VOLUME XXIII, NO. 48
DECEMBER 2, 1970

TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

WE are fairly used to hearing about gods that fail, or of gods that die, since these phrases come easily to the lips of literate men, but we have little awareness of the character of the disorders which overtake a people afflicted by loss of faith. Even when the symptoms appear close at hand, they are given other explanations. Distance is needed for recognizing them. We know, for example, that the collapse of the Aztec empire before Cortez and his handful of confident bravos was the fate of a people made impotent by feelings of doom. They had nothing but memories to set against the Spanish arrogance and the immeasurable self-righteousness of men determined to conquer by right of the one true religion. The invaders fought without pity and killed without restraint—was not all the world and its riches theirs for the taking, on the authority of the Deity? It would be centuries more before scientific progress would proclaim another "Almighty" for the Western world, establishing another order of conquests to be eagerly pursued—one far wider and more consuming than those won by any of the victories of colonial arms. Again, the wearing away of faith in Western religion was something we have clarity on only from the passage of years and the transfer of allegiance to the new faith. Detachment while enduring such great changes is extremely difficult.

In the case of the anthropomorphic god of conventional Christian belief, however, there was another way in which loss of faith came to rare individuals. In a curious passage in *Ends and Means*, now an almost forgotten book, Aldous Huxley tells the story of Marie Lataste, an ignorant peasant girl who developed mystical tendencies. She began by having visions of the Virgin Mary and Christ, but after a time these images no longer visited her reveries. Huxley thought she was beginning to penetrate to deeper levels of reality, reaching beyond the finite symbols of her religion. Yet whatever the inner meaning of the formless void that a purer subjectivity presented to her, she now experienced what in the Western mystical tradition has been termed the "dark night of the soul." The cherished figures had dissolved. Huxley comments: "Significantly enough this particular form of spiritual anguish is not experienced by unorthodox Christians nor by those non-Christian mystics who profess a religion that regards God as impersonal. . . . the belief with which the oriental mystic sets out is in accord with the testimony of his own experience. He has no treasured belief to give up; therefore enlightenment entails for him no spiritual anguish.

While one may suspect that no one reaches genuine spiritual enlightenment without enduring severe ordeals, there may be truth in Huxley's observation. The dissolution of the images of illusory gods must bring pain in direct proportion to the faith that has been placed in them. A "dark night of the soul" surely overtook the Aztecs, making them succumb in despair to the conquistadores, and a historian could doubtless find other illustrations of this sort of enervation.

What brings a people, a race, or an entire civilization to embrace beliefs that are doomed to fail and betray? We probably can have no answer to this question without an almost miraculous accession of self-knowledge, since understanding human vulnerability at so broad a level would mean knowing the part played, in principle, by illusion in human experience. Yet more pragmatic considerations may give some light. For example, a man who places the locus of power *outside himself* is always too trusting a soul. Cut off from that power, either by its exhaustion or by its unaccountable disappearance, the man suffers catatonic depression. Others will say of him that he *believes* himself to be powerless and beyond

hope. They of course know better, but can do little to help him.

The customary and obvious retort to this argument is that we must not extrapolate it to history. What arrogance! To think that this pygmy, man, this frail and fragile reed, has the power to look after himself! Yet this objection might call for no more than a re-examination of the meaning of "self," and bring the rejoinder that not all men answer to this half-accurate description. Further, there is much evidence to confirm the view that men who have a low opinion of themselves leave no memorable mark on history. It might be added that while men with a high but delusive opinion of themselves eventually trip and lose their achievement, this hardly exhausts the catalog of human possibility. The *hubris* which leads to the fall of empires may be avoidable. To read the past for the necessities or inevitabilities of the future may be to commit a statistical fallacy which wholly neglects the promise of individuals.

Such facts about the past are important; indeed, we could not even speak of the past without them. Yet if we allow them sovereignty over the present and the future, we rule out the possibility of change. Total reliance on such facts would lead us into believing that a statement about man cannot be true unless it is true about a large number of men. And this, in turn, would make the high qualities of genius, men of extraordinary character and inspiration, into virtual impossibilities under the laws of nature. Yet the men we wish to remember were without exception *not* like most other men; they are memorable because they broke the mold of habit and common expectation—because, you could say, they behaved like *gods!*

If a man is a trainer of athletes for the Olympic games, or even a business executive intent upon staffing an exploratory or adventurous enterprise, he will not, looking for candidates, consult the statisticians of common human behavior to guide his selections. He will look for persons of uncommon human behavior. Men capable of only "average" performance would naturally finish last in the Olympic games. The idea is to improve the record, not to find justification for saying that it can't be done.

