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BACK TO THE DARK AGES: HOW ELECTRONIC MEDIA ARE PULLING US BACK TO BARBARISM

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"If we slide into a modern, high-tech version of the Dark Ages, we will have done it to ourselves without the assistance of the German tribes that destroyed Roman civilization." — Robert Bork

SUMMARY

After the barbarian invasions, the analytical elements once embedded in Roman culture faded from the scene. Literacy, education, and civility vanished, while superstition swelled. Medieval villages became little more than floating islands of ignorance in Europe's dark forests. Books were rare, vocabularies were limited, and violence ruled the day. The Roman Catholic church restricted reading and writing as a means of controlling a large and diverse population. Adults and children shared in the same coarse activities so that nothing was hidden from little ears and eyes. People saw fairies and goblins in the flickering lights of marsh gas, and fireflies were said to be the souls of unbaptized infants.

The great irony of our age is that, for all our technological prowess, American culture is beginning to resemble Medieval Europe. The technological shift from the printed word to the visual image is pulling us back into the Dark Ages, as evidenced by a turning away from word-based modes of learning, a dramatic climb in self-gratifying behavior, and a renewed interest in pagan forms.

Alaric, the Gothic king, pushed open the flap and stepped outside. The imperial envoys approached his tent now pitched within the shadows of Rome's walls.

One of the envoys cleared his throat, assumed a dignified stance, and spoke on behalf of the Roman senate: "We are now prepared to make peace; but we are not afraid to fight. If we cannot come to fair and honorable terms, then, by all means, sound your trumpets; for we are many and in great anguish."

Upon hearing this well-delivered oration, the barbarian bellowed out a loud laugh. He knew the inhabitants on the other side were slowly starving to death because of his stranglehold on the city.

"The thicker the hay, the easier it is mowed," pronounced Alaric.

Alaric then listed off his demands: all the city's gold; all the silver; all the precious furniture; and all the slaves with German blood in their veins.

"If such, O king, are your demands," sputtered the other envoy, "what do you intend to leave us?"

"Your lives," said Alaric.¹

How had Rome reached such a predicament? For over 600 years no foreign enemy had set foot inside the empire's capital; but on 24 July A.D. 410, 40,000 Goths, allied Huns, and newly freed Roman slaves entered the city. A cruel slaughter of the Romans ensued. In the years to come, German tribes from the North would descend upon a rotting carcass. The Goths, Huns, Franks, Lombards, Angles, Saxons, and others staked out their territories, further splitting and splintering the empire well into the twelfth century. As we shall see, the Dark and Middle Ages illustrate what can happen to a society when it lapses from the written word; but also they illustrate what might happen to us, if America forsakes her word-based heritage.

Darkness Descending

Following the barbarian invasions, the analytical elements embedded in Roman culture began to fade from the scene. Literacy, education, and civility vanished, while superstition swelled. Tribal chieftains, triumphant warriors, and a handful of patricians left over from the empire cut up and resettled Europe. The images we have of Europe during the Middle Ages — that of Grimm's fairy tales with deep dark forests, lurking wolves, hags, and roaming highwaymen — are not too far removed from the reality of the times.

By the time of Charlemagne's reign (A.D. 768–814), European society was predominantly rural. The Romans had not built roads in Central Europe, and it largely remained a vast woodland. Medieval villages were islands, cut off from one another, and the residents rarely ventured too far from town. G. G. Coulton comments in *The Medieval Village* that these villages typically numbered 50–500 souls at the most. "The people are few, and their ideas and words are few, the average peasant has probably never known by sight more than two or three hundred men in his whole life; his vocabulary is almost certainly confined to something even less than the six hundred words...."² So isolated were these hamlets that if a villager perchance wandered into a neighboring village 20 miles away, he might not be able to make out the dialect of the other inhabitants. The average day's journey was seven miles away — the time it took to go out on foot and return before the sun went down,³ and one did want to return before the sun went down. A person was twice as likely to be murdered than die by accident, and the murderer faced only a one in one hundred chance of being brought to justice.⁴ Roving gangs, sometimes composed of renegade knights, waited in the woods to fall on helpless travelers.

In the second half of the first millennium, the absence of literacy in the West coincided with great swellings of membership within the Roman Catholic Church due to the conversions of the barbarians.⁵ For 500 years the ability to read and write was practically unknown, not only to the average layperson but also to kings and emperors.⁶ This is not to say that *no one* could read or write; rather, these skills were restricted to a privileged clerical class.

One could almost say that literacy faded because the barbarians cared nothing for books, but there are other reasons why the lights went out in Europe.⁷ For example, the alphabet became disguised and unrecognizable as styles of it multiplied. The scarcity of papyrus and parchment also helped restrict reading. Beyond these reasons looms another, perhaps a greater cause for the eclipse of literacy. Simply

stated, the church restricted reading and writing. The Vulgate Bible, produced by Jerome in the fifth century, was written in Latin and therefore out of reach to the common person. The unbiblical Roman Catholic doctrines of the priesthood, transubstantiation, purgatory, and indulgences were rarely challenged because people could not read the Bible for themselves. In 1229, the Council of Toulouse forbade everyone but the clergy even to possess a copy of the Scriptures. Keeping the masses illiterate was a means of controlling a large and diverse population.

James Burke has noted how medieval people lived in a world without “facts.”⁸ Information coming from outside the village walls was scant and could not always be corroborated. Records were rarely kept. Because there were few calendars and clocks, few could mark the passage of time with precision. In an island world such as this, in which information could not be cross-referenced or confirmed, there could not exist a sense of history, geography, or science.⁹ Writing had a magical quality, and books, when they could be found, were considered miraculous objects.

As literacy faded, so did education. Institutions of higher learning in the Roman Empire, housed within cities such as Athens and Alexandria, were specially targeted by post-Constantine emperors in the fourth and fifth centuries, who cared little about cultivating the mind or preserving the past, so that books and philosophy eventually vanished out of sight.¹⁰ Because human communication was primarily oral and no books, facts, and body of knowledge about the past or present state of the world were available to transmit to others, there was no reason for a formal system of education. Schools in the monasteries and some private tutoring existed, but a system of primary education, where common people develop the skills of reading and writing, was unknown.¹¹

What is so spectacular about reading and writing anyway? This is a question that will be asked with greater frequency as we ease down the image-friendly road. Educators must address this question since the digit directors who have set themselves to the task of creating a new virtual world on our behalf intend to offer more reasons why literacy should be “redefined” to accommodate a less articulate society. There are many good reasons to keep our culture literate. First and foremost, Christians must realize that if they are going to *be* a “people of the Book,” they must first *know* the Book. It goes without saying that Christianity is a word-based faith and historically has been at tension with image-based religions, namely pagan idolatry. God purposefully chose the medium of *writing* to make Himself known. Writing is God’s preferred medium because it possesses the objectivity and permanency needed to convey and preserve the old, old story.

Another reason literacy should remain valued in our culture is that childhood, and all that it entails, is an outgrowth of literacy. As Neil Postman explains in *The Disappearance of Childhood*, childhood did not exist in the Middle Ages. Of course, biological children existed, that is, people smaller in stature than adults; but childhood as a social artifact did not exist. Postman argues that in a literate culture a child has to be separated from the rest of the community to be taught how to read and write. In an oral society, the distinctions between a child and an adult are almost invisible because both share a communication environment in which competence is measured only by the ability to speak — something a child becomes competent at by age seven. In the Middle Ages, children and adults shared the same world, the same games, the same stories, the same activities. There was absolutely nothing hidden from a 10-year-old within the home or village.

It was not until after the invention of the printing press, Postman says, that “children had to *earn* adulthood by achieving literacy, for which people are not biologically programmed.”¹² By the sixteenth century, schools became one of the primary instruments to help civilize society. Children were slowly and carefully introduced to an expanding world in which adults had decided to keep some information

safe from little ears and eyes. The process of providing a child a literate education had to begin at an early age when, as we now better understand, the brain is at the greatest point of neuron growth. Childhood, then, became the transition period to prepare oneself for adult civility. One reason children seem to be growing up so fast these days is because electronic media have broken down the wall that used to exist between children and adults. Television has no secrets.

In other words, the Middle Ages were less civil before the spread of literacy. William Manchester comments that the “level of everyday violence — deaths in alehouse brawls, during bouts with staves, or even playing football or wrestling — was shocking.”¹³ We like to think of Medieval Europe as a wonderful time when knights in shining armor wooed lovely princesses with courageous acts of chivalry at jousting tournaments. In fact, these tournaments were just as likely to be occasions for abductions and mayhem. In 1240, for instance, 60 knights in shining armor were brutally hacked to death at a tourney near Düsseldorf.¹⁴ The barbarians brought with them a thirst for blood, which their newly found faith somehow did not quench. The “Christian” king Clovis once took an ax and smashed open the skull of a fellow Frank when he heard that a church vase had been broken in a tribal spat. “Thus you treated the vase at Soissons!” he screamed as he brought the ax down.¹⁵ The legend of the Pied Piper is actually based upon the acts of a psychotic pederast, who sexually abused and butchered dozens of children in the Saxon village of Hammel.

Medieval Europe’s blood thirst was rivaled only by its sexual vulgarity. The close quarters people lived in did not help matters. The typical peasant house consisted of a single room, where in the center lay a “gigantic bedstead, piled high with straw pallets, all seething with vermin. Everyone slept there, regardless of age or gender — grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, and hens and pigs — and if a couple chose to enjoy intimacy, the others were aware of every movement.”¹⁶ Strangers were invited to share the bed, too. If a husband happened to be away, perhaps on a pilgrimage, and returned to find his wife with child, the common way to deal with it was to say that while sleeping, she had been impregnated by an incubus — an excuse theologians of the day readily confirmed.¹⁷

Children and adults lived their lives together. Historian J. H. Plumb says, “The coarse village festivals depicted by Bruegel, showing men and women besotted with drink, groping for each other with unbridled lust, have children eating and drinking with adults.”¹⁸ The practice of adults playing with children’s genitals was a widespread tradition according to Philippe Ariès: “Everything was permitted in [children’s] presence: coarse language, scabrous actions and situations; they had heard everything and seen everything.”¹⁹

The persistence of paganism coupled with the decline of literacy and the isolation of rural life opened the cracks for superstition to creep in to the popular worldview. Darkness swallowed up the empire sometime after A.D. 400, and the analytical elements that had once existed before this time were replaced with “popular” superstitions. Ramsay MacMullen says, “For reasons having nothing to do with [early] Christianity, the habits of mind once characterizing the [educated] elite — the more intellectual, analytical, comparativist, and empiricist elements of ancient thought — lost favor.”²⁰ In the days of Jesus, events in the weather were explained in natural terms, but a thousand years later they were being explained in strictly mystical terms. Pagan sorcery and churches joined in a strange partnership. “Weathermen” (*tempestarii*) were summoned to towns to cast their enchantments toward the sky. Bishops wore the hat of magic men who not only blessed crops but also cast spells to ward off evil spirits. People saw fairies and goblins in the flickering lights of marsh gas, fireflies were said to be the souls of unbaptized infants, and there was a reliance on the signs of the zodiac to explain natural disasters. (The University of Paris came to the conclusion that the Black Death was caused by the conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars.²¹)

Darkness Descending Again

We cannot ignore the parallels between the Dark Ages and our own time. We have no barbarians at our borders (the current terrorist threat notwithstanding). Nevertheless, as with Rome, our society's analytical elements are in jeopardy. The great irony of our age is that for all our technological prowess we are remarkably less articulate, less civil, and more irrational than we were 100 or even 200 years ago. The technological shift from the printed word to the visual image is pulling us back into the Dark Ages.

As noted above, there are distinct differences between oral cultures and literate ones. Oral cultures think concretely and subjectively, have limited vocabularies, rely heavily on memory, and focus primarily on the here and now. Literate cultures think abstractly and objectively, have large vocabularies, process information in a detached and analytical fashion, and are capable of grasping and learning from the past. America seems to be sliding back into what Walter Ong calls a state of "secondary orality."²² Ong (writing before the proliferation of the personal computer!) believes electronic communication technologies are having a powerful influence on the mindset of contemporary cultures. Although still dependent on its literate past to keep society's trains running on time, cultures of secondary orality have an environment "in which a majority of people, particularly the young, spend a great deal more time, and give a great deal more allegiance, to sound and image-based media than to written and printed words."²³ Ong suggests the ways today's youth think and express themselves have more in common with oral cultures of the past than with literate cultures.

The irony sharpens when one considers that in our own culture we require children to spend at least 12 years attending school; yet, sadly, electronic media have become our children's "first curriculum," signifying the tremendous influence of television, videos, and CDs. The school (and for some, the church), of course, constitutes the second curriculum.²⁴ The entertaining programs, the magnetic personalities, and the lusty music flowing forth from electronic media have gained *first place* in the hearts of our children. The school, at least the traditional concept of school, with its *word*-based modes of learning, earns a half-hearted *second place* because it cannot compete with stimulating and fast-moving images. This is one reason why schools are now focusing on the tangible and experiential in their methodologies. As Gene Edward Veith points out in his book *Postmodern Times*, "Instead of students learning primarily from language — from books and the mental discipline of reading and writing — the new curriculum relies on *images* — computer screens and VCRs — and on manufacturing elaborate but entertaining experiences, such as interactive games and field trips."²⁵

That we are less civil than we were a century or two ago has been articulated by Stephen Carter in his timely book, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*. Carter argues that civility is declining in America because of a spiritual crisis. Our crudeness and rudeness stem from our obsession to get what we want at all costs. Carter notes that it was Erasmus's work, *On Civility in Children* (1530), that put forth the notion that *self-discipline* was the hallmark of civilization separating the barbarian from the nonbarbarian. Erasmus was extremely popular among a growing literate middle class, who were accustomed to a world where people ate with their hands from a common plate, urinated in the street, and chopped one another up over minor disagreements.²⁶

There is no doubt that our growing lack of civility is a moral problem, but I would add that it is a moral problem exacerbated by technological innovations, particularly innovations in electronic media, which have conditioned us to expect immediate gratification. Whether it be fast food, instant entertainment, or immediate sex, the dominant value of all technological innovation from the microwave oven to the birth control pill is *speed*. We cannot wait until next year, or even until tomorrow, or an hour from now; we must have it *this very second*. It is the barbarian, Erasmus would say, who must satisfy all bodily desires

the moment they surface. Are we surprised, then, when driving down the road, we are suddenly cut off by a three-ton sports-utility vehicle with an obscenely gesturing, screaming maniac at the wheel? Add to road rage, air rage, talk show rage, and after-the-athletic-event-mash-everything-in-sight rage, and one gets a better picture of what kind of people we are becoming — very selfish ones. A pack of libido-driven men roam Central Park on a Sunday afternoon groping and stripping helpless women while police officers look the other way. Two teenage Goths laden with bombs and guns emerge from their suburban bat cave in Littleton, Colorado, and commence to blow up their school and massacre fellow students.

Sadly, we now reward individuals for being “as nasty as they want to be.” Every Monday night millions of teens sit screen side for WWF’s “Raw Is War” and soak up a procession of violence, profanity, and vulgar exhibitionism. Major corporations support talk shows with daily themes such as “I impregnated 30 girls and I’m proud of it”²⁷ and recording artists with names such as Cannibal Corpse, whose lyrics describe overt sexual acts with the severed head of a child. Allan Bloom was right when he said in *The Closing of the American Mind*, “Such polluted sources issue in a muddy stream where only monsters can swim.”²⁸

One does not have to look far over the castle walls of modernity to find monsters swimming about in the stinky moat of popular culture. Only now we do not summon the local bishop or the magic man to fetch them out, but instead we blow them up with 20 tons of TNT, an exciting new development hatched in the fertile imaginations of authors such as Stephen King. The demons who once lurked in the dark forests of Medieval Europe seem to have migrated to the wardrobe rooms of Hollywood, where they have zipped themselves up in exotic new costumes. Screwtape, C. S. Lewis’s scheming demon, had hoped this would happen. The evil spirit told his nephew Wormword that the trick was to

*emotionalise and mythologise their science to such an extent that what is, in effect, a belief in us, [sic] (though not under that name) will creep in while the human mind remains closed to belief in the Enemy. The “Life Force,” the worship of sex, and some aspects of Psychoanalysis, may here prove useful. If once we can produce our perfect work — the Materialist Magician, the man, not using, but veritably worshipping, what he vaguely calls “Forces” while denying the existence of “spirits” — then the end of our war will be in sight.*²⁹

Lewis was an apologist who aimed his arrows at modernism’s secular doctrines. He understood there might come a day when demonology would transform itself into a kind of public fascination with devils, but it would be a fascination absent of traditional Christian presuppositions. It took only 50 years for Lewis’s prediction to come true.

Our enchantment with aliens is in keeping with Lewis’s insightful observation. Our fascination with aliens has become a regular media bonanza, going as far back as Orson Welles’s famous broadcast, *War of the Worlds* (1938). Since that benchmark event, extraterrestrials have been showing up as our friends (*E. T.*), our enemies (*Alien*), and our personal saviors (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*); but alien mania is more than a harmless flirtation with the “What’s out there?” It is a sign that Americans are refusing to apply reason to their beliefs, that we are rejecting the very idea of rationality.³⁰ It’s only entertainment, one might counter. Unfortunately, for many in our culture, the line between escapist entertainment and reality is becoming increasingly blurred. According to polls, 40 percent of Americans think aliens have visited our planet.³¹

It is no coincidence that members of the Heaven’s Gate cult were avid consumers of *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *The X-Files* fare. Like overanxious children awaiting a much anticipated summer vacation, members readily packed their space bags when their wide-eyed leader, Marshall Applewhite, announced that the UFO tailgating the Hale-Bopp comet was ready for boarding. Americans want to hear messages from outer space because Jodie Foster wanted to hear them — we long to hear them with her — which is why

one media outlet was so quick to call the 1999, HD119850 signal a “close encounter with what promises to be the most important scientific discovery of all time.”³² As it turned out, the signal was not the most important scientific discovery of all time, but such proclamations are now typical of the news media, whether they are associated with distant radio static or traces of life on Mars.

New Age mumbo-jumbo is big business in the United States. Calls to psychic hotlines approach one-third of all 900 numbers and constitute a billion-dollar industry.³³ Of course, there is nothing *new* about New Age religions. Behind all the hype of horoscopes, Wicca, and channeling, lurk old-fashion divination, magic, and demon possession. Veith explains, “With the eclipse of Christianity, primitive nature religions come creeping back in all of their superstition and barbarism.”³⁴

The Middle Ages demonstrate that when a society lapses from the written word, the vultures of incivility and irrationality begin to circle overhead. These same vultures are circling over us now. Then again, the renewed interest in reading brought on by the Harry Potter phenomenon might lead us out of our present darkness.

But I don't think so.

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Notes

- 1 This account is based on Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 3 (London: Everyman's Library, 1976), 241.
- 2 G.G. Coulton, *The Medieval Village* (New York: Dover, 1989), 65.
- 3 See James Burke, “Communication in the Middle Ages,” in *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society*, 3d ed., ed. D.J. Crowley and Paul Heyer (New York: Longman, 1999), 71.
- 4 Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 134.
- 5 Harry J. Gaff, “Literate and Illiterate; Hearing and Seeing: England 1066–1307,” in *Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader*, ed. Harry J. Gaff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 16.
- 6 Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 17.
- 7 The points made here are discussed in Neil Postman's insightful work, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 11–14.
- 8 Burke, 71.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 10 Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 90.
- 11 Postman, 14.
- 12 Neil Postman, *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble about Language, Technology, and Education* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1988), 153.
- 13 William Manchester, *A World Lit Only by Fire: The Medieval Mind and the Renaissance* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1992), 6.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 J. H. Plumb, “The Great Change in Children,” *Horizon*, Winter 1971, 7.

- 19 Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. Robert Baldrick (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1962), 103.
- 20 MacMullen, 153.
- 21 "Did You Know? Little Known or Remarkable Facts about Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages," *Christian History* 15, no. 1: 2–3.
- 22 Water H. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982).
- 23 Lori Ramos, "Understanding Literacy: Theoretical Foundations for Research in Media Ecology," in *The New Jersey Journal of Communication* 8 (Spring 2000): 53.
- 24 See Neil Postman, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979). According to one study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the typical American child in 1999 spent an equivalent of a full work week consuming electronic media outside of school (38.5 hours of TV, music, videos, and computer for fun), with television ranking first at close to three hours per day. ("New Study Finds Kids Spend Equivalent of Full Work Week Using Media," Kaiser Family Foundation press release, 17 November 1999 [www.kff.org/content/1999/1535/pressreleasefinal.doc.html].)
- 25 Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 183–84.
- 26 Stephen Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 14–15.
- 27 John Leo, "A Lovely Day for Haranguing," *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 November 1995, 33.
- 28 Allan Bloom discusses rock music in *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 74.
- 29 C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: MacMillan, 1976), 29.
- 30 See Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Regan Books, 1996), 263.
- 31 Richard Carliss, "A Star Trek into The X-Files," *Time*, 7 April 1997, 42.
- 32 Todd Halvorson of *Florida Today*, "HD119850 Signal Was Loud and Clear," *Pensacola News Journal*, 24 October 1999, sect. A.
- 33 Charles Strohmer, "The Future — Your Call? The Commercialization of Psychics and Astrology," *Christian Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (1999): 34.
- 34 Veith, 200.