraphs of most original, sophisticated, genial, and heavy prose^[3] (one may venture that Melville could have penned such economics), which, on the score of their absolute uniqueness and quaintness, have generally failed to be taken for what they truly are, and have been disingenuously mistaken for the satire of a hyperborean Quixote, when nothing could be further from the truth. Scandinavians are not a humorous lot, they are dead serious, so to speak.

People complained they never knew whether Veblen was joking or serious (Dos Passos, 1966, p. 809).

Third, setting inordinate store by his Darwinian and agnostic cartography, he veered off course, unknowingly, but found new territory: the chronicling of the landfall, however, was not a dull Malthusian tale of selective adaptation (and no one cannot tell with certainty what our captain expected to find before he set sail); instead, Veblen's most precious record of his restless pursuit of these invisible wills that are wont to haunt the human anthills, consists of a social topography of the supernatural imprint.

In other words, the Captain left us an invaluable map of the wave motions imparted by external spiritual sources to the collective makeup of the human hive. Fourth, at last numbed by such tenacious fighting with overpowering superhuman beings, Veblen, alas no less a manipulable busy bee than any other in the hive, will make himself the mouthpiece of one such rival spirit; a spirit – though not identified by Veblen as such, and here lies the complication – no less pernicious than those he had been opposing with indefatigable vigor, steadfast courage, princely indignation, and unsurpassed insight. Of this spirit we shall speak hereafter.

We now found ourselves in the wide and desolate Antarctic Ocean. . . Many unusual phenomena now indicated that we were entering upon a region of novelty and wonder. A high range of light gray vapor appeared constantly in the southern horizon. . . The heat of the water was now truly remarkable, and in color was undergoing a rapid change, being no longer transparent, but of a milky consistency and hue. . . A fine white powder, resembling ashes – but certainly not such – fell over a large surface of the water. . . A sullen darkness now hovered above us. . . Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil. . . And now we rushed into the embrace of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in the pathway a shrouded human figure. . . And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow (*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, E.A. Poe, 2001a, pp. 766, 768, 769).

3. The spirit, the race and the economics

The conditions under which men lived in the most primitive stages of associated life that can properly be called human, seem to have been of a peaceful kind; and the character – the temperament and the spiritual attitude – of men under the early conditions of environment and institutions seems to have been of a peaceful and unaggressive, not say an indolent, cast. For the immediate purpose this peaceable cultural stage may be taken to mark the initial phase of social development (Veblen, 1979, p. 219).

So in the beginning there was peace. This was a time of “savage arts” – a time of tilling, harvesting, goods in common, and sedentary husbanding of the procreative virtues of the earth. This was the time of matriarchy, nurturing mothers (*almae matres*) and ferocious goddesses – days filled with matters that were “natural to women rather than to men.”

Indeed there is such a spiritual (magical) community between women and the fecundity of animate things that any intrusion of the men in the affairs of growth and fertility may by force of contrast come to be viewed with the liveliest apprehension (Veblen, 1990, p. 79).

And though Veblen affirms – and this shall be the core of his belief, as will be detailed hereafter – that “any instinctive bias to colour, distort and derange the facts by imputing elements of human nature will unavoidably act to hinder and deflect the agent from an effectual pursuit of mechanical design,” he is intriguingly disposed to grant a truce to a “sympathetic interpretation of natural phenomena in terms of human instincts” (an otherwise, in his view, improper disposition, economically speaking), and allow it to unfold in this magical barter of fluids between womanhood and the “speechless others,” namely animals and plants (Veblen, 1990, pp. 73, 74).

But to such putative serene tenure of Woman there follows an epoch of assault and plunder by Man.

With an accumulation of wealth...there comes an inducement to aggression, predation...Such aggression is an easy matter in the common run of lower cultures, since relations are habitually strained between these savage and barbarian communities. There is commonly a state of estrangement between them amounting to constructive feud, though the feud is apt to lie dormant under a *modus vivendi* so long as there is no adequate inducement to open hostilities, in the way of booty (Veblen, 1990, p. 156).

The analysis at this point suggests the “impersonal” actuation of some of sort of *redress* – a “straightening out” of the matriarchal aberrant episode into a despotic discipline of male rule colored by the exaltation of prevarication and prowess. The reference is here made to those pastoral-nomadic hordes hailing from the East – the Aryans, and other brunette stocks (Veblen, 1961c, pp. 477-96) – whose task it was, amongst other things, to disturb the peace of the European continent at large, bring women and children under the ward of kingly stewardship, and thereby vest in their chieftains the usufruct of the appropriated human and instrumental stock. Property and the organized system of ownership, indeed, were the chief innovations of such “redress,” and clearly, as Veblen would have extensively argued, the implications of this institutional transformation were far-reaching: the most notable precipitate of this turn of events – his abiding discovery – is indeed the formation within and gradual take-over of the anthill by a commandeering posse of parasitical elements, which he named the “kept,” or “leisure,” class (government, warfare, religious observances, and sports) (Veblen, 1979, p. 2). The sequence of factors and conditions responsible for precipitating such a momentous transition from peace to quasi-peace are never clearly spelt out, however. The precedent appears to be a “habitual margin of livelihood in excess of current needs,” which yields “a habitual margin of population” (Veblen, 1964a, p. 238), but what happens thereafter in Veblen’s accounts is misty, at best: either the surplus population, for lack of matching resources (implicit Malthusian assumption) migrates, or the budding leisure class inveigles the surplus, and arrests thereby the accumulation and growth of the enterprising community. The north-European cultural region is the case in point: from the sixth to the eleventh century, according to Veblen, the blond strains of the Baltic seaboard and the Scandinavian peninsula thrived under a decentralized regime distinguished by advanced workmanship, which made the surplus, and the ensuing wandering traffic, possible. On its conversion to Christianity, the anarchoid institutional furniture of theses Nordic peoples mutated into feudalism, and assimilated its barbarian cast of despotic prerogative – surplus and migration came to a stop (Veblen, 1964a, pp. 232-42). The model presents two orders of problems: first, one is still not told what finally prompted the blond ones to join Christendom, and, second, the pre-Christian era amongst these communities, was never peaceable to begin with: indeed, the aforementioned interval preceding the conversion is the so-called Viking era, whose economic contribution, by Veblen’s own admission, consists in its entirety of but two activities: piracy and the slave trade – hardly items of the motherly times of yore (Veblen, 1961a, p. 498). This aspect – the reasons surrounding the shift from savage communism to the barbarian regime of ownership – was never dissected precisely.

