

Devices of the Mind

Now, jumping ahead to our own day, I'd like you to think for a moment of the various words we use to designate technological products. You will notice that a number of these words have a curious double aspect: they, or their cognate forms, can refer either to external objects we make, or to certain inner activities of the maker. A "device," for example, can be an objective, invented thing, but it can also be some sort of scheming or contriving of the mind, as when a defendant uses every device he can think of to escape the charges against him. The word "contrivance" shows the same two-sidedness, embracing both mechanical appliances and the carefully devised plans and schemes we concoct in thought. As for "mechanisms" and "machines," we produce them as visible objects out there in the world even as we conceal our own machinations within ourselves. Likewise, an "artifice" is a manufactured device, or else it is trickery, ingenuity, or inventiveness. "Craft" can refer to manual dexterity in making things and to a ship or aircraft, but a "crafty" person is adept at deceiving others.

This odd association between technology and deceit occurs not only in our own language, but even more so in Homer's Greek, where it is much harder to separate the inner and outer meanings, and the deceit often reads like an admired virtue. The Greek *techne*, from which our own word "technology" derives, meant "craft, skill, cunning, art, or device"—all referring without discrimination to what we would call either an objective construction or a subjective capacity or maneuver. *Techne* was what enabled the lame craftsman god, Hephaestus, to trap his wife, Aphrodite, in a promiscuous alliance with warlike Ares. He accomplished the feat by draping over his bed a wondrously forged snare whose invisible bonds were finer than a spider's silken threads. The unsuspecting couple blundered straightway into the trap. As the other gods gathered around the now artless couple so artfully imprisoned, a gale of unquenchable laughter celebrated the guile of Hephaestus. "Lame though he is," they declared, "he has caught Ares by craft [*techne*]." Here

techne refers indistinguishably to the blacksmith's sly trickery and his skillful materialization of the trick at his forge.

Likewise, the Greek *mechane*, the source of our "machine," "mechanism," and "machination," designates with equal ease a machine or engine of war, on the one hand, or a contrivance, trick, or cunning wile, on the other. The celebrated ruse of the Trojan Horse was said to be a *mechane*, and it was admired at least as much for the devious and unexpected turn of mind behind its invention as for the considerable achievement of its physical construction.

The Man of Many Devices

We come back, then, to Odysseus, the trickster par excellence, introduced in the first line of the *Odyssey* as "craftyshifty"—a man of many turnings, or devices. One of his standard epithets is *polumechanos*—"much-contriving, full of devices, ever-ready." It was he, in fact, who conceived the Trojan Horse, one of the earliest and most successfully deceitful engines of war. Listen to how Athena compliments Odysseus:

*Only a master thief, a real con artist,
Could match your tricks—even a god
Might come up short. You wily bastard,
You cunning, elusive, habitual liar!*

(transl. Stanley Lombardo)

These traits, as any psychologist will point out, are closely associated with the birth of the self-conscious individual. The ability to harbor secrets—the discovery and preservation of a private place within oneself where one can concoct schemes, deceive others, contrive plans, invent devices—is an inescapable part of every child's growing up. The child is at first transparent to those around him, with no distinct boundaries. If he is to stand apart from the world as an individual, he must enter a place of his own, a private place from which he can learn to manipulate the world through his own devisings.

Granted, such manipulative powers may be exercised for ill as well as good, and the Greeks sometimes appear to us remarkably casual about the distinction. But, in any case, the gaining of such multivalent power is inseparable from growing up; to give people greater capacity for good is also to give them greater capacity for evil. In what follows, it is the conscious *capacity* that I will speak of as having been necessary for our development, not its employment in a negative or destructive manner.

What I want to suggest is that, to begin with, technology was a prime instrument for the historical birth of the individual self. And the *Odyssey* is almost a kind of technical manual for this birth—for the coming home, the coming to himself, of the individual. When you realize this, you begin to appreciate how the “My name is Nobody” story, which seems so childish and implausible to us, might have entranced Homer’s audiences through one telling after another. You can imagine them wondering at Odysseus’ presence of mind, his self-possession, his ability to wrest for himself a private, inner vantage point, which he could then shift at will in order to conceal his intentions from others—something no one lacking a well-developed ego, or self, can pull off. And they doubtless wondered also at his self-control, as when he refused his immediate warrior’s impulse to respond in kind to the Cyclops’ aggressions—an impulse that would have proven disastrous. Instead he pulled back, stood apart within himself, and devised a trick. In reliving Odysseus’ machinations, the hearers were invited into that place within themselves where they, too, might discover the possibilities of invention and craft. It requires a separate, individual self to calculate a deceit.

