

## THE CONVENTION OF KNOWLEDGE

AS any student of ancient philosophical cosmologies knows, there was once a time when men of learning were wholly convinced that the constitution of the world is finally psychological—that all attempts to find "reality" must lead in the end to awareness of ascending states of consciousness, and that inquiry is exhausted only by entry into that state which is no state, where subject and object dissolve into one.

The assignment of "reality" to objects of external perception—with multiplying consequences in theories of knowledge, definitions of certainty, ideas of progress, morality, and meaning—was held by these ancient cosmologists to be the fundamental cause of the ignorance afflicting mankind. The ignorance was to be overcome, they maintained, only by the slow development of self-knowledge. According to this view, the first step in self-discovery lies in becoming aware of the contribution of the subject to the apparent reality of the object. That all that we see and know, or believe that we see and know, has only a *relative* reality, is the fundamental theme of the Buddhist scripture, the *Diamond Sutra*, which seems to declare the relativity of even the truth by which a man overcomes the illusions of the senses, since, for the man no longer involved in such illusions, the truth about them has lost its relevance. Relative reality is no more than temporal relevance. What remains, then, as the substratum of reality in a universe so stripped of misleading appearances, to the point where it cannot be termed "universe" any longer? Nothing remains, in fact, but the living compassion of men free from illusion for those who are still unfree.

What, we are bound to ask, can be the relation, if any, of this ancient epistemological sophistication to the urgent but ill-defined issues of Western civilization, today? How, in other words, could there possibly be a bridge across the wide abyss which separates a totally "religious" meaning of life, as elaborated by these philosophers, from the Enlightenment conception of human existence—the

idea of making fine and wonderful things out of the raw materials nature affords, and of providing increasing happiness and the excellences of existence for all?

While the "never the twain shall meet" view of East and West could be supported with various arguments, the fact is that an entire generation in the West has suddenly emancipated itself from the assumptions of Western ideas about "knowledge," filling the resulting vacuum with a rather giddy collection of "Eastern" notions, and the young have accomplished this with no more forethought or deliberation than was involved in letting their hair grow. If intellectual "heritages" can be so easily abandoned—as though they were mere fashions—then the cultural tradition itself may need critical examination even more than the generation which disdains to accept it. Fortunately, this criticism is already proceeding, with growing intensity, and needs no particular encouragement.

What, then, are the assumptions involved in the Eastern tradition? We have two quotations for help in answering this question. One is an extract from the *Diamond Sutra*, near the beginning, giving the counsel that Sakyamuni Buddha will repeat throughout the dialogue (taken from the translation by William Gemmell, published by Kegan Paul in 1912):

Every species of life, whether hatched in the egg, formed in the womb, evolved from spawn, produced by metamorphosis, with or without form or intelligence, possessing or devoid of natural instinct—from these changeful conditions of being I command you to seek deliverance in the transcendental concept of Nirvana. Thus you shall obtain deliverance from the idea of an immeasurable, innumerable, and illimitable world of sentient life; but in reality there is no idea of a world of sentient life from which to obtain deliverance. And why? Because, in the mind of an enlightened disciple, there have ceased to exist such arbitrary ideas of phenomena as an entity, a being, a living being, or a personality.

This seems virtually "nihilism" for the young-man-in-search-of-his-fortune, and also from the familiar "good society" point of view. It invites the disciple to turn away from the world—the world where so much work remains to be done—and not only the world, but also from serious, scientific *thinking* about it. So, even apart from the abandonment of practical social ideals—conceptions of universal material progress, outfitting everybody for living the good life, and wiping out disease and cancelling poverty by means of the genius of scientific research and its medical and technological applications—the very idea of *rigor* in knowledge, of discipline in discovery, seems to fly out the window.

Well, this comment may have some truth in it—even though it ignores the fact that the Buddha didn't "turn away" from the world—but it ought to be supplemented by noting that *discipline* is not absent from Sakyamuni's injunctions. Discipline is a central part of his teaching, but it applies to the life of the individual and to the control and use of his mind, not to a collection of determinations concerning the laws of external nature. So, the sense of reductive unworldliness, of practical indifferentism, can be justified only if this aspect of Buddha's religious psychology is ignored. And ignored it has been, by some of the wildly joyful exponents of "Eastern" teachings in the West. Directly questioned concerning the ascetic principle of Buddha's teaching, Allen Ginsberg turns away, preferring the indiscriminate options of the hedonistic civilization he otherwise castigated so bitterly in *Howl*. It almost seems that, up to now, whatever ideas we borrow from other cultures, they cannot really be absorbed into the mainstream of belief until they have been Americanized—made to conform to the here-and-now, instant enjoyments of the world's most Prodigal Sons. By this means, high philosophy becomes exotic verbosity, obtaining pseudo-dimensions from a merely chemical inversion of nirvanic bliss.

