

The Diabolical Symbolism of the Automobile

Rodney Blackhirst

...these locusts were like horses armored for battle...

Revelation 9:3-9:7

With the possible exception of the television no other item of modern technology is so pervasive and so ubiquitous and is so inseparable from the identity of modern man as that of the automobile. Modern man has displayed an unstinting and passionate love affair with this product of his own invention and automobile transportation has become an unquestionable norm on every continent on the planet. In affluent societies, mom, dad and often the kids have cars of their own, while even poor villages in the 'Third World' or the global 'South' nowadays will usually depend upon road transport for survival in one way or another, and a truck or jeep is a hallmark of community progress. It is possible to conceive of modern life without other technologies, but the automobile has become so woven into our existence that it is difficult to imagine life without it. The globe is covered from one end to the other with trails of asphalt and literally billions of vehicles traverse them every day. The yellow-brown palls of exhaust that hang over our cities are the outcome relentless road journeys requiring countless gallons of fuel. We wake up in the morning and find there is no milk: without hesitation we climb into our vehicles and drive to the store. We have established a global automobile culture and it is so central to who we are and where we are going that we are happy to have freeways scar our landscapes and are ready and willing to fight evil and immoral wars to ensure there is cheap petroleum in our tanks. This whole culture separates modern life from all that came before. Unlike our ancestors, we have all climbed into automobiles and traveled roads from one place to another at speeds unimaginable by horse, and many of us have spent long hours in automobiles and indeed some of us have spent a good portion of our lives in them. They are unavoidable: a fact of life.

In a traditional perspective it is clear that all God-created things are part of a symbolic order and have their own inherent symbolism. Indeed, Creation is in whole and

in its parts a manifestation of the Divine and, as far as man is concerned, a revelation consisting of 'signs' for him to understand. What though of man-created things? Man is the microcosmic encapsulation of the cosmic order and to this extent - his comprehensiveness - he exercises a god-like power by which he can "create" objects that are seemingly as real and as integral as "natural" or God-created objects. What is the status of these things? Are these part of a symbolic order with a symbolism of their own? The answer to this question is yes, certainly, for there is nothing man can do that is not symbolic at some level since this is the very nature of the Creation, and his houses and furniture, clothes and effects are all symbolic of something. And this necessarily extends to his machines of both high and low technologies. When man makes he exercises a God-like demiurgic power. In the Greek tradition the cosmos was understood to be a crafted object, as the word *kosmos* itself implies, and was made from primal materials by a Craftsman god. This is the cosmological God, the lower aspect of the Divine Being that engages with creation, deigning to dirty His hands, unlike the higher aspects of Divinity which remain aloof from the Creation. In the Greek pantheon the demiurge was the blacksmith god Hephaestus, the Hellenized adaptation of the Egyptian potter god Ptah, the lame-legged Olympian who tarried in his workshop all day, manufacturing trinkets and gadgets and mending objects for the other gods who, in the main, found his antics enormously amusing. The human blacksmith in the Greek order reveres this Olympian deity as immortal exemplar, but more importantly the whole art of the smith is understood in terms of *mimesis* - imitation - of the divine model. It follows that one observes the action of the exemplar in the divinely crafted objects of nature, and so not nature but the *action of the exemplar in nature* serves as the basis for *mimesis*. For example, the white-hot flux of metals that occurs in a volcano is terrestrial evidence of the applied arts of the Olympian blacksmith, Hephaestus (Vulcan). The human blacksmith, in a context of reverence for and awe of the Olympian model, will imitate the volcano and the arts of the god in his furnace. Again, he does not imitate nature; he imitates the *god in nature*. By this means the productions of the forge attain a type of existential legitimacy: such productions have a God-approved legitimacy as much as trees and rocks. There is, in this sense, no distinction to be made between God-made and man-made objects for the man-made object is the product of a sanctified *participation* in

the work of the God; the craftsman works with or for the God, imitating the way the God works (in nature, his handiwork) just as an apprentice will imitate the ways of the Master.

