

CASTLES IN SPAIN

OR

NINETEEN NINETY-NINE

THROUGH all times and places there seems to have flowed a dream of a Golden Age, remote in place or in time, where all went for ever well. Cartographers of rationalized desire have given it geographical location, now here now there, in the course of the centuries; often enough on islands, serene and lively in the roaring seas. The Hesperides, the Land of the Young, St Brandan's Isle, the Empire of Prester John, England (for eighteenth century France), France (for the young Wordsworth), America, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the Trobriand Islands, each in turn has provided a name like a looking-glass map focussing and reflecting the projected hopes of men; men who thought to find somewhere in the enormous world justice, freedom, pity, peace, and not only facilities for 'the pursuit of happiness' but happiness itself, domesticated, secure, grazing in beauty, a gentle unicorn in some Whipsnade of the heart's desire.

So long as this Whipsnade went unvisited, all was well; but wish-sanctuaries, like bird sanctuaries, are spoiled by trippers; and the bitterness of Dickens in the United States and of Malcolm Muggeridge in Russia serves to indicate the disillusionment that dogs the spiritual tourist. It is safer by far to plant the Golden Age in temporal rather than spatial distance; for though many of the nightmares of the young H. G. Wells have come true, so far there has been no Time Machine.

The Golden Age has been seen both in the past and in the future. It used to be said that Christianity had transferred it from the former to the latter: but this is not accurate, for Christians as such have always believed in no less than three Golden Ages; the morning innocence before the Fall, when 'the corn was orient and immortal wheat that never should be reaped nor ever was sown, but stood from everlasting to everlasting'; the eternal Present of the Incarnation, transmuting that wheat into the very Body of God, and enabling men
' . . . to know through all this earthly dresse

Bright *Shootes* of everlastingnesse'

—and the ultimate fulfilment of the Kingdom of Heaven to come.

It is however true on the whole to say that outside the Christian tradition, or at any rate outside those of the communities known to Islam as the Peoples of the Book, Jews, Christians and Moslems,

the nations have tended to look back, to trust to legendary remembrance rather than to hope, for the vision of the golden years. Even those in whom, as in the Norsemen, a barbaric and aggressive vigour abounded, could see nothing more blessed in the future than the dreadful twilight of the gods. Even those in whom, as in the contemplatives of India, the energies of the mind had tended to absorb those of the body, could look forward only to a surcease of the long recurrent rhythms of time and consciousness, and to the end of the compulsion to perceive the false diverse insufferable world.

It is true also that, after the disintegration of the unitary Christian culture of medieval times, there arose a great division of opinion as to where the Golden Age should lie; and that humanists since then have tended always to refer it to the past or to fantasy, while fanatics have tried to force it into being in the future, paving the floors of present hells with blue prints for factories that should purvey inexhaustible supplies of bread, circuses and jam tomorrow.

To examine first the humanist vision: the Renaissance itself looked back to classical culture, and found all glory in the revival of Greek art, learning and philosophy. Seventeenth century England cast longing eyes back to Saxon times, before the Norman invader came. Swift, imprisoned in the burnt-child rationalism of that Augustan era which followed a century of ideological warfare all over Europe, presented his Golden Age in a kingdom of the beasts themselves, acting from sage and simple instinct; and set up in his Houyhnhnm hippocracy, an ideal State which has been an object of devotion from his day to that of Walt Whitman, longing to 'turn and live with animals . . . so placid and so self-contained', and indeed to our own when hippophilic girls of the county families, slender and tough in their jodhpurs, still devote their thoughts and energies entire to the comfort, fame and prowess of their steeds.

Later, while Rousseau, hybrid humanist and fanatic, dreamed of a primitive community in which all men had been born virtuous, free and equal, and looked eagerly forward to a future in which, when 'the last king had been strangled with the bowels of the last priest' this happy state of affairs should return, his contemporaries across the Channel permitted themselves a romantic hankering after an ancient Albion in which venerable and benevolent Druids, draped in a perpetually renewed supply of Persil-washed white robes, cut mistletoe with golden sickles, reciting the poems of somebody very like Ossian. By the time, however, that Marie-Antoinette and her ladies were playing at being shepherdesses whose beribboned flocks had never known ticks, worms or footrot, the fashions here had

