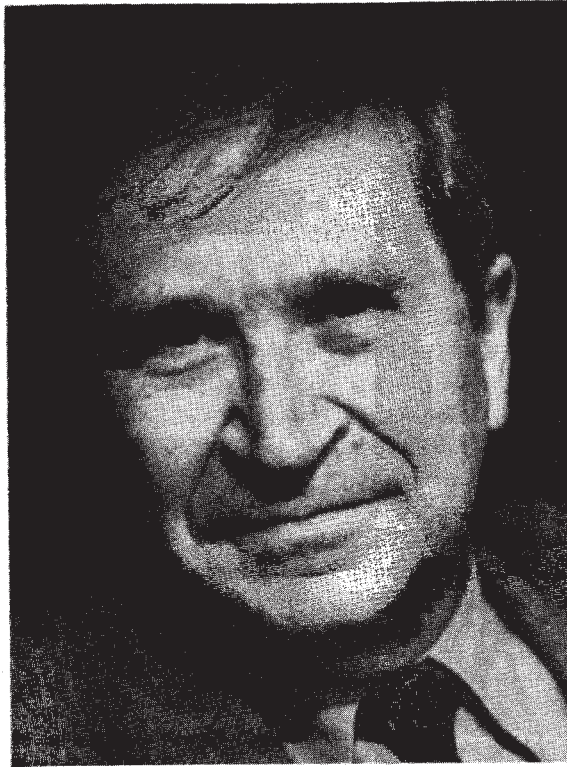


ENCUENTROS



Approaching the End of the Millennium

Lecture by

Homero Aridjis

IDB CULTURAL CENTER

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APPROACHING THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

Homero Aridjis

In the year 776 AD, Mayan astronomer-priests met in the holy city of Copán to synchronize their two calendars: a sacred calendar representing the gods, and a secular calendar measuring human time. The participants in this event were portrayed in a stone sculpture hewn into one of the altars in the city. Today, over twelve centuries later, the astronomers have long since turned to dust, their mythologies are long dead, and their system of measuring and tabulating time with *tunes* and *katunes* has been changed to the Gregorian *calendarium*, with Christian religious festivals based on the phases of the moon and European seasons. We can surely say that the ruination that overtook Copán came not from the heavens but from the earth, not from the gods but from men.

In our own day, the Lacandona Forest in Mexico has become a natural

victim of human greed, discord, violence, and a population explosion. At the present rate of deforestation, whatever remains of it is doomed to disappear by the end of this century. Given the climate of ethnic, religious, economic, political, and social conflict, combined with the stand-off between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the Mexican Government, it is unlikely that any feasible ecological solution to this problem will be found any time soon.

The admonition of Heraclitus the Obscure that "the sun must not overstep its boundaries or it risks punishment by the Furies, the ministers of justice," also applies to Copán, the Lacandona Forest, and Mexico City, because in their own ways and in their own times, these are all places whose natural resources have been overexploited and whose limits of growth

have been exceeded. With the ritual count of 260 days abolished, we can say that Copán, like Teotihuacán, Monte Albán, Chichén Itzá, and other pre-Hispanic sites from which people through the ages have observed the heavens, is simply slipping back into the past, into the endless night.

We are about to turn the corner of the millennium, to enter the year 2000 as marked on the Gregorian calendar, which was adopted in 1582 by Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal. It is now said to be in use "universally," although it would be more modest to say "worldwide." As is known, the Gregorian calendar replaced both the Roman Julian calendar, whose year started in May and which served Europe for over fifteen centuries, and the ancient systems of measuring time by the stars, the sun and moon, the creation myths, or the major happenings that occurred during the lives of religious prophets.

Our knowledge of ancient history is very relative where dates are concerned, because before 1492, for example, it is very difficult to know if events were dated according to the year of Christ's birth, the year of his passion, or the year of his resurrection.

The basic problem is that the histories or biographies of Jesus mention his birthplace, his parents, even his genealogical tree, but they cannot state with accuracy the year in which he was born. Certain scholars even have doubts about his birthplace. If, as James P. Mackey notes, we have to analyze the New Testament texts on the resurrection in order to explain the myth of Jesus' death, then

we are making Western history conditional on three events of Jesus' life that date back to times that cannot be precisely identified. We should recall that the practice of dividing history into BC and AD (Before Christ and *Anno Domini* or After Christ) arose in the Middle Ages.

