

## SOME ANCIENT QUESTIONS

IT may be that only heroic people dare dream of immortality; it seems certain that only a heroic age will support belief in it. Who will risk speaking, today, of death as the portal to wonder? What poet could sing of life as having a sequel in eternity? The language of the time shrinks from such large-hearted visioning. A Socratic midwife, coming among us, might soon have to join the ranks of the unemployed.

Well, we have other distinctions. No age has been so productive as this one. Our capacity to make things is equalled only by our skill in putting an end to them, for no one can rival us, either, in the arts of destruction and death. As death-dealers, we are supreme. What happens to people who die? We do not know; what's more, we never ask. We take pride in a sophistication which makes the question seem frivolous.

What do we say about death when we are compelled to say *something*? Ambiguities and euphemisms would probably cover nearly everything. We have avoided the subject for generations. And the last man of our age to write openly and convincingly of life after death was John Haynes Holmes, whose *Affirmation of Immortality* appeared in 1948. Holmes was Platonic and Emersonian in temper. He repeats the final portion of the *Phaedo* as embodying his own conviction, then asks of his readers:

What are we to think, for example, when a great and potent personality is suddenly cut off by an automobile accident, a disease germ, or a bit of poisoned food? Must it not be what George Herbert Palmer thought as he looked upon the dead body of his wife, one of the outstanding women of her time—"Though no regrets are proper for the manner of her death, who can contemplate the fact of it, and not call the world irrational if out of deference to a few particles of disordered matter, it excludes so fair a spirit?"

Is thinking of this sort so beside the point, today, that we can find no occasion to repeat it, or has it merely been crowded out by what seem more urgent issues? "Desacralization" was the word used by A. H. Maslow to describe the mood of modern physiology—a coarse spirit which drove him from medical school and into a profession that seemed more open to the practice of healing. Yet a man who wants to think as Palmer did discovers little soil in which to plant the seeds he nurtures privately in his mind. Everywhere he meets sterility, blankness, indifference. There is much brittle wit, these days, but no gentle humor, no field for higher longings, nor any literature rich in invitation to brooding on the presence of transcendent realities in human beings. We know the anatomy of social struggles in their last-ditch phase, and are instructed in the ways of a world affording choice between becoming a victim or an executioner. Anarchist intransigence defines the last surviving principled morality. We celebrate the brotherhood of the naked and alone, the truths of underground men, the authenticity of the transfixed and trampled, as though no human excellence could rise in structured complexity and still survive the wickedness of the age. The good we can think of seems, alas, nearly as bankrupt as the evil we know—which is to say that it is but an embryo good, left unworked by imagination and daring. Our idea of good has been through the grinder and the pulper, and has the formless ineffectuality of everything processed by the reductive skills we use so brilliantly.

What, again, of death? A vastly sophisticated essay on the high cost of funerals demonstrates that we cannot afford to die. Is there a "death-wish" or not? A score of learned papers consider the question. Not long ago, it seemed that every other doctoral thesis in psychology reported the

minutia of the thoughts of the dying. A more adventurous scholarship might repeat hoary experiments with "mediums," as though the only way to know anything unorthodox about death—which is to say, anything at all—must be to contact someone whose strange unbalance or psychic disorder enables him to have an eerie sort of experience he does not understand.

There is at the same time a new mood in the air. Philip Rieff's reversal of the question, "Can a civilized man believe?", making it, "Can an unbeliever remain civilized?", seems a useful indication of the change. Yet a change born out of anxiety or spurred by desperation doesn't really get very far. An anxious man is hardly in condition to choose beliefs. He may be a little too eager to "get away," and willing to forget unfinished business. And, especially in this civilization, he may be vulnerable to the expectation that some person or group has already packaged what he thinks he is looking for. The new mood, in short, has pitfalls.

Ought a man to hope to find out about death without knowing about life? A great deal of what most people believe about life is only hearsay. Actually, the entire question of "belief" needs examination. There is a word in our scientific background that ought to come into such deliberations: Hypothesis. It is not easy for a man to tell the difference between what he knows and what he believes. Everyone has beliefs, but there would be a distinct advantage in classifying them as hypotheses, even though hypotheses lack an important element that is common to most beliefs—feeling. A hypothesis or a theory may be constructed out of something that was intuitively felt, originally, yet—because of scientific usage we think of the theoretical approach to knowledge as somehow neutral, emotionally. A man has more of a stake in his beliefs. He could say to himself, however, that this personal interest makes inspection of them still more important. At any rate, bringing in the idea of hypothesis may help

us to distinguish between what we believe and what we know.

