

The Terror of History by Teofilo F. Ruiz

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The first impression that this book conveys is rather unsettling: the cover depicts a dark and ghastly painting by the Spanish painter Francisco Goya, where Saturn (Chronos) eats one of his children. In the Greek myth the god Chronos, who represents time, devours his offspring unaware of the fact that a day will come on which one of his children will do the same to him. By writing stories about the great pestilence that struck Florence (and a great part of Europe) in 1348, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, mystics, religious movements, witches and so on, Teofilo F. Ruiz aims to trace a common thread that runs through all of these (and many other) matters. In this sense the book's target is fulfilled: we are presented with a lot of examples that go in this direction and demonstrate that when humanity needs to face something terrible, catastrophic and shocking, the reaction is marked by a desire to escape that horror: to escape history, to kill Chronos and obliterate time.

Ruiz, Distinguished Professor of History and of Spanish and Portuguese at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), is very dedicated to the argument he is writing. He has taught an undergraduate course sharing the title of this book for over three decades, and taped a series of lessons covering the same topic for the Teaching Company (2002).

Borrowing the main idea of this book from Mircea Eliade's *Cosmos and History* (1954), he argues 'that the unpredictability of

history [...] shapes our individual and collective lives' (p.6). More precisely,

Most of humanity seeks to escape the terrifying reality of human history, to make some sense of events, to hope for something better [...] than what we have. And most of all, a majority of humans refuse to accept that the universe, the world, god(s), are utterly indifferent to our plight. But this is only the beginning (p.6).

Indeed, we are just at the beginning of the book, in chapter one. Here, after sketching the terror of history, Ruiz briefly illustrates three forms of escape from the reality of the world and the cruelty of history as posited by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (*The Waning of the Middle Ages*, 1924): religion, the embracing of the material world, and the pursuit of beauty.

Chapter two, 'Religion and the World to Come', deals with one of the most effective refuges men and women have chosen since the beginning of time. Religion has always been a driving force for a great part of humankind, and continues to work for many. This includes magic, astrology, alchemy and hermeticism (these four, according to Ruiz, functioned as forms of religion), Francesco d'Assisi and the mystics. The witch craze cannot be missing in a book like this, and is found beside more recent phenomena such as the rebellion of the Canudos (late nineteenth century) or the cult-like Heaven's Gate group in San Diego. These and many other forms of religion, concludes Ruiz, have utopian dreams or tend towards the bizarre and esoteric, but always offer an escape from history and its manifold terrors.

Chapter three, 'The World of Matter and Senses', focuses on a form of escape that results in an embrace of the material world and the senses. This denotes forms of intoxication that lead outside the real world and permits to create another world made of excesses,

lust, drugs, food, alcohol and so on. The awareness of being part of the historic process vanishes behind physical pleasure. Of course, as the author remembers, these sensations are part of our daily experience, but it is when they become central in our life that ‘we step onto a different plane and reject our role as historical agents’ (p.127)

In chapter four, the last form of escape: ‘The Lure of Beauty and Knowledge’ appeals to tormented souls who turn their angst into art. For the author this is almost always the case, and he calls to mind the Nietzschean *Übermensch* for affirming that the giant, the great artist, ‘is often the man or woman who lives outside the usual norms of society and even of history’ (p.133). The main idea here is that through art and utopia (Ruiz cites, among the others, Plato’s *Republic* and Marx’s transition to full communism as example of notable utopias) we try to keep history at bay and reject it.

The book ends with a short conclusion, which adds little, save for an even darker vision of life. Ruiz’s view of the past, present and future alike is not a comforting one. As he points out, ‘neither my reflections on these matters nor even the accumulated experience of all my years bring either wisdom or solace’ (p.168), and he has a ‘growing awareness [...] that life is, after all, meaningless’ (p.157).

The main weakness and yet also strength of this book is that it hovers halfway between the academic and the personal. Despite being a professor of history, the author continuously centres the discussion on his personal experience. It would maybe have been a more interesting project dividing the book into two sections, one historical and academic (with notes and bibliography), and the other personal, with comments and reflections on the first section. On the other hand, Teofilo Ruiz convincingly manages to deal with a complex topic and wide ranging spectrum of time that one cannot

but applaud his great effort.

The Terror of History is an enjoyable book, though disturbing at the same time. As said, it is not an academic book; it covers largely personal reflections and considerations. I would recommend it to any curious reader keen to investigate some of the most dark and challenging moments in the history of humankind and see if and how we coped with them.

Bibliography

Eliade, Mircea. 1954. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Trans. W.R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Huizinga, Johan. 1924. *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Trans. Fritz Hopman. London: Edward Arnold.

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