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December 1, 1985 (letter 5)

Dear Colleague:

I am not much good at memorizing the dates of history, partly because I don't want to invest effort in something that may change overnight. I feel this way, in particular, about the dates of the Egyptian dynasties. Why bother to memorize them when, almost every time I open a new book on the ancient Near East, the dates are revised? Modern dates are not a problem: 1066 remains as firm as the Rock of Gibraltar. Ancient dates, however, are inscribed on sand. For instance, I have always assumed that Zoroaster lived around 600 B.C., that he lived in what Karl Jaspers called the "Axial Period" of world history, along with such major philosophical-religious thinkers as Socrates, Buddha, and Confucius. But recent scholarship has pushed Zoroaster back to 1400 B.C. (See Gherardo Gnoli, Zoroaster's Time and Homeland, 1980). This revision of date knocks a hole in Jaspers's thesis of the Axial Period--the idea that a certain kind of universalist thought appeared, more or less at the same time, in widely different parts of the world.

Dates assigned to Quaternary geological events change even faster. Revisions occur all the time. In Egyptian chronology, when new evidence calls for change in the dating of one dynasty, the dates of all the other dynasties become suspect. Something like this, I assume, occurs in geomorphic history as well: alter significantly the date of one glacial advance and the dates of all the other glacial advances in the same hemisphere are called into question. But in history, Zoroaster is thrown back by some eight hundred years while the dates for the rest of the Axial gang stay put. What a loose bag is ancient history! Or can we suggest that the emergence of some one like Zoroaster is more like the eruption of a volcano--a local event with no clear linkage to the behavior of volcanoes elsewhere--than like the advance of a glacier?

In history, how important is a single fact or event? This is the classical "Cleopatra's nose" question, recently resurrected by Hugh Trevor-Roper. On 23 October 1940, Hitler asked General Franco to help him stage an assault on British Gibraltar. By 1940, Hitler was widely believed to be irresistible. Mussolini yielded to him, so why not Franco who, after all, also owed something to Hitler? Moreover, from a nationalist point of view, the removal of the British from Gibraltar would have been a popular move. But Franco said "no." If he had said "yes," Gibraltar would almost certainly have fallen. "Then the Mediterranean Sea would have been closed to Britain and a whole potential theatre of future war and victory would have been shut off." (History and Imagination, 1983).

The "Cleopatra's nose school of history" believes that one small action--the utterance of a monosyllable "no"--can change world events. In our time, the influence of this school is exhibited in the commonly accepted notion that if a lunatic were to press one little button, the world as we know it will come to a sudden end. The horror of this possibility is one reason why I prefer the Marxist materialist interpretation of history. It is so reassuring! According to the materialist view, history moves along a broad and massive front toward

a. foreclosed end that no individual can thwart. Questions such as "Yes or no? Shall I press the button or not?" are the stuff of melodramas and nightmares, compared with which schemata of irresistible forces and movements, inevitable stages and progress, transcending altogether the waywardness of even powerful individuals, are a soothing dream. If the scientific schemata were true, we can all sleep better. The rub is: if true, we have never been and need never be awake.

Occasionally I come across lines in a poem that make a vivid impression: the following, for instance, by someone called Vennberg.

The dead are laid to rest in Wood like the unborn.
(Oh, to rest there in deepest sleep
like a cigar in fragrant box!)

Best wishes,

J. L.