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THE FUNCTION OF RELIGION

MOST discussions of religion fail to make certain distinctions which, it seems fairly obvious, are crucial to any clarity on the subject. This somewhat cavalier reference to "other discussions" seems justifiable, even though the present discussion makes no pretense at expert authority, for the reason that we, at least, approach the subject without a vested, if not without a special, interest. The distinctions in question are those between (1) Religion, per se, as a quality, an expression, and a need in human life, (2) religions, meaning those separate and distinctive aggregates of doctrine, faith or belief which mark off one "religion" from another, and (3) the religious institutions which formulate dogmas and creeds, declare the rules of orthodoxy, and speak to the lay public in the oracular tones of Deity itself.

It seems to be the intent of most contemporary writers on religion to blur the boundaries between these aspects of the subject, rather than to make them clear and distinct. And this, it may be submitted, is the principal reason why most of what is written on the subject of religion is confusing rather than clarifying, deceiving rather than enlightening.

So far we may go with assurance and conviction. But what, then, is Religion? It is the sense, the instinct, the intuition, of human beings that there is a life higher than our daily physical existence; that we have a unity with Nature, the world, and our fellows more profound than any mundane alliance or external combination; that, in our world—through it, but not necessarily of it—run currents which bear the substance of eternity and, perchance, of immortality; and that the stuff of human life contains every conceivable essence of both good and evil, both divine and diabolical, withal the power to know all these things, and to choose what we shall do with our knowledge and our potentialities.

Already we are deep in heresy. But if we say, as we think we must, that every religion the world has known has reached us through a human channel, then every religion, so far as goes what evidence we have, is *man-made*, and surely the religions of the world, taken together, bespeak all these things, and more. But how does religion, in its best sense, serve the individual human? It is for him a transcendental lever—the source of his ultimate invulnerability to disappointment and despair, the means by which he raises himself to the stature of a god, and, breathing the atmosphere of spiritual conviction, finds the strength and the resources to become more than what he was—evermore, more than what he was.

Religion, then, is a source of moral strength and fortitude, but it is also something else—a form of communication with an inward rather than an outward reality. The familiar term for this sort of communication is "prayer," yet prayer which is addressed to some external being, or agency—to the virtue which is without rather than within—is itself a denial of the potential divinity—or actual "dignity"—of man. Prayer, in ancient times, was always an invocation rather than a supplication, an act of magic rather than the petition of a self-deprecating "sinner."

But in referring to "prayer," we trench upon another division of our subject—that of religious institutions. Everyone has heard of books of prayer. To read them is to realize that they ought to be called "books of spiritual abdication." For psychological and historical reasons which are a vast study in themselves, the tendency of religious institutions is always to externalize the inwardness of religion, to make prayer a transaction between an ineffectual being—man—and an omnipotent being—"God." In his remarkable book, *Of Fear*

and *Freedom,* Carlo Levi suggests that human life is the drama of success or failure in the gaining of human individuality. To withstand the dread suctions of primordial chaos—to remain an independent center of consciousness, of will, thought, and feeling—this is to be a man. To find a higher unity through completely realized individuality is the evolutionary project of human beings. Religion is the inner promise of that unity, while institutional sects and artificial creeds are the betrayal of the promise, its transformation into the pseudo-unity of irrational emotional conformity. The ceremonies, rites, images and symbols of institutional religion are the means of the betrayal—by which men are helped to *feel* that they have reached the goal, through an act of submission instead of by an act of conquest. Institutional religion celebrates failure, and covers over human defeat with the glamor of piety.

And yet, because very few of the elements of human experience are either all black or all white, we are able to recognize something of the true spirit of religion in every creed, and to find men both great and good among sectarians as among free-thinkers and philosophers. But this fact should be enough to show us that the spirit of truth, whether religious or otherwise, will never suffer codification. It eludes the strait-jackets of the creeds and dissolves the denials of materialism. It is at once private and personal, and universal and free. The search for truth presents endless paradoxes, and until we learn to look for the paradox, as containing the sight which peers beyond the horizon of our limiting definitions of the possible, the logical, the orthodox, or the "scientific," we seek, not for the living truth, but some one of its partisan expressions, some tired compromise which ignores the ceaseless progressions of life and consciousness.