Will the Jews, whose lunisolar calendar puts the presumed year of the world's creation at 3761 BC, and the Muslims, whose era starts with the Hegira or the emigration of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD, be as enthusiastic as Westerners in celebrating the year 2000? In India, where the Gregorian calendar is used for secular purposes and religious life is governed by the Hindu calendar, will the people also go out into the streets to celebrate the advent of the third millennium?

Personally, I hate all New Year festivities, and I am afraid that the celebrations ushering in the year 2000 will simply be two thousand times more depressing as far as I am concerned.

Eusebio de Cesárea, in his *Crónica Eclesiástica*, attempted to incorporate the history of the Church into the framework of the history of the world, starting with Abraham. If the Church was founded by the apostles, and the apostles talked about Jesus, then it was obvious that time should be divided into pre and post Christ eras. But if the birth of Christ, as Jaroslav Pelikan recalls, had more to do with the world of mystery than the world of nature, and if the Gospels of Matthew and Luke which describe Jesus' childhood are seen more as Christologies, how can we all agree on a system for dividing time into

regular divisions for dating events?

According to Rudolf Bultmann, the oldest stories of a people are not even histories, they are *myths*. Their stories are not human experiences or deeds but theologies and cosmogonies. Even Herodotus recounts historical facts as if they were a succession of narratives. Thucydides was perhaps the first man to look upon history as a form of knowledge. What is said about history could be said about the way in which ancient peoples measured time: the Mexicans linked it to mythology and the Christians to Christology.

We know that in the hypothetical year 221, Julius Africanus undertook the impossible task of producing a *History of the World*, beginning, of course, with creation. He set Jesus' birth in the year 5500 (from the creation of the world), and his return in the year 500. History would last 6000 years. Fortunately, his calculations turned out to be wrong.

The *Primera crónica general de España* (First History of Spain), commissioned by King Alfonso the Wise in the thirteenth century, started out by describing how Moses wrote the book of Genesis. It included Bible stories as well as Greek, African, Roman, and Gothic stories up to the time of the Spanish kings. The confusion between history, religion, Christology, mythology, legend, and fable was quite touching. Thus many of the ancient histories started not only with Jesus but with God Himself. In the twelfth century, Gioacchino da Fiore divided history into three periods: that of the Father (Old Testament), the Son (New Testament,

in which we are now living), and the Holy Spirit (the Millennium). Thanks to this idea we have one of the masterworks of the plastic arts: *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch.

Within the Eurocentric context of our culture, there will be plenty of opportunities in the year 2000 to commemorate the Gothic cathedrals and the splendors of the major cultural centers like Venice, Paris, London, New York; the geniuses of art, literature, philosophy, and music, such as Dante, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Dürer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Spinoza, Velásquez, Goya, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Goethe, Carroll, Flaubert, Dickens, Machado de Assis, Proust, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka, Joyce, Borges; and names such as Columbus, Bartolomé de las Casas, Bernardino de Sahagún, Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, Marx, Edison, Einstein, Freud, Pasteur, and Fleming. Against such luminaries, we do not know by which template we should assess the architects of the pyramids and temples of the non-Christian world, or of Tenochtitlán, Dürer's ideal city. Into what context can we place the visionaries and shamans like Milarepa and María Sabina, among the saints and Christian mystics like Ruysbroeck, Hildegard von Bingen, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint John of the Cross, and Saint Teresa of Avila?

Culture, like an ecosystem, is not only created by great people, but by a host of little people whose names are never known or known only to a few, and who are now barely remembered or completely

forgotten. It was those little people, with their ideas and labor, who were the movers and motivators of the material and spiritual structures of their day. Those familial and social fabrics have disappeared, but they were decisive in shaping the cultural ecosystem.

And speaking of ecosystems, I wonder whether this hypothetical thousand-year review, which will have so much to say about the masterworks of man, will leave room for evaluating the masterworks of nature. In what museum, other than the Earth, will these be found, and what critic will possess the aesthetic judgment to evaluate the branches of an ash tree, the colors of a coral reef, the plumage of a macaw, the skin of a tiger, or the wings of a butterfly.

People living in the year 1000 saw the upheavals of nature and human life as acts of the devil, a devil jealous of the works of God. Today we see those upheavals as acts of men, men heedless of the works of God.