changed; and the castles of the Middle Ages were beginning to take on that alpine glow which was to rest on them for over a century, from Chatterton to Chesterton. It was a glow that varied in intensity; now the frivolous pink limelight of Horace Walpole gothic, now the steadier illumination of Scott's novels; now the dimmer religious light of the Oxford Movement, now the zealous glare of Pugin; now the sunset craftsman's glory seen by Ruskin and Morris, and hailed as Merrie England. Or was it sunrise glory? In late Victorian Britain, with its almost incredible material security, and its sense of inevitable progress, of benevolent evolution, of 'one far-off divine event to which the whole creation moves', fanatic and humanist occasionally joined hands in an expectant ritual dance, to the tune, say, of 'England awake, the long, long night is over'; Blatchford and the Guild-Socialists hoped to revive in the future the small bright scenes of industrial goodwill that Morris saw imprinted on the past; and the Golden Age that had been once was soon to be again.

Quickly enough, however, the partners dropped hands; and those who had looked for that Age to come transferred their faith to the apocalyptic prophecies of Marx or, more soberly, attempted to lay with Sidney and Beatrice Webb the foundations of the New Jerusalem upon an extremely solid sub-structure of Blue Books and Fabian Society publications.

Even while the medievalists still gazed upon the fading turrets of the Middle Ages, other humanist groups could already see the Golden Years elsewhere. Pater, and presently Wilde, projected magic lantern slides upon the curtain of the Renaissance; Theosophists shone theirs upon Egypt and Babylon; Greece had its turn once more with Isedora Duncan and Margaret Morris; and presently the nineteen twenties and thirties were yielding to a cultivated nostalgia for the eighteenth century, the era of Mozart, of good taste, of individual liberty, of a gaiety that had no connexion with the organised municipal entertainments appropriate to a Park of Recreation and Culture. This nostalgia took a more popular form in the cult of 'Old Vienna, the City of Song', where the only recorded occupation of the populace was to 'take what this life of ours can give—

Live, laugh and love; love, laugh and live'—
to the most enchanting waltz music.

The war years, scattering families all over the country, narrowed the vision of millions down to the remembrance of peace past, the hope of peace to come; their popular lyric writers, seeing the Golden Age just round the corner after the conquest of Germany, could bring embarrassing tears to the eyes of even the sophisticated homeless by singing:

'There'll be blue birds over
 The white cliffs of Dover
 Tomorrow, just you wait and see.
 There'll be love and laughter
 And peace ever after
 Tomorrow, when the world is free.

'The shepherd will call his sheep
 The flowers will bloom again
 And Jimmy will fall asleep
 In his own little room again. . . .

Alas, after two years of peace the bluebirds are moulting, the shepherd has been conscripted, the flowers have been cut down for a satellite town, and Jimmy is very lucky if his own little room is anything more tangible than a Planster's Late Joy. The Golden Age is in the past once more; shining through the rich placid landscape of Kilvert's Diaries; glowing in the muffin-flavoured afternoon sunshine of Trollope's cathedral closes and Charlotte M. Yonge's family-battered drawing rooms; apparent in the leisure, the water colours, the enormous meals, the snug gusto, the high-minded cosiness, the privacy, the lamplit domestic comfort of the Victorian era. Mr Michael Sadler and Lady Peck write novels about it; Dickens films follow one another with exuberant persistence; the Book Society exhibits Victorian fiction; and Winterhalter and Frith come again into their own.

For humanists, that is, the Golden Age lies there. At present, convinced and ardent fanatics seem to be few in this country for the first time since the Levellers thought of establishing a theocracy to be administered by themselves. Temporal hope is under a cloud, and poor H. G. Wells is dead and the utopias of his middle years with him. In his youth he saw in the figure of Ostrog the Boss the destroyer of his future earthly paradise of marble and machinery with its clear-eyed inhabitant scientists, male and female; and in his old age understanding returned to him with the atom bomb, and was revealed in the bitterness of his last book—*Mind at the End of its Tether*—which foresaw no hope whatever for that race of men whom he had once visualized as being 'like gods'.

A few communists perhaps still hope to force the Golden Age into being by the achievement of a revolution whose ultimate fruit should be 'the withering away of all external authority in a classless society', a few Zionists hope for it for themselves in a time when the Jewish National Home shall have been built up in Palestine upon the bomb rubble of however many Arab homes as may be necessary; while the

little group of Zoölaters, which proclaims in flybills that 'Kindness to animals must come before peace among men', must foresee it in some vast, doped game preserve.

