



Introduction

Ariadne's Clew¹

Conversations in a Garden

The following is a meditation on wisdom, a meditation derived from conversations in a garden.

For my pleasure and relaxation I had transformed a nondescript area into a garden in back of a little house in Belgium. Eventually it became a place for meetings and conversation, although a garden, we should always remember, is never finished. It is a perpetual beginning. There should be a sign at the entrance: "Work in Progress"!

These visits and meetings convinced me that a garden has strange psychological powers. Stressed individuals become progressively calmer as they advance into a garden. The further they penetrate it and discover its different aspects, often slowly and with a contemplative pace, the more their demeanor changes. They drop their armor of competition to lay bare their spirits and to let out their deepest sentiments.

¹ The thread given to Theseus by Ariadne which made it possible for him to find his way out of the labyrinth.

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Depending on their ability to abandon their competitive spirit (a difficult task, if it is one) they evidently become wholly transformed. It is as if they had passed from Hell into Paradise.

Everything becomes interesting and spontaneous. One can finally relate and discuss in a spirit of mutual respect.

This led me to inquire into a very interesting phenomenon: the somewhat sudden transformation of one who has entered the gate of a garden. The question is: what changes?

Discarded Books

I follow the previous observation with a strange story about the interweaving of destinies. With interest, I have wondered how one comes to choose one novel rather than another in a bookstore.

What leads us there? Is it a form of destiny or simply chance that makes us choose on that particular day, for example, the latest novel of Iris Murdoch?

One day I went off to find a book on parsonage gardens. It happened that someone told me, with a tone of admiration, "Your garden strangely resembles that of a parsonage"! This remark intrigued me—even disturbed me. I had counted on a certain originality, a certain coherence of the whole and here they were calling it a parsonage!

This surprised me even more since I had attempted to create a garden as you would find in England, not a garden in the French style where everything bends to an overall symmetry, where each element refers to the other; but a garden where the order is subjugated to the quality of the whole: a visible order, but not too much. You sense its presence, in effect, an innate, real order, disappearing under the presence of various and different flowers, a harmony you feel rather than see.

Having gone out, then, to get a book, I passed in front of a bookshop. Attempting to enter, I noticed a person appear out of nowhere, quickly and rather disdainfully, discarding a box of books on the sidewalk. The box was labeled "Free." From all indications the owner had decided that they had no market value. I hastened over to the box. Looking inside, I found, among other titles, *Réflexions sur l'art actuel* by Jean Onimus, *Le Phénomène humain* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, as well as *Variété* by Paul Valéry. I took the books and returned home and made a first examination as soon as I arrived.

It is always pleasant to peruse books that seem to fall from the sky. You could say that the pleasure is doubled and enduring when the books are out of style, dirty, and heavily annotated by different readers! In brief, they have lived. The book by Jean Onimus appeared very interesting and helped me in my reflections on destiny and beauty in our lives. The one by Teilhard de Chardin, completely

outmoded, contained passages which I found truly remarkable. That of Valery was somewhat shocking.

It is possible that destiny had led me (blindly?) that day to find these "discarded books," that it had been the expression of a fundamental power difficult to describe other than as intuition. It is not difficult to calculate the probabilities of finding these books by chance. Yet it is difficult to admit that our lives depend on small events which appear to be nothing at all, a little like the beating of a butterfly's wings.

So here, then, is the result of all those conversational interweavings and past readings. They are often imprinted with feelings, understandings, exclamations, and long silences. But that is what a conversation is and also what a reading is. In fact, the beauty of a conversation is not necessarily contained in its natural logic. It seems to me, rather, proportionate to the interest you have in the persons involved, that is, it is relative to the view you have of the others. Certainly a written text cannot duplicate the emotions or the subtle details that render so much pleasure. The text bears the linear logic which we give the experience *a posteriori*; it is a fragment of that reconstituted event, the structured report of an inquiry transformed into an experience; in this case, of two events: one of the many meetings I held in my garden that focused on an unforeseen discussion of friendship, and the unexpected discovery of a box of books considered worthless by society because they were out of fashion. Is it possible to give these rejected books new life as the gardener does with seeds or the composted waste from the previous year?

