

## WORLD WITHOUT DRAMA

THERE are no heroes among things. Things have dimensions, surfaces, insides and outsides; they can be moved about, their color and form afford obvious attractions—and, of course, they can be used. But the life of a thing has no dramatic moments. There is a kind of drama or excitement which develops for the human beings who unravel the complications of vast natural arrangements of things, but once these are explained—reduced, that is, to predictable order—the drama comes to an end. No *necessary* forms of behavior can be dramatic; they may be in some sense impressive, but the impressiveness of predictable happenings wears off as they become familiar. They are only part of the "scenery" now.

So, in terms of human longing for the heroic, the creative, the original, science is the organization of our disillusionment, the display of the stable, no longer surprising behavior of *things*. Man, declared Erich Fromm a few years ago, is not a thing. What companionship, then, can he find in the world?

For some three hundred years, now, the expectation of new knowledge about man has been dependent upon the progressive investigation of the nature of the things in the world. When chemists disclosed important matters concerning the chemical constitution of things, it was not long before we began to have chemical theories of the origin of life, ours included. And when the biologists, with the aid of geologists, got to the point of formulating principles of organic evolution, a spate of parallel doctrines about the development and survival of the human species was the result. Our knowledge of man has had all its "breakthroughs" from elaborate studies of something else. Let an ape pound his chest in the jungle, and encyclopedia articles are prepared to explain the new light thrown on human psychology. If rabbits and wolves and elephants

reveal their hunting habits, a scientific foundation for nationalism may appear in the appropriate literature. Would we like to learn how to make peace? The pacific habits of certain "social" animals teach lessons we should ponder.

Well, all this information may be to some purpose. It is almost endless, but hardly instructive about the nature of man. It tells us little about what differentiates men from things and animals, but adds a great many facts to the store of what we feel obligated to teach to our children.

Yet the case for studying things in order to comprehend human nature is not without support. We are very much entangled with things. Genes are a kind of thing, and the outer environment, so plainly limiting to a large part of our lives, is made up of things of various sorts. The trouble is, we find nothing in the genes, and almost nothing in the environment, to illuminate what we most prize in human beings. The best of men show their metal by becoming anti-environmental forces. A recent paper by a humanist psychologist was devoted to the crucial importance of *transcending* the environment, of becoming independent of it. This is the unpredictable drama potential in all human life. We can hardly define ourselves as human beings by seeking our origins in what is to be overcome.

Maybe the world out there has more than a "thing" aspect, but you'd never suspect it from what can be learned from scientific studies. Three hundred years of science have stripped the universe of all transcendent attributes and made human beings into abstract, practically nonexistent spectators—until the recent existentialist revolt. And now we have stark affirmations of man's moral identity, but no history or science of moral man, and no schooling in truly human

development. From being scientifically defined "things" for several generations, we discover that we are in the last act of our drama and must suddenly behave like gods.

We have, in short, overwhelming moral reason but almost no cultural foundation for believing in ourselves. Our hearts fill with intense longing for heroic behavior, but our heads are loaded with pedestrian indoctrination about "conditioning." Then there are those grimly objective statistics. In the practice of the social sciences it is generally believed that an act is not really human unless a lot of people can be photographed while performing it. What a single man says is not important; only *vox pop* can gain a sociologist's ear. Only the patterns of mediocrity define significant human behavior. Release unto us Barabbas! There's a man we can understand.

The value of statistics is that you get rid of the guesswork. Science is prediction and heroes don't go around in packs. Statistics leave out the drama because the dramatic element in life is what hasn't happened yet. So we measure the measurable elements in the cultural environment—these, we say, go a long way toward determining mass behavior. We need, we say, to find out as much as we can about mass behavior. But that is not *all* that we need to know about ourselves. Knowledge of mass action is almost entirely about behavior we must learn to put an end to.

This, at any rate, is Sartre's view, which he expressed in his review of Henri Alleg's book, *The Question*, which tells how the author, an Algerian journalist, was tortured by the French. The French had their reasons, of course. They *had* to do it. They thought Alleg could give them information which would save French lives. And that, Sartre muses, is what the Nazis contended when, a few years earlier, they were torturing Frenchmen. They wanted to save German lives. They were only doing what the cultural environment demanded. Sartre wrote:

. . . the French have uncovered a terrible fact. If nothing protects a nation against itself, neither its

past, its integrity, nor its laws—if fifteen years are enough to change victims into executioners—it means that the occasion alone will decide. According to circumstances, anyone, anytime, will become either the victim or the executioner.

No wonder Sartre finds little or nothing to say about the value of "science" in his philosophical work. The heroism advocated by Sartre is in spite and defiance of the mechanistic world view. And there is no pantheistic cosmology to lighten his burdens.

