

The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written on the Sky

The end of the twentieth century of the Christian era is not far distant, and all about us things fall apart. There comes to my mind the last drawing from the pencil of William Hogarth, who died in 1764: it is a sufficient representation of the state of civilization today.

Hogarth's final drawing is known as "The Bathos" or "Finis." This word "bathos" signifies the depths, or the bottom; also it is applied to the process of sinking from the sublime to the ridiculous. Hogarth's pencil shows us a devastated and desiccated world in which all things have come to an end. In the shadow of a ruined tower, Father Time himself lies expiring, his scythe and his hour-glass broken. In the last puff of smoke from Time's tobacco pipe, one discerns the word "Finis." A cracked bell, a shattered crown, the discarded stock of an old musket, the tottering signpost of a tavern called "The Worlds End," a bow unstrung, a map of the world burning, a gibbet falling, an empty purse, a proclamation of bankruptcy, the stump of a broom, a broken bottle – this litter lies about fallen Father Time. Overhead the moon wanes, and Phoebus and his horses lie dead in the clouds. What once was sublime has descended to the ridiculous; thus the world ends, "not with a bang but a whimper." A month after he executed this famous tail-piece, Hogarth himself ceased to be.

This is the world of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; and it is the actual state in many lands of what once was a civilized order. Will the wave of the future, perhaps by the end of this century, engulf us all? Are there means for resisting this inundation? Or do we, like Canute, vainly command the tide to retreat from the beach on which we have taken our stand?

Most of us, reflecting now and again upon our present

discontents, are tempted to feel that "the struggle naught availeth"; that the freedom and justice and order of our civilization are trickling away, like the sands in Father Time's hour-glass; that at best we will become the isolated and powerless individuals of Alexis de Tocqueville's "democratic despotism," never permitted to come wholly to man's estate. That would be a society infinitely boring; but the alternative might be the ghastly slaughter and starvation that already have devastated much of Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. The naive meliorism of the nineteenth century has vanished from among us; it has been succeeded by gloomy vaticinations, among the young as among the old.

Perhaps you fear that I am embarking upon a long tale of woes. But I mean to spare you that. Rather, my purpose is to suggest that you and I are not the slaves of some impersonal force of the sort that Hegel and Marx called History; for history after all is no divine power, but merely a series of written records of what has happened in past times. I come to you not as a gravedigger, but as a diagnostician. Indeed our whole civilization is sorely afflicted by decadence; yet it need not follow that, already having passed the point of no return, we must submit ourselves to total servitude and infinite boredom. Just as renewal of soul and body often is possible for the individual person, so whole societies may recover in considerable degree from follies and blunders.

Letting some cheerfulness break in, I have taken for the title of this essay a line from G. K. Chesterton's long poem *The Ballad of the White Horse*, which has for its setting the age of King Alfred in England. In certain stanzas of the first book of that courageous ballad, Chesterton speaks of Eastern fatalism (as contrasted with Christian hope): those "men of the East" who "spell the stars,/And times and triumphs mark." Here Chesterton has in mind the historical determinists and prophets of doom of the twentieth century. I give you two stanzas:

*The wise men know what wicked things
Are written on the sky,
They trim sad lamps, they touch sad strings,
Hearing the heavy purple wings,
Where the forgotten seraph kings
Still plot how God shall die.*

*The wise men know all evil things
Under the twisted trees,
Where the perverse in pleasure pine
And men are weary of green wine
And sick of crimson sea.*

Truly, many wicked things have been written on the sky of our time, worse than things written on New York's subway cars; and the perverse in pleasure pine in their millions, glutted with narcotics, pornography, and insane sensuality. A good many people fret themselves over the rather improbable speculation that the earth itself may be blown asunder by nuclear weapons. The grimmer and more immediate prospect is that men and women may be reduced to a sub-human state through limitless indulgence in their own vices – with ruinous consequences to society.

