

## THE GREAT BOOKS

A FULL-PAGE advertisement in one of the popular news magazines, placed by a southern railway company, invites American parents to take new interest in the sort of education being received by their children. In form, this advertisement represents a public-spirited idea. Even if its appearance should be prompted by the vulnerability of the railway company to the excess profits tax, the choice of education as a subject for discussion might show a kindly interest in the welfare of the nation. The interest, however, is more noticeably troubled than benign. The sponsors of this advertisement fear the corruption of education by missionaries of Communism in the guise of teachers and text-book writers, and propose—

If the parents of the U.S.A. join forces with our educators. . . if they seriously try to determine what our sons and daughters are learning . . . if they investigate radical ideas brought home from the classroom . . . if they take an interest in textbooks and the people who write them and publish them—

Stalin & Company salesmen will have to go home tomorrow and report to the boss, NO SALE!

We can agree that "radical ideas" ought to be recognized and examined, especially when they emerge in the minds of "bright-faced youths, between junior high school and voting age." But how do you identify a "radical" idea? Further, are there good radical ideas which may be distinguished from bad ones? Or are they all bad? Does an otherwise harmless idea become evil because Stalin has made use of it? We can't afford to have any misunderstanding on these counts.

Developing its theme, the railway company explains that our young people in the schools are high on Stalin & Company's "prospect list." These boys and girls are brought together in school, making a convenient focus for the propagandist. As the railway points out: "Influence *one* textbook publisher . . . contaminate *one* teacher . . . and Communism can reach hundreds or thousands of young minds."

Now we are getting closer to the railway company's meaning. A "radical idea," it appears, is an idea tainted by Communism, and propagated by agents or admirers of Stalinist Russia. Further, a "radical idea" is like a germ. It releases its poisons in the minds of the young much as a virulent carrier of infectious disease spreads infection in the body. Accordingly, argues the railway, we must protect the minds of the young from all danger of infection, and this means keeping a watchful eye out for the germs of disease—in this case, *ideas*. How long shall they be kept in this sanitary—not to say sterile—condition? Until, we suppose, they reach voting age.

The analogy is a pretty one, not without similarity to medieval notions of religious orthodoxy. No witches were more eagerly sought, nor more righteously condemned, than those who seemed to threaten the young with Satan-inspired doctrines of heresy. The rigors of suspicious investigation of teachers reached right up to the college level, for Peter Abelard, it will be recalled, presumed to apply reason to the problem of the Holy Trinity, and since the wise guardians of public morality during the twelfth century knew full well that the Trinity could *not* be reasoned about, they hauled Abelard before the Inquisition and made him promise to restrict the sallies of his reason to subjects of lesser importance.

The injustice of the Church authorities to Abelard is very plain to us, today. Abelard had no army behind him, and he had no desire to displace the authorities from their positions of power. All Abelard wanted was to stimulate *thinking* among the youth of his time, and he set a rather remarkable example of how to pursue this activity.

A communist agent, on the other hand, hopes to convert the young to a series of doctrines and dogmas which, once they gain ascendancy among the people, would lead to political tyranny. It is tyranny, we say, that we oppose, and not thinking. The difficulty, however, is this. The communist also uses the tools of thinking, even if he does not use

them well; and even if, as seems clear enough, he uses them, not for the purpose of promoting free inquiry, but in order to indoctrinate people with hard and fast conclusions. And certain of the ideas that the communist starts out with—ideas in regard to justice, the rights of man, and freedom—are found in the thought of men with quite other purposes. How, then, shall we know which of the individuals who seem to be "thinkers," like Abelard, are devoted to a true educational ideal, and which are merely using the methods of thinkers in order to make their conclusions seem the fruit of reason?

The southern railway company, despite its deep concern for education in the United States, takes no notice of this problem.

This seems a good place to reply to a question from a reader, who asks:

From time to time in your magazine, you refer to the Great Books. Will you please be good enough to tell me what this means?

The Great Books may be defined as the books which contain nearly all the "radical" ideas known to Western civilization. Those great radicals, Plato and Jesus, are two of the earliest thinkers included, while Karl Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky are among the few nearly contemporary authors on the list. The Great Books form the foundation for the teaching of the Humanities in at least one college and one University—St. John's at Annapolis, and the University of Chicago—and are the basis of an adult education program carried on in many cities in the United States, involving, we are told, some fifty thousand people.

In formal and precise definition, a "radical idea" is an idea which goes to the root of things, most particularly, to the root of human behavior. The Great Books, then, are books which are regarded by educated men as having accomplished at least some success in this direction. Who decides which are the Great Books? In general, the men who read them and are affected by them, and are led by this experience to declare their greatness. Does everyone agree about their greatness? Of course not. It is commonly admitted, however, that they are all worth

reading, and that many of them are necessary to the liberal education of man.