Religion, we say, is of the heart. But it is also of the mind. How shall we understand that vast corpse of futile intellectuality—Theology—save by recognizing that reason plays a crucial part in the determination of religious truth? Religion without mentality is not religion at all, but barbarism frocked in priestly presumption. A generation ago, it was fashionable in religious circles to disavow theology as a dusty, musty waste of time. Action, the practical imitation of Christ—that was the thing. But how imitate Christ without at least a modicum of knowledge of who or what Christ was, what he stood for, lived for? The career of Christ was something more than an emotional splurge of "goodness." There are dark and mysterious sayings among the words of Christ. There are veils behind veils in the discourses of the Buddha. Krishna speaks to Arjuna of the substance of things unseen, and even the Tao of Lao-Tze hints of a structured metaphysics beyond the aphoristic images of simple speech.

So, from these hints, these mystical vocabularies and vaulting metaphysical ideologies have risen the edifices of theology. Were they all fools and dreamers, these ancient metaphysicians? Were Pythagoras, and the disciples of Pythagoras, mumblers of superstition? Did Plato record only weird speculations for the sake of beguiling an audience of gullible enthusiasts for two or three millenniums to come?

This vanity which permits us to imagine that there can be religion without strenuous study, regular reflection, and eager stretching of the mind—are we so sure that we came by it honestly?

Even the professors of orthodoxy periodically discover that there is no constancy or devotion without the stress of conviction concerning a transcendental scheme of things. But the professors of orthodoxy seem to make no new discoveries for themselves. They search, instead, the pragmatic discoveries of other generations of priests, and realize that a drama must be played—there must be a protagonist, an antagonist, and a crisis followed by deliverance. They revive, therefore, the orthodox mystery play, refurbish old dogmas with the emotion of new anxieties, and

call once more the sluggish faithful to the pews and the psalters.

But the real drama of religion must be played out by each man for himself. The good news of salvation is the almost silent whisper of the inward man who speaks eternally, but is hardly ever heard. If we knew how to strengthen that voice, we should never need to question about religion. We should never be deceived, nor quail and whimper, when we are afraid, rushing to some haven of soft assurances that our fears are more blessed than the courage which makes others stand alone. We cannot, we say, stand alone. Indeed, we cannot. The question, rather, is, With whom shall we choose to stand? With whom do we stand when we leave behind the integrity of reason, in order to enter some "traditional faith"? With whom do we stand when we forego the narrow way and the strait gate of faith in our own capacity to learn the truth, to accept some incomprehensible formula because of the feeling of "security" it affords ?

Is there then no companionship in the quest, no fellowship of souls? Obviously, an easy answer to this question will be gained only from those who come forward to say, "We are the people, and our wisdom will die with us." Yet in every age have been those who are allied by a temper of the mind and a similarity of objective. Plato and his companions called themselves "the friends." The epistles of Paul relate to a community of moral striving. Arjuna finally entered the battle, and he did not fight alone. It would be a denial of the logic of human brotherhood to suppose that, as men find the natural religion of their inner lives, they will not also find those who, as Whitman said, "all labor together, transmitting the same charge and succession." Whitman, indeed, spoke for everyone who has discovered the true function of religion:

> We hear the bawling and the din, we are reached at by divisions, jealousies, recriminations on every side,
>
> They close peremptorily upon us to surround us, my comrade,
>
> Yet we walk upheld, free, the whole earth over, journeying up and down till we make our ineffaceable mark upon time and the diverse eras,
>
> Till we saturate time and eras, that the men and women of races, ages to come, may prove brethren and lovers as we are.

Letter from ENGLAND

LONDON.—Mr. Leonard Schapiro is engaged in a study of Soviet law for the Royal Institution of International Affairs. In a recent radio talk on the Russian Communist Party's post-war survey of the proper place in society of music, art, literature, philosophy, psychology, biology, and other subjects, he called attention to some aspects of the Soviet attempt to change human nature into the pattern disclosed to those architects of the State religion—Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. Going back to the earlier days of Communist Russia, we find that, for the first three years after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, free political debate was the rule. At the annual party congress in 1921, however, Lenin decreed: "The time has come to put an end to opposition." The central machinery made liberal use of the practice of appointments, and an obedient apparatus was built up throughout the country. Critics were "liquidated." Finally, any incomplete surrender of artist, scientist, or scholar, to the direction of party or government brought condemnation, "whether as cosmopolitanism, or as lack of Soviet patriotism, or as slavish worship of western culture, or as art for art's sake, or as objectivity." Formulation, annunciation, application—the three stages of evolution of a party line prescribe also the three forms of public discussion; but once an official pronouncement has been made, no deviation is tolerated. Criticism is vital only to the degree that it detects hidden heresies.