The possibilities for efficient corruption, political and personal, are greater in our time than in any previous era: we have devised ingenious instruments to that end. Anyone who thinks seriously upon these tribulations must grow thoroughly disheartened on many occasions; he is tempted to confess himself one of those "men of the East" who know all too well what wicked things are written on the sky tempted to shrug, sigh, and murmur, "What cannot be mended, must be endured." If most of the wise, or relatively wise, among us so resign themselves, indeed all is lost. Public affairs are surrendered to the domination of squalid oligarchies, and private life becomes a fruitless pursuit of sensual pleasure, that gypsy witch, *el amor brujo*. One may trace such a process through the

Roman decadence; but we of the twentieth century have enabled ourselves to carry on the process more swiftly and thoroughly.

Should we submit our wills to what is said to be inevitable – to the writing on the sky that fatalists descry? This question entered the mind of Edmund Burke, near the end of his tether, when it appeared that Jacobinism was sweeping all before its “armed doctrine” and soon would engulf Britain. Burke declared that it would be better far to die with sword in hand than to submit to a social life-in-death. And he pointed out to the British government that what may appear inevitable, the foredoomed course of mankind, actually may be undone or averted by people and events quite unexpected and brought forward by subtle and mysterious forces whose coming the wisest of men could not predict. There is no ineluctable “march of history.” As Burke wrote in his Fourth Letter of the Regicide Peace, “The death of a man at a critical juncture, his disgust, his retreat, his disgrace, have brought innumerable calamities on a whole nation. A common soldier, a child, a girl at the door of an inn, have changed the face of fortune, and almost of Nature.”

Here Burke is referring to historical instances. His man who died at a critical juncture is Pericles; his instance of disgust is Coriolanus, in the early Roman Republic; the “retreat” he mentions is the elder Pitt’s retirement from public affairs, a major cause of the American war of independence; the disgrace is that of the Constable of Bourbon in the time of Francis I; his common soldier is Arnold of Winkelried, flinging himself upon the foreign lances at Sempach; his child is Hannibal, at the age of twelve taking his oath to make war upon Rome; his girl at the inn is Joan of Arc. History is made by human actions and thoughts, not by irresistible abstract imperatives; and Providence ordinarily operates through human agents.

The world is ruled by imagination: so we are told by Napoleon Bonaparte, master of the big battalions. In our day the world

appears to be ruled by what T. S. Eliot called the diabolic imagination. The political imagination of the ferocious ideologue, the obscene imagination of the literary panderer, have brought us to bathos and perhaps nearly to *finis*. The only weapon effective against the diabolic imagination is the moral imagination (a term we owe to Burke). So here let us turn to diagnosis of the causes of our afflictions, public and private, and to conceivable remedies.

The most mischievous mover and shaker of the French revolutionary era was Jean-Jacques Rousseau – a moralist, as Burke acknowledged him to be. The most mischievous mover and shaker of the Russian revolutionary era was Karl Marx – a moralist of the diabolical variety. (As Alexander Gray puts it, “To consider whether Marx was ‘right’ or ‘wrong’; to dredge Volumes I and III of *Capital* for inconsistencies or logical flaws; to ‘refute’ the Marxian system is, in the last resort, sheer waste of time; for when we consort with Marx we are no longer in the world of reason or logic. He saw visions – clear visions of the passing of all things, much more nebulous visions of how all things may be made new. And his visions, or some of them, awoke a responsive chord in the hearts of many men.”)

It was a principal error of the nineteenth-century Rationalists to fancy that most people are moved by enlightened self-interest. Certainly there is sufficient selfishness in all of us; but knowing where one’s best interest lies in the long run is another matter. Instead, people are moved by visions of a sort, whether sublime visions or gross visions. How many people choose their spouses on the basis of enlightened self-interest – or have the opportunity to do so, even if they would? In affairs matrimonial, as in affairs public, the visionary imagination’s part is much larger than that of either enlightened self-interest or pure reason.

And people are moved by moral intentions – even when their

intentions are to subvert the conventional morality. How many sincere Communists would there be if the avowed purpose of Marx were to slaughter and loot? Communists do slaughter and loot, and Marx approved at least the slaughter; but those are incidental pleasures; the avowed motive is the redemption of humanity through the abolition of religion, property, and the old social order. "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs." The Bolsheviks who liquidated the kulaks are said to have gone about their task with tears in their eyes, often: they had convinced themselves that they were inflicting suffering for high moral purposes.