The classicist George Dimock has remarked that Homer makes us feel Odysseus’ yearning for home as “a yearning for definition.” The episode with Polyphemus is symbolic of the entire journey. In the dark, womb-like cave, Odysseus is as yet Nobody. Homer intimates childbirth by speaking of Polyphemus “travailing with pains” as his captive is about to escape the cave. Only upon being delivered into freedom, as we

have seen, can Odysseus declare who he is, proclaiming his true name (Dimock 1990, pp. 15, 111). Further, every birth of the new entails a loss—a destruction of the old—and the thrusting of the sharpened beam into the great Cyclopean eye suggests the power of the focused, penetrating individual intellect in overcoming an older, perhaps more innocent and unified vision of the world (Holdrege 2001).

To grow up is to explore a wider world, and Dimock points out that, first and last, Odysseus “got into trouble with Polyphemus because he showed nautical enterprise and the spirit of discovery”—not because of recklessness or impiety. “In Homer’s world, not to sail the sea is finally unthinkable.” Perhaps we could say, at great risk of shallowness: in those days, to set sail was to embark upon the information highway. There were risks, but they were risks essential to human development. Homer certainly does not downplay the risks. Having been warned of the fatally entrancing song of the Sirens, Odysseus plugged his sailors’ ears with wax, but not his own. Instead, he had the others lash him to the ship’s mast, sternly instructing them not to loose him no matter how violent his begging. And so he heard those ravishing voices calling him to destruction. His desire was inflamed, and he pleaded for release, but his men only bound him tighter.

You may wonder what the Sirens offered so irresistibly. It was to celebrate in song the great sufferings and achievements of Odysseus and his followers, and to bestow upon them what we might be tempted to call the “gift of global information.” In the Sirens’ own words:

*Never yet has any man rowed past this isle in his black ship
until he has heard the sweet voice from our lips.
Nay, he has joy of it and goes his way a wiser man.
For we know all the toils that in wide Troy
the Argives and Trojans endured through the will of the gods,
and we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth.*

"We know all things." The rotting bones of those who had heeded this overpowering invitation to universal knowledge lay in heaps upon the shores of the isle of the Sirens. Only the well-calculated balance of Odysseus' *techne*—only the developing self-awareness with which he countered the excessive and deceitful offer—enabled him to survive the temptation. As Dimock observes about Odysseus lashed to the mast:

Could a more powerful example of the resisted impulse be imagined . . . ? Odysseus has chosen to feel the temptation and be thwarted rather than not to feel it at all.

Here we see the perfect balance between the open-hearted embrace of life with all its challenges, and artful resistance to the ambitions of hubris. The temptation of knowledge leads only to those rotting bones unless it is countered by the kind of self-possession that enables us to resist our own impulses. The external gifts of *techne* come, in the end, only through the strengthening of the *techne* of our own consciousness. When you look today at the mesmerized preoccupation with the sweetly sung promises of salvation through digital information, you realize that our own culture honors the Sirens far more than it does the healthy respect for risk, the self-discipline, and the inner cunning of Odysseus, man of many devices.

knowledge
w/o
wisdom

Balance and Separation

If my first point, then, was that technology can serve as midwife to the birth of the individual, the second is that this midwifery requires a well-calculated balance between the challenges we take on and our self-possession, our wide-awake, conscious resourcefulness. This sensible calculation is part of what it means to be grown up, notwithstanding the widespread, if impossibly foolish, notion today that whatever *can* be attempted *ought* to be attempted.

There's a third point here. The Cyclopes, unlike Odysseus, lived in a kind of state of nature, and they spurned all advanced

technologies. Never faring upon the open sea, they refused voyages of discovery. Odysseus describes them this way:

*To the land of the Cyclopes, violent, innocent of laws,
we came; leaving it all to the gods
they put hand to no planting or plowing;
their food grows unsown and uncultivated,
wheat, barley, vines which produce
grapes for their wine; Zeus' rain makes it grow for them.*

....