To a tremendous extent, human nature has been conditioned by this process of arbitrary decree. Stalin has more power over the thoughts and beliefs of Soviet sectarians than ever a Pope had over the subjects of the Vatican—which may explain in some measure the jealous enmity of Rome for the Kremlin! But, with all this uniformity of dogma, human consciousness in Communist countries is still torn by conflicts and contradictions, and it will take more than political education, persuasion, and "correction," to resolve these in any permanent fashion. "As for the struggle between the old and the new," says Mr. Schapiro, "it is clear enough what is meant by the old: any admiration of western culture, individualism, scholarship pursued for the mere purpose of discovering the truth about the subject, anything falling short of complete surrender to the social plan, in fact the private world." The odd thing is that this ambitious aim to remould human nature has only resulted so far in the reintroduction a few months ago of the death penalty in Russia.

Turning to Germany, we find everywhere what has been aptly called "the jungle of the German mind." Mr. Matthew Halton, European correspondent of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, in a radio talk here after a recent visit to Germany, pointed out that, only five years ago, the concentration camps were giving up their maimed and dead, and non-fraternisation was the order of the day. The cycle is now complete: German delegates are at Strasbourg for the Council of Europe, and we are on the Rhine today as guarantors and friends. A German father told Mr. Halton: "My kids still believe much of the stuff they learned in the Nazi days." And an educated young German woman with whom he discussed literature, having remarked that Germany had produced the greatest poetry of the world, and having been asked what great German poets there were except Goethe, Schiller, and Heine, said in reply: "Heine? Who was Heine?" The explanation, of course, is that Heine was partly Jewish, and his name was proscribed by the Nazis.

It is beginning to be realized here that these two major European phenomena have lessons for us in England. No fulfillment for mankind is possible without acceptance of the fact that there are inner compulsions by which alone may a man live a full life. "Power must be for a purpose," C. A. Coulson remarked at a recent conference of the Modern Churchmen's Union, "to fulfill some pattern large enough to command man's whole allegiance." We need a deeper sense of our inter-relatedness, and to forget our political and economic obsessions.

ENGLISH CORRESPONDENT

REVIEW
THE STERNER SORT OF CRITIC

MANNY FARBER, who might with reason be termed the George Jean Nathan of the movies, is sometimes panned and pilloried in the correspondence pages of the *Nation* (for which Mr. Farber writes reviews) by some aggrieved individual who thinks that Mr. Farber can see no good coming out of Hollywood. We sympathize with Mr. Farber, whether or not our grounds for pessimism are the same as his. And some gratitude is due the *Nation* for giving space to such critics as Farber and James Agee, who record their exacting preferences without either personal inhibition or commercial restraint.

It is possible, through a surfeit of picture-sitting, to lose the edge of sensibility and in time to adopt a tolerance which overlooks many of the typical offenses against good taste in Hollywood films in order to have an excuse to go to the movies at all. The critic who refuses to capitulate to this conquest by vulgarity through repetition is a valuable citizen, and it is in this capacity that Mr. Farber deserves admiration. He will not, apparently, give in. Thus, for his sinning against the second-best standards of motion picture criticism, Farber is "told off" by an indignant *Nation* correspondent:

> I could forgive him [Farber] his dissection of "Riding High," or even his snappings at the motives and techniques of Capra, Huston, Reed, *et al.* But when he laces into "The Men," "Home of the Brave," "No Way Out," and some others, the man is just raving. I daresay there is some good (perhaps not *art*) even in the run-of-the-mill Hollywood output; how much more so in these authentically produced, deftly acted, and altogether competent films?

We have heard *Home of the Brave* and *The Men* praised as excellent, but *No Way Out* we have seen, and have been wondering somewhat about its good and not-so-good qualities. Whatever Mr. Farber said about it, some criticism is certainly justified. For those strong-minded folk who stay away from the films altogether, we may report that it is the story of a young Negro doctor who is interning in a large public hospital located in a neighborhood notorious for race riots between the Negro population and slum-dwelling whites. The younger of two gangster brothers dies while under examination by the Negro interne, with the result that the other brother, a psychopath-at-large, accuses the young doctor of deliberately causing the death. The story moves swiftly toward its climax of a race riot, in which the Negroes, who are forewarned of a white attack, silently invade the rallying place of the white gang and beat its members to—this is no figure of speech—a pulp. Meanwhile, the Negro doctor "confesses" to malpractice in connection with the death of the gangster, by this means forcing an autopsy (which the brother and wife of the dead man had refused to authorize). The autopsy shows that the doctor is innocent, thus vindicating both his motives and his ability, and greatly relieving his white supporters, as well as the hospital administration.

