

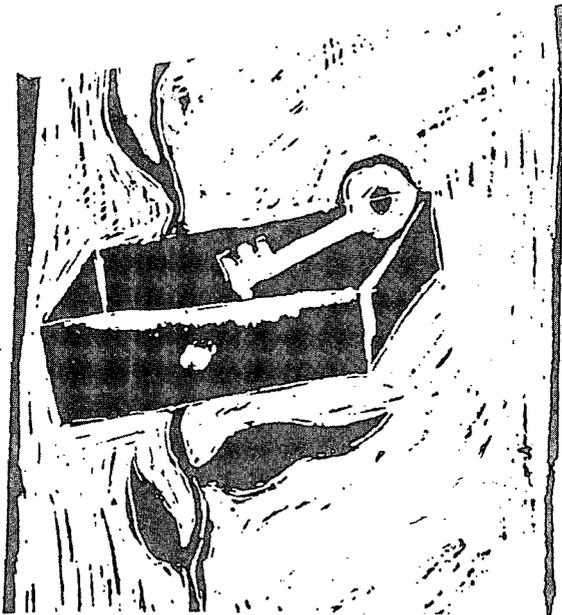
Inventory

by Tom Disch

Crammed ever tighter, stacked ever higher,
all jammed together, the artifacts
Of fifty years agglomerate in cupboards,
closets, cartons, drawers and shelves
Until one final fatal freebie triggers
the avalanche and the levee fails,
The seeds split their pods, the spores
disperse to mushroom everywhere:
Heaps of cast-off clothing climb the backs
of chairs, then shoot out threads
That cling to moldings and lamp poles
which soon are festooned with webs
Of underwear and overalls; stacks of paperbacks
ascend on both sides of the toasters
And form a bridge to the ziggurat of stereo
components where a horde of extras—
White elephants, senile Walkmen, silly
69¢ tshotckes, unsprung windups—
Re-enact Griffith's *Intolerance*; the magazines
become a liquid mass that breaks
Against the pilings of the coffee table; the air
rustles with bills paid to vanished
Department stores, still shimmering like willow
leaves, still insistent as tombstones
On the facts they commemorate, purchases
and purposes else lost to history;
Dishes spill from their secret places, flotsam
on the tide of periodicals, awash
In the wrack of a lifetime's robinsonade:
cans of dry putty, coils
Of clothesline, nests of flowerpots, plastic
jack-o'-lanterns and Easter baskets,
And the gleanings of a dozen shingled beaches—



things of beauty, toys forever,
To release one's grip on any of which
would be to accede to Heraclitus
That nature's a promiscuous flame, one wick
the same to it as another,
No single seashell lovelier than the rest,
all estimations of worth
As arbitrary as the prices Van Gogh got
in his lifetime or gets now in Japan;
Now's the time to call the Savanarola
Extermination Service, but no, too late,
Already that memo is a fossil in the rich
deposits of the desk, lost among pencils
And lapsed warranties; already the third telephone,
ringing with terror, has crawled beneath
The bed to enlist in its limbo of dustballs
and old shoes, some scarcely worn,
While within the tiered suitcases atop the closet
rumors of annihilation spread:
Trousers that have waited years for waists
to match their waistlines, T-shirts
That have told the same joke too many times,
bold prints that want their former
Confidence—all foresee the bonfires
of their vanity; so must a fetus
Feel at the first whisper of the word Abort
or dinosaurs as the comet appears
Announcing their extinction, inexorable
and all unmerited;—or as the texts
That Heraclitus in his heyday wrote
and thought immortal, which were
Preserved in Alexandria's great library
a little while and then incinerated.



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Beyond Hubris

by Juliana Geran Pilon

Modernity on Endless Trial

by Leszek Kolakowski

Chicago and London:

The University of Chicago Press;
304 pp., \$24.95

With disarming and hardly disingenuous modesty, Polish humanist Leszek Kolakowski describes his new anthology, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, as a loose collection of “semi-philosophical sermons” written over the course of a decade or so, purporting to offer no original philosophy. He adds, as an apparent afterthought, that he views them as conscious, deliberate appeals for “moderation in consistency”—an idea for which he, a very much former Marxist, confesses a long-standing fascination. In fact, these intellectual cameos are sophisticated attempts to struggle with some of the most difficult and interesting challenges to our culture; their style is so elegant and refreshingly clear as to delight even the reader who on occasion may take exception to some of the author’s conclusions.

