

THE FOUR AGES · *John Hollander*

I

Terribly unimportant kings
Grimly gave each other rings.

II

That was when the rings had become truly golden
By being remembered dimly and made bright in
The Great Fable that was itself the age, the age
That was not the poor first but the rich harvesting
Of cold grain smitten in the wind by early stones.
The light of dawn was all eaten up in hunger
For beginning again, when the vivid eye lived
At subsistence level; it was only later
On in the day when we saw what shining was all
About, and when we could afford comparisons
Of this with that and then and now, and time
And space lay all about us waiting to be used.
We remember the first age now only to give
The lie, which is its great truth, to this later one.

III

After that there was only one age; it appeared to be one of a series, but its followers were all parts of it. Bronze fell off to iron in the chains of fable, and rose to steel in the technological degrees, but gold, brass, pinchbeck and shoddy were all corners of the same room: one could stand in one or another, but one was equally unwarmed by the fading coals in the vast grate. This was the time and place of where we still are and probably will be, and it is hard to tell whether one is better off knowing this or not.

IV

And then? Even if we imagined some
Entirely different kind of time, or place
For whatever would happen next to fiddle
With—even if unimaginable

Phases in the prolonged existences
Of such barely imaginable things
As our lust for exemplifying might
Cause us to strain for were at hand to build
A last age from, the whole thing would collapse
Into the rubble of the third again.
It would be like the wings toward which a sad
Vaudeville clown would turn for respite, only
To find himself bounced back on stage once more.
A kind of negative apocalypse
Keeps ruining not what has gone before
But what would stand for everything to come
After the paling series of befores.
Almost as if the treasure of a last
Time, a final place, where to be guarded
As jealously as an origination,
Or a vacuum-surrounded metal metre
Kept in a bureau of eternal standards.
But it is not that "And so, we are back
Where we started from"; rather, we have come
To an understanding of the age we have
And will have, of the sense of an unending
That, given our own ends, we settle for
As easily as into a firm chair
At a clear table with an empty page
Beginning to wrinkle already now
Its wide brow, puzzled by our moving hand
What it will do and what it will not do——
But yielding up its blank simplicity.