In the matter of "belief" concerning a life after death, there is evidence of something that might be recognized as the scientific spirit in the practice of spiritual teachers and philosophers of the past. For example, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is a philosophical expression of Hindu religious tradition, there is the following passage:

As a man throweth away old garments and putteth on new even so the dweller in the body, having quitted its old mortal frames, entereth into others which are new. The weapon divideth it not, the fire burneth it not, the water corrupteth it not, the wind drieth it not away; for it is indivisible, inconsumable, incorruptible, and is not to be dried away: it is eternal, universal, permanent, immovable; it is invisible, inconceivable, and unalterable; therefore, knowing it to be thus, thou shouldst not grieve. But whether thou believest it to be of eternal birth and duration, or that it dieth with the body, still thou hast no cause to lament it. Death is certain to all things which are born, and rebirth to all mortals; wherefore it doth not behoove thee to grieve about the inevitable. The antenatal state of beings is unknown, the middle state is evident, and the state after death is not to be discovered. What in this is there to lament? Some regard the indwelling spirit as a wonder, whilst some speak and others hear of it with astonishment; but no one realizes it, although he may have heard it described.

Here is an exposition of the doctrine of immortality and at the same time recognition of the difficulty in individual verification of it. Yet Krishna, the teacher who speaks, was once an ordinary man, subject to the same limitations, and Arjuna, whom he is instructing, is urged to make himself independent of all doctrine by means of those disciplines of which the *Gita* is advocate. The achievement of knowledge *is* possible, as Krishna declares at the end of this passage (which occurs in the second discourse):

Seek an asylum, then, in this mental devotion, which is knowledge, for the miserable and unhappy are those whose impulse to action is found in its reward. But he who by means of Yoga is mentally devoted dismisses alike successful and unsuccessful results, being beyond them; Yoga is skill in the

performance of actions: therefore do thou aspire to this devotion. For those who are thus united to knowledge and devoted, who have renounced all reward for their actions, meet no rebirth in this life and go to that eternal blissful abode which is free from all disease and untouched by troubles.

When thy heart shall have worked through the snares of delusion, then thou wilt attain to high indifference as to those doctrines which are already taught or which are yet to be taught. When thy mind once liberated from the Vedas shall be fixed immovably in contemplation, then shalt thou attain to devotion.

What should be borne in mind during a consideration of this text is the realization that the entire civilization of India has been schooled in the teaching of immortality. The *Gita* is not concerned with "proving" it, but with the means to it. No attempt is made to hide the distinction between belief and knowledge. What is novel, for us, in this exposition of philosophical religion is the presence of a man who speaks with accents of certainty on the subject: this we have not experienced as it is presented here. We hardly know what to make of it.

Yet a study of the subject would soon persuade us that the outlook of the *Gita* is not unique. A book such as, say, *Reincarnation in World Thought* (Julian Press, 1967), by Head and Cranston, makes it plain that our own epoch is rather the unusual one, since the prevalence of teaching and belief in immortality and reincarnation has in the past been worldwide, and may be so again. Without arguing the matter of "proof," it would be well worth while to investigate the quality of the civilizations where the conception of the immortality of the soul has been generally accepted and made the foundation of thought. A further consideration is how "belief" is dealt with, in view of its obvious inadequacies. Beliefs, that is, while apparently inevitable, are plainly not good enough.

We know from our own intellectual history what box canyons of moral isolation and spiritual egotism can result from intense preoccupation with religious beliefs. The socio-moral side of the

scientific movement, up to and including the work in education of John Dewey, gives us an excellent critical account of quite necessary reforms. But how did past *religious* teachers deal with the problem? Since we began with an example from the thought of India, we might as well stay there, especially since East Indian material on the subject is richer and probably more profound than any found elsewhere. Gautama Buddha was an Indian religious reformer who worked to free the people from doctrinal excesses and casuistic disputes. His fundamental objective was the liberation of man from self-caused misery. On the immortality of the soul, he is said to have remained silent when the question was put to him directly.

The story is told of the Buddha that a wandering monk, Vacchagotta, came to him and asked two questions. One was: "Is there the Ego?", the other, "Is there not the Ego?" The Buddha did not reply, but remained silent until Vacchagotta went away. Buddha's disciple, Ananda, then asked his Teacher why he had not answered the monk. The reply of the Buddha, as given in Edmond Holmes' *The Creed of Buddha*, was as follows:

"If I, Ananda, when the wandering monk Vacchagotta asked me: 'Is there the Ego?' had answered: 'The Ego is,' then that Ananda, would have confirmed the doctrine of the Samanas and Brahmanas who believe in permanence. If I, Ananda when the wandering monk Vacchagotta asked me: 'Is there not the Ego?' had answered: 'The Ego is not,' then that, Ananda, would have confirmed the doctrine of the Samanas and Brahmanas who believe in annihilation. If I, Ananda, when the wandering monk Vacchagotta asked me. 'Is there the Ego?' had answered: 'The Ego is,' would that have served my end, Ananda, by producing in him the knowledge: 'all existences are non-Ego'?"

