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“Something There Is That Doesn’t Like A Wall”

Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”, 1915

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To be human is to be insecure. The same could be said of anything that lives on this planet, for all lives, even those that are not “short, nasty, and brutish”, are subject to the need for food and the threat of the elements and of other living things. The difference is that the human animal has had, from earliest times, the capacity to recall and to anticipate, to imagine and to identify, and hence, to *know* that it is insecure. And with what seems to be an inborn itch to rationalize, to find reasons for phenomena, humans have created institutions, even at a very primitive level, that are aimed at dealing with insecurity – institutions we might call the martial and the religious.

The application of violence, reinforced by weaponry, maintains the food supply, defends against animal and human predators, and enables acquisition of new territories. Even when the advent of agriculture assures a steadier food supply, families, tribes, confederacies make use of warriors, from out of their midst or through hire, to secure the society. The Japanese tale of the Seven Samurai, grippingly told in the Kurosawa film, shows how the process can take place even in relatively modern times. In general, human societies have created warrior castes, warrior classes, and eventually what Dwight Eisenhower’s audacious speech-writer called, in 1959, the “military-industrial complex”, the symbiotic relationship between an industry that thrives on the manufacture and sale of weaponry and a military happy to find reasons to put it to use. Respect for, glorification of, military prowess, enters into the cultural fabric of most human societies, for instance through versions of the epic, through sentiments such as Dryden’s “only the brave deserve the fair”, and through transference to athletic heroism, as preserved, for instance,

in the Odes of Pindar, and of course in the following of sporting events either from the stands in stadiums or from the couch facing the television.

The ancient human animal also observed the processes of age, and death, and the prior existence of a seemingly endless solidity beneath his feet and even more endless firmament above his head. But life itself wasn't endless. People, even when not killed, grew infirm and died. Why? Such mysteries asked for more explanations, and the rationalizing imagination created supernatural beings, household, local, and eventually universal gods, and the market for specialists in such matters. All the better if they could produce a *modus* for achieving a life that *doesn't* end. Priest castes, in charge of systematized beliefs and the stories that maintain them, appear in most societies, and their ceremonies and terminology become an important component of those societies' culture.

There is a surviving Sumerian prayer which embodies the pathos of early civilized man, developed enough to have invented writing, ploughs, markets, gods, and guilt complexes, but still at a loss to know how to fend off adversities. It is a weird anticipation of Wang's epilogue to *Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan*, but without the saving irony -- and an even closer anticipation of Kafka.

May the wrath of the heart of my god be pacified!

May the god who is unknown to me be pacified!

May the goddess who is unknown to me be pacified!

May the known and unknown god be pacified!

May the known and unknown goddess be pacified!

The sin which I have committed I know not.

The misdeed which I have committed I know not

...

An offense against my god I have unwittingly committed.

A transgression against my goddess I have unwittingly done.

...

The sin, which I have committed, I know not.

The iniquity, which I have done, I know not.

The transgression I have done, I know not.

The lord, in the anger of his heart, hath looked upon me.

The god, in the wrath of his heart, hath visited me.

The goddess hath become angry with me, and hath grievously stricken me.

The known or unknown god hath straitened me.

The known or unknown goddess hath brought affliction upon me.

...

How long, known and unknown god, until the anger of thy heart be pacified?

How long, known and unknown goddess, until thy unfriendly heart be pacified?

Mankind is perverted and has no judgment.

Of all men who are alive, who knows anything?

They do not know whether they do good or evil.

...

And so on. There would soon enough be men and women willing to tell him what was good and evil, and eventually religions would be developed that could make a good stab at offering the needed security.

But the most obvious, and possibly the earliest, device for achieving security is the walled enclosure. One of the oldest, if not the oldest, city that we know of is Jericho, which is associated with walls from its earliest mention. Jericho was geologically located within natural barriers, and to those were added man-made walls. However effective such walled cities have been at protecting their residents, they are culturally most remembered in their breaching, whether by means of sonic power at Jericho, or, as in the case of Troy, by deception, or, as in the Great Wall of China, by its own unsupervisable length, or, as in Hadrian's Wall, by the irresistible savagery of the Scottish ruffians, or, as in Berlin, by an officer's televised booboo. On the other hand, as civilization became more and more a product of urban life, the walled cities of the Renaissance became a prime source of the enriching of modern cultures. I shall pick up this question later in the paper. (A serious study of the cultural characteristics of walled societies would be, I believe, a useful contribution to the study of human security in its varied senses.)

London's wall still stood at the time of the Spanish Armada, and the English sense of besieged isolation over the ensuing decades manifested itself in numerous references to

protective walls in the cultural products of the time. Among plays, for instance, in the mid-1590s Robert Greene revives the tale of the 13th-century Roger Bacon and his plan to surround England with a wall of brass (*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, 1594), and at about the same time Christopher Marlowe has Doctor Faustus preparing to do the same for Germany (*The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, c.1592). Shakespeare's "rude mechanicals" wreck the ancient tragic tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, separated by their feuding sets of parents by a property wall; and in a more straightforward tragedy, Romeo the Capulet has to climb over the enemy Montagues' wall to reach his Juliet. Earlier in that century, the image of the walled fortress fuses military with religious motifs in startling fashion in Luther's hymn of 1529:

*Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott
Ein gute Wehr und Waffen ...*

I should like to turn for a while to the phrase that I've borrowed for the title of this paper. Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" was published in 1915. At that time, despite the constant American expansion westward through native territory, and the recent Spanish-American War, a high percentage of Americans liked to think of themselves as isolationist – creating a pressure that significantly delayed their entry into World War I. In this poem, the speaker (let's call him Robert Frost) agrees to meet with his neighbour to mend the simple piled-stone walls that separate their properties. It's an annual activity, made necessary by the "something" in nature that "doesn't love a wall". The fact is that the wall is unnecessary:

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."