About the Clew

"Hell is other people," writes Jean-Paul Sartre in *No Exit* (1989, 47), But often Hell is nothing but oneself. Hell begins with the programming of the desire to live. Others tell us what to do, what to say, what to think. This is the problem posed by collective thought, although we are certainly and primarily responsible for this state of affairs. In many instances, we set up the problematic situations. As Paul Watzlawick emphasizes in his book, *The Situation Is Hopeless, But Not Serious*, our perceptions of reality trick us. We ourselves program reality daily and make it gloomy. We have here a double mixture that is rather harmful: we tell stories to others about ourselves and we hope that they will like the stories and that they will like us! We set up a fiction, a sort of virtual reality. Tony Duvert writes (1972, 3-4):

Daily conversation demonstrates the basic value of all anecdote, of the use we make of it and the suppression of the representative, narrative, and formative word by the words' producer. To speak of ourselves and of others to someone, that is, to recount the real, is the habitual and expected method of exchange. From these little anecdotal bubbles, these

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micro-stories, stilted and regimented like a court procedure, arises through a conversation a social edifice which has as its foundation the myth of the transparent world (it obeys the simple alternative of true or false) and has for its end the drama of recognition. By these anecdotes we identify ourselves and seek to recognize the other person. We seek mutual self-validation and the expression of this accord between the two lies in the duplication of the responses. Innately and almost like an animal ritual, the discourse of identification is based on the narration of the self and the world in which the constant fragility of the real is destroyed by mutual agreement. It becomes the belief in a universal fiction, that of Man, of Society, of Language, and of Self, which are linked together in a narrative.

To invent life is to begin anew each morning. Moreover, it is a continual process rather than a final state that must be discovered as time unfolds. This process is the mastery of one's own destiny and it has here a particular meaning; that is, it is synonymous with the respect of all that exists. As we will see in the course of this text, this mastery is profoundly ecological, by which I mean that the key to happiness and wisdom is the respect of one's space or realm: that of oneself, that of the other and the others, that of nature, and that of the environment. At the same time, wisdom lies at the base of ethics, by which I mean the respect of habitat. Wisdom consists, then, in knowing how to inhabit respectfully one's individual, social, and environmental space. Proceeding from this lies a series of principles grouped around the notions of equilibrium and harmony. In other words, it is the listening to the voice of our own hearts, the voice of others and the voice of nature.

This, then, is the clew of Ariadne in this book.² We have the choice in life to create our own happiness or our own misery. It all depends on us. Should we *succeed* in life, or should we *live life well*? Such is the overriding question of our thread of reflections on daily life in this book.

It is a question of an ecological wisdom in the larger sense of the word. To know how to live is also to respect oneself, to respect others, and to respect nature. In the end, it is nothing else than living happily from day to day. Truly the human being cannot escape the fatality of the mundane and the daily routine unless one forges one's own destiny according to the principles of a new art of living. These principles orient his interactions and constitute an art of life founded simply on the notion of respect. It is preferable to live well and to invent a daily

² Ariadne had married Dionysius! She had given to Theseus, who had arrived at Crete to battle the Minotaur, a ball of thread to unravel in the labyrinth so that he could find his way out after destroying the monster. This ends in marriage. Such is the pretty side of the legend!

life encompassing these three objectives: goodness, beauty, and harmony in relations.

Is this really new? Not at all, even if the problems of life are complex. There is a strange similarity among the ethical philosophies of Western antiquity, the traditional Chinese philosophies of wisdom, and the proposals contained in these subsequent pages. From very early in history, humans have attempted to reconcile wisdom, happiness, and ethics to ideas of aesthetics. Beauty is not incompatible with happiness, indeed to the contrary. These, then, are the major aspects of daily action.

Preliminarily, however, we must consider certain nuances of the following terms:

- *Daily Life*: the true life which passes without perception, that which one looks at without seeing it.
- *Wisdom*: the capacity to live in the present happily; it means for daily life the Mastery over our destinies; it refers thus to the process of learning life in all its goodness and beauty and implies, on the one hand, the rejection of all that is conventionally imposed and the desire for a reinvention of the world which would be of our own dimensions and, on the other hand, the respect of all that exists.
- *The Sage*: the person who can combine pleasure, beauty, and happiness in thought and actions.
- *Morals*: the socially articulated set of rules of conduct.
- *Ethics*: the personal quest for goodness in our way of living with ourselves, with people, and with nature.
- *Dilemma*: the description of a situation which contains two possibilities of action and which hides a third possibility—probably more interesting!
- *Beauty*: the fusion of happiness with life.