"That it would not, sire."

"But if I, Ananda, when the wandering monk Vacchagotta asked me: 'Is there not the Ego?' had answered: 'The Ego is not,' then that, Ananda, would only have caused the wandering monk to be thrown from one bewilderment into another: 'My Ego, did it not exist before? but now it exists no longer!'"

In short, as Holmes suggests, the Buddha refused to reply to the question in yes-or-no form, since he would be forced to adopt some one of his questioner's preconceptions by making either reply. Suppose for example that the Ego has both a mortal and an immortal aspect, and that while we know something about the mortal part and are attached to it by both vanity and affection, the immortal part, although subtly real, has not been conceived by us at all. It may be that we have no terms in which to conceive it. The Buddha, one could say, knew that lifetimes are occupied in acquiring an understanding of the immortal side of life, since to know what is immortal is to be able to enter a timeless condition at will. In a discussion of this question in his book, *Buddhism*, Edward Conze elaborates on the explanation:

Now suppose that Mr. John Smith is fed up with this state of affairs in which everything is just produced for a short time in order to be destroyed again. Suppose he wishes to become immortal. Then he has no choice but to deny himself throughout the whole length and breadth of his being. Anything impermanent in himself he has to get rid of. Just try to think of what is left of Mr. Smith after he has become immortal. His body would obviously be gone. With the body his instincts would have disappeared—since they are bound up with his glands, with the needs of his tissues, in short with the body. His mind, also, as he knows it, would have to be sacrificed. Because this mind of ours is bound up with bodily processes, its operations are based on the data provided by the bodily organs of sense, and it reveals its impermanence by incessantly and restlessly jumping from one thing to another. With the mind would go his sense of logical consistency. As a matter of fact, Mr. John Smith, turned immortal, would not recognize himself at all. He would have lost everything that made him recognizable to himself and to others. And he could be born anew only if he had learned to deny all that clutters up the immortal side of his being—which lies, as the Buddhists would put it, outside his five skandhas—if he would deny all that constitutes his dear little self. Buddhist training consists, indeed, in systematically weakening our hold on those things in us which keep us from regaining the immortality we lost when we were born.

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But, as I have said, it all depends on one's view of the nature of man. Those who regard man as a creature of earth only, will be inclined to compare this Buddhist yearning for immortality with the snail which leaves its house in order to go on a flying expedition. Those who regard man as essentially a spiritual being will prefer the Buddhist simile of the mountain swans who, when they have left their mountain lake, go from puddle to puddle, without making their home anywhere, until they are back to their true home in the clear waters of the mountain lake.

One can easily see why, so far as "belief" is concerned, Buddhism is divided into those who think that the idea of individual immortality is too risky an affair, which could lead to endless egotisms and misconceptions, and those who maintain that the risk must be taken, the paring down of personality endured, since the crown of soul evolution is the work of the great fraternity of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. And one can also see that religion and philosophical religion may be two very different things. Yet all religions, it seems clear, are dilutions and often distortions of what in the beginning were profoundly philosophical ideas.

To keep this brief study in balance, one ought now to go to the writings of Plato, since, whatever unsympathetic scholars may say, there can be little doubt that Plato was a philosopher of immortality, and that he taught the doctrine of palingenesis, or rebirth. He has not, perhaps, what we would call a Hindu or a Buddhist mood, yet one who loves Plato has no difficulty in feeling at home in some of the philosophical treatises of the East. The roots of the heroic spirit are found alike in Plato and the *Gita*. And in the hands of Socrates, as Plato's spokesman, the invitation to philosophy is not quite so forbidding as Mr. Conze makes it out to be, in his explanation of Buddhist reluctance to speak of immortality. Yet both speak of the bondage of the senses and the emancipation that is necessary before the soul can drink of the waters of eternal life. Plato, as usual, makes use of myth, reaching finally a place where Socrates says:

And of these such as have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy live thereafter altogether without bodies, and reach habitations even more beautiful, which is not easy to portray—nor is there time to do so now. But the reasons which we have already described provide ground enough, as you can see Simmias, for leaving nothing undone to attain during life some measure of goodness and wisdom, for the prize is glorious and the hope great.

Of course, no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them. But that either this or something very like it is a true account of our souls and their future habitations—since we have clear evidence that the soul is immortal—this, I think, is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking, for the risk is a noble one. We should use such accounts to inspire ourselves with confidence, and that is why I have already drawn out my tale so long.

And now having done, for this is almost the end of the dialogue, Socrates says it is time for his bath, since he is about to drink the poison and he does not wish to give the women the trouble of washing his body after he is dead. In the setting of the *Phaedo*, the death of Socrates, from which this is quoted, the argument has a rare persuasiveness, since Socrates readies his companions for his death with a discourse on the immortality of the soul, while he, himself, needs no preparations; he has been ready for years.

