

Guarding our Senses in the Age of the Show:  
Against the Burning Out of Hearts  
by David Cayley

*I live with the refusal not only to say certain things but also to use certain words or to permit certain feelings to creep into my heart...Reflection on certain things we take for granted is, in my opinion, acceptance of self-destruction, of burning out your heart.*

*Ivan Illich<sup>1</sup>*

At the beginning of 1972, I became friends with a woman who worked part-time taking tickets at Toronto's now demolished Towne Cinema, which was then showing one of that year's most talked about films, *A Clockwork Orange*. One day she told me a story which had a big influence on me. During a matinee screening of the film, a spectator in the balcony had become violently disturbed and appeared to be undergoing some sort of nervous breakdown. Emergency services were called, and the man was taken away. The film resumed, but, before it was over, my friend observed a steady stream of the remaining audience members also leaving the cinema. She surmised that the man's outburst had shifted their perspective on what they were watching, and why they were watching it, and sapped their desire to continue.

*A Clockwork Orange* is a dystopia in which a charismatic delinquent, inspired by Beethoven, whose music is prominent in the soundtrack, leads a gang of self-styled "droogs" who randomly commit graphically depicted rapes, beatings and other acts of what they call "ultra-violence." Along with contemporary films like Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* and Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*, it pioneered a cinematic style in which the explicit and unsparing portrayal

1 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, House of Anansi, 1992, p. 127

of violence justified itself as both a salutary honesty and as declaration of artistic freedom: what can be shown must be shown. The film was widely praised for its moral and aesthetic daring. Some demurred – Pauline Kael in her *New Yorker* review called it “pornographic” – but Vincent Canby, *The New York Times* critic was more representative in writing, after the film had won *The New York Film Critics’ Award*, that it was “a brilliant...work” and, though also “dangerous,” only “dangerous in a way that brilliant things sometimes are.”<sup>2</sup> Discussion continued as to whether the movie was an edifying depiction of contemporary nihilism, as well as a revelation of the violent instability at the heart of Western classical music, or just a cheap thrill, but, either way, the price of admission to the debate was that one had to see the film.

It would probably be too much to say that the unknown spectator in the balcony, pushed over the edge by *A Clockwork Orange*, changed my life, but the story of his breakdown was certainly the seed around which a new attitude began to crystallize. I had grown up on the idea that art’s proper direction is always towards explicitness and disinhibition, and that decorum is usually only a timid fetter on artistic freedom. I rejoiced in my right to read formerly censored texts like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, or Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* (though this last title, I remember, remained hidden against my adolescent eyes in my father’s sock drawer – even after it was published by the Grove Press). Along with everyone else I knew, I was against the Motion Picture Association of America’s hypocritical Hays Code, which had protected movie-goers from sex and unpunished vice until, already in tatters, it was finally abolished in 1968. I knew the heroic history of the many artistic avant-gardes who had tried to shock their bourgeois publics out of their fatal complacency. But now I began to wonder, for the first time, if there were

2 Vincent Canby, “Orange – Disorienting But Human Comedy,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1972.

things which it would be better not to say or see. I asked the question mainly in relation to arts like television and cinema, arts in which it is possible to produce a semblance of reality that goes far beyond what can be done in media whose artifice is more apparent, like theatre or literature. Movies, for example, have an uncanny resemblance to dreams. They are shown to mass audiences in darkened cinemas in much the same way as individual fantasies are projected within the darkened mind during sleep. What if movies, because of this dream-like verisimilitude, slip past whatever defenses we may have erected and become a permanent part of our mental furniture, regardless of what we may consciously think of them? Or, put another way, what if the preponderance of our experience consists of things that have been devised and designed for us, rather than of things that have actually happened to us in the everyday course of events?

