

The Acceleration of Modern History

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IN THE PAINTING *The Tichborne Dole* by Gillis van Tilborch, one sees Sir Henry Tichborne and members of his family, accompanied by his household staff, gathered in front of his Tudor home and prepared to distribute the dole. Baskets of loaves are in the foreground. The figures in the painting wear the peculiar tall hats of the seventeenth century. On the right of the composition are tenants and villagers.

This somber, realistic painting brings to life a distant time and a vanished social order. It helps us to reach across the centuries and envision a fabric of life completely unlike our own. Painting, like history, helps us reconstruct the past and perceive values and social relations which have disappeared with the passage of time. Sometimes, as in *The Tichborne Dole*, we are given a glimpse into customs and attitudes that are wholly outside contemporary experience. And the revealing art work also makes us better comprehend what historian William H. McNeill refers to as "the incessant mutability" of human life. He insists that this is the most salient characteristic of life in the modern era, saying that "no sooner has the restless West worked out a potential 'classic' style of life . . . than with great tribulation that particular ordering of society and culture" is discarded. Indeed this is the sadness of history—what Heraclitus recognized so long ago, namely that everything changes.

We know this, but the shock of recognition of change—virtually total change—is a continuing discovery. There's a very human desire for continuity, for a fixed lifestyle, scenes, and mores; but change affects and overcomes everything. To be

sure, in some societies, which are remote from centers of unrushing Westernization—India is an example—the old retreats very slowly or co-exists with the new. Even in Western Europe, with its involvement with technology and social transformation, the environment is more fixed than it is across the Atlantic; the landmarks of a civilization are safeguarded and preserved to a greater degree than in America. The character of the old countries of Europe persists in its physical manifestations, despite the turbulence and turmoil of the late twentieth century, such as one finds in the inner districts of London and Frankfurt.

In America, however, life is in a state of accelerating transition. The surviving fragments of colonial and nineteenth-century America—even early twentieth-century America—are constantly threatened as communities are revamped to conform to contemporary desires. A real danger exists that, without constant and successful struggle, the heritage of the American past will be obliterated. In 1887, Joseph West Moore wrote of Washington that it was a city of "countless turrets." Today, as the author of *Washington Then and Now* correctly observes, "most of the turrets have disappeared." The long-range survival of even the most protected districts has to be in question because of the underlying social transformation which has altered living patterns that made possible the areas now gentrified, at least temporarily saved from destruction. The more one studies the history of American cities, the more one realizes how everything has changed in American life, except in isolated corners. One looks down a street with knowledge of its

yesteryear and sees in the mind's eye several different streets; one comprehends how the frame of life is almost completely changed generation by generation. And what one sees today of late twentieth-century America surely won't survive long into the twenty-first century. Impermanence is the hallmark of modern America.

Of course it is not only buildings—the frames for life—that have been demolished in recent decades. Our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents lived in worlds utterly different from our own. These were worlds different in clothing worn, transportation, commercial activity, recreation, language, social customs, and codes of behavior. As we comprehend all this, we comprehend the enormous acceleration of history. The result of the acceleration is that it's difficult to be at peace with life, to be reconciled to any set of changes, for they are transient in character and will be followed by others. This wasn't the nature of life in the past; this wasn't a condition of existence that human beings had to deal with in psychological terms. In the past, the transformation of life was accomplished at a slow pace, often an almost imperceptible pace. A Roman of the second century A.D. lived in a world very similar to the world of the second century B.C.

Nowadays the pace quickens; it's almost impossible for one generation to adjust to the world of the next generation. Even the decades seem to take on distinct character. Angela Carter writes that the stones of European country life today are "permeated with a sense of loss." She says that much of the older European order is "crumbling away." She cites the deep change taking place on the land—"the final divorce of human beings from the land." She finds this change "perhaps greater than the transition from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age." And if this is true of Europe, how much more true it is of America, as evidenced by the shocking change in the American farm heartland since the early 1980s—a region with

frightening depopulation and economic loss.

Michael Novak, the distinguished scholar, has written an analysis of change in the American farming region and arrived at a conclusion similar to that reached by Miss Carter. He says that "Farmers in the American Middle West" are "hit by forces they do not understand, [and] are living in fear." He observes that farmers "choose a way of life that means being rooted for generations. And how that rooted existence is being destroyed by the economic forces of the late twentieth century." He concludes that the process is "worse than a funeral."

One wonders: Can modern Americans develop a way of dealing with a tidal wave of change? Should moderns "shout hallelujah to the river gods," as a British political philosopher once asked in regard to disturbing changes? The historian Francis Russell, writing in another context, finds change impossible to come to terms with. "Time's passage," he says "is too inexplicable to think about, so we do not think about it. It is the petrifying enigma." Nevertheless, Russell has dwelled on and written about time—the movement of "the rectangle of sunlight"—in enormously eloquent, perceptive ways. And is it not our duty to dwell on time and living patterns in a world unnerved by the acceleration of history? If we don't do this, how can we keep our sanity and maintain our desire to live and build for future generations?