The moral is simple enough. No one can contemplate death or discover its meaning without a willingness to look at it directly, to ask the great questions, and to ask them as though no man had ever asked such questions before. And this capacity seems to arise only in those able to look at life directly, while hearkening to the same inner counsels, however weak at first, which from the beginning of time have moved the good and the great.

## *REVIEW*

### ON ART AND LEARNING

SOME years ago—perhaps four or five—MANAS received a letter from a reader in Connecticut who had been stirred by something that had appeared in the paper on "art." A correspondence developed, and the reader, who was Robert Jay Wolff, let us see some things he had written back in 1948 and 1949—articles which appeared in *Art News*, *Arts and Architecture*, and the *College Art Journal*. The material proved intensely interesting to the editors, who have found it quite difficult to say much about "art" in a paper like MANAS. What can be said usefully seems limited to very broad generalization. So, to find a writer who was articulate in this area and at a level appropriate for MANAS seemed an exciting event. Mr. Wolff, it developed, had been teaching art and design at Brooklyn College for a number of years, and before that had been associated with Lazlo Moholy-Nagy at the School of Design in Chicago. Yet it wasn't his background and history which interested us, in those days, but the lucidity of what he wrote. It turned out that he was a painter who felt far more at home in front of a piece of canvas than a sheet of white paper. Writing, he said, made him realize his deep distrust of language, and even after he got the words down on paper he would eye them with suspicion. How could talk possibly convey what he felt? So that is the way Wolff set down his ideas; he chiselled them out of his head like a sculptor working in granite. This might have been hard on him, but it was good for his readers.

After a while he sent along some drafts of lectures he had given eighteen or nineteen years earlier—old manuscripts and a few articles from art journals arranged in a sequence of development. These became a series on art and design education which appeared at odd intervals in "Children . . . and Ourselves." We don't mind admitting that these discussions may have done a bit more for the editors than for anyone else, since

we kept reading them over—first because that is an editor's job, and then because it was so enjoyable to read them. They no longer seemed to be just about teaching "art," but about a great many other things.

Wolff manages to say what very few people are able to get down. Take for example the following on "creativity" and the understanding of art:

Creativity, if it can be defined, would mean to me a self-propelled exertion of all the faculties to preserve and nourish the diverse forces of nature in oneself through an inventive, disciplined and, if possible, aesthetic structuring of the outer facets of one's existence. Creativity is the establishing of an equilibrium between the inner life with all its mysterious power, its turmoil and its penetrating intuitions, and the particular outer structure which is created to contain and express it. Creativity to me is in the effort whether it fails or succeeds. Works of art are exciting and inspiring to me only insofar as they confirm the presence and force of my own creative exertions. In this sense I believe one can only establish a living affinity with great works. One cannot ever fully understand them.

It is said that knowing something about a work of art will bring one closer to it. I believe it is the other way around and that knowledge in this sense remains merely decorative without the propelling power of a deeper creative bond.

Since this approach to a work of art seems possible only where there has been some experience with the creative problem, it can reasonably be asked, "If this is true, then do only practicing artists have the key to art? What about the rest of us? If art is not made for the people of the world, then what is the reason for it? Do we all have to become artists?"

My answer to this last question is that yes, in a way, people have to become artists before works of art live for them. Putting it in another way, they will have to drop the notion that, given some aesthetic sensibility, an agile brain and a willing eye, art can be educated into them. The only door to this realm is creative effort and self-generated revelation.

As far as I am concerned, the main task of education is not to improve the view from the doorway but to entice people to pass through it.

It took more than a year for the lectures on art education to appear in MANAS. Almost from the beginning, the MANAS editors instructed their printers to save the type of each article in this series, since material as good as this, it seemed, ought not to exist only in the files of a weekly magazine. So, after it was all printed, Mr. Wolff wrote a preface, and it wasn't too long before Grossman Publishers decided to bring out Robert Wolff's essays, *On Art and Learning*, in hardback (\$7.95) and paper (\$3.50). The book has just been published and should be available in all major bookstores.

This book is valuable to the general reader on a number of counts. First, as the discussion of creativity shows, it distinguishes between art as act and art as artifact. The conception of art is essentially Blakean. While the art of time and place is of course not ignored, the central idea is that the artist is a man of heightened awareness, who frees himself from, or never submits to, the conventions and prejudices of his time. You can tell, from this book, that Mr. Wolff has learned how to get this idea across to class after class of students who start out filled with mistaken notions. It is impossible to distill the insight of this book from one or two rich experiences. The loose, free, yet exactly appropriate illustrations he gives of teaching situations come to one who has spent a lifetime doing this work.