These questions arise in response to two outstanding features of our contemporary situation: the first is the technologies of visualization that now create representation of such life-like plausibility that their artificiality is effectively hidden; the second is the sheer volume of designed experience to which people are now exposed. Here the focus expands far beyond the movies to include all forms of premeditated and professionalized communication – whether it's a tourist destination, a newscast, or a carefully curated brand. I began to wonder, not just whether specific works like *A Clockwork Orange* might overwhelm, disorient and desensitize their audiences, but also whether there might be a critical threshold between spontaneous and simulated experience, one that we cross at our peril. Can planned or media-ated experience, beyond a certain intensity, so overshadow any possible spontaneity that true surprise becomes unimaginable?

My *Clockwork Orange* epiphany changed my practice with regard to movies. I now asked myself whether a certain

theme or story was something I wanted to take in and was prepared to live with. This might sound a little prissy, but it was, in fact, quite a rough and ready rule – it had to be since it partly involved discerning the character of movies and other entertainments in advance. I subscribed then, as now, to Jesus' teaching that a person is defiled not by what goes into their mouth [or eyes or ears] but by what comes out.<sup>3</sup> I only tried to avoid exposing myself unnecessarily to sights that I thought would dull my sensibilities.

The possibility and desirability of assimilation became my crucial criterion. Assimilation, as I am using the word here, refers to the way in which new experience or information attaches to the existing and evolving structure of a given person's understanding. Only what fits this evolving structure and can find a site to which to attach can be assimilated. What does not fit may challenge and alter the structure, if its dissonance is sufficiently pointed and potent, but a great deal of what is taken in in a media-saturated society is simply debris. It is not assimilated – there are limits to what we can assimilate – but neither is it harmlessly shed, like rain off a roof. What happens to it then? Perhaps we can say that it becomes part of our unconscious experience – unassimilated, unacknowledged, but still somehow there – part of that large and novel class of experiences that have happened to us without our ever having *had* them in the usual sense.

To be concrete, let's say that I am washing the dishes, and I hear via CBC Radio that thirteen people have died in a train derailment in India. This can mean nothing to me, since I know nothing of the place, the people or the circumstances, and yet it is supremely meaningful to the people involved and has been presented to me as such – as news I should know. Either I must slough off the information – be it only by the unnoticed, infinitesimal gesture of hardening my heart against

3 Matthew 15:11

the suffering this must have entailed – or I must pretend that I care, by passing the story on or tut-tutting about rail safety in India. My point is that you're stuck with what you see and hear, whether it's the news or *A Clockwork Orange*, and often in the form of unconscious images that you don't even know you have, let alone where they came from. If you watch or listen to the news, then you must process the news, either by assimilating it or by finding a way to ignore or displace it in a way that must finally involve creating a protective layer of psychic callous.

One way of characterizing our time is as the epoch at which progress turned back on itself and began to consume its own substance. Modernity, taking its inspiration from the Roman Church, has believed that humanity is making steady, if jerky, moral and economic progress. It's my contention that this progress has now, in effect, gone into reverse. The future is a nightmare – whether one foresees ecological meltdown, by war or industrial overreach, or imagines a humanity saved by re-engineering itself and its environment. Ivan Illich, in his books of the early 1970's, argued that modern institutions had reached and were rapidly surpassing a threshold at which they would begin to get in their own way and defeat their own purposes. They were facing the onset of what he called “paradoxical counter-productivity.”

The logic, or tendency, that Illich identified is apocalyptic. It is my view, which I won't argue here, that Christianity is apocalyptic by its very inspiration – the appearance of God in human form invents history as a one-way street that may lead to heaven or hell but cannot be stopped or reversed.