Meanwhile the arts, which once surrounded mankind with wonderful admonitions and reminders of meaning, have exhausted themselves in the exploration of form. The evolution of modern art combines a gradual dissolution of human content with a growing awareness of the ephemeral character of form. As the physicists, in pursuit of the material "thing-in-itself," dissolved matter into a web of energies, the artist declared himself free of bondage to external appearances. The linkages of symbolism had been cut by great historical revolutions and the "round and soft forms of living bodies" that excited Renaissance painters gave way to the fascinations of painting itself. Only antiquarian playfulness or mockery could permit the use of extracts from the old symbolism. From the point of view of an organic world view, modern art has been coasting for generations on the affluence of technological success, animated by the stimuli of scientific discovery. Its preoccupation has been with the object, pursuing its essence until it became plain that, at least as "things," objects have no essence. In *Rococo to Cubism* (Random House, 1960), Wylie Sypher says:

Cubism exploited the rich ambiguity of the modern object exactly while science and the cinema were also discovering ambiguities in the modern view of things. The theory of relativity that evolves through F. H. Bradley, Whitehead, Einstein, and modern mathematics is only the scientific expression of "the new landscape" of the twentieth century, a landscape revealed for the first time in cubist painting and the cinema. . . . At its extreme purity—in Braque's painting—cubism is a study of the very

techniques of representation—painting about the methods of painting, a report on the reality of art. . . . The device of the collage is one of the guarantees of the integrity of cubist art, its refusal to accept subterfuge, its denial of the single identity of things.

To prove that art and life intersect, that thought enters things, that appearance and reality collide, or coincide, at the points we call objects, the cubist relied on certain technical devices: a breaking of contours, the *passage*, so that a form merges with the space about it or with other forms; planes or tones that bleed into other planes and tones; outlines that coincide with other outlines, then suddenly reappear in new relations; surfaces that simultaneously recede and advance in relation to other surfaces; parts of objects shifted away, displaced or changed in tone until forms disappear behind themselves. This deliberate "oscillation of appearances" gives cubist art its high "iridescence." However we describe it, cubist painting is a research into the emergent nature of reality, which is constantly transforming itself into multiple appearances, at once fact and fiction. Cubism is a moment of crisis in the arts when "description and structure conflict" in a world of plural vision and classic form. Above all, cubism refused any melodramatic stress, the literary subject, the "big" anecdote; it was an ingenious examination of reality in its many contingencies, an experimental painting with the hardihood of modern science and thought.

Well, we aren't obliged to take all this too seriously, except to notice that the fine arts are now in deep hypnosis by the fascinations of form, and, as Mr. Sypher points out, this art presents no drama in any high human sense. It deliberately avoids the human. Ortega wrote years ago in *The Dehumanization of Art*:

Far from going more or less clumsily toward reality, the artist is seen going against it. He is brazenly set on deforming reality, shattering its human aspect, dehumanizing it. With things represented on traditional paintings we could have imaginary intercourse. Many a young Englishman has fallen in love with Gioconda. With the objects of modern pictures no intercourse is possible. By divesting them of their aspect of "lived" reality the artist has blown up the bridges and burned the ships that could have taken us back to our daily world. He leaves us locked in an abstruse universe, surrounded by objects with which human dealings are inconceivable, and thus compels us to improvise other

forms of intercourse completely distinct from our ordinary ways with things. We must invent unheard-of gestures to fit those singular figures. This new way of life which presupposes the annulment of spontaneous life is precisely what we call understanding and enjoyment of art. Not that this life lacks sentiments and passions, but those sentiments and passions evidently belong to a flora other than that which covers the hills and dales of primary and human life. What those ultra-objects evoke in our inner artist are secondary passions, specifically aesthetic sentiments.

Such artists, you could say, are using the materials given them by their time. Their revolt against the past was a revolt against sentimentality and cliché, just as the revolt of the scientists had been against theological pseudo-science and stubborn denial of facts. But the preoccupation of both with the temporary magic of the object—its permutations, dynamics, and finally its disappearance into a haze of invisible, impersonal energies—has left us without any content for the meaning of human life. The theatre of objective events has itself dissolved into recondite mathematical theory, and physicists are beginning to wonder how much of the subtle structure they have found "out there" is the mirror-image of their own elaborate speculations.