An easy familiarity with art history adds dimensions to the discussion. A great many painters of the past are brought in casually, to reinforce a comparison, to illustrate a point. How did Courbet, for example, make certain realizations possible in his time, which may now be brought home by the use of photography? Those who work in art education will find many illustrations of the book's general usefulness. Here, we should like to press its emphasis on the responsibility of the designer.

Not long ago a famous engineering school held a conference to gather expert advice on its plans for broadening the base of the curriculum.

Among the consultants invited to contribute were four talented and successful industrial designers. These men shaped their suggestions to the understanding of educators with a predominantly scientific background. Then, after outlining a program, they said that adding design to an engineering curriculum would be meaningless without a strong emphasis throughout on the moral responsibility of the designer. This statement was greeted with a dull silence. What do you *mean*? they were asked. What body of established knowledge would you draw on for this sort of "moral instruction"? It became quite plain that the engineers and scientists felt that they were not accountable for what politicians and others may do with the fruits of technological progress and innovation. So, to the question of what is the basis for teaching moral responsibility, perhaps the only answer worth giving is the one made famous by Louis Armstrong: "If you have to ask what it is, you'll never know."

Yet it is possible to discuss what designers mean by responsibility. Wolff does it all through his book. Here is one statement:

The most urgent task confronting the teaching of design today is that of creating visual habits organic to and consistent with those life-patterns, biological, ethical, and social, upon which modern man's well being so heavily depends.

We can first ask ourselves, what meaning does design have for most of us? What are our visual requirements with regard to the things with which we surround ourselves? And once we have identified the nature of our visual attitude we can ask ourselves what relevance it has to those more conscious and thus more easily identifiable social and individual values which are the motivating forces of our mode of life.

It has been said that the art of any given period reflects the prevailing human attitudes of the time. If we find it easy to tolerate deception and deceit, pretentiousness and greed within the accepted pattern of daily living, then there is no reason not to expect this tolerance to include the kind of design that bears the mark of similar motives. The question is seldom raised as to whether contemporary taste in design has anything to do with those criteria which make for

decency and integrity in human relationships. It is possible to evade the search for these values by assuming that the ethical factor is sublimated within the general character of the created form, and that adherence to progressive modes in art and design relieves us of any specific moral responsibility. This attitude ignores the fact that all forms of art are corruptible, even the purest: witness the banalization of the Mondrian discipline into a weak visual device for advertising radios.

Without the constant challenge of these basic criteria, the new and fresh developments in the art of our times will be converted into a mere reflection of the weaknesses of our society before they can grow to serve our deeper needs.

The lectures making up this book were given to students of Brooklyn College who were preparing to be art and design teachers in secondary schools. The book comes to grips, therefore, with teaching children or adolescents who are fresh out of grade school. It deals with the impact of the heavy academic studies they are now subjected to, and suffering from. It takes into account the practical limitations which face nearly all high-school teachers in urban schools. It evades nothing, over-simplifies nothing, sentimentalizes nothing, yet embodies the mission of the sensitive artist who also is a teacher. There seems enough of everything of a general sort, in this book, and not too much of anything. The jacket note gives an excellent summary:

Wolff undertakes a wide-ranging study of the central concerns of art and education: the unnecessary barrier between art and the public, the dullness of much education, the need for personal, creative equilibrium amid social collapse. Wolff opens the door to all the sensory aspects of human learning and living, for teaching art is really teaching to see and feel—and it is precisely the sensory, humanistic aspects of education that have been dangerously neglected. The training and growth of the living mind are the subject of these essays, and the book that results is a warm, concerned, and useful one.

## COMMENTARY

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

IN a text which appears at the beginning of a book referred to in this week's lead article, Abraham Heschel observes:

We have never been as openmouthed and inquisitive, never as astonished and embarrassed at our ignorance about man. We know what he makes, but we do not know what he is or what to expect of him. Is it not conceivable that our entire civilization is built on a misinterpretation of man? Or that the tragedy of man is due to the fact that he is a being who has forgotten the question: Who is Man? The failure to identify himself, to know what is authentic human existence, leads him to assume a false identity, to pretend to be what he is unable to or to not accept what is at the very root of his being. Ignorance about man is not lack of knowledge but false knowledge.

Then, in the Introduction, there is the following from W. Macneile Dixon:

You have heard of this curious doctrine, of this psychology which rejects the psyche and retains only the "ology," the science of the self without the self. Thus, in summary fashion, the great authorities deny and dispose of us, and incidentally of themselves. Where we imagined the "I" or self to be, there is only, they tell us, a series of fleeting impressions, sensations, fancies, pains, pleasures, which succeed each other with amazing rapidity, but without any support, any connection or tie between them, no entity over and above them that as center or subject thinks, feels or desires. It is then a mirage or hallucination, this notion of the self. And an interesting and peculiar illusion, which till yesterday successfully played the impostor's part upon the whole human race, philosophers included. And not only so, but after this prodigious feat of deception, it laid a snare for itself and caught itself out. This illusion, the most extraordinary that ever was, discovered itself to be an illusion.