Frost, filled with "spring ... mischief", challenges the aptness of the proverb:

“Why do they make good neighbours? Isn’t it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offence.
 Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
 That wants it down.”

But his neighbour, with two stones in his hands,
 ...like an old-stone savage armed. ...
 ...moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
 He will not go behind his father’s saying,
 And he likes having thought of it so well
 He says again, “Good fences make good neighbours.”

There the poem ends. Where the speaker/poet finally stands on the debate is not entirely certain. But the repeated proverb and the repeated dictum bear further thought. The proverb has been around a long time. Where Frost uses “wall” and “fence” interchangeably, the E. Rogers whose letter of 1640 is cited in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, makes a significant distinction (*Letter in Winthrop Papers* [1944] IV.282):

A good fence helpeth to keepe peace between neighbours; but let vs take heed that we make not a high stone wall, to keepe vs from meeting.

In the decades following December 7, 1941, The United States became all too willing to pull down fences all over the world, and after September 11, 2001, it has at the same time accelerated the pace of putting up fences within its own territory and, if it gets its way, within its neighbour’s. This is not unusual when a nation is persuaded that its security is threatened. During the Communist scare of the late 1940s and 1950s, numbers of

politically insecure Americans came north and enriched Canadian culture, much as did those few German-Jewish emigrants allowed into Canada just before and after World War II.

In England, for a couple of generations after the failed Spanish invasion, the dreaded “intelligencers” or domestic spies are common in London and even get mentioned in the plays. But in nations where domestic espionage is ostensibly aimed at maintaining security in the face of potential incursion, “security” creates systemic insecurity, and enters the texture of a culture, down to its humour. (There is an apparently true story of a drunken East German theatre director who refused to get into a taxi, accusing the driver, who had asked his address, of wanting to know too much.)

Nevertheless, I hope it doesn’t open a can of worms to suggest that the walled demarcation of East Berlin was not without its positive cultural dividends. Similarly, the creation of ghettos in Europe from the middle ages onward had mixed cultural results and demonstrates the ironies of “walling in and walling out”. The ghettos were originally created by a ruling class to humiliate, and reduce the perceived (or purported) threat of, an energetic, ethnically divergent minority. But eventually, particularly in North America, they were maintained and at least partly created by minorities, e.g. immigrants, to achieve cultural security. An historical aside: the original ghetto, in Genoa, and virtually all those that followed in Europe, were Jewish. In impoverished sections of American cities, however, what were first referred to as Negro or black ghettos, eventually became the primary definition of “ghetto”, and now one has to specify “*Jewish ghetto*” to students. Lacking walls but easily identifiable geographically, there was in Toronto of the 1950s its own “golden ghetto”, where lived numerous Jews in comfortable circumstances. But the one area that at all resembled a gated community, Wychwood Park, neither was nor is that sort of a preserve. Neither does it seriously resemble the growing phenomenon of gated communities in American cities, with their private security guards keeping out the thieving *canaille*. That communities of anarchic poverty and communities of highly protected wealth should exist within the same economy need not be a surprise to Marxist observers: the phenomenon is an expected outcome of the capitalist system. But to tie the phenomenon to our present task, I should like to offer you a simple, perhaps childish game, which in

its flailing terminology might put you in mind of the Sumerian prayer quoted earlier in the paper: How viable would you find the following statement if its blanks were filled with the suggested terms:

An economy that includes both gated communities and poverty ghettos is a fundamentally insecure economy.

A society that includes both gated communities and poverty ghettos is a fundamentally insecure society.

A culture that includes both gated communities and poverty ghettos is a fundamentally insecure culture.

Applying Raymond Williams's terminology (for which, as Volker Gransow suggests, a superior alternative terminology has yet to appear), how are we to determine which is the "dominant culture" here, which an "alternative", which an "oppositional"? The problem exists only if we accept the idea that geographical and political contiguity implies a necessary relationship. If, on the other hand, a mutual indifference is in effect, or even a schizoid fragmentation, then a millefiore stream of parallel lines – cadillacs, crack-houses, Mozart, Kraftwerk, Riopelle, Ingres, Shaquille O'Neal, John Polanyi, -- flies across our view for a few years to take up spaces in some future *Handbook to the 21st Century*, where they can be individually looked up. To accept this fragmented picture as the state of present-day cultures the world over can be, in an odd way, reassuring. "Nothing to be done", as Beckett's characters put it. Much more difficult it is to attempt to see them as parts of the totality of human culture, "involved in mankind", and therefore in each other. To achieve this would require a good many neighbours, patiently removing their walls, stone by stone.