The first impression one gets from this picture—which is not entirely Hollywood's fault—is that the best acting and best directing have to do with crime and violence. This has been true of movies for a long, long time. We have artistic experts on depravity, degeneracy, corruption, and weakness, but portray their opposites with an astonishing lack of conviction. And the abstractly principled act is practically unknown to popular entertainment. Richard Widmark, who stole *The Kiss of Death* from Victor Mature, plays the psychopathic Negro-hater and Negro-baiter in *No Way Out*, and does it so well that the impressionable spectator can hardly remember anything else. The scenes of violence and those portending violence are the most gripping, and they have all been paced up and exaggerated far beyond the call of duty, even in Hollywood. On the other hand, the people who made *No Way Oat* wanted to get audiences on the side of the Negro hero. They certainly succeeded.

Apart from other matters, a scene that should be mentioned presents the love and tenderness between the young Negro doctor and his wife. Nothing like this, so far as we recall, has ever been on the screen before. Negro performers usually portray comedy stereotypes which, over the years, distort the habitual movie-goer's subconscious impressions of the human beings whose skins happen to be dark. This love scene is natural, involving a conversation between man and wife about their common problems. It should help to reduce the white man's sense of "difference" in respect to Negroes.

One can approve the motives without admiring the "art" of *No Way Out*. The picture is certainly far better than what happens when an advertising man gets religion and decides to take the message of the churches to the people in a Great Big Way, but it has the typical overdoing of almost everything that Hollywood does, and makes its point with a bludgeon rather than the suggestion which leaves a little thinking for the audience to contribute. Whatever art may be, it always obliges some measure of creative response from the people who appreciate it. The movie-makers don't seem to have much confidence in their "people."

By fortunate coincidence, a reader recently sent us a copy of a young Negro law student's reaction to *No Way Out*. It has almost nothing to do with the movie, except by analogy, so that quoting it really constitutes a change of subject, but it does reveal what many Negroes are thinking these days, and that such movies help them to get their thoughts on paper. This particular student set down an essay on race prejudice and race hatred, including the following passages:

> I read almost daily of proposed methods to contain, overthrow, or restrain the expansion of Communism—to infiltrate the country of the Communists with propaganda and agents, and start a revolution against what we call their "Masters in Moscow"—to encircle them with a gigantic army—to withdraw and build a mighty Maginot Line in the oceans, to form a Western affiliation. I read with interest the statement of former President Hoover, that 160 millions of Americans cannot hope to defeat 800 million Communists, and that by sending more billions to the destitute white men in Europe, we do not materially strengthen their or our position. . . .
>
> Truman's first move should be to abolish all race discrimination in the United States. . . . Truman's second move should be to recall all military and financial aid to France which is earmarked for use in the subjugation of the dark peoples in Indo-China; with an explanation that we are turning over Puerto Rico to the United Nations for a plebiscite, to determine the wishes of the people. Then, to give notice to all nations of our example, and suggest that they do likewise. Then, finally, under the Truman plan of assisting backward nations with technical advice and small loans, to teach them to exploit their natural resources, so that they can make life easier for themselves, through the selection of a group of experts, doctors, engineers, miners, diplomats, and assistants, made up chiefly of darker peoples—but no double-talking "Christian Leaders," who are already unwelcome the world over—to conduct an extensive survey and make friends with the natives and send recommendations for demonstration farms, mines, roads, dams, and harbor facilities—later to be sold to the natives and paid for from the proceeds of the improvements—and assurance to all the natives that they will have our support for their freedom, . . . without any need for a revolution.
>
> This is the way to make friends—to show these people that they can be free men, and not obligated to us or Russia. This is the way out. The cost in dollars is nominal; but the American will have to give up his myth of Race superiority and to sit beside black delegates in the United Nations, and black ambassadors in a non-segregated Washington, D.C., and discuss the problems of production and distribution with black captains of Industry, and moreover, if this is to be a solution—the American white man must outdo the Communists in every way, including social equality, to prove that he likes it.
>
> America may prefer to end like the white hero in the picture, *No* Way *Out*—spilling his life-blood, but refusing the aid of the black man—if so, to my way of thinking, there is *"No Way Out*."

