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A STAR OF SOME MAGNITUDE

FROM what event should we date the initial breakdown and subsequent decline of institutional religion in the West? From the Lutheran Reformation? From Galileo's demonstration of the Copernican hypothesis, and his argument for scientific and mathematical proofs? From Charles Darwin's replacement of the story of Creation with the Theory of Evolution? From the shock and disaster of the first World War? From the moral disintegration spread around the world by World War II?

No doubt iconoclasts like Nietzsche and martyrs like Dietrich Bonhoeffer should be taken into account, as well as the cross-fertilizations that have resulted from the wanderings in the Orient of writers, soldiers, and, more recently, doctors of the mind as well as dissatisfied men of religion. But however we assign causes, the fact of the decline is completely evident, and there is enough internal turmoil in the major denominations of Christianity to show that the questioning of traditional belief is by no means limited to attacks of skeptics from without.

At such a time, various tendencies seem practically inevitable. Those to whom it seems perfectly natural to take instruction in what to believe from specialists or experts who have been trained in religious matters will not be grateful to pastors or priests who try to explain to them that the time has come for believers to shape their own faiths. And there will be persons among the clergy who, while feeling very "advanced" and ready to embrace new convictions themselves, will still wish to retain proprietorship over the beliefs of others. The consequence of this can only be the multiplication of bizarre sects and the development of personal followings of "charismatic" leaders. All this has little to do with religion, although it is probably quite typical of a period of transition during which an age dies and another comes to birth. And to take such goings-on seriously, as an expression of the human longing to know, is almost certainly to overlook the larger sweep of change in human attitudes.

The fact is that for several generations, the religion of the West has been the worship of Science, with its treasury of exact knowledge, its demonstrations of "results," and its promise of unending progress. That the kind of science we know has exactly nothing to say to human beings, in terms of their most richly human qualities and higher aspirations, was in general overlooked in the general rush of a progress that was undeniable; it is only from the double disaster of satiety and multiplying problems we don't seem to be able to *get at* that we are now inclined to listen to what philosophers declared many years ago. These counsels have nowhere been put more succinctly than in *The Human Situation,* by W. Macneile Dixon (the Gifford Lectures delivered in 1935-37). Toward the end of this volume is the following:

> . . . whatever the soul may be, it is never found apart from a self, which, it seems to be frequently forgotten, is as necessary to thinking as to feeling or living. The only existent which includes all other existents is consciousness, the appanage of the self, and apart from the self, the centre of everything, there is neither consciousness nor thinking, neither desiring nor explaining, neither science nor logic, neither knowing nor being known. The attempt to derive the self from atoms and the void, from space and time, to deny it any constructive role in the system of nature, has not failed for lack of unceasing and desperate effort. It has failed because you cannot explain the self in terms of the not-self. The philosophies of the future will, I think, take another and more promising way. They will allow to the self its unique status, its standing as a factor, a primary factor and an organising factor in the universal whole.

In another place, Dixon is more explicit concerning what has happened to the modern mind—a development which, we should add, is now under challenge and even angry questioning:

> Time was when man was the chief object of his own attention, interest and study. We have changed all that. Nature has usurped the pride of place, and we are told to think of ourselves as mere incidents in a process. The modern view fuses man and things. Men are merely things of one kind among innumerable things of other kinds. That light travels at the rate of 186,000 miles a second rather than at 146,000 makes me neither glad nor sorry, any more than does the proportion of the electrons to the protons in an atom of oxygen but that we are glad or sorry at any time, or at any thing, is, it seems, utterly irrelevant. What is of real importance is to know that there are six thousand white corpuscles and five million red corpuscles in a cubic millimetre of blood of each one of us.
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> Time was when man's presence on the earth gave it dignity amid the heavenly host, when the intellectual systems magnified mankind, exalted the mind and assigned it a great place in the hierarchy of creation. "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!" Hamlet was, of course, mad, and only a madman could say such things. One must admit that it is hard for the plain man to accept what the philosophers and men of science tell him is the truth. . . . Too much chlorine, too much or too little sulphur make us or mar us. Carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, or their combinations under colloidal conditions—there you have the whole history, a complete account of mankind. In them are to be found the spirit of Plato and of Shakespeare, the brain of Newton and Beethoven, the hopes and fears and affections, the saints and heroes, the wars and civilisations, the religions and sciences, the cathedrals and the poems and the pictures.
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> If this is what is meant by explanation or enlightenment offered by our times, the plain man may well exclaim, "Heaven keep us in our wits. Perhaps we are as mad as Hamlet. His madness would not be noticed among us. We are as mad as he." Nevertheless, towards some such conclusions, unless I am mistaken, the finger of modern knowledge seems to point. Much has been said in their support. You will not be out of the fashion if you adopt them. True it is that they have not been demonstrated. It is not what science has proved, but what she threatens to prove, that so alarms the friends of religion and of the soul. . . .
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> Our modern teachers appear, I sometimes feel, apprehensive lest man should prove a greater enigma than they can deal with, or indeed, perhaps, than they desire him to be. They have, in my judgment, good reasons for their misgivings. The truth about him may be very remote from their notions, may lie elsewhere than they would have us believe. Man may be more interesting and important than they suppose, possibly even a star of some magnitude in the celestial universe.

