

Tom Wolfe  
McGraw-Page Library Dedication  
September 16, 1988

Thank you very, very much, President Payne.

And I want to assure you that Randolph-Macon suffered no damage on the diamond with me on the mound for Washington & Lee. But we won't go into that this morning.

I want to thank you profoundly for the great honor that you've bestowed on me. But above all I want to congratulate June McBroom and her family, and President Payne, and everyone who's had a hand in this absolutely marvelous library that's going to be dedicated today.

My only regret is that the beloved Bill Gibson, who put so much of himself into the creation of this library, could not be with us today.

A library is actually a fairly recent invention in human history. And it is one of the most remarkable inventions in human history in that it is an extension of memory of the sort that had not been envisioned through millenia.

And I think this particular invention is going to be put to the test increasingly over the next 11 years and four months as the 20th century comes to an end and all of us begin to look back on this astonishing 100 years known as the 20th century.

I know that many people in the academic world - and certainly people all over the world of journalism, which I inhabit - are already feeling the pressure to look back at the 20th century and to make some kind of sense out of it. And some of the results, I'm afraid, are going to be rather appalling.

About the year 2000... I mean, think for just a moment of all the television specials that we're going to be subjected to. There'll be Michael J. Fox - by that time wearing some lineless aviator bifocal glasses - with wire hair sprouting out of his ears, hosting a documentary for CBS television entitled, "Forward into the Past."

But as all of these looks back at the 20th century... I mean, what are they going to say? What are they going to discover?

Well, obviously, they're going to point out that for a start, this has been the century in which wars have become so enormous they have become known as "world wars."

It will be looked upon as the century in which mankind developed the capacity to blow up the entire planet by turning a couple of cylindrical keys in a missile silo. But even if it blew to smithereens, mankind, also in this century, developed the capacity to escape to the stars on space ships; for the first time in human history, able to break the bonds of earth's gravity.

But I think above all, after all of the spectacular accomplishments, and spectacular occurrences, and dreadful wars are reckoned with, I think what this century will stand out for will be as the century in which mankind developed the astonishing, the exhilarating, the exciting confidence to sweep away standards that had been in place for millenia and to start from zero in area after area of human life.

"Start from zero" happened to be the motto of the Bauhaus school in Germany in the early 1920's. And it is because of that motto and that approach of the Bauhaus school of sweeping away all standards in architecture and in art that had existed up to that time, that we find such remarkable phenomena in our own country as the fact that for the past 40 years - up until just a very few years ago - there had not been built in this country a large public building with a front door. Not a single one.

I'm sure you've all experienced what I have experienced in Richmond, in New York, in many other cities. You go to one of these modern, glass office towers after working hours, say, about 6:30 or 7 to meet someone, and you find yourself at the base of a tower that is completely girdled with identical slabs of plate glass.

You start pushing these slabs of plate glass, desperately trying to get in. None opens. You go on, on, one after another. Usually, you'll finally reach a strip of white Formica, incised with the letters, "Entrance," with an arrow. You push the next slab of plate glass. It doesn't open, either. Now you're getting frantic.

You notice a night watchman inside, wearing a pair of balloon-seat, green twill pants. You rap on the piece of glass, trying to get his attention. But he inevitably has a radio up to his ear the size of an aluminum siding salesman's sample suitcase. He's listening to the Pus Casserole or some other new group. He's unable to hear you. It comes like something from out of a Krafft-Ebing casebook dream. You're desperately trying to make progress. You're getting absolutely nowhere. And finally you begin to ask yourself, "Why is it that in this enormous country of ours, there has not been built for four decades a single, large, public building with a front door?"

And you find out it is because a handful of intellectuals in a small city, Dessau in Germany, more than half a century ago, had it in mind to "start from zero."

In the political area, starting from zero was the motto and, in a way, the bloody flag of the most extraordinary political movement, probably, in history. I'm talking about Communism.

Communism was radical not because it swept away the old order. Every revolution has swept away the old order. What was truly revolutionary about Communism was the fact that it also swept away the moral basis of all old orders - as in the remarkable Maoist phrase, "morality begins at the point of a gun." Again, starting from zero.

But in the United States, our contribution to starting from zero - sweeping aside standards that had been in place for millenia - has been more in the everyday arena of manners and mores.

And as I mentioned at the outset, much of it has been exhilarating. It has been a very daring experiment. Much of it has been chaotic.

To just cite the most obvious example...

Think of what is rather primly known as the "sexual revolution."