COMMENTARY
SECURITY OF PURPOSE

A MAN who inquires, "What is really so?" can court brain fever in an hour, unless the absolute scepticism which usually haunts such questions is interrupted. Happens a stubborn conviction, some sturdy dream or an unforgettable vision may break in upon his reflections, releasing him from the treadmill of reason. Nevertheless, his deliverance is not quite complete for behind the mind, somewhere within other layers of his being, an intellectual conscience again propounds the unanswered query, *How do you know?*

Political campaigns are periodic re-stimulants of this inherent uncertainty. Wars, even minor ones, sometimes sound like great shouts of derision at all who hunt for the facts in the case. The most microscopic human disagreement has infinite potentialities for baffling the mind: why, after all, are people what they are? The conscientious historians who patiently erect elaborate structures of explanation appear to be building with match-sticks; the least tremor or table-tipping reveals that their so-cleverly-balanced intricacies are not constructed to last. The "inside story," like the skin of an onion, is made up of a series of inner wrappings, the peeling of which releases as much bitter astringency for human hope as the split onion does for the human eye.

Yet though pretentious hypotheses and staggering outlines of man's millenniums waver and fade, and imposing conceptions bring no security in their wake, the layman may yet rest from the torment of logical despair. A sentence or two upon a page, a flash of illumination, a thought arising in a manner he does not question, a hope replenished spontaneously when it seems too frail to survive—the flow of these simple things keeps open the door of his mind and the other door of the heart.

Truth may never be shouted from the house-tops, nor bound in sixteen gilt-edged volumes, but so long as there are those who listen and look, the speech of truth will be heard, the words of it seen. MANAS does not claim to speak the truth, but only to aim for that speaking; it does not traverse every view, but attempts to give impartially whatever is given. What is presented hopefully and candidly may not save the world, today or tomorrow, but it may help to serve and save, in the world, the dignity of thinking man. This, at least, is an aim within the compass of possibility, and one that may be pursued with whatever resources are available.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

> Your column once discussed the feasibility of placing "obstacles" in the way of the desires of children. Do you mean *restriction?* And what, in your opinion, are the proper sorts of restrictions? Children don't always respond well to the idea of an absolute authority, rightfully able to impose restrictions and rules. And yet, what other obstacles are conceivable except those of restrictions?

IN our opinion, "obstacles" and "restrictions" are far from synonymous. Restrictions are certainly obstacles, but the most educative obstacles are not those reinforced by a threat of punishment—as are most "restrictions."

Ordering an adolescent to be in bed every night by nine o'clock is a restriction, designed, let us say, to insure alertness in school and to insinuate that there should be time only for studies on week-day evenings. However, if the same result were accomplished by a parent stating that he would no longer allow the youth money for athletic equipment unless he kept himself at a certain level of scholastic attainment, this would be placing an "obstacle" in the way of freedom for athleticism—*i.e.*, the athleticism would then have to be earned, either by the youngster taking a job or by his improving his studies. *But the young one would still be left free to make a choice* from three alternatives—the third being to go without money for athletics.

A parent might refuse to lend money to an adolescent who wishes to buy a car, thus influencing toward very strenuous money-earning during summer months. This would be an "obstacle," not a "restriction." All restrictions, in essence, are backed by the idea of arbitrary authority. Placing obstacles in people's way simply means that we are not doing for them exactly what they would like to have done; it means that we are putting *conditions* on our future assistance, and not that we threaten after our cajoling efforts come to nought.

Although we think the definitions of "obstacles" and "restrictions" here suggested are useful, perhaps we had best disregard the words for a while, and simply talk about Cooperation and non-Cooperation. The latter word, non-Cooperation (non-violence), has been given definite psychological and religious meaning by Gandhi, who held that it is morally wrong for any man to submit to the will of another in anything consciously disapproved. This implies that man is only fully moral when he will not accept employment in a Belsen or a Dachau, when he actually does not wish to support such policies, nor drop an atom bomb on a Japanese community unless *he* himself really thinks it a good idea. (This is an interesting test for Morality—the judgment of what is "moral" falling, not upon the act, but upon the motivation.) In any case, if this seems a good principle, nothing stops our applying it in our relationships with our children. This would mean that a parent would have to be determined *not to accede to a child's desire unless* he believed the desire to be constructively oriented.