With Dixon for tutor, we are led in other directions. And how different the universe to which he invites us! Its architect is the imagination—although it may be nonetheless real for that—and its medium is consciousness. Is this the world where reside the truths of philosophical religion? Yet at the beginning of his book, Dixon predicts no certainties. Instead, he warns the reader against his errors. Why should this, for some men, only strengthen the invitation? We know there are others who may be frightened off by cautions of this sort, having been taught to respect only the sure thing.

What should a man do when he finds himself born into a world where the mainstays of belief have given way, where authorities abdicate and the best men declare that they have no answers to the important questions? It is customary for a "seeker" to go from door to door of the established religions, hoping to find a place which may be "comfortable" for himself and perhaps his family. Others, by inexplicable intuition, suspect that the highest truths may not be comfortable at all, in terms of ordinary longing. And why, still others ask, go to seek the truth in places where it has been filtered out by an institutional process methodically pursued for several centuries? The great reformers were seldom ecclesiastics. Nor were they willingly "founders" of churches or anything like that, although they doubtless knew what men would do to what they taught. Buddha and Jesus were destroyers of orthodoxy. Why,

then, should a man looking for the truth begin by adding his strength to some existing orthodoxy?

But what is he—a single individual—to do? The question has no easy answer. There are books, of course, some of them great. There are exquisite scriptures which came before the ecclesiastical organizations which grew up around them and are responsible for the endless commentaries that often obscure or blur what the first teachers meant. There are also fine books by men with awakened and wondering minds, such as Dixon's *The Human Situation.*

What should a man ask or look for in philosophy or religion? Whatever "spiritual truth" is, it should help him to become stronger, less dependent upon anything or any one outside himself. That might be the first rule or test Then, it should have something to say about what is real and what is only appearance, and how such matters are decided. It should deal with the question of how thing work, the laws or principles of order in nature and life and, finally, it should illuminate the problem of meaning or purpose. Most of all, perhaps, it should help a man to understand the complexities of motivation he finds within himself, and give some working knowledge of the paradoxes of human nature.

Some questions of this sort are already dealt with effectively in world literature. Those who have read the *Tao Te Ching,* the more comprehensible of the *Upanishads* selected dialogues of Plato, some of Plotinus, and of more recent thinkers, Emerson, will not find these ideas new or unusual, but the practical ground of all philosophical thinking. To these Dixon adds the European philosopher, Leibniz, as indispensable to a philosophy of immortality, and Dixon seems adamant on the necessity for this. What he says, however, is more a delighting expostulation than an "argument":

