VOLUME XXIII, NO. 42
OCTOBER 21, 1970

THE DECLINE OF THE "OFFICIAL"

THIS may be the first time in history when large numbers of people are turning away from the "official" ways of doing things, and—in noticeable contrast to similar mass rejections in the past—propose no new "official" program to replace the one now in force. "Official" is a word usually taken to mean having the backing of established political authority, but here we use it as including the restrictive and coercive aspects of social habit or custom—what Ortega termed "binding observance." As he explains:

> Now, the greater part of the ideas by which and from which we live, we have never thought for ourselves, on our own responsibility, nor even rethought. We use them mechanically, on the authority of the collectivity in which we live and from which they waylaid us, penetrated us under pressure like oil in the automobile. . . . No one thinks of uttering them [these ideas] as a discovery of his own or as something needing our support. Instead of saying them forcefully and persuasively, it is enough for us to appeal to them, perhaps as a mere allusion, and instead of assuming the attitude of maintaining them, we rather do the opposite—we mention them to find support in them, as a resort to higher authority, as if they were an ordinance, a rule, or a law. And this is because these opinions are in fact established usages, and "established" means that they do not need support and backing from particular individuals and groups, but that, on the contrary, they impose themselves on everyone, exert their constraint on everyone. It is this that leads me to call them "binding observances." The binding force exercised by these observances is clearly and often unpleasantly perceived by anyone who tries to oppose it. At every normal moment of collective existence an immense repertory of these established opinions is in obligatory observance; they are what we call "commonplaces." Society, the collectivity, does not contain any ideas that are properly such—that is, ideas clearly thought out on sound evidence. It contains only commonplaces and exists on the basis of these commonplaces. By this I do not mean to say that they are untrue ideas—they may be magnificent ideas; what I do say is that inasmuch as they are observances or established opinions or commonplaces, their possible excellent qualities remain inactive. What acts is simply their mechanical pressures on all individuals, their soulless coercion.

In this passage from *Man and People*—Ortega goes on to distinguish between general "public opinion," which has the force of binding observance, and the "energetic, aggressive, and proselytizing" opinion of a rebellious group. The generally prevailing opinion, he says, needs no special defense: *"so long as it is in observance,* it predominates and rules, whereas private opinion has no existence except strictly in the measure to which one person or several or many people take it upon themselves to maintain it."

The all-pervasive schemes of binding observance are of course subject to change, but their alteration is almost imperceptible except in the climactic time of revolution, when the sudden collapse of many familiar structures of habit makes deep anxiety, if not actual terror, an obsessive factor in the lives of many men. The more theoretical and unpracticed the revolutionary ideas, the fewer the people who will have the inner resources and stabilities to sustain them during the period of rapid change.

Studies of past revolutionary epochs show that the victorious leaders find it immediately necessary to fill the vacuum left by these lost stabilities with new binding observances. So it is that the ecstasy of "revolutionary love" cannot last, since it is released in crisis, and when the crisis is over the love has no form. Then the Napoleons and Stalins add compulsion to the definitions of the new order, and the people are obliged to adapt and conform as well as they can to its ideologically binding observances. Yet often there are gains. There are gains to the extent that areas are widened where self-reliance can be exercised and private thought pursued without

official prescription. There are gains if there is a growth in individuals which is recognized as a deepening sense of the meaning of life—a development which cannot be mechanistically caused by turbulent historical events, although it is associated with them.

We started out by saying that the present may be the first time in history when large numbers of people are withdrawing from the patterns of established observance yet plot no campaigns for a new or better "officialdom." This is a movement of the human spirit, a "tropism" which has had illustrious forerunners, Thoreau being a notable example. Gandhi, who recognized in Thoreau a spiritual kinsman, is another. The "official," as Gandhi saw it, becomes the inhibitor of authentic human growth by replacing its initiative and absorbing the field of its exercise. And Vinoba, in some respects Gandhi's successor, said recently that it is no part of the government's duty to spread revolutionary ideas, and that, in fact, when it attempts to do this, or pretends to, it emasculates both the theory and the practice of revolution. Revolution, in short, in the eyes of such men, must be unofficial. Could we say, then, that some of the confusing and increasingly "unorganized" aspects of the changes now going on are due to the fact that they mark the beginning of the age of *unofficial* revolution? That the cadres of this revolutionary society-to-be remain authentic only so long as they continue to be unofficial, self-defined, and in some sense "unique"?