What will it take to generate comprehensive conceptions of high meaning for human life? How could the idea of the hero be restored in an acceptable form? For the hero is both archetypal and future man. He has a thousand faces. In the past, the high religions have always formed their images of the hero by means of living connections with symbols of natural transcendence. Some great man strode through the world, leaving a track of portals to the higher life. The East has been the chief beneficiary; of such visitations, with memorials in art that remain unforgettable. The ancient world abounded in records of the Bodhisattvic promise to mankind. Speaking of the art of ancient India, W. Norman Brown has said:

Sculpture was not meant to be a reminder of a human being or of an apotheosis of man, but of

something abstract, spiritual in reality beyond apprehension of the senses, an ocular reference to universal knowledge that might somehow become comprehensible to humanity. It isn't that we have now only to exhume the ancient faiths that gave those art

It isn't that we have now only to exhume the ancient faiths that gave those art forms their enduring splendor and try to "believe in" them. We are obliged by some strange mutation of our own inner development to do better than adopt the psychological costumery of a nobler past. We have to assimilate our past, not copy it. There may also be a sense in which we have outgrown old-style heroes, those resplendent figures of martial valor and knightly derring-do. An image from the past is always in cipher, or the future would contain no mystery and the human drama be at an end. Yet a past that set down messages to the future may give indispensable instruction. A passage from a letter by Roderick Seidenberg to Lewis Mumford, which the latter published in *In the Name of Sanity*, tells of horizons lost and forgotten by modern man:

The gods and Pharaohs of Egypt are seated—great granite figures of power. There is in these postures an element of the ultimate, an expression of a transcendent attitude. But what, pray, is our posture upon having miraculously touched the innermost sources of nature's power? Our school children here in the backwoods of the village of Tinicum are taught in the daily drill to duck under their desks when they hear the siren blow. The citizenry have built themselves deep underground shelters where they are to cower while their civilization is blown to atoms. And those not fortunate enough to grovel in fear and trembling underground are taught to fall upon their faces in the gutters of their cities and await their doom. Prostrate, our heads deep in the mud, we face the future. Such is our posture.

It is time to study the best of men, instead of the mediocre many who make us legislate for the worst. It is time to learn our independence of things, instead of the statistical rules of our confinement by them. And if we cannot yet be great men or imagine modern heroes, it is at least possible to open our minds to such possibilities.

We cannot afford many more "lost generations," and our artists and writers are already too expert in the language of alienation and despair.

For relief from all this sodden resignation, we quote from Harold Goddard's Introduction to a volume of Emerson's Essays, intended to generate some awareness of what it might have been like to know Emerson personally:

"O Iole! how did you know that Hercules was a god! 'Because,' answered Iole, 'I was content the moment my eyes fell upon him.' "

That passage from Emerson's essay on "Character" seems to embody the experience that many men had on beholding Emerson himself. "It was with a feeling of pre-determined dislike," writes Crabbe Robinson, "that I had the curiosity to look at Emerson at Lord Northampton's a fortnight ago when in an instant all my dislike vanished. He has one of the most interesting countenances I ever beheld,—a combination of intelligence and sweetness that quite disarmed me." "He is a man *sui generis*," said Harriet Martineau, "that I don't wonder at his not being apprehended till he is seen. His influence is of an evasive sort. There is a vague nobleness and thorough sweetness about him which move people to their very depths without their being able to explain why." "The main thing about him," the elder Henry James declared, "was that he unconsciously brought you face to face with the infinite in humanity." "It would have been enough if we had said that something beautiful had passed that way," writes James Russell Lowell, attempting to convey the effect of one of Emerson's lectures. "That man," Carlyle said to Lord Houghton, "came to see me. I don't know what brought him, and we kept him one night and then he left us. I saw him go up the hill; I didn't go with him to see him descend. I preferred to watch him mount and vanish like an angel."

Emerson doubtless knew as much about "things" as the next man, but far more important was his conviction that they should not be permitted to ride human beings into the ground. We are hardly able to explain the occasional appearance of men who have so strong a sense of high calling—equal, indeed, to Promethean mission—yet the fact of their presence can hardly be denied. From the scientific point of view, they present us with the problem of the "small sample."

But so, in a time demanding courage and radical innovation, do most of the human excellences we long to see come into decisive play. Why, when we have no difficulty in recognizing that some men have special talents for manipulating whole populations, should we resist dramatic evidence that there are also men in whom great insight has a special flowering? What is Emerson's essay on Self-Reliance but a richly persuasive exposition of what the modern Existentialists are saying? As Peter Koestenbaum put it a few weeks ago:

Each one is *fully* responsible since it is a scientific fact of human existence that each one can influence the situation to an extraordinary degree. . . . Thus the [teacher] is totally responsible for the welfare of the child, but his responsibility extends also to teach the child that he is fully responsible for his life. . . . The statement "I am responsible for you" implies the statement "I am responsible for teaching you that you are responsible for yourself." This ostensibly paradoxical approach of relegating responsibility without any personal exoneration is called the sense of subjective responsibility. Responsibility has the same magical properties of knowledge and of wisdom. You do not reduce your share of it by giving all of it away to the world. In fact, you increase it.