Apocalypse is a Greek word meaning revelation or unveiling, and I think it precisely describes our current reality. The inevitability of disclosure is a constant theme in the New Testament. Jesus says that he will “utter things hidden since the creation of the world”; that there is “nothing hidden”

that will not be “made manifest,” nothing “secret” that will not “come to light”; that “the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed...” etc.<sup>4</sup> Thinkers like Ivan Illich and Rene Girard have recognized that this logic of discovery plays out over the course of Western civilization and now begins to hit a wall. This tendency, whose accumulating momentum makes it a fate, is evident across the board in our time: in economies, built only to grow, that must now stop growing; in an artistic avant-garde that has run out of taboos to break, but doesn’t know what else to do; in an intellectual culture built on demystification that now generates nothing but obscurity. Those hidden things that were to be revealed have all been brought to light, but somehow remain hidden in plain view. The habit of “going forward” dies hard, and no one wants to be the first to say “turn back.” To turn back is to be “reactionary” – a path from which the spectres of *blut und boden* are surely enough to warn us away. This apocalyptic character of our time, I would argue, makes special demands on us – the first being to recognize that this is, in fact, our situation: bewildered, disoriented, our path approaching a wall, our habits quite unsuitable for the task we are called on to perform. There is a scene in *Don Quixote* when the Don and Sancho enter a cul-de-sac which ends at the wall of a church, and, when they can go no further, the Don remarks drily, “We’ve come up against the Church, Sancho.” It’s a resonant line and one that fits our situation. The many churches that descended from “the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church” with which Don Quixote collided have failed, but we have no other.<sup>5</sup>

*A Clockwork Orange* is just one of many possible examples of paradoxical counter-productivity at work in media. What was intended to purify sensibility was at that same time

4 Matthew 13:36, Mark 4:22; Luke 2:35

5 The quoted words appear in the Nicene Creed.

poisoning it, according to my reading of the parable of the Unknown Spectator. The means to shock people awake had instead begun to shock them into insensibility.

This is a specimen of the much more general dilemma of how to live in a *technogenic* society. A fancy word, I know, but one that I want to use in a fairly precise sense. Technology is the origin or genesis of the account contemporary people give of themselves. It informs our stance – how we walk and talk and hold ourselves – and it informs our self-image – who we think we are and what we think we are made of. This observation is, in one sense, a truism – a statement so obviously and so universally true as to be unremarkable. “Artificiality,” as Walter Ong says, “is natural to human beings,” and “there is,” as John Durham Peters adds, “no humanity without arts.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, we have been products of technology ever since we began to talk, walk upright and make fire. But, to see our artificiality as inherent and constitutive is not to say that it has no limit, no threshold at which this inherent artificiality exceeds its proper boundary, no point-of-no-return at which it becomes total and begins to enclose existence as a mirror in which we can see nothing but our own reflection. I will call this imagined point of balance the *technogenic threshold*.

A *Clockwork Orange* crossed this threshold in 1971, and, thanks to the bad conscience generated in me by the tale of the Unknown Spectator, I was able to perceive it. The question then became how to preserve the integrity and receptivity of my imagination, using that word in its broadest sense as standing for the very capacity to form images and ideas. Beyond the *technogenic threshold*, I supposed, I would no longer be able to shape this faculty for myself. A *Clockwork Orange* and its ilk would already have shaped my

6 John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 233 and Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Routledge, 2002, 9. 81.

sensibility, and furnished my imagination, to a depth that would resist any attempt to discern what was moving me.

Identifying this threshold implies no romantic notion of authenticity, as if I could, or should be able to furnish my imagination, just as I like. Media historians, from the time of Harold Innis and Eric Havelock on, have shown convincingly that media have a structuring effect on perception and cognition at all times and places. What is novel about today's media is the persuasiveness of their simulations, and the depth and extent to which they penetrate and preoccupy people. The province of Ontario, where I live, recently found it necessary to institute in law a "right to disconnect," just so its citizens could play and sleep free of the insistent nagging of their smartphones.<sup>7</sup> We are being remade by our media in a way that goes far beyond anything previously experienced. Prepubescent children now have their roots in the world-wide web, as much as in any local or familial ethos, or in any constraining or constitutive tradition. No ethics even remotely adequate to this situation exist. If we take ethics to mean the moral standards proper to a given *ethos*, we can see why. What is an ethos without temporal, spatial, or cultural boundaries?