I am suggesting that the real conflict in our age is between opposed types of imagination – or, to speak more accurately, among a variety of types of imagination. There are the idyllic imagination of Rousseau, the diabolic imagination of Sade, the leveling imagination of Marx, the moral imagination of Burke, the Animal Farm imagination of the hedonists; and other species that might be distinguished. The wicked words written on the sky are not in one tongue merely: we may perceive there, competing, the moral illusions of the fanatic ideologue, the bleary-eyed voluptuary, and the militant atheist.

So the great contest in these declining years of the twentieth century is not for human economic interests, or for human political preferences, or even for human minds – not at bottom. The true battle is being fought in the Debatable Land of the human imagination. Imagination does rule the world.

Yet most people are aware of this imaginative competition only vaguely, or not at all. Everybody probably is familiar with the mentality that derides or detests imagination – to that mentality's own bane. In Chicago once, addressing a group of industrialists and professional people, I mentioned the need for conservative imagination. One businessman present replied indignantly, "We don't need any imagination: we're practical!" The man was in deep labor troubles at the time – produced, in

part, by his failure to deal imaginatively with his employees. He fancied that they were governed (as he fancied himself to be governed) by pure enlightened economic self-interest. Nothing is more impractical than pure doctrinaire practicality.

So it is with people who fancy that the worlds discords may be harmonized by economic formulas, or by public elections. I am all in favor of the dissemination of sound economic understanding; I myself have just written a high-school textbook in economics. But I am amused by the "free enterprise films" often produced by industrial and commercial firms for showing to captive audiences of employees or schoolchildren, films that laud especially the methods and products of the films' sponsors. As old Thomas Fuller put it, "A mother-in-law's sermons seldom sit well with an audience of daughters-in-law." If the dismal science is to be taught effectively, abstract precept and platitude will not suffice: it must be taught with imagination, including the employment of symbols, allegories, fables, literary illustrations – and appeals to the moral understanding. It is important to grasp the laws of supply and demand; it is still more important to grasp the principles of justice.

The delusion that right reason will prevail through popular elections is still more widely entertained – despite the recent failures of that theory in lands so diverse as Vietnam, Zimbabwe, and El Salvador. Many persons of large means, in this land of liberty, continue to fancy that winning a national election or a state election or a local election or even a school-board election somehow will of itself set right the condition that was out of joint; therefore huge sums are poured into the electoral contests. I do not imply that elections make no difference; I mean that they do not make a great enduring difference; the real decision is not at the polls, but in people's long-run imaginations. For conservatives especially, a successful election is at best a

holding operation, temporarily preventing some silly things from being accomplished rather than securing the adoption of wise permanent measures. Some folk complain that President Reagan did not promptly abolish the welfare state, right after taking his oath of office. But Mr. Reagan himself had been perfectly aware that he would be able to accomplish nothing of the sort; he had learned that while governor of California. Politics is the art of the merely possible. The long-run decisions of the electorate are formed not by party platforms and campaign speeches, but by visions – by prejudices, if you will. Only the changing of such visions can produce large enduring political alterations, for better or for worse. The popular rhetoric of Franklin Roosevelt or of Ronald Reagan achieved considerable political success because it awoke visions in many people's imaginations.

So if we mean to resist the wicked things written on the sky, if we are to set our faces against the totalist and nihilist wave of the future, we must renew the sources of our moral imagination. I do not mean that we should repair to doctrinaire ideology; to the contrary, we should abjure the narrowness of ideology and improve our liberal learning – which is something very different from today's liberal politics. Paul Elmer More once remarked that the able conservative statesman possesses a certain quality of imagination which is of high service at times of crisis. That sort of imagination – and not political imagination only – is what American conservatives must employ if they aspire to erase the wicked things written on the sky.

I fear we have not yet made much progress in this direction, we conservatives. I am told that one national organization intended to wake the imagination of the rising generation, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, has found itself injuriously short of funding since the victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Why so? Because well-intentioned possible benefactors of ISI fancied that the victory having been won at

the polls, who needs imagination any longer? Who needs even to think? We're in power. The trouble with this reasoning is that unimaginative administrations do not remain in power; so the time falls out of joint all over again.