What if these specifications of responsibility, which seem heroic indeed, are simply "normal" for a fully developed man? Surely Emerson qualifies as a "teacher" in the sense implied by Dr. Koestenbaum, since he was able to do what this teacher is supposed to do without making anyone feel small or inadequate. He generates an ennobling view of human life without preaching or moralizing. It is a use, you could say, of art in which the flow of ideas comes as the resonance of a state of being rather than a didactic exposition. What if a hero is a man who has found his natural home in that state of being? The possibility that there could be a science of such development, with appropriate dynamics and laws to be studied, may need only the concentrated sort of attention we have been giving to the dynamics and laws of "things," for it to appear, in L. L. Whyte's phrase, as "the next development in man."

## *REVIEW*

### TEACHER OF WESTERN MAN

REFERENCES to Platonic currents of thought and to a Platonic "revival" are made so frequently in these pages that some direct attention to this idea seems in order. A Platonist is a man who takes the abstracting and idealizing tendency of the human mind seriously, as a reaching after something substantial and real. To put the matter paradoxically, the Platonist is persuaded that unless a man attempts "the impossible," his failures will not be worth while. That Platonism involves imaginative conviction of this order is sufficient to explain why it has never swept the world as a popular religion. But that it also contains verities which popular religions suppress or leave out, in order to gain mass acceptance, might be a reason for the fact that Platonism finds new advocates in every historical crisis.

A revival of Platonism occurs when some man with a deep concern for the problems of his age finds help in Plato for understanding them. And he may also find help from his age in understanding Plato. Leonard Nelson, for example, a German philosopher who died in 1928, recognized in Hilbert's mathematical discoveries a vindication of Plato's claims for the Dialectic. (See Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, Dover.) Robert E. Cushman, an American theologian, saw in Plato a psychotherapist of greater wholeness and vision than present-day psychoanalysts, and he wrote *Therapeia* (Chapel Hill) to explore the healing potentialities of Plato's philosophy. A modern historian, Louis J. Halle, used (or perhaps reinvented, out of necessity) the Platonic theory of Ideal Forms as the ethical foundation for world peace (see his *Men and Nations*, Princeton University Press). And quite recently, an American philosopher of some eminence, John Herman Randall, attributed to Plato the animating principle of every flowering of Western civilization. He said in an article in the *American Scholar* for the summer of 1968:

Inevitably, it seems, the great outbursts of creative artistic energy in the Western cultural tradition, like the Renaissance, and the Romantic movement, have turned for their philosophic expression to some form of Platonism. Even when they have been great scientists, like Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Newton or Einstein, they have been great scientists because they possessed the artist's insight and imagination. Like Bertrand Russell in his Platonic periods, they have sought in science chiefly the beauty of the harmonious order of natural law not the sweat and dirt of the multitude of facts.

We have for review an essay by John Wilkinson, "Consulting the Renaissance," which appeared in the *Center Magazine* (of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions) for last July. For Mr. Wilkinson, the Renaissance is a major event in the history of Platonism. And Platonism—as a temper, more than it is a doctrine—is for him high, non-institutionalized, humanist inquiry. His essay deals with an aspect of the Renaissance that it is surprisingly difficult to find good material about—the Florentine Revival of Learning which occurred at the end of the fifteenth century and involved as its most notable figures Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino. History, one may say, does not "come alive" for the reader until it is put into a form which enables us to identify with the persons involved—until we begin to see how their deepest urgencies may also be our deepest urgencies. In this way history becomes a part of the present. The superficial differences of external change—or "progress"—are stripped away and the reader becomes able to *feel* with people of other times. Mr. Wilkinson's essay, being short, can hardly do this for the reader, but it strongly suggests that he has this kind of relationship with the historical material he is using.

Concerning the awakening of the European mind to the treasures of Greek thought, he writes:

The real influence of the classics on the thought of the Renaissance is a vexed question. I, for one, cannot imagine how admiration for Cicero or Virgil could produce much in the way of thought, even though their value as arbiters of style is unquestionable. I think, on balance, that the case for

the influence of Antiquity must rest on the incorporation of neo-Platonic, i.e., Greek, thought into the works of philosophers, scientists, and artists of the period. (In the case of Montaigne, sceptical and stoic influences are dominant, but these two were derived from Socrates through Plato and represent therefore, another kind of "new" Platonism.)

It may be useful to speculate on the question of how this incorporation of Platonic thought was achieved. My thesis is that the Academy, rather than the medieval university, was Academy of the Sages.

It is known that most of the Schools of Greece took their rise from the teachings of Socrates. The Platonic Academy itself of course had other academic antecedents, especially in the various schools of Sophists (some of whom, like Protagoras and Parmenides, must have been among the greatest philosophers and teachers who ever lived) and in the pan-Hellenic Academy of the Sages.

