

## THE BASIS FOR NEW BEGINNINGS

THE project of our time—the only one worth talking about—is, as any one can see, the creation of a society truly devoted to the service of man; which does not subdivide and force him into peonage to any sort of partisan or dehumanizing interests, whether those of other people or even his own. The patterns of action in the present are not in the service of man, nor does what little momentum we have left from the past tend in this direction. The present is rather afflicted by dismay, disenchantment, and feelings of Sisyphusian despair. Meanwhile the managers of our society remain convinced that we have no choice but to continue what we have been doing, although, as they say, we must learn to be more circumspect, more calculating, more *scientific* in what we do. The idea of a fundamental change in orientation, in direction, seems outside the realm of possibility.

But this is only the official view. Increasingly large segments of the population are declaring for radical change. There is even a sense in which the blind hunger for change on the part of many of the young has precipitated the beginnings of actual alterations in the total picture of human society. There is a new Luddite rebellion, and also a Children's Crusade, already going on. And there are all those changes in individuals which are difficult to measure, but are noticeable to those who give more attention to attitudes in the people they meet than to the figures of the statisticians.

Yet there is news—nearly all of it bad—in the figures of the statisticians. We know, for example, that the foundation in fact of the "growth" theory of progress for industrial America is approaching collapse. When the chairmen of boards of big industrial corporations admit this, it is likely to be so. We know that the international balance of trade is turning against us, that we are importing more and more of our

"necessities" and becoming thereby a "dependent" nation. The ecologists have frightening things to say about the finiteness of our natural resources and their rapid dissipation. Land, water, and air are being degraded by what we do to them. The cost of health and even survival may soon equal the price of the luxuries by which we have measured our progress and superiority over other peoples.

This is some of the less debatable news we get from the statisticians. There is of course a lot more. Practically all the scientists, from microbiologists to geophysicists, have reason to be worried about what man has been doing to his environment, and therefore to man.

Why, then, so much reluctance to change our ways? Apart from the built-in resistance of human nature to innovation, there is the matter of our first principles and our idea of knowledge. Practically all of the things we have been doing, and which have got us into so much trouble, grew out of ideas and attitudes which were at least consistent with our ideas of knowledge, if not a direct result of them. And those ideas, which we have regarded as the substance of a great heritage, have *worked*. We have been boasting for a century or more about how well they work. So we are faced with this massive contradiction—that ideas and principles that have worked so well for so long now seem to have brought us to the brink of ruin. Nonsense, many people say. Sheer emotionalism! Well, there is a great deal of emotionalism getting expressed, these days, but not without cause. And there are very good reasons for the fact that the best men among us, for at least a generation, have been choosing to work in areas of salvage and reform of one sort or another. These men began doing this work quite a while ago, because they sensed the direction in which the world was moving. And today the

justifications of their careers are wholly manifest. Now we have "objective evidence" of a great many persistent evils—and objective evidence, according to our own theory of knowledge, is something that we dare not ignore. Hence the feeling of crisis and the spread of emotionalism, and the emergence of a "know nothing" and "cargo cult" psychology in some of the curious social formations of the present. These phenomena will probably multiply as the actual crisis deepens and the evidence of malfunction piles up.

It is difficult to "do" anything about the natural or "normal" resistances to change in human nature. The only quick way to overcome it is by inspiring sudden fear to produce emotional polarization, and the conservative reaction which sets in immediately after the change is as bad or worse than the earlier resistance. To overcome this resistance to change by constructive means, men need to develop disciplined powers of imagination and some daring, and only those with heroic potentialities are likely to learn these things during vast social disturbances.

What else can we do? This is not really a difficult question to answer. We need to give renewed attention to our first principles and our theory of knowledge. Initially, the attention should be critical.

First, then, we can say this: What we know about the world and how it works does not touch human beings nor make any significant reference to the distinctive realities of man's life. As various historians of science have shown, the modern idea of the world and of nature began to crystallize and take definite shape with the work of Galileo. The resulting conception is well summarized by E. A. Burt in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*:

Physical space was assumed to be identical with the realm of geometry, and physical motion was acquiring the character of a pure mathematical concept. Hence in the metaphysics of Galileo, space (or distance) and time become fundamental

categories. *The real world is the world of bodies in mathematically reducible motions, and this means that the real world is a world of bodies moving in space and time.* In place of the teleological categories into which scholasticism had analysed change and movement, we now have these two formerly insignificant entities given new meanings as absolute mathematical criteria and raised to the rank of ultimate metaphysical notions. . . . Teleology as an ultimate principle of explanation he (Galileo) set aside, depriving of their foundations those convictions about man's determinative relation to nature which rested upon it. The natural world was portrayed as a vast, self-contained mathematical machine, consisting of motions of matter in space and time, and man with his purposes, feelings, and secondary qualities was shoved apart as an unimportant spectator and semi-real effect of the great mathematical drama outside.