Be that as it may, it is of import, nevertheless, to underscore that, barring the desire to account for economic life in evolutionary terms, Veblen’s narrative has, shortly past its introductory chords, already taken leave of its Malthusian premises, and is steadily diverging towards unfamiliar, but promising, shores. As he, at one point, concedes that

during the early stages of industrial development, wherein the industrial arts are capable of yielding a surplus beyond the mere sustenance of the workman, the struggle for wealth may have coincided in some instances with a struggle for subsistence, he is swift to dismiss this traditional working-hypothesis of classical economics by pointing to its general inapplicability to the common run of modern economic development.

Such is, no doubt, its character in large part during the earlier and less efficient phases of industry. Such is also its character in all cases where the “niggardliness of nature” is so strict as to afford but a scanty livelihood to the community in return for strenuous and unremitting application to the business of getting the means of subsistence. But in all progressing communities an advance is presently made beyond this early stage of technological development. Industrial efficiency is presently carried to such a pitch as to afford something more than a bare livelihood to those engaged in the industrial process (Veblen, 1979, pp. 24, 25).

Thus, unequivocally, Veblen denies that the struggle for wealth originated in the competitive and aggressive bidding for scarce food. By and by, there seemed to be a loaf of bread for every mouth, and soon thereafter per capita food availability kept soaring. Yet the strain increased, and the struggle did not abate. There were more than enough loaves, but some had to command a larger share of the communal produce than others. Why?

Human nature being what it is, the struggle of each to possess more than his neighbor is inseparable from the institution of private property. And also, human nature being what it is, one who possesses less will, on the average, be jealous of the one of possesses more, and “more” means not more than the average share, but more than the share of the person who makes the comparison (Veblen, 1961b, p. 397).

And so the reader is revealed the shocking truth: ever since the onset of what Veblen called the predatory and quasi-peaceable culture (Veblen, 1979, pp. 212-45), we have done and do things, we have lived and live, prodded by the sting of *invidious comparison (or emulous rivalry)*, to outdo our neighbors, by way of material and protocolar ostentation. At heart, the human anthill is, more appropriately, a bedlam. As known, *The Theory of The Leisure Class*, Veblen’s masterpiece, iterates this theme by applying methodically, and with success, the reasoning to all facets of collective use and wont.

In this work, we witness the first accomplished attempt at delineating the contours of this extraneous, pernicious supernatural entity, which the Captain calls the *barbarian spirit*. In his view, this spirit is the cause of the “arrested development” of the human hive (Veblen, 1979, p. 213). Under its aegis, men have erected complex social arrangements, whose “barbarian” and sinister nature may be evinced by the following features: prevarication, prepotence (the foisting of one’s will upon those of weaker others), physical exploit, domination, rivalry, subterfuge, chicanery, deception, and all varieties of expedients to turn to account in the pursuit of excellence and mastery within one’s fold; inordinate importance attached to matters of rank, class, seniority, etiquette, and gentlemanly right-of-way; the near coincidence between the appetites of the low-class delinquents and the wealthy, and the unremitting use and undisguised enthusiasm for war – the most wasteful of all collective actions, both as a means for settling scores for the sake of patriotic repute and on account of national supremacy,

and as an honorable way of living, or, better still, perishing (die a soldier’s death for one’s country).

The spiritual backwardness enforced by the barbarian discipline, especially in the early phases of modern civilization, is best observed in the practices of religious ceremony.

Not least among elements of national strength [of a predatory culture] is its religion, which fosters the national pride of a people chosen by the Most High, at the same time that it trains the population in habits of subordination and loyalty, as well as in patient submission to exactions. But it is essentially a parasitical culture, despotic, and, with due training, highly superstitious or religious (Veblen, 1990, pp. 166-7).

As it sought the idolatry of as many racial stocks as it could muster, the barbarian spirit has manifested itself under a variety of guises.

What a people of these antecedents is capable of is shown by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes, Persians, the Hindu invaders of India, the Hyksos invaders of Egypt, and in another line by Israel and the Phoenicians, and in a lesser degree by the Huns, Mongols, Tartars, Arabs and Turks. . . . Seen in perspective and rated in any terms that have a workmanlike significance, these stupendous dynastic fabrics are as insignificant as they are large, and none of them is worth the least of the fussy little communities that came in time to make up the Hellenic world and its petty squabbles (Veblen, 1990, pp. 167, 168).