The book is divided into four parts: modernity, barbarity, and intellectuals; the dilemmas of the Christian legacy; liberals, revolutionaries, and utopians; and scientific theories. In more or less logical order, these categories embrace the question of what modernity is (or is not), together with two related epistemological-sociological questions: should modernity be placed in the dock at all, and if so, who is qualified to judge it? (Certainly not the self-righteous but usually deeply flawed intellectuals, whom the equally contemptuous Solzhenitsyn has called “the smatterers.”) Kolakowski further explores the contribution of religion and the role of faith; the shortcomings of utopias, revolutions, and politics generally; and finally he offers a transcendental—and quixotic—critique of

all ideology, including the self-righteously “scientific” kind.

To begin with, he lays to rest the idea that “modernity” is something to be for or against insofar as the development of technology and economic rationality are concerned. Kolakowski’s chief fear is that, in the name of modernity and a mystical sense of “progress,” we shall witness the disappearance of what he calls “taboos,” defined by him as “barriers erected by instinct and not by conscious planning,” whose function is nothing less than the preservation of social life. “Various traditional human bonds which make communal life possible, and without which our existence would be regulated only by greed and fear, are not likely to survive without a taboo system,” Kolakowski argues; on this pragmatic ground, he is prepared to defend them.

On the one hand, Kolakowski unequivocally attacks reason as a moral guide, since what he takes to be “the normal sense of ‘rationality’” allows for—indeed invites—nominalist relativism. Thus he bluntly and clearly asserts that “there are no more rational grounds for respecting human life and human personal rights than there are, say, for forbidding the consumption of shrimp among Jews.” Yet this proposition flies blatantly in the face of the natural rights theory of Immanuel Kant, whom Kolakowski in another essay correctly and emphatically praises.

The essay “Why Do We Need Kant?” is in fact a particularly astute rendering of the German philosopher’s rather complex rationalist ethics. Kolakowski appreciates that the classical doctrine of natural rights asserts that each human being is by his nature unequivocally entitled to fundamental rights and that people are ends in themselves—ideas that, contrary to other, less sophisticated naturalist theories, emphatically do not belong to an empirical concept. Kolakowski regards as essential the appreciation that the

ethical understanding of humanity derives legitimately from neither anthropological nor historical research, but is rather substantiated morally. And Kant, of course, derived that moral ground from practical reason.

On this issue, Kolakowski is tentative. While noting that moral substantiation *can* be obtained through postulating absolutely autonomous principles of practical reason, and hence might not have to rely on religious tradition, he avoids taking a stand on the matter by noting simply that its resolution is “another question.” One senses that Kolakowski has great sympathy with Kant’s rational moral justification on a purely intellectual—which is to say, rational—level. Yet Kolakowski seems to lean away from it in the end, for the Dostoyevskian reason that human beings are not equal to this kind of rationality, and that without God, to echo the great novelist, “anything is possible.”

Kolakowski fears the human penchant for invoking “rationality” to dismiss age-old traditions—a tendency to which intellectuals especially are prone—and invoke certainty and ideology in the service of grand illusions whose result is terror and destruction. Having witnessed the tragedy of his own country, the monstrosity of Nazism followed by the horrors of communism, Kolakowski will forever appreciate the danger of inhumanity in the name of deceptively lofty but in fact barbarous principles. The result, in his case, is a skepticism that has turned dogmatism into its opposite: an apology for balance, for tradition, for pluralism at all costs—even at the cost of abjuring philosophy. Kolakowski appears to have been stunned into forgiveness and tolerance.

Sympathetic to the forces of novelty and, for lack of a better term, “modernity,” Kolakowski deplors the “spirit of technology” and believes that Christianity alone has the power to shield man from the evils of despair on the one hand and *hubris* on the other.