

Consuming Passion

Leisure and Pleasure in the Victorian Age

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What is life really about, besides eating, sleeping and fucking? And the necessary chores to make such survival possible. It is about consumption and the leisure needed to engage in it. Consumption is often contrasted against production, the latter being more elevated, although its ultimate goal is after all reduced to the former. In a sense one may argue that in consumption man only satisfies his personal desires, and the satisfaction he thereby gains is of no interest to anybody but himself. What concern to us is the fascination of Newton for pink velvet-clad furniture? Ultimately it is about the meaning of life, how much of it should be devoted to our privacy and how much should be communal? In the latter we partake of history, in the former we are just caught in an accidental stage of it, but due to its very accidentality it anchors us in a temporal particularity and gives to our existence a solidity, strong enough to inspire one of our more pervasive emotions, namely that of nostalgia.

History pursued intellectually, with the aim of elucidation, risks ironically more acutely than those motivated by other ambitions, to commit the cardinal sin of historical studies - anachronism. How tempting it is to concentrate on those aspects of the past which have direct consequences for the present. In this way we unwittingly weave a red thread and give to history a narrative. And narrations belong to our most cherished needs, they create curiosity and resolutions of the same. Antiquarian history is different, it is pointless as all activities associated with fetishism. Its concern is to dig up the jetsome and floatsom that the past have delivered at our shores, and cherish it all without discrimination, because after all it is an indulgence in nostalgia. The book of Flanders belong essentially to the second category, although her ambition is somewhat more elevated. In fact she wants to classify the major trends of modern western consumerism, be it shopping, reading, theatre, sports, be it racing or bicycling, travelling, and illustrate how they have changed over time. The result becomes more of a compilation than a structured narrative, leaving the hapless reader with much more than he is prepared to learn. Unreadable as the cataloguing may turn out to be, at least it suggests a glimpse of life, once vivid but now almost completely vanished, filled with features of great importance at the time, but which failed to leave enduring traces¹. Although it is of minor importance to learn the particulars, it is sobering to be made aware of the general phenomenon, maybe trite by itself, but inescapable, namely life as lived is very different from life as narrated.

History as written and taught is to a large extent one of interlocking biography. One may argue the importance of the individual, but history without personalities is a dry

¹ Not entirely, as the fact that we can at least dig up something testifies to part of it at least being reconstructible.

history indeed, and the pleasure many of us gain from its study is the acquaintance of people of the past, who come eventually to occupy position close to that of fictional characters. In particular the personalities we are privileged to meet are even more privileged in making our acquaintance, in particular they belong to the privileged varnish of humanity² and as such utterly unrepresentative. Flanders remarks that up to the 17th century the private possessions of the common man were almost non-existent, and the few he possessed were almost all made by himself. The idea of a consumer society simply did not exist, consumption was the privilege of the varnished class. It was only in the 18th century that the first stirrings could be seen, and almost all of the authors thematic surveys take as their point of departure that very century. In particular she shows that many things we believe saw the light of day in the 19th century had quite discernable roots as long as a century before.

The great motor of the consumer society was of course the so called Industrial Revolution. Its first step was to harness the power of the multitudes, and its final step to satisfy their insatiable needs, bringing about a self-generating process which like all such processes tends to grow exponentially. At the time there was the notion of the mob. The bulk of humanity, assumed to only possess the lowest of tastes and impulses, and constituting a permanent threat to established order³. The developing consumerism of the masses, however snobbishly it may be regretted, especially in our age, made much to diffuse this fear through its 'civilizing' and hence emasculating effects⁴. The great transformation this brought about induced a great gulf between modernity and the past, the awareness of which maybe one of the characteristic features of our modern age. Up to the 18th century the quotidian life of the average person had been rather unaffected for millenia, because we should never forget that the drama which narrative history generates, was mostly unknown to most of those living contemporarily⁵. Since then it has undergone a momentous change. On the other hand, it could very well be that the greatest change has already taken place, and that the life of our children and grandchildren will in the essentials differ from our own less than our lives differed from those of our parents and grandparents.

In what exactly did this great change consist? It is tempting to point at technological improvement, in particular medical such, and indeed technological change is a fascinating aspect of history, affecting us much more in a sense than the traditional aspects of wars and diplomacy. Yet when it comes to technology, the crucial aspect was that of communication. The railway revolutionized life, making life far more concentrated in space, and hence also time. It is true that it is tempting nowadays to look upon railways as being outmoded replaced by cars and planes, on the other hand railways do provide a very viable means of mass transportation, far more so than the present automobile centered one, and besides the latter has in no essential way refined the transformation of space already brought about⁶. Another kind of communication change was brought about by common literacy. It made

² To which we anachronistically are apt to place ourselves retrospectively.

³ When one discusses racism of the time, this is something one should keep in mind.

⁴ It is a contentious issue how much weight should be given respectively to leftist political pressure and the effects of capitalist 'trickle down'.

⁵ The only difference, but what a difference, being brought about religious cultural imperialism

⁶ In recent decades transcontinental flights have admittedly changed space on a global scale, by replac-

books and other publications a mass entity, and also developed the postal service. As to letters one should not forget that at the end of the 19th century the telegraph was installed, admitting communication of information literally by the speed of light. The modern age has not essentially improved on this. Television has to some extent replaced the written word, but e-mails only make once again that possible which was taken for granted a century or so ago when delivery my mail was done several times a day⁷. And the advent of the phone, possibly the most momentous change in the early 20th century, has only been refined by the mobile variety.

Returning to the book there is not too much to be said rather than recalling a few tidbits of curiosities, which may or not may not have wider ramifications. The author explains the concept of 'lime-light' appearing in the theatre in the middle of the 19th century providing bright illumination for the stage, no doubt spectacular to audiences unexposed to electric lights. The precise process need not concern us, suffices it to say that it was purely chemical. It led to the art of stage lightening, which enhanced the theatre as a purveyor of spectacle, with more and more elaborate stage settings and tricks. Of course the Opera should be seen in this light of vulgar entertainment with its mix of music and staged opulence, surviving nowadays as a fossilized spectacle for the benefit of a refined audience. One also notes that the general biblical education of the masses was much more substantial than the present, making many references possible, which now would leave blank minds. How many people of today are aware of the struggle between Charles XII and Peter the Great, unless they are of Swedish or Russian progeny? In the early 19th century at least, popular plays in Britains toured on such themes, as with the story of Mazeppa, an officer in the Carolinian army, strapped to the back of a horse, enacted live, with a horse thundering along many a stage. What is so popular at the time, how often is it not forgotten a generation later? Or one could turn to the development of chains and department stores, the latter essentially a reorganization of the traditional market. How advertisement emerged obtrusively, so necessary to clamour for attention amidst a cut-rate competition. The more specialized reader may be interested in the emergence of the bicycle, at first so hard to mount and maintain, then made far more governable; and how the development of roads went hand in hand with the growing craze for bicycling, and how this spawned what later would turn into motorism a mere generation later. There are many threads to unravel, but the presentation leaves much to be desired, the author suffering from having done so much research and not wanting anything of it go to waste. It is like throwing away things in your attic. Once you start to look at each item one by one, it is not hard to find merits and potential uses, making the eventual discarding seem so brutally definitive.

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ing the traditional ship. Yet the difference is less one of a kind, and when it comes to bulk, the ship is still the only alternative

⁷ This was of course only possible for a segment of the population, the idea of postal delivery by hand does not work if the postman spends most of his day writing letters of his own.