With the speed-up in modern life has come an alteration in our perception of reality. Dr. Stephen Bertman, author of *Doorways to Time*, has observed that we have come to accept the modern concept of the proper tempo of life as the only tempo. Our minds are conditioned by what is strictly contemporary, as though every human being were compelled to adopt a single way of life and mode of thought. We should realize that this is a fundamental goal of totalitarian societies which are distinctively modern phenomena. Even the most democratic society generates enormous social and

economic pressures that have the effect of pushing people into a single mold. And democratic theorists are as determined as totalitarian ideologues to compel people to conform to contemporary values and norms. Witness the contemporary contempt or disapproval directed at contemplatives or those who elect to uphold the traditional Christian value of chastity. In some churches there is opposition to those who choose to shape their religious lives in terms of a personal relationship with the Almighty, a quiet, religious life in which the individual withdraws from society. Only a corporate, socially-oriented religious faith finds widespread approval. And this is so despite long centuries of human religious expression of a very individual, inner-focused type. It's as though church leaders were saying that God now only approves of a thoroughly contemporary form of religious expression and rejects all other types from the past.

Indeed, rejection of the past is a central feature of modern thought in many fields, as though what exists now, or is in process of development, has primacy over whatever was thought, done, or favored in the past. Thus, art is admired and valued to the extent that it departs from the representational tradition of Western art. Newness is regarded as the sole criterion of correctness or greatness in numerous areas of life from the arts to social relations and individual behavior.

What the modern world establishes in adopting this response to the acceleration of history is a pattern of deprivation. When we tear down, eliminate, or exclude what has gone before, we undermine our personal and civilizational base, eradicate important values and sanctions, and leave ourselves exposed, vulnerable, and empty. Because of our modern knowledge, we believe that we understand everything about the world. We give up all of that which has become less human in turn, and are emptier for all our knowledge.

The only solution for this condition, the only way to end the state of deprivation, is a conscious inner turning that allows one

to deepen one's perception of the world. Ironically, our perception of both past and present is impaired by our knowledge, that is to say, by the conceptual frameworks of existence that represent modern understanding. In the laboratory, a scientist sees tiny organisms through a microscope and discerns layers of life unknown to the ancients. But that same scientist, in the course of daily life, is likely to view the world pretty much as a blur. He assumes that he understands all. While astronomy has taken giant leaps as a science, ordinary human beings undoubtedly are far less familiar with the celestial environment than the builders of the stone circles of Britain and Western Europe 4,000 years ago. The stars aren't an intimate part of the world of moderns; the seasons don't affect us—at least moderns in cities in advanced countries—the way they affected ancient people or even those contemporary people who live on the margins of the modern, industrialized, urbanized world.

One suspects that moderns are over-specialized, over-concentrated on the knowledge derived from a small band of time. Specialization and concentration make modern man vulnerable psychologically, if in no other way. In ancient times over-specialization led to the weakening and the destruction of societies—a truth that doesn't escape moderns with a knowledge of and interest in history. And with the over-specialization and concentration I have referred to has come a diminishment of a sense of awe about life, which surely is dangerous inasmuch as the story of human life is the story of the unpredictable occurring—the happening that can't be calculated.

One of the most disturbing of modern phenomena is the inability of many people to take seriously previous eras and the people who lived in them. This surely isn't the case with modern historians and archaeologists, but they face an uphill struggle in an age that has scanty interest in and respect for the past, except as a momentary curiosity. This phenomenon may be accounted for to some degree by

the fact that people in our time are accustomed to intense visual presentations involving color and movement. They may find the black and white photo of the past from the nineteenth and early twentieth century—and still less the stone and brick fragments, drawings, and textiles from earlier ages, markedly less real. Thus, as Dr. Bertman suggests, “the ancient medium becomes the message.” When the instruments of communication were less perfect, people didn’t have cause to encounter this kind of reality gap.

Jane Greer, an American poet, is among those who don’t experience this gap, who appreciates the importance of remembering and going back even further than one’s own birth or one’s own times. She reminds us that we are “attached,” saying, “We are not historyless like Adam, breathed out of nothing; we’re drawn from the narrow end of a real and compelling vortex—*history*—vivid with blood and bone, passion and fear, as it touches down to make us in the here and now. . . . It was and is real, all immediate in its time. . . .”

If moderns have this understanding, they will be able to overcome the psychological emptiness of the modern age. They will develop a sense of continuity and permanence—a sense that’s essential to civilized existence. Of course, it’s necessary to substitute understanding for the reality of permanence and security that existed in earlier ages. Today, unhappily, we live in a world full of built-in obsolescence—short-term loyalties, marriages, social views, jobs.