There is also the question of what *good* there can be for the "common people" in renouncing worldly reality. Most of us, after all, are by no means ready to "seek Nirvana," even supposing that this doctrine about illusion is one that we must all embrace, sooner or later. But this question has

mainly an isolating, intellectual origin, bringing the need for our second quotation, which is from G. Lowes Dickinson's small volume, *Appearances* (published by Doubleday in 1914). In the chapter which tells about his visit to the temple at Borobudur, in Java, Dickinson describes the sculptures representing the story of Sakyamuni's life:

We see the new-born child with his feet on lotuses. We see the fatal encounter with poverty, sickness, and death. We see the renunciation, the sojourn in the wilderness, the attainment under the bo-tree, the preaching of the Truth. And all this sculptured gospel seems to bring home to one, better than the volumes of the learned, what Buddhism really meant to the masses of its followers. It meant, surely, not the denial of soul or of God, but that warm impulse of pity and love that beats still in these tender and human pictures. It meant not the hope or desire for extinction, but the charming dream of thousands of lives, past and to come, in many forms, many conditions, many diverse fates. The pessimism of the master is as little likely as his high philosophy to have reached the mind or heart of the people. The whole history of Buddhism, indeed, shows that it did not, and does not. What touched them in him was the saint and the lover of animals and men. And this love it was that flowed in streams all over the world leaving wherever it passed, in literature and art, in pictures of flowers or mountains, in fables and poems and tales, the trace of its warm and humanising flood.

It should be added here that for the Buddha, Nirvana was not "extinction," nor did it imply "pessimism"; liberation from the bonds of sense was a sad fate only for those who loved their bonds; but this raises other difficulties. We of the West don't want any "double doctrines." We want one truth for all—the same gospel for the masses as for the élite. In fact, we claim to want to abolish all élites. The first thing to do in behalf of general liberation, according to the revolutionary tradition of Western history, is to eliminate the élite. The French did it in '93, and the Russians did it over a long period in the twentieth century, wiping out not just "aristocrats" but also cultured intellectuals who were sympathetic to the revolution. In America we call them "eggheads" and ignore or make fun of them. Americans have this thing about "equality" we are bound to enforce in both education and politics, even if, in time, it reduces all ideas about knowledge to

conform to the claims of the "naïve empiricists" and delivers government into the hands of automatons that are hardly men, but rather carefully constructed images of "leaders," who, by their continual echo of commonplaces, demonstrate their identity with the common people.

So, by this and other processes of easy self-deception, we have gradually lost the vision in the eighteenth-century idea of the equality of all men. By denying the differences among men in the expression of their potentialities, we have driven distinction and excellence underground, and condemned to corruption the hierarchical structures through which all social wholes maintain life and continuity. These structures still exist, but are now largely in the control of the manipulators, the Machiavellians. We know who these people are. Exposing them is the favorite occupation of twentieth-century muckrakers. There are plenty of books and articles about the military-industrial élite, about those who control the mass media, about the new managerial class, about tax-law experts, about the image-makers and taste-makers, about the vote-getting techniques of the new, scientific politicians, about adulterators and irresponsibles among the manufacturers of foods and drugs, about demagogues who thrive on the sale of conspiratorial and devil theories of history, and, in general, about men who depend for their power and wealth on the appetites and ignorance of others. Yes, we know who they are, but we don't know what to do about them. Neither, obviously, do the "tough" revolutionary thinkers of our time know what to do about them, since they propose only theories and programs for obtaining equal or greater power over the people, in apparently total disregard of the recent lessons of history—that it is by seeking power that good men turn into tyrannical rulers, thus losing their goodness and eventually becoming the enemies of the masses they originally set out to help.

This futile argument about "power" will doubtless go on for a long, long time, even though the intelligent and honest advocates of getting power are now obliged to qualify their claims more and more—either that, or give up their honesty. Take for example Sartre's support of political action:

Given that men are free, and that tomorrow they will freely decide what man will be, I can not be sure that, after my death, fellow fighters will carry on my work to bring it to its maximum perfection. Tomorrow, after my death, some men may decide to set up fascism, and others may be cowardly and muddled enough to let them do it. . . . Does that mean that I should abandon myself to quietism? No. . . . For example, suppose I ask myself, "Will socialization, as such ever come about?" I know nothing about it. All I know is that I'm going to do everything in my power to bring it about. Beyond that, I can't count on anything. . . .