This seems a fair enough account of the joint disenchantment and awakening that seems to be going on at the present time. Its circumstances, while provocative enough, are not in themselves very helpful, since the materials of our lives are so lacking in nourishment. If a man would live by vision instead of in this vacancy, he must somehow generate the resources and stuff of

dreaming out of himself, for the cupboards of contemporary thought are quite bare. It is only those who deliberately seek enrichment, often from ancient and mythic origins, who are able to point the way to human wholeness, and to take some steps in that direction. For ours is a naked impoverished world from the viewpoint of the psyche, and it may soon be poor in many other ways.

The obstacles to going against the temper of the times are intimated by Charles G. Jung in his posthumously published *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. In this book he felt able to express certain ideas he had not been able to discuss before, such as the matter of "a life after death." The following by Jung is part of a passage included in *Reincarnation in World Thought* (Julian Press, 1967):

My life as I lived it had seemed to me like a story that had no beginning and no end. I had the feeling that I was a historical fragment, an excerpt for which the preceding and succeeding text was missing. . . . The meaning of my existence is that life has addressed a question to me. Or, conversely, I myself am a question which is addressed to the world, and I must communicate my answer, for otherwise I am dependent on the world's answer. That is a suprapersonal life task, which I accomplish only by effort and with difficulty. . . . My way of posing the question as well as my answer may be unsatisfactory. That being so, someone who had my karma—or I myself—would have to be reborn in order to give a more complete answer. It might happen that I would not be reborn in order to give a more complete answer. It might happen that I would not be reborn again so long as the world needed no such answer, and that I would be entitled to several hundred years of peace until someone was once more needed who took an interest in these matters and could profitably tackle the task anew. I imagine that for a while a period of rest could ensue, until the stint I had done in my lifetime needed to be taken up again. . . .

In my case it must have been primarily a passionate urge toward understanding which brought about my birth. For that is the strongest element in my nature. This insatiable drive toward understanding has, as it were, created a consciousness in order to know what is and what happens, and in

order to piece together mythic conceptions from the slender hints of the unknowable. . . .

It is astonishing to see how many self-nourished men who brood on such questions reach the same general conclusions, intuiting or feeling that there are in nature processes of rebirth ordered by the same general principles. Something of this sort may have been what Harold Goddard was getting at when he spoke of human life as made of the fabric of realized dreams—and of matter as the substance "on which creative energy can be projected."

## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

PICTURES BY FEININGER

WHAT can be done with photography? Well, a camera can see for you, and photographs can show you things you wouldn't ordinarily see at all, such as scenes in distant places or vistas a camera can look at, but not a man. It is a commonplace that the camera has freed the artist of any obligation to literalism, but this tells us little of what photography may be in itself. Robert Jay Wolff wrote in *MANAS* some years ago:

The best contemporary photography strengthens our visual powers, not by changing and altering familiar things, but by giving us a chance to see the thing observed in terms of itself. However, there are factors which prevent the easy identification that is made in everyday life. Things do not seem as familiar as they should. And at this point we can ask ourselves whether the camera has distorted life or whether it is seeing it with a frankness our eyes have never known. Photographs may record the everyday world exactly as it exists. Yet the camera, with artless detachment and uncompromising truthfulness, can render this world unfamiliar. Obviously, something is wrong somewhere. In our search for the error, we can eliminate the camera. It is within ourselves we must look for the answer.

How are we to determine the factor which makes the photographic record so different from the familiar impressions of our smugly trusted eyes? Perhaps the answer is this: the camera sees as well as looks; we look but do not always see. Familiarity does not necessarily imply seeing. More often, it is the point in the course of contact where the eye is relieved of further search. We look at an object not to see it but to identify it. The incentive which impels us to look does not often demand more than perception of abbreviations.

Now we are getting somewhere. The camera doesn't edit out the uninteresting or irrelevant things. It photographs what is there. The photographer may edit, of course. He chooses what to photograph. But the photographer may use the camera to teach us how to look beyond mere identification to see more of what is there. Here photography begins to be an art. And when

what the camera sees is something we could not possibly see, or see clearly or well, without the lens or other assisting devices, then the camera becomes a wonderful tool for the enlarging of the field of human awareness.