More specifically, the "100 Great Books" were chosen, with the counsel and help of others, by Dr. Robert M. Hutchins during his presidency of the University of Chicago. A list of these books may be obtained by writing to the Great Books Foundation, 59 East Monroe, Chicago, Illinois, or to Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 425 North Michigan, Chicago, which has just published an edition of the Great Books, containing the principal works of seventy-three authors, from Homer to Freud, in a set of fifty-one volumes.

Speaking of the Great Books, Dr. Hutchins has said:

These books embody our tradition, in the sense that they ask and examine the important questions which have always confronted man. Their authors are the great minds and the great thinkers; the illumination they give to universal problems is the brightest beacon we have in approaching those problems today.

Those who think the great books have no relevance to life in the atomic age should be reminded, for example, that Plato discusses communism in the *Republic*, that the elemental lesson of Thucydides is destruction of a noble civilization which could unite to throw back the invader but not to save itself; that one of the most recent of the great books, Tawney's *Acquisitive Society*, explained in 1920 why Mr. John L. Lewis will never be satisfied with any contract he makes.

The Great Books are easy to read in that they state their ideas with clarity and logic, which is one explanation why men of all ages have agreed they were great. They are the best textbooks we know. . . .

We said above of Jesus and Plato, who have an important role in a number of the Great Books, that they were "great radicals." While this is true enough, they were not socialists in the sense that Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky were socialists. But Plato does seem to propose, in the *Republic*, a socialist organization of the State, under which the most talented members of society would have the fewest possessions. Is this a "radical" idea? To us, it sounds like a very good idea, provided these individuals themselves approve of the arrangement.

The objective of education, in such a society, Socrates maintains, would be to assist men to become philosophers, working toward the day when "true philosopher-kings are born in a State, one or more of them, despising the honors of this present world which they deem mean and worthless, esteeming above all things right and the honor that springs from right, and regarding justice as the greatest and most necessary of all things, whose ministers they are, and whose principles will be exalted by them when they set in order their city. . .

Let us imagine, then, a "social studies" textbook which advocated the ideals of Plato's *Republic*, and repeated its criticisms of our modern acquisitive society. Such a book, we imagine, would not last very long in the public schools. The book would obviously make light of the profit system. It would refer somewhat contemptuously to our exaggerated notion of the importance of free economic enterprise. It would, if it followed Plato with any accuracy, accuse the entire system of economics practiced by the Western world as being directly responsible for the wars among the nations. For the way of life of the modern State, in the terms of Socrates, is "a State at fever-heat," whose people are filled with unnatural wants, unable to be satisfied with "the simpler way of life." Quite likely, with regard to the aims and desires of the people in these countries, Socrates would make no important distinction between Communist Russia and the United States, arguing that both populations have overweening appetites for the same, unlimited material satisfactions.

It is hardly necessary to say more to prove that Plato is a practically inexhaustible source of "radical" ideas. But will his books "contaminate" the minds of our young men and women?

Jesus, unlike Plato, showed little interest in the State, which he seems to have regarded either as amoral or at least as irrelevant to the true moral life. If you want to get to heaven, Jesus told the comfortable young men, sell all you have and give your riches to the poor. He condemned great wealth as a peril to the soul. Some of the early Christians, who "had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts II, 44-5), were quite

plainly non-political, religious communists. The early Christian Fathers held that all things belong to all men by the law of nature, and that "private property is lawful only as an accommodation to the imperfect and vicious character of human nature." (Westermarck, *Christianity and Morals*, pp. 260-61.) Aquinas was more complacent toward private property, but allowed that if "a need be so plain and pressing that clearly the urgent necessity has to be relieved from whatever comes to hand, as when danger is threatening a person and there is no other means of succoring him, then the man may lawfully relieve his distress out of the property of another, taking it either openly or secretly; nor does this proceeding properly bear the stamp of either theft or robbery." (*Summa Theologica*, II, ii, 66.2.) Finally, Tawney, another Great Books author, remarks that "Compromise is as impossible between the Church of Christ and the idolatry of wealth, which is the practical religion of capitalist societies, as it was between the Church and the State idolatry of the Roman Empire." (*Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, p. 286. )

There you have it: The writers of the Great Books—or many of them, at least—are men who have not the slightest hesitation in spreading "radical" ideas through the classroom. You may argue that Plato and Jesus, Aquinas and Tawney, were *respectable* people who were content to write books about their theories. They didn't try to start revolutions; they were not angry men of the Terror. True enough, but Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky are also counted among the men who wrote Great Books, so that we do not escape the menace of radicalism by sealing off its less violent exponents in a polite category of "classical" writers.