At this point we may have to remember the saying, once before quoted here, that "of all tyrants, our own affections are the fiercest lords." When we "cooperate" with the designs of a child *only* because it gives us personal happiness to please him, we are violating an obligation of impartiality which we owe the total human community—and when we do this we may, in turn, feel defensively embattled against the rest of the community, which leads us toward more noticeable isolation in the psychological confines of our own family circle. This may be the rationale behind all of the traditional disapprovals of overindulging one's children. We may find some reason here, too, for defending the old "spare the rod and spoil the child" thesis—in respect to parents who "cannot bear" to cuff a youngster, no matter what the occasion, not because of kindness or a sense of justice, but out of thought of the emotional disturbance that would be caused to themselves—a disturbance

that would not prevent them from chastising someone else's child.

In the adult's field of affairs, also, we must surely recognize that men have "ruined" women and women have "ruined" men through nothing more than an abject desire to please. We may say, as John Dewey has so often said, that what a person wants is not necessarily what he needs, and that we must judge the needs of any man as best we can.

So, as always, we find ourselves knocking at the door of philosophy. After all, we cannot discover what is good for the human being until we ascertain what the human being is, over and beyond the societal terms which Dewey and other humanitarians have evolved as descriptive of human happiness. These societal terms in themselves, moreover, are very complicated and difficult to understand. The average man needs some idea of what is "ultimately" good for man—if such a formulation is possible—which may be easily grasped by reason.

As we have before suggested, we believe that the single idea of the Human Soul, as an entity primarily concerned with an endless though gradual extension of capacity for evaluation, provides this sort of answer—an answer to which the best of our scientific, religious, and philosophical traditions are never truly opposed. Such a view makes life an adventure in learning, and we, on this faith, could simply use the criterion of the best and most *learning* for our children, family or society in deciding when we shall "cooperate." In relation to our children, especially, we might "withdraw cooperation" when we feel that the child will learn most from release from a state of too great dependency on us.

Finally, referring to the last part of our subscriber's query, we might dwell a little more on what is really meant by the "attainment" of a desire a child's or anyone else's. Do we not find ourselves desiring a great many things at any given time? Our selection of one particular object for attainment is often later seen to be nothing more than a kind of passing fancy. The materialization or concretization of our own longings and inadequacies by focussing upon a single objective is simply picking a *symbol* of what we want—and seldom a very adequate one, at that. This partially unconscious mental process is typical of children. A child's desire *may* be profoundly rooted in some "need of the soul," and be an adequate symbol, or it may be a woefully inadequate representation of what that child truly wants. Desires often need guidance in the form of reasonable opposition to bring their "essence" to a meaningful embodiment.

We have to judge, too, something beyond the intensity of a child's desire—the *type* of accompanying emotion. The child who wants something petulantly or angrily or sullenly is probably a child confused—he doesn't really want it at all, but something else. He seeks what he first asks for in the same way that many men seek feverishly for a quick fortune. Such may even half suspect that this attainment of material wealth will not bring them what they most want out of life, yet proceed just the same, because in this way they at least have something "tangible" to fight for.

But if all this is true, we can at once see why we should never, under any circumstances, allow the child to feel that his desire is impossible of realization. *Precisely because* these desires have a symbolic meaning, the child must not ever be allowed to feel utter defeat. "Placing an obstacle" should never mean making attainment *impossible*. Yet when the realization of a certain objective becomes properly difficult, the child will sometimes penetrate, in the process of *either* attaining or relinquishing that end, to a deeper vision of that for which the immediate ambition was but the inappropriate and temporary representation.

FRONTIERS
Distance Perspective

[The following Letter to MANAS has been with us for some time, a companion to another printed under Review ("John Steinbeck—an Appreciation," November 15). The style is different from that most characteristic of MANAS, amounting to something like autobiographical essay, yet a place may belong to it in Frontiers, for it does offer a point of departure for the individual effort to synthesize "trends" by personal reflection.]

AN airplane sometimes affords a feeling of being temporarily abstracted from everything which makes up the modern world—even though we are sitting in one of the latest and most awesome inventions. The abstraction, of course, is only physical, but it suggests all sorts of psychological counterparts.

How often have men wondered how the affairs of earth would appear if viewed telescopically by the inhabitants of another planet? Certainly many activities would appear to be less than rational. Our whole monetary system and complicated trade arrangements, for instance, revolve around the fact that men dig gold out of the ground at one point and carefully bury it again somewhere else, in the vault of a federal reserve bank.

