

The Glory of the Past and the Commotion of the Present

By TRISH MAHON



We are a distracted people – and by distracted, I don't merely mean that we are momentarily preoccupied, rather we are incapable of focus. A recent study from Microsoft measures the modern human attention span at a mere 8 seconds ... less than that of a goldfish and more akin to a bee or a fruit fly. Our ability to concentrate has deteriorated in proportion to our obsession with digital devices and applications which have had a pronounced effect on the human brain. Modern

attempts at coherent thought are regularly disrupted by texts, emails, social media alerts, or some other restless and twitchy digital distraction.

This sets forth the question of our time ... how shall we preserve the glory of our past when we are preoccupied with the commotion of our present?

Consider those fundamental things that required more than 8 seconds of coherent thought ... The American Revolution, the US Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Women's Suffrage Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, Space Travel, and The Internet. And then there are the great works of literature that are neither character-limited nor condensed: *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Middlemarch*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Fountainhead*, *Brave New World*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, etc.

These enduring masterworks capture the conversations of their time, but what about our time? In what section of what library will they house our collections? In what galleries will they display our still-lives and landscapes? In what halls will they play our sonatas and concertos?

Our moment in time is fraught with disruption, detachment and the transmission of so much information that we have lost our words, masked our canvas, and silenced our symphonies. We have forfeited precious, human relationships for vapid, digital connections and snubbed a mortal embrace for the cold tap of a soulless automaton. While we walk in the shadow of the inspired minds of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Bronte, Dickens, Nabokov, Woolf and Eliot - our progress has come at the price of creative expression. The poetry of our time has been deadened by touchpads and dumbed down by smartphones as our metaphors and allegories have slipped somewhere beneath the protective film of our iPad Air and the haptic engine of our Apple Watch.

Every generation seeks to escape the limitations of the human condition by crafting a unique story. There are no short-cuts ... not even for us. *Siri* is not going to chronicle our times. We cannot *Roomba* through the halls of modern consciousness or *Uber* our heart back home. We will not find our "mind's eye" shared on *Instagram* or our heart's desire booked into a \$99/per night spare bedroom on *Airbnb*.

At some point, we have to address the meaning of life and the emotion of existence as so many societies, generations and civilizations have before us ... or our very short stint on planet earth and our very small moment on the human stage may very well be deemed inconsequential.