I've related my intuition, in the face of the Unknown Spectator's breakdown in the balcony, that I might have to begin rethinking a lot of received, and previously hallowed, ideas about artistic vanguards, the progress of the arts, and the desideratum to continually "break new ground," "push the envelope" etc. This was the beginning of a practice which I'm reluctant to call asceticism, since there was no hair shirt, or other self-mortification involved, but for which I have as yet no better word. It began to come clear to me, only during a lengthy conversation, extending

7 Bill 27, the "Working for Workers Act," proclaimed on December 2, 2021



over many days, that I recorded with Ivan Illich in 1988.<sup>8</sup>

This conversation was a continuous surprise to me, but there were moments when the surprise intensified. These were moments when Illich said things that I had never before heard, or thought, but which I must have been disposed to hear, since they instantly took root in my mind. Since one of these moments forms the basis of the answer I will eventually give to the conundrum of the Unknown Spectator, I will recall it here at some length. It began with a discussion of a passage in Illich's *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) in which he predicts that, if contemporary societies continue to pursue "engineered obsolescence," they will eventually "break all bridges to a normative past."<sup>9</sup> I asked whether he thought this had since happened. Yes, he said, "the conceptual and perceptual topology in which I [now] live is non-continuous with the past."<sup>10</sup> He went on to talk about the practice of abstention and renunciation that he thought were required to live in such a world. "I live with the refusal," he told me, "not only to say certain things but also to use certain words, or to permit certain feelings to creep in my heart."

Such a refusal is necessary, he went on, in order to avoid become a "splitter" – an idea he took from Robert J. Lifton's book on the way in which Nazi doctors became capable of murdering and experimenting on prisoners while still retaining the character of affectionate fathers and husbands.<sup>11</sup>

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8 An edited version was broadcast on Ideas as "Part Moon, Part Travelling Salesman: Conversations with Ivan Illich" at the end of 1989. A transcript is here, <https://www.davidcayley.com/transcripts>; the audio is here: <https://www.davidcayley.com/podcasts/2014/11/6/part-moon-part-travelling-salesman-conversations-with-ivan-illich>. A full transcript was published by House of Anansi in 1992 as *Ivan Illich in Conversation*.

9 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973, p. 83

10 *Illich in Conversation*, p. 124; everything I will subsequently quote is in the six succeeding pages, so I will dispense with further notes.

11 Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*,

(The word *splitter* is Illich's, not Lifton's, but it sums up Lifton's thought.) We must decline to act as "splitters," he said, or chance "maiming our hearts." I agreed that the things of which he was speaking – genetic engineering, nuclear weapons, certain forms of extreme medical impudence – might, in one sense, constitute "deeply corrupting images" but still asked whether we oughtn't to contemplate and discuss these things insofar as they "actually exist in our world." He commended instead "horrified silence" and said that was the stance he had taken when he participated in peace demonstrations in West Germany in 1983 against the stationing of Cruise and Pershing II thermonuclear missiles there.<sup>12</sup>

...at the time the Pershing missiles were to be stationed [in Germany], I made myself available to the young people, mostly high school students, who wanted to organize protests. And I said we can't protest in any other way than by standing there silently. We have nothing to say on this issue. We want to testify by our horrified silence. In horrified silence, the Turkish immigrant washerwoman and the university professor can make *exactly* the same statement, standing next to each other. As soon as you have to explain, opposition becomes again a graded, an elite affair and becomes superficial. I do not want to take part in a conspiracy of gab about peace but claim the privilege of horrified silence, in front of certain things – if I can make my horror visible.

Then came the words that I have held on to ever since – there is a real danger, he said, of people "burning out their hearts."