The journal that I helped to found, *Modern Age*, concerned in large part with the moral imagination, has always had hard sledding; during 1983 it had to suspend publication, although it is now being revived. The naive may suggest that surely there is plenty of money available from the affluent to support a serious quarterly of conservative views. But not at all: *Modern Age* and other periodicals of a conservative bent are shoestring operations because the people who ought to be backing them are obsessed by debating points of finance and putting up funds for elections. One is surprised and pleased that in recent years such conservative publications, addressed to more than immediate political and economic controversies, as *Chronicles of Culture* and *The Southern Partisan* have made their appearance and achieved some influence; these are symptoms of awareness in some quarters that conservatives ought not to ignore humane letters and philosophy.

Who puts that writing on the sky? Who applauds it? Aside from radical ideologues of one sort or another, the principal offenders are what Peter Berger and Brigitte Berger call "the knowledge class." I quote their description of this new middle class, in their recent book *The War Over the Family*:

Put simply, these are the people who derive their livelihood from the production, distribution, and administration of symbolic knowledge. They are not just the so-called intellectuals, who may be seen as an upper crust in this new stratum. Rather, the expanding "knowledge industry" (as the economist Fritz Machlup first called it) contains large numbers of people who could by no reasonable criterion be called intellectuals: the vast educational system, the therapeutic-"helping" complex, sizable portions of government bureaucracy, the media and publishing industries, and others.

What these all have in common is that bodies of symbolic knowledge (as distinct from the knowledge of, say, the physical scientist or the marketing expert) are to be applied to indoctrinate ("educate"), inspire ("help"), and plan for other people.

As the Bergers mention, in America this new class now numbers millions of people. It is they who aspire to run the "Information Age," through the computers. They are ready to program you and me. The chief trouble with them is that as a class they are devoid of moral imagination and humane learning; and they are puffed up with presumption. One thinks of Eliot's lines:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Those wicked things written on the sky – those slogans that would supplant community by collectivism, character by approved social indoctrination, literature by propaganda, love by welfare, thought by conditioned response, babies by Cabbage Patch dolls – generally seem commendable to the Knowledge Class.

For they have been crammed with certain types of information, but their imaginative powers have been left to wither. This has been a disastrous failure of American education, but the fault is mentioned only glancingly and by implication in the recent report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education – a report for the most part valuable.

Fancying themselves wise, the Knowledge Class as a body either embraces, or else accepts as inevitable, the things that seem to be written on the sky. Their vision is either vaguely humanitarian or concerned principally with perquisites for themselves.

A young woman of our acquaintance, who recently involved herself with success in computer-instruction, reports a conversation with representatives of this Knowledge Class. They were given to grumbling ideological slogans, such as "Eighty per cent of the wealth is owned by two per cent of the people" – perhaps a sufficient illustration of the actual limits of their knowledge. Our friend commented to us that these people obviously form a privileged class, what with ample salaries, academic tenure, tax-exempt grants, expense-paid junkets, "gofers" to do their work, sabbaticals, and merely routine duties to perform. Yet they are unaware that the Privileged are themselves; and they mumble self-righteously those slogans written on the sky.

Conceivably we may contrive means for restoring the imagination of some members of the Knowledge Class – or at least the imagination of the successors to the present generation of that class. If we cannot, we had best cudgel our own imagination for ways to restrain the Knowledge Class. As Humpty-Dumpty puts it, "It's a question of who's to be master, that's all."

A culture dominated by that sort of knowledge which is mere information presently will become a dull and impoverished culture, if not something worse. It may end in bathos, though meanwhile the fortunate members of the Knowledge Class may have diverted themselves in perverse pleasures under those twisted trees. When the moral imagination is extinguished, those wicked things written on the sky soon take on earthly substance; and servitude to them is not mild.

Nothing is but thinking makes it so. The present mind-set of the American Knowledge Class was produced by ideas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: vulgarized Darwinism, vulgarized Freudianism, socialist ideology – winds of doctrine of yesteryear. Mechanism and materialism, scientists' concepts now being undone by physicists of our own time, still lie at the back of the assumptions of the Knowledge Class. The

typical member of today's Knowledge Class possesses no distinct awareness of that source of his prejudices; nor does he understand that the ground is shifting under his feet, that new ideas are at work. The presumed wave of the future may drown him.