This is Sartre's tough-minded, existential honesty, and we must admire him for it. But he won't win any elections with it. His skepticism will have to be kept a dark secret if he hopes to help some revolutionary group to gain power. It is true that on a few occasions men rise to positions of "authority" by other than conventional political means, but then what authority they have rests on moral grounds—on the refusal to coerce rather than the proclaimed determination to do so for the general good. A good teacher has authority—that is, people listen to what he has to say—not because he has said that he will compel people to behave in a certain manner, but because they honor his wisdom. But wisdom is almost never successful in open competition with political methods on the issues of power. Only when the popular expectation of good from power is finally exhausted will there be some hope for the exercise of moral authority in public affairs.

The present policy—the conduct of the Vietnam war is a good illustration—is to use power to obtain our ends and to allow only "technical" criticism of failure. Call back Alcibiades, we say; or, give the Republicans a chance. Meanwhile, the price to be paid for this unimaginative course of waiting—of insisting on *final proof* that power does not pay—cannot now be estimated and put into terms that are persuasive to people who still believe more in power than anything else. So other lines of investigation may prove more fruitful.

It is a curious development of modern physics—and more lately, of modern psychology—that ancient philosophical conceptions of knowledge and of

cosmology seem to be emerging from the deliberations of eminent physical scientists. For example, in his third book, *Space, Time and Gravitation*, published by the Cambridge University Press in 1920, Arthur S. Eddington stated a view of the nature of the universe—of the universe, that is, as we know it—which has been gaining acceptance in recent years. In the last chapter of this book, he says:

The theory of relativity has passed into review the whole subject-matter of physics. It has unified the great laws, which by the precision of their formulation and the exactness of their application have won the proud place in human knowledge which physical science holds today. And yet, in regard to the nature of things, this knowledge is only an empty shell—a form of symbols. It is knowledge of structural form, and not knowledge of content. All through the physical world runs that unknown content, which must surely be the stuff of our consciousness. Here is a hint of aspects deep within the world of physics, and unattainable by the method of physics. And, moreover, we have found that where science has progressed the farthest, the mind has but regained from nature that which the mind has put into nature.

We have found a strange footprint on the shores of the unknown. We have devised profound theories, one after the other, to account for its origin. At last, we have succeeded in reconstructing the creature that made the footprint. And lo! it is our own.

In another passage, Eddington makes his account of the new scientific epistemology more precise:

. . . We have a world of point-events with their primary interval-relations. Out of these an unlimited number of more complicated relations and qualities can be built up mathematically, describing various features of the state of the world. These exist in nature in the same sense as an unlimited number of walks exist on an open moor. But the existence is, as it were, latent unless someone gives a significance to the walk by following it; and in the same way the existence of any one of these qualities of the world only acquires significance above its fellows, if a mind singles it out for recognition.

It seems likely that no matter in what direction we look—or "take a walk"—we shall find the same persuasive symmetry, be able to apply similarly elegant equations, and even, perhaps, gain similar

access to power. If this should be the case, then the external universe, however it turns out, can be recognized as in large part our own creation, the substratum of which is indeed "the stuff of our consciousness," as Eddington said some fifty years ago, or as the Buddha declared some 2500 years ago. To show the pervasiveness of this conception in modern scientific thought, the ruminations of a leading investigator of perceptual psychology may be quoted. The following is from *The Morning Notes of Adelbert Ames, Jr.* (edited by Hadley Cantril, Rutgers University Press, 1960):

Perhaps as far as we can go at present in answering the question "What is the inherent nature of environmental phenomena?" is to say "God knows." Certainly the findings of modern physics not only show that the answer is not as simple as it used to be thought, but that the more that is discovered, the less likelihood there is of finding the answer.

In connection with the methodology of modern physics the conclusion of these inquiries, that there are no aspects of perceptual awareness that are not significances contributed by the observer, is of interest. In the last analysis all scientific findings are based on observations, i.e., perceptions, so that they cannot avoid containing at least some aspect of human significance.

A noted modern physicist (Bridgman) has said in substance: "The shadow of the investigator is discerned in the most abstract scientific findings." An understanding of the ultimate intrinsic nature of environmental phenomena does not appear to be a necessary prerequisite for at least great advances in man's understanding of the nature of his perceptions and prehension of sequential events and of his behavior. . . .

What all this means, for the man in the street, would seem to be that whatever is scientifically said or learned about the world "out there" will eventually be reduced to either merely practical considerations (getting enough to eat, shelter, clothing, etc.) or to some kind of reflection of ourselves. Knowledge of "the world" itself does not result, but only seems to. Now this, if compared with the familiar claims for modern progress in science, becomes an unsettling and shaking proposition. For the prospect, when logically developed, is no more than the promise of an endless succession of new *techniques*.

