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Etienne Barilier

The Gothard and the Pyramids

The men who raised the Great Pyramid of Cheops had to shift nearly three million cubic metres of stone. A train travelling through the Gothard base tunnel hurtles down a hole equivalent to five Great Pyramids. But whereas the ancient Egyptians moved all that rock in the name of the spirit, to earn their place in eternity, we only want to save a little time – one hour of the journey from Zurich to Milan.

In short, the ancient Egyptians bent all their efforts to the struggle against death and the conquest of eternal life in pure and disinterested homage to their gods. What then is the fundamental purpose of our pharaonic labours? Is it to ensure the most efficient transportation of people and of merchandise? Or is it, perhaps, to transform people into another kind of merchandise?

This is the bitter reproof so often addressed to our material and materialistic civilisation. Its works, feed only its hunger for speed – and thus for growth – and whet its appetite for more. Today we live in the age of universal and instantaneous communication, of virtual travel. If real journeys are to remain economically viable, if our rail networks are to retain their usefulness, should we not shrink space even further? Should distance not be compressed to the utmost, or even abolished altogether, so that «real time» may remain competitive with «virtual time»? Is the Gothard tunnel no more than an imitation of broadband Internet access? In the twenty-first century, is a train in a tunnel – all its compartments illuminated – anything other than a substitute for the light-encoded messages that travel down a fibre optic tube?

«What's wrong with that?» reply the defenders of modernity. «Yes, the Gothard base tunnel is an internet. No, our pharaonic labour doesn't buy us eternity, just a little time. But our enormous advantage over the Egyptians is that time really does exist, while eternity does not. The Great Pyramid will never be anything other than a gigantic tombstone – a memorial to wishful thinking. Maybe the Gothard base tunnel does only win us one hour, but it is an hour's worth of reality, an hour of life and work. And it can be multiplied by the millions of travellers who will use the tunnel.»

Who is right? Those who deem a tunnel more useful than a pyramid and time more real than eternity? Or is it the others? Spiritualists or materialists? The prophets of development or the decriers of consumerism? In my opinion both are wrong. Both pretend that Gothard and Giza

are antithetical, that we have nothing in common with the ancient Egyptians but the countless tons of rock that have been shifted. I believe, on the contrary, that we have everything in common with them.

Yes, the Egyptians endeavoured to halt time, whereas we strive to speed it up. While they adored Amon, we prefer Mammon. But these are trifling quibbles. By the sheer scale, the lunacy even, of their enterprises, the Egyptians transcended their gods entirely; just as we, in turn, transcend ours. Enterprises of such pharaonic magnitude – ancient or modern, commemorative or functional – engender an autonomous power that disdains the intentions of their inceptors. The immensity of them, their monumentality, gives rise to a unique mystery: that of human potential. Pharaonic works do not simply occupy space; they reveal and possess it. They provide us with a vertiginous sense of space which is more than merely physical. In the tallness of skyscrapers like the Twin Towers – as in the myth of Babel – we cannot help but discern the desire to reach the sky, to stand upright. And when such towers fall, they bring down with them much more than a symbol of American capitalism.

The tallest tower in the world is in fact the 1,000-metre chimney that, from Sedrun, plunges to the central gallery of the Gotthard tunnel. The tallest tower in the world enabling work on the longest tunnel in the world. How could enterprises on a scale to rival nature itself not exert a fascination every bit as great as that of the deepest ravines and the most soaring peaks? No, indeed their fascination is the greater. Doubtless, the Alps are sublime. But something which, though in the midst of nature and as vast as nature, is yet the fruit of human hands, is that not the more sublime? We are that which exceeds us: this is the very core of the mystery of the human.

Soon, a few minutes will be enough to cross the fifty-seven kilometres of the Gotthard base tunnel by train. Should I personally ever be afforded the experience of that journey, I shall not be taking advantage of the absence of scenery to do some reading or, thanks to my laptop computer, to surf the net – a virtual tube embedded in a real one. Nor, during the twenty or so minutes of my gestation in the womb of mother earth, in the secret belly of Switzerland, shall I be thinking of the time I have saved. I shall be thinking of the Great Pyramid of Cheops and of the Great Wall of China, which is visible from the moon. Perhaps I shall remember the Tower of Babel; I shall certainly recall those of Manhattan. And in the calm of my railway carriage, I shall have the sense of sharing in the human adventure and of gaining something – neither time perhaps, nor eternity – but something at least as valuable.

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