It would be very simple, here, to sneer at the people who are frightened by such ideas, saying, "Plainly, you are willing to have Plato in your library, and accept the ethics of Jesus as a kind of theoretical adornment, so long as you don't have to regard Plato as a genuine reformer, or acknowledge Jesus as a teacher instead of as a vaguely admirable personage." This is the familiar attack made by critics who see the obvious hypocrisy of conventional opinion. What this attack overlooks, however, is the

difference between the "program" of Plato and Jesus, and that of the communist revolutionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Plato was an educator who worked for the day when kings would be born philosophers. He advocated no bloody revolution, no class war powered by partisan resentment. But this peaceable approach, we are quite sure, rose from no bourgeois horror of political disturbance. Plato dealt in ideas, great ideas, because he was convinced that, ultimately, ideas rule the world. Jesus was a disciple of the philosophy of human brotherhood. It is certain that he believed that no important battle can be won with bloody hands. But both Socrates, who was Plato's teacher, and Jesus were executed at the demand of a maddened populace who feared *the moral power of their radical ideas*. This shows the enormous importance of being able to think—to distinguish between radicals who are educators and those who are not. Socrates taught a life of reason, Jesus a life of love, yet both were destroyed by respectable people who feared the unsettling effects of their radical teachings. And, let us note, the people who today feel themselves threatened by men whose supposed "radicalism" is founded on neither reason nor love these people have themselves largely neglected the teachings of both Socrates and Jesus. A hateful radicalism, perhaps, is the just due of those who reject its kindlier forms.

But why, finally, should Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky, be included among the authors of the Great Books? No man eager to understand the world he lives in, having read these three, will ever ask this question. The difficulty, here, lies in the supposition that the contentions of a great book are to be accepted as though they were infallible truths of a revealed religion. The fact is that people who fear ideas—radical ideas, conservative ideas, any kind of ideas—are people who do not really understand the function of ideas in human life. Ideas are not like germs, to be typed and classed forever after as good or evil. Ideas are formulations about the nature of things, and since a man has knowledge, participates in wisdom, only to the extent that he attains to some *working* conception of the nature of things, the inheritance of ideas is the very essence of

civilization. It happens that there is tremendous power in the works of certain communist writers. Their sense of wrong, perhaps, was greater than their sense of right, and this made them conceive the problems of mankind in terms of an Enemy. But for the handful of men who thought in this way, there were and are countless millions who do not think at all about such matters.

How can education proceed without exposing the young to any sort of radical thinking? As Dr. Hutchins once said, "We have to study communism, *lest* we become communists." And there is little hope of finding out about what communism is from men like Louis Budenz and Whittaker Chambers. But communist ideas are important to know about if only because they have changed the face of history during the twentieth century. It will take minds as great as the originators of these ideas to see through the confusions they have created, to point out the source of their power and the misdirection of their energy. And great minds become so by being free—free because they are fearless—and incapable of being contaminated because they know how to extract the wisdom which lies hidden in every idea, even in the bad ones.

With unparalleled irony, the southern railway company's warning against radicalism in the schools concludes with this quotation from President James A. Garfield: "Next in importance to freedom and justice is education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be maintained." By all means, let us protect education—protect it by preserving the free flow of ideas, and striving for justice in the evaluation of both men and ideas. Love of freedom and love of justice make a radicalism worth courting.

## *Letter from* **South Africa**

NATAL.—Mr. Trygvie Lie of the United Nations Organization recently commented on the growing disparity between the rates of increase of the world population and of food supplies. Michael Roberts in his excellent book *The Estate of Man* (1951) calls attention to the fact that, "in the past thirty years, more good soil has been lost than in the whole of previous history. Nearly a million square miles of fertile land have been turned into desert." Yet the population of the world, already about 2,350 millions, is increasing at the rate of twenty million a year.

This world-wide problem has particular applications in South Africa, where land suitable for pastures and cultivation is severely limited, while the forces making for soil destruction and loss are particularly active.

Fortunately, there are many signs that, in spite of the considerable preoccupation with political events, the thinking people of the country are both conscious of and concerned about the matter. The late General Smuts said, "Erosion is the biggest problem confronting the country, bigger than any politics," and the truth of this statement becomes daily more obvious. A constructive programme for soil conservation is now actually being put into practice.

Areas of the world's surface suitable for cultivation but as yet untouched are becoming rare. It is always interesting to hear of fresh developments being contemplated or undertaken. A scheme has lately been proposed and investigated in part of the eastern portion of South Africa.

Going north from the flourishing sea-port of Durban, through a coastal belt successfully developed during the last hundred years by sugar farmers, one comes to Zululand, the greater part of which is a "native reserve," or area set apart for exclusively African occupation. Bounded on the

north by Portuguese East Africa, there is here a vast expanse of undeveloped, partly even unexplored, country.