But what about the apparent inevitability of the rule of "binding observances"? In Ortega's definition, they seem mainly oppressive, yet they must also be a device of Nature, since no society is without them. One thing seems clear: we seldom even notice the binding observances which operate in our own lives until the loss of their meaning begins to be manifest, or until they have self-evidently destructive effects. Pursuing "progress," for example, has long been a binding observance in America, but when it brings universal pollution in its train questions begin to be asked. Another means of making binding observance "objective" is the sudden impact of another culture—the result of war, conquest, or colonization. In *Man in a Mirror*, Richard Llewellyn dramatizes the intrusion of white civilization on African tribal culture by comparing their binding observances. An educated Masai leader, a man who had the role of intermediary between his people and the white administrators, broods on the differences:

> Nterenke began to realize with increasing dismay which he found almost comical that the Masai intellect held not the least notion of physical science, no philosophy, or sense of ideas in the abstract, or any mathematical processes higher than the use of the hands and fingers. He amused himself in trying to imagine how he might teach Olle Tselene the theory of the spectrum. Yet every tracker knew the value of sunlight in a dewdrop because the prism told where the track led and when it had been made. How the eye saw the colors or why the colors were supposed to exist was never a mystery or problem. They had no place anywhere in thought. But all male Masai, from the time they were Al Ayoni, had a sharp sense of color from living in the forest and choosing plumage for the cap. Color became a chief need in the weeks of shooting, and comparing, and taking out a smaller for a large bird, or throwing away a larger for the smaller, more colorful. He wondered where the idea of color began, or why a scholar should interest himself. Mr. James had taught that sound politics led to a rich economy where people earned more money for less hours of work, and so created a condition of leisure needed by inventors, whether mental or physical. The Masai had always enjoyed an ample economy, if it meant a complete filling of needs, and after the animals were tended, there was plenty of leisure. Yet there were no inventors of any sort. There was a father-to-son and mouth-to-mouth passing of small items that pretended to be history, and a large fund of forest lore that might pass as learning, but there were no scholars, no artists, no craftsmen in the European sense.
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> The effect was to lock a growing mind in a wide prison of physical action and disciplined restriction that by habit became accepted as absolute liberty.

Today, as we read this perceptive description, we may experience a wave of nostalgia for a

simple life like that of the Masai. It seems so natural, so *good,* while our own civilization, as we have recently discovered, has been in the charge of sorcerer's apprentices and scientific boy Fausts. Already the longing for an eternal Peter-Pan career is strong in the young, and while their vitamin-nourished glands make this unlikely they can at least dress up like Indians, romance about the "tribes," and do what else they are able to screen out the ugliness they see and feel.

It may be natural enough for the young to react by feeling to the present scheme of binding observances according to a good/bad scale of judgment; in this they are only repeating history, and they are after all young; yet there is another way of looking at these things. We learn from medicine and the new psychology, for example, that the symptoms of illness may be best understood as the body's or the mind's strenuous if failing effort to get well. A neurosis is a distorted healing process, a defense against what seem dangerous enemies, a struggle of the psyche for survival. If we look at "binding observance" with this in mind, we may be able to find a better solution for its evils.

Binding observances are unquestioned social habits. What do we know about habits? Well, we know that we can't get along without them. So far as the life of the physical body is concerned, we certainly couldn't do without its physiological habits, which we call instincts. Suppose we had to make our hearts beat with a continuous act of the will? Or give precise instructions to the cells along the margins of a gash on how they must heal the wound? The "binding observances" of the body come very close to being perfect as well as indispensable. This reliance on the services of habit applies in all directions. We don't feel that we really possess a skill—like driving a car—until we can use it without thinking about how it works. An artist can't really profit by his "technique" until he is able to forget it—forget, that is, that it's in his fingers and at his service. A good habit is an extension of human function which has become second nature. Once the function took concentrated attention, but not after it has been made into a habit.

Actually, there may be a vast natural ground for this idea. In his remarkable book, *Instinct and Intelligence* (Macmillan, 1929), Major R. W. G. Hingston expresses the view, based on a great deal of personal observation, that "instinct began in a reasoned act which gradually became unconscious." While there may be little room for this opinion in modern evolutionary theory, it certainly fits with what we know about the formation of our own useful habits, and the entire subject of how evolution takes place is still mysterious enough to allow consideration to the idea. Further, it has the advantage of supporting the conception of human life as a self-determined expression of nature; as A. H. Maslow has put it, we are "*self*-evolvers."

If one looks closely at this question of habit and freedom, or habit *versus* freedom, it gets very metaphysical indeed. A habit is a way of acting, a form of behavior, an instrument of the will. Nobody acts without instruments. By confining (conserving) and directing the energy of action, an instrument makes the action possible. A habit, you could say, is the endowment given an instrument for relatively independent behavior, freeing the individual for other, more demanding activity. A bad habit is an endowment which makes you do a thing you no longer want to do, or which prevents you from doing something else which is more important. Obviously, then, a good habit is a habit which will not get in the way of a man's capacity to innovate, yet will efficiently take over on functions which are purely instrumental. A wise man will choose and develop his habits by this criterion.