At the same time, however, there can be no escaping the fact that a man-made object, though it may be made by participation in a divine work and in this way woven into Creation, is nevertheless a "creation" of a lesser order, for the simple reason that man is man and not God, and the truth of the matter is that he can create nothing that is really *new*, all his so-called "creations" being reworked from existing materials, namely the divinely crafted *kosmos*. In all his productions man is recycling materials that have already been through the primal forge of the divine craftsman. Even the most sophisticated high-tech engineer is really like a backyard inventor recycling junk and spare parts from nature. There is a necessary sense, therefore, in which all human production is secondary and a man-made object is always a remove from natural objects. When we say that God crafted the cosmos from pre-existing materials we only do so for convenience, just as we distinguish a demiurge from a higher deity only for convenience. But in the case of man it is literally the case that he must start with pre-existing materials, so while he can "create" demiurgically from a *materia* he cannot, like God, create *ex nihilo*. God is not merely Demiurge but in so far as man's powers over nature are God-like those powers are *demiurgic* and *can be nothing more*, for man cannot create from nothing and even his finest productions are, at best, recycled goods. There is therefore something inherently flawed in human productions vis-a-vis natural objects. They can only ever be *like* natural objects but never *be* natural objects by having the same relation to the Principle. Man's productions are one step removed from the true *prima materia* which - while we speak metaphorically of God as forming the Creation from a pre-existing material (His demiurgic aspect) - is actually the Nothing of *ex nihilo* (His higher aspect). *Mimesis* is also not without its inherent moral and spiritual dangers, for in the exercise of man's demiurgic powers that are a consequence of his microcosmic internalisation of the forces of the cosmos, the distinction we have just made is liable to be overlooked and man soon starts to think of himself as god-like in a fuller and inappropriate sense and his "creations" as primary. Again, man creates nothing. He

recycles. Just as the backyard inventor imparts inordinate value to what seems to others worthless junk, so man imparts an inflated value to his own productions.

In a traditional social order we find that technological innovations are carefully sacralized and integrated into the continuum of tradition, even if radical adjustments need to be made to weave the new technology into the total symbolic framework that is the matrix of such a society. Sacralization, though, always consists of ways and means of ensuring that the inherent limitations and dangers of man's productions are understood. The way that the plough was woven into traditional symbolism illustrates this well, to cite one example. The blacksmith knew well that his materials are already crafted objects (crafted by the Divine Blacksmith) and whatever he makes of them can never be *pristine* because he can never *be* God but only a co-worker to God, and then in only one of His aspects. It happens though, because of cyclic degeneration, and because it is in the nature of technology for one innovation to suggest another and then another and so on, that technological developments inevitably out-pace every effort to integrate them into the symbolic framework, and improvements and modifications in technology call for such complex adjustments to traditional symbolism that, eventually, new technologies evade sacralization and the traditional constraints and balances cease to be effective or disappear altogether. The obvious example to be cited here is the invention of the printing press which technology - the technology of mass literacy - could not be integrated into what remained of a traditional order in Europe, as we see in the desperately heavy-handed and clumsy devices by which the Inquisition and the Index attempted to enforce some degree of orthodox restraint, and in the fact that they failed so comprehensively to prevent the Protestant Revolt from using the technology to rupture Christendom. Here is a technology that "started a revolution" as the historians say, in this case a decisive rupture from the unified spiritual ideal of the Middle Ages and a catastrophic breaking point for the Christian order. By this time in European history we are already aware that the fabric of tradition is tattered and that new technologies will not be woven into the fabric but will tear new holes. The clock, so long as it had a round face and two hands in a cosmological soli-lunar order of symbols, could find some symbolic integrity, but little compared to the times and seasons kept before the mechanical regularity of clock-time.

Needless to say, by the time the automobile was invented there was no prospect whatsoever that it could be integrated and so to speak neutralized within a matrix of traditional symbology because the Western tradition was in mere threads and European man's pursuit of his demiurgic delusions were well advanced. There can be no question, therefore, that the automobile and all its associated technology is diabolical - or in Greek terms, Promethean - because whatever has not been sacralized is so.

This does not prevent us from examining such a technology as the automobile from within the framework of a traditional symbology, however. As modern man's most prolific "creation" it will surely reveal something significant about the predicament in which he finds himself. From this point of view, there are two peculiar and unusual things about the automobile that require attention: the fact that it has the appearance of being self-moving and the fact that its cabin, into which human beings climb, forms a separate space from its environment. The automobile is, by definition, a self-moving machine, as the term "horseless carriage" suggests - its whole construction gives the illusion of it being self-moving - and in its typical form it is like a capsule, an interior space. In both these cases let us note that these are characteristics of *animals* and also of man. Both animal and man are self-moving creatures. The automobile mimics this characteristic. And both animals and man are "capsules" in that they form microcosmic interior spaces. The car is like this too. The interior is a separate space, with exterior sounds muffled, and increasingly, especially in contemporary vehicles, a whole world of gadgets within, every comfort of home on board. So in these respects the car is like an animal or man: most obviously like an animal and most specifically a *quadruped*. The fact that it replaced the horse is enough to make this plain: it is, amongst other things, a metal horse. An understanding of this is the starting point of any symbolic consideration. The automobile is, first and foremost, an artificial beast. It has four legs in four tyres and eyes and mouth in lights and grill and its power is still measured in horsepower. Modern man's obsession with the automobile is a direct extension of an earlier preoccupation with the horse. But unlike travel on a horse, the automobile traveler climbs inside the vehicle and so travels within the beast, so to speak, occupying the microcosmic world of the cabin. In this respect the beast has been combined with the cart or carriage. The

