

THE MILLENNIUM



ALBERT PINKHAM RYDER, *TOILERS OF THE SEA*

the implosion of our overcrowded species might be a more immediate cause of bursting out of our egg.

Of course we entertain our Buck Rogers dreams of escape into space, a sort of *folktrek* into the cosmos. We pursue exploration of space in the manner our European ancestors forced themselves upon the rest of earth in fierce competition for whatever spoils might be found. We are a species of insatiable plunderers, though of course we tell ourselves we are not, that we seek only knowledge (and, some claim, *God*). Our great hunger is for wealth and for what is useful to us. Unless we experience a mass epiphany overnight we will most likely behave beyond the ozone as our predecessors beyond the oceans. We will pillage planets and hammer and smash space matter until it is functional. Our vision of the universe is as of a huge orchard of riches.

A paradox that underlies history is that the eras of greatest creativity and discovery are also the most dangerous. The 50 years since World War 2 are unparalleled in the advances of knowledge and productivity, comparable to the entirety of the previous ten millennia, and we have consequently structured technologies that are destroying us even as our civilization owes its existence to them. Seers of government and industry patronize us with visions of increasing affluence and certain virtually painless technological solutions to deadly problems caused by technology. The assumption is that the *haves* will have more and be able to endlessly amuse themselves to death. It is our irony that in a world in which half its human population is threatened with death each day because it has hardly enough with which to survive, the portion that has much more than it should is strangling on the wastes of its affluence.

The mechanization of the society while alleviating the dependence on muscle has underestimated and disregarded the

aspirations and sensitivities of biological beings who resent definition as economic or utilitarian units. The mass upsurge in religion and subsequent lateral involvement in personal salvation is a defense against a world that overpowers and humiliates the individual person.

It takes a long time to throw off obsolescent philosophies and ways of viewing the world. The salvation of our bodies and souls does not lie in elegant mythological solutions nor is ascension to the clouds the reward of a life spent on one's knees. We are at a point in our evolution in which we ought to realize that everything is continually in transition, that ideas and institutions change and wear away with the same consistency as mountain ranges. Space exploration has significantly altered perceptions of Earth and has begun changes within its societies that are remaking civilization and drawing the majority of us reluctantly out from our personal pasts we wish to burrow into like comfortable sofas. The computer redesigns society rapidly and incompletely.

Nuclear power, which is the fortress of nationalism, has rendered it obsolete. Nationalism, capitalism, democracy, socialism and communism are no more than parts of a process of human development that is always evolving into something else. Ideals, which are usually expressions of concern that people have about the welfare of others, develop into ideologies that separate them as enemies. Ideologies do not translate well into realities. Governments generally violate their charters, and no matter how they wish to be considered, are most often oppressive to their populations and aggressive with their neighbors. Political rights or liberties hardwon by one generation are usually eroded by successors who take them for granted without realizing how rare and necessary they are. Calculated fears of enemies leads to abrogation of civil rights. Dialogue succumbs to what is safe to say or think. Demagogues thrive in

atmospheres of fear and despair; without the cooperation of the populations they arouse and repress they would have no power.

Though we are inclined to measure progress through technical achievement it should at least be as important to concentrate on the contradictory evolution of political liberty and the slow development of a world civilization. Marx anticipated such a civilization in the last century, the two world wars made it almost impossible to resist in this century. The great contradiction lies with the rights and liberties of individuals and minorities, and with former colonies and subject nations that have been released from foreign dominance and reassert their claims as separate and independent peoples while genociding themselves with ancient feuds and virulent ethnic cleansing.

As we warp into the 21st century we should remember that the center of the century we are departing, at its very heart, is the war that even in an era of secular modernism and passive morality exposed the true evil of humanity's ambiguity. Propelled by increasing intellectual ferment and rapid, bewildering social and technological change, a reaction of violence and murder on an unprecedented scale tore apart the modern psyche, which has not recovered. At the core of our century are the death camps: those horrible names that will forevermore elicit a shudder in history. Auschwitz. Dachau. Treblinka.