The Judeo-Christian tradition of the Apocalypse, which starts with Ezekiel and continues through St. Paul and St. John of Patmos, up to Beato de Liébana and other medieval visionaries, has changed. After World War II and the experience of the Holocaust, followed by the nuclear arms race, we now believe that the Apocalypse will be the work of man, not of God.

The concept of Nature held by the poets and artists of the second half of the twentieth century has also changed. The natural world is no longer considered idyllic, as in the Homeric *Hymn to the Earth*, the *Eclogues* of Virgil, some

medieval *Book of Hours*, or through the eyes of the romantic poets of the nineteenth century. The way of looking at water, air, and earth is different. The brotherhood evoked in the beautiful *Canticle of Creatures* by St. Francis of Assisi has been shattered. We have passed from an attitude of contemplation to an active or fearful mind set. The gardens, parks, and woods that used to delight people's hearts are now either closed or dying of cancer, just as human beings are. The people of today have turned against the very idea of the tree and, by extension, have even destroyed the enchanted forests of fairy tales.

As the twentieth century draws to a close, we still have not cast off the medieval terror of life or, even worse, the terror of death. Sometimes I have the feeling that man's conscience is like the obsidian mirror of the Aztecs, reflecting the living body in a corpse-like state.

We have also abandoned our anthropocentrism. In our smallness and in our greatness, we are no different from—but nor are we the same as—those people who lived in the year 1000, or those who probably will exist in the year 3000. One thing will inevitably continue to unite the human beings of the three millennia: the awareness of the death of the body. A minority will be aware of something else—of the ecological deterioration of the Earth and of the vertiginous speed with which plant and animal species are disappearing.

For the year 2000, the media will of course engage in their collective rituals: they will review the history of the past ten centuries, bombard us with stories of deeds

done, and with examinations of conscience from which we shall always come out looking bad. The heroes of history, and of culture and civil society will be people we already know, people who have become famous during ten centuries of Eurocentrism. After all, aren't the skeletons of the Vikings in the archaeological museums larger than those of Mesoamericans?

National histories will merge into world histories. When all is said and done, events in the First World will have been repeated in the Third World, and Latin America (to which the Europeans brought their religion, language, and calendar) will practically no longer exist. And if it does exist, it will be because of its natural disasters, its violations of human rights, its social conflicts, or its unsafe roads and highways. Amazonia could become the world's largest desert over the next ten years. Certain Latin American cities, such as Mexico City—overpopulated and polluted, insufficient water supply, natural resources destroyed—will become the scenes of frequent ecological emergencies. Others will become the locales for crime, prostitution, drugs, and abduction. Devalued by economic crises, we Latin Americans will find ourselves fighting against a new kind of slavery.

"The Third World is dead, long live the First World!" After the fall of the Berlin Wall this became the cry of the poorer countries which once upon a time abhorred the idea of aligning with the superpowers. These nations had been searching for a historical alternative, linked not by similar economic, environmental, or joint cultural relations, but by their shared

status as victims of underdevelopment and exploitation.

It is common knowledge that the "Third World" concept did not come from the Third World itself, but was an invention of French journalists during the 1950s. It acquired political life at the Bandung, Indonesia summit in 1955, in which Nehru, Nasser, Chou En Lai, Nkrumah, and Sukarno were participants. Unfortunately, the true nature of the relations between the First and the Third Worlds rapidly put an end to the dream of political solidarity among countries not aligned with the opposing sides in the Cold War.

Although the concept of Third World has weakened over the years, the problems of underdevelopment, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, corruption, and failure to embrace democracy have not disappeared from our planet, and neither has their outcome, namely poverty. Out of this Third World has come a Fourth World (which includes Somalia, for instance), and a Fifth World (the world of immigrants), and also a Second World, in which countries like Mexico struggle along.

What do those countries that used to belong to the Third World, and that used to attend useless conferences and gatherings still have in common, apart from a tendency to chew over the old economic, social, environmental, and political problems and to export human beings to the First World? They still retain the old colonial mentality, assuming that the solution to their problems will come from outside, from other countries and other

people, and not from their own government or from their own populations. What we failed to learn between the Bandung Conference and the fall of the Berlin Wall was that our countries not only have to defend themselves from each of the superpowers in turn, but from their own political vices, and that the only possible solution to our problems lies in our capacity to be free. And for us to be free, our heads of state must learn to govern democratically and without corruption, and, above all, without betraying their peoples' dreams.