But it is nearly impossible to escape the sensation that there lurks in the books of Veblen an unconfessed imputation to such a spiritual force of an *independent will*. Nowhere does he intimate unambiguously that such barbarian commandments of mortified submission are but men’s fabrication, or the scheming contrivances of a cunning and fraudulent caste of outlaws, who slip into priestly vestments as if they were stage costumes, and who, by a pretense of “doing magic,” manage to apportion the group’s material wealth. The clergy is not laughing behind the back of the faithful, as wealth passes from the latter to former.

. . . . No degree of imputed inhumanity in the most high God will stand in the way of a god-fearing astute priesthood volubly ascribing to him all the good qualities that should grace an elderly patriarchal gentleman of the old school; so that even his most infamous atrocities become ineffably meritorious and are dispensed of his mercy (Veblen, 1990, p. 163).

There is no question here of a squalid heist, plotted by gloating priests, consummated at the expense of a beguiled congregation, and thereby elevated to the rank of institutional practice. In earnest the Levites comminate, in earnest the believers believe. All this should be, to Veblen, a matter of tastes, of which there is no disputing. But he arraigns such cults, nevertheless. What for?

Upon what is the judgment to be passed? Upon the fact that, for Veblen, devout communities are the least technologically advanced; as such they are the least expressive of, and most hostile to, free human endeavor. Technology is the meter, the gauge for assessing the superiority of one community with respect to another.

It is a matter of common notoriety that when individuals, or even considerable groups of men, are segregated from a higher industrial culture and exposed to a lower cultural environment. . . . they quickly show evident reversion toward the spiritual features which characterise the predatory type (Veblen, 1979, p. 197).

Veblen does not enter into matters of theological detail, but points to a pervasive and enduring spiritual bent common to all members of predatory, monotheistic, patriarchal groups: their *superstition*, or animism – that is, the delusive conviction of seeing demons where there are none, or the inclination to impute anthropomorphic valence and agency to objects and situations. Such superstition makes one interpret the inanimate facts and circumstances of life as alien beings endowed with willpower, which often conspire against humans, and which need to be soothed, cajoled, allayed with propitiatory rites that will hopefully smooth the asperities of the jagged life of the superstitious believer.

He is especially prone to accept so much of the creed as concerns the inscrutable power and the arbitrary habits of the divinity which has won his confidence (Veblen, 1979, p. 296).

Superstition is a collective notion, not a psychological one: it pertains to the dynamics of the group, not to those of the individual – thus, in the case of religious observances, we are not dealing with an individual, isolated swindle, but with a collective form of delusion. And that is when the supernatural comes in for acknowledgment. If one affirms that predatory cults breed upon superstition, but is incapable to inquire into the circumstances that first brought about superstitious intoxication – incapable to answer whoever should ask him “who or what first insufflated a predatory, oppressive spirit into human life-forms?,” he has no alternative other than having recourse to the metaphysical postulation of such intangible, original, self-contained, and strong-willed spirits. Lesser gods, so to speak, or maybe lesser angels, under whose watch “fear, pugnacity and self-aggrandisement” are given free rein and articulate expression (Veblen, 1990, p. 43). It is our contention that Veblen has unconsciously taken this course – his drift. Of course, he would have found the claim preposterous. Yet, as a rebuttal, it would be of little avail to insist on his behalf that a prolonged habituation to the rough conditions of a ferine and tumultuous state of society, alone, can satisfactorily explain the existence and prevalence of predatory attitudes.

The complement of instinctive dispositions, comprising under that term both the native propensity and its appropriate sentiment, makes up what would be called the “spiritual nature” of man – often spoken of more simply as “human nature” (Veblen, 1990, p. 14).

As Veblen must have known, there is far more to the economic life of Man than the mere evolving, no matter how intricate, of a congeries of appetites and proclivities in the shadow of earth’s seasons. But indeed, to hazard that the Persians, the Israelites, the Arabs and the rest of their abusive brethren, may, on account of their authoritarian discipline and stunted economics, be swiftly dispatched as a pack of snarling scavengers, too rugged and too beastly to be ever receptive to the binary tongue of technology, leaves something to be desired. Disclaiming he wrote what he did “in the way of deprecation,” the Captain expostulated at regular intervals with a view of disabusing the readers that his (bitter) conclusions could be stretched to fit all aspects of a given community’s full-blown cultural outfit, when, in fact, the focus, he assured, was merely economic. But that was uttered tongue in cheek – his judgment was trenchant, unqualified, blunt – and on the mark. Notwithstanding, it must take more than a mere habituation to war, the developing of cunning, and the sharpening of all those faculties subservient to predation, aggression and sport mastery, to tend a particular anthill to a point at which it becomes capable, say, to myth-make the narrative of the Ark, set in the stone of Behistan the victories of King Darius, or

compile by the hand of Avicenna the *Canon of Medicine*, whatever the merits or demerits of these achievements might be.

There are two forms of superstition: positive and negative. Positive superstition, as was pointed out above, is a proclivity to assign to the contingencies of life supernatural agency when there is none. It is a form of paranoiac drunkenness that turns the individual into a fearful, half-reasoning, and obstinate creature: when he “perceives” the “gods” to be “on his side,” the superstitious man gives himself over to unrestrained shows of hysterical exhilaration (e.g. bingo fever), but should he fancy himself to be the random prey of a flock of ravenous Erynies (e.g. the curse of Friday the 13th), his reaction may, in extreme instances, take the form of methodical truculence and sagacious ferocity, whose repercussions can be quite devastating. Positive superstition is palpable, easily identifiable. Veblen saw it with clarity, and wrote on the subject a most penetrating analysis; to him, it is one of the main auxiliaries of the barbarian spirit – it is by means of it that thus blinded individuals carry out the spirit’s bidding.

