

On Periodic Futility

According to Xenophanes, eclipses occur by extinction of the sun and the sun is born anew at its risings.

Aet. ii. 4; Dox. 332r

There is no intellectual effort which is not ultimately futile.

Jorge Luis Borges

I am writing this letter to you, people of the Blue World, for I know how much you cherish being envied by others. You love your belief in your own uniqueness. You indulge in your collective feeling of supremacy, in which you drown your personal failures. You worship your pretentious individualism, which you celebrate in masses like a herd of sheep. I hope this letter will be to your delight.

At the outset, please, allow me to briefly introduce myself. I was born as a member of the generation, which was to be called the Golden. In our world, this name is periodically given to the rare generations, which have the privilege of experiencing Spring during their youth. These are the only generations, which can take advantage of Spring and make an attempt to change our world.

I know that in your world, experiencing Spring is an opportunity granted to every generation. Each of your generations shares the proud belief that it can accomplish something

great – something of historical or even transcendental relevance. In our world, everyone knows that Spring arrives only once in several generations.

Together with other members of my generation, I was brought up to believe that I am somehow special. The generations of our parents and grandparents taught us to be strong and to believe in ourselves, so that we do not miss the rare opportunity to change our world. Maybe it is due to this upbringing that I feel I can understand you – people of the Blue World.

Our parents and teachers resented the fact that they would experience Spring in the weaker part of their lives. They knew their role would be to watch our deeds without having a part in them. Nonetheless, they never articulated this resentment. Maybe they were even proud that they could at least indirectly – through our education – have an impact on our Spring and thus shape the world of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

I studied poetry and rhetoric, just like all my companions (and the members of all Golden Generations before us and Golden Generations yet to come). We knew that in the days to come, the most important skill for our labors would be to move and to inspire the hearts of men.

As expected, Spring gradually started arriving during the last years of our studies. Its first breeze accompanied us when we translated Cicero's speeches and recited Sophocles' verses. During the very last year of our studies, we lived in a state of restlessness and expectation.

I can still recall the day when Spring finally set in. It was a few weeks before the day scheduled for our final exams. We were all sitting in a large lecture hall in the university building and we were listening to a lecture on Greek tragedy. Suddenly, eight men sitting in the first row

rose from their seats and bade us to step outside. We all walked out of the building and plunged into our Spring.

Although you may expect a detailed description of what followed, I do not consider it worthwhile to retell our Spring to you – people of the Blue World. Given your belief that you live in an almost permanent state of Spring, I think you would hardly understand. Nor will I try to take account of all the great deeds we achieved during that Spring. I want to talk about what followed.

Soon enough, Spring was over and we fell back into commonness. Again, we were standing in front of the university building, this time cloaked in dark gray overcoats. I do not recall the details of the long discussion we had in the lecture hall. I can only recall the picture of the eight men – those that stood up and bade us outside during the beginning – sitting in front of the chalkboard. They spoke for a long time and recapitulated in much detail all the years of our preparation and the great achievements of our Spring. But the longer they spoke, the more the audience became unquiet and started interrupting them. The meeting ended in a clamor of words and accusations and the word futility could be heard from all sides. In a few hours we were all standing in front of the university building for one more time and after we departed, we never met again.

My memories of the few years that followed the end of Spring seem to be shrouded in oblivion. I never found out what most of my companions were doing and I can only recall that our entire world experienced a stage of stillness.

A few years later, the generation of our children claimed the stage. Children, who have seen Spring and had its glance in their eyes, but have already grown up in a world of lengthening shadows.

Members of the Shadow Generation – as they were called – studied history. Just like all the members of all Shadow Generations in the past and of all Shadow Generations yet to come. First, because they wanted to take account of the great deeds of their parents. Deeds, which they saw as children, but which they were too young to take part in. However, as time moved on, younger members of this generation moved away from the desire to chronicle our deeds and they felt an urge to understand them. They wished to comprehend why we, their beloved parents, were not able to do something, which they believe they would have achieved, if given the chance. Gradually, the glance of Spring in their eyes turned to disdain and sometimes even hatred. Hatred for us, their parents, pathetic weaklings who failed to use the rare opportunity they were granted.

With pride, I have to note that my son became an intellectual leader of his generation. With pride but also with profound bitterness. As I am writing this letter, my eyes are striding towards his famous book *Vanitas Periodica – On Periodic Futility* lying on my desk. Few people can measure the depth of my bitterness when reading my son's lines about the futility of my generation, about my own futility.

The book starts with a description of our Spring. In this part, it is a rather average historical chronicle. What became famous is the second part of the book, which is more philosophical. In this part of the book, my son coined the term *periodic futility*.

To appreciate this concept, you have to understand that in the writings of our philosophers, *futility* is a term often used to describe a teleological paradox. Our philosophy is traditionally based on the notion that each thing carries within itself its own end or purpose – that for the sake of which such thing exists. This purpose or end is the force that brings the thing into motion. According to our philosophers, a thing without a purpose is a thing without motion. Things without motion do not interact with other things and hence, they do not exist. In other words, a thing without a purpose does not have ontological existence.

This end or purpose is not to be mistaken with causality. The motion of a thing does not have to precede its purpose in time. However, each thing in motion must have its logical purpose for the sake of which it moves, thereby interacts with other things and thereby ultimately exists.

According to this concept a futile thing cannot exhibit motion and ultimately does not even have existence. Hence, for our philosophers, speaking of futility is a logical paradox.

The way my son defined futility was not as an attribute of any other thing or as a force, but rather as a thing in itself. Periodic futility is then defined as a thing that has its own ontological existence and its own motion despite not having any external purpose for the sake of which it exists. So as to reconcile this paradox with the basics of our philosophy, my son added that periodic futility has an end in itself. You could say it exists and is in periodic motion only for the sake of existing and being in periodic motion.

Clearly, the previous statement is a pure tautology devised only to overcome the paradox and to make the concept of periodic futility compatible with a broader philosophical framework. The crucial point, however, is not the tautology, but the introduction of a moving thing having its own existence without having any purpose outside itself.

Members of my generation (including myself) were always rather skilled in creating an appearance than in analyzing the underlying substance. We were trained to move the hearts of people, not to convince their minds. Therefore, my philosophical understanding does not suffice to grasp all the implications of my son's work, which reinterpreted a teleological paradox as a thing with its own ontological existence. I do not comprehend this philosophical concept in its entirety. But I do understand how a man feels, after his son calls him, all his deeds and all the deeds of his generation futile. And I know how a human being feels after being told that its world is driven by the force of periodic futility.

Now, you may ask why I started to write this letter. I do not have an answer to this. I know this letter is futile, because similar letters have already been written infinite times by disillusioned members of Golden Generations in the past and such letters will be written infinite times by members of Golden Generations yet to come. Those letters – just as all other deeds of all Golden Generations – have always been and always will be futile. I have already had the chance to break the circle of futility, which is more than most human beings in our world can ever hope for. I know I can not reclaim this opportunity by means of this letter.

Maybe these lines are a perverse attempt to humiliate myself in front of you – people of the hated Blue World. To humiliate myself by admitting that I envy you. I envy you for your priests, who show you the end. I envy you for your philosophers, who explain to you your purpose. I envy you for your poets, who convince you of your own heroism. I envy you for your sons, who admire your deeds and do not call them futile. And most of all, I envy you for your historians, who disguise your own periodic futility under the pages of their superficial chronicles.

* END *