I mentioned earlier the New Testament teaching that

New York: Basic Books, 1984

12 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/10/23/more-than-a-million-protest-missiles-in-western-europe/9d703245-36fa-40ce-8714-e281f796a472/>

we are more likely to be corrupted by what we say and do than by what we hear and see. “Listen and understand,” Jesus says. “What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’”<sup>13</sup> This was invaluable counsel in a society preoccupied with ritual purity, but it’s easily misunderstood in a modern society in which “do not be afraid” has degenerated into “what, me worry?”<sup>14</sup> With Illich’s warning about burnt out hearts, a thought I had been trying to think since the Unknown Spectator was helped out of the Towne Cinemas suddenly became clear, urgent and articulate. The flood of prefabricated sights and sounds, words and images, in which the typically media-ted modern person stands can dull sensibility and corrode sensitivity. In this way, we can be deprived of the very faculties we need to discern the character of our world. Illich’s motto was, “I fear the Lord is passing me by.”<sup>15</sup> By this he meant that he hoped to remain alert to the prompting of each moment and aware that a moment missed might be missed forever – that our lives, in other words, have real stakes. The crucial point is that discernment of the moment of the Lord’s passing, depends on the faculties by which we discern it, and these can easily be disoriented and disabled under the deluge of what French philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls the “hyper-real.”

Illich did not speak by accident of the heart as the capacity endangered by “conspiracies of gab” or casual intercourse with “corrupting images.” The heart, for him, is the very seat and centre of the person insofar as that person is whole and undivided. It is the heart that will know when the Lord passes, the heart that will unfold the “mysterious struc-

13 Matthew 15: 10-11

14 “Do not be afraid” are the angel’s words to Mary at Luke 1:30; “what, me worry?” was the motto of the *Mad Magazine* (1952-2018) mascot Alfred E. Neuman.

15 *The Rivers North of the Future*, p. 59

ture” of what presents itself. We possess, according to Illich, inner as well as outer senses, and the heart is where these inner perceptions register and assemble. It is in this sense that the Bible speaks of the heart – as the place where good or evil are “stored,” as what leaps and rejoices, or grows dull and callous, as what can be hardened or suddenly opened – “I will remove from you your heart of stone,” God tells the prophet Ezekiel, “and give you a heart of flesh.”<sup>16</sup> It is in this sense also that Augustine in his *Confessions* says of Bishop Ambrose of Milan that his “eyes ran over the page, and his heart perceived the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent.”<sup>17</sup>

About this spiritual or symbolic organ modern persons are highly ambivalent – when we are under the influence of bio-medicine and anatomical science, we think of the heart as a muscle or a mechanical pump, that can be readily repaired and even replaced, should it become defective, by someone else’s heart. When we sing or read old books, meditate or pray, we experience the heart that melts and breaks, dreams or faints, cheats or is faithful – the heart whose chambers open inward into the realms of psyche and spirit. This ambivalence, which makes us all in some sense splitters, traces back in Illich’s view to the very first stirrings of our contemporary world in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was then, Illich says, that science and spirit began to part company.

Reading, in the monastic tradition, had been an engrossing sensory experience – with the often-unseparated words of the cumbersome codex book sounded out and savored on the tongue. Reading monks were often compared to buzzing bees or grazing cattle. Then came a revolution in

16 Ezekiel 36:26

17 *Saint Augustine’s Confessions*, Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1991, p. 92; Augustine found Ambrose’s technique remarkable because, at the time, reading normally involved sounding out the words.

the lay-out of the manuscript book. Texts were divided into titled chapters; indexes, notes, quotation marks, paragraphs, and tables of contents were added; word separation, introduced earlier in some places, now became universal; and books, though still hand copied, became smaller and more portable. These changes, taken together, effected a revolution, though one that has been little noted and generally overshadowed by the invention, centuries later, of movable types.<sup>18</sup> It produced what Illich's calls "the visible text." In the *lectio divina* of the monastic orders, the word of God enfolded and contained its reader. The reader, in reading, was being read. The new optical technology, as Illich calls it, of the transformed page, allowed the mind of the reader to hover above the text. Laid open by its new apparatus of chapter and verse, index and inventory, it could become a scholarly tool, or what Illich calls "the mirror of [a] mind."

