

## CHAPTER VII

### STEREOTYPES AS DEFENSE

THERE is another reason, besides economy of effort, why we so often hold to our stereotypes when we might pursue a more disinterested vision. The systems of stereotypes may be the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society.

They are an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around. There we find the charm of the familiar, the normal, the dependable; its grooves and shapes are where we are accustomed to find them. And though we have abandoned much that might have tempted us before we creased ourselves into that mould, once we are firmly in, it fits as snugly as an old shoe.

No wonder, then, that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe. It is an attack upon the foundations of *our* universe, and, where big things are at stake, we do not readily admit that there is any distinction between our universe and the universe. A world which turns out to be one in which those we honor are unworthy, and those we despise are noble, is nerve-racking. There is anarchy if our order of precedence is not the only possible one. For if the meek should indeed inherit the earth, if the first should be last, if those who are without sin alone may cast a stone, if to Caesar you render only the things that are Caesar's, then the foundations of self-respect would be shaken for those who have arranged their lives as if these maxims were not true. A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy.

When, for example, in the fourth century B. C., Aristotle wrote his defense of slavery in the face of increasing skepticism,<sup>1</sup> the Athenian slaves were in great part indistinguishable from free citizens. Mr. Zimmern quotes an amusing passage from the Old Oligarch explaining the good treatment of the slaves. "Suppose it were legal for a slave to be beaten by a citizen, it would frequently happen that an Athenian might be mistaken for a slave or an alien and receive a beating;--since the Athenian people is not better clothed than the slave or alien, nor in personal appearance is there any superiority." This absence of distinction would naturally tend to dissolve the institution. If free men and slaves looked alike, what basis was there for treating them so differently? It was this confusion which Aristotle set himself to clear away in the first book of his *Politics*. With unerring instinct he understood that to justify slavery he must teach the Greeks a way of *seeing* their slaves that comported with the continuance of slavery.

So, said Aristotle, there are beings who are slaves by nature.<sup>2</sup> "He then is by

nature formed a slave, who is fitted to become the chattel of another person, *and on that account is so.*" All this really says is that whoever happens to be a slave is by nature intended to be one. Logically the statement is worthless, but in fact it is not a proposition at all, and logic has nothing to do with it. It is a stereotype, or rather it is part of a stereotype. The rest follows almost immediately. After asserting that slaves perceive reason, but are not endowed with the use of it, Aristotle insists that "it is the intention of nature to make the bodies of slaves and free men different from each other, that the one should be robust for their necessary purposes, but the other erect; useless indeed for such servile labours, but fit for civil life... It is clear then that some men are free by nature, and others are slaves. ..."

If we ask ourselves what is the matter with Aristotle's argument, we find that he has begun by erecting a great barrier between himself and the facts. When he had said that those who are slaves are by nature intended to be slaves, he at one stroke excluded the fatal question whether those particular men who happened to be slaves were the particular men intended by nature to be slaves. For that question would have tainted each case of slavery with doubt. And since the fact of being a slave was not evidence that a man was destined to be one, no certain test would have remained. Aristotle, therefore, excluded entirely that destructive doubt. Those who are slaves are intended to be slaves. Each slave holder was to look upon his chattels as natural slaves. When his eye had been trained to see them that way, he was to note as confirmation of their servile character the fact that they performed servile work, that they were competent to do servile work, and that they had the muscles to do servile work.

This is the perfect stereotype. Its hallmark is that it precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception, imposes a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reach the intelligence. The stereotype is like the lavender window-panes on Beacon Street, like the door-keeper at a costume ball who judges whether the guest has an appropriate masquerade. There is nothing so obdurate to education or to criticism as the stereotype. It stamps itself upon the evidence in the very act of securing the evidence. That is why the accounts of returning travellers are often an interesting tale of what the traveller carried abroad with him on his trip. If he carried chiefly his appetite, a zeal for tiled bathrooms, a conviction that the Pullman car is the acme of human comfort, and a belief that it is proper to tip waiters, taxicab drivers, and barbers, but under no circumstances station agents and ushers, then his Odyssey will be replete with good meals and bad meals, bathing adventures, compartment-train escapades, and voracious demands for money. Or if he is a more serious soul he may while on tour have found himself at celebrated spots. Having touched base, and cast one furtive glance at the monument, he buried his head in Baedeker, read every word through, and moved on to the next celebrated spot; and thus returned with a compact and orderly impression of Europe, rated one star, or two.

In some measure, stimuli from the outside, especially when they are printed or spoken words, evoke some part of a system of stereotypes, so that the actual sensation and the preconception occupy consciousness at the same time. The two are blended, much as if we looked at red through blue glasses and saw green. If what we are looking at corresponds successfully with what we anticipated, the stereotype is reinforced for the future, as it is in a man who knows in advance that the Japanese are cunning and has the bad luck to run across two dishonest Japanese.