So, from the viewpoint of ancient psychology, the entirety of modern scientific achievement would be regarded as a species of "magic," the manipulation of forces and powers for ends which may be, and often are, far afield from authentic human concerns and a philosophic conception of truth. Actually, the humanist critics of scientism have been saying exactly this ever since the days of Schiller and Carlyle, and it now appears on the testimony of at least *some* leading physicists and *some* leading psychologists, that the humanist critics have been right.

What will happen when this judgment or conclusion has been spread around? What will the believers in modern progress and the pursuit of power (power equals truth, truth power, and that is all ye need to know) do for a faith to live by when the linchpin of the World Machine is generally known to have been pulled and cannot be put back, and that the wheels of the modern car of Juggernaut may soon roll off in every direction? This is, of course, the threat of a psychological failure, not a physical one; all the little machines will still run, the black boxes will still work, and the computers will still give their statistically infallible instructions. Only the fact that there is no truth or human value at the center of things will have become public.

Should this diagnosis—or prognosis—be in any way correct, it is evident that we dare not wait until the last hour of the failure of public faith. Fortunately, there is evidence that some men are already asking themselves about the meaning and the discipline of self-knowledge, and are recognizing that neither this discipline nor any other can have an enduring practice save upon the ethical ground of understanding and compassion for one's fellow men.

## *REVIEW*

### DESCRIPTION OF THE MAZE

INSPECTION of *Needles, Burrs, and Bibliographies* (published by Pennsylvania State University), providing extensive resources for study of the interrelations of technological change, human values, and the humanities, is bound to impress the reader by the immensity of the task accomplished. Collected in one place are both listings of and sometimes valuable quotations from many hundreds of recent works on the multiplying problems and dilemmas of the technological society. If you want to know what almost any thoughtful critic has said on this broad subject, you can probably find it, or a clue to it, in this compilation. The general editor, Maxwell H. Goldberg, conceived the work in 1962, in connection with studies of the impact of organizational and institutional bigness on the human values of the individual, carried on at the Center for Continuing Liberal Education at Pennsylvania State University. The dimensions of the disturbance and the complexity of the reaction felt by those whose primary allegiance is to humanistic values can hardly be measured, since all the factors keep on proliferating. Discussion of the resulting problems, as Mr. Goldberg says, has proceeded "at an exponentially accelerating rate," and many new writings "have contributed to a veritable Noah's flood." In this volume, Mr. Goldberg and his associates have given at least some order and sequence to the major currents in a suddenly rising tide.

Are there, one wonders, any historical parallels to this sort of sweeping critical activity? Parallels to the present do not come easily to captives of the conceit that modern civilization is *unique*. But if the modern age be regarded only as an ideological phenomenon—as an expression of contemporary ideas concerning "reality" and the locus of power—then there are distinct correspondences between the questioning of the present and the sort of inquiry which pervaded Europe during the Enlightenment. The men of the

Enlightenment challenged the fixed certainties of the medieval world-view. What need have we of God, cried Lamettrie, when Nature herself displays such wondrous potentialities?

But, it will be said, there is no such unifying and uplifting enthusiasm in present-day criticisms of technological oppression. This is indeed where the parallel breaks down. We have only a terrible sense of confinement, of having been cornered and regimented by systems of our own making; we wander in the twilight of a man-made maze, but lack an Ariadne's thread to lead us to freedom. In a quotation cited in this volume, Loren Eiseley puts the sense of the situation:

Today's secular disruption between the creative aspect of art and that of science is a barbarism that would have brought lifted eyebrows in a Cro-Magnon cave. It is a product of high technical specialization, the deliberate blunting of wonder and the equally deliberate suppression of a phase of our humanity in the name of an authoritarian institution: science, which has taken on, in our time, curious puritanical overtones.

We have, in short, the same deep feelings of dissatisfaction with the past, a growing distrust of the dominant authoritarian institution, a sense of being increasingly cut off from our higher possibilities; but, unlike the bold reformers of the eighteenth century, we don't know what to do. The spreading requirements of the technological imperative reach into our lives like a vast fungus growth, and simply to stay alive we nourish its hateful tentacles.

Yet there is another kind of difference between the Enlightenment and the present. We know a great deal about our own anxieties and desperations. We keep minutely particular score on how we feel about everything: We catalog each despair, append long critical footnotes to each inadequate solution. The intense self-consciousness of the age probably has a greater claim to historical uniqueness than any other attainment of the twentieth century, and may, indeed, contain the key to a regenerating vision. Perhaps the chief virtue of a work like *Needles*,

*B~rrs, and Bibliographies* lies in the fact that it brings our elaborate consciousness of psycho-social disaster up to date.