*For the Cyclopes have no red-cheeked ships,
no craftsmen among them, who could build
ships with their rowing benches, all that is needful
to reach the towns of the rest of the world as is common—
that men cross the sea in their ships to meet one another;
craftsmen would have built them handsome buildings
as well.*

(transl. George Dimock)

If “nature is good to the Cyclopes,” observes Dimock, it is “not because they are virtuous. Rather, the kindness of nature has deprived them of the stimulus to develop human institutions.” To venture out—to separate themselves from the womb of nature—would have brought risk and pain, but it could also have brought self-development. Technology, I would add, is an instrument, a kind of lever, for this necessary detachment of the individual self from a nurturing surround that otherwise can become stifling, as when an infant remains too long in the womb.

My third point, then, is this: technology assists the birth of the individual in part by separating him from the natural world. To begin with, this separation, this loss of paradise, reconstitutes the world as an alien, threatening place, continually encroaching upon the safe habitations fortified by human *techné*.

Reckoning with the Scoundrel

Before considering our own predicament in this historical light, I would like to make one matter fully explicit. To admire Odysseus

for his self-awakening is not to deny that he was, in many ways and by our lights, a scoundrel. On their way home after the fall of Troy, he and his men sacked the city of Ismarus simply because it was there. Likewise, as Helen Luke reminds us, they came to the land of the Cyclopes seeking plunder, so it is hard to blame Polyphemus for responding in the same spirit. The Cyclopes themselves were a pastoral folk who kept peaceably to themselves, and the crude Polyphemus was able to speak quite tenderly to his sheep (Luke 1987, pp. 13–15; but compare Dimock 1990, pp. 110–15).

Nothing requires us to repress our own judgments about Odysseus' behavior. But it is always problematic when such judgments are not tempered by a sense for historical and individual development. None of us would like to be judged solely by what we have been, as opposed to what we are becoming. And all human becoming is marked by certain tragic necessities, partly reflecting the progress of the race to date.

This is clear enough when we look at the developing child. "Blessed are the little children"—profoundly true, for they have a wonderful openness to everything that is noble, beautiful, healing. But children have also been characterized as beastly little devils, casually inflicting horrible pain upon each other. This, too, has its truth. The point is that neither judgment makes a lot of sense when taken in the way we would assess the well-developed character of a fully self-conscious adult. The child is only on the way to becoming an adult self, and much of what we see in his early years is less the expression of the individual to come than it is the raw material—both noble and diabolical—from which the individual must eventually shape himself.

Reversals

During the past several hundred years of scientific and technological revolution, we have indeed been shaping ourselves and "growing up." This is why, if you look at technology and society today only through the lens of my argument so far, you will be

badly misled. After all, nearly three millennia—most of recorded history—lies between Homer's day and our own. Things have changed. What we see, in fact, almost looks like a reversal.

There is, to begin with, the "inversion" of nature and culture that philosopher Albert Borgmann talks about. Early technological man carved out his civilized enclosures as hard-won, vulnerable enclaves, protected places within an enveloping wilderness full of ravening beasts and natural catastrophes. We, by contrast, live within a thoroughly technologized and domesticated landscape where it is the remaining enclaves of wildness that appear painfully delicate and vulnerable (Borgmann 1984, pp. 190 ff.). Today, if we would set bounds to the wild and lawless, it is the ravening beast of technology we must restrain. If nature still threatens us, the threat is that it will finally and disastrously succumb to our aggressions.

A second reversal is closely related to this. You will recall that the *Odyssey* opens with its shipwrecked hero on the isle of Ogygia, where the beautiful goddess, Kalypso, has kept him as her consort for seven years while urging him to marry her. She would have made him a god and given him a good life, free of care. The name "Kalypso" means "the Concealer," and her offer of an endless paradise would in effect have kept Odysseus unborn and nameless, concealed within an immortal cocoon. But he chose instead to pursue the painful path to his own home so as to realize his mortal destiny as a man.

The contrivings and devisings of *techne*, as we have seen, served Odysseus well in his striving toward self-realization and escape from anonymity. But now note the reversal: as Neil Postman has famously elaborated in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) and other works, today it is technology that cocoons us and promises us endless entertainment, distraction, and freedom from cares. There is scarcely a need to elaborate this point. Just watch the advertisements on television for half an hour.

I remarked earlier that when Odysseus set sail on his perilous journey over the high seas, he was, in a sense, embarking