All the other sciences, as is well known, tried to follow the example of physics. There were modifications of method, of course, with other principles introduced, but the metaphysical foundation hardly changed at all. Man as he thinks of himself—a being of purpose, of meaning and striving, of mind and independent choice—was never able to re-enter the universe by means of any of the sciences. Even those branches of science which ostensibly deal with human beings have consistently avoided recognition of the authentic human essence, as given in the experience of every one of us. This neglect of the human being is notorious and quite obvious to those who look critically at, say, the professions of psychology and sociology. Such judgments are often cited in these pages, as for example, in the Sept. 8 issue (page 2), where a psychologist is quoted on the effect of the dominance of behaviorism in psychology, causing him to conclude:

What does behaviorism mean? I mean in a human way. Really very simple: behaviorism is the strongest possible wish that the organism and, *entre nous*, the person may not exist—a vast, many-voiced, poignant lament that anything so refractory to the assumptions and methods of eighteenth-

century science should clutter up the world-scape.

Then, in last week's *Frontiers*, there is an extract from C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* in which the author speaks of those sociologists whose main interest is in "prediction and control." Their objective is essentially manipulative—to learn how to deal with men as physicists deal with atoms, in order to "control social behavior." Seldom is there any question on the part of such social scientists as to whether they have the *right* to "turn frightened draftees into tough soldiers who will fight a war they do not understand," nor does the issue of social power come up for consideration in their deliberations.

Since our approach here is practical rather than metaphysical, we shall not attempt the difficult task of proposing a physics that is essentially man-related—even though the latest speculations of modern theoretical physics now point the way to a "science of motion" based upon the consciousness of the observer—but turn rather to those branches of science which are more directly related to human welfare. How, for example, could economics be conceived as a science devoted to human welfare? Here we do not lack for practical suggestions. There is already in print an effective comparison of modern economic ideas with a more ideal conception, by E. F. Schumacher, which appeared a few years ago in *MANAS* (and is also in *The Manas Reader*). We quote at length from this article, which Schumacher titled "Buddhist Economics," but might also have been called "Gandhian Economics." He begins by pointing out that modern economists suffer from a kind of metaphysical blindness, allowing them to believe that their science "is a science of absolute and invariable truths, without any presuppositions," and some of them even claim that economics is as free from "values" as the law of gravitation. Schumacher makes the question of labor the basis of the comparison:

Now, the modern economist has been brought up to consider "labour" or work as little more than a necessary evil. From the point of view of the employer, it is in any case simply an item of cost, to be reduced to a minimum if it cannot be eliminated altogether, say, by automation. From the point of view of the workman, it is a "disutility"; to work is to make a sacrifice of one's leisure and comfort, and wages are a kind of compensation for the sacrifice. Hence the ideal from the point of view of the employer is to have output without employees, and the ideal from the point of view of the employee is to have income without employment.

The consequences of these attitudes both in theory and in practice are, of course, extremely far-reaching. If the ideal with regard to work is to get rid of it, everything that "reduces the work load" is a good thing. The most potent method, short of automation, is the so-called "division of labour" and the classical example is the pin factory eulogized in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. Here it is not a matter of specialization, which mankind has practiced from time immemorial, but of dividing up every complete process of production into minute parts, so that the final product can be produced at great speed without anyone having had to contribute more than a totally insignificant and, in most cases, unskilled movement of his limbs.

The Buddhist point of view takes the function of work to be at least three-fold: to give a man a chance to utilize and develop his faculties; to enable him to overcome his ego-centredness by joining with other people in a common task; and to bring forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence. Again, the consequences that flow from this view are endless. To organize work in such a manner that it becomes meaningless, boring, stultifying, or nerve-racking for the worker would be little short of criminal, it would indicate a greater concern with goods than with people an evil lack of compassion and a soul-destroying degree of attachment to the most primitive side of this worldly existence. Equally, to strive for leisure as an alternative to work would be considered a complete misunderstanding of one of the basic truths of human existence, namely, that work and leisure are complementary parts of the same living process and cannot be separated without destroying the joy of work and the bliss of leisure.

From this point of view, there are two sorts of mechanization, and they are opposed in principle. One enhances man's skill and power,

while the other turns the work over to a mechanical slave and at the same time makes the man a servant of the slave. The difference is much the same as that pointed out between a tool and a machine by Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Society*. The tool increases the man's potentialities, leaving him the master of the situation, but the machine, unless it is basically a tool in character, takes command and dominates through its one-valued necessities.