Although the Lyceum, the Garden, and the Porch had long and honorable histories, Plato's Academy seems to have wielded incomparably more influence on the ethical and intellectual life of Renaissance man than any other of the Greek Schools. It is even a tenable thesis that every religious renewal in Christianity, not to mention in Islam and Judaism, goes directly back to the neo-Platonic form of the Platonic Academy, taking mysticism as religion *par excellence*, as opposed to institutionalized ecclesiasticism, reformed or not. One of the reasons that the Platonic Academy has had such a long continuing influence is that it never died out, although after waves of increasing institutionalizing and bureaucratization for example in the form of universities, it time and again lost its identity and became an Establishment hireling.

One is nonetheless tempted to say that Plato knew how to put what he thought into terms which resist institutionalization, and that the revivals come when perceptive students rediscover the wonder of Plato himself. Mr. Wilkinson says:

What we call the Renaissance really took fire in the fifteenth-century Platonic Academy of Florence under the influence of the Byzantine Platonist George Gemisthos (called "Pletho"), who spent the last half of his life in the Peloponnesian Mistra. Hardly less important in Florence was the work of Cardinal Cusanus, who studied Platonic philosophy in Constantinople just before it fell to the Turks. . . .

Although Gemisthos Pletho, like Machiavelli, probably desired to get rid of Christianity completely and to "act as a midwife" for the rebirth of a polytheistic and classical Greek culture, most of the other leading members of the Florentine Academy sought to renew Christianity by assimilating it to the philosophy of Plato. In general, the Renaissance was hostile to the Church, but not to Christianity. Erasmus, the leading figure of the Renaissance of Northern Europe, fell out both with Luther (over the doctrine of free will) and with Rome. He refused a cardinal's hat and told Thomas More flatly that he was wrong in dying for a papacy that was a "festering sore." Erasmus wished to return to the Gospel message of simplicity and love and had a violent antipathy to "institutions" which, in his words, "could have no heart."

The Oxford Reformers, in particular John Colet, drank at Florentine Neoplatonic springs. Colet preferred Neoplatonic "emanationism" to scholastic philosophy and regard Genesis as "poetry."

Pico and Ficino, together with Cusanus, are called "the philosophical fathers of Renaissance humanism":

Ficino's translation of the whole body of Plato's works was an event of the greatest significance for that course of mathematical and dialectical thought which has remained dominant in the West down to the present. Pico's conviction that man, through his own free choice, determines his own nature is not only modern but super-modern. Such an anthropology freed him, and should free us, from any version of the *jus naturale* (itself derived through the Stoics from Platonism) that makes this "law" something immutable, graven in the nature of things, and in respect to which we must be more or less passive.

An article in the current (Winter 1968-69) *American Scholar* by David Michael Levin, "On Levi-Strauss and Existentialism," is a striking illustration of the fact that the issues of Platonism do not die out.

From philosophy Mr. Wilkinson passes to science, showing the line of Platonic influence on Galileo and Leibniz. Meanwhile, the Florentine Academy gave birth to others:

The three centuries immediately following the founding of the Florentine Academy witnessed the founding of others more or less on the Florentine model, in nearly every European country. It is astonishing how similar these seedbeds of the Enlightenment were to the original Academy of Plato, although it cannot be denied that, as in all genealogies, the direct influence of the founder was more and more diluted, surviving principally in the conception of mathematical physics as the vehicle of natural philosophy (*not* in the "value-free" version of the science of the present).

Mr. Wilkinson's article continues, giving an account of the humane spirit, the disciplined but open minds of Platonic thinkers, and their refusal to give up their tolerance of differences, to ignore contradictions, or to adopt any simplifying uniformity of belief which would close out other directions of inquiry. The article would be a good one to take as the introductory basis for a fresh exploration, in history, of the seminal conceptions of Western man.



## *COMMENTARY*

### EMERSON ON PLATO

EMERSON, who participated in a Platonic revival not mentioned in this week's Review, has an essay in which he shows, without much exploration of "doctrine," why the Greek thinker has been the parent of so much fruitful thought. Plato combines discipline with ardor. He has an instinct for the reality of both the measurable and the immeasurable. The best man, for Plato, is not the reciter of finalities but the pursuer of growth. As Emerson says:

Plato apprehended the cardinal facts. He could prostrate himself on the earth, and cover his eyes, whilst he adored that which cannot be numbered, or gauged, or known, or named: that of which everything can be affirmed or denied: that "which is entity and nonentity." He called it super-essential. He even stood ready, as in the Parmenides, to demonstrate that it was so,—that this Being exceeded the limits of intellect. No man ever more fully acknowledged the Ineffable. Having paid his homage, as for the human race, to the Illimitable, he then stood erect, and for the human race affirmed, "And yet things are knowable!"—that is, the Asia in his mind was first heartily honored,—the ocean of love and power, before form before will, before knowledge, the Same, the Good, the One; and now, refreshed and empowered by this worship, the instinct of Europe, namely culture, returns; and he cries, Yet things are knowable! They are knowable, because, being from one, things correspond. There is a scale: and the correspondence of heaven to earth, of matter to mind, of the part to the whole, is our guide. As there is a science of stars, called astronomy; a science of quantities, called mathematics; a science of qualities, called chemistry; so there is a science of sciences,—I call it Dialectic,—which is the Intellect discriminating the false from the true. It rests on observation of identity and diversity; for, to judge, is to unite to an object the notion which belongs to it. The sciences, even the best,—mathematics, and astronomy,—are like sportsmen, who seize whatever prey offers, even without being able to make any use of it. Dialectic must teach the use of them. "This is of that rank that no intellectual man will enter on any study for its own sake, but only with a view to advance himself in that one sole science which embraces all."

If Plato confined the mind with intellectual rigidities, if he generated bias in his readers or trained them in the conceits of unearned certainties, one could soon have too much of him. But these are not offenses of Plato. Any certainty a Platonist reaches must be forged by himself. Hence the dissatisfaction of the reader who looks in Plato for relief from doubt and the pain of personal decision. What did he say about immortality? One must consult the myths, or take comfort from Socrates' indifference to death in the *Phaedo*. Plato instructs in a sense of proportion while leading to a wider terrain. You can call him a Greek, but even this might be deceptive:

An Englishman reads and says, "how English!" a German,—"how Teutonic!" an Italian,—"How Roman and how Greek!" As they say that Helen of Argos, had that universal beauty that every body felt related to her, so Plato seems, to a reader in New England, an American genius. His broad humanity transcends all sectional lines. . . .

A great common sense is his warrant and qualification to be the world's interpreter. He has reason, as all the philosophic and poetic class have: but he has, also, what they have not,—this strong solving sense to reconcile his poetry with the appearances of the world. . . . He never writes in ecstasy, or catches us up into poetic raptures.

Well, even enthusiasm for Plato must have an end. It would be better, perhaps, to celebrate his excellences without naming him, since too much praise will often polarize the reader in another direction. Yet this has never happened to anyone who lent his mind for a time to Plato.

A certain shyness afflicts the contemporary spirit in respect to outspoken idealism. We shall probably recover from this condition before many years have passed. The sophistication of avoiding inquiry or comment regarding great philosophical questions depends upon the sort of affluent complacency that is not likely to last much longer in the modern world. Another Platonic revival, deepened by currents from the still more ancient Asian philosophies—which also nourished Plato—could give the inner balance crucial to an age threatened by both material and psychological instability.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves A DIET OF WONDER

WHEN, as often happens, it is not possible to explain something wonderful, the next best thing may be to savor and cherish it. This is about all we can do with the subject offered in a book for children and parents by Rachel Carson—*The Sense of Wonder* (Harper & Row), which is beautifully illustrated by photographs, some in color, by Charles Pratt and others.

The sense of wonder is a human capacity that is an end in itself. It may become a means, but it ought not to be exploited as a means. Poets and lovers of nature are abundantly endowed with a sense of wonder. We honor the ancient Greeks for their pioneering achievements in civilization, yet behind all their greatness was this quality or spirit which defies explanation and escapes measurement. William Heidel wrote in *The Heroic Age of Science*:

The Greek seems to have felt, as did Wordsworth, that "the world is too much with us"; its very jostlings gave him a sense of being an alien until he could, as it were, keep it at arm's length long enough to glimpse its meaning. Its significance and relations fascinated him—if he could discover these, the brute facts interested him little. That many of his guesses went wide of the mark, means only that he was human; that he returned again and again to the attack, and never gave up the attempt to read the hidden meaning of the world by the light of his limited experience, proves that he possessed the spirit of the scientist and the philosopher. Once one realizes this irrepressible urge of the ancient Greek, his very enterprise acquires an interest for the thoughtful student, who values the idea more highly than the material in which it may chance to be embodied. Where the pioneers with the light heart of youth and inexperience thought to dear at a leap abysses which the ages have not sufficed to bridge, one must have grown old indeed if one fails to admire their adventurous spirit. May it not be in that spirit, informing everything they attempted, there is to be found the richest legacy which a highly endowed race has bequeathed to the modern world?