What weakness does this impressive collection of "insights" into our present condition disclose? Our major weakness, perhaps, lies in the solid inevitability we assign to what technology has wrought. There seems hardly any consideration of the possibility that its development might have been in another direction or have produced quite different consequences. This failure in awareness that *we* created this superstructure of mechanistic pseudo-necessities is probably behind the dull sense of inevitability and helplessness that the invasion of technology's mindless creations has produced. In consequence, many of the recommendations for "control" seem—to use a political analogy—like proposals for a mere constitutional monarchy to contain the drives of the technological Calibans and Frankensteins which have taken charge of so many aspects of our lives. But these timid measures cannot possibly work, mainly for the reason that there is no basis for self-limitation in the value-free logic of the machine.

Well, what *can* we do? For one thing, we can stop respecting the mandate of collectivist morality—that the good of the social whole depends upon everyone making the same mistakes. That the world is flat or that wars are necessary to survival are assumptions which may achieve some authority through widespread acceptance, but they gain no truth from belief. An end is put to beliefs of this sort by the refusal, at first by only a very few, to accept them. So long as we concede that the kind of technology we have, because we have it, is here to stay, only after-thought measures of restraint will be attempted, and then the failure of these, like the failure of the League of Nations, will serve the arguments of the advocates of no-control.

What then should critics of technology propose? Are they reduced to advocating a wild Luddite revolt? On the contrary, a completely

rational alternative to the scientific, technological ideology was offered in these pages a few weeks ago (MANAS, Aug. 13) by E. F. Schumacher in his article, "Buddhist Economics." In this discussion, the fundamental motives underlying socio-economic systems are examined, and criticism is not limited to elaboration of the pain suffered by victims of existing Procrustean arrangements. Mr. Schumacher wrote:

A modern economist may engage in highly sophisticated calculations on whether full employment "pays" or whether it might be more "economic" to run an economy at less than full employment so as to ensure a greater mobility of labor a better stability of wages, and so forth. His fundamental criterion of success is simply the total quantity of goods during a given period of time. . . .

From a Buddhist point of view, this is standing the truth on its head by considering goods as more important than people and consumption as more important than creative activity. It means shifting the emphasis from the worker to the product of work, that is, from the human to the subhuman, a surrender to the forces of evil. The very start of Buddhist economic planning would be a planning for full employment, and the primary purpose of this would in fact be employment for everyone who needs an "outside" job: it would not be the maximization of employment nor the maximization of production. Women, on the whole, do not need an outside job, and the large-scale employment of women in offices or factories would be considered a sign of serious economic failure. In particular, to let mothers of young children work in factories while the children run wild would be as uneconomic in the eyes of a Buddhist economist as the employment of a skilled worker as a soldier in the eyes of a modern economist.

While the materialist is mainly interested in goods, the Buddhist is mainly interested in liberation. But Buddhism is "The Middle Way" and therefore in no way antagonistic to physical well-being. It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of pleasurable things but the craving for them. The keynote of Buddhist economics, therefore, is; simplicity and nonviolence. From an economist's point of view, the marvel of the Buddhist way of life is the utter rationality of its pattern—amazingly small means leading to extraordinarily satisfactory results.

Two sorts of objections to Dr. Schumacher's proposals may be anticipated—practical objections and ethical objections. The practical critic will say that it is too late to change. The twig is bent, the rhythm set, and the advance sale of tickets to Modern Progress reaches too far into the future. These practical objections, however, could be easily disposed of, were it not for the support they obtain from the *ethical* objections. We already have a *mass* society, it will be argued, and Schumacher's reforms would work only for very special and adaptable individuals. Nobody has the right to advocate reduction of wants to the multitude who are victimized by existing social injustice. This is an old moralistic dodge of the men who have power and control. We *must* place power in the hands of the right men, and use it intelligently for the general good. And so on.

But this "ethical" argument, while not without persuasion, is really no more than a repetition of the doctrines of nineteenth-century utilitarian philosophers, which, in turn, were founded on simplistic eighteenth-century hedonistic psychology. Welfare power politics, in short, makes its arguments in cavalier neglect of the richest contributions of twentieth-century humanism, arising from the deepening self-consciousness of the present. It is time that the social implications of the new psychology received serious attention from contemporary reformers. The resources revealed by *Needles, Burrs, and Bibliographies* may help to define the plateau from which this enterprise could be launched. The volume has 200 pages, is priced at \$2.50, and may be ordered from Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.

