

Are All Times the Same?

Paula Williams

RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S forceful statement, "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it," can be substantiated by numerous examples drawn from history. Beginning with a conspicuous instance, the great 200-year Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, comes to mind. For centuries before the ascension of Octavian as the first emperor of all Rome, fighting and bickering existed both internally and externally throughout the republic. At the same time that uprisings of the oppressed plebians were causing unrest and fear among the Italians, unwelcome Roman colonists on the edges of the republic were being slaughtered by their foreign neighbors. There were consuls and even general-dictators before Octavian's time who had their chance to end the strife. Yet peace never came until he, Octavian, took control. Why?

As Emerson would explain were he here to do so, Octavian knew what to do with the time. And indeed he did! He wisely ended the rivalry of his generals knowing that such rivalry had caused much of the turmoil that the republic had felt. He stationed his legions in the trouble spots of the new empire rather than trusting to luck that he could send them to their stations in time if they were needed. Both of these moves brought him closer to his goal of ending the external conflicts. In solving Rome's internal strife, he lightened the burden of taxes, replaced unfaithful administrators who exploited the people with more honest, hand-picked men, and built marvelous public works so that his subjects had such luxuries as baths, centralized heating systems, even piped-in water. The result? Probably the longest span of time in Western history ever to elapse without seeing a major war.

And further upholding Emerson's thesis, some centuries later, during medieval times, Dante, the Italian poet, appeared. Born into an era so devoid of artistic or literary culture as to be termed the "dark ages," the author produced work worthy of the standards of the Renaissance. *The Divine Comedy* had it been on a par with the other scant writings to come out of that era would today be just another pitiful reminder that the literary art had once been lost for several hundred years. Instead, Dante conquered the times and produced a piece of literature that is even now read to be enjoyed, not to be laughed at as a clumsy bit of medieval myth as its contemporaries often are. Dante must be placed in the rank with Octavian when it comes to having made the most out of his time.

Leaving the world of the past for a while, the world of the present looms before us, almost defying us to search for modern counterparts of Octavian and Dante. For although it is simple enough to look back in history and form opinions as to who made good use of

his time and who did not, it is difficult to stand back far enough to clearly perceive the present's full dimensions. What seems wisdom today may prove folly tomorrow; what appears evil now may look innocent later by the same token. With this possibility in mind, the only man currently shaping the times seems to be Khrushchev, the Communist Party's esteemed first secretary and premier of the USSR. Khrushchev is the man who is calling the plays while the rest of the world steps forward or back according to the way he chooses to call them. Like Octavian, Khrushchev wants an empire, a Communist empire that claims all the known world as well as colonies in space, just as Rome ruled colonies about the Mediterranean in addition to her well-entrenched Romanized lands. Of all the world's leaders, only the Soviet premier is taking an active part in the game of wide-scale conquest. Through the tools of fear and bluff, he hopes to cow the world's peoples into accepting the axiom, Better Red than dead. Whether his work will look wise or foolish, evil or innocent to future generations, only time will tell. Many contemporaries of Octavian hated him immensely, yet he is respected as a wise and able ruler today. Of course, today's peoples are not suffering from the direct effects of any of Octavian's innovations; tomorrow's peoples may be suffering from radiation sickness and strontium 90 malfunctions due to Khrushchev's.

Despite what one says for or against the personal qualities of the group of men throughout history who have made use of the time in which they lived, they have left their mark, in many cases a great mark, on the world and its peoples. Yet despite my general agreement with Emerson's statement and my proofs to back it up, I cannot help but question one point in his remark: the "we" in "This time, like all times, is a good one, if *we* but know what to do with it," is currently ambiguous. At one time, I suppose, "we" could have meant each man as an individual knowing what to do with his own time. Surely the time when that connotation was effective is long since past, and it may have been obsolete since the earliest tribal days. Persons are always worked upon by outside forces. Men are assaulted by other men; tribes are challenged by other tribes; and countries are attacked by other countries. That is the way of the world. To assert that an individual can take control of his environment and make times good is ridiculous. If and only if outside forces do not appear to beat him down from his aspirations or if he has the strength behind him to defeat the outside forces, may he conquer his time. Octavian had to contend with the hostile nations around his empire and made his Roman Peace through his army's strength; Dante fought those who devoutly held that classical Latin was the only tongue in which to write. He argued long and loud for the use of the vernacular and wrote *The Divine Comedy* in his native Tuscany; Khrushchev is today being opposed from all sides as he goes about his work. Evidently the Man Thinking has no easy job, even after he has figured out what to do with his time.

As the world matures, then, the "we" must include ever-widening areas of people. Nations cannot do what they think is right without consulting other nations or preparing for the suicide a full-scale war will bring in the modern world. Perhaps in the not-so-distant future, the "we" will take in the whole solar system, and one world will need to appraise its strength in terms of that offered by other planets before it attempts any policy change that will make better use of time. The "we" is ambiguous, yet it presents an example of a good ambiguity. A fine quotation must have enduring qualities, a narrow term must be capable of broadening with time. Emerson made such an allowance by using the flexible pronoun "we," illustrating the same resiliency the framers of the American Constitution built into that document—the ability to be reappraised with time. Emerson knew what he was saying, and he said it for eternity.

Thoughts on a Cold Winter's Evening

Jerry L. Childers

I am sitting at my desk, and, although I try to focus my thoughts on my work, I find that I am mentally wandering to other times and to other places far from the book beneath my reading lamp and the writing paper and pen before me. I'm always an oppressed soul halfway between the last day of Indian summer and the first day of spring. I lose all interest in my studies, and I long to take myself away to a distant place, far from the snow, the cold, and the winter. Of all the seasons of the year, I know the winter to be the most dreary and interminable length of time.

I can remember experiencing this same chained and tormented feeling long ago in my childhood. I would look from my bedroom window out on the dirty, melting slush in the streets and would watch the voluminous black clouds of smoke as they arose from the chimneys and deposited their soot over the world below, and I would wish that the earth were warm and clean again. The tree outside my window was cold and naked with its shoulders heaped with a dingy layer of ice and snow. I was sure that the tree was in pain, and I knew that the tiny seedlings in the window-box beneath my sill were as anxiously awaiting the warmth and the freedom of spring as I.

After the long torment of those days, I would soon rid myself of my shoes and delight in the warmth of the moist earth beneath my bare feet. It was always difficult for my mother to know where I might be in those days as I would wander, barefoot and free, away to the nearest haven of trees and stretch of meadow that I could find. Even today, I go for such sojourns in the country whenever I can. Most people, caught up in the machinery of modern living, have forgotten what simple joys they knew as children. I believe the purest and most rewarding pleasures I have ever known were