mythological parallel with the Trojan Horse must be pointed out here; although it is not self-moving it is nevertheless a foreshadowing of the automobile - an artificial horse on wheels into the interior space of which men climb. The Trojan Horse, of course, is an emblem of the sacrilegious sack of Troy and so by extension an emblem of cyclic decline and not in any sense a felicitous symbol. The Trojans mistakenly greeted the evil "gift" as a sign of victory when in fact it was the cause of their fall and the means by which the Achaeans penetrated the walls of sacred Ilium.

The image of the Trojan horse allows us a further imagery, for it was a gargantuan horse and in some ways might remind modern man of the *dinosaurs* of the fossil record. When we remember that the automobile is fuelled by the processed residues of former aeons now compacted into subterranean lakes of crude oil the analogy becomes more apt. The horseless carriage does not really look like a horse, at least of the modern type, but more like some squat, flat-faced, prehistoric ancestor of the horse with a plated protective skin. There is indeed something dinosaur-like about many larger road transport vehicles; it takes little imagination to see this if one is standing on a roadside at night as trains of large transport vehicles roar and rumble by. If the automobile is like some artificial beast from a former aeon, the truck and lorry are like large multi-legged prehistoric monsters. It is characteristic of the later stages of a cosmic cycle for men to plunder the remains of the earlier stages, bringing into circulation with the plunder the psychic residues of those earlier stages. The technology of the automobile is an example of this. To fuel this technology modern man removes from the earth the volatile residuum of former ages and makes from it food for his metal horse which, morphologically, is not an improvement on the horse in any sense but more a reversion to the grotesque quadruped forms of the prehistoric past. There is a strongly "jurassic" motif in this technology that must be noted as one of its most significant characteristics. What manner of quadruped is the car? Its form is clearly not like that of existing animals, even though it takes its departure from its immediate forerunner, the horse. Where do we find quadrupeds large enough that men could conceivably sit inside them? To find resemblances we need to look at many dinosaur lifeforms: just as the Trojan Horse was titanesque, so the automobile is the return of a quadrupedal morphology from a distant era. There is no escaping the

implication that this technology is therefore inherently monstrous and unleashes malignant, chthonic forces held in check until modern man released them from the earth.

In alchemical symbolism this is expressed as a *dragon* motif. The locomotive has an obvious resemblance to the classical dragon - especially when locomotives were stream-driven - but so too does a road-train, and there is something dragon-like about the entire automotive technology. The steam-driven locomotive was literally fire-breathing: in automobile technology there is still the exhaust to suggest fire-breathing but more particularly we are reminded of the way dragons carry fire within their bellies by the *internal* combustion engine, the very *internalness* of the combustion being the parallel. It is not an accident of symbolism that crude oil is called "black gold". The lakes of oil under the earth are, in fact, the residuum of the aurumic humus of Edenic times, the physical residue of the gardens of the Golden Age, and so are in that sense the treasure of the alchemical dragon. Modern man has stolen this treasure and unleashed the dragon. The petroleum sciences are, then, a counter-alchemy, a diabolical alchemy that hastens the onset of cyclic dissolution rather than preparing the way for the new cycle. In recent decades it has become obvious that this technology entails transposing the heat and carbon contained in these lakes of oil from the earth into the atmosphere and that this is likely to have a profound impact on the polar structures of the earth and so constitutes a transformation of global, geological proportions. In the long run this must have an impact upon the entire balance of the terrestrial system and perhaps even upon the earth's axial balance and magnetic polarities and such like. We are belatedly beginning to realise that this - equal to the atom bomb - looms as the greatest threat to our own existence we have yet engineered. Now we face the dragon in, amongst other things, the storms and monsoons, tidal waves and wild perversities of weather that follow from emptying chthonic residues into the atmosphere. This is the full context in which the humble, everyday automobile is dragon-like. In European medieval dragon mythology, also let us note, the dragon is confronted by a knight *in armour*. The metal, protective skin of the medieval knight prefigures the same in the automobile. In the automobile we find the motif of dragon - with its internal fire - and the motif of the knight's armour combined. Much medieval dragon mythology concerned technological triumph and prepared the

spiritual conditions for industrialism. Many of the most basic mechanisms used in automobile technology, such as crankshafts, are actually medieval in origin. The metal-plated knight slew the dragon, stole its treasure, and acquired its powers, specifically the power of internal combustion.