Illich ascribes many changes to this scribal revolution, among them the emergence of a new sense of self modelled on this new style of reading, but the one that concerns me here is the split between head and heart that occurred when "book-ish" reading replaced "monk-ish" reading. During the same years of the early 12<sup>th</sup> century that text was becoming visible and tractable, the first universities were founded – first in Bologna, then in Paris, then in many places. They took as their vocation the literary and scholarly inquiry that had been made possible by the transformed book, but they set aside the element of spiritual formation that had been the over-arching purpose of monastic reading. "The ascetical-mystical pursuit of prayer" and "the in-

18 Illich has told this story in his essay "A Plea for Research on Lay Literacy" (*In the Mirror of the Past*, Marion Boyars, 1992, pp. 159-181); in his book *In the Vineyard of the Text* (University of Chicago Press, 1993; and in an unpublished essay called "Text and University," here: <https://www.pudel.samerski.de/pdf/TEXTANTL.pdf>. A much more extended version of the ideas I am sketching here comprises Chapter 10 of my *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*, (Penn State Press, 2021)

tellectual-critical pursuit of truth,” Illich says, “underwent “institutional segregation.” “The acquisition of knowledge” was “pried’ apart from “advancement in sensual discipline.”

Illich believed that this separation of head and heart, critical thought and character, mind and body constituted “a cultural split...schism or rift that has been of deeper cultural consequence in the constitution of the West than any substantive, ‘scientific’ or doctrinal ‘reformation’ since.” Characteristically, he condensed a many-centuries- long development into a clairvoyant reading of a founding moment, a reading which I’m sure will seem hyperbolic to some readers, but that was the way in which he studied history.

We live today at the extreme and failing end of the development that Illich traces to the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. By excluding the ethical character of our way of life, and the arts by which we actually live – what we call technology – from the university curriculum, we have ended up with a world governed by principles we barely understand and have no capacity to control. A pretense of control is still performed in our politics, but this consists mainly of what Illich called rain dances – his name for “rituals ...that make those who participate in them blind to the discrepancy which exists between the purpose for which you perform the rain dance, and the actual social consequences the rain dance has.”<sup>19</sup> One of Illich’s responses to these circumstances was to revive the practice of *askesis* that he felt had been neglected in modernity – that long modernity whose arc he traced back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He used the Greek form of the word because he hoped it would be less likely to alarm contemporary readers than its English derivative, *asceticism*, which he thought had unfortunate and unwanted associations with heroic and

19 *Ioan Illich in Conversation*, p. 66; Illich developed his conception of ritual through his reading of anthropologist Max Gluckman. See his *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations*, Manchester University Press, 1962

self-regarding bodily disciplines, new and old. His argument was that all traditions, and not just the pre-modern Western one, had understood the need to locate their arts of living, including the practice of knowledge, within the context of what he called spiritual formation. (It would be possible, in this connection, to simply speak of *cultural* formation insofar as cultures were once concerned with the whole person and not just with what are now casually called “skill sets.”) One learned to see and hear, taste and touch in the way thought appropriate in a given cultural setting. Illich’s choice of the word *Askesis* was meant to evoke the Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian variant of this universal understanding, but Illich was always intensely aware of the extent to which “our world is out of whack” with all “prior historical epochs.”<sup>20</sup>

Illich had no thought of reviving antique or outmoded practices. He believed that the study of history could shed light on how we reached our present impasse, that a serious encounter with the past, free of the present’s typical condescension, could unsettle contemporary certainties by revealing truly different ways of understanding the world, and that past practice could inform and guide the present; but he insisted that any contemporary practice of askesis would have to be “profoundly different from any[thing] previously known.”<sup>21</sup> He offered no program, and didn’t see it as his place to prescribe people’s conduct in detail. But, in the communities in which he lived throughout his life, he saw it as his “task to explore the ways in which the life of the intellect, the disciplined and methodical pursuit of clear vision – one could say philosophy in the sense of loving truth – can be so lived that it becomes the occasion for the kindling of growth of *philia*” – again the Greek word