Almost all religions prophesize a final war or cataclysm that will end human life. We are now present at prophecy. All of our history has led us to the savage frontier of our most primitive fears. We cannot uninvent nuclear weapons. The knowledge of them is with us for as long as the human race defies its own handicaps and dwells in the galaxy. Our extinction might be melodramatic if we do not take charge of our evolution and completely dismantle all nuclear arsenals as well as chemical and biological warfare agents. If we are not smart enough to contain our goblins of mass destruction we will leave little trace that we once briefly and foolishly dominated Earth.

We live at present in an age of intellectual reversion, of savage descent to public ignorance and intolerance, which are generally present but not always given the forum or respect of recent years. We pay serious, almost morbid attention to the pathological pieties and simplifications of religious zealots, racial supremacists and far-right ideologues who act at the extreme edge of our anxieties and reduce the national dialogue to a medieval level. Undemeath the meanness and bellicosity that signify our national regression is a plea to slow down the lunge of technological disruption, a refusal of the nihilistic vision of the future that the popular culture visually and noisily embraces. The feeling is that the culture has moved off the track of its history, that it moves too quickly for anything to have much significance. The majority careen along as if nothing will stick to them or be affected by them.

We must begin to pay attention to consequences, to remember now and then that the morning cup of coffee perpetuates the economic enslavement of a continent, that the excess food we waste contributes to the starvation of millions, and a charitable scrap or two thrown to the hungry does not relieve the causes of their hunger. We cannot afford any longer to blur truth or approach hard realities obliquely. We must change our definitions: tyranny is tyranny, left or right, murder and terrorism have no other definitions whether initiated by huge war machines or small groups of amateurs. We must accept responsibility for the ravaging of our planet and for the enormous contradictions between equality and wealth. We should learn that our aggression and carelessness will probably obliterate us and remove our species from a history we are only beginning to comprehend. We should not allow our anxieties about that comprehension destroy us.

We might listen to quieter voices we seldom hear over the uproar, friendly voices that guarantee difficult times ahead and warn us that we need each other to get there from here. We are alone together in the dark and each of us will inescapably die.

We imperil the future when we lose faith in it. We endanger our descendants when we try to hide our evasive lives in the vanished worlds of our ancestors. No single human can avoid death by retreating into a personal past and a society cannot survive through empty homage to a fancied simpler period or more glorious age. Romanticizing the past inhibits the insights that history provides and dissolves the strengths of will necessary to converge with the future.

It really makes little sense to fear the future. After all, it is where we will spend the rest of our lives. Every moment is new, like waves from an immense ocean, each second an uncertainty unexplored and doubtful and as instantly history, irretrievable except in memory and myth.

Arthur Rimbaud wrote, *At dawn, armed with burning patience we shall enter the splendid cities.* And Samuel Beckett: *You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.*



"He didn't say 'al dente,' did he?"

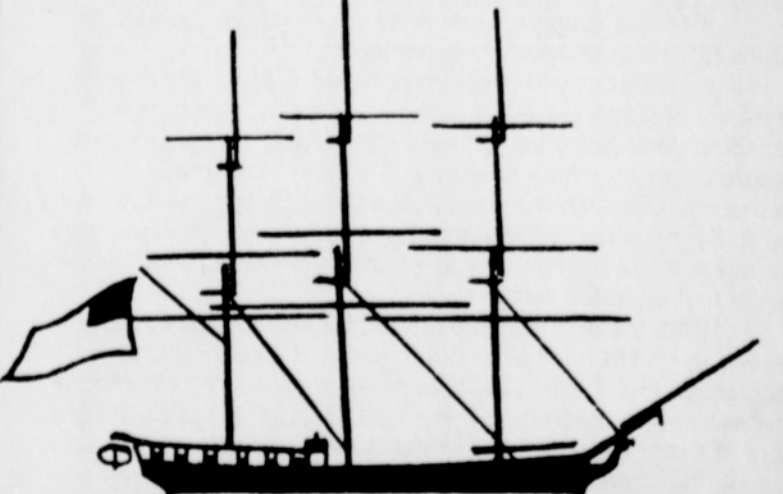
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