It is by no means difficult to extend this conception of economics in many directions. It begins with basic consideration for human need, taking into account not only the obvious material needs, but also the needs of people to be self-reliant, self-sufficient, and self-respecting. Ivan Illich sees this sort of economics as a fundamental part of education and offers some suggestions in his book, *Deschooling Society* (Harper & Row, \$5.95). It is basically educational, he maintains, to develop technology along simple lines that bring the mechanisms in use within the comprehension of common folk, and at the same time meet their practical needs. As he says:

In the thirties any self-respecting boy knew how to repair an automobile, but now car makers multiply and withhold manuals from everyone except specialized mechanics. In a former era an old radio contained enough coils and condensers to build a transmitter that would make all the neighborhood radios scream in feedback. Transistor radios are more portable, but nobody dares take them apart. To change this in the highly industrialized countries will be immensely difficult; but at least in the Third World we must insist on built-in educational qualities.

To illustrate my point, let me present a model: By spending ten million dollars it would be possible to connect forty thousand hamlets in a country like Peru with a spiderweb of six-foot-wide trails and maintain these, and, in addition, provide the country with 200,000 three-wheeled mechanical donkeys—five on the average for each hamlet. Few poor countries of this size spend less than this yearly on cars and roads, both of which are now restricted to the rich and their employees, while poor people remain trapped in their villages. Each of these simple but durable little vehicles would cost \$125—half of

which would pay for transmission and a six-horsepower motor. A "donkey" could make 15 mph, and it can carry loads of 850 pounds (that is, most things, besides tree trunks and steel beams which are ordinarily moved).

The political appeal of such a transportation system to a peasantry is obvious. Equally obvious is the reason why those who hold power—and thereby automatically have a car—are not interested in spending money on trails and in clogging roads with engine-driven donkeys. The universal donkey could work only if a country's leaders were willing to impose a national speed limit of, say, twenty-five miles an hour and adapt its public institutions to this. The model could not work if conceived only as a stopgap.

This is not the place to elaborate on the political, social economic, financial, and technical feasibility of this model. I wish only to indicate that educational considerations may be of prime importance when choosing such an alternative to capital-intensive transport. By raising the unit cost per donkey by some 20 per cent it would become possible to plan the production of all its parts in such a manner that, as far as possible, each future owner would spend a month or two making and understanding his machine and would be able to repair it. With this additional cost it would be possible to decentralize production into dispersed plants. The added benefits would result not only from including educational costs in the construction process. Even more significantly, a durable motor which practically anyone could learn to repair and which could be used as a plow and pump by somebody who understood it would provide much higher educational benefits than the inscrutable engines of the advanced countries.

Manufacturing and technology *could* be developed around the ideal of serving the true needs of human beings, as conceived in this way. The same principle applies in the so-called advanced countries, where the do-it-yourself principle is continually frustrated by indifferent manufacturers who insist upon designs which make home repairs almost impossible and require the purchase either of entire new articles or at least sub-assemblies instead of simple parts to replace those which are damaged or worn out. The artificial dependency created by technology on its ineffable know-how is socially and culturally

ruinous. It has the tendency of turning a nation of ingenious, inventive people into impotent "consumers," and this, indeed, may be one of the hidden factors behind the new Luddite revolt.

We have one more author to quote on the question of the sciences and technological development, this time a Japanese novelist, Tanizaki Junichiro, who is hardly known in this country. He was sitting in his home on a very cold day, and found himself grateful for the warmth from a Western-made heater, but oppressed by its ugliness. This led to a long train of reflections:

. . . it is on occasions like this that I always think how different everything would be if we in the Orient had developed our own science. Suppose for instance we had developed our own physics and chemistry: would not the techniques and industries based on them have taken a different form, would not our myriads of everyday gadgets, our medicines, the products of our industrial art—would they not have suited our national temper better than they do? . . .

If we had been left alone we might not be much farther now than we were five hundred years ago. Even now in the Indian and Chinese countryside [this was published in 1934] life no doubt goes on much as it did when Buddha and Confucius were alive. But we would have gone ahead in a direction that suited us. We would have gone ahead very slowly and yet it is not impossible that we would one day have discovered our own substitute for the trolley, the radio, the airplane of today. There would have been no borrowed gadgets they would have been the tools of our culture, suited to us.

He gives as an example of indigenous technology Japanese and Chinese paper, which has a delighting texture and "gives us a certain feeling of warmth, and calm and repose."

Perhaps he is right. It seems at least possible that if the industrial development of the West had proceeded at a slower pace, less fiercely acquisitive, less arrogantly dominating, we should not have many of the dilemmas we now face, nor would we have imposed so many problems upon the rest of the world.