A side argument might be made by pointing out that men steadfastly set upon self-improvement are frequently punished as heretics by their society. A heretic, by derivation, means a man who dares to choose for himself. This, quite clearly, says something about what he thinks is the locus of power. Such a man, by nature, will resist all inherited beliefs. Not that he will necessarily refuse to adopt them, but he will adopt them, if he does, only after critically inspecting them. He retains the power to determine what he will think, what he will believe. And what he does believe is therefore something more than "belief."

Why is the mystic an interesting figure? Simply because the practice of mysticism, if successful, develops into what may be called "firsthand" religion. The great mystics, let us note in passing, were not known as "egotists." They had a certain confidence in what they knew as the result of inner investigations, yet they did not display arrogance or conceit. Apparently, what "they" knew did not seem to them a private acquisition, but came rather from access to some universal truth. What then is the dark night of the soul? Judging from what is said in books, it is the dissolution of those external aids to belief—outside sources of power—which, so long as they are relied upon, keep their dependents among the lame, the halt, and the blind.

Why is the quest of the mystic difficult? Because it involves generating a sense of reality for what, in ordinary habits of thinking, is non-specific, all-pervasive. One must, so to speak, learn how to lean back on the ocean of life—and *life* includes all those obscure and sometimes terrible processes from which, vainly, most human beings try to escape. A mystic grows into something very close to being a wantless, desireless man. Why should he want what he

finds he already has, in the omnipresences of other selves with which he is now united?

There are various books on mysticism, but the passage which comes at the end of the sixth *Ennead* of Plotinus is surely among the most comprehensible and inspiring accounts of what the word means.

But the weaning of a man from his sense of reality in lesser matters—finite matters, perishable matters—is a process filled with feelings of deprivation and pain, called, therefore, "dark night of the soul." Why, after all, should a man cut himself off from what since a child he has been told it is good and right to have? What is this "enlightenment" which leaves a man naked and alone? In a slight but lovely book about his travels in the East, published in 1914 (*Appearances,* Doubleday, Page), G. Lowes Dickinson wrote of the popular Buddhism of the people of Java, finding it filled with the warm impulse of pity and love for all creatures. Then he, a Westerner, sitting before a figure of Sakya-Muni at Borobudur, held imaginary debate with Buddha the Eastern philosopher, contesting "his theory of human life, its value and purpose."

> For a long time I was silent, meditating his doctrine. Then I spoke of children, and he said, "They grow old." I spoke of strong men, and he said, "They grow weak." I spoke of their work and achievement, and he said, "They die." The stars came out, and I spoke of eternal law. He said, "One law concerns you—that which binds you to the wheel of life." The moon rose, and I spoke of beauty. He said, "There is but one beauty—that of a soul redeemed from desire." Thereupon the West stirred in me, and cried "No!" "Desire," it said, "is the heart and essence of the world. It needs not and craves not extinction. It needs and craves perfection. Youth passes strength passes; life passes. Yes! What of it? We have access to the youth, the strength, the life of the world. Man is born to sorrow. Yes! But he feels it as tragedy and redeems it. Not round life, not outside life, but through life is the way. Desire more and more intense, because more and more pure; not peace, but the plenitude of experience. Your foundation was false. You thought man wanted rest. He does not. We at least do not, we of the West. We want more labour; we want more stress; we want more passion. Pain we accept, for it stings us into life. Strife we accept, for it hardens us to strength. We believe in action; we believe in desire. And we believe that by them we shall attain." So the West broke out in me; and I looked at him to see if he was moved. But the calm eye was untroubled, unruffled the majestic brow, unperplexed the sweet, solemn mouth. Secure in his Nirvana, he heard or he heard me not. He had attained the life-in-death he sought. Unhelped by him, I must go my way. The East, perhaps, he had understood. He had not understood the West.

Without conceding that Lowes Dickinson wholly understood either the Buddha or himself, what is it, we might ask, to "understand the West"?

This is a matter of some importance, for the West, it now seems likely, is about to enter a vast, collective "dark night of the soul." These are times of faltering faith in the gods of the Western pantheon. The cardinal beliefs of Western civilization, on which men have so long relied, no longer prove themselves in practice. The results we expect are not the results we get. The Great Machine no longer works very well; there is sand in the gears, sugar in the tank, and jokers in our predictions. To get the objectivity we need toward what is happening to us, we shall have to see how and why we acquired this faith that is breaking down, for then, and only then, will it become possible to attempt its reconstruction.

