

TRACES

Ernst Bloch

Translated by Anthony A. Nassar

Stanford
University
Press

Stanford
California
2006

Flower and Unflower

Some can give up their self in something external without losing themselves there, without leaving themselves at all. Assuming that they're on a good footing with the thing outside, yesterday like today, like tomorrow especially. When on Monet's eightieth birthday a photographer came to him from Paris, the artist replied to him: Come back next spring and photograph the flowers in my garden; they look more like me than I do. For others, a familiar old cabinet in the room would have done the same service. Then precisely the unflower—something imperishable—would have belonged in the still life, the stilled life between people and things.

The Leyden Jar

All the more remarkable that we can use what we don't even know, as though it were there for us. The engineer Siemens once climbed the pyramid of Cheops: already halfway up he didn't like the look of his guides. At the top there was little time to enjoy the view, for the Bedouins took out their pistols and robbed him. But he had long ago noticed the electric charge in the desert air, so he very craftily placed his mackintosh under his feet, held up his moistened finger in the air, and just as the sheik stood before him, lowered it to his nose. A spark leaped across from the human Leyden jar. The Bedouins ran away screaming, and even Siemens—once the laborious descent, alone and without magic, was behind him—marveled for a long time at "his" power. He had certainly proven himself as a magician, but how does enlightenment become superstition, the times table a hocus pocus? It laughs at it, and finally looks just like it. The calculated spark jumped just as the conjured one perhaps once did, this time "good," another time "bad," for neither concerns the spark.

The First Locomotive

There is even a wild legend about George Stephenson's debut.¹ He pulled the first mobile boiler out of the shed. The wheels turned, and the

inventor followed his creation down the evening street. But after just a few strokes the locomotive sprang forward, ever faster, Stephenson helplessly behind. From the other end of the street there now came a troop of revelers who had been detained by beer; young men and women, the village preacher among them. Toward them the monster now ran, hissing past in a shape that no one on earth had ever seen, coal-black, throwing sparks, with supernatural velocity. Even worse than the way the old books portrayed the devil; nothing was missing, but there was something new. A half mile further the street made a bend right along a wall; into this the locomotive now rammed and exploded with great violence.

The next day, it is said, three of the pedestrians fell into a high fever, and the preacher went mad. Only Stephenson understood it all and built a new machine on rails, and with a driver's seat, so its demonic power was put on the right track, indeed almost organically. Now the locomotive boils as though hot-blooded, pants as though out of breath, a tamed land animal on a grand scale, who can make us forget the golem.

The Indians saw horses for the first time with the white man, about which Johannes V. Jensen has remarked, If we knew how they had seen it, we would know how a horse looks.² In the preacher's madness we see how one of the greatest revolutions in technology looked before one got used to it and lost the demonism behind it. Only an accident occasionally brings it to mind again: the crash of the collision, the bang of explosions, the screams of shattered people—in short, an ensemble that has no civilized timetable. Modern warfare especially did its part; here iron became even thicker than blood, and technology quite ready to recall the hellish aspect of the first locomotive. There is no way back, but the crises of accidents (of uncontrolled things) will persist all the longer as they lie deeper than crises of the economy (of uncontrolled commodities).

The Urban Peasant

I know someone who is cowardly in a beautiful way. Of course with animals he's fine; with other people he strands up for himself. But like a peasant, although he was born in the big city, he mistrusts machines; the clang of steel against steel, the fuel explosions by means of which we so gently move from place to place. He likes to say, The danger of being born in

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