If our sciences had been able to develop with man at the center of things, instead of only matter and its motions, we might have gained some maturity of purpose before we obtained all the power which is now an obsession and an evil genius of the national policy. It is difficult to go back and make a new beginning, but, difficult or not, that is the meaning of the polarizations of opinion now going on in our society, and what we speak of as the generation gap. New beginnings are being made, with or without the maturity that ought to be present at the start. So, from this point of view, we don't have much choice in the matter. The need for a conception of science, of knowledge, which has man at the center of things is urgent and necessary. Better late than never.

## *REVIEW*

### CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

WE have for review *At the Edge of History* (Harper and Row, 1971, \$6.95) by William Irwin Thompson, who teaches the humanities, presently at York University in Toronto. Writers like Mr. Thompson have been very much needed, but long in coming. His book is one of the sort we have been hoping to see. He qualifies as an articulate representative of the new intelligence, with all the strength and independence of the breakaway generation of youth (he was born in 1938), but with a controlled sense of limit that gives intelligible form to the freedom he achieves. He is a man of no party. In this book he works mainly as an iconoclast, yet you would never call him "negative," for his criticisms seem intended to clear away the obstacles to a life of affirmation for human beings, and to expose the blurring effect of pretentious emotional substitutes.

*The Edge of History* is something of a philosophical memoir. It begins in Los Angeles, where the author was born and grew up. Los Angeles is not a place to experience history, for there it has been homogenized and too much imitated. Los Angeles has not yet found a life of its own. There is a long account of the author's experience at the most famous of the country's "growth" centers, which left him something less than a convert to this version of the future; then comes a revealing study of the technocratic isolationism of M.I.T., where he taught for a while.

The distinguishing characteristic of M.I.T. he finds to be "its overwhelming lust for power," which he sees reflected in the design of the place. Then he says:

Impressive as the architecture of power can be when seen on the outside, it must be ignored if one is to overcome the discomfort of living and working in a monument. The interminable gray corridors of the main building invite attack, and as I was walking through them one day, I was explaining to a friend how I thought the campus expressed the Institute's

sense of values. A graduate student, who was walking down the corridor slightly ahead of us, overheard my analysis and turned to comment: "You don't understand. I don't even notice these halls any more." I responded by saying that the very fact that his education forced him to move, with a split consciousness, in absolute indifference to his environment required a higher psychic price than he was, perhaps, aware of. The price might seem small to him, but when his attitude was multiplied by all the other engineers in our industrial culture it became evident in the polluted environment and the Cape Kennedy neurotic family life of engineers in what psychiatrists call "the aerospace syndrome." Still persisting in thinking that I was merely talking about the prettification of the countryside, the student concluded by saying, as he accelerated down the corridor, "I came here to build computers. The question is not how to appreciate the environment, but how to master it. If I had stuffed words into a straw man's mouth I could not have created a better expression of the M.I.T. culture of power.

M.I.T. becomes for Thompson the perfect microcosm of Western man's inner contradictions, which have now become outer as well. Our very excellences, which are technological, are our deepest flaw. Stratospheric air transport threatens the earth's atmosphere from above; smog poisons it from below. We now have manmade earthquakes from exploding bombs in the earth's crust, while nerve-gas kills thousands of sheep in Utah. "The technology that brilliantly succeeded for two centuries by moving in complete indifference to nature now seems about to suffer massive retaliation."

Thompson reads the scroll of current history as an ancient Greek might read it; for him it is wholly *rational* to expect a massive retaliation from nature, even though the technologists, who were not raised on Greek tragedy, "will not accept the fact that their unique excellence and their tragic flaw are one." Where did the blind rationalism of technology originate? Thompson answers:

Modern science triumphed over medieval alchemy by eliminating the mind's affective resonance with nature. Roger Bacon thought his alembic was a microcosm of the mountains at large,

and that if his mind were as focussed in his laboratory as God's was in His creation, then he would be able to move with nature in its teleological process and raise base metals higher in the Chain of Being to become gold. In Latin, "laboratory" means a place to work and pray. But alchemy didn't *work*, and nature had to be deadened before it could become a tool to our ends. We conquered the superstition that kept us chanting litanies on our knees in front of nature, only now to be brought down to them again by the overtowering *hybris* that moves in utter contempt for the very ecology that supports human life. Those of us who, as teachers of the humanities, stand in the chorus but never touch the *skene* of action, can see the tragedy coming, but it does no good to shout a warning to the hero. He cannot hear us, for he moves in a world apart, distracted from his surroundings by his past successes and his own invincible sense of power. Man and the humanities are out of his hearing, except on state occasions when atavisms are decorative and lip service is paid to "the education of the whole man." The engineer, be he capitalist or Communist, has been *trained* to his success, not his failure, and he will continue to perform according to his training until the disastrous end. Then the inconceivable will be obvious, civilization will scream, and the world will turn over. Since each age is a reversal of the last, I would hope that over the ashes of the old technology a new Whiteheadian science could arise.