Several rivers flow into the sea between Durban and the Portuguese boundary, and in many cases the typical lake or lagoon at the estuary is suggestive of a natural harbour. At one of these points, Sordwana Bay, investigations are now afoot with a view to developing there a great harbour and port which could be connected directly by rail with the rich mining districts of the Transvaal.

Further north, beyond Richard's Bay and St. Lucia, another estuary and chain of lakes form the Kosi Bay area. The lakes teem with fish, their shores and surrounding districts with bird and animal life, already protected from exploitation by the timely proclamation of the whole area as a National Park or Game Reserve. The adjacent territories, Maputaland and Tongaland, are isolated and undeveloped, primitive, quite cut off from the rest of South Africa, and very little explored. Parts of the area are covered by magnificent natural forests containing, for instance, Yellow-wood trees, some of which are over a thousand years old. The Sihangwana Forest is one of the largest in South Africa. In another part of the area, that north of the Pongola River, the soil is rich and it is estimated that with irrigation it could be made highly productive. An irrigation survey is at present being made. This will have to be followed by delicate negotiations with the Portuguese, since the Pongola, which would have to be dammed, runs into the Usutu which in turn flows through Portuguese territory to the sea. But there is little doubt that irrigation will eventually come, and a vast area of fertile land will be brought under cultivation.

This food-growing area is the land between the Ubombo Mountains and the Pongola River. Between the river and the sea the land consists of sand with a good grass covering, but this is said to have great timber-growing potentialities. There will probably be, also, mineral and other

discoveries here. There is known to be coal, as well as diamonds; and prospecting for oil is now proceeding.

In an area of some 2,500 square miles lives a sparse population of natives, mostly on the sandy flats destined for timber cultivation. These are not the hardy Zulus, but a primitive, somewhat degenerate people known as the Tongas, suffering from malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases, and from malnutrition. There is a plan on paper to devote a large proportion of the potential wealth of this hitherto barren country to the use of the local natives, by means of something in the nature of a big co-operative society.

Members of an expedition which recently visited the Tongaland-Maputaland area were deeply impressed by its possibilities, and estimate that when malaria has been brought under control and the Pongola irrigation scheme is implemented, the land will become one of the most important food-producing areas of South Africa.

SOUTH AFRICAN CORRESPONDENT

## *REVIEW*

### AN INDIAN NOVEL

COMMENT on Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* (Crown, 1952) seems appropriate for several reasons, even though the volume can hardly be considered a monumental achievement. It seems clear that the Western world has at least had the opportunity to learn a great deal from India in regard to philosophically inspired political movements, and if the precious quality of philosophy has a more vigorous life in India than in America, we should be curious as to its role in Indian literature. The Indian novelist, for instance, may be woefully inept at sustaining dramatic suspense—a special capacity which seems to come naturally to most of his Western contemporaries—but perhaps some of the Indian writer's difficulties stem from the fact that he views life in terms of a host of subtle complications, making him pause over undertones and overtones which he finds difficult to communicate.

If the Westerner is a natural dogmatist, the Easterner is a natural synthesizer. Except in those cases where Western influence has supplanted traditional orientation among Indian thinkers, we are less likely to find sharply defined "schools of thought" either in literature or in politics. Save for aggressively fanatical religious factions, it is more difficult for the Indian to be either a "libertarian" or a "moralist," since what he is most apt to be, by natural instinct, is a little of both.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's finest work, in our opinion, is *So Many Hangers* (see MANAS for Nov. 23, 1949), which unfortunately never became available in an American edition. A much stronger and more useful book than *Music for Mohini*, this novel dwelt upon the paradoxical advantages and disadvantages of Western and Eastern cultures, as combined in an India beset by almost insuperable economic problems. *Music for Mohini*, also, shows an equal respect for ancient and modern orientation, and, as is the case with

some of Pearl Buck's works, affords opportunity for some interesting reflections.

Bhattacharya deals in sharply delineated cultural contrast by portraying the life and love of a young Hindu girl betrothed by her parents by advertisement and arrangement, in conformity with Brahmin tradition. As Mrs. Buck several times pointed out in her novels concerning China, this sort of system may not work out as badly as romantic Westerners insist that it should. We view the happy coming together of two people actually very well suited to assume mutual obligations and enjoyments, although the arch-conservative influence of the groom's home creates a genuine battle between the generations, in which we are bound to disapprove superstitious traditionalism. In *Music for Mohini*, the young husband and his wife refuse to comply with the Brahminical demands for "breast-blood" to propitiate the God of fertility, and the young bride, who happens to be barren for a considerable period of time, thus becomes the focus of strained and painful controversy. Jayadev, her sometimes worried husband, finding himself extremely desirous of seeing a pessimistic horoscope proved mistaken, reflects upon his hopes for a child:

Around the image of his son the battle of the Big House raged in full fierceness. A sudden regret came upon him, like a shock, that the old order must pass, that his son, his heir, would not know the ease and graciousness, the power and godlike prestige, the splendor and grace of living that had been the inheritance of the Big House for a thousand years. Jayadev, regretting the bounteous past, ached for his unborn son, who was caught in the flux of a fast-moving tomorrow.

