

The Trial

The man has been waiting patiently on the wooden bench in the chamber, not having much else to do: the light from above only illuminates the bench and a podium, as if the light was focused like a spotlight on Broadway, with everything around the focus fading into darkness. Low murmurs can be heard emanating from persons unseen, the volume increasing ominously as the walls echo the sounds.

Eventually, a sonorous voice rang out, "ORDER. LET THE DEFENDANT PRESENT HIS CASE."

Ever so slowly, the man rises from his bench, long white cloak flowing with his minute movements as he approaches the podium. Into the darkness he stares, eyes straining to make out the specific shape which the voice originated in the darkness beyond the light. His hands are shaking in trepidation; his voice cracks with a false start, which he feigns into a cough, and tries again.

"It has always been our goal, as a society, to reach for the unknown," the man starts, "As a society, we need something to strive for, like an apple teasing the burdened mule, to tantalize and captivate our imaginations so we can progress and learn, to push our limits and to accomplish more for a better future for the society.

"Since the dawn of our people, we have looked up into the heavens and fantasized about the moon, the stars and the planets: cultures created whole mythos surrounding these celestial bodies, for its tantalizing allure attracts the curiosity of the people. It is human nature to want to know the 'why', and it drives us to discover. With our tools and machines, many mysteries of the world has ceased to be enigmas, but the heavens are still beyond our understanding, and this gap in our knowledge drives us on.

"It would be a bittersweet parting if the mysteries were to be solved, but to abandon them altogether would be a tragedy. By forcing us to abandon our research and our drive, we lose the will to proceed, and instead stagnate in blissful ignorance of the world around us; being a society technologically frozen in time's onward march is something which should be avoided. Perhaps in the future –"

The man's monologue is interrupted by a loud voice from the shadows, with a different timbre as from the first, stamping out everything the man said.

"And it isn't like that already?", the voice interrupts.

Murmurs from the darkness creep out again as the man attempts to continue his monologue as if there was no interruption. The echos produced drown out the man's words, which themselves add to the din of the chamber.

"SILENCE. ANSWER THE QUESTION."

The man stumbles verbally yet again, as if hit by an invisible hand into a dumb stupor; to fill the deafening silence of the hall he made an obvious imitation of throat clearing before beginning.

“What you see now is merely a lull in scientific progress as a consequence of political and social-economical factors. I assure you that such conditions are merely transitory and in time the forward march of progress will reign again unimpeded. As I was saying, perhaps – ”

The voice interrupts again: “What makes you so sure? If your so-called scientific progress was merely a phase as opposed to the constant of your society as you are attempting to depict to us, you would have no ground to stand upon.”

“It's not a phase, you see – throughout history mankind has always sought for advancement, and even the most severe of the lulls in progress come to a pass,” the man says, “I trust that in the end, we will realize the cloud of fog which enshrouds our eyes impede us, and will move on to greater heights, such as the heavens itself. Right now the general population is ignorant and fumbling in the darkness, but eventually those of us which carry the beacon of enlightenment will usher yet another golden age, like ages gone past.”

Mutterings start again, rising in the familiar escalation of the room, but this time was abruptly cut short by a stern uttering: “BUT YOU HAVE NOT.”

Dreadful silence fills the room with such tension which seems a mere wayward breath would cause it to snap – the man's breathing was laboured under the duress of expectation in cold sweat. Seconds tick by, and the only sound is the pounding heartbeat of the man, whose every word seems to carry the weight of the world. Eventually, he says, “But we're trying. The masses are not easy to move, but I trust that eventually someone will come along with the right spark to do so and that day of glory will come to a pass. It is an inevitability, you see, and I'd bet everything on it.”

This time, the man is not cut off, but nevertheless the horde of voices seem to huddle around and discretely plan their next move. Perhaps the evidence was being discussed and would be sufficient to win him the trial. However unlikely that may be, one can always be optimistic. He was but one man, and the masses, while difficult, is possible to appease, but is merely a stone attempting to change the course of a river.

Yet another voice wrenches the man from his thoughts into unadulterated reality: “Have you lost reason on which you have grounded your precious science on? What of the past hundred years suggests that human civilization will recover from the catastrophe it has wrought upon itself, dooming its people to a world of false reality, where fantasy is much more preferred than stark reality?”

The chamber floods with light, momentarily blinding the man, and suddenly the walls weren't there – the chamber seems to have spontaneously transformed into a spherical theatre with a perfect view of the world. The chorus of voices begin to thunder.

“Look at the wastelands tendered by unkempt nature, effected by the neglect of humanity after you discovered the escape that virtual reality brought; thousands of years of civilization and knowledge lay undisturbed in rotting catacombs, unseen by those who rather spend the day daydreaming in that bubble which nurtures them from the cradle to the grave; generations of people never had and will never understand the hardships of work or the joys of discovery, limited by the imagination of *a priori* knowledge without authentic experience to learn of new things.

“Look at the cells which you men have willingly confined yourselves in, addicted to the soma fed into them from birth, unwilling to face the crude reality and its superficial imperfection, choosing instead to spend their existence away from the natural beauty of the world. Idleness rules the day in the least productive of manners, wasting the abstract thought that your ancestors once gathered from such bouts of daydreaming and instead exists to only fuel the fantasy of the mind as a part of the so-called 'paradise' you yourself created and in yore heralded as a saviour, but is the root of the neglect viewed previously.

“As one of your poets once mentioned, ignorance is bliss. When the collective of humanity choose to extol the virtues of idleness, the responsibility of knowledge becomes a burden to bear, and it is only natural for them to be ignored. If there is something which throughout time has remained a constant for all of humanity, it is the short-sightedness and stubbornness of its societies, unwilling to change because change is novel and unwelcome. Society then thus shuts itself in its willing static prison and collectively reject our gifts to mankind; in this state you have no use nor need for it, and we think these gifts would be used better elsewhere.”

The man slumped against the chamber floor, hard and cold. His hands are clamped over his ears in the foetal position in denial, for he knows the absolute truth of the words uttered. There is no redemption, no salvation, and no emancipation from the fate in store.

“YOUR REQUEST FOR A TRIAL HAS BEEN MADE. EVEN YOU UNDERSTAND THE FUTILITY IN OPPOSING OUR WILL, FOR IT IS ABSOLUTE IN ITS DECISION. IN A FASHION REMINISCENT OF YOUR VULGAR PRACTICES, MAY THE FORGETFUL WATERS OF LETHE WASH OVER YOU.”

A silent outcry blares through the man's head as he is escorted out of the chamber; while one side cries in outrage that a heritage is lost, a small voice within reminds him that man has lost nothing at all.

By Joshua Tsai