A long section in the middle of the book deals with the ironies of problem-solving action, showing how each "solution" shapes a new confinement for human beings. The resolution of this paradox lies in the detached man of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, but this is not so simple, and to grasp the meaning of the problem is only a faltering, first step.

Now comes a masterly analysis of the failure of the "liberal imagination," represented, in this case, by the findings of the experts asked by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to imagine what the world may be like in the year 2000. (*Daedalus*, Summer, 1967.) "The difficulty with the liberal imagination," Thompson says, "is that it is so owned by the myth of progress that it cannot think of the future in any other terms except more of the same." He finds this true of all the contributors to the report, except for the questions raised by David Riesman

and Erik Erikson. The report lacks "a vision of terror and an understanding of evil." With the help of Herman Kahn and Anthony Weiner of Hudson Institute, and of technocrats in general, science has fallen to the level of industrial technology. Speaking of the report, Thompson says:

Their charts and graphs may give the impression of being more scientific than my merely literary essays, but if one takes a simple-minded, linear extrapolation and puts it through several computer runs, he is still going to come out with a simple-minded, linear extrapolation of the GNP's of the major powers in A.D. 2000. All the computers in the world won't help you if your unexamined and unconscious assumptions on the nature of reality are simply wrong in their basic conception. Kahn and Weiner are no more scientific than the actors on late-night television, who with the trappings of white laboratory smocks, charts, graphs, and acidity meters try to "prove" that Roloids can cure the upset stomach the commercial is causing.

Precisely because Kahn and Weiner are neither scientists nor humanists, but what we call social scientists, they have difficulty in understanding human forms of violence and terror in their revolutionary aspects and can only find themselves at home in discussion of the technological forms of violence and terror inflicted upon men by their own machines. Here Kahn and Weiner come into their own and become quite effectively frightening as they discuss the military-political world which they serve.

One of the effects of thinking in terms of mythic reality is a natural openmindedness and an immunity to dogma. There are balances in mythic awareness which free a man of the desperate need for finite certainties and sure-thing explanations, and this may account for some of the pleasant surprises in this book. But first what seems to us a lucid passage on the meaning of "myth":

There may indeed be a "*mythopoeic* mentality," but it is not restricted to precivilized man, but is to be found in geniuses as different as Boehme, Kepler, Blake, Yeats, Wagner, Heisenberg, and that student of Boehme's theory of action and reaction, Isaac Newton. Myth is not an early level of human development, but an imaginative description of reality in which the known is related to the unknown through a system of correspondences in which mind

and matter, self, society, and cosmos are integrally expressed in an esoteric language of poetry and number which is itself a performance of the reality it seeks to describe. Myth expresses the deep correspondence between "the universal grammar" of the mind and the universal grammar of events in space-time. A hunk of words does not create a language, and a hunk of matter does not create a cosmos. The structures by which and through which man realizes the intellectual resonance between himself and the universe of which he is a part are his mathematical, musical, and verbal creations. Mediating between Nous and Cosmos is the Logos.

"Only myth," Thompson says at the end of the book, "remains equal to reality." One could add to this by saying that "knowing" reality must be, for man, an act of the imagination. Full human reality is always something generated by men themselves, and sustained by them through the discipline of thought, which becomes the stuff of their real being. It is this aspect of nature and life of which the technocratic intelligence does not even dream. Man is the vision of his own becoming, much more than anything he has become. A science which deals only with the dead objectivities of the past can therefore know hardly anything about man.

The last chapter seriously questions certain dogmas of the Darwinian theory of organic evolution, showing that there is nothing in the theory to account for the extraordinary development of the human brain. It also assembles interesting recent evidence in behalf of the geological reality of a submerged Atlantic continent, revealing the shy way in which present-day anthropologists flirt cautiously with the idea of Atlantis by quoting old codices of the pre-Columbian peoples of Mexico, in which they tell of the landing of their ancestors at a place which is now Northern Veracruz. There is plenty of reason for caution on the part of academics, in view of the hunger of the popular press for "sensation," yet, as Mr. Thompson says, the story keeps cropping up in various sources. Sooner or later, he thinks, the truth in myth will become obvious, although this may not be in the

extravagant terms of true-believer persuasion. This writer's way of looking at and presenting the evidence should appeal to many readers. And the price of ignoring evidence of the verity in myth may be very great. As Thompson says:

Science often progresses upon ignorant oversimplifications until the simplifications wear out their usefulness and are discarded. Now as the simplifications are indeed wearing out the young are being accosted by new complexities that they cannot handle. Already the hippie dropouts from our universities and high schools are becoming caught up in black magic, sorcery, and the crudest forms of occultism, and Charles Manson in Los Angeles and the Zodiac killer in San Francisco are showing us what happens when twentieth-century rational and fatuous man fades away. The Pythagorean synthesis of science, religion, and art advocated by Whitehead and Teilhard de Chardin will be angelic, but the cultural transformation of our society will also involve all the subrational returns of the demonic.