The hard boiled army of plansters, awaiting the day when they shall have 'dragged their blue prints with rough strife through the iron gates of life' is perhaps a rather larger group; as is that of their intellectual 'opposite numbers' who, impersonal as they, and inclined as they are to think of men and women and children in their infinite individual diversity as masses, units, crowds whose separate selves are meaningless and irrelevant, look for release in the import of oriental philosophies that deny altogether the reality of the human self.

It is perhaps sinister that human hope for the future should burn so low at a time when even the projectors of a golden age upon the past veer so fast from era to era; it is as if men sought everywhere for meaning, and could find it neither in remembrance, nor in the passing generations which so solidly fill the chronicle-novels, nor in building Stationery Office card-houses for posterity. We have lost our temporal roots; we are blown along the years 'a fortuitous concourse of atoms' from eroded soil.

There are two remedies on the natural level. One is stillness, and the deliberate exposure of consciousness to the full impact of the living present, the sights and sounds and smells, the decisions and activities of the moment; the green chair and the Chinese picture, radio music in another flat, tyres on a wet road, the cigarette smooth within the lips, the sweet smoke, the fingers moving the pen. . . . The other is the realization that private and personal life is the basis of all that can be known or done.

'Cultivons notre jardin' said Candide. But how is the escapist (into nostalgia or into anticipation) to come to understand that the moment and the garden are all he has, when for so long he has been taught to run away from himself into the past or the future, the group or the plan; to forget mortality in watching the exhilarating expanse of days, like the crisp waves seen from a ship at sea, in which he has not been and will not be; and to condemn as narrow and bourgeois such modest ideas as Plantin had of *le bonheur de ce Monde* . . . *Avoir une maison commode propre et belle, un jardin tapissé d'espaliers odorans* . . . *dompter ses passions, les rendre obeissantes. Attendre chez soi, très doucement la mort*—death as the inevitable end of every man's life, not as the resented preventable accident or war crime or prison-camp atrocity that it has seemed for over thirty years.

It was Chesterton who said that the natural life could be kept in

sweetness and sanity only by the supernatural; and his remark is most appropriate here. Of the interpretation of time by eternity, however, it is not the purpose of this essay to write, except to suggest that it is only from the light of that instant and immortal radiance, so little known, so long forgotten, that the golden ages are reflected at all; and that if the knowledge of it were finally quenched in a vast utilitarian industrial culture covering the world, men would live only as sentient units of production and consumption, without hope or purpose.

RENEE HAYNES.

O B I T E R

THE CHURCH IN RETREAT. Action and Contemplation: Christians who are bold enough to give themselves to the one must be rooted in the other. Such is the reminder Paul Claudel has recently given in an address at Louvain (quoted in *La Vie Spirituelle*, April)

'Our Lord remains with his Church to the end of the world. With that Church which is always being put in her place, cross-examined, constrained! And her only reply is the Cross, her only reply is to make a Cross of herself, placarding it with the glorious proclamation of St Paul: 'Learn of me what is the breadth and length and height and depth'. She must needs spring from her Master, she must spread in every direction those eagle's wings of which the Apocalypse speaks. The depth: that is to say a firm rooting in the faith, in doctrine, in the rock (*pierre*) that is Peter (*Pierre*). Her arms must be large enough to embrace not this world only, but the one to come no less. . . . And what in the end is the purpose of those eagle's wings but to carry us away; but where? St John gives us the answer: into the desert. And Moses explains further: into the hidden places of the desert, into that desert of prayer where we stand alone, face to face with the Sun, face to face with our Creator. That is what we need more than all else, we need prayer more than bread. It is in the desert that we shall be able to consider all those things of which we are not going to be forever deprived by the tyranny of Pharaoh!'

Sunday, the day of rest which mirrors the seventh day of God's own resting, is the central point of Christian contemplation. Not indeed the desultory 'obligation'; the last Low Mass and the raffle tickets in the porch. To recover the meaning of Sunday is to find again the foundation of the life of grace, *semper agens* necessarily, for we live in the world. But first of all *semper quietus*. It is a sure instinct that has devoted the whole of *La Vie Spirituelle* (April) to a