

Roy Ridgway

# Everything is history

There's no future without a past. That should be obvious, but how often do you hear people say, 'Oh, to hell with the past! Now is all you have.' Well, in a way, that's true; but what they mean by the present is not what I mean by the present. The present is a nothingness which we fill up with the past (memories, experience, knowledge which are present in everything we do) and the future: our expectations. There is direct awareness - Spinoza's 'pure knowing subject' seeing 'what is,' but that is for most of us a very rare experience.

For most of us, living our everyday lives, a present that is completely divorced from the past is not possible except in meditation, when you withdraw from life for a while and empty your mind (usually by repeating a mantra) of all thoughts, memories and desires or in Gestalt Therapy when you stand outside yourself and observe your behaviour in the present, or more correctly, the immediate past, which has been called verbal meditation. Often it is one part of the mind looking at another: the past - memories, experience, knowledge - looking at the present; but in true verbal meditation there is an observing self that is without memories, like, in fact, the 'pure knowing subject.' You can't keep this up for long; though long enough perhaps to change direction. It is an exercise, not a way of living: not in this present day and age which leaves little space to do this.

But even as a pure knowing subject when you observe the present you are seeing what 'has been' (in Gestalt Therapy to correct faulty conditioning). And the only future you can possibly conceive of *in this world* (being-in-the-world) is what has been called the 'has-been' future - a future in which the past is still working. Dwelling in the future is something different; it is seeing tomorrow as gone before it begins; the future disappears in your reveries, you enjoy it before it happens.

At times of bereavement I cut myself off from my future because someone to me is missing - someone, for instance, like a mother, who was quite literally my past, my childhood. At such times I can't bear to think of my past and therefore I feel I have no future. Time stands still. There is no movement. Coupled with this is the desire to change the past - the 'if only' feeling - which Sartre said was like trying to spin a disc backwards. This is the meaning of anguish. It is the torture of trying to change what cannot be changed, or the mind's refusal to part with something that has already gone.

When Dryden wrote about the present moment, in *The Spanish Friar*, he saw it as the 'has-been' future:

This hour's the very crisis of your fate,  
Your good and ill, your infamy and fame,  
And the whole colour of your life depends  
On this important now.

By failing to act in the present we avoid the future. We stand still and watch life pass us by. In one his *Epistles* Horace expresses this thought as follows:

He who postpones the hour of living is like  
the rustic who waits for the river to pass  
along before he crosses; but it glides on  
and glides on forever.

Mistakes can be corrected in the future. The 'if only' feeling when applied to a future possibility has some meaning. We can learn from our past mistakes and behave in different ways now and in the future. The theory that all progress depends on our ability to look backwards at the errors of the past has been expressed by that great philosopher of science, Karl Popper, in the following formula:

P1 TS EE P2

where P1 is the initial problem (the result of past error), TS the trial solution (in which you test a present theory), EE the process of error elimination (through understanding the mistakes of the past) and P2 the resulting situation, with new problems. And so we go on - looking back, correcting the mistakes of the past, and going forward to find that we have created new problems. Kierkegaard recognised this when he said that life must be lived forwards, but can only be understood backwards.

But dwelling in the past like swelling in the future - going for a walk in the country, for instance, and thinking of something that happened yesterday or planning tomorrow - is throwing away the present. Being objective about the past, seeing it as it affects the here and now, is something different. You don't try to retreat into the past, but bring the past into the present.

You cannot close your eyes to the past. Wherever you look you see the past: you see its mistakes as well as its achievements. If I look at, say, Winchester Cathedral it means little to me if I don't see its function as a place of worship. True, I can see its intrinsic beauty, apart from its function, as I can see the intrinsic beauty of, say, Battersea Power Station, but I cannot fully appreciate it unless I can understand its architecture and the faith that inspired those who built it, which means knowing about the Saxons and Normans and about the Christian religion. Everything is history.