There are doubtless other ways to formulate this comparison and warning, but the point seems clear enough, the danger unmistakable. *At the Edge of History* becomes practically unique in its holistic coverage of the issues confronting modern man by raising questions of this sort.

**COMMENTARY**  
**LAFCADIO HEARN**

IT is not possible, in brief space, to give a sample of how Lafcadio Hearn writes about writing, but one of his lectures to his students in the University of Tokyo, on the question of literary societies, illustrates the quality of his thinking. He begins by quoting Herbert Spencer's rule that no society should attempt what individuals can do better by themselves. In general, then, Hearn is against literary societies. At first he speaks misleadingly of their usefulness, but then discloses that no society which has more than three members can be of service, and he says that the Pre-Raphaelite society "existed only by groups of three, and these groups touched each other only at long intervals," and then for "business" reasons. Most literary societies, he says, have social rather than literary intentions. The one he belonged to, he explained, existed only to accumulate funds to defend the rights of authors against dishonorable publishers.

He makes but one concession:

I will say that literary societies of a serious character, such as those formed in universities, and sometimes outside of them, have this value—they still help men to rise up to the general level. Now "the general level" means mediocrity; it cannot mean anything else. But young students of either sex, or young persons of sentiment, must begin by rising to mediocrity; they must grow. Therefore I say that such societies give valuable encouragement to young people. But though the societies help you to rise to the general level, they will never help you to rise above it. And therefore I think that the man who has reached his full intellectual strength can derive no benefit from them. Literature, in the true sense, is not what remains at the general level; it is the exceptional, the extraordinary, the powerful, the unexpected, that soars far above the general level. And therefore I think that a university graduate intending to make literature his profession, should no more hamper himself by belonging to literary societies, than a man intending to climb a mountain should begin by tying a very large stone to the ankle of each foot.

This candor runs throughout the book.

*Talks to Writers* appeared in 1927, published by Dodd, Mead, with an introduction by John Erskine, of which this is the concluding sentence:

If there is, unfortunately, no magic by which a Lafcadio Hearn can teach us to write with his own skill, at least in his talk of his beloved art there is a kindling eloquence that rouses in us something of his own desire to see the beauty of life and to tell the truth about it.

## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

#### WRITERS WHO TEACH

THE idea of making a book out of essays by writers who teach was a happy one, and we have enjoyed reading *Writers as Teachers/Teachers as Writers* (Holt paperback, \$2.45), put together by Jonathan Baumbach as editor. A good writer has to be honest, possess some self-awareness, and be able to enter into the lives of other people. One gets the impression from this book that the classes taught by its contributors are oases of life and discovery on the academic scene. There is something good in each of the reports, but we found the most value in the essay by Wendell Berry and the introduction by the editor.

It is clear of course that taking a course in "writing" is not the way to become a writer. A writer becomes a writer because *nothing* can stop him from doing so. If anything can, he is not likely to have the makings of much of a writer. But the oasis feature of these classes, we must admit, makes them something of value.

The teachers all agree that writing cannot be "taught." Several of them think it can't be written about. In our own experience, apart from minor utilities like Strunk and White, we can think of only one good book on writing—Lafcadio Hearn's *Talks to Writers*, which is a collection of Hearn's lectures to his students in the University of Tokyo, given many years ago. Hearn will help a writer to realize what he is learning as he learns it.

What then does a teacher of writing do? The editor puts it well:

One can't tell one's children anything (or one's students), can't save them from deception or death, though one quixotically tries. That quixotic gesture is what teaching—particularly the teaching of writing—is about. . . .

Ah then, what are we doing in the classroom? The best we can, I should hope, since nothing—nothing worth knowing (nothing beyond the banality of facts)—can be taught. It is what every serious teacher finally discovers. And it is after that

discovery that the most valuable experience in the classroom can take place.