Insight into the prevailing articles of faith is provided by Lewis Mumford in a four-part series recently completed in the *New Yorker,* titled "The Megamachine." (*New Yorker* for Oct. 10, 17, 24, and 31.) In the second installment Mumford writes:

> The chief premise common to technology and science is the notion that there are no desirable limits to the increase of knowledge, of material goods, of environmental control—that quantitative production is an end in itself, and that it is our sacred duty to insure that every means be used to expand the facilities for quantitative expansion and production. This was a defensible position in the seventeenth century, when an economy of scarcity still prevailed everywhere. Then, each new facility for production,

> each fresh increment of energy and goods, each new scientific observation for experiment was needed to make up the terrible deficiencies in consumable goods and verifiable knowledge. But today our situation is precisely the opposite of this. Because of the success of the sciences in widening the domain of prediction and control, in penetrating the hitherto inviolable mysteries of nature, in augmenting human power on every plane, we face a new predicament, derived from the very economy of abundance: deprivation by surfeit. The overproduction of both material and intellectual goods poses—immediately for the Western world and in the end for all mankind—a new problem: the problem of regulation, distribution, assimilation, purposeful direction.

A single anecdote conveys Mumford's basic point as little else can. Writing of Persian rugmaking in the sixteenth century, he says:

> One beautiful rug, which now covers a wall in the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, demanded the whole life of the temple slave who made it. But this slave was an artist, and in his art he enjoyed the freedom to create. At the end of his task, he proudly signed his name to the masterpiece. He had not lost his identity or his self-respect; he had something to show for his working life. Compare the death of this slave with Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman."

Mumford is no champion or apologist of slavery, yet hour after hour, day by day, which man had the better life?

Mr. Mumford's article is devoted to tracing the gradual loss of the organic ground of the life of both nature and man to the abstractions of science and the techniques of industrial process. It is a loss in thought, and therefore in the foundations of faith, which has been followed by an increasing loss in fact, through the distance established between men and their habitat by mechanical and now electronic devices. The failure of the megamachine—the knock in the engine, the screech in the transmission—the occupational ills of the operators, become more apparent every day. Yet it was only a few years ago that Vannevar Bush, a former director of the United States Office of Scientific Research and Development, announced that the invention and practical development of *anything* we want is no longer a problem. The skills of engineering are so advanced and the techniques of research so perfected that, when it comes to new devices or appliances, "It is no longer a question of whether they can be built; it is rather a question of whether they are worth building." In short, we can have whatever we want, if having it seems desirable enough. This, as Mumford points out, is the fulfillment of the Baconian dream, yet right at the apex of its development it is turning into a nightmare.

But what can we put in the place of the sharp, clean abstractions, the exact laws and the "objective truths" made available by science? What could be made the ground of a new faith? The sharp, clean truths of science have brought us incredible progress, but the fruits of this progress, heaped up, pressed down, running over, now crowd us to the verge of exhaustion, self-destruction, death. The feeling that some vast reversal of meaning is upon us is occasion enough for speaking of a collective dark night of the soul.

Can men find a new ground in the far less definable but living realities which surround their existence—which are obscure simply because they relate to wholes, because they penetrate everywhere, like the air we breathe? Is there, indeed, some practical lesson to be learned from the mystics, who found a less mutable reality on which to found their faith when the familiar forms of traditional belief faded away? How did they develop this new, sustaining conviction? We do not know. All we know is that they discovered a locus of power within themselves.

Letter from **JAPAN**

THERE are various ways to convey the thought of one generation to another—in literature, drama, philosophy, essays. But words themselves may carry a double freight of meaning. I know there are idioms of this nature in English, but, here, I should like to take an instance from the Chinese language, one which has long been in use in Japan, too.

A story made the origin of this idiom. Long, long ago, there was a very wise lord in China. He was visited one day by a merchant who brought him a halberd. The merchant explained at length how fine it was, saying that it could pierce any armour in the world. So the lord bought the halberd, being willing to pay the price the merchant asked.

Some time later, the same merchant came to the lord's residence, declaring that he had another fine thing for sale—a shining, splendid shield. The merchant told the lord how this shield had been especially made for him, with many extraordinary qualities, insisting that nothing could break or pierce its protection. The lord's retainers were much impressed by the shield and expected their master to buy it. But the lord remembered what the same merchant had told him about the halberd. He asked how what the merchant said of the halberd could be true, if what he now claimed for the shield could be relied upon.

This story of the merchant and the lord is the origin of a familiar idiom, "a halberd and a shield," which means—unresolvable contradiction. Yet this expression has come to be more than an idiom, for in Chinese there is no single word signifying contradiction. If you translate the English "contradiction" into the Chinese or Japanese, you must write "a halberd and a shield"—even in abstract logical or philosophical discussions.

This may sound queer to those who are not acquainted with Far Eastern languages, and I draw attention to such things, not in order to puzzle the reader, but to invite consideration of certain enrichments that might result for thought by rendering old idioms into English. Instead, for example, of saying "halberd and shield," you would write "ICBM and anti-ICBM measures"!