## COMMENTARY

### SOME OLD GOOD BOOKS

SOMETIMES old books are best, and we think three old books will be of the most service to the reader who is made curious about the teachings of the Buddha by E. F. Schumacher's recent article, "Buddhist Economics," or by the quotation from it in this week's Review. For simple exposition of Buddha's philosophy, Edwin Arnold's exquisite poem, *The Light of Asia* (available in a variety of editions), remains the most humanly appealing as well as a faithful account. *The Creed of Buddha* (New York and London: John Lane, 1908), by Edmond Holmes, was written to demonstrate the importance of Eastern philosophical religion to the West. Mr. Holmes says in his preface:

The dominant philosophy of ancient India was a spiritual idealism of a singularly pure and exalted type, which found its truest expression in those Vedic treatises known as the Upanishads. . . . When [the reader] has solved the problem of the indebtedness of Buddha to the philosophy of the Upanishads, he will be confronted by another problem which for us of the West is of even greater importance, the problem of the indebtedness of Western thought—of Pythagoras, of Plato, of Plotinus, of Christ himself and those who caught the spirit of his teaching—to the same sacred source. That problem, too will have to be grappled with, if the West is ever to discover the secret of its own hidden strength, and if Christendom is ever to understand Christianity.

The third book we recommend is Fielding Hall's *The Soul of a People* (reprinted by Macmillan in many editions since the first in 1898), a study of the life and ways of the people of northern Burma, and how they took to heart and put into practice the Buddha's teachings. All this is now doubtless very much changed, yet Hall's book is a perceptive record of what has been and might in some respects be again.

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*Correction:* Our review of Jim Peck's book, *Underdogs Vs Uppergods* (MANAS, July 30), "greatly exaggerated" the effect of the blow on the head received by Walter Bergman, a Freedom

Rider, in an encounter in Birmingham, Alabama. We said Mr. Bergman died. Jim Peck writes to tell us that Mr. Bergman is "very much alive." He suffered paralysis from an almost fatal stroke but is getting better, year by year, and recently took part (in a wheelchair) in a picket demonstration against the ABM system. His friends will be glad to know that he also walks with the aid of a walker. We are especially indebted to Jim Peck for enabling us to correct this bad mistake.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Is there any point in trying to keep up with the thinking and efforts of top administrators of public education to improve on what the schools are now doing? A report by Peter Schrag (in *Saturday Review* for Aug. 16) on a gathering of such people, called to deliberate "The Youth Revolution" at a conference sponsored by the Advanced Administrative Institute of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, makes this question inevitable. Toward the end of his long, impressionistic recital, Mr. Schrag says:

What became clear was that the schoolmen were as much as the kids—perhaps more—prisoners of the system. The shared heat and sweat were indeed symbolic. Most of the superintendents could no more change the conditions of life in Central High than they could cool off Holmes Hall [where the Harvard meeting was held]. (Not only was their political power limited, their imagination was even more circumscribed, and their capacity for anger invisible.) Of all their little hypocrisies—their rhetoric about responsibility and due process, about independence and hard work—none was as great as the pretense that they could, if persuaded, do something to reform things, that they were ethically or intellectually equipped to act.

The report of this conference of administrators—to which a number of high school students were invited to voice their complaints—is discouraging at almost all levels. With some few exceptions, the only problem recognized by the administrators was that of "control." The title of an article in a current issue of *School Management*, "Strategies for Coping with Boycotts, Violence, Sit-Ins," expressed the attitude of the majority of administrators, Mr. Schrag says. From this point of view, "the kids are the enemy, barbarian hordes who have to be conned, or co-opted, or accommodated." Problem-solving means to get the kids "back in-class in short order."

Yet there were administrators who broke the pattern, like the deputy superintendent from a Midwestern city who admitted that "two-thirds of the high schools in his district stink and that the kids are perfectly right to scream about teachers who can't teach, administrators who are inaccessible, and programs from another age and frame of mind." Another man maintained that three-fourths of the administrators attending the conference "don't have a clue" concerning what is really wrong. "We should have known all the things the kids are demanding of us, but we messed up our opportunities for reform." He expressed doubt that administrators had any freedom for action left to them. Mr. Schrag ends with some general observations:

There are all sorts of notions of what the schools should be but none of them is possible of realization under existing circumstances. Educational philosophy can have no life of its own, cannot exist without a more general idea of culture or an antecedent political theory, and without a society that practices, rather than betrays, its articulated convictions about peace, freedom, and independence. Any school person who blindly represents the authority and compromises of the community has no reason to expect the full trust of his students. Any school person who professes interest in students and ships them off to Vietnam on the day they graduate is a person whose motives are necessarily in doubt.

There is no general idea of culture in America at this moment; we are living in a no man's land labeled "the generation gap" which gives its educational system no cues—other than unprincipled conformity—to follow. The school manager of the old style is a lost man charged with the resolution of problems and conflicts he cannot possibly handle or even confront. What distinguishes him from his students is that they are beginning to understand his pathetic weakness, and to discover that he, by all that keeps him together and sane, must forever deny it.