The extension of metal armour plating from man to vehicle is most suggestive of the tank, the military adaptation of the automobile. The Trojan Horse was tank-like too, a military device, and here we must remember the intimate connection between this type of technology and military motivation, the human drive to find new and better ways to kill. Most technological "advances" are of military origin not the outcome of humanitarian sentiment, another instance of the way they are sponsored by the destructive forces of cyclic decline. In the case of the automobile we can see ancient precedents in such military innovations as the Roman's famed "turtle" formation, where groups of foot soldiers would lock shields on all sides and overhead and move into battle as a single, impenetrable "vehicle" that, since the legs of the troops inside the formation were hidden by shields, appeared to be self-moving. The parallel with the turtle in this case is again a comparison with an animal, this time with the emphasis on the idea of a protective shell. Aside from a mammalian quadruped symbolism, devolved from the horse, the automobile has an obvious "turtleness" in this respect, and in fact the turtle is a quite appropriate and traditional symbol for the microcosmicness of the automobile's cabin. Even more appropriate, though, - since the turtle is slow - is the same idea expressed in other creatures with exoskeletons, like insects. Frithjof Schuon observed that there is something profoundly insect-like about the conditions of modern living and he compared our sprawling cities to vast hives of frenetic insect activity. In this analogy our automobiles are very much the exoskeletal insects that scurry to and fro throughout our ever-swarming urban hives. A modern city seen from the air is like an ant heap. The way the automobile has devoured the globe is comparable to a Biblical plague of locusts. This analogy is particularly evident in the famous German designed *volkswagon* which indeed looks insect-like or locust-like and is popularly called a "beetle" or a "bug". In the Bible, in fact, we find a peculiar conjunction of the symbols we have discussed: insect and horse. In John's Revelation we are told there will be *locusts* - with the powers of

scorpions - which are *like horses* and they are even said to be covered in iron body armour and to make a din, and their appearance is accompanied by the emptying of the Abyss, the smoke of which chokes the atmosphere and obscures the Sun. Another appropriate symbol, with important astrological resonances, is the crab, the zodiacal image of enclosed microcosmicness which is essentially interchangeable with the turtle or tortoise as a symbol but is fast, not slow. The jerky start-stop, scurry-stop, scuttling of the crab is very much like urban automobile travel and even the indirectness of the crab's propulsion has a parallel in the quite peculiar (even counter-intuitive) shift of energy from the motions of the engine's pistons to the turning of wheels in which the "drive" is indirect.

The implication of this exoskeletal technology for man himself is, of course, that he is becoming a crustacean as he lives more and more of his life - from conception to death - in the protective shell of his automobile. Increasingly he feels more at home within this shell than he does stepping out into the fresh air. When he feels like communing with nature he drives to a vantage point to sit in the car and watch the sun set, listening to a CD and enjoying drive-thru food and drive-thru beer purchased with drive-thru money. New technological endeavors are devoted to finding more and more ways to enable the motorist to conduct more and more of his life without once stepping out of his car. Indeed, technological visionaries suppose that soon motorists might be physically connected to their automobiles by way of biotechnological devices and really become part of the vehicle. Naturally, the more man adopts this exoskeleton the further his existence is removed from the pristine craftwork of nature - he is further abstracted from reality - and also the more his inherent bodily powers atrophy. Traditional man in whatever era walked a great deal in his life. Traditional life is local but it also insists on pilgrimage and, even with horse travel, walking was the normal mode of locomotion. It is the uniquely human mode of locomotion that cannot be compared to the gait of any other creature, contemporary or jurassic. The left-right alternation of walking, moreover, is integral to the human form and is directly analogous to the two halves of the brain so that, in quite a biological as well as symbolic sense, walking is a parallel to the basic operations of thinking. Modern man walks very little. He drives. This is to say he sits. He

