

# Judith Wright

## THE NOTION OF PROGRESS AND THE TERMINAL EXPERIMENT

Not very long ago, a less than eminent politician, commenting on the views of Dr Ehrlich, remarked that people had been forecasting the end of the world for a long time but it hadn't come to pass. The obvious rejoinder was that modern forecasts of the end of the world were a little different from previous ones, which were based on religious, not on scientific, premises. Since science has replaced religion as the modern faith, and religious forecasts of the end of the world now attract only a handful of believers while nearly all of us are now convinced that what scientists say must be right, or at least well-founded, this is certainly a new twist to doom-forecasting.

Whether or not the prognostications turn out to be true, scientists can at least point to actual changes in the physical world, and can employ the tools of statistics, physics, genetics and biology to support their view of the urgency of the situation. But the burden of the message, of course, is still the same: "Repent, repent and mend your ways for the end of the world is at hand."

Our sins nowadays are not against a divinely-handed down decalogue, but against a new entity, the biosphere of which our new ecotheologists emphasise that man is but a small part. We sin as physical, not spiritual beings, and as children of the planet, not as children of God. But interestingly, many of the sins are much the same — greed, hubris, the desire for worldly goods, for instance; but new ones have replaced some of the old. Lust, for instance, may be condoned just so long as it doesn't result in procreation — which quite reverses the old order.

A new ecodecalogue might have a rather different set of commandments, and the penalties would not be individual damnation but general disaster. That is, the end of the world, long looked for with actual hope and joy by Christians and other religionists, has now become not the consummation but the destruction of our hopes.

No evangelists could be more fervently convinced than the new ecotheologists, and already there are schisms and rival sects, preaching different forms of ecoevangelism — the population-controllers, for

instance, against the technology-hailers and the advocates of Living Simply. We have no lack of prophets; what we still lack is the vision and the enthusiasm of a general conversion. Without that, as we now begin to see, we have little chance of a truly practising congregation.

The fact that all our long-held optimism about the benefits of technological progress has collapsed so suddenly has thrown us into a mental chaos in which no guiding principles, no tools of thought or directives for action, go uncontradicted. That optimism had branched into almost all our disciplines, educational, economic, political, legal, philosophic. None of the dozens of these disciplines has done more than put a tentative toe into the problems of a radical change in our thinking, our view of human history and destiny, and the philosophies of science and economics.

Teilhard de Chardin, long hailed as among the greatest modern thinkers, put forward only a few decades ago his view of the destiny and future of the human race. As a Catholic, his view of the history of human development was based on a final consummation of humanity as conscious spiritual beings; but as a thinker deeply read in the sciences, he added the dimension of then-contemporary scientific thought to his view of that development. He saw humankind as now entering the wholly new phase of what he called "planetisation", in which all human resources of technology and world communications turn man (in an essentially masculine apotheosis) into a kind of world-brain, reaching toward complete unity and unanimity. This final harmony, with war, want and hatred abolished, was the aim and end of the whole planetary development.

This world-organisation of consciousness, he thought, was inevitable. He argued that the whole history of evolution tended towards greater and greater organisation and increase of consciousness, as its summit of achievement, and that mankind was destined to complete its great bio-spiritual adventure by reaching this full consciousness and control over the planet and over himself (Teilhard seldom mentions women.) For this reason, he welcomed the surge of growth in technology and in population, because it was necessary to spiritual progress, rather than to human wellbeing, though directed to both. Looking at what he recognised as a simultaneous growth in human hatreds, dissensions and misuse of power, he saw this as a passing phase. He was convinced that the very proliferation of population and technology would force humanity to a final leap in consciousness which would bring humanity to the level of a single planetary mind, devoted to the last discovery, that of God. The end of the

planet and of the species Man would result in a total consciousness of divine purpose, a kind of explosion of matter transformed to spirit itself.

Teilhard put this apotheosis at possibly millions of years in the future; and though he emphasised that the final choice confronting man was between a collectivisation of force or power, and a collectivisation of love, he continued to believe that all evolution leads towards an ultra-human unity. "The human molecules are tightly packed together", he theorised, "and the more this is the case the more impossible it becomes for them, owing to their nature and structure, not to merge both physically and in spirit."

The sweep of his thought can't be conveyed in the drastic compression I have made of it, but clearly it gives a very different perspective on the destiny of the human race than any that the ecotheologists or deep ecologists give, because it includes, as they do not, the dimension of consciousness or spirit. It's worth remarking that many thinkers about the "environmental crisis" do call for a new uniting vision of humanity and the future as an urgent need, a spur to galvanise us into action on environmental problems, which they see as insoluble without it.

Yet Teilhard himself concluded that "our present condition is still so immature that mankind in its existing form ... cannot be scientifically regarded as anything more than an organism which has not yet emerged from the embryonic stage." (Science, of course, is not religion.)

If we accept this estimate, we are being faced at an embryonic level of immaturity with problems that can only be solved at a level of maturity we are never likely to have the chance to reach. Estimates of the planet's capacity to support our present rate of growth, industrialisation and pollution — even without the nuclear-war problem — vary from a low of twenty years or so to a high of perhaps a couple of centuries. Even assuming that we manage somehow to avoid all this, there is still the question of the unknown implications of our destruction of our own life-support systems, and of the social, political, economic, and human problems of switching virtually all our resources into research and management of the ecosystems of the world. The time-lag in our mental and institutional adjustment looks nearly insuperable.

There are still, all over the world, peoples, governments and supra-national organisations (especially the latter) dedicated to the notion that infinite growth is possible on a finite planet and infinite exploitation of finite systems is our only hope of economic wellbeing. Even on the

individual level, few people can grasp the dimensions of the problems we face — which have scarcely come into view in all their massive implications — let alone can make them part of daily life and action. For how appallingly new they are, and how embedded in us all are the attitudes that have brought us to the crisis-point in the first place!

Teilhard, writing even so recently as the 1950's, still was living in times where technology seemed a saviour, with no more than a few by-problems to be overcome. It was a few years later that the first conferences of some concerned scientists began. Here in Australia, the time-lag meant that perhaps the first important public statements by a scientist on the "emerging crisis" were made (by Sir Frank Fenner in *The Two Faces of Science*.) Sir Macfarlane Burnet has now emphasised that the biggest problem facing mankind (it's always men who are to solve the problems they make) is the development and management of the planet as a "viable human ecosystem". But in the public forums, apart from immediate issues like the fate of the Great Barrier Reef and the forests and beaches, there's been little discussion in public forums.

Scientists themselves, of course, have not yet plumbed the full depths of the "crisis" and its implications, since science itself has been so largely diverted into military-industrial research and development, and the billions of dollars spent on these have starved other areas of research. The present "information explosion" on the subject of ecological deterioration has been handicapped not only in research but in presentation of the problems and discussion of possible moves towards action. This starvation has — perhaps intentionally — kept most people in the dark as to its scope and menace. Not until the late "sixties and early seventies" did the idea that there was in fact an "environmental crisis" begin to be widely discussed; it was a woman scientist's work, *Silent Spring*, (1962) by Rachel Carson, which set off discussion on the implications of chemical interference with the environment. The whole question of what we are doing to the world and ourselves sank into quiescence over the mid-1970's and the 80's, as the great industries formed a power-bloc and the media fell silent.

So the world network of communications which Teilhard saw as the beginnings of a "world-brain" has been easily subverted. Those few individuals and groups which have tried to spread the news of looming problems have been equally easily denigrated ("emotional", "uninformed", "hysterical") and pushed aside.

Individuals, in today's world of huge and impersonal organisations and closely controlled media, may well feel helpless. But it remains true that only individual knowledge, work and action can move and influence decision-makers in a democracy. If we refuse to believe that it is already too late to change, there may be a climate in which change is possible; otherwise the belief is self-validating.

What could the new planetary vision be? In a world more and more inhumanly organised and structured on materialist and authoritarian lines, there seems no place for vision at all and little hope for individual faith in a future of new unity. As we look at the great cities in which the human molecules of Teilhard's visionary "world-brain" are increasingly crushed and huddled together, we seem to see, not any emergence or possible emergence of a new harmony, but rather increasing violence, crime, ignorance, cynicism, hopelessness, mental and emotional instability, surrounded by increasing pollution, disease, and the sheer visual and sensory weight of ugliness and physical and moral deterioration. The messages that flash around the planet over the network of today's communication systems are not carrying any news of an increase in maturity, responsibility and hope; rather, they seem messages of disorder, dissolution and despair. We are not seeing visions, but nightmares.

Yet is total breakdown, total loss of control, necessary for the establishment of a new structure, a new kind of control? As long as we cling to the forms of the past, we may not be able to foresee or build the forms of the future, but if we forget the lessons of the past no wisdom can emerge to guide those forms. What we are going through may be a necessary pre-condition for the emergence of a new principle of social cohesion based on a coherent rejection of past error, and a binding force based not on notions of technological mastery, but in mutual recognition of the realities of feeling, compassion, belief in ourselves and our capacities for change. Maybe, then, we should be welcoming, not fearing, the breakdown we see.

"In the destructive element immerse" is a psychological imperative we have not yet dared to try.

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These essays will be published in Judith Wright's collection of essays *Going on Talking*, published by Butterfly Books, PO Box 107, Springwood NSW 2777. RRP \$14.95.