So, as we asked at the outset, why consider the meetings, read the-papers, discuss the plans, of the managers?

Hardly anyone knows what might or ought to be done, judging from the amply informing material which appears in the monthly supplement

on education in the *Saturday Review* Yet another article in the Aug. 16 supplement, "The Free Schools of Denmark," by Estelle Fuchs, offers some clues. MANAS for Aug. 13 reported Kenneth Clark's proposal for alternative schools for urban children, suggesting that the Danish folk schools had proved the value of alternative education which has government support. Miss Fuchs develops this idea at some length. After some history of Danish practice in public education, she describes in detail the alternatives presently available to Danish parents. The origins of these alternatives are traced to the nineteenth-century demands of Danes who wanted education for their children free from the influence of the Lutheran state religion, and to the folk school movement established by Kristen Kold under the inspiration of N. F. S. Grundtvig (see *Light from the North* by Joseph K. Hart). More recently schools reflecting the philosophy of John Dewey and A. S. Neill have sprung up. All these schools are aided by government subsidy, and while there is some supervision by the state, freedom of teaching seems the rule and school inspection is often by a person chosen by the parents who operate the school. The operating costs of these schools are very low. Miss Fuchs comments:

A significant effect of the existence of the free schools is that they remove much conflict from the public schools. Any dissident minority, with a minimum expense and with government cooperation, can leave the system and establish its own school. The result of this is that when Danes discuss educational problems, they tend to stress professional, pedagogical concerns or the matter of finance. They rarely discuss the kinds of problems that are considered important in the United States, such as school-community conflict or teacher-administrator difficulties. A striking characteristic of Free Schools is the general coincidence of goals on the part of parents, teachers, and administrators. . . .

While there are plenty of differences between the United States and Denmark, Miss Fuchs' final observation is worth repeating:

An advantage of a system with publicly supported alternatives is that freedom from the monolithic compulsion by huge bureaucratic

organizations may free the schools of debilitating conflict. But perhaps the most important advantage is that permitting concerned groups of parents and community organizations to set up schools for segments of the population that find the present system unsatisfactory may unleash creative potential and make possible an educational renaissance.

## *FRONTIERS*

### **What Is a Work of Art?**

[This article first appeared in *Arts and Architecture* for February, 1949, under the title, "Why Do I Paint?"]

WHAT is painting? Like a word, it is a bridge men build to reach each other. And yet it is more than this—more than a mere vehicle of communication. For function is only a half-truth and in stopping with it we fail to let our understanding reach the fundamental need in the service of which painting is merely an instrument. Without consciousness of this need we lose direction, and critical judgment becomes merely a matter of a choice between one mode and another. On the other hand, if we can clearly identify the thing we seek we may find that our historic reliance upon interpretable subject-matter may be the mysterious barrier between the people of today and their art. It is certain that we cannot grasp the meaning of the contemporary struggle in painting without awareness of the need in us that it strives to satisfy. Without this understanding, all painting since cubism must be looked upon as mere visual diversion which fails its historic purpose because it is not pictorially communicative.

Basically, painting is only one expression of the critical need of men to provide their lives with vivid and heart-lifting evidence of the mutuality of their separate existence. The absence of symbols of inner mutuality in contemporary life is not, as in other days, a source of mere disenchantment. The romantic overtones which once surrounded philosophical withdrawal and solitude are gone. The poetic protest becomes either a political polemic or a cry of torture. The human spirit caught between the tyranny of cold order and resignation to self-destruction can only seek survival in new patterns of human mutuality. This search has been going on in painting since the first cubist and expressionist experiments at the start of the century. The failure of descriptive painting to reach the heart of contemporary life, without a

doubt, lies in the fact that it has lacked the means and the will to enter this arena.

Recognition of pictorial subject-matter is not enough. The image of a man in a painting does not become a symbol of inner mutuality merely by reason of the uniformity of the act of visual identification. This would be to say that familiarity with what a man does, how he appears to others as he moves through life, is to know him, and that the individual can somehow survive his isolation merely by sharing a familiar and acceptable exterior pattern with his fellow men. This describes the world of hypocritical and incomplete familiarity upon which this heartsick society frustrates itself. The uneasy and artificial mutuality of the convention hall is echoed in the painting that relies on the uniform reception of recognizable external events. How deeply does such a painting touch the problem? Is the struggle of the individual with the antagonisms between individual fulfillment and social integration resolved, or merely alleviated, by mutual participation in a mutually acceptable external order? Does this not imply that social integration on an objective level will automatically bring about spiritual health in the individual? This is the view that in the 1930's produced the Thomas Benton type of art, which tries to persuade us that if we observe the side of a barn long enough we will never feel the need to contemplate our navels.