20 *Rivers North of the Future*, p. 60

21 I’m quoting from an unpublished outline Illich prepared in 1989 and submitted to David Ramage, then the President of the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, for a lecture series on “Askesis.” The lectures were never given.

was chosen in preference to *love* or *friendship* in order to avoid the modern associations of those words. He wanted in other words to heal the split that he felt had defined and determined the destiny of the modern university.

At the beginning of his seminal *Tools for Conviviality* Illich complains that the word “austerity” has been “degraded and has acquired a bitter taste,” whereas “for Aristotle or Aquinas it marked the foundation of friendship... Thomas... defines ‘austerity’ as a virtue which does not exclude all enjoyments, but only those which are distracting from or destructive of personal relatedness.”<sup>22</sup> This statement reflects the same spirit that informs his later remarks on askesis, and on the need to guard our senses and avoid the *maiming* of our hearts. The “profoundly different” *askesis* that he urged his contemporaries to imagine, and of which he himself gave an example, was not meant to dampen enjoyment and celebration but to enhance them by protecting our inner and outer faculties from dullness, degradation and glut.

The point I want to enter here is that this will involve *re-nunciation* as much as *pro-nunciation*, going back as much as going forward, undoing as much as doing. “God is not found in the soul by adding anything,” says Meister Eckhart says, “but by a process of subtraction.” But part of the myth of progress that Wittgenstein says *informs* our society is a violent resistance to subtraction.<sup>23</sup> We are ever ready to add, rather than subtract, and, in this, we are abetted by the language of problems and solutions: one finds out what’s wrong, then fixes it by adding new layers of control and regulation, supervision and training, to “the system.” Subtraction is not a solution. “A picture held us captive,” as Wittgenstein, again, says, “and we could not get outside of it, for it lay in our language and

22 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, Harper and Row, 1973, p. xiii

23 “Progress is the *form* of our civilization rather than one of its features,” Wittgenstein says in *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 7).



language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”<sup>24</sup> Going forward, breaking new ground, staying in tune with *the* (always advancing) *culture* are all reflexes. They lie “in our language.” It is hard, therefore, to think of less rather than more, of the past rather than the future, of modesty and restraint rather than expansion and self-assertion.

Contemporary people now live, very largely, in the future – in plans, models, risk projections and the like. The decisive role played by modeling in the construction of the recent pandemic is a sufficient example. What would it mean to begin putting more emphasis on what is *present* here and now? It would mean finding a time that has not already been predicted and pre-determined – a time still in some sense free. It would mean refusing the steady succession of stupefying emergencies that, taken together, comprise the phases of a single never-ending emergency. It would mean rediscovering the past, not as a dead letter, but as a source of new beginnings and unexplored roads. And it would mean insisting that today, as always, it is necessary to think - even in the face of seemingly cogent claims that there is no time to think.

We cannot sustain civil discourse, civic peace, and free inquiry without a willingness to refuse what manifestly destroys these things. We cannot create the future without recovering the past. We cannot live in a din that drowns out thought or think with words designed to defeat thinking. We cannot keep “going forward” when what we need is already behind us. “Open any old book of ascetism,” Illich says, and you will find the idea that the senses must be guarded against every kind of unreality in order for us to discover what Voegelin calls reality’s “mysterious structure.”<sup>25</sup> The Unknown Spectator found the boundary by exceeding it. Our whole civilization has now followed him into glut, disorientation and overload. Time, I would say, to turn back.

24 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1953/2001, p. 115

25 *The Rivers North of the Future*, pp. 108-109