In commemorating the multi-cultural accomplishments and deeds of the past ten centuries, many people will believe that by thus retracing the steps of the dead they are reconstructing the path of time, but in the end they will have achieved a present full of emptiness. No one knows what paintings and books, what buildings and cities, and what other works of man will still be accessible or still be standing during the coming millennium. No one can tell what items currently referred to as artistic will roll around the world as bits of organic matter until they end up as forgotten garbage.

The libraries are full of the works of divine poets, princes of poets, who were exalted in their day by critics from both east and west. In the twenty-first century, thousands of copies of books that were once bestsellers are going to end up in the trashcans of the second-hand bookstores. Those literary geniuses, titans, and giants who received lavish praise in the reviews and major newspapers of the United States will perhaps become nothing more than

lists of names without any individual identification. The media that idolized them, assuming that media still exists, will not remember what it was they used to praise, and will move on to exclaim about other shooting stars. All man's attempts to escape death through literature, painting, music, and science are in vain. At the end of time, not only man, but also his works, will disappear into the black hole of oblivion. And even those acts of love by which a man and a woman seek to perpetuate themselves and live forever will also vanish in an instant into that same black hole.

Over the map of the Americas, another map may be superimposed, that of the woods and forests that are fast disappearing. And over that map of deforestation yet another map may be drawn, one pinpointing ethnic groups threatened by environmental destruction. The Yanomami of Brazil, the Aché of Paraguay, the Yagua of Peru, the Miskito of Nicaragua, the Guaymí of Panama, the Tarahumara of Mexico, the Maya of Guatemala, the Guambiano of Colombia, the Mapuche of Chile—all these groups have been affected by the advent of settlers, military incursions, forced displacement from their land by miners, ranchers, lumbermen, highway construction, hydroelectric dams, and tourist resorts. In this, the decade of the fifth centennial of the meeting of two worlds, it is urgent that our governments take their native populations into consideration when preparing development projects or defining their free-trade areas. If they don't, Latin America is going to end up full of

repetitions of the Chiapas experience.

In 1970, the Villas Boas brothers, who devoted decades trying to save the indigenous peoples of Central Brazil, said that all that remained of the extinct tribes of Alto-Xingú were their names and the sad accounts of their final disasters. The same can be said about many ethnic groups throughout the world and about their habitats.

“Of the six to nine million Indians who originally lived in the Amazonian rainforest, only about 200,000 now survive. There were 300,000 Aborigines in Australia when The First Fleet landed in Botany Bay; a century later 60,000 remained. Every single Carib Indian on the island of Hispaniola was killed or deported by the Spanish colonialists, to be replaced by slaves from Africa,” notes the *Atlas of the Environment*. As J. Eric Thompson wrote over three decades ago, the disintegration of native cultures in the wake of “civilization” is a sad thing, because material progress does not bring greater happiness or compensate for the loss of spiritual values.

The chronicle of human births and deaths that have occurred over the past millennium, that we expect to be recited in the year 2000, should not fail to include the plant and animal species that have now disappeared from the face of the earth.

This graveyard of nature would include such illustrious dead as the dodo bird, the painted vulture, the Bali tiger, many mammals, reptiles, birds, and fish and the huge forests in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe. We cannot even mention those organisms that have passed

away silently and unnoticed, for we never had any names for them.

In the presence of this vast natural graveyard, the twenty-first century is going to become a century of ecological Noahs, of men and women obsessed with creating biotic arks to save those ecosystems and species that are vanishing in a flood of extinction.

Like the character in Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* who has to decide which child to save, the moral dilemma of this *homo ecologicus* will be deciding which places and which creatures to select, which bases of knowledge and wisdom to plumb in light of current social and economic conditions, which criteria to use—biological, scientific, economic, aesthetic, moral—and how to influence other people to save lives.

Who is this *homo ecologicus* to decide on the fate and the right to exist of other creatures and forms of life, whose mystery surpasses his own intelligence and capacity for action or thought? Isn’t there a chance that he will get lost in the labyrinth of eschatology, the doctrine of last and final things, as so many writers and visionaries before him have gotten lost in the exercise of their art or religion?