These are thoughts which come from looking at the pages of *The Anatomy of Nature*, a large book of photographs by Andreas Feininger published by Crown in 1956. Mr. Feininger has been a *Life* photographer, and some of the pictures in the book have appeared in that magazine. Basically, however, the book reflects the purposes of the author-artist-photographer, who is, incidentally, the oldest son of Lyonel Feininger, the German painter whose works are well known in this country and who taught at the Bauhaus in the early days. Lyonel Feininger now seems to have given something of his wondrous qualities for dealing poetically with structure to his son. Any kind of school should have a copy of this book, for a variety of reasons. The photographs make a take-off point in many directions. Andreas Feininger's purposes are well suggested in the following:

As I look at the web of my little spider it seems to me—the former architect and engineer—a structure worthy of as much admiration as any structure created by man. Like any creation of nature, it is functional, designed for a definite purpose, constructed with marvelous economy to achieve maximum efficiency with a minimum of material and weight. It has clarity and symmetry of organization. And it derives from these basic qualities a particular kind of beauty which far surpasses that of man's ornamental design. A spider web has the elemental beauty that is inherent in any truly functional form. It is the same sort of beauty that we find in the symbols of Euclidean geometry, in ballistic curves, and in the crystals of snow. We also find it in flower shapes which nature did not design as objects of beauty but as devices of propagation. We recognize it in shapes of bones which, rivalling modern sculpture in abstract beauty, are formed to bear the strains and stresses to which they are subjected. We see such beauty in nature wherever we look and, although we often may not comprehend what underlies it, the more closely we look the more we find to enjoy. No one has given better expression to this than Dr. Roman Vishniac,

the superb photographer of nature's manifestations, who once said: "Everything made by human hands looks terrible under magnification—crude, rough, and unsymmetrical. But in nature every bit of life is lovely. And the more magnification we use, the more details are brought out, perfectly formed, like endless sets of boxes within boxes."

A fact the engineering background of the author finds of interest is that the tensile strength of the silken thread in a spider web surpasses that of structural steel!

What Feininger says about the beauty of forms which perfectly serve function has a great many possibilities for development. Take communication as a function. Why is it that so many books which are required reading for certain kinds of knowledge are so ineffably dull? Is this evidence of a sort that what they contain is not worth learning? Compare, for example, a nineteenth-century scientific report with a twentieth-century contribution: almost always, the one written in the nineteenth century has more "life" in it, is more interesting. It may even betray some enthusiasm! Of course, a selective process may cause us to read only the exceptional literature of past science, but there seems a deadly bookkeeping quality about nearly all the papers written today.

Why shouldn't we insist that writing about the realities of life and nature and the world should sparkle with the atmosphere of wonder and the ardor of discovery? What nature does in pursuit of her own ends is always beautiful, Mr. Feininger says. If science is the capture of the secrets of nature, then why can't the practice of science be beautiful in all its parts? *The Anatomy of Nature* might be said to have this contention as an implicit thesis. Counting is not the only way of knowing:

Although scientists can measure with superb accuracy the frequencies of the electromagnetic radiation which we perceive as color, they are unable to explain how the sensation of color occurs within the brain. Nor can they explain the psychological effects of color harmonies. Or from music. Or from works of art. But we do not need to understand to be able to enjoy. We understand intellectually, but we

enjoy emotionally—we feel. Few people understand the physics of color, but most feel moved by the beauty of a flaming sunset sky. It is in this sense, through feeling and sympathy, that I attempt on the following pages to show the reader some of the wonders which surround us—some of the manifestations of nature's design.

Well, the author is not averse to adding some interesting engineering facts along with his pictures. Under a perfectly gorgeous photograph of a clump of skunk cabbage growing in a New England swamp, he tells how the tough shoots of this plant, which break through the ground in early spring, are able to penetrate the often frozen soil. First of all, the leaves come up furled, like a flag wrapped around a pole. This makes the shoot into a kind of spear. Then, these plants generate heat and warm the surrounding earth as they drive toward the surface. "The internal temperature of skunk cabbage plants pushing up through frozen soil has been found to be as much as twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit higher than that of their surroundings and ten to twenty degrees above the freezing point."

This book is filled with the camera's revelations about structure in nature. Without one air photo, you would never know that the tributaries of the Colorado River, in one area, look exactly like a great leafless tree. Throughout, magnification reveals the delicacies of structure and textured beauty of insects and plants. On the whole, Feininger persuades his reader that the useful or functional is always beautiful, leading to the proposition that when men have a better understanding of the function of their own lives, everything they do will grow beautiful.

## *FRONTIERS* A Hard, Hard Time

A FEW years ago, when the Black movement was first getting under way as a militant undertaking, a black journalist of capacity and eminence visited a white journalist, an old friend, who was also a man of capacity and eminence. The black journalist brought with him the outline of a black political party, complete with statement of platform and objectives. He wanted to show it to his friend. "You understand, of course," he said, "that the people who put this together would be very angry if they knew I was showing it to you." The white journalist said he understood.

He read the statement, then turned to his friend and said: "Well, it sounds fine, but there's absolutely nothing in it about relations with white people, now or in the future. Don't you think it ought to say something about that?" The black journalist answered: "They can't—they simply can't think about that now. And I can't suggest it to them."