A great many of the social habits which men acquire—and which become binding observances, or are incorporated in constitutions—are prescriptions for the not yet wise. The wiser a man is, the less his need for or dependence upon such habits. But if he is really wise, he seldom

insists that other people change their binding observances. Instead, he writes a *Bhagavad-Gita* or conducts a Socratic Dialogue. He knows that people whose habits are suddenly taken away from them by fiat will either become enraged, succumb to fright, or lapse into apathy, because their familiar modes of action have been destroyed.

If the prevailing set of binding observances in his society add up to intolerable evil, he may contest them non-violently. The most deep-seated observances are below the threshold of rational inquiry. They are taken for granted; as Ortega says, they make the ground of assumption with which you demonstrate arguable matters; you don't have to prove *them.* The need of the Spanish conquistadores to convert the heathen Indians to the one true religion was not open to debate for these invaders. They were Christian and *right.* The need of the South Africans to discriminate against Indians and blacks involved the very identity of the ruling race. They might be obliged to talk about the question, but they couldn't really *reason* about it. Their racism was a binding observance impenetrable to rational communication. Gandhi saw this. Explaining why he believed that non-violent action was needed, he said:

> "Because human beings are not always ready for persuasion. Their preconceptions may be so deeply rooted that arguments do not touch them at all. Then, you must touch their feelings. Nothing else will change their minds."

One might say that non-violence was for Gandhi an appeal from a stance above the threshold of reason to those whose behavior, in a given situation, was below it. He met one extreme with another.

But this is the requirement of a crisis situation, when men are ruled by passion and fear, as is usually the case when their deepest binding observances are challenged, and it probably takes a Gandhi to turn such confrontations into mutually educational experiences. Without Gandhis to lead, there may be a tendency to think of "action" as taking place only in crisis situations, making this idea into a "radical" binding observance, while neglecting multitudinous other processes of natural human awakening and growth. These processes thrive in the interstices of society, and on the fringes. There are those who, today, instead of migrating to "new lands," are finding ways to live without official guidance. They have performed a kind of inner emigration, but you couldn't say they have "opted out." A happy instance of this new social tendency was reported in the Los Angeles *Times* for Aug. 15, by John C. Waugh. The story tells of twenty-two men and women who have joined to create New Mexico's Theater of All Possibilities on 160 acres of flat and open land near Cerillos. The players live in the stalls of an abandoned stable and the yard makes an outdoor theatre. Benches for the audience seat two hundred. Mr. Waugh relates:

> In the festival season in the late summer, the troupe sets up tents for playgoers who wish to camp overnight or take m the group's repertoire of seven plays.
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> The commune dwellers are all artisans practicing a dozen theatre-related crafts—among them a leathersmith, a wood carver, printers, a blacksmith, table-makers, potters and photographers.
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> One of the four co-directors—they also double as actors—is the commune butcher. Another is an adobe builder. Maria Allen, the commune leader's wife, is also a potter and the overseer of the group s livestock—hogs, chickens, guinea hens, horses and one mule.
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> One way or another, each member of the commune must earn $75 a month. The $900 a year they must each contribute to the commune treasury is enough to feed and board the members, run the theatre, build new buildings, plant and maintain orchards and gardens, husband livestock, hold a theatre festival, take three plays on tour once a year and pay off a mortgage.

John Allen, a former engineer now in his thirties, is apparently the moving spirit in the group. The *Times* writer says he "looks and talks like a stern pilgrim just landed on a rock-bound coast."

> Having rejected the Establishment, he is convinced that communal living is the only social form left that makes sense. A family of four, he points out, spends $10,000 to $20,000 a year living a non-commune life. On his commune, the same family can live for $2,000.

The members, who in age range from eighteen to forty-three, have no use for drugs, which are banned, and outlaw drunkenness. The plays in the repertoire include Shakespeare, Sophocles, Molière and Brecht, and some dramas by members of the group may be added. The actor-craftsmen prefer not to be called a "commune," because of the term's associations, but a reporter has to use a generalizing noun now and then.