What then? Would not the young, too have their own proud inheritance? Were they not to be a living torch of the new age to come? Great and exciting days lay ahead. India, free to build up her destiny, was not yet truly free. She was like a prisoner held too long in a dark cell. Unchained and released suddenly, she was bewildered by the light. But the stupor would pass. India would renew herself, and her strength would be the strength of the young—not more, not less.

Yes, Jayadev told himself, his son had no need of the Big House, of a House of the past, for he would have his own proud inheritance.

Just as this is not a remarkable book, so is there nothing unexpected about the conclusion, a satisfactory synthesis being achieved, the elders and the young alike propitiated by sweet reason and fortunate circumstance. Western readers will be able to sense, however, some of the subtle happiness which the Indian way of life long brought to many of her populous millions, despite accompanying superstitions. Such a pattern of values seems to be almost incomprehensible unless described by one who has himself lived in this so different mental and emotional world, and perhaps Bhattacharya accomplishes what a Western writer could not.

The best commentary we have seen on Bhattacharya's book is of itself of more independent value than anything occurring in *Music for Mohini*. Robert Payne, reviewing *Music for Mohini* for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, expresses himself as follows—perhaps stretching a point in its favor because of his deep appreciation of what are often called the "spiritual values of the East":

The English language is being perpetually renewed from abroad. Italian and French worked on the English tongue in the age of Elizabeth, so that there are times when even Shakespeare seems to be thinking in some language which is not English so much as a compendium of two or three languages. There is richness in this diversity. Now, when all the world this side of the Curtain knows some English, we can expect increasingly to come upon books written by foreigners who know our language well, yet they write it with prose rhythms borrowed from their native tongues and their resourcefulness leads them to invent phrases which would never occur to an Englishman or an American.

At a time when we need to know more desperately than ever how the Indians think and behave, "Music for Mohini" acquires an added importance. The books on the nature of Indian polity and political development are legion, but they tell us too little of the living India, the faith by which the

peasants move and how they react to Western ideas and on what hopes they build their lives.

We wonder to what extent English-reading Indians will be able to benefit from perusal of Western creative literature? This would seem to depend upon the degree of philosophic stability attained before such reading is begun. Western creative writing is admittedly and deliberately "exciting," tempting one to all manner of adventurous exploration. Western novels have clarity and power, but can hardly be regarded as of an equal "harmlessness" to the few corresponding works produced by Indians.

A children's story such as *And Gazelles Leaping*, for instance, will certainly not "over excite" youngsters in the fashion accomplished by so many high-tension tales of Western adventure. Although we were hardly fascinated by *And Gazelles Leaping*, we would rather take our chances with a child raised on such fare than upon the emotionally supercharged Lone Ranger adventures.

We shall thus take a special interest in what promises to be a gradual infiltration of Indian novels into Western publishing and channels of book distribution, and shall be inclined to overlook imperfections of technique. It will be a long time before the creative literature of India will afford effective means for comprehending the social conditions of that vast country, so heavily populated with technical illiterates; but, when the gap between the two cultures has finally been bridged at the level of mass consumption, we may expect a mutual leavening to take place—a leavening conducive to better one-world understanding.

**COMMENTARY**  
**IN DEFENSE OF THE "OLD"**

ONE of the routine criticisms of the Great Books is that they are nearly all "old," and unable, therefore, to throw much light on "modern problems." There is a sense, of course, in which problems change from generation to generation; and a sense, also, in which even the highest wisdom must be brought "up-to-date"; but the principles of scientific inquiry do not change with each generation, so why should there be any significant change in the modes of intelligent inquiry into the nature of human beings?

The Great Books are offered as an antidote to a situation well described by Simone Weil in *The Need for Roots*:

Nowadays a man can belong to so-called cultured circles without, on the one hand, having any sort of conception about human destiny or, on the other hand, being aware, for example, that all the constellations are not visible at all seasons of the year. A lot of people think that a little peasant boy of the present day who goes to primary school knows more than Pythagoras did, simply because he can repeat parrotwise that the earth moves round the sun. In actual fact, he no longer looks up at the heavens. This sun about which they talk to him in class hasn't, for him, the slightest connection with the one he can see. He is severed from the universe surrounding him, just as little Polynesians are severed from their past by being forced to repeat: "Our ancestors, the Gauls, had fair hair."