Here is another example, again from Chinese, but this time of a character. The character, "bu," means "to fight." As you may be aware, most of the Chinese characters were originally picture characters, each one or each compound of them (formed in one character) having distinctive meaning. Now "bu" is composed of two characters, meaning "to stop" and "arms." In other words, to fight means to stop the use of arms by the other party. I think this fairly describes the intended meaning of the statements of many governments or belligerents, nowadays. In some cases, the start of a war is justified as a measure to *prevent* war. It seems a pity that we have made so little advance in candor in our explanation of fighting, and still use a euphemism which was initiated a long time ago. I am neither scholar nor linguist, but such attainments are not required to recognize how long we have been in confusion on these subjects—a confusion faithfully mirrored in language.

TOKYO CORRESPONDENT

REVIEW
FAILURE OF A DREAM

THE reader of Nadine Gordimer's new novel, A *Guest of Honour* (Viking, $8.95), is likely to be impressed by two things: the sagacity of the politicians of the new African states, and the almost impossible problems which they face. Having lived in South Africa all her life, Miss Gordimer is qualified to portray faithfully the character of the new black leaders and of the whites who are being displaced. Set in a Central African land, the story focuses on an English administrator who had been expelled by his own government from the country because of his sympathies and cooperation with the black nationalists. The book begins with his return, ten years later, at the invitation of the African president, whom he had worked with and admired, to be present at the independence celebration of the new state, and to stay on, afterward, as a consultant on education. Widely known and respected by the Africans, the former administrator sorrowfully watches emerging factionalism destroy the unity of the liberation party, which had achieved independence for the country, wanting to help, but unable to do so. There is a "modern" love affair woven into the action, but it seems irrelevant to the strength and value of the book.

"Racism" as a theme or an issue has little part in Miss Gordimer's narrative. On the contrary, the American reader, at least, will find encouraging the practical realism of the rapid adjustment to the new rulers made by whites who remain in the country. The shrewd intelligence of the Africans is too apparent for there to be any nonsense about "white superiority," and the necessity for getting along with them puts a sudden finish to the epoch of racial conceit. The story's real drama grows out of the tensions between two Africans, one a young and handsome man, who is president, the other in his fifties, the former mentor and older colleague of the popular leader, who has been left out of the newly formed government. Both are men of ability, persistence, and will. Once they worked shoulder to shoulder, in the days before independence, and the Englishman finds it extremely difficult to choose between them. His attempt at making a reconciliation does not work at all.

The problem, as Miss Gordimer shows it, is this. The practical benefits sought by the African political leaders before independence were the economic advantages enjoyed in the "developed" countries of Europe and America. The "People's Independence Party," which forged independence for the land, grew out of the trade union movement. When independence became a fact, trade union leaders did not see the benefits arriving—certainly not fast enough. The new government, not yet in office for a year, was already making "deals" with foreign investors that seemed certain to maintain the old conditions of the mercantile economy of the colonial imperialists. The view of the government, however, was that unless new capital could be attracted, the economic development of the country could not begin. Sacrifices, they said, would have to be made, and the people must be patient, trusting their leaders.

One of the Englishmen who had remained to work for the Africans, somewhat in his cups, summed up the situation to a trade union critic of the new government:

> . . . talking into your beard, this business about the workers and the government building the socialist state for the benefit of the workers. . . . In African states the economy can only be developed to the detriment of the workers. For a hell of a long time to come. That's a fact. I don't care what political creed or economic concepts you want to name, the realities of production and distribution of wealth remain the same right through the continent. No, no—I know what's coming—don't trot out what happened in Europe a hundred years ago, because you know the answer to that one, too. The sacrifices squeezed out of the European working classes in the nineteenth century enabled Western economies to reach a point where they could acknowledge the demands of the poor bastards who'd sweated their guts out. It was possible for one reason only: the point had been

> reached without disturbing the pattern of growth. Within limits, they'd come to a stage where increased consumption leads to greater investment."

There may have been answers to this argument—the older African leader gave some of them at a party congress—but the president's group was confronted by the popular demand for immediate results and allowed no interference from "trouble-makers." So, little by little, the situation degenerated. Angry workmen went from demonstrations to violence, and from violence to meaningless terrorism was only a short step. So old political allies were parted in bitter opposition, and the Englishman who had wanted to help them both realize their dream was killed in an incident that had no purpose from any point of view. At last the president was compelled to call for British troops, who came, established "order" of a sort, putting things back the way they were. This is the end of the story.