Well, individuals can understand situations like that and deal with them as human beings, but when large social confrontations are involved, there may be nothing that can be said or done. There are some wrongs so massive that only the erosions of time can bring the changes wanted at a social level—time, and the continuous efforts of individuals to keep alive at least a private vision of what is wanted.

What then can individuals do? What Nancy Milio did as a social worker in Detroit would be one illustration. She was trying to get a child-care center going in a black neighborhood. She needed the help of some black leaders. She realized that, because of how they conceived what they needed to do to help their people to gain self-reliant attitudes, they were bound to minimize her efforts and to sneer at her, in public. But they would talk to her in private and she got the cooperation she needed, because of their influence. She didn't care what they said about her in public, for then she

wasn't Nancy Milio any more, but a symbol which the black leaders felt they had to use in this way to achieve emotional unity among their people. Maybe there are better ways to get emotional unity, but that was the way they worked, and the white people who came down to the ghetto to "help" usually gave them plenty of reasons not to change. Nancy Milio was one in a thousand.

How much of a man's identity is the result of his "race"? We don't know. We argue about it, mostly in moral terms, but we don't know. We don't know much about race, except in superficial empirical terms. Yet we believe that, generally speaking, human greatness transcends race. We have some magnificent reasons for believing this.

To what extent is a single white man responsible for everything wrong that other white men have done, all down through history? The question is impossible. Yet some whites are ashamed of what white men have done and are doing today, in relation to the people of other races. They do what they can, but it is not enough. Their failure exacts a cruel penalty of men of especially rare ability. If men generally were guided by principles of reason and justice it would never be necessary for the talented member of any minority group to become a champion and spokesman for his own people. A free society is a society in which no man *needs* to speak for himself or his own group, because all men speak for him and them. It is the failing society which condemns him to become a special sort of man.

In recent work of importance and distinction, nowhere does this problem become so apparent as in the writing of Frantz Fanon. It is evident that Fanon is an authentic humanist. It is also evident that, because he happened to have a black skin, and because of the unspeakable cruelties and injustices perpetrated against black peoples, he felt he had to become their partisan, although, beneath the surface of nearly everything he wrote, there was a universalism struggling to find expression. It couldn't really come out free and clear, because

of the depth and extremity of the sufferings of black people.

This is another of the agonies of historical wrong—an agony of the mind and feelings of exceptional men. It, too, seems to have no remedy but time, and it is no ordinary pain.

There exists in Atlanta, Georgia, an Institute of the Black World, which is a part of the King Memorial Center of that city. The Institute is headed by a black scholar, Vincent Harding, who came there from Spelman College where he was chairman of the department of history and sociology. One of its purposes is to define and give content to Black Studies. The Institute publishes Black Papers, and in the second paper of this series, Mr. Harding discusses the radical change in the spirit of black thinkers and leaders. The earliest black scholars and historians, he shows, conceived their role to be one of demonstrating to the white majority the value and importance of black contributions. They hoped and fully expected that America would eventually gain that natural moral maturity which would bring black people into full citizenship and full acceptance by all. This outlook lasted until very recently. The writer uses the term "Negro" to differentiate that outlook from the one which is now beginning to prevail. It has become virtually impossible for today's Black thinkers to feel what their teachers felt concerning America:

We have lived through the politics of the sixties, through all of the promises and betrayals, through the discomfiting of the West. We have seen ourselves as part of a new people the formerly colonized, "the wretched of the earth." We are unique, but we also share a common history with the colonized. . . .

Black History does not seek to highlight the outstanding contributions of special black people to the life and times of America. Rather our emphasis is on exposure, disclosure, or reinterpretation of the entire American past. We want to *know* America at its depths now that invitations to its life are besieging us. And it is clear even now that the Black past cannot be remade and clearly known without America's larger past being shaken at the foundations. While Negro History almost never

questioned the basic goodness and greatness of American society, while it assumed its innate potential improvements (provided it was ready to read additional volumes on Negro history), Black History has peeped at a different card.

This paper goes on to speak of neglected realities, glossed-over crimes, and recalls Tom Paine's anticipation that a flaw in the new Republic at its origin would enlarge, through the years, finally becoming obvious to all. There is no talk of having the white man finally "see," or of a future in which all will be united. The image of Black men saying things like this is, inescapably, for the new Black historians, an image of men on their knees, and not since the middle of the twentieth century has this posture been either possible or imaginable for black men of spirit. It seems quite clear that the only way to help bring this historic division to an end is to understand its practical necessity, just now, for all but the veritably Christlike among men. This is a hard, hard thing to say, but it grows out of recognition that there may be times when some kinds of truth must go into hiding for a while, in order to be preserved.