What is called today education of the masses is taking this modern culture, evolved in such a closed, unwholesome atmosphere, and one so indifferent to the truth, removing whatever it may still contain of intrinsic merit—an operation known as popularization—and shoveling the residue as it stands into the minds of the unfortunate individuals desirous of learning, in the same way as you feed birds with a stick.

There is more than wisdom about human nature in the Great Books. A number of the classics of scientific discovery are also included, as notable illustrations of the way in which exceptional human intelligence moves in an effort to understand the universe around us. What we

learn from the Great Books is that discovery, in any direction, is always free, creative, and non-traditional, so that the charge that education by means of the Great Books is tradition-bound is virtually meaningless. Rigidly scholastic minds may neglect or try to hide the essential freedom of great ideas, but this is not the fault of the books, but of their would-be interpreters.

We have one more defense of the Great Books—particularly, the "older" ones—a defense we borrow from an unpublished manuscript. It is a sentence to the effect that "old truths regain vitality when they are obscured by new errors." No reader and lover of the Great Books will miss the impact of this statement.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves

Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any influence on our lives. In later life we admire, we are entertained, we may modify some views we already hold, but we are more likely to find in books merely a confirmation of what is in our minds already: as in a love affair it is our own features that we see reflected flatteringly back. (Graham Greene.)

MR. HENRY BESTON, for reasons which we shall try to make apparent, was impressed by these lines, and passed them along to this Department. We have had one of Mr. Beston's books on our desk for some weeks, and, rather than rushing a review, have allowed it to circulate among various friends—also trying it on a six-year-old. The appreciation which follows is by a reader to whom the book was first shown:

Henry Beston's Tales should never have been allowed to get out of print, but, here they are again, in 1952, re-issued by Aladdin Books, New York, from *The Firelight Fairy Book* and *The Starlight Wonder Book*, with some new stories, all charmingly illustrated by Fritz Kredel, under the title, *Henry Beston's Fairy Tales*.

Now, there is much to be said against Fairy Tales, in general, as food for a child's imagination, which psychologists seem to have amply demonstrated, but, not against Henry Beston's. To be sure, in his, the good, traditionally, after many and impossible trials of strength and courage win their happiness "ever after"; but, the usual "black magic" of the punishment of the wicked is somehow left in these Tales to Nature—children are never called upon to witness the wicked being "boiled in oil," though they will feel that retribution is on its way to overtake the wicked—which seems, after all, the logical and cosmic thing to happen, even to ourselves. In fact, when the publishers say on the jacket of this book that youngsters from eight years on to eleven will enjoy these stories, it is to leave out a large audience of adults, also, who will appreciate Henry Beston's art of story-telling.

When Mr. Beston visits Fairy Land, we are glad he does not cease to be a naturalist, for his storms there are elemental—not just story-book storms; there is a significance in his magnificent clouds; his mornings come with the dew on them, with a bird

call, with the whistle of a boy glad to be alive. The child can know what are the beauties of Nature from these tales; he can also see the beauty and grace of persons, of fabrics and hangings and carvings, as well as the beauty of hills and trees and brooks and flowers.

Then, there is the quest motif—ever appealing since the myths of Jason, of Hercules, and the Knights of King Arthur. Very tenderly done is Henry Beston's tale of "The Wonderful Tune." Again, he has given us gay and whimsical tales, like "The Snow Man," with a little—very restrained—"moralizing" that will affront no one. Best of all, in these tales the happiness of hero and of heroine is never tinged with thoughts of revenge toward those who have done them wrong; there are only kindly thoughts as toward one sick or ignorant.

These Tales are simple, *clear* as in daylight. Obviously, there is no fussing over words and expressions. So, they speak out to the fancy that is not fantastic, but has to children, it must be, the order and logic of Dreamland. We are glad for this recovered and bettered art of Fairy Tales.

What is a fairy tale? A fairy tale seems the simplest way of presenting a theme through story. Most other imaginative literature is involved, in some way or other, with historical background. This compels an attention to detail, an attention to logic and to fact—both of which, incidentally, are a bit unnecessary for children, whose "attention span" is limited. The fairy tale, on the other hand, enables the child to go immediately, and directly, upon an adventure. His adventuring is in terms of values, aspirations and ideals, and when he reads and comprehends a fairy story he may know just as much as anyone else about the story he has read. Small wonder, then, that fairy tales have developed as natural reading for children.

But fairy tales also indicate a great deal about the nature of the values and beliefs held by the author—a kind of implicit "history" which cannot be avoided. In another way, too, social and cultural attitudes eventually enter the picture, for we find in Grimm, and even in Andersen, an emphasis on evil which may be more productive of nightmares than a hopeful sense of values.