Well, artists, as we have before suggested, are naturally stalwarts in the rejection of the "official." They develop their conventions, too, of course, since they are human, yet the weaknesses of unthinking conformity show more quickly in the arts than in other areas of enterprise and can be guarded against. This example may not be world-shaking in implication, but it illustrates a great many basic changes in attitude and objective among a disciplined group of people. There are other such groups, and many such individuals. The *energy* which is turned toward the future is not going into "official" alternatives, but into extraordinarily diverse individual transformations and dramatically original enterprises, none of which looks forward to power, status, or acquisition as the climax of their achievement. It might be said that even if we could collect many such accounts, our samples would remain statistically insignificant, compared to the population of the world. That would be true enough, but we are sampling germ cells, not somatic cells. This objection reminds one of what Faraday said to Gladstone when the latter commented on the scientist's first model of a dynamo: "Very interesting, sir, but what good is it?" The inventor replied: "What good is a newborn baby?"

REVIEW
STRUTTERS AND FRETTERS

IN *Running Away from Myself* (Grossman, 1969), Barbara Deming takes a close look at the popular films of the 1940'5, groups them in categories, and concludes that, taken together, "they grant us a vision of the Hell in which we are bound, but cannot grant us a vision of our better hopes." The one movie of that time which, she thinks, had some claim to being art was, ironically enough, Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux,* a "comedy" of murder.

No movie-goer old enough to remember the films and stars of those days can fail to find something of interest in this book, which is illustrated with stills of Humphrey Bogart, Joan Crawford, John Garfield, Dick Powell, Ray Milland, Cary Grant, Bing Crosby, and many others. Certain pangs will visit some of Miss Deming's readers, since it was hard not to enter into many of these skillfully produced pictures—submitting to their cunning and accepting their "regular guy" pieties. The movies had not then been overtaken by a nihilist mood, and the actors had little difficulty in believing in their roles. So it is time that someone did what Miss Deming has done. She says:

> This book attempts to decipher the dreams that all of us have been buying at the box office, to cut through to the real nature of the identification we have experienced there—to that image of our condition that haunts us, unrecognized by most of us, unacknowledged, yet troubling our days.
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> Because it is a blind comfort they offer, our movies are hard to read in this way individually. But in unison they yield up their secrets. If one stares long enough at film after film, the distracting individual aspects of each film begin to fade and certain obsessive patterns that underlie them all take on definition. Film after film can be seen to place its hero in what is, by analogy, the identical plight—the dream then moving forward carefully to extricate him. From such a series of instances one can deduce a plight more general, sensed by the public (and by the public-minded film makers)—a condition that transcends the literal situation dramatized in any single film.

Miss Deming was for several years a film analyst for the Library of Congress. She not only saw all the pictures she discusses, but took lengthy notes in shorthand while she watched them. Almost no one else could write this book, and since there is now no way to get at this material—no comprehensive film library exists—the record is probably unique. Perhaps it should be. Perhaps these pictures are not worth all the attention they would be given if bright young scholars could get at them easily. But this book is clearly of value. It shows how the leisure hours of many millions of a generation were spent. It recaptures the images, the nuances, the plots and devices of the entertainment of an epoch and enables us to consider them reflectively.

One could say that Miss Deming has assembled the raw material for a Platonic commentary on the cinema, since these movies are all the "Homer" that a great many Americans ever had. Much of what Plato says about the mimetic poets applies to the medium of film (see Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato*), and there are things he does not say that will have to be added, sooner or later, since the filters of commerce and technology, to which all films are subjected, played no part in the transmission of the Homeric tradition. Moreover, a certain innocence graced the poets of Greece—a quality box-office-guided Hollywood cannot claim. These are distinctions Marshall McLuhan hardly notices, and certainly does not stress, when drawing his bold parallels between the "oral" cultures of the past and the deliveries of the electronic media.

A psychological truth about all drama and all storytelling is that you don't have to say "everything" to achieve the feeling of being understood. Humphrey Bogart, exiled in a cafe in Casablanca, staring sightlessly into the past, does not need to "explain" how he feels. We all know that dead-end mood. Yet there's good in him; in us, too. The task of the film-maker is to get this man out of trouble, revealing the "good" almost by accident while making him earn his release in a truly "American" way. Miss Deming observes:

> Often in these films, the hero's extrication from his difficulties is effected by sleight of hand. The film

> makers could again protest they were unaware of executing any such feats. Cunning of that sort need not be plotted, it is instinct. The least knowing among us cunningly enough delude ourselves. . . . The film medium lends itself especially to sleight of hand. The spectator, in the first place, plays a more passive role than he does in relation to any other art and so he is in a more suggestible state. He is seated in darkness. The screen, the only source of light in this darkness, easily usurps his attention. This is so of the lit stage at a play, of course, but at a play, at least, the eye of the spectator must move to take in the scene. At a movie, the camera performs the work *for* the eye. We need not even turn our heads to follow the action; the camera does that for us. It squints for us, to note details. It is alert; we need not be.
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> As a movie communicates both at the visual level and at the level of the word, it is easy for it to distract us with words spoken, with a name given an event, while the underlying sensuous appeal it makes remains unacknowledged—and may have very little to do with those words. This is possible in the theater also; and something comparable is possible on the printed page; but in the movies it is so to a new degree, because of the freedom the camera has to range through the physical world—quite casually, it would seem. (To those who make the film, it can seem casual too; here is always much that is involuntary.) It is very possible for a person in the audience to ridicule the film he has seen, to point out glaring absurdities of plot—and still, in spite of himself, to have responded to it very actively, at a less obvious level.