If we are ready to look into ourselves and admit the truth of our socio-individual needs and observe how our lives are incessantly motivated by them, we will see that the spiritual comfort derived from the meaningful form is less than we thought it was. For if we do not experience in a painting a duplication of man's struggle to build himself into a larger totality, not through self-destruction but through self-enrichment—if we do not experience the painting as a living act embodying this aspiration—then all the wondrous symbol meanings of shapes and forms and images will leave us ultimately untouched. Visual gossip,

no matter on how high a plane, can contribute nothing to this, the key problem of our times.

Through the words of Kyo in *Man's Fate* Andre Malraux reveals the conflict which exists in all of us and which only the bravest of us can face. Kyo says to his wife: "We hear the voices of others with our ears, our own voices with our throats. . . . But I, to myself, to my throat, what am I? A kind of absolute, the affirmation of an idiot: an intensity greater than that of all the rest. To others, I am what I have done."

These are the words of anguished protest against the inability of men to build into the pattern of outer mutuality implicit symbols of the inner life where the will to this mutuality actually lies imprisoned. Here one individual, motivated from within, is destroyed by the external structure which separates itself from and even denounces the spiritual and individual need that created it. Here is the essence of the failure of the painting that derives its meaning primarily from form references to outer appearances. Here lies the meaning of the painting whose total visual impact embodies the will to overcome this destructive paradox, where structure and order are powerful enough to partake of the subjective aspiration as well as house its symbols.

There are perhaps only a handful of paintings that come anywhere near this almost impossible synthesis. But no painter today who is of his times is unaware of the problem. The pendulum of modern painting swings through the center of it and the painter leaves his mark somewhere far or near to the right or left of it. Pure, structural abstraction states the problem by militantly rejecting half of it, although Mondrian brought to his rigid structural idiom an echo of the inner voice in his last works. Paul Klee was always around the center of this synthesis while the Guernica mural strikes toward it on a heroic scale. The paintings of the late Arshille Gorky crystallize the swing of the pendulum in the other direction. Gorky, structural technician that he was in his early work, turned to automatic subjectivism,

apparently realizing that no prescribed order can contain or even be fused with a process of growth, and that if there is to be structure it must be of the essence of the creative effort and not a discipline imposed upon it.

To those who fully sense the implications of man's fate in the world today, there can be no doubt that twentieth-century painting as much as that of any epoch in history has been of its times. For the most part critical writings which have established popular attitudes have been based on subject-matter or æsthetic analysis or, failing this, have created a sanctified domain where all who enter must leave the world behind. This has resulted in the almost comic dilemma of the public in finally accepting the word of authority without sensing the dynamic identity between the new work and their own lives. The wilderness of words and articles and books on painting since cubism seems only to have helped to destroy the possibility of direct recognition in the process of establishing or refuting artistic authenticity. To many painters today the general cynical acceptance of their work is more disheartening than rewarding for it confirms the fact that the forty years' effort since cubism has failed in its human mission.

Should the artists blame themselves, as many critics insist? Would their paintings fail under any conditions to invoke that sense of mutuality which is at the heart of the painter's effort? Subject-matter critics have blamed the absence of familiar imagery, while apologists and enthusiasts have sublimated purely æsthetic aspects when they have not lifted the whole matter into the realm of the magic and mystical or the quick-frozen realities of Pop art.

It is possible that through the centuries of Western descriptive painting people have unconsciously found their greatest satisfaction, not in the legends and events and objects described, but from the sense that here, as nowhere in life, islands of isolation have found unity and total significance. Subject-matter

obscures but does not necessarily destroy painting's power of instantaneously total projection, a power not possible in any of the other arts. Twentieth-century painting has used this power to an extent never before attempted, where compositional unity is not merely a coordinated relationship of independent parts but where the imagery of separate parts unites to create a total and symbolic image of the whole. Cubism had to break up the clear-cut identity of the parts before the image of unity could be sensed. Mondrian destroyed all but the last trace of the part in order to find a totality where no part would disturb the exclusive reception of the whole.

It does not take much reflection to see that these problems were not concocted in the artist's ivory tower, but that they are part of the riddle of contemporary existence. We could ask of governments as well as artists: "To what extent can we enrich the meaning of the whole without destroying the individual life of the part, and to what extent can we enrich the meaning of the part without destroying the whole?"

Admittedly, the struggle for this equilibrium is not new. What makes it overwhelming in this day is the fact that never before in history has the aspired-to totality been so vast and, by comparison, the parts so infinitesimal. There is terror in this discrepancy, the terror of social disintegration and individual dislocation. Somewhere within the conflict between the realities of this terror and its antithesis, the vision of order and unity, there can be found the essential identities of twentieth-century art no less than of human life itself.

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