Wendell Berry's contribution reminds one at the outset of Kenneth Keniston's definition of "youth"—the time when a young man or woman has not yet decided what he will do with his life. He has not yet committed himself to a clear direction. Feeling this about his students, Berry says:

And so, as I see it, the confrontation between teacher and student is essentially a confrontation between experience and possibility. It is exciting and often deeply moving to work and think and speak in the atmosphere of possibility that surrounds students. But in this there is also an irreducible bewilderment, for though one presumably has some measure of control over facts, and even over one's own possibilities, I think that one must be extremely hesitant and uneasy in dealing with possibilities that belong to other people. I would rather enlarge a student's sense of possibility than "direct" it. But this is personal, at least in its effect on the student, and insofar as it is personal it is problematic; there are no systems for it. Experience speaking to possibility has also the obligation to pass on some sense of what may be expected, a sense of the practicable, and at the same time to avoid condescension and discouragement. This is what I think of as the moral predicament of a teacher, and as it can have only particular solutions in the lives of particular students it remains a predicament, always as liable to failure as to success.

In the section on the things he does in class Berry says:

I have spoken above of accuracy of observation of detail which I think is indispensable both to good writing and good thinking. But there is a perceptiveness which depends on that, and follows from it, and is more valuable: that is the sense of form, the form both of the thing being written about and of the thing being written. The sense of form has to do with the discovery of the way consciousness moves into and among these relationships. Language is both the instrument of the discovery of form and form's graph and embodiment. Form cannot be predicted, but only made, and so it is impossible to tell how to make it. In teaching, one is limited to showing examples and to pointing out failures. In a given piece of work it is possible to say whether or not there is a coherent form and whether or not the form is of any interest or value. It is possible to say

what is arbitrary or irrelevant. But it is impossible to say what *ought to be* the form of work that is formless.

As in everything that Berry writes, this essay has a wholeness of outlook and a reach of mind which suggest that a "writer" needs to be something more than a talented recorder of words. He says toward the end:

To me the hope of becoming, as a teacher, more than a mere mechanic of facts and procedures lies in the awareness of the lives that produce the work and that are, in turn, to be served by the work. I believe that the most meaningful calling, for both teacher and student, is not the making of a product—not even a great book—that will be worthy of the attention and interest of other people, but the making of a life that will be worthy of *one's own* attention and interest. The highest creativity, as always, is to come to a sense of the amplitude of life and the largeness of possibility. In our own time the most necessary and useful act of creation will not be to produce a great work of art, but to imagine and implement a meaningful alternative to the pigeonhole—the narrowly specialized and all too well prepared "place in society"—that the education machine offers as a goal, but which is really a dead end and a death.

A long contribution by Denise Levertov—"The Untaught Teacher"—tells the story of the teaching experiences of a well known poet who herself never went to school. The most interesting section is about the poetry workshop she was conducting at the University of California in Berkeley at the time of the People's Park campaign, in which she took part. Out of the conflict and struggle of that event came a kind of camaraderie that intensified both teaching and learning. Miss Levertov writes:

To have lived through the Berkeley siege means to me, then, not only a new vision of what life might be like in a world of gentle and life-loving people. It means not only the knowledge that there is no such thing as a generation gap when people are engaged in a common task in which they believe. It means not these things alone, though they are much, very much; but also the conviction that a meaningful education in the future—if there is a future worth the name—will be broken down into the smallest viable units (classes averaging between ten and fifteen) and that these units will do many more things together than study

specific subjects: they will cook together (something that would restore meaning to eating together), and grow vegetables and flowers together, and mend each other's clothes—and study not only one subject as a group, but several related and unrelated ones, while each individual would also be sharing some study and other activities with other semi-autonomous groups. In such educational interweavings each teacher would also be, part of the time, a student along with the rest; and all teachers would share, at least to the extent consonant with his or her age and family situation, in the life of the commune—for such educational units would be communes, to a far greater degree even than such forerunners as Black Mountain College seem to have been. A pipe dream? I don't believe it is merely that, remote and hard to effectuate as such a scheme may sound at a time when colleges everywhere are *expanding*. I can't see it as a mere pipe dream because I believe it is a necessity. (If Paul Goodman's proposal for storefront elementary and high schools had been taken seriously several years ago, it would have been one of the greatest advances made in the history of education.)

Wright Morris, perhaps the best known novelist among the contributors, offers much common sense concerning what *can* be taught, but also lists the difficulties with which any sort of teaching about writing is hedged. The following illustrates his approach:

Somewhere Stendhal says, "If the word love comes up between them, I am lost." This line will serve the writer of fiction who finds himself teaching writing. If the word "creative" comes up—often—he too is lost. It evokes precisely those gifts that lie outside of craft problems. The gifted writer can learn, and does learn, to write better, although most of what he learns is self-taught. He learns by reading writers he considers his superior, and he learns by reading critically what he has written. Without this faculty of self-criticism he will never prove to be his own master. It is also possible for him to learn from the hints and comments of another writer—not too often, perhaps, but it remains within the possible. Considered as *craft*, writing can be taught and most writers can learn to write better. The word "creative" can be left unmentioned.

Who should read this book? Almost anyone interested in what people do in courses in "creative writing."