Then there are the cities, appearing, from a remote vantage point, only as blots of ugly smoke against the sky. We have taken particular pride in our "search for beauty" in Western civilization, comparing ourselves advantageously to the material indifference of the Easterner. And we have also prided ourselves upon our superior qualities of analytical reason. But from a distance, all of the complications of reasoning which make centralized, specialized living possible, appear, somehow, at a disadvantage. The careless filth of the "backward" regions of the world would at least be erased in distance perspective, but all the nice rational "planning" of the modern American city is completely obliterated by the contaminating vapors of industry. Too, while the gold standard makes little logic at fifteen thousand feet, the barter system would be comparatively comprehensible. And it may also seem that we, who have thought ourselves to be escaping from the squirrel cage of bare struggle for subsistence, through the advantages of our contrivances and conveniences, are nevertheless submerged in corporate bogs of involvement for which the smoke of the city is a fairly adequate symbol.

The open spaces of American mountains and plains still have an appeal from the air and can stimulate the imagination—in a manner probably not dissimilar from that enjoyed by the first settlers of the western states. Freedom and a welcome lack of uniformity are somehow suggested by the configurations of land, the interrelationships of varying altitudes and the natural growth which flourishes at each. The farm land of the Middle West suggests man's direct link of dependency with the natural forces of the earth. There is beauty here, and something of the story of patient effort to understand the laws of nature and to win the most beneficial sustenance from parent earth.

But then comes Chicago, a thoroughly ugly interruption of the freshness of earth and sky. A monstrous thing with jagged edges arises out of the depressing yellowish haze, and, you wonder, is this Civilization—this thing that somehow shakes all of one's æsthetic sensibilities with a kind of foreboding? So you look back quickly to the farm land still within your range of vision to understand why, with every year of increasing urban settling, there is also a strengthening of sentiment among small groups of dissenters for a return to a simpler life, more closely related to the basic productivity of earth. Every movement to render individual man more resourceful, less dependent upon the huge Machine which our economy has become, seems to lead back toward a closer and more understanding relationship with the produce of earth.

Of course, in a sense, the cities themselves are like the airplane they have produced. They

afford the *possibility* for an evaluative contrast between methods of human living, and they have some advantages. The most primitive farmer, existing without any opportunity for specialization, was certainly handicapped in respect to time for development of the things of the mind. Perhaps it is our destiny to create extreme conditions in order to ultimately understand what a proper "balance" in human life might be, and perhaps the extremes will continue to develop until a weariness with urban creations, a saturation with material complexity, will drive us toward satisfactory antidotes. . . . But even after an effort to achieve this optimism, the city of Chicago did not look good. Under the smoke lay the greatest concentration of the meat industry—an industry which has sucked from the soil at least an additional seventy-five per cent of the minerals and vitamins actually needed by existing populations. All nature has been stretched out before the human race to use, but seldom have we used it with any regard for its organic Wholeness.

While "nature" does not fight back as men fight, while "it" is incapable of animosity or revenge, our careless thefts from the land have returned to plague us. Yet even when we see this we may not turn to a view of One World, economic and moral. William Vogt, who wrote *The Road to Survival*, finds no hope that we can sustain our own rapidly increasing population unless we cut ourselves off from the rest of the world and forget about the even more denuded sections of earth and older and even less fertile lands. If, however, the bounty of earth is not meant to be disparted and sundered by factional groups of humans, the lack of Wholeness in our vision will bring about an ever intensifying disproportion in human relationships, more and more wars based upon the inexorable facts of a diminishing food supply.

In less than one week any man, if he should want to, can encircle the globe in an airplane, but to accomplish the same thing with the Mind has always been the real problem. The philosophers, it seems, have always striven for some quality partially represented by the term "detachment." But of detachment there are two kinds. There is the kind enforced upon one when an airplane leaves the ground—when one must realize a complete helplessness in directly affecting the outcome of the flight. This sort of detachment is an acquiescence to the inevitable, and there are times and places when it can inspire to valuable thought. But when men similarly acquiesce to the machine-like controls of modern totalitarian civilization, they relinquish far more in the area of free choice than is actually necessary. Specialized mechanization restricts us only in respect to a *portion* of our lives. To submit to tight routines in the necessity of gaining a livelihood does not compel us to accept them throughout the whole of our lives, nor even, inevitably, in respect to our productive relationship with economy.