Losing wisdom in a labyrinth of knowledge, losing knowledge in a chaos of information, we Americans have been saddled with a Knowledge Class that takes for gospel the wicked things written on the sky – or, at best, has no notion of how to erase those wicked words. Fancying themselves wise, the Knowledge Class play with their computers in the belief that they open the way to emancipation from old dogmas and old duties. In reality, they open the way to bathos, the descent from the sublime to the ridiculous.

The seraph kings of Chesterton's ballad are swift to take advantage of human pride. Of all the forms of pride, the worst is intellectual pride. "Lo, I am proud!" declares Lucifer, in a medieval miracle play. The Knowledge Class takes pride in the delusory "wisdom" of Chesterton's "men of the East."

Many false prophets are gone forth into the land; certain false prophecies nevertheless work their own fulfillment; I would have us reject those voices.

For it is not inevitable that we submit ourselves to a social life-in-death of boring uniformity and equality. It is not inevitable that we indulge all our appetites to fatigued society. It is not inevitable that we reduce our schooling to the lowest common denominator. It is not inevitable that the computer should supplant the poet. It is not inevitable that obsession with creature comforts should sweep away beliefs in a transcendent order.

Yet the sands run swiftly through the waist of Father Time's hour-glass. Exhortations like mine will not redeem us: for the most part, they will fall upon deaf ears. If we are to give

the lie to those wicked things written on the sky, there must appear among us men and women endowed with the sort of imaginative power that transforms the spirit of an age.

Conceivably that power may come somehow from without- as it seems to have come to the poetic imagination of Albert Einstein. Adversity may strengthen character, and grim circumstances may quicken wits. Providence operates ordinarily through human agents, whose thoughts and actions may reverse the whole drift of their times.

One thing we can do is this: to refrain from choking up the springs of the moral imagination. If we stifle the sense of wonder, no wonders will occur amongst us; and if wondrous remedies are lacking, then indeed the words of doom written on the sky will become as the laws of the Medes and the Persians, ineluctable. The computerized intellect of the Knowledge Class would deny us wonder; it would deny us fruitful speculation.

Sir Bernard Lovell, the astronomer, recently pointed out that "literal-minded, narrowly focused computerized research is proving antithetical to the free exercise of that happy faculty known as serendipity - that is, the knack of achieving favorable results more or less by chance." This word "serendipity," like that quasi-scientific word "entropy," is a tag attached to the inexplicable: an awkward twentieth-century acknowledgment that now and again, in certain persons, there may penetrate to the imagination perceptions of truth which ordinary rationality cannot attain.

"Computers act as very narrow filters of information," Lovell continues. "They must be oriented to specific observations. In other words, they have to be programmed for the kinds of results that the observer expects." For the past sixteen years, he remarks, no major discovery has been made in radio astronomy. "Could it be more than a coincidence that the wholesale application of computers to the techniques of observation is associated with this puzzling cessation of

serendipitous discoveries?”

Just so. Computerized knowledge already may have begun to choke the springs of imagination. Of course it is not merely the device called the computer that works this mischief: rather, it is the mentality of the dominant Knowledge Class, one of whose instruments the computer is. Damage to the imagination – whether we call that mysterious faculty serendipity or intuition or the illative sense – may extend to many other fields than radio astronomy. It may extend to attempts at renewal of the person and of the Republic – to the life spiritual and the life temporal. If so, the wicked things written on the sky may be graven upon tablets of stone and set amongst us for our obedience to the commandments of the Savage God.

Then let us seek our redemption from outside the ranks of the Knowledge Class. Let us remember that even a common soldier, a child, or a girl at the door of an inn may change the face of fortune. Sometimes we Americans seem trapped in what my old friend Max Picard called “the world of the flight” – that is, the flight from God. We flee; God pursues. God may catch up; He can if He chooses. Often He works through the imagination. But so does Lucifer. Our personal and our public future may be determined by the sort of imagination that gains ascendancy among the rising generation. Nothing is inevitable save death and taxes. It is not too late to write some good things on the sky.

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