Mr. Beston's tales, as noted, are a very definite—perhaps deliberate—departure from such preoccupations, a difference which is quite striking for the reason that other modern fairy tales often thoughtlessly repeat the traditional form. While Beston has his Monsters, they are never simply horrible, and may even show capacity for sympathetic feeling—becoming "monster-like" only when they have been misunderstood or abused by man. We recall, for instance, an intriguing creature called the "hippodrac." The hippodrac is indeed an awesome structure, larger than any earthly animal and equipped with wings and dragon scales. The hero, armed only with a magic wand given him for service once rendered a suffering fairy, reduced the monster to kitten-size and, in this more tractable condition, discovered that the hippodrac made a "swift response" to friendship offered. Once created, this understanding between man and beast was never broken, even when full power and size were returned at a time when the ends of justice could thereby be served. A touch such as this is wonderfully philosophical, suggesting that some of the more terrifying powers within ourselves need to be captured, held down to small size, and sympathetically studied so that, when finally unleashed, they may serve constructive purposes.

We should like to close these friendly remarks about Mr. Beston's book by repeating a few sentences borrowed from the last week's Review in MANAS. "Buck Rogers" and his innumerable relatives and progeny in science-fiction have certainly run away with the field as far as children's interest in fiction is concerned. Mr. Beston has no chance of overtaking space cadets, but for thoughtful readers his work affords an illuminating comparison. What the child of the future will read, we cannot yet know, but let us hope that there will some day be much wider use of plots based upon man's relationship to nature. The sentences we had in mind from last week's Review run as follows:

With the aid of fantasy, the story-teller conveys a vivid sense of kinship between man and nature, such as a child may remember for all his days. . . . Take for example the tale about the youth who, wandering through the forest, does a kindness to the ants. Later, when in the clutches of an angry king, he is ordered on pain of death to separate a ton or so of millet from sand before sundown, the ants appear in force and work the miracle for him. There is more to this story, but the underlying theme concerns the reciprocity of living relationships. Having been a friend to the wild things, the youth finds nature responding in kind.

## *FRONTIERS*

### An Article and a Movie

IN *Harper's* for June, Van Wyck Brooks draws attention to one more member of that small fraternity of thinkers who, while fully recognizing the telltale signs of disintegration in modern civilization, nevertheless refuse to withdraw into refuges of tired pessimism. Brooks' article is about Lewis Mumford, a man whom, we willingly confess, we should know more about. It is quite possible, apparently, to read Mumford sporadically without discovering the full impact of his affirmative views. In any event, Mumford's inspiration helped to lift Mr. Brooks to a notable level of discourse:

For Mumford, man is "ready to depart on new missions," and he is himself in a strong position as a prophet of this world culture because he is aware of the logs that block the path. . . . He long since relinquished the optimism that belonged to a constructive and expanding age—though this had been a healthy reaction against a mouldering past—together with the notion of progress itself that grew out of an adolescent pride in the scientific conquest of nature and the invention of machines. For did not the rise of fascism prove that social movement in a direction contrary to the direction of world civilization was not in the least unthinkable? Mumford has never had any use for the nineteenth-century dream of a liberation of mankind by mechanical invention, for the values that count for him are inner values; and he well knows that the planet on which we live may become an extermination camp at any moment.

The special point of interest, here, about Mumford's works is that they represent some thirty years of chewing on the problems and the possibilities created by modern technology. While there may be those alive today who understand something of the Eternal Verities, Mumford is one who seems to feel an inner compulsion to apply the Eternal Verities to the vast diversity of modern civilization. He has gone the long way—the socially fruitful way round, to come to some fairly simple conclusions. He began by writing, not about morals, but about architecture. The

titles of his four major works are revealing of the direction of his interests and his ascent to larger meanings: *Technics and Civilization*, *The Culture of Cities*, *The Condition of Man*, and *The Conduct of Life*.

Mumford, in short, is not the sort of moralist who sits in a quiet sanctuary and mocks at the aimless "busyness" of the machine age without having, himself, the slightest competence in the world of machines. Mumford has been a power for understanding modern technology. He does not want to flee this wicked world, but to transform it, and now, he thinks, is the time to begin. Again, in Brooks' words:

. . . he [Mumford] says we are witnessing the last great crisis of a power civilization that is based on a wholesale denial of human needs and values. This civilization has been heading for the virtual extinction of man in a kind of sophisticated barbarism without soul or purpose. But, while the age threatens world-wide catastrophe, it holds forth also, Mumford thinks, an unexampled promise and the chance of a fresh life drama. A new world has already come into existence, as yet in fragments only, a new culture emerging from our chaos of ideologies and creeds, but this requires a rebirth of the positive values of life, for the inner world of man has withered and shriveled. The twentieth century, as Mumford puts it, inherited a morality that was the unearned increment, in reality, of religion, so that, like most rentiers, men are now unable to support themselves by their own independent efforts in the sphere of morals. The main task of our time is therefore to restore the value of personality, debased by a sordid debunking, in order to turn the helpless puppets of a deterministic world—in Mumford's phrase—"into wakeful and willing creators." This calls for a culture of personality, a larger field for imaginative design than the building of a skyscraper, bridge, or ship. . . .