Has it Occurred to Us?

WHEN is "the time"? Great things would be accomplished, daring projects begun, useful labors inaugurated, and a host of new programs attempted, we are told, if only it were *the time*. Many people, besides prophets, see tremendous improvements that are possible in our social order. To paraphrase Sidney Carton, we may say that there are far, far better things to do than we have ever done. Why have we never done them, and why are we not doing them now? Is there a supernatural force in "Time" that rules our hopes and conditions our accomplishments, or may we still expect to captain our own souls and navigate toward our dreams?

Has it occurred to us that waiting for an opportunity is like waiting to grow up? In time, all of us do appear to grow up, but was it by marking time—or by *taking* time? Curiously enough, we usually do not see an opportunity coming; it is there "before we know it," as we say, and that phrase is tell-tale. Perhaps the shoe is on the other foot, and opportunities are waiting for *u*s, resting incognito until we penetrate their disguise. At least, this may be a more plausible account of the facts.

Our common idioms suggest that opportunities are fleeting: they must be seized and grasped, or they are missed. Yet minutes, though also fleeting, are made long or short, according to our use of them. May not opportunities, likewise, be extensible and flexible? If we have a plan, and so far as we can tell, it is a good one—good, that is, for more than our own amusement—we can try to work it out. We can take every opportunity of forwarding the project, and even if it should not prosper, we shall have the satisfaction of knowing that our attempt was sincere, and as strong as we could make it. How much contentment might arise, in this discontented era, if each man went to work for his ideals in the unshakable confidence that whether or not "the time" was right, his effort was made, attesting his good faith.

It is strange, but we actually always have time to pursue our ideals. Hobbies may be denied us for a variety of reasons; the arts may be closed to us, and we may be tied hand and foot to a particular occupation. But ideals are ours for the thinking, whatever our situation, and since they require more thinking than "doing," they do not interfere with whatever else we may have to be about. In fact, the ideals we hold bring to life the things we do. Is it not a delightful providence which arranges that our dreams can go on despite drudgery, that our hopes hold up although we are "held down," and that our existence is never too full to allow a wide-open space for the burst of a new idea?

Our only trouble is that we try to cross our species. Ideals and activities are related, but their anatomies are widely different. They are cooperative, but never interchangeable; effective, but not in the same way. We ask, What good is it to believe in freedom, if society continues to enslave its members in more respects than can be counted? But in this we are confusing the power of conviction with the results of a policy. Ideas can act only as ideas—we should look first for their influence upon the mental atmosphere (our own and that of other people), not upon physical conditions. If we believe in freedom, we shall be extremely careful not to infringe upon another person's liberty of thought and conscience, and will this not create a certain mental air about us, so that other freedom-lovers will be attracted to our company? Do we not, then, *have* freedom, even though our circumstances have not changed an iota? And was there ever a number of people who had freedom, who did not manage to extend it to a still greater circle ?

Or perhaps we look for peace—where? How? Peace is made, not found. Nor does it fall like a gentle rain from heaven—it is created by an effort of the will. We speak of one who "knows" peace, and the expression is apt, for nothing is ever known until it becomes our own. Perhaps we set our sights too high. Immediately, before we are

utterly discouraged, we would like to have Peace on Earth. We can wait until tomorrow, or next week, for goodwill among men, but that is the limit of our patience! Meantime, we are anything but peaceful ourselves (being too concerned about Peace in general), and we may be extraordinarily disturbed by the fact that others are not as exercised over the Problem as we are. What price Peace?

How do we stand on Hope? When we see none in the world outside, does our inner stock multiply to meet the deficiency, or do we walk out, beaten, into that closer hell which, like Dante's, bears the inscription, "Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here"? Hopelessness is "the time" when hope should spring forth with greatest power, yet how often we take that time to give up. Could life itself be more ironic? We may sometimes have the feeling that our jobs hold us, instead of the other way 'round, and, similarly, that Hope keeps us going more often than we keep its spirit up. But this is a false modesty, and will lead us astray. Our energy, and our energy alone, vitalizes both our work and our hopes, and of energy we may say that it is one thing for which we can "ask and it shall be given." Knowledge we do not always possess, skill we may not yet have acquired, but energy—the will to do the best we can—is constantly within call.

Our "earliest opportunity"—is this not a breathtaking idea, when the very earliest opportunity *is this minute?* What is it that the gods permit us to do *right now?* Has it occurred to us that no other measure of duration need concern us?