It is not enough to preserve the survivors of over-exploited species in botanical gardens or in zoos—they need to be preserved in the places where they are born and reproduce, where their life support is found. Their habitat must be their sanctuary. From the natural and moral standpoints, the earth’s flora and fauna belong to no person or country, and no group or nation can determine or place

conditions on their right to life. Invoking national sovereignty and territorial domain to justify crimes against nature is both childish and dishonest, two terms already used in connection with the destruction of Amazonia and Lacandonia, the killing of whales, sea turtles, and dolphins, and the felling of woods that are home to the Monarch butterfly.

History is biting its own tail. Eras and suns are born and die. As the Copán River carried along with it some of the structure of the Acropolis every rainy season, time—as Thompson observed—carries away and disposes of cultures, leaving in their place nothing but oblivion.

According to Mexican mythology, we are now living in the era of the Fifth Sun, Four Ollin, Sun of Movement, a sun that is approaching its death, which will be caused by earthquakes. As in the past, on the occasion of previous destructions, we place our hopes in the next sun not yet created which, like Heraclitus' bird of the resurrection, is writhing in the ashes of suns now dead.

This hope, which we hold on to even though we know it to be misplaced, is strengthened by the impermanent permanence of the past and by small private rituals, such as mine when, in a Dublin museum one day in May 1995, I touched the concentric circles of an ancient stone, the rings of the Stone of Time. With my empty hand I thus sought to caress four thousand years of oblivion.

I put a date on that encounter with the illusive present, but looking back from any year in the future, it will not matter

whether that chance act of mine took place in 1995, in 1900, or in 1321.

Mircea Eliade has said that modern man, in contrast to *homo religiosus*, sees himself as the only subject and agent of history, and that he will not be completely free until he has killed the last god. I am certain that the last god to be killed will be Earth itself. Free from his mythological gods, man, who has created a pantheon of ephemeral gods in his own image, is now turning against the biological gods and destroying the ark of biotic wealth.

Plutarch puts the death of Pan in the first century AD, during the reign of Tiberius, after the lesser Greek gods had already died. According to Christian legend, he died in the year Christ was crucified. In my view, the god of Nature has had a long biological death, and is still dying every day, every hour, every minute.

In the Mayan religion, the sky is held up by trees of different species and colors (red in the east, white in the north, black in the west, yellow in the south) with a green tree, the *ceiba*, in the center. If we cut down the *ceiba*, the firmament will collapse upon us.

Novalis, in one of his works, evokes distant epochs when poets played upon marvelous instruments whose strange sounds could awaken the secret life of forests and revive dead seeds in barren land. I urge all human beings to join together in letting the mythological Orpheus sing among us again in the next millennium.

Ecology, like poetry, lies waiting within every human heart.

Homero Aridjis was born on April 6, 1940 in Contepec, Michoacán, Mexico, and has published twenty-three books of poetry and prose, including *Antes del reino*, *Perséfone*, *Los espacios azules*, *El poeta niño*, *Espectáculo del año dos mil*, *El último Adán*, *Gran teatro del fin del mundo*, and *La leyenda de los soles*. His *Obra poética*, covering a period of thirty-four years, was begun in 1994. The translation of his latest novel, *El Señor de los últimos días: Visiones del año mil*, will be published in 1996 in the United States, the Netherlands, and France, while his works in general have been translated into ten languages.

He studied philosophy and letters at the Autonomous University of Mexico. The most outstanding awards he has received have been the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize (1964) for *Mirándola dormir*, the International Literary Prize Diana-Novidades (1988) for his novel *Memorias del nuevo mundo*, and the Grinzane Cavour Prize (Italy) for the Italian translation of *1492-Vida y tiempos de Juan Cabezón de Castilla*, best foreign novel of 1992.

Mr. Aridjis received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation in 1966 and 1979. He has conducted poetry classes at Columbia University, Harvard, New York University, and Indiana University, where he received a doctorate in 1993. He has also served as Mexican Ambassador to Switzerland in 1976 and to the Netherlands in 1977-79.

In 1985, Mr. Aridjis founded the Group of One Hundred, a group of artists and intellectuals involved in the battle against pollution and in defense of the environment. In 1987, as Chairman of the Group, he received the United Nations Global 500 Award. Mr. Aridjis travels between his home in Mexico and Europe, and the United States, participating in conferences on poetry, culture, and development.

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