spends more and more of his time sitting within the metal and glass protective shell of his automobile. Walking has been reduced to a few movements of the feet on pedals and in clutchless cars to just the accelerator. It is instead the upper body, the head and arms and hands with which ones drives. It is a particularly cerebral, head-focused activity compared to walking. The thinking that accompanies driving is a-physical and abstract. Consequently in this, as in other ways, modern man is being reduced physically and hardened mentally. He needs the protective shell because he is becoming more puny and more vulnerable in himself. This is the tragic paradox of technological man - the more gargantuan his technology becomes the more he is himself diminished as a creature. He is dwarfed by his own giants. He is the little man in the big machine, the Wizard of Oz. Modern mythology projects an image of this in the typical characterization of the technologically advanced "aliens" or creatures from outer space - pale, shrunken creatures with atrophied limbs and huge heads. Man empties himself into his technology. Bit by bit he replaces his internal faculties with exterior devices. This is the way of the cosmic cycle. Man is *most* microcosmic at the beginning of a cycle. He loses this integrity, however, and throughout the cycle his microcosmic powers are emptied back into the macrocosm. Every technological advance injures some aspect of man's primeval integrity. Man conquers nature by emptying himself. The conquest of nature is thus profoundly self-defeating. The discovery of fire weakened man's internal fire. The invention of shoes did injury to his feet. Literacy crippled his memory. We are currently exteriorizing the human nervous system into computers and the immune system into vaccines. More and more the human microcosm loses its integrity vis-à-vis the macrocosm. Cyclic decline is an *exteriorization*: the exoskeletal automobile is an image of this in our times. The zodiacal symbol mentioned earlier, the crab, calls for more comment here. In the conventions of modern Western astrology the zodiac begins at Aries and so Aries corresponds to the head in the human body. But an earlier symbolic order has the zodiac beginning at Cancer with that sign corresponding to the head. In this symbolism the crab is analogous to the exoskeletal human cranium. In the symbolism of the greater cycles Cancer is the primal age and the crab is an image of the microcosmic completeness of primordial man. But the beginning is also the end, and so there is a zodiacal symbolism underlying modern man's metamorphosis into crustaceans: as the end

of the cycle approaches and man has emptied his internal powers into his own productions, exteriorizing them, the primal symbolic is reversed parodically so that modern man in his automobile is a counter-image of the primordial microcosmic integrity of the men at the start of the cycle.

Returning to a Greek vocabulary, the sitting posture normal while driving, and the consequent decline of the uprightness of walking, and the idea that a life of this inevitably damages the primal integrity of the human form and its capacities, recalls the lameness of the demiurge, Hephaestus. It is commonly supposed that Hephaestus was made lame by his fall from Olympos to Lemnos, but in fact he was lame from birth and so a defective deity among the Olympians. Automobile technology is very precisely Hephaestean in this regard. Hephaestus is lame: his lower body has atrophied. He hobbles about playing with his gadgets and inventions. The motorist - his lower body irrelevant - is an Hephaestean being, symbolically lame. There is, in fact, in the mythology of Hephaestus recorded in Homer's account of the Trojan War, an uncanny foreshadowing of the self-moving vehicle presented as an Hephaestean device. In the blacksmith god's workshop, we are told, there are a set of metallic stools, forged from the god's furnace, that scuttle to and fro the assemblies of the Gods all of their own accord, like self-moving and intelligent creatures. In the same passage we also meet a group of "golden maidens" crafted of metal but who are nevertheless self-moving and endowed with *nous*, in what other writers have correctly observed to be a prefiguring of the modern robot. Modern technology has realised the contraptions of the Hephaestus' workshop and the automobile is the realisation of his fabulous self-moving stools. Hephaestus is a binding god too, and we note the way the traveler is bound into the cabin of the automobile by belts and straps. But there is no sense in which modern technology participates in a sacralized Hephaesteanism: rather the technology has now been stolen from the god who himself has disappeared in man's demiurgic intoxication and plunder of the earth. Inevitably, there must be demonic and diabolical forces associated with such a technology and indeed we see aspects of this in the way certain people develop obsessions with cars, in the phenomenon of "road rage" and of "speed demons", mild mannered people who are aggressive, maniacal drivers, and in the others ways people manifest forms of psychic

possession regarding cars. Every diabolical technology collects human victims whose lives are overtaken by the technology. Television is the obvious example. It impacts upon most of us, but some people it utterly absorbs and in effect destroys. The automobile is the same. The nature of the possession might be described as microcosmic collapse. Without the machine there is nothing left. Without his car modern man is stranded and cold. As the poet said, *the centre cannot hold*. In the end of days men become like rootless spinnifex in a frenzy of pointless transportation from A to B and back again and live their crustacean-like lives as a fitful journey to nowhere looking at reality through a windscreen. Traditional symbolisms provide ways to understand the diabolical nature of these things.