The sense of wonder is not, of course, unique to the ancient Greeks. We are all born with it, and John Holt, in *How Children Learn*, makes its not yet blighted presence in the young the foundation of his thinking about education. Rachel Carson often protested its neglect and suppression through the endless acquisitive pursuits of civilization. Her *Sense of Wonder* was written to show what people can do for one another to arouse and sustain this delight in being in the world. As she says: "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder . . . he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."

The book begins with description of a "small tract of woodland" including a portion of the Maine shoreline where Miss Carson spent her summers. She tells how, when her nephew Roger was only twenty months old, she wrapped him in a blanket and carried him down to the beach "in the rainy darkness":

Out there, just at the edge of where-we-couldn't-see, big waves were thundering in, dimly seen white shapes that boomed and shouted and threw great handfuls of froth at us. Together we laughed for pure joy—he a baby meeting for the first time the wild tumult of Oceanus, I with the salt of half a lifetime of sea love in me. But I think we felt the same spine-tingling response to the vast, roaring ocean and the wild night around us.

Summer after summer, Roger came to Maine, not for "instruction," but simply for this kind of living in the world. Yet there was awareness of what was happening for him, and some attention given to letting it happen:

We have let Roger share our enjoyment of things people ordinarily deny children because they are inconvenient, interfering with bedtime, or involving wet clothing that has to be changed or mud that has to be cleaned off the rug. We have let him join us in the dark living room before the big picture window to watch the full moon riding lower and lower toward the far shore of the bay, setting all the water ablaze with silver flames and finding a thousand diamonds in the rocks on the shore as the light strikes the flakes of mica embedded in them. I

think we have felt that the memory of such a scene, photographed year after year by his child's mind, would mean more to him in manhood than the sleep he was losing. He told me it would, in his own way, when we had a full moon the night after his arrival last summer. He sat quietly on my lap for some time, watching the moon and the water and all the night sky, and then he whispered, "I'm glad we came."

Children learn far more when learning is left to itself—when it comes not as an acquisitive process but in the service of another kind of "knowing":

When Roger has visited me in Maine and we have walked in these woods I have made no conscious effort to name plants or animals nor to explain to him, but have just expressed my own pleasure in what we see, calling his attention to this or that but only as I would share discoveries with an older person. Later I have been amazed at the way names stick in his mind, for when I show color slides of my woods plants it is Roger who can identify them. "Oh, that's what Rachel likes—that's bunchberry!" Or, "That's Jumer [juniper] but you can't eat those green berries—they are for the squirrels." I am sure no amount of drill would have implanted the names so firmly as just going through the woods in the spirit of two friends on an expedition of exciting discovery.

It would be awful to call this a "curriculum" for bringing up a child, and one wonders if the time will ever come when education will be as natural and effortless for all children as these experiences were for Roger. It seems as though the kind of knowledge that can be "added" to people, as information, was quickly acquired by Roger mainly because nobody cared much whether he got it or not. Miss Carson says:

I think the value of the game of identification depends on how you play it. If it becomes an end in itself I count it of little use. It is possible to compile extensive lists of creatures seen and identified without ever having caught a breathtaking glimpse of the wonder of life. If a child asked me a question that suggested even a faint awareness of the mystery behind the arrival of a migrant sandpiper on the beach of an August morning, I would be far more pleased than by the mere fact that he knew it was a sandpiper and not a plover.

I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so

important to *know* as to *feel*. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions have been aroused—a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and unknown, a feeling of sympathy pity, admiration or love—then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning. It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.

This attitude toward human growth is shared by every observant teacher, from Rousseau to John Holt. A full generation of young nurtured on a diet of wonder might transform the world.

## *FRONTIERS* Concerning "The People"

AN unresolved paradox lies in the fact that "the people" to whom our hearts go out when they are sung about by Pete Seeger, are the same people who remain passive witnesses of impersonal cruelties, who sometimes give prejudice the force of natural law, and who regard deviants from familiar custom as dangerous persons who probably deserve whatever happens to them.

This is not altogether true, of course. The folk mystique abstracts certain constant human qualities from the lives of the common people and the poor—their patience in adversity, their willingness to share, their simple compassionate acts, their romantic longings, their cheerful endurance of endless drudgery—and makes a rich theme of these evidences of spontaneous goodness in mankind. The magic of folk expression comes from seeing people in a particular way—usually against a pastoral background—and in relationships where they struggle against the vaguely identified "badness" in the world. It is a partial view, but there is deep truth in it, and there are times when there seems little else to maintain the faith of human beings in one another.