For him [Mumford] the ultimate lesson of democracy is that each must take upon himself the burden that was once transferred to messiahs and dictators, and that man's business is not so much the mere contemplation as the active creation of the divine.

Works like Mumford's, we suspect, are indispensable glosses for our own time on the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount, the

*Bhagavad-Gita*, and the *Upanishads* The test of the moralist is not simply in the purity of his principles, but also in his ability to deal with situations of great technical complexity without becoming either confused or dogmatic, and without oversimplifying existing problems by demanding that they submit to moralistic formula. Men like Mumford, we suspect, accomplish a great deal toward preventing the forms of moral judgment from becoming narrowly sectarian.

Turning, now, to the "movie": the currently showing film version of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* makes clear the enormous obstacles standing in the way of an awakening such as Mr. Mumford would inspire. Here, in the conflict of racial cultures in South Africa, is almost unrelieved tragedy. Obviously, neither Mr. Mumford nor anyone else can do anything about the human misery in South Africa, right now, or even soon. In fact, this film, which is excellent, and notably faithful to the content and mood of the book, bears so heavily upon the mind and feelings as to produce a kind of depression which gains but little surcease from the final catharsis. The story is about fathers and sons—a black father and a black son and a white father and a white son. Both fathers lose their sons, and both are bowed down by catastrophic sorrow. It is in this hour of common anguish that the two men, the black and the white, find unity in the common dignity of being human.

These men suffer what is, in the terms of our civilization and culture, the supreme blow of fate. The black man suffers more, for he finds his sister turned prostitute, his brother become opportunist, his son a robber and a murderer—murderer of one who, in almost unbearable irony, turns out to be the active and understanding benefactor of the native Africans—the son of the white man. So the son of the black man has to die for his crime. The white father has at least the luminous experience of learning from a manuscript, written by his son just before his death, the reason why the Africans who come to Johannesburg so often fall into

extreme moral degradation. Thus the white father's tragedy involves what a Buddhist might call the *karma* of the white community; in behalf of his race, he suffers retribution for having weakened and destroyed the moral foundations of the native culture, while exploiting the Africans as much as the traffic will bear. The white man gains this understanding from his dead son's writings, and both light and love are born in his heart.

But the black man—the black man is the image of the patient and unchanging sufferer. He is a dark Prometheus, but without explanation of his pain. Why are these several agonies made his lot? Are he and his people but passive agencies through which the whites may grow in moral understanding? What vision of the future, beyond a future of dully patient suffering, will lift up his heart?

We have no answer to this question, nor has, we think, Mr. Paton, who shows us the face of South Africa as it is. Yet the burdens born by white and black—burdens of ignorance and prejudice, burdens of oppression and injustice—seem curiously weighted beyond need by the enlarging tragedy of death. For death, in this story, is the immutable constant of immeasurable disaster. It is death which nearly destroys both these fathers, and this psychological excess of sorrow leads us to ask: Should death ever be allowed such power over life? Is death truly the focus of ultimate tragedy?

Too much of the life of fathers is drawn into the lives of their sons, not just in South Africa, but everywhere that death is worshipped as the master of life. To be so vulnerable to death seems not altogether natural. This servitude to death, it may be, makes men possessive of their children, brothers, sisters, wives, and steals away the independent dignity of life. Death, of itself, can no more be called a tragedy than day and night. If this is a world of life, then death is only a process in living, although a mysterious one.

Is it death which makes the difficulties of life become intolerable? We can not think so. And

here, perhaps, is the common delusion which brings together blacks and whites, and all the races of men who think of their lives as threatened by death, subjecting them to a common tragedy. A man who fears death is likely to be tempted by racial theories of destiny. The promise of life here is brief at best, and seems to need, for what fulfillment may be possible, all the support which animal competitiveness and ruthless striving can afford. Fear of death often makes us cling to our loved ones to a point where our dignity as individual souls is lessened; and the group tenacity for life so generated may lead to ramifications of family and racial egotism beyond human capacity to trace.

What, in truth, is the setting of the human struggle? By what immovable stars should our lives be guided? What is the greatest evil, the greatest good? We shall need more clarity, more certainty, about these things, if we are to be equal to the vast project which Mr. Mumford exhorts us to undertake.