> Religion, until our modern interpreters got to work on it, rested upon belief in another and future world, with which our human destinies were somehow associated. If no such world exist interest in religion is, to my mind, of much the same order as an interest in Gulliver's travels, or the tribal customs of the Lilliputians. Religion has resigned in favor of ethics. . . .
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> What did Christ teach, and His followers believe these nineteen hundred years? It is not for me to say. I have read in the books of some theologians that a confirmation of the belief in a future life is undesirable. When they assure us further that human destiny, the fate of the soul, is not a religious interest at all, and claim merit for this remarkable discovery, they are not, I think, wise, in their generation. They incur a widespread suspicion that they have profound misgivings, are far, indeed, from sure that for this ancient faith there is the slightest foundation. They proclaim that Christianity is not in need of this supporting pillar, and rests upon far more solid columns. It is an interesting speculation how long it would survive the extinction of the belief. In my judgment not long. The decay of this ancient hope, as old as the human race, is the worm at the root of all our creeds, and without it Christianity becomes what Arnold a generation ago declared it to be, "Morality touched with emotion," a gentle humanitarianism, associated with a time-honored and beautiful ritual—humanitarianism, which that penetrating thinker, Dostoievsky, held to be the form of atheism most to be dreaded, the greatest anti-religious force in Europe. When Christianity ceases to stand for the infinite and everlasting value of the individual, its sun will surely set. Let its guardians look to it. Men will not long distress themselves to save their souls when they know that save for the present hour they have no souls to save.

Dixon has his theory of immortality, one that he shares with an illustrious company of philosophers, and he devotes more than several pages of this book to its advocacy and defense, although he never argues tendentiously. Dixon is at home along both the highways and the byways of the philosophic thought of the world, and he ruminates out loud much more than "argues" for a view or contention. To go on a journey among ideas with him is a pleasurable experience, since he is never out to convert.

One thing that a book of this sort helps to make clear is the folly of creeds. The truths of philosophic religion are by nature subjective and when known are in some sense the creation of the

knower. Men can reasonably unite in the *search* for philosophic truth, but to unite in "belief" is to agree upon a substitute for knowledge, which may then turn into a tacit agreement that there is no longer any need to look for it. Something of this sort may have happened in the case of the Christian belief in immortality, which, as Dixon points out, died away at some time during the nineteenth century, perhaps through the erosions caused by confidence in a very different sort of knowledge—the knowledge of the objective world of things accumulated by the disciplines of science. Creeds, one could say, are a fraudulent substitute for objective certainty, having the form of certainty in verbal expression, yet lacking experience that what is said is in fact true. How different the apparently tentative and yet quite persuasive way in which Dixon declares his conviction of immortality:

> How many modes of existence are there? I cannot tell you, but I should imagine them to be very numerous. And what kind of immortality is at all conceivable? Of all doctrines of a future life palingenesis or rebirth, which carries with it the idea of pre-existence, is by far the most ancient and the most widely held, "the only system to which," as said Hume, "philosophy can hearken." "The soul is eternal and migratory, say the Egyptians," reports Laertius. In its existence birth and death are events. And though this doctrine has for European thought a strangeness, it is in fact the most natural and easily imagined, since what has been can be again. This belief, taught by Pythagoras, to which Plato and Pythagoras were attached, has been held by Christian fathers as well as by many philosophers since the dawn of civilization. It "has made the tour of the world," and seems, indeed, to be in accordance with nature's own favorite way of thought, of which she so insistently reminds us, in her rhythms and recurrences, her cycles and revolving seasons. "It presents itself," wrote Schopenhauer, "as the natural conviction of man whenever he reflects at all in an unprejudiced manner."
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> According to Plato's theory of reminiscence, our present knowledge is a recollection of what was learnt or known by the soul in a previous state. You will say, it has no knowledge of its previous lives. But what man remembers every day of his life? And lost memories, as the psychologists will tell you, are recoverable. For the memory appears to be a palimpsest, from which nothing is ever obliterated. If we have forgotten most days and incidents of our present lives it is natural that memories of previous lives should fail us. Yet from infancy every forgotten day and hour has added to our experiences, to our growth and capacity. All that a child was and did, though unremembered, is still part of him and is knit up into his present nature. Every day and hour had its value and made its contribution to the mind and soul. So it may be with former lives, each of them but a day in our past history.

When it comes to philosophy and questions of human destiny, the uses of logic seem to resemble much more the skill and technique of the artist than the tight exercises of reason which are supposed to lead to unavoidable conclusions. There is nothing wrong, they say, with the "logic" of John Calvin, yet who would now follow him to his conclusions, save from the habit of unthinking conformity? No man who releases himself from the barren formulas of the not-self, and who now sets out to inquire into the possible meanings of