If the experience contradicts the stereotype, one of two things happens. If the man is no longer plastic, or if some powerful interest makes it highly inconvenient to rearrange his stereotypes, he pooh-poohs the contradiction as

an exception that proves the rule, discredits the witness, finds a flaw somewhere, and manages to forget it. But if he is still curious and open-minded, the novelty is taken into the picture, and allowed to modify it. Sometimes, if the incident is striking enough, and if he has felt a general discomfort with his established scheme, he may be shaken to such an extent as to distrust all accepted ways of looking at life, and to expect that normally a thing will not be what it is generally supposed to be. In the extreme case, especially if he is literary, he may develop a passion for inverting the moral canon by making Judas, Benedict Arnold, or Caesar Borgia the hero of his tale.

The role played by the stereotype can be seen in the German tales about Belgian snipers. Those tales curiously enough were first refuted by an organization of German Catholic priests known as Pax.<sup>3</sup> The existence of atrocity stories is itself not remarkable, nor that the German people gladly believed them. But it is remarkable that a great conservative body of patriotic Germans should have set out as early as August 16, 1914, to contradict a collection of slanders on the enemy, even though such slanders were of the utmost value in soothing the troubled conscience of their fellow countrymen. Why should the Jesuit order in particular have set out to destroy a fiction so important to the fighting morale of Germany?

I quote from M. van Langenhove's account:

"Hardly had the German armies entered Belgium when strange rumors began to circulate. They spread from place to place, they were reproduced by the press, and they soon permeated the whole of Germany. It was said that the Belgian people, *instigated by the clergy*, had intervened perfidiously in the hostilities; had attacked by surprise isolated detachments; had indicated to the enemy the positions occupied by the troops; that old men, and even children, had been guilty of horrible atrocities upon wounded and defenseless German soldiers, tearing out their eyes and cutting off fingers, nose or ears; *that the priests from their pulpits had exhorted the people to commit these crimes, promising them as a reward the kingdom of heaven, and had even taken the lead in this barbarity.*

"Public credulity accepted these stories. The highest powers in the state welcomed them without hesitation and endorsed them with their authority...

"In this way public opinion in Germany was disturbed and a lively indignation manifested itself, *directed especially against the priests* who were held responsible for the barbarities attributed to the Belgians... By a natural diversion *the anger* to which they were a prey *was directed* by the Germans *against the Catholic clergy generally*. Protestants allowed the old religious hatred to be relighted in their minds and delivered themselves to attacks against Catholics. A new *Kulturkampf* was let loose.

"The Catholics did not delay in taking action against this hostile attitude." (Italics mine)<sup>4</sup>

There may have been some sniping. It would be extraordinary if every angry Belgian had rushed to the library, opened a manual of international law, and had informed himself whether he had a right to take potshot at the infernal nuisance tramping through his streets. It would be no less extraordinary if an army that had never been under fire, did not regard every bullet that came its way as unauthorized, because it was inconvenient, and indeed as somehow a violation of the rules of the *Kriegspiel*, which then constituted its only experience of war. One can imagine the more sensitive bent on convincing

themselves that the people to whom they were doing such terrible things must be terrible people. And so the legend may have been spun until it reached the censors and propagandists, who, whether they believed it or not, saw its value, and let it loose on the German civilians. They too were not altogether sorry to find that the people they were outraging were sub-human. And, above all, since the legend came from their heroes, they were not only entitled to believe it, they were unpatriotic if they did not.

But where so much is left to the imagination because the scene of action is lost in the fog of war, there is no check and no control. The legend of the ferocious Belgian priests soon tapped an old hatred. For in the minds of most patriotic protestant Germans, especially of the upper classes, the picture of Bismarck's victories included a long quarrel with the Roman Catholics. By a process of association, Belgian priests became priests, and hatred of Belgians a vent for all their hatreds. These German protestants did what some Americans did when under the stress of war they created a compound object of hatred out of the enemy abroad and all their opponents at home. Against this synthetic enemy, the Hun in Germany and the Hun within the Gate, they launched all the animosity that was in them.

The Catholic resistance to the atrocity tales was, of course, defensive. It was aimed at those particular fictions which aroused animosity against all Catholics, rather than against Belgian Catholics alone. The *Informations Pax*, says M. van Langenhove, had only an ecclesiastical bearing and "confined their attention almost exclusively to the reprehensible acts attributed to the priests." And yet one cannot help wondering a little about what was set in motion in the minds of German Catholics by this revelation of what Bismarck's empire meant in relation to them; and also whether there was any obscure connection between that knowledge and the fact that the prominent German politician who was willing in the armistice to sign the death warrant of the empire was Erzberger,<sup>5</sup> the leader of the Catholic Centre Party.

1. Zimmern: *Greek Commonwealth*. See his footnote, p. 383.
2. *Politics*, Bk. 1, Ch. 5.
3. Fernand van Langenhove, *The Growth of a Legend*. The author is a Belgian sociologist.
4. *Op. cit.*, pp. 5-7.
5. Since this was written, Erzberger has been assassinated.

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