Negative superstition is the denial of the existence of demons, when the hive under investigation is indeed teeming with them.

Veblen’s ship never capsized because he, unlike all professionals of higher learning, steered clear of both types of superstition, especially the positive sort.

In the end, for Veblen, the economic struggle within mankind consists in a confrontation between the inheritances of the past and a technology-prone agnostic outlook of life. Salvation can only come from an unbridled blossoming of an inborn proclivity of humans, which the Captain named the *instinct of workmanship* (we shall deal with this theme in the following section), namely that innate bent to engage all rational faculties in devising efficient ways and serviceable means that are of use and beneficial to the “ends of life” (Veblen, 1990, p. 31). So it appears that the fate of the race revolves round the outcome of a duel pitting a spirit against an instinct – hardly an even match. We shall return to this point.

As regards technological proficiency, the record of mankind, across time and space, is varied. Some groups, because of particular circumstances and racial endowments, have been more successful than others in mitigating the infirmities brought about by the barbarian spirit, and have thus been capable to afford a freer run to the drift of impersonal and mechanized means of production within their communities.

Can racial endowment account for scientific proficiency? On this count, Veblen’s answer appears somewhat inconsistent. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, he states that of the three main ethnic types of the Occidental populations – the dolicho-blond, the brachycephalic-brunette and the Mediterranean, the first shows “more of the characteristics of the predatory temperament” (Veblen, 1979, p. 217), but in later works, the thesis is otherwise. He reformulates his racial theory first by contending that the dolicho-blond mutant[4] issuing from that center that “lies within the seaboard region bordering on the South Baltic, the North Sea and the narrow waters of the Scandinavian peninsulas,” was a *typical original* (Veblen, 1961d, pp. 470, 471); which contention could be taken to mean that Veblen wished to posit the dolicho-blond as one of those founding stocks of the race – a racially homogeneous group with a defined, neatly hewn spirit-guide. And what are the institutional traits of the spirit guide of the aboriginal blond?

The northern blond communities alone appear, on the available evidence, to have had no gentile of tribal institutions, whether matrilinear or patriarchal. . . [The dolicho-blond hybrids]

show little of the institutions of the peculiar to a pastoral people. . . Among these peoples the patriarchal system is weak and vague, women are not in perpetual tutelage, the discretion of the male head of the household is not despotic nor even unquestioned, children are not held under paternal discretion beyond adult age, the patrimony is held to no clan liabilities and is readily divisible on inheritance, and so forth (Veblen, 1961c, pp. 488, 490).

All of which, unsurprisingly, are conducive to a mind-set attuned to the scientific logos, the raw apprehension of facts in causal sequence, and the rhythms of workmanship. And so Veblen has come full circle: it will be the “dolicho-blond’s man burden” to show the Occidental peoples the way out of the Barbarian labyrinth and instruct them in the matter-of-fact discipline of ciphers, physics, and the machine. This shall do the Swedes, Balts, Wends, Danes, Norse, and their wandering brethren: the Gauls, Goths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Alemanni, Heruli, Burgundians, Franks, Bavarians, Longobards, Jutes, Angles, Saxons, Normans[5], and last, but certainly not least, Norwegian-Americans.

4. The instinct of workmanship and Veblen’s Nordic aesthetics

The instinct of workmanship is that instinct which

Disposes men to look with favor upon productive efficiency and on whatever is of human use. It disposes them to deprecate waste of substance or effort. . . It occupies the interest with practical expedients, ways and means, devices and contrivances of efficiency and economy, proficiency, creative work, and technological mastery of facts. Much of the functional content of the instinct of workmanship is a proclivity for taking pains (Veblen, 1979, p. 93, and 1990, p. 33).

Herein lies the seed of progress. For Veblen, the vicissitudes of western civilization have been punctuated by the barbarian spirit’s resolve to stifle the free-play of humans’ goodly proclivities. Workmanship in full swing translates into: free institutions, free thought, the reputability of the scientific achievement, heresy (as an unyielding refusal to submit to the dead letter of the books of faith), and technological excellence. The mere presence of a leisure class – the most conspicuous manifestation of the predatory spirit – is inconceivable within a regime that requires equitable distribution, universal education, and sizable accumulation in the way of engineering and technical appliances. The blond stock has been at the forefront of this slow transformation from a regime hampered by privilege, to a republic of enterprising communes.

Perhaps [the proclivity to unreasoning fear that is visible in superstitious practice] enters in a less degree in the spiritual nature of the European blond than in that of any other race; that race – or its hybrid offspring – has at any rate proved less amenable to religious control than any other. . . The blond hybrid peoples of Christendom were the last to accept the patriarchal mythology of the Semites and have also been the first and readiest to shuffle out of it in sequel; which suggests the inference that they have never fully assimilated its spirit; perhaps for lack of a sufficiently strict and protracted discipline in its ways and ideals, perhaps for a lack of a suitable temperamental ground. There is, indeed, a curiously pervasive concomitance, in point in time, place, and race, between the modern machine technology, the material sciences, religious scepticism, and that spirit of insubordination that makes the substance of what are called free or popular institutions (Veblen, 1990, pp. 129, 201).