Yet to raise man's love for man above the level of the powerless fraternity of "little people," the insight of a Blake and the penetration and resolve of a Tolstoy are needed. Without this sort of two-level understanding we regularly fall prey to the siren voices of ideologists who claim to have figured out how to structure a "folk" society without suppressing the wonderful folk qualities everyone loves. They promise that "on-the-barricades" fellowship will survive the revolutionary establishment—which amounts to claiming that it will not *be* an establishment. In current political revolutionary thinking, for instance, the guerilla fighter is a folk hero. He is an unregimented, freelance warrior who lives on the land like Robin Hood. None of the temptations of organization wither his vision of a society founded on comradeship. When the revolution is successful, he looks for less confining frontiers of action. He has the integrity of a military Peter Pan.

Celebrating the wonder of folk qualities in story and song can have a healing and regenerating effect, but the warm, generous feelings that result need the balance one of the songs in the current Beatle album suggests—the rejection of violence as a means to human ends.

In the past, when the appeal of "folk" was siphoned into nationalistic movements, "the people" were armed against themselves. For there is another set of abstractions that can be: applied to populations in society, leading to a different although equally faithful picture of human behavior. It is the mode of life which helps to account for the powerlessness that is the melancholy background of the "folk" situation. In *Man and People* (Norton paperback), Ortega examines the involuntary aspect of much of what "people" do:

Now what is usual, what is customary, we do because it "is done." But who does what "is done"? Why, *people*. Very well—but, who is "people"? Why, *everybody*, *nobody* in particular. And this leads us to the observation that an immense part of our lives is made up of things that we do, not because we want to, not out of our own inspiration or on our own account, but simply because "*people*" do them; . . . so now *people* force us into human actions that proceed from them and not from us.

But this is not all. In conducting our lives, we orient ourselves by our thoughts, by what we think things are. But if we draw up the balance sheet of these thoughts, ideas, or opinions by which and from which we live, we find to our surprise that many of them—perhaps most of them—we have never thought on our own account, with full and trustworthy evidence of their truth; we think them because we have heard them and we say them because they "are said." . . .

Well then, who says what "is said"? Obviously, each one of us; but . . . we say it not on our account but on account of this unseizable, indeterminate, and irresponsible subject, *people*, *society*, the *collectivity*. In the measure to which I think and speak not from my own individual conviction, but simply repeating what "is said" and "is thought," my life ceases to be mine, I cease to be the supremely individual person that I am and I act on society's account—I am a social automaton, I am *socialized*.

In what sense, Ortega asks, is this collective life *human* life? Now comes the historical analysis:

Since the end of the eighteenth century, it has been arbitrarily and mystically supposed that there is a social spirit of consciousness, a *collective* soul, which the German romanticists, for example, called *Volksgeist*, or "national spirit." . . . But . . . there is no such *collective soul*, if by *soul* is meant—and here it can mean nothing else—*something* that is capable of being the responsible subject of its acts, *something* that does what it does because what it does has a clear meaning for it. But then will the characteristic of *people*, of *society*, of the *collectivity* be precisely that they are soulless?

The collective soul, *Volksgeist* or "national spirit," social consciousness, has had the loftiest and most marvelous qualities attributed to it, sometimes even divine qualities. For Durkheim, society is veritably God. In the Catholic De Bonald (the actual inventor of collectivistic thought), in the Protestant Hegel, in the materialist Karl Marx, this collective soul appears as something infinitely above, infinitely more human than man. For example, it is wiser. And here our analysis with no special effort or premeditation, with no formal precedents (at least so far as I am aware) among philosophers drops into our hands something disquieting and even terrible—namely, that the *collectivity* is indeed something human but is the human without man, the human without spirit, the human without soul, the human dehumanized. . . . A very strange reality, this which now rises before us! It looks as if it were something human, but dehumanized, mechanized materialized!

How, exactly, do things go wrong? By what means do ideas lovingly derived from the "folk," then extrapolated into ideological systems, turn into forces of dehumanization?

In the last chapter of *Man and People* Ortega returns to the way in which "public opinion" operates in a population. It is made up of the ideas which no one feels a need to question:

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 a 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 they do not need support and

backing from particular individuals or 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 experience 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 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 pressure on all individuals, their soulless coercion.

What Ortega is saying is that the abstract truth or magnificence of an idea cannot be taken as a measure of its social utility. If the idea is not internalized in terms of *meaning* by the people, if it is not "clearly thought out on sound evidence," it cannot operate in their lives as either good or true. Its abstract appeal will not convey meaning, but only pressure.

Study of the effects of "binding observance" on human societies is just about all there is to the content of sociology, in Ortega's view. It is very like Socrates' "double ignorance," against which the scalpel of the dialectic was directed. Socratic dialogue is chiefly a process of liberation of mind, more uninstruction than instruction, at least at first. For a society of "people," while filled with the wonder of human qualities, also displays all the ugly symptoms of what Plato called "the involuntary lie in the soul"—the pride taken in popular forms of self-deception.