I'm sure all of us could cite countless examples of just what has occurred within the past 25 years. But I'll just cite one from two weeks ago which I love.

This was the occasion in which it was discovered that two actors - a man and a woman - had been posing as the most extremely twisted, sexual perverts in human history in order to go on daytime television talkshows. They went on the Oprah Winfrey Show. They went on the Geraldo Rivera Show. They had dreamed up things that even Krafft-Ebing had never heard from the lips of any poor, depraved soul in his entire career - such as, "That thing with the cup." And it was discovered that these were merely out-of-work actors looking for a spot on television.

Geraldo Rivera threatened to sue. But I think that in fact justice - or at least poetic justice - has already been served. The world has been crying out for such a gesture as these two actors have made.

After all, think of the number of times over the past five years - if you happen to turn on your television set in the morning - there's a smiling face, a glistening face saying to you, "This morning we plan to have a very frank and searching look at the little known world of Beastiality - and the Human Soul. This morning our guests are two members of the Pan-Western Beastiality Association and two members of the Animal Rights League. And they will confront the question, 'Do animals have rights in sex play?' We'll be back in a moment."

Now, this is beamed into every home without the blink of an eye, and it has reached the point where the term "perversion" really can no longer be used in polite discourse among educated people because the term "perversion," the term "deviation," for example, presumes that there is some stable standard by which such things are judged. Of course, no such standard exists any longer. That has been part of the experiment of starting from zero. And it's been a fascinating one.

Think of other terms that have disappeared from the language. Think of the term "co-habitation." Remember that term? There was a term called "co-habitation." How can you use such a term in an era in which the staple of Mom's pie America is the weekend in which Buddy comes home from college with his girlfriend and says, "Mom, which room do we use this weekend?" This is just everyday talk.

Or the term, "illegitimacy?" Has absolutely no meaning any longer in a country in which one of every five births is outside of marriage. This has been very much an era of starting from zero.

We don't have to deal with anything so spectacular and so sensational as sexuality. Just think of the more hazy, the grayer area of simply ethics. I was somewhat surprised two years ago when the complete end of amateur sports in America came, and very little notice was made of it.

Of course, we know at any large college or university there's no such thing as amateur sports. Amateur sports exist only at colleges and universities where there's too little money to pay for a mercenary corps on your campus. But the real end came two years ago when the Boston Marathon, just think, the Boston Marathon of all events, turned pro.

I'll never forget the sight, having to be there. As the great runners of the world, who are always in the front of the pack of thousands of runners, headed forth. And, there, in addition to the numbers on their backs, were pictures on their chests.

And these pictures were of tubes of fungicides for the foot. They were of striped orthodic running shoes. I mean, just imagine Miltiades and Phidipades on the plains of Marathon, considering calling up their agents before the big run is made to see if somehow this event cannot be sponsored by Desenex and Adidas.

This, I think, is an amazing change. And again, an example in not even a moral area. It's more an ethical area of starting from zero.

Think of the changed attitudes in the last 25 years towards debt. I'm beginning to hear in the early 1970s, people saying, "You know you've got to leverage yourself."

I say, "What do you mean, 'leverage yourself.'"

"You've got to get in debt. You've got to get in debt up to here. Otherwise, you're a fool."

So I did it. I got into debt. I got into tremendous debt. It became the cry of the age. And it infects you! Once you start getting into debt, it's glorious! You love it! It's intoxicating!

Just two years ago, I was in Dallas, and I happened to be sitting at a dinner table next to a gentleman I had never met, a Texan. He turned to me and he said, "Son." (I was gratified by the implication).

He said, "Son, I gotta tell ya something. I went down to the bank today. I borrowed me \$2.8 million dollars. That was a personal loan, got nothing to do with my company. I borrowed that, personally. Unsecured. A personal loan. I borrowed \$2.8 million dollars."

And you know what I did? I clapped him on the shoulders. "That's great! That's terrific!" I mean if he had told me he made \$2.8 million dollars that day, I would have yawned probably. I mean, people are making money all the time. But he borrowed it! It was great! It was fascinating!

Now, I think that so much of this... and again, I mean it when I say a lot of this is exhilarating. It's an experiment in manners and mores that has never been undertaken anyplace on earth in the entire history of mankind. It wasn't even undertaken at Versailles! I mean, things like this couldn't have been done.

I think part of it is due to the fact that for the past 40-odd years, really probably 45 years, since about 1943, we have been in the rising curve - and we're still in it - of an economic boom without parallel in history. It is 45 years, I would say, of absolutely sustained economic soaring over the landscape, so that today we have the phenomenon of wealth, created at every level of the working population of this country on a scale that would have made the Sun King blink!