## *FRONTIERS* Canadian Comment

SOME years ago a leading Latin-American expert, asked by an American what magazine he could read to keep informed concerning Latin-American affairs and thought, replied that no such magazine existed—there was nothing he could read. The best reporting on Latin-America, he said, appears in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Taking this suggestion seriously, MANAS subscribed to the weekly edition of *Le Monde* for a year, but translation from another language proved impractical and the subscription was allowed to lapse. MANAS also subscribed to the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* for several years, finding this paper an excellent corrective of the insularity of the American press. We heard the other day that *Le Monde* is now issuing an English edition and—checking with the newspaper desk at the library—we learned not only that this is so but also that the English *Le Monde* has "merged" with the *Manchester Guardian*. This combination ought to make very good reading for those who tire of the homogenized fare of the domestic commercial press.

If reading a foreign newspaper seems too extensive a program, a foreign magazine may be a substitute. Take for example *McLean's*, which is probably Canada's most widely circulated magazine. A Canadian friend has supplied us with a copy of the July issue and reading it gives the definite impression that Canadian communications are less institutionalized than those in the United States.

Some Canadians are now considerably upset by what seems to them the financial and cultural imperialism of the United States. They feel that too large a proportion of Canadian industry is owned by American corporations, and there is material about this problem in the July issue. But of greatest interest to American readers would be a long open letter by Bruce Hutchison, a veteran Canadian journalist, to Pierre Trudeau, Prime

Minister of Canada. In this letter, Hutchison tries to understand the United States in behalf of his Canadian readers. After speaking of the revolt of American youth, the struggle of the blacks for social and economic justice, the drug craze and the crime wave, he asks:

Will the personal freedom so long regarded as natural and unassailable be doomed in the long run by a centralized technopolitical system requiring instantaneous decisions from a few experts at the summit? Must the machine, which released man's body from inhuman toil, return his mind and manhood to a new, luxurious prison, equally inhuman?

We continue with quotations which illustrate the insight of this Canadian's view of the United States:

The sovereign event now moving next door is not the success or failure of any government, personality, polity or law. It is a much more intricate, almost psychic phenomenon of the kind that has occurred in mankind's experience at infrequent intervals centuries apart, and then with momentous results as if a dam had broken to unloose a flood. .

Because they are educated and free to think as they please, the American people, or a least the thoughtful ones who make public opinion, are the most self-critical and probably the most unhappy of all western peoples. The vacuum aches.

Up to now most Americans feel the ache vaguely, but it is spreading. While they use different language, always cryptic and self-conscious, I have heard the same questions asked by cowboys in the mountains of Wyoming, lobstermen in Maine, financial men in Wall Street, statesmen in Washington and, more insistently, by young hitchhikers on the road. Where has society gone wrong? Can it be reformed gradually and peacefully over time or will it explode suddenly in chaos? . . .

What, after all, is life intended for? What is the human creature's appointed place and function in the universe? Why has he distorted and defaulted them? To the truly ultimate questions no answer can come from the politicians, the economists, the scientists or the men of business. None from the practical men of any kind, only from the philosophers. But the United States, producing everything else, has yet to produce a philosopher with a sufficient message for these times, an idea big enough to fill the vacuum.

As for American "influence" on Canada:

It is just impossible, by any policy whatever, to isolate Canada against the *outward* impact of American culture. No nation can be so isolated from currents gushing out of a technology that all nations imitate, an affluence they all seek for themselves, an appetite that they all share.

In style of living, in use of gadgets, in hunger for goods and easy, predigested ideas, the whole world is being Americanized—not by any deliberate design but simply because no one really wants to stanch the technological flood. It moves under its own momentum, blindly, massively, irresistibly, everywhere. And nowhere so fast as across the Canadian border.

If we cannot resist the worldwide American gloss is our nationality therefore condemned to extinction? By no means, provided that we do not confuse gloss with reality.

After a sensible account of what Canadians do well, and some encouragement for them to do more of the same, Mr. Hutchison offers some comment on Canadian relations with the United States:

. . . what happens if the American giant, rebuffed and distrusted and wounded by friends and enemies abroad, turns as mean and unreasonable as some of our own people? What if it tries to isolate itself again?

Then, too late, we would learn how much anti-Americanism has festered in Canada, how little anti-Canadianism is in the United States; how comfortable it is to live beside a friendly neighbor with all his irritating faults, how difficult beside a spiteful one. We always complain that Americans take us, ignorantly, for granted. So they do, but the same error in reverse is just as dangerous.

Well, a magazine article is only a magazine article, even if this one is better than most. It may not sway events or inspire a prime minister. Yet it does reveal some of the extremely pleasant qualities of Canadians, and there are substantial advantages in having neighbors endowed with patience and common sense.