The weak figure in the book—he is not meant to seem weak—is the President, who never really explains himself or his policies. He asks for trust and confidence, but fails to give an adequate accounting of his decisions even to his close friend, the Englishman, and for this reason loses him. The book would have gained from a more intimate description of what went on in the president's head. Miss Gordimer allows him to be only a pageant of a man.

As for the problems confronting him, and his resources for meeting them, a sentence from Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* seems partly to parallel the situation. Of the militant "worker" movement in the United States in the 1930's, Baldwin wrote: "However they might extol Russia, their concept of a better world was quite helplessly American and betrayed a certain thinness of imagination, a suspect reliance on suspect and badly digested formulae, and a positively fretful romantic haste." In other words, what the Africans wanted was what the departing colonial powers possessed. Gandhi would have said that they were still victims of *cultural* imperialism, and that it would prove impossible to gain the "advantages" of the industrially developed nations without taking on their weaknesses and defects.

This seems a good place to repeat some of the fundamentals of economic development as expounded by E. F. Schumacher. In a paper printed in the *Journal of Overseas Administration* for April, 1969, he said:

> Economics does not start with goods; it starts with people and their education, organization and discipline. Without these three, all resources remain latent, untapped, potential like the marvellous unlimited resources of Brazil about which so many people have said that "Brazil is the country of the future and will always remain so." There has been plenty of opportunity to observe the truth of this thesis after the Second World War. Every country, no matter how devastated, which had a high level of education, organization, and discipline, produced an "economic miracle." In fact, these were miracles only for people whose attention is focused on the end product, the "tip of the iceberg" in the form of factories and capital and consumer goods. The top had been damaged but the basis, which is education, organization and discipline, was still there.
>
> Here, then, lies the central problem of development. If the causes of poverty are deficiencies in these three respects, then the alleviation of poverty depends on the removal of these deficiencies. Here is the reason why one cannot "jump" in development, because education does not jump; education is a gradual process. Organization does not jump; it must evolve to fit changing circumstances; and the same goes for discipline. All three cannot be ordered or simply planned they must evolve step by step, and the foremost task of policy must be to speed this evolution. And all three must become the property of the whole people, not merely of a small majority.

Much of this paper is devoted to showing how governmental programs of aid to the underdeveloped nations break down, and how impractical and ill-advised many of them are. Even well-intentioned and well-planned programs go awry. Mr. Schumacher writes:

> If most of the aid is government-to-government, how can it break down into thousands upon thousands of small activities involving millions of people?

Governmental bureaucracies, no matter how efficient, can never handle more than a modest number of projects, and if the bureaucracies are enlarged to handle more they almost invariably become unworkable. . . . The task of the future, as we see it, is twofold: first to develop new methods of cooperation between governmental and non-governmental, voluntary agencies; and, second, by means of such cooperation or by other means, greatly to increase the effectiveness of voluntary effort. The voluntary agencies have frequently been criticized for being unbusinesslike and ineffective, more often than not by themselves. There have been insistent demands for "streamlining" and "coordination"; but these things are easier said than done and there is a real danger that "coordination" may mean nothing but the setting up of more committees to cause delays, strangle initiative, and kill enthusiasm. It is not surprising that the demand for "coordination" arouses the antagonism of field workers, who know more about the difficulties and frustrations of development work than the coordinators back home and realize how much depends upon their own spontaneous devotion and initiative. . . .

Instead of the idea of *coordination* we would propose the idea of *infrastructure.* In many developing countries there are literally hundreds of groups of voluntary workers working in relative isolation, each on its own small project, almost like subsistence farmers. The resources at the disposal of each of them are normally extremely limited. "It's the poor that 'elps the poor"—true enough; but the limitation of resources does not apply merely to money; it also applies to know-how and everything else. Like subsistence farmers, the voluntary field workers are generally too much on their own, lacking an effective *infrastructure* of facilities. Here is a group struggling with a technical problem which others have solved long ago; owing to an almost total lack of communications, they are in complete ignorance of the solutions found elsewhere. The same mistakes are made over and over again; the same inventions have to be made over and over again; there is no cumulative process leading from strength to strength but, instead, a thousand starting from zero. The voluntary workers, although coming from rich societies with virtually unlimited scientific resources, normally are completely isolated from these sources; they have no means of mobilizing them difficulties which at home would be resolved in a day demand enormous personal efforts for their resolution, causing delays of weeks or months. In short, there is a lack of *infrastructure,* and just as subsistence farmers cannot help themselves effectively, no matter how hard they work, until someone creates for them an infrastructure of communications, transport, education and research, so the development work carried on by voluntary organizations needs to be given an infrastructure of facilities of an analogous kind.