Indeed, it is possible to create our own happiness. What we need to know is how to attain it. In effect, happiness becomes possible when we learn how to transform what is inevitable in life, what we would call universal fatality, into sources of positive energy, that is, reflective, emotive, social, and ecological energies. Through these transformations, we then attain the wisdom for daily life, a form of mastery over our destinies. In other words, we pass from the state of actors, subjected to the inevitable, to that of authors of our own lives. We must also come to understand that the true source of happiness cannot be found anywhere else than through such a path.

The personal mastery of our destinies opposes us to the condition of universal and elusive fatality. We enter into and depart from this world under cir-

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circumstances that we do not control. In a sense, life is foreign to us and unknown, and it often continues to be so. Often we are estranged from our own hearts and bodies, from our environment, and from our society. But this quality of strangeness originates from ourselves and no one else! Wisdom begins with the assumption of consciousness and by the examination of the conditions whereby we become alienated from life when we abandon its direction to others.

The first chapter, "The Tea Garden," poses the practical problem of the transition from the competitive life built on multiple strategies to a vision of authentic wisdom in which it is no longer a question of tampering with reality. The dilemma initially articulated is the following: should we continually rely on the familiar and acquired ways of knowing or should we periodically dismiss them as too hackneyed? We suggest in this chapter a method of transition, a passage toward another system of values, specifically, beauty, happiness, harmony, and simplicity. And so, the reflection on the compositions of a Chinese tea garden, of a Japanese Zen garden, and the oriental concepts of wisdom can help us understand this transitional movement.

The second chapter, "The Strange Individual," deals with the illusions of reality concerning the character or *persona* that we invent everyday. Its point of departure includes the following dilemma: should we live for others in opposition to ourselves or should we live for ourselves in opposition to others? This chapter explores the various life scenarios by which we create our personalities and strive to be the best. We seek desperately a victory that ultimately risks being illusory. In the end, we find ourselves alone, having lived our life by proxy.

The third chapter, "An Absurd Situation," reflects on the relationship between hope and happiness. It treats a third dilemma: Must we calmly accept the absurdity of life, or can we stake out a better life here or elsewhere? Happiness and the constant hope for something better seem to be strange bedfellows! How, then, do we solve this fundamental problem?

The fourth chapter, "The Heart of the Subject," launches a fourth dilemma: should we continually manifest an openness of mind or should we hold firmly to our convictions? This chapter concerns the construction of the individual within day-to-day wisdom, that is, in the knowledge of oneself associated with sincerity and truth.

The fifth chapter, "The Actor and the Double," treats the transition from self-knowledge to action, which arises from a reflection on a fifth dilemma: should we take part in history or should we limit ourselves to being the authors of our own lives? In effect, self-knowledge should result in something concrete, that is, in self-creation. We derive our beauty from our research of sincerity and self-respect. The sage strives for a grandeur of sentiment and a greatness of soul which endows a certain beauty, and this beauty becomes the fundamental characteristic of wisdom in everyday life.

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The sixth chapter, "Yours Truly, Your Friend," deals with an important dilemma concerning ethics and the concept of wisdom: must we choose between egoism and altruism? Are humans fundamentally egoists? If so, we would delude ourselves by choosing altruism. We will attempt to show that there exists a third way: friendship. Wisdom should order human relations so that sympathy, friendship, and sharing become integral parts of those relations. Sympathetic reasoning should replace strategic reasoning, and self-development will necessarily proceed from it by the sharing of common cause, or, at least, by an empathy and an openness to the desires and hopes of others.

The seventh chapter, "Investing Nowhere Else," constitutes a conclusion. It consists of a final reflection on the relationship of wisdom to ethical conduct as well as the daily and transitory character of this way of life. It is the recollection of the major theme of this book: the replacement of a competitive, contriving vision of life with a new wisdom for daily life. In other words, wisdom is the process of learning life in all its goodness and beauty.