

Time Must Have a Stop.

Aldous Huxley, 1944

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But meanwhile, where was the note he had made by way of commentary on those lines in Hotspur's final speech? He flicked through the pages. Here it was.

If you say absolutely everything, it all tends to cancel out into nothing. Which is why no explicit philosophy can be dug out of Shakespeare. But as a metaphysic by implication, as a system of beauty-truths, constituted by the poetical relationships of scenes and lines, and inhering in the blank spaces between even such words as 'told by an idiot, signifying nothing,' the plays are the equivalent of a great theological Summa. And, of course, if you choose to ignore the negatives that cancel them out, what extraordinary isolated utterances of a perfectly explicit wisdom! I keep thinking, for example, of those two and a half lines in which the dying Hotspur casually summarizes an epistemology, an ethic and a metaphysic.

*<<But thought's the slave of life, and life's time's fool,
And time, that takes survey of all the world,
Must have a stop. >>*

Three clauses, of which the twentieth century has paid attention only to the first. Thought's enslavement to life is one of our favourite themes. Bergson and the Pragmatists, Adler and Freud, the Dialectical Materialism boys and the Behaviourists – all tootle their variations on it. Mind is nothing but a tool for making tools; controlled by unconscious forces,

either sexual or aggressive; the product of social and economic pressures; a bundle of conditioned reflexes. All quite true, so far as it goes; but false if it goes no further. For, obviously, if mind is only some kind of nothing-but, none of its affirmations can make any claim to general validity. But all nothing-but philosophies make such claims. Therefore they can't be true; for if they were true, that would be the proof that they were false. Thought's the slave of life – undoubtedly. But if it weren't also something else, we couldn't make even this partially valid generalization.

The significance of the second clause is mainly practical. Life's time's fool. By merely elapsing time makes nonsense of all life's conscious planning and scheming. No considerable action has ever had all or nothing but the results expected of it. Except under controlled conditions, or in circumstances where it is possible to ignore individuals and consider only large numbers and the law of averages, any kind of accurate foresight is impossible. In all actual human situations more variables are involved than the human mind can take account of; and with the passage of time the variables tend to increase in number and change their character. These facts are perfectly familiar and obvious. And yet the only faith of a majority of twentieth-century Europeans and Americans is faith in the Future – the bigger and better Future, which they know that Progress is going to produce for them, like rabbits out of a hat. For the sake of what their faith tells them

about a Future time, which their reason assures them to be completely unknowable, they are prepared to sacrifice their only tangible possession, the Present.

Since I was born, thirty-two years ago, about fifty millions of Europeans and God knows how many Asiatics have been liquidated in wars and revolutions. Why? In order that the great-greatgrandchildren of those who are now being butchered or starved to death may have an absolutely wonderful time in a.d. 2043. And (choosing, according to taste or political opinion, from among the Wellsian, Marxian, Capitalistic or Fascist blueprints) we solemnly proceed to visualize the sort of wonderful time these lucky beggars are going to have. Just as our early Victorian greatgreat-grandfathers visualized the sort of wonderful time we were going to have in the middle years of the twentieth century.

True religion concerns itself with the givenness of the timeless. An idolatrous religion is one in which time is substituted for eternity – either past time, in the form of a rigid tradition, or future time, in the form of Progress towards Utopia. And both are Molochs, both demand human sacrifice on an enormous scale. Spanish Catholicism was a typical idolatry of past time. Nationalism, Communism, Fascism, all the social pseudo-religions of the twentieth century, are idolatries of future time.

What have been the consequences of our recent shift of attention from Past to Future? An intellectual progress from the Garden of Eden

to Utopia; a moral and political advance from compulsory orthodoxy and the divine right of kings to conscription for everybody, the infallibility of the local boss and the apotheosis of the State. Before or behind, time can never be worshipped with impunity.

But Hotspur's summary has a final clause: time must have a stop. And not only must as an ethical imperative and an eschatological hope, but also does have a stop, in the indicative tense, as a matter of brute experience. It is only by taking the fact of eternity into account that we can deliver thought from its slavery to life. And it is only by deliberately paying our attention and our primary allegiance to eternity that we can prevent time from turning our lives into a poindess or diabolic foolery. The divine Ground is a timeless reality. Seek it first, and all the rest – everything from an adequate interpretation of life to a release from compulsory self-destruction – will be added. Or, transposing the theme out of the evangelical into a Shakespearean key, you can say: 'Cease being ignorant of what you are most assured, your glassy essence, and you will cease to be an angry ape, playing such fantastic tricks before high heaven as make the angels weep'.

A postscript to what I wrote yesterday. In politics we have so firm a faith in the manifestly unknowable future that we are prepared to sacrifice millions of lives to an opium smoker's dream of Utopia or world dominion or perpet-

ual security. But where natural resources are concerned, we sacrifice a pretty accurately predictable future to present greed. We know, for example, that if we abuse the soil it will lose its fertility; that if we massacre the forests our children will lack timber and see their uplands eroded, their valleys swept by floods. Nevertheless, we continue to abuse the soil and massacre the forests. In a word, we immolate the present to the future in those complex human affairs where foresight is impossible; but in the relatively simple affairs of nature, where we know quite well what is likely to happen, we immolate the future to the present. 'Those whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.'

For four and a half centuries white Europeans have been busily engaged in attacking, oppressing and exploiting the coloured peoples inhabiting the rest of the world. The Catholic Spaniards and Portuguese began it; then came Protestant Dutch and Englishmen, Catholic French, Greek Orthodox Russians, Lutheran Germans, Catholic Belgians. Trade and the Flag, exploitation and oppression, have always and everywhere followed or accompanied the proselytizing Cross.

Victims have long memories – a fact which oppressors can never understand. In their magnanimity they forget the ankle they twisted while stamping on the other fellow's face, and are genuinely astonished when he refuses to shake the hand that flogged him and manifests no eagerness to go and get baptized.

But the fact remains that a shared theology is one of the indispensable conditions of peace. For obvious and odious historical reasons, the Asiatic majority will not accept Christianity. Nor can it be expected that Europeans and Americans will swallow the whole of Brahmanism, say, or Buddhism. But the Minimum Working Hypothesis is also the Highest Common Factor.

Three prostrate telegraph poles lying in the patch of long grass below my window at the inn – lying at a slight angle one to another, but all foreshortened, all insisting, passionately, on the fact (now all of a sudden unspeakably mysterious) of the third dimension. To the left the sun is in the act of rising. Each pole has its attendant shadow, four or five feet wide, and the old wheel tracks in the grass, almost invisible at midday, are like canyons full of blue darlaieess. As a ‘view,’ nothing could be more perfectly pointless; and yet, for some reason, it contains all beauty, all significance, the subject-matter of all poetry.

Industrial man – a sentient reciprocating engine having a fluctuating output, coupled to an iron wheel revolving with uniform velocity. And then we wonder why this should be the golden age of revolution and mental derangement. Democracy is being able to say no to the boss, and you can’t say no to the boss unless you have enough property to enable you to

eat when you have lost the boss’s patronage. There can be no democracy where . . .

Sebastian turned over a page or two. Then his eye was caught by the opening words of a note that was dated, ‘Christmas Eve.’