But before people will take up these modes of development and use them, it is necessary to think about them, to understand that nothing else will really help or work. Unfortunately, colonial powers, reluctantly relinquishing control over subject populations, do not help the people from whom they have profited to think in this way. They do not understand the necessity, themselves.

COMMENTARY
HOW TO BE A MACHINE

WRITING in 1914, Lowes Dickinson charged the Buddha (see page 7) with having attained a "life-in-death" condition, which seems an infelicitous way to speak of Nirvana. However, by 1970, Charles Reich, in the *New Yorker* (Sept. 26) condensation of his book, *The Greening of America,* turns the phrase around and applies it to the West Dickinson was defending, with far more justification:

> Of all the forms of impoverishment that can be seen or felt in America, loss of self—a sort of death-in-life—is surely the most devastating. It is, even more than the Vietnam war, the source of discontent and rage in the new generation.

Later, speaking of the technology-dominated state which shapes the externals of modern life, he speaks of its relentless, single-minded pursuit of a single objective—increased productiveness—obtained by "organization, efficiency, growth, progress." No other value, he says, is allowed to interfere: beauty, community, amenity, or even life itself must go, if it gets in the way. "Only such single-valued mindlessness would cut the last redwoods, pollute the most beautiful beaches, invent devices to injure and destroy plant and human life. To have just one value is to be a machine."

Mr. Reich should be read along with Mr. Mumford. They go together, supporting and amplifying each other. In his *New Yorker* contributions (Oct. 10-31), Mumford is writing history—the history of how we came to be obsessed with the non-human value of the machine. Learning this history, we begin to see what can be done to change the direction of the present. Mumford has one suggestion which represents a course already taken spontaneously by some people. He says:

> Whatever the advantages of a highly organized system of mechanical production, based on non-human sources of power—and, as everyone recognizes, there are many advantages—the system itself tends to grow more rigid, more unadaptable, more dehumanized in proportion to the increase in its automation and in its extrusion of the worker from the process of production. At this point, I wish only to emphasize that the deliberate maintenance of a widely diffused and varied group of handicraft occupations would have been a guarantee of human autonomy and an essential factor of economic safety, and that the recovery of many of these all but lost arts, which William Morris began in the nineteenth century, was—and remains—an indispensable counterbalance to mechanization.

When men realize that there is no alternative to a certain course, following it becomes not only possible, but may even be pleasurable.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
AN ENGLISH VIEW

WE have been reading a book from England—*Education and the Modern Mind,* by W. R. Niblett, a Faber paperback—and cannot help but wonder if life in England is not pleasantly slowed down compared to conditions in the United States. The British no doubt have their alarums and excursions, but they seem to retain the ability to think things over with some serenity and calm. Even Christianity sounds rather different when serious English Christians express themselves.

More than one American writer goes to England, now and then, to get time enough to think.

This book says a lot of old and true things. Mr. Niblett says them very well, in terms of several basic and recurring themes: The meaning of life is not found in the pursuit of happiness—people devoted to the worship of the bitch goddess, Success, will not get happiness, nor will they, in the end, enjoy their success—and schools which are accessories to these objectives will betray the young.

These ideas form the background. Specifically, on education, Mr. Niblett contends that there is no important learning unless those who teach have vision and enthusiasm for what they do; that the "by-products" of teaching, that is, the existential values the teacher feels and conveys in subtle ways, are more important than communication of his "subject"; and that the framework of cultural assumption and the daily lives of the people are the educational influences which really shape the young, no matter what is ostensibly "taught."

The author says in his first chapter:

> Much activity today, even quite desirable activity, brings satisfaction only while it is in progress. When it is past there is a blank, and we hurry to fill the vacuum with more action. Education itself, once the infant stage is over and it has begun in earnest, is apt tacitly to assume that its proper function is to help children—and indeed whole nations—to "get on," so that more money, more power, and therefore more happiness will eventually be theirs.
>
> It is not difficult to understand the argument or the desires that lie behind it. But there are signs that a creed of "getting on" is failing to satisfy on any depth many of those who hold it. What are comfort and leisure for when we have attained them? Perhaps, after all, men were better off when they could feel quietly sure that faith and vision were the birthright of mankind, even if individually they could not all be its vehicles.

But these sensibilities are now all but lost:

> We can hardly believe today even in progress.
>
> It is not to be expected that a satisfying philosophy of education will be widely spread when a satisfying philosophy of life is so seldom achieved. If life lacks a sense of direction, so will the education it is possible to give our children whether at home or in school. A generous allowance of pocket-money with which to purchase ice cream and happiness may well be an unconscious confession of inability to impart gifts more valuable. In such a time of holiday from conviction some kinds of learning will not take place at all and our young people will be left, as many are left today, on the loose. Even techniques and skills themselves—looking, listening, writing—will be acquired with less effectiveness and less intensity. And to try to meet the challenge, as we may be tempted to do, with a reply in material terms is not to meet it: no multiplication—however desirable in itself—in the number of new schools and laboratories, of youth centres or technical colleges, will answer such questions; no rearrangement of secondary education so that more of it will become "comprehensive" at eleven or "multilateral" at fifteen; no piercing of more entrances through the walls of our universities.