Viewed in this light, film can be seen as a medium which from the beginning puts into practice all the arts of seduction of the feelings and the mind. They may not be used for this purpose, but the fact that they can be, almost without our knowing it, is something to keep in mind. The point is that the film-goer has given up all the adventitious aids to resistance of seduction. Except for his eyes, he has accepted an immobile condition and is ready to be saturated by what happens, is said and felt upon the screen. You could say that he has entered into close embrace with a technology equipped with superb manipulative skills.

Great dramatic art, as Miss Deming suggests, can do this, too. Even a book can prove enormously gripping. Yet great works are not the only things we are attracted by or vulnerable to. So the psychological odds of a relationship entered into at the beginning of a performance or spectacle are of some importance.

It is probably no accident that a civilization which prides itself on its capacity for unemotional, objective analysis—for ruling out all feeling in the determination of *facts*—should at the same time reward with immense riches the actors and other performers who are most successful in generating emotional response in others. The psychological balances in life which should belong to the individual are thus delegated to specialists in the polarities of thought and feeling. We *hire* people to be objective for us, and we hire other people as emotional champions. The scientists know for us and the movie stars feel for us, and both are supremely efficient surrogates at what they do.

Miss Deming regards her work as having only pessimistic implications. "The figures cast upon this country's movie screens," she says, "falter in any gesture of promise." For encouraging signs in the arts, she believes, one must look "outside the confines of our movie houses." But what, one wonders, would be the ideal use of this medium? It is now above all a tool of the conditioning process, and who, we should ask, can be trusted with instruments of influence which are exercised on people who are by definition passive and accepting when they go to the movies?

The whole issue of the responsibility involved in stirring or directing the feelings of others is present in such questions. The theatre itself, as we know, had a sacred origin. It evolved from the mystery dramas of antiquity, of which Aristotle remarked that they had the purpose of exciting in the spectators certain feelings of awe and wonder. More than one psychologist of modern times has noted that the dramas of Æschylus and Sophocles accomplished a natural psychotherapy for the Athenians, and Harold Goddard showed in *The Meaning of Shakespeare* how the great Elizabethan playwright served his audiences similarly. Perhaps something better could be done with film by pioneers who would be willing to go back to such root-intentions for a new beginning.

COMMENTARY
"HALF A SHOW"

SOMEWHAT like Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author," little piles of papers and marked-up magazines cover most of the desk space in the MANAS office, awaiting circumstances in putting the paper together which will make their contents especially relevant. Some items wait a long while, then gain importance by reason of related material that is scheduled to appear. One such item, kept within easy reach because of its excellence, finds natural association with this week's Review on the role of popular films in American life, which suggests that Miss Deming's book brings together "the raw material for a Platonic commentary on the cinema."

In the *Saturday Review* for last July 18, the TV-Radio editor, Robert Lewis Shayon, devoted a page to a critical analysis of a respected educational TV program, *The Advocates,* which he had watched throughout the season. This program, as many know, addresses itself to "specific issues in public affairs in a pseudo-debate-courtroom format." The intent is to give the members of the audience opportunity to improve their understanding of current issues:

> For thirty-eight Sunday evenings, the program's participants regularly and commendably have tried to clarify such questions as "Should the United States sell jet fighters to Israel?" or "Should unions demand that employees have the option of working half-time or full-time—thus 'liberating' wives from the frustration of boring housekeeping and motherhood chores?" Skillful, intelligent rhetoricians have presented their cases, pro and con, on each issue. They have examined and cross-examined friendly witnesses. A moderator-judge has regulated times and tempers.

It was typical that about halfway through these programs Mr. Shayon became bored and restless. "The program," he found, "seemed destined to call attention to important issues but to never satisfactorily engage the mind in their consideration." It was not until a psychiatrist participating in the half-time or full-time work-day debate proposed an actual "experiment" to settle the question that Shayon began to suspect what was wrong. Nor did the psychiatrist's approach provide the final answer.

