

UNEASY RIDER

Isaiah 41:13

Man is by nature a rider in the universe. He is a rolling stone, or rather, rolling genes, and he is a high rider, riding high on the bridge of the earth-ship, riding higher and higher, and faster and faster – and more and more afraid he is riding for a fall. Increasingly, he is an uneasy rider in the universe.

It is nothing new, this unease of man as wanderer. Even Odysseus, after taking on the Cyclops, the Lotus-Eaters, the Sirens, and whatever else there is under the four winds, sighed a great sigh and admitted, “There is nothing worse for men than wandering.” He longed for home, but couldn’t stay there. Homer left his journey open-ended. He was wise.

Man has always felt this tension, this unease, caught as he is between his longing for home and his urge toward the unknown. It is time that haunts him -- his projects, his infancy on history and sees the past as simplicity, security, stability, serenity, the cradle of the familiar – but sees it also as arrest, stagnation, and he projects his hope of growth on the future and sees it as change, adventure, progress, but also as uncertainty, revelation and death, the fearful unknown.

He may resolve this tension in several ways.

He may become a Compulsive Rider, riding pell-mell, helter-skelter, as fast as he can, “anywhere, as long as it’s away, man”, away from the frozen hell of home, toward anyplace, any no-place, as long as it’s some 24 hour haven, some weekend heaven of an unknown, and as long as “it don’t keep nobody from moving on”, and on, and on – only to discover that the unknown may be a living hell and home a dying heaven. And, if the runner is wrapped in a leather jacket on a motorcycle or in a mink on a yacht, what difference is there? What difference if the talisman is a string of cheap beads or a million-point-five diamond on a chain? What difference

if his stomach is full of alcohol or his lungs full of poppy smoke? He's still a compulsive rider, "man", riding right out of this world, right into his own brand of narcotic dreams, right out of reality into nightmare. He may ride his poor, limping nightmare into death.

Or he may become, not a Compulsive Rider, but a Revolutionary Rider, a rebel for rebellion's sake, a breed of Rebel without a cause. Here is a man so frightened by his infancy, the past is for him nothing but bugger-bear, ogre – and in the irrational rage of the child, wishes to destroy it all, rip it to pieces, burn it down. He sees himself as the strong and innocent child-man, Samson, the "sun child" pulling down the whole evil structure, the entire depraved system, nobly uncaring that he dies in the rubble, but with no plans for the new. The apocalypse burns in his head. So he will play the naked savage. He will throw history to the fire. He will affirm the "now", even if it destroys all that feeds, clothes, sustains the masses, even if it destroys the very instruments of reason and value by which the future may be reshaped. So much does he fear and hate the past, he is an uneasy rider into unreason. He is not easy to ride with.

But these two riders – the simple-minded runner, and the causeless rebel are not all. They but catch the TV eye (the electronic eye of the great bug). They make the most noise.

But there are other uneasy riders, caught in the same tension between home and the unknown. Some are philosopher-scientists, poets too. They are not afraid of the past. They know they get their tools from it – tools to shape and reshape the future. So they do not hate the past and they do not flee the contingency, through anti-matter to who knows where and, even when we are unaware, still we are all aboard – uneasy riders.

But at his best, man may be something more than scientist-philosopher-poet, taking the ideas and values of the past to shape and reshape (with as much faith and fearlessness as he can muster) the ever-changing frontier of the future.

He may, with a profound sense of history, also be, as rider, even uneasy rider, profoundly religious. Let us talk about the only religion most of us know from the inside – Judaic-Christianity.

I do not know where the Christian lost his self-image as rider, as voyager, as adventurer, as God's wanderer. Was it somewhere after the death of Marcian, who gave us St. Paul's adventures, who coined, as every seminarian knows, the title, "New Testament"? Was it after the death of Augustine, who gave us "the City of Man" as a place of eternal departure and "the City of God" as a goal of eternal arrival? Or was it at the birth of Aquinas' theology, whose frozen system seemed to shut out "imagination and enterprise?" Was it the medieval church that turned the faith back on itself? That made the church a museum, mummified morals for all time, saw the religious as embalmer of the past, custodian of relics, curator of ancient religious artifacts, with no change, no growth, no riding, no future – but standing stock still, a reliquary of old dreams, with all of the excitement and adventure of a mausoleum?

Well – I have no idea who changed or tried to change the church's image. Maybe today it is you – me. I only know it is not the Biblical image of Abraham (who set out across the rim of the world not knowing where it would lead), or of Moses (who put both Egypt and the burning bush behind him to carry a people with him to more promising land), or the prophets (who knew even the temple was temporary, who saw God's world as turning). I know also it was not Jesus of Nazareth (who having once set his hand to the plow, did not look back), nor was it St. Paul (who saw most clearly that in the resurrected Christ, God offered "all things new").

All of these deserved their name, "pioneer", for all saw God alive on the ever-unpredictable frontier. All drew their nourishment from the past but were future

oriented. None stood still. All believed there is “no ease in Zion”. They were not easy. The future lies open to God. “Now”, “today” is the frontier. The possibility of “doom” and “resurrection” lies ahead. Go on, they said, venture. “Choose ye this day....”. “For I, the Lord thy God, will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, (hold on, do nothing, stand still? – No!) Fear not; I will help thee”. (Isaiah 41:13)

Let us pray:

O Lord, teach us there isn't such a thing as a timid saint. Help us to see ourselves in thy hand, facing forward, the only way a saint can face. Give us the sense and faith to shape the future, as our fathers shaped the past. So may we have hope out of despair, and life out of death. Amen