The "holiday from conviction" has produced all the other ills, and it is probably further along in this country than in England, since here we already know from experience that the bribes of "affluence" can do nothing to regain the respect of the young for institutions of learning.

There is a sense in which the value-free objectivity of the scientific method has been a collaborator in the divorce of learning from human

meaning. A valuable chapter in *Education and the Modern Mind* examines the contributions of sociology to education, which have so vastly increased our grasp of the part played by the environment in affecting human attitudes and behavior. Mr. Niblett says:

> Without any doubt then a sociological approach is bound to add to our realization of the scope and nature of education whether in school or outside it. What it can never do—by itself—is to give us an adequate philosophy of education. The social scientist, as a social scientist, sees human feeling and effort as contributing to a social pattern, and efficient education primarily as a process of helping people to fit into that pattern with as little waste of time and as little pain as possible. Like other scientists, he may appear to be the honest man among the self-deceivers, the one determined to tell the truth. And, at first sight, it might seem that there is no defence against his contentions; for if we know the objective truth there is nothing else that can be said. But, of course, if we look on any phenomenon detachedly and entirely from the outside, cause and effect, stimulus and response, are all that we can see.
>
> Very much of the effort of any science—biology, psychology, sociology included—is to annotate the behaviour of phenomena. There is no need for sociology or psychology or any of the sciences to *believe* in man. . . . For sociology as such there can be really no criteria or standards for the evaluation of conduct. Its concern is not to attribute praise or blame or make moral judgments, but rather to record simply and calmly the pattern which has been woven. Karl Mannheim in *Ideology and Utopia* pointed out twenty years ago that increased knowledge of a sociological kind never gets rid of the need for moral decisions, but only forces them farther and farther back. "What we gain from this retreat from decisions is an expansion of our horizon and a greater intellectual mastery of our world. . . . Whenever we become aware of a determinant which has dominated us, we remove it from the realm of unconscious motivation into that of the controllable, calculable and objectified. Choice and decision are thereby not eliminated; on the contrary, motives which previously dominated us become subject to our domination; we are more and more thrown back upon our true self."

That is no doubt what *ought* to happen, but the sophistications of scientific relativism have not been developed in a context of over-arching vision. They emerge rather in a vacuum devoid of ideals to take the place of the disillusionments brought by detailed analysis and exposure of self-deception. But what does self-deception matter when, finally, there is no authentic self, no moral agent, no real inner being with the capacity to outgrow his parochial beliefs, his partisan prejudices, his local egotisms? Such an objectivity begins with brilliant criticism but ends by endorsing nihilism through moral default. The "detached observer" is not a man if he is *only* a detached observer. The detachment of science gains its value from enabling the individual to find the best way, as Mr. Niblett says, "to take responsibility for the world upon himself."

One chapter is devoted to the problem of curriculum:

> We chase far too readily a will-o'-the-wisp called "a certain minimum knowledge which every boy or girl should possess by the time he leaves school," forgetting that the test is not what he possesses—in some sense of the word—when he is examined in it at sixteen or eighteen, but what he possesses twenty or thirty years on from the day he left school behind. Has he got from his schooldays a sense of life's importance, an inkling that maintained, disciplined enthusiasms matter, that imagination, sensibility and depth are of greater value than wide information, that books ought to be used and read all through life, that "happiness" is not the goal?

These are the great, unsettled questions, and the answers cannot be "taught," as Socrates suspected, but only eternally investigated. Mr. Niblett writes of education in its high and original meaning—the meaning which, since it cannot ever be precisely set down, has been neglected in favor of the measurable, and the plainly communicable. Yet the teaching he speaks of is an activity which somehow gets this meaning across, or rather, will settle for nothing less, whatever its failures from day to day.

FRONTIERS

In the News

A REPORT of a survey of people who say they have no "religion" reflects the superficiality of the questionnaire approach to matters of this sort. Not what people say they believe, but what they do with their lives, would surely give more insight into human attitudes and convictions—if, indeed, we need "surveys" to inform us of what is everywhere before our eyes. Of what supplementary value to Thoreau's "Life without Principle" would a table of the religious beliefs of his time have been? In the present case, the incidental comments of the researchers are of more interest than their findings, but they say nothing that we haven't known all along—that "irreligion" is typically defined by contrast with the forms of prevailing conventional belief. As an English sociologist, Colin Campbell, observes: "One needs only to be reminded that in the ancient world the early Christians were called atheists because they refused to acknowledge the Roman gods." As usual, people who are today held to be without religion have higher educational attainments than most believers. Meanwhile, what earthly or heavenly good does it do anyone to know that 98 per cent of the people of the United States identify themselves as either Protestants, Catholics, or Jews?