The psychiatrist wanted to find out by test whether giving fathers more time at home would actually *help* the children. "I'm an empiricist," he said.

Light dawned on Mr. Shayon when he shifted his wondering to an ancient Greek context, casting the rhetorician advocates as the pre-Socratic Sophists and the psychiatrist as an early Greek scientist who "sought to understand the cosmos without theology or magic but by reason and observation alone." Mr. Shayon then mused:

> Missing, however, in this contemporary microcosm of the ancient Greek mind, was the figure of the philosopher Socrates, who was less interested in the means or techniques by which men seek their goals than he was in the worth of the goals themselves. Except for the psychiatrists, the behavior of the cast of *The Advocates* was entirely "eristic," polemical reasoning for the purposes of victory in argument.

This seems a very important generalization to make about the mass media. Their "educational" programs never question the fundamental "binding observances" of the age because they *can't*—they would immediately stop being "mass media" if they did. No profitable medium of communication commits suicide; not with a conscientious board of directors in control. So skillful Sophists remain in charge, and, as Mr. Shayon remarks, "the Sophists without Socrates is half a show."

What's wrong with the Sophists? For a full-dress portrait of these exceedingly clever people one should go to Werner Jaeger's *Paideia,* but Mr. Shayon's summary account of the debates of "the advocates" will do almost as well:

> All arguments were self-serving; how could the viewer judge their validity? Without some measuring of value, the arguments tended merely to reinforce pre-program prejudices. But empirical testing is but one way to decision, as is rhetorical persuasion. Another way, the Socratic answer to the Sophists, is

> dialectic—a process of criticism that seeks to determine first principles.

The light of first principles often has the effect of demonstrating the triviality or irrelevance of the arguments on both sides of a popular question, which follows from exposing the superficiality of the question itself. Socrates, in short, would question "too much" for the popular taste, which is sufficient explanation of why he never appears on television.

Mr. Shayon's concluding paragraph offers valuable criticism:

> The trouble with the art of rhetoric and eloquent public appeal is that it tends toward relativism. In the Sophists' act of persuasion and refutation there is the problem of discovering whether anything of permanent value can claim the support of all in the audience. This is the problem that *The Advocates*, well-meaning popularizer of knowledge, cannot solve in its present format. This is why the programs seem one-dimensional, never penetrating beyond the repetitive, essentially static position of the pleaders.

The fact is that "value-free technicians in the art of debate" cannot teach us anything at all, and a negative byproduct of the display of their confident skills is that we may be beguiled into thinking that we know something when we don't. Their contribution is almost always in the area of the "unbridled lucidity" Michael Polanyi describes in *The Tacit Dimension.*

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
DISCIPLINE AND DELIGHT

A LITTLE more than four years ago (MANAS, June 8, 1966), we gave some attention here to Kornei Chakovsky's *From Two to Five* (University of California Press, 1963). Chukovsky was throughout his life the most famous children's writer in Russia, loved and honored by all, and since the English edition of his book appeared a similar respect for him has grown in this country.

The most exciting thing about *From Two to Five* is the author's demonstrations, with endless illustrations, of how children use words and make up words. Their use of language is spontaneously creative, their natural speech a kind of poetry. Experiencing, learning, and knowing are all one to the child, and his development is artless and free. The following comes early in the book:

> But, of course, a child is a child, and not a learned pedant. Despite his tremendous intellectual efforts he never feels like a mental toiler, tirelessly in quest of the truth. Now he plays, now he jumps, or he sings, or he fights, helps his grandmother or his mother with the housework, or he frets, maybe he draws, or listens to a fairy tale; in any event, the interpretation of the life around him is never undertaken by him as a special task of his existence. He never isolates thinking from the rest of his activities, and the very process of his thinking during this period is erratic, sporadic, and easily distracted by other preoccupations. A prolonged concentration of thought is not natural in the preschool child.
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> It often happens that, posing one or another hypothesis for a puzzling fact, the child forgets it within a minute and improvises a new one. Gradually, he finally works his way toward a more correct understanding of reality, but, of course, one cannot expect that a mistaken hypothesis will always be followed by a more correct one. The child advances toward the truth in wide zigzags.
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> At times two completely opposite conceptions coexist peacefully in his mind. This is illustrated in the following amazing sentence uttered by a four-year-old girl, a Muscovite:
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> "There is a God; but, of course, I don't believe in him."
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> Her grandmother indoctrinated her with the dogmas of orthodox faith, and her father, on the contrary, drew her toward atheism; she, however, wanting to please both, expressed simultaneously, in one short phrase, both faith and disbelief in God, revealing great adaptability and (in this instance) very little concern with the truth:
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> "There is a God; but, of course, I don't believe in him."
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> Making two assertions, mutually exclusive, the child did not even notice that the result was an absurdity.
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> The preschool child has no need at his age for certain truths either on the sociological or on the biological plane; for this reason he plays lightly with concepts, creating for himself, with ease, various fictions and making use of them this way or that, according to his whim.

