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## NOTES & TOPICS

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### On Time, Age, and Cosmonauts

IN MIDDLE-AGE nostalgia is not just one æsthetic emotion among many: it is an ingredient of every occasion when beauty penetrates a thickening carapace.

Everyone is half-possessed by his private Golden Age; even, so I suspect, those whose childhoods were an agony of loneliness or hardship. ("Ah, when she *stopped* beating me! Has there ever been such joyful relief in later years?")

The valley through my window is brilliant with the early morning sun. Poignancy is the first and last element of my muted joy at this shining meadow between the woods. I don't remember, of course, an exact occasion, or exact occasions, when such a scene and time of day moved me as a child. What stabs the mind—"poignant" is one of those marvellous words whose original and half-buried meaning throbs like a kind of pun—what stabs the mind when I watch this meadow is more like the memory of a repeated dream than of any waking occasion long ago.

Yet it is, of course, the existence of past occasions in the mind which creates this dream-like sense of loss and beauty. And what complicates and exacerbates this valued emotion is that those distant occasions were all of them suffused with expectation and not at all with regret. I regret the time when beauty involved me in no regret.

It must have been this common, perhaps almost universal experience, which led to the multitudinous myths of a real Golden Age, set in history or before it. A harmless and appealing myth in many of its forms: in other forms a dangerous and misleading perversion. Even the childhood which we recall at these moments of poignancy is unreal in the sense that our minds have selected only the brightest colours of that many-coloured spectrum. How much less real are those many forms of "the good old days" which have been invented to justify a purely personal regret and sense of loss! This is a hypostatisation: the attempt to derive an intellectual construction from an emotional experience. "Because, in my middle age, my childhood gleams for me in unearthly colours, the world itself was better long ago."

Yet the conservative *emotions* are not merely excusable or legitimate: they are the necessary

and humanising reaction to the distress of growing old. This perpetual, almost dizzying play of the past on the present is what makes growing old not only bearable but a constant enrichment. This interplay is capable of frequent and various permutations: one of my own intentions is to experience, recognise, and register as many of these as possible.

LAST WEEK I came across the photograph of a youngish Dr. Goebbels. There could be no direct æsthetic emotion here, such as a sunny meadow does provide. Yet the two occasions produced reactions which were strangely similar. That particular face of Goebbels belongs to 1932 or 1933, early in the last stage of my "productive past." (For me nothing experienced after the age of twenty-two is capable of producing poignancy, or the true interplay of past and present.) That face of Goebbels! What a complex—an unseizable complex—of places, faces, smells, tastes, and emotions! From which seems to emerge the Midland railway station at Rugby and a great-aunt whom I certainly never saw there. With no incentive of charm or beauty that mean little face has produced an emotion which is æsthetic, significant, wryly pleasurable.

But I do not hanker for the dear dead days of Dr. Goebbels!

Politics are about what happens next, informed by what has already happened. The main thing about them is that they must be directly concerned with the future, and only indirectly, only informatively with the past. Personal nostalgia is a disastrous motive for political action, if only because this true and rich emotion is bound to become embittered when it is allowed to engage in a direct conflict with present reality. Nostalgia should illuminate and animate the present. If we use it to deny the present we are constructing a ridiculous opposition between phenomena which belong to different planes of experience. One cannot sensibly oppose a mountain with a dream, or an economic system with regret for the sunlight flashing on nanny's spectacles.

The opposite fault is the hypostatisation of the future which is indulged in by the more extreme utopians. Such people often seem to have inhumanly severed themselves not only from history but also from their own childhood. And since a politician should be fully human he ought at least to be *equipped* with regret and a sense of poignancy.

Marx wrote that "the social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future." He was wrong, for there is no poetry of the future and all revolutions have looked backward for their poetry.

But how difficult for a politician, or anyone

else, to hold the proper balance—to allow only the legitimate and enriching confrontations of past and present! And if the poet or artist must err he will do better to err in the direction of sentimentalising the past rather than in the direction of inventing the future. The past, after all, is *something*—even in a sentimentalised form—while the future is nothing at all. When young poets glorify the future they either leave it mercifully vague and undescribed, or they simply transfer into that non-existence something which they love and admire in the existing world of past and present. (Growing old is the discovery that the future did not exist after all.)

HAS ALL THIS BEEN NO MORE than an attempt to explain (though not to excuse) the revulsion I feel against capsules and cosmonauts? Let it be plain, in any case, that I feel hardly more kindly towards astronauts; and the very existence of these rival terms contributes to my disgust at the whole affair.

I feel, in any case, that it would be more honest to approach my revulsion in this way, emotionally and personally, than to rehearse once again the more or less familiar reasons for deploring a childish waste of energy and money.

The extreme achievements of technology have become increasingly alien to most people's everyday experience. Fifteenth-century armour, in its more extravagant forms, is already a property of science-fiction—of *our* science-fiction. Those steel monsters, with bird-cage helmets, have never been domesticated—have never taken their place in the familiar bric-à-brac of history. And what about this:

Their squat barrels, doubled by the recoil cylinders that grew on their backs like tumours, pointed their cavernous mouths upward. . . . The crews wearing padding over eyes, ears, and mouths lay flat on their stomachs ready for the firing which was done electrically at a distance of 300 yards. . . . The shells rose in an arc 4,000 feet high and took sixty seconds to reach their targets. . . . Men of the garrisons heard the shells descending with a screaming whistle . . . until the shells exploded upon them with deafening crash and the stolid steel heads smashed through the concrete. . . . Ceilings fell in, galleries were blocked, fire, gas, and noise filled the underground chambers; men became hysterical, even mad, in the awful apprehension of the next shot.\*

Read in anything approaching a "normal" state of mind this, too, seems to belong to some mercifully unrealised and scarcely credible future. In fact it is a description of Skoda 305s bombarding the Liège forts in August, 1914.