In a world of “incessant mutability” life affords a diminishing number of guarantees of solidity. Hence in our era there is emphasis upon immediate gratification. That accounts for the “me” generation outlook and the popularity of libertarian notions that elevate individual wants to the highest level. The past offered much that the present lacks, namely tranquility, simplicity, communal life, and loyalty, and extended family bonds. To be sure, one must not idealize the past and regard it as though it contained only those character-

istics and qualities. As we know, there were long periods of ferocity, calamity, and collapse, protracted decline and terror resulting from the encroachment of barbarians on civilized centers. Nevertheless, there were long sunlit patches, periods of equilibrium; and the different societies of older times were constructed to last. As we study their rhythms of life, we find nothing like the modern anticipation of impermanence that is so destabilizing to our psyches.

The key question for us is whether civilized existence can endure in the new instant world that virtually demolishes the concept of durability in everything from household goods to marriages. Is the instant life ordained by the technology that we value so much and that we can’t live without and can’t earn our living without? Are we totally creatures and captives of technology? One of the favorite sayings and ideas of our age is that one can’t “turn back the clock.” Children growing up in the instant world don’t know any other time sense except as they study history or ponder the meaning of paintings such as *The Tichborne Dole*. There has been the fear in modern times—in connection with totalitarian societies—that children born into an Orwellian world would have a consciousness and a conscience completely sundered from the consciousness and conscience associated with the pre-totalitarian world. And one also must wonder—and, yes, fear—that the children of today and tomorrow will lose all contact with the values and time-sense of the past and not miss at all what they haven’t known personally—and this in a democratic society. If this fear proves to have been justified, the future will be a cemetery of values.

Terry Waite, who was seized by terrorists in Lebanon, expressed concern about this development, saying that “over the years we have in many ways removed ourselves from history and from our heritage.” It’s as difficult to recognize the dimensions of this move today as it was difficult for the Romans during the decline of the Empire to recognize that the old order—an order that seemed eternal—was

disappearing. As Morris Bishop has said, "the transition from ancient to medieval was slow." Rome fell quietly and over a lengthy period. Many factors contributed to the decline and fall, including license, luxury and sloth, Christian non-resistance and other-worldliness, the change in the Roman population through the admission of barbarian peoples, and the willingness of the rulers to admit non-Romans to Roman citizenship.

The task before us as moderns—perhaps as post-moderns—is to prevent the heritage of our civilization slipping away—prevent an erosion of the richness of which we are heirs. It also is our task to overcome the restlessness, the emptiness, and the obsession with the new that is characteristic of modern life at its worst. Finally, our task is to fashion within the technological framework of evolving contemporary life the human values derived from the past so that humaneness isn't obliterated in the future. And part of this effort must be restoration of the idea of durability in personal and social relations so that values aren't of the instant variety. This task should be achievable because awareness of the importance of the inner core of our lives is strong. As H. D. Forbes said in *The Idler* (June 1987), "the human being has an impenetrable inwardness." We can't afford to lose that inwardness in the new world of advanced technology.

We can't afford to lose the traits which we know to be distinctively human—love of God, family and country, mercy, courage unto death; loss of these traits is the real horror of the world described in Orwell's *1984*. As so many age-old features of life have disappeared in the late twentieth century, one can't assume that the distinctively human qualities and values will endure; they are endangered. Indeed Flora Lewis has pointed out that in the twenty-first century the adulthood of children already born "yawns ahead with uncertainties." We must continually ask

ourselves: What truly matters in life? What must we save from the past? What must survive if there is to be continuity in our civilization, despite colossal change in so many areas. Always, certainly, we need to bear in mind that gaining new tools such as electronics does nothing to improve the inner quality of life or to advance wisdom. Robert Allen has written:

I sense a serious drift in the world. Too many people know how to make a silicon chip or sell a silicon starlet, but nothing else. We are abdicating our humanity; we are turning into a race of petty engineers intent on oiling the gears and fine-tuning the sprockets while the juggernaut of technology lumbers we know not where, with us along as coal stokers.

Ultimately our task in this generation is to come to grips with it so that time is sensed and valued differently in the pursuit of our inner lives than our technological epoch values time—that is, as a function of a machine guided and directed existence. We must seek inner rhythms that give us a sense of peace amid turbulence. We cannot allow our lives to be shaped by the speed-up dictated by the technic world, though we continue to live in that world. Philosophy, religion, study and appreciation of the past should give us a way of transcending the time sense and the values of a technological age. The time sense of the modern, urban, highly technological world is inadequate for enduring human requirements—inner peace, a sense of joy, an appreciation of beauty, profound loyalties, and a deep-rooted feeling of community with bonds of a lasting character. We must be able to transcend the forces and dictates of our era. Modern people must find ways to step back from the crush of the external contemporary world and discover inner resources and an inner life that will carry them through the tumult of a new century that will impose change to an extent never known in man's long history.