Grandmother and father, you could say, committed the only absurdity in this situation; *they* subjected their heavy concepts to a lighthearted fate, not the little girl. Needing to get along with both of them, she solved the problem quite handily, in the terms of the realities in her life.

Yet this "adaptability" is by no means ridiculous when transferred to other areas. Consider, for example, Niels Bohr's principle of Complementarity, which in modern physics enables us to tolerate the fact that the phenomena of light are best understood when two intrinsically contradictory explanations of its motion are adopted. The terms of the wave theory of light have not even nodding acquaintance with the terms of the particle or quantum theory. They require very different-models of the primary unit of light and its behavior—in fact, in the wave theory, there is no "unit" to consider; yet the man who deals with light can dispense with neither theory, since both of them *work,* although in differing explanations. So, complementaril is a name for living with a contradiction which gets us by! That little girl just might become a theoretical physicist, some day, with her way of solving impossible contradictions.

Chokovsky goes on to consider the conscious playfulness in children's thinking:

> A four-year-old girl, playing with her wooden horse as with a doll, whispered:
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> "The horsie put on a tail and went for a walk."
>
> Her mother interrupted her play, saying, "Horses' tails are not tied to them—they cannot be put on and taken off."
>
> "How silly you are, Mommie, I am just playing!"
>
> The truth was that inseparability of horses from their tails had long been known to the little girl, but, precisely because of this, she could use a contrary notion, creating an imaginary situation, and could play with her toy horse as with a doll—that is, dress and undress it. The more closely I observe children, the clearer it becomes to me that the attitude of our "adults" to the truth often seems strange to the child—especially while he is at play.

As a writer of poetry for children, Chukovsky gave close attention to the way in which their awareness of words develops. His last chapter is a series of "commandments" for children's poets, based on his own long experience. Here is a sample of what these rules are like:

> We have said that children's vision most often observes not the quality but the movement of objects. From here stems our *ninth "commandment"* for children's writers: not to crowd their poems with adjectives. Poems enriched by epithets are not for small children; one never finds adjectives in verses made up by preschoolers. This is understandable because the epithet comes as a result of a longer acquaintance with the object. It is the fruit of experience and exploration not yet congruous with the preschooler's age.
>
> The writers of children's poetry often forget this and overburden their verses with an enormous number of adjectives. For the young child this results in nothing but boredom because what excites him in his literature is action and the quick succession of events. Since this is so, let us have more verbs and fewer adjectives! I consider the ratio of verbs to adjectives the best objective criterion of the suitability of a given poem for the child "from two to five."

Nearly everything that can be said about the way children think can also be said about adults, with a few qualifications added. One of the very best books about writing, for example, Lafcadio Hearn's *Talks to Writers* (Dodd, Mead, 1927), has a chapter which compares the use of adjectives by Scandinavian and French writers. Hearn quotes from their novels, showing how a feeling of power and even vivid description emerges from a couple of pages by Björnson, then asks the reader to count the adjectives. There are only ten! Then, the effect achieved by fine French writers—Baudelaire, Loti—who use scores of them, is illustrated. Much turns on the objective of the writer, of course, but it is important to recognize the psychological value of these different forms in narrative and description.

As for the vitality and incessant discovery of the child's approach to his environment, few contemporaries reach the clarity of John Holt on this subject. In *How Children Learn*, in telling how children investigate such curious objects as typewriters and cellos, he remarks that the child—

> is much better [than "scientific" adults are] at picking out the patterns, hearing the faint signal amid all the noise. Above all, he is much less likely than adults to make hard and fast conclusions on the basis of too little data, or having made such conclusions, to refuse to consider any new data that do not support them. And these are the vital skills of thought which, in our hurry to get him thinking the way we do, we may very well stunt or destroy in the process of "educating" him.

Kornei Chukovsky died last October at the ripe age of eighty-seven. His book, *From Two to Five*, was first published in Russia in 1925 and has been through sixteen editions there since.

FRONTIERS

The Long-range Question

THE best experts are beginning to change, sounding less and less like experts. An honest expert, today, is a man who is loosening up, who is no longer sure; and he no longer feels it necessary to pretend that he has the right answers. What this change will do, eventually, to the structure of modern society, which was very largely erected by confident specialists, remains to be seen. The main difference may be that the mistakes we make won't be so lethal as the ones we are making now.