\* August 1914. By Barbara W. Tuckman. Constable.

Surely it was the wild, inconceivable disparity between this futuristic horror and any kind of normal peace-time experience which helped to drive the men mad. There is a limit to the possibilities of physical pain, which was reached, no doubt, by a flint spearhead twisted in the stomach. Those Belgian garrisons were not pioneers in their experience of pain, but they did experience a new degree of horror at the monsters which their own world had been *secretly* creating. (The frightful new artefacts of that war were a secret, in a sense, even from the men who worked on them. At night those men went home from the factories, and there they ceased to believe in the monsters they were helping to create. What is more the new weapons could have no emotional reality until they were used.)

It may be, of course, that some scientists, technicians, and skilled industrial workers really do fully inhabit the same world as the reactors, rockets, and space capsules on which they work. But I find this very hard to believe. For their *homes*, after all, look like anybody else's, and the notable fact about nearly all homes is that they are years and years behind the space-age. If we had known in 1932 that cosmonauts would be circling the earth in thirty years' time we would have invented futuristic homes—a whole changed scenery of the future—to suit this miracle of advanced technology. Yet in the room where I now sit there is no single object which might not have existed thirty years ago. Even the television set downstairs was *thinkable*—indeed had been thought of—at that time.

Perhaps my own house, in a fairly remote countryside, is untypical; but it is not old-fashioned in any bizarre or intentional way. There is nothing in this house to amaze by its quaintness even the inhabitant of a New York penthouse. And my domestic scene is, of course, one of staggering modernity compared with those which are familiar to the great majority of my contemporaries.

To many of us, then, the technological spearhead of the world which we inhabit is as remote and alien as those unimaginable futures which science-fiction writers have tried to imagine. And *we do not like* what is remote and alien.

I can't pretend that it is only the destructive possibilities of modern invention which appal me. I do not know how dangerous the space competition will prove to be in military terms. I am almost sure that it would disgust and alarm me even if there were nothing belligerent about it.

Because it is *premature*.

This is true in the obvious sense that the resources wasted on space exploration might have been, and should have been, devoted to the relief of human suffering on earth. But the pre-

maturity takes other forms; or at least it can be seen under different aspects. Most of us inhabit a world in which space exploration is not yet emotionally permissible. It does not belong to *our* time, or to *our* experience of space.

If, on the whole, I do feel a more immediate hostility to cosmonauts than to astronauts, it is not only that the cosmonauts have done "better." It is because the disparity between the astronauts and the society which created them is not so great as the disparity between Major Popovitch's capsule and his mother. True, the American space programme is every bit as premature in the context of world history. But the prematurity of the cosmonauts is grosser and more apparent simply because most Russians live in more primitive conditions than most Americans.

AND LET US HEAR NO MORE of the eternal spirit of man ever reaching to new heights... The world ought to be more grown-up than it used to be. We ought, by now, to have developed a better estimation of our priorities. We ought, to put it less arguably, to have a nicer sense of propriety—of what is fitting—of the movement of history as something which should proceed at a decent, or at least at a regular and more or less uniform pace. (I am not concerned with

whether history *can* proceed like that, but with whether we want it to or not.)

The Two Cultures? But it is too easy to see them simply as distinct academic disciplines. The real dichotomy is between, on the one hand, the domestic, the everyday, the intimate possession of an immediate and poignant past, and on the other hand, those waddling, Michelin-like figures which feed a nuclear reactor. (Take off their protective clothes and *they themselves* turn out to be tenders of rose-gardens with yellowing photographs on the mantelpiece of Edwardian grandparents.)

We can distinguish—I *think*—between the changes which have been more or less fitting, because more or less timely and necessary, and the changes which have been gratuitous, because premature and irrelevant. To abominate television sets, refrigerators, democracy, and the health service is the false application of a natural and true nostalgia. To find the advent of the "space age" premature, and therefore alien and repulsive, is the proper reaction of any sensitive man.

Perhaps. I think so. But perhaps, too, this simply shows the limits of *my* tolerance, the extent of *my* hardened arteries, diminished sympathies, futile craving to undo what is done and to restore what can never be restored.

Philip Toynbee

## On Goethe

For a New Translation — By W. H. AUDEN

EVERYBODY knows that the thrones of European Literature are occupied by the triumvirate referred to in *Finnegans Wake* as Daunty, Gouty, and Shopkeeper, but to most English-speaking readers the second is merely a name. German is a more difficult language to learn to read than Italian, and whereas Shakespeare, apparently, translates very well into

German, Goethe is peculiarly resistant to translation into English; Hölderlin and Rilke, for example, come through much better. From a translation of *Faust*, any reader can see that Goethe must have been extraordinarily intelligent, but he will probably get the impression that he was too intellectual, too lacking in passion, because no translation can give a proper idea of Goethe's amazing command of every style of poetry, from the coarse to the witty to the lyrical to the sublime.

The reader, on the other hand, who does know some German and is beginning to take an interest in Goethe comes up against a cultural barrier, the humourless idolisation of Goethe by German professors and critics who treat every word he ever uttered as Holy Writ. Even if it were in our cultural tradition to revere our great

W. H. AUDEN has just completed (together with Elizabeth Mayer) a new translation of Goethe's *Italienischer Reise*. This is his introduction to the handsome illustrated (by Goethe and his friends in Rome and Naples) edition which will be published by Collins (London) and Pantheon (New York).