According to the Los Angeles *Times* of Oct. 26, a twenty-four-year-old naval officer, an Annapolis graduate, stationed in San Diego, has formed an anti-war group called Concerned Officers Movement, of which there are twenty-eight known members, most of them Navy, but there is an Army captain, a marine, and an Air Force lieutenant in it, too. This young man, John F. Kent, has applied for recognition as a conscientious objector. As the *Times* writer says:

> He opposes the Vietnam war, existing officer-enlisted man relationships, pollution of the sky and sea by naval vessels and the system of military justice. John F. Kent doesn't have much of a future in the navy.

Some of his colleagues in COM, however, he said, "want to stay in and reform the navy from within." Meanwhile, the Pentagon is processing the letter protesting the Vietnam war signed by Kent and the other twenty-seven in the San Diego chapter of the group and sent through channels to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird.

Kent, the *Times* relates, has the background of a consistent "over-achiever." As a physics major he was in the upper 15% of his class at the naval academy, and was twice All-American wrestler. "John," the coach at Annapolis said, "was always a competitor, and you could depend upon him to put up a fierce battle whether he was expected to win or lose. . . . Everything points to sincerity in his new beliefs.'

Apparently, COM is a legal organization and high Navy spokesmen avoid appearing disturbed over its existence. Asked if he was "concerned," Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Chief of Naval Operations, said: "There's always been dissent in the Navy, thank heavens." According to Kent, there are twelve chapters of COM, "with active groups aboard the aircraft carriers USS Hancock and USS Coral Sea." COM has kept itself independent of other anti-war groups, including organizations of enlisted men. Kent explained that while COM objects to present treatment of enlisted men, he believed that more could be accomplished by remaining unattached. "We've got to use the class distinction," he said, "to use the system against the Navy." He reports surprisingly friendly treatment from his fellow officers, even from those who disagree with him, but he has had anonymous threatening phone calls, although no physical attacks, on or off duty.

If what John R. Sheaffer says in the Nov. 7 *Saturday Review* can be relied upon, even bitter critics of the Army Corps of Engineers will soon have reason to grant that body of professional devastators some grudging praise. Mr. Sheaffer is an expert in natural resource management. In

collaboration with William J. Bauer, a Chicago engineer, he has worked out a way of disposing of urban wastes which will not only stop the pollution of national waterways but will replenish the soil of unused terrain. Through the Army Engineers and appropriations by Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel, this method is now to be applied. The first stage is planned for Muskegon County, Mich.:

> Bauer . . . proposed coupling of the sewage outlets of twelve great cities and townships into one great outlet pipe that swung away from Lake Michigan, Muskegon Lake, Mona Lake, and White Lake—traditional sinks for the wastes in these communities—and fifteen miles inland to virtually uninhabited sandy barrens of the eastern part of the country. There the pipe would empty into three aerated lagoons, each covering eight acres. These man-made basins, agitated continually by streams of air from mechanical mixers to minimize odor while bacterial colonies in the waste matter decomposed their host, would be big enough to hold the waste flow up to three days.

The holding of the flow gives time for new colonies of bacteria to grow, whenever they have been killed by toxic industrial spills. Then the waste is carried to storage lagoons where it can be held during the winter until the ground is soft enough to receive it as fertilizer. The plan includes rotary irrigation rigs "which would spray the liquid with its suspended solids over almost 6,000 acres of now unproductive but potentially valuable sandy soil." Numerous other bonus uses of the waste are described in this article. Mr. Sheaffer concludes:

> If we take the Muskegon irrigation tract as a model, simple mathematics tells us that a billion gallons of waste water per day (that is the flow rate of Chicago's sewage disposal system, the largest in the country) can be disposed of on 260,000 acres of land. A preliminary survey of the major metropolitan areas in the United States suggests that all of them could be served in this manner by using marginal lands equivalent to no more than 2 per cent of the acreage on which fifty-nine principal crops were harvested in 1968.

Mr. Sheaffer begins his discussion by citing the view that "the whole Great Lakes system is rapidly being brought to the end of its life," but says that the effects of the massive discharge of wastes can be stopped and the decline of the lake system reversed by using the sewage and factory effluents to fertilize barren land. His explanation of how this can be done—has already been done on an experimental scale—makes intensely interesting and heartening reading.