The most useful "experts" of the future will be men who start out by admitting how little they know. John Holt is a good example of this. When a former student wrote him from college that she envied him because, she said, he had "everything all taped," he replied:

> "You could not possibly be more mistaken. The difference between you and me is not that I have everything all taped, it's that I know I don't and I never will, I don't expect to and I don't need to. I expect to live my entire life about as ignorant and uncertain and confused as I am now, and I have learned to live with this, not to worry about it. I have learned to swim in uncertainty the way a fish swims in water."

An educator is not really an expert or specialist, of course, even though "education" is regarded as an academic "discipline" and conference after conference is held by its practitioners. Mr. Holt, you could say, is an expert in not being an expert. He is a disciple of Socrates, and the attention he gets results from the fact that more and more people are realizing that this is the kind of knowledge we need.

Other writers on education are showing the same good signs. Discussing "The Schools We Want" in the *Saturday Review* for Sept. 19, Nat Hentoff says:

> Some years ago, in researching *Our Children Are Dying*, I learned an invaluable lesson about learning. In that Central Harlem elementary school, each teacher was free to work in his own way—provided that he was not just a custodian or a time-server. Accordingly, one second-grade class was as Summerhillian as you can get in a public school, while I was appalled in a fifth-grade room by the stern, seemingly authoritarian, no-nonsense zeal of *that* teacher to make sure that everybody left his class much more confident in the basic skills than when he started. At first, I visited that fifth-grade room as a silent condemner. The man was anachronistic!
>
> By the middle of the year, however, it was overwhelmingly clear that the children in that room were very much into learning, eager to push on. Not because they were being force-fed but because they were responding to the palpable desire of the young man in charge that they learn as much as they could. And tough as he was, he also communicated his unyielding confidence that they *could* learn. It was not a "free" classroom but it was a place where something real was always going on. The day, for instance, he brought in an analogue computer. The kids were anxious to see it work. "It's yours," he said. "You make it work. The instructions are there." And in time, a class composed of what had previously been regarded as "slow readers" made the machine run. Some were quicker, but one way or another each had a part in bringing the computer to life.

Obviously, the important thing in education *is* not the method but the man. Mr. Hentoff remembers that the teachers he learned from when he went to school were themselves "chronic learners," not people who stopped after they had learned what they *had* to know. The hunger to know is something that can be increased or spread only by an amiable contagion.

The old-fashioned specialist, confident of his well-established certainties, goes about expecting to make the rest of the world adjust to what he "knows." He hires out as a consultant. If he is a man who knows, say, about the administrative necessities of prisons, he may be called in to decide how big the cells should be, and what color to paint the walls. The question of whether there ought to be prisons does not come up. Decisions are dictated by the past. Opportunities for expertise along these lines are endless, as a passage in *Personal Space* (Prentice-Hall, 1969) by Robert Sommer will show:

> Society has certain objectives in building mental institutions, high schools, and public libraries although some users may not share these goals. It is probably easiest to document this with regard to mental patients and most difficult with regard to schools, especially when critics such as Paul Goodman and A. S. Neill have argued cogently for letting children do what they want. If a child chooses to play in the streets instead of learning Latin or mathematics, that is his prerogative. Neill assumes that a student will come to the material when he is ready, and if he reaches the age of 17 without a desire to learn geography, it is probable that he wouldn't have derived much benefit from enforced attendance in a geography class. But Summerhill is not a public institution with society s goals in mind. It is a student-oriented school built with the child's individual growth as its *raison d'être* and in this sense differs from a mental hospital with public funds to perform certain services for society. The twin goals most frequently associated with mental institutions are custody (removing unpleasant and unwanted people from society) and therapy (behavior change), and these goals may conflict with those the patient has set for himself. . . . Most large mental institutions serve neither society's interests nor those of the patients.
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> . . . The question remains whether another type of environment without locked doors and personal indignities could accomplish this more effectively. There is no question that the shelters mental patients would design for themselves would differ markedly from what society has provided or is likely to provide in the future to meet its own needs. It is possible to design a Summerhill for mental patients, the sort of place where their anxieties are allayed through a minimization of social contacts. Determining whether patients would be rehabilitated into society from such institutions is as relevant as asking whether students will learn Latin at Summerhill.

This sort of special knowledge reaches out with questions in all directions and invites the reader or inquirer to do the same. The sub-title of Mr. Sommer's book is "The Behavioral Basis of Design." It ends:

> Good design becomes a meaningless tautology if we consider that man will be reshaped to fit whatever environment he creates. The long-range question is not so much what sort of environment we want, but what sort of man we want.

What we need is more "experts" who know how to raise *this* question more insistently.