What unshackled this spirit of insubordination and this passion for numbers and technique, was the coming of another spirit, namely the coming of what Veblen calls the “pecuniary culture.” The advent of the bourgeois (Sombart, 1987) coincided with

a revulsion from the stale funk of despotism, and brought to a fevered pitch the accounting obsession of the merchant class. The testimony of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* owed its lasting value to the realization that the barbarian spirit has managed to survive the impetus of the bourgeoisie’s philistinism, by allying itself with the pecuniary mind set (Chapter IX, *The Conservation of Archaic Traits*, recounts precisely this story). And though, the appetite of predation is at cross purposes with that of the machine – hence the perennial conflict between business chiefs and engineers (recounted in *The Theory of Business Enterprise*)[6] – “the current commercial scheme of life appears to be only less inimical to the functioning of those instinctive propensities that serve the common interest” (Veblen, 1990, p. 182).

Even the daydreams of the pecuniary day dreamers take shape as a calculus of profit and loss computed in standard units of an impersonal magnitude, even though the magnitude of these standard units may on analysis prove to be of a largely putative character (Veblen, 1990, p. 200).

So, after much shuffle, the barbarian animus manages to retain the upper hand in the economic dynamics of the hive: technology and the instinct of workmanship have been allowed to thrive insofar as they could be relied upon to serve the purpose of pecuniary accumulation, carried out at the expense of the community at large. As known, the subservience of the machine to the logic of profit is of an imperfect kind, at best, and needs much in the way of industrial sabotage (Veblen, 1963, Chapter 1) to run to the effect prescribed by the dictates of business exigency. That the instinct of workmanship could never be set free, completely, was Veblen’s torment – the flame that fueled the fire of his resentment. In fact, the technology of the twentieth century is, for the most part, a bundle of knowledge and patented routines that takes much pains to accord with the proprietary nature of commerce – it is not a free form of workmanlike endeavor aimed, in common, at furthering the “ends of life,” as Veblen had daydreamed.

A manifest and inveterate distaste of waste...still persistently comes in evidence in all communities, although it is greatly disguised and distorted by the principles of conspicuous waste among all those people that have adopted private ownership of goods (Veblen, 1990, p. 90).

The insufferable encroachment of the barbarian animus on the ways of workmanship could be seen at work in multitudinous instances, none of which he failed to identify. A most conspicuous one is the “rise of the corporation” (Veblen, 1964e, Chapter V), which is the embodiment in human society of a particular drive, namely the pursuit of gain on the part of absentee ownership. As Veblen repeatedly affirmed on this count, the corporation’s “end and aim is not productive work, but profitable business; and its corporate activities are not in the nature of workmanship, but of salesmanship. If it is an ‘industrial’ corporation, so called, it will make use of the technical ways and means, processes and products; but it makes use of them as ways and means of doing a profitable business. It has only an absentee beneficiary interest in the work done” (Veblen, 1964e, p. 83). And that is obviously not good enough – far from it; corporate industry amounts to nothing more than a mere ancillary usage of workmanship for the purpose of gain, whose proximate purpose is, in turn, to gratify the purely barbarian appetite of pecuniary emulation and invidious exploit. When all is said and done: a complete rout of the good instinct.

How does all of this impinge on the fate of *beauty*, which Veblen made sure never to leave behind? E.A. Poe and Saint-Exupéry had already decried, no less beautifully than Veblen himself, the betrayal of aesthetic purity:

We [Yankees] have no aristocracy of blood, and having, therefore as a natural, and indeed as an inevitable thing, fashioned for ourselves an aristocracy of dollars, the *display of wealth* has here to take the place and perform the office of the heraldic display in monarchical countries. By a transition readily understood, and which might have readily been foreseen, we have been brought to merge in simple *show* our notions of taste itself (Poe, 2001a, p. 405).

Si vous dites aux grandes personnes: “J’ai vu une belle maison en briques roses, avec des géraniums aux fenêtres et des colombes sur le toit . . .” elles ne parviennent pas à s’imaginer cette maison. Il faut leur dire: “J’ai vu une maison de cent mille francs.” Alors elles s’écrient: “Comme c’est joli!” (Saint-Exupéry, 1998, pp. 10-2)[7].

And thus Veblen:

The superior gratification derived from the use and contemplation of costly and supposedly beautiful product is, commonly, in great measure a gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty (Veblen, 1979, p. 128).

As was indicated earlier, the canons of waste are at work in every aspect of human production. They are conspicuously present in the minute craft and the grandiose designs of the house of worship, where the columnar awe, the ethereal vaults, the lavish, if not obsessive, display of yellow and gold (such as would be unbearable to sober taste), curlicues, volutes and aimless spirals are, to Veblen, the optical work of impression choreographed by the artful hires of the leisure class – all of these architectural devices are meant to have “an appreciable uplifting and mellowing effect upon the worshipper’s frame of mind” (Veblen, 1979, pp. 119, 125).

The endless variety of fronts presented by the better class of tenements and apartment houses in our cities is an endless variety of architectural distress and of suggestion of expensive discomfort. Considered as objects of beauty, the dead walls of the sides and back of these structures, left untouched by the hands of the artist, are commonly the best features of the building (Veblen, 1979, p. 154).

Thus, superfluity, gingerbread, waste, “the exaltation of the defective,” saturated hues, useless trinkets, the harking back to era of craftsmanship, the obsession with “hand-made” as a sign of reputability versus the nasty cheapness of “machine-made,” the thick, the ornate; all of these are marks of barbarous appetite, and as such, cannot but be rated as *ugly* – unbecoming a proper aesthetic sense. But how is one to define “sober taste?”

Beauty of form seems to be a question of facility of apperception. . . Beauty in any perceived object means that the mind readily unfolds its apperceptive activity in the directions which the object in question affords. But the directions in which activity readily unfolds or expresses itself are the directions to which long and close habituation has made the mind prone. . . This *habituation is an adaptation of physiological structure* and function. . . So far as the economic interest enters into the constitution of beauty, it enters as a suggestion or expression of *adequacy of purpose*, a manifest and readily inferable subservience to the life process. *This expression of economic facility*. . . in any object – what may be called the economic beauty of the object – is best served by neat and unambiguous suggestion of its office and its efficiency for the material ends of life. On this ground, among objects of use

the simple and unadorned article is aesthetically the best (Veblen, 1979, pp. 151-2, emphasis added).

This is Veblen’s aesthetic principle. It is somewhat obscure, and consists, in fact, of a syllogism:

- (1) to apprehend is to apperceive – that is, to assimilate external information through the filter of sense-function and past experience.
- (2) but apperception – this perception cum learning – is moved by *affinity*, and thus seeks in the external object a form and structure that resembles its own mechanism (or that of any metabolism): it seeks physiological congruence – a harmonious assimilation of external elements according to function (presumably what the body and mind do). We see beauty when we recognize a *pattern*.
- (3) in looking for economic beauty, we let abhorrence of waste, and purpose guide the apperception, and so end up with liking best the simple, functional, and inexpensive object.

As a syllogism it is weak, at best. First, the notion of apperception implies the coupling of experience *and* learning faculties: this, however, may give rise to a myriad different representations, as many as there are personal histories – a situation that easily defies generalization (indeed, a pygmy, say, is not likely to apperceive beauty as a Finn would, nor is it a matter of certainty, of course, that all Finns would take a similar liking to the same things). Second, if we understood it aright, the second component of the syllogism is surreptitious: true, one seeks patterns, and thus relishes sympathetic affinity – the clicking of mind and object; but it is not clear how and why the mind in its pursuit of beauty should be classing information according to structure and function alone: if an individual is fond of the arabesque motif (hopefully, not a barbarian abomination), what does that suggest of that person’s mind? This second proposition is an unwarranted addition. And third, “economic beauty” is a spurious concept. Beauty is unqualified, as Veblen must have intimately suspected, for his harangues do not just touch honorific silverware, but swirl into a sweeping condemnation of all things, economic and otherwise, deemed unfit according to his trump criterion of aesthetic purity: that which he has tossed in as the second step of the syllogism – namely, that beauty coincides with simplicity and practical functionality. This may not be untrue, but it can only be set down as a very special case of a general idea of beauty. Indeed, such a case may duly come under the caption of “Veblen’s Scandinavian, or Nordic, ideal.” It is more in the nature of a wish, than of theoretical appreciation – it may be represented as an archetypal, blond, apperceptive yearning.

By apprehending dispassionately the brute forces of “brute matter” (Veblen, 1990, p. 81), shielding the instinct of workmanship from animistic contamination, and taking minerals for what Veblen thought they must be – namely, refractory materials “that have no spiritual nature” (Veblen, 1990, p. 80) – technological perfection will suffer no impediments. In the heretical communes of the engineers – a Nordic variation of Plato’s philosopher-kings – spiritual communion is, interestingly, not ruled out (Veblen, 1990, p. 29); what form such rediscovered communion of souls should take, the Captain does not say, however: it shall certainly never be the blustering, and wasteful

cults ministered by the rule of Elders for the sake of a merciless and vindictive Father-God. Nor will it be housed in overwhelming temples, but will most presumably find a proper venue in a sober structure built upon functional carpentry. In this free republic of blond insubordinates, reigns the dead solemnity of inanimate matter wrought by the unfaltering scansion of the machine process. Any romantic deviation from this norm of technical imperatives, such as the “Arts & Crafts” movement initiated by the nostalgic medievalists of Britain (Ruskin and Morris) can aspire to nothing loftier than “hang[ing] as an aenemic fad upon the fringe of industry” (Veblen, 1964b, p. 197). Production, says Veblen, has to be machine-driven; it cannot revert to the ways and means of handicraft, the guilds and the workshop. The polish and anachronism of the Dreamers’ manifestos entail the laborious craftsman-like manufacture of articles far too expensive for the consuming public, which is not a viable arrangement in the face of modern economic requisites.

“Industrial art” has no chance of life beyond the hothouse shelter of decadent aestheticism (Veblen, 1964b, p. 197).

Though these artifacts content the artisan’s sense of original accomplishment – a spiritual preoccupation of great import, when the health of the workman is taken into consideration (this was one of Ruskin’s chief concerns) (Ruskin, 1985, pp. 77-109) – their ultimate impact upon the economic fate of the community is, as Veblen admonished, nothing more than the mere gratification of the canons of conspicuous waste and reputable ostentation (Veblen, 1979, p. 162).

Archaism and sophistication came of a revulsion against the besetting influence of what was present before the eyes of the leaders. The absolute dearth of beauty in the philistine present forced them to hark back to the past. The enduring characteristic is rather an insistence on sensuous beauty of line and color and on serviceability on all objects, which it touches. And these results can be attained in fuller measure through the technological expedients of which the machine process disposes than by any means within the reach of the industry of a past age (Veblen, 1964b, p. 198).

In truth, Veblen had eyes to see, and this last passage is of great significance. For social thinkers possessed of a smattering of honesty, the screaming squalor and drabness of modern industrialized agglomerates was too pressing a matter to be swept under the wishful anticipation of forthcoming “natural adjustments favorable to the poor.” And Veblen, as many others, could not but share the apprehension of the British romantic reformers in regard to the workmen’s sense of achievement, as well as their unremitting disgust for the sordidness of contemporary industrial tenements and occupations. Indeed the above passage suggests that, “sensuous beauty of line and color” could very well agree with Veblen’s “Diogenes-like” aesthetics[8], provided it was effected by mechanical and technical means. Lest one should have construed Veblen’s insistence on simplicity, inexpensiveness and functionality as no more than an accolade to, say, the dismally bare, yet indisputably functional and cheap, design of latter-day American malls, it is thus requisite to be reminded of this important qualification, which stands as incontrovertible proof that Veblen had never wished to cast religion (in the literal sense, i.e. communion) (Veblen, 1990, p. 29), or the fancifully beautiful overboard. His invectives are so surcharged with a Platonic tension of sorts as to belie the impression that all he sought to advocate was an industrial

republic managed by a “fantastic brotherhood of over-specialized cranks” (Veblen, 1963, p. 140). His Utopia was a community of souls and hands – the machine, though pivotal, could not possibly constitute the spiritual foundation of his societal blueprint. But the details were never worked out, and all this tangle of spirit and workmanship – the questions of precedence, purpose, and meaning, of the one vis-à-vis the other – never went beyond the expectant view that all things would harmoniously converge to their proper emplacements once the machine industry would be afforded a free-swung regime of operation. He thereby gave his theories an air of unreality, as he repeatedly sought to contrast the ill humor of an entity as ominous as the barbarian animus with the diligence of workmanship – two incommensurable entities. The error that send him drifting, was the failure to identify as many sinister spirits as there are swarming the anthill – he saw but one, and played in the hands of another. This other, equally noxious being, is the *dry spirit of mechanized life*, of computation and aridity, which, on account of its kindred fondness for norms coercion and discipline is often found cooperating, as Veblen had understood, with the predatory animus – the combined outcome of such cooperation, he, in fact, christened “pecuniary culture.” But Veblen, despite everything, because he himself was an exponent of the “vainglorious skepticism of the Western culture” (Veblen, 1990, p. 59), could not but affect a tinct of negative superstition, which made him embrace somewhat rashly the triumphing current of modernity: *the faith in the “neutral” might of technology*. Veblen’s reliance on the bounties of the machine was too great: technology per se suffices not. There must be purpose – teleology, which, for him never went beyond saying that action must be serviceable to the “ends of life” (Veblen, 1990, p. 80). And as to defining what these ends of life truly consist of, he took his cues from “vainglorious skepticism,” which, by definition, cannot, and wishes not, to say much on this count. Inspiration must be sought elsewhere, but by this time, the Captain, like Pym, reaching the dark side of the South Pole after unspeakable distress, found himself too used up and too weak to put to sea again. In the final glimmers of his testimony, he faces his arch-foe – in the garb of Christian dogma – one last time, and despairs thereafter that his blond utopia of technocratic heretics could ever come about.

[The great movements and revulsion against mechanized work go] to show. . . that however exactly and however pervasive the discipline of the machine process may be, it can not, after all, achieve its perfect work in the way of habituation in the population of *Christendom* as it stands. The limit of tolerance native to the race, physically and spiritually, is short of that unmitigated materialism and unremitting routine to which the machine technology incontinently drives (Veblen, 1990, pp. 320, 321, emphasis added).

Veblen will always remained trapped between the urgings of the machine moloch and the humane pull of compassion, beauty and justice. On the mid-, ascending, path between the liquid insensibility of the “shiftless ne’er do well” (Veblen, 1979, p. 237), and the dry ratiocination of the ideal “engineer” – both lying outside the barbarian realm – Veblen will meander hesitatingly, most often preferring to take refuge in “morally colorless” (Veblen, 1979, p. 207) claims, which will, alas, turn this epic of spirit versus instinct into an irresolute confusion.

To summarize: Veblen’s Nordic aesthetic triptych of functionality-inexpensiveness-simplicity, in its purest manifestation, can only be the feat of a soviet of engineers,

operating the machines in a business-free environment, featuring property in common, modesty and thrift; and denoted by the remarkable absence of Christian and like superstitious cults, conspicuous leisure and consumption, aggressive salesmanship, and intricate alien incorporation of absentee ownership.

5. Aristocrats

Salvation will not come to the Common Man by way of unrestricted machine operation, humans are not automata – and if Monotheism is to be “faulted” for impeding the transformation, it is a fault for which mankind should be thankful. Technology is a precious conquest – the danger lies in the “neutral” character often imputed to it. As is the case for money, technology per se is not conducive to a melioration of the ends of life; it is, of course, the principle guiding the application that is of decisive significance. All these are truisms, however, that are deflecting the argument from the present theme of beauty and craft.

Machines can do wonders, but in the house, Man is king, and Woman is queen. At home, we should be given the chance to be the aristocrats of an imaginary republic of common individuals, all kings and queens. Such individuals should have the liberty to indulge time, money and fancy in arraying the hearth – not all has to be plain, simple and functional, as a matter of necessity. It has to be *beautiful*; the home should be feasted every day, and in the preparation for such quotidian celebration, utmost care should be devoted to the particulars of taste, radiance, atmosphere, color, and sound.

Edgar Poe – this most excellent American aristocrat – can give us counsel on these matters.

A judge at common law may be an ordinary man; a good judge of a carpet *must be* a genius. . . Every one knows that a large floor *may* have a covering of large figures, and that a small one *must* have a covering of small. . . As regards texture, the Saxony alone is admissible. . . Distinct grounds, and circular or cycloid figures, *of no meaning*, are here Median laws. The abomination of flowers, or representations of well known objects of any kind, should not be endured within the limits of Christendom.

Glare is a leading error in the philosophy of American household decoration. . . In the matter of glass, generally, we proceed upon false principles. Its feature is *glitter* – and in that one word how much of all that is detestable do we express!

Even *now*, there is present to our mind’s eye a small and not ostentatious chamber with whose decorations no fault can be found. The proprietor lies asleep on a sofa – the weather is cool – the time is near midnight: I will make a sketch of the room ere he awakes:

It is oblong. . . a shape affording the best ordinary opportunities for the adjustment of furniture. It has but one door. . . and but two windows. . . Their panes are of a crimson-tinted glass. . . The colors of the curtains and their fringe – the tints of crimson and gold – appear everywhere in profusion, and determine the *character* of the room. The carpet – of Saxony material – . . . is of the same crimson ground. . . The walls are prepared with a glossy silver-gray tint, spotted with small Arabesque devices of a fainter hue of the prevalent crimson. . .

Many paintings relieve the expense of such paper. These are chiefly landscapes of an imaginative cast. . . The tone of each picture is warm, but dark. . . Repose *speaks* in all.

Two large low sofas of rosewood and crimson. . . A pianoforte, an octagonal table. . . Some light and graceful hanging shelves. . . sustain two or three hundred magnificently bound books. . . Beyond these things there is no furniture, if we except an Argand lamp which. . . throws a tranquil but magical radiance over all (E.A. Poe, 2001b, pp. 416-9).

Would have the Captain found repose in such an abode? The evidence suggests that he probably would have not. The gloom, the crimson, the gold, and the overall affected sophistication, the magical radiance; all of these would have failed to capture his Scandinavian genius, let alone those “magnificently bound books:” a “decadent crudity,” a display of “superior clumsiness” if judged from his Nordic viewpoint (Veblen, 1979, pp. 162-4). But this is to presume too much. Should we persist in venturing gratuitous suppositions of this sort, we would surely offend the memory of another most excellent aristocrat, for Veblen was one, without the trace of a doubt. *The books.* There is a passage in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* that touches on books, in fact: and broaching this sentimental topic, the author – a true lover of parchments as all true scholars – *falters*. Though he laments the leisurely naïveté of that well-bred book-buyer that seeks the “more awkward article,” Veblen cannot forebear to own that *the old-style book is indeed beautiful*. . . But then, the imperatives of consistency, and the Scandinavian drive, soon force him to qualify the point, and thus redress immediately that instant of “weakness.”

...While the decadent book may be beautiful, the limits within which the designer may work are fixed by requirements of a non-aesthetic kind. The product, if it is beautiful, must also at the same time be costly and ill adapted to its ostensible use (Veblen, 1979, pp. 164, 165).

After all, there is reason, instead, to presume, that Veblen might have agreeably come to seat himself on one of those rosewood, gold-flowered, sofas, leaf through one such magnificently bound tome, and quietly fall asleep. So that Poe could make a sketch of the chamber.

Before parting, we should like, by way of mere suggestion, to query Mr Poe whether substituting a Kashan, reminiscent in texture and colors the Ardabil Shrine carpet (if so much magnificence can ever be if remotely approached by the best contemporary master weavers), for the crimson Saxony of his sketch, would not, in his opinion, somewhat enhance the magical radiance of his imagined interior. We shall wait for an answer.

Notes

1. “The hedonistic conception of man is that of a lightning calculator of pleasures and pains, who oscillates like a homogeneous globule of desire of happiness under the impulse of the stimuli that shift him about the area, but leave him intact. . . He is an isolated, definitive human datum, in stable equilibrium except for the buffets of the impinging forces that displace him in one direction or another” (Veblen, 1993, p. 139).
2. “The outcome of the method [of classical economics], at its best, is a body of logically consistent propositions concerning the normal relations of things – a system of economic taxonomy. At its worst, it is a body of maxims for the conduct of business and a polemical discussion of disputed points of policy” (Veblen, 1993, p. 135).
3. “His language was a mixture of mechanics’ terms, scientific latinity, slang, and Roget’s *Thesaurus*” (Dos Passos, 1966, p. 811).

4. According to Veblen, the dolicho-blond type issued from the Mediterranean race by a process of mutation, occasioned by the second glacial era in the late quaternary (Veblen, 1961d, pp. 462-5).
5. This list of wandering blond peoples is taken from Veblen (1964a, p. 237).
6. Veblen (1978, Chapters V and VI).
7. "If you tell grown-ups: 'I have seen a beautiful pink brick house with geraniums on the windows, and doves on the roof... they have a difficult time picturing this house. One has to tell them: 'I have seen a hundred-thousand dollar house'. Then they exclaim 'how pretty!'"
8. Insisting on the "elimination of all honorific and wasteful values" (Veblen, 1979, p. 157).

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