So you can be sure that right now, while we are assembled here on this beautiful campus, you can be sure that your electrician, or your air conditioning mechanic, or your burglar alarm repairman, or mine in any event, is right now in Puerto Vallarta, or Rancho La Puerta, or Barbados, or St. Kitt's.

He's there with his third wife, or his New Cookie. He's dressed in a Harry Belafonte canecutter shirt, open down to the sternum, the better to allow the gold chains to twinkle in his chest hairs.

He and his New Cookie, in a few hours from now, are going to have a little designer water before dinner. After dinner they'll be out on the dance floor. She'll be wearing a pair of Everlast boxing trunks. She'll be wearing a man's strap-style undershirt. She'll have a hairdo that looks as if a Snapper lawnmower has run over her head. It's a look known as the War Waif coiffure.

He will be staring at her with these red eyes through these walnut shell eyelids. He'll be desperately trying to do the Robot or the Eel or the Sado-macho until the onset of dawn, saline depletion or myocardial infarction, whichever comes first.

And after all, why shouldn't he? Because what are Mom and the Cutlass Sierra and Buddy and Sis up against a love like this?

That first night on the disco floor, she wore a pair of boxing trunks. While leather punks and painted lulus, African queens and sado zulus paid her court. I grow old the 1980s way. Death, but from a max-Q-octophonic beat, stroked-out, but on my own two feet, disco-macho for you, my New Cookie.

Now, what this means is that we are in an age in which for the first time in history, it is possible for every man, or every working man or woman to live the life of an aristocrat. To cloak oneself in the sort of luxuries and to live life as if immune from ordinary rules in precisely the way that only aristocrats of the past were able to do. It means that we are in the period of what I think of as the "fifth freedom."

Some of us will recall that during the second World War, President Roosevelt enunciated four freedoms, which he said henceforth every person on earth should enjoy. These were freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion.

We are now in the era of the fifth freedom - which is freedom from religion. After all of the freedoms have been obtained, the last restraint to be thrown off, the last shackle to free yourself of is the restraint of religious belief and of ethical concerns.

The thing that makes this a rather critical topic in the United States is that as de Tocqueville observed 150 years ago, in a country with as much political and personal freedom as the United States, it is only the monitoring device, the self-discipline of a people who are highly religious and highly devoted to moral concerns that holds this society together.

And we are entering into, I think, a 10 year or 11 year period, right up until the end of the century, in which this will come highly into focus.

Again, I reiterate that I have enjoyed this era. I have considered it highly exhilarating, very exciting, and certainly from a writer's point of view, it has been a feast, a feast that no other generation of writers has ever had before.



So I have absolutely no complaints. But in certain areas, the freefall is running into problems. I'll just mention a couple...

The sexual revolution has now run into a stone wall which is known as AIDS, which I don't need to amplify.

In the area of the great boom, we have recently run into something, which may only be a little tripwire, called October the 19th, which has sent a chill, but not yet a paralyzing chill, through the financial community of this country. But a somewhat chaotic atmosphere nevertheless exists.

And I can't help but recall, it was just about exactly 100 years ago this year, that Friedrich Nietzsche, on the occasion on which he said that God was dead, also said that the 20th century would be a century in which mankind would still feel guilt but would no longer have the opportunity for redemption since he had abandoned his belief in God.

He predicted - this is 1888 - he predicted that the 20th century would be a century full of catastrophic wars caused by the fact that man was filled with self-loathing.

Following these wars, he said, there would be a period known as the revaluation, by which he meant that mankind would be searching desperately for new sets of values to replace the old, since there would be no longer any possibility of simply turning back to the religious structures of 1900.

I can't help but believe that that is precisely the period that we are in right now. The period of the revaluation. And I think that, just as the 1980s have been the period of money fever that has affected people all over this country, I think that the 1990s, will be the period of moral fever.

And certainly the graduates who will be leaving Randolph-Macon this spring and in the next few years, I think, will be in the midst of this tremendous search for new sets of values to somehow replace the osteoporadic skeleton of the old.

Perhaps you might consider this a forbidding vista, but I think it is also a tremendous opportunity. And there may be, and I do not doubt for a moment that there is, among the young men and women of this college, that genius or perhaps that handful of geniuses who will emerge, in due course, from the beautiful portals of the McGraw-Page Library with that new constellation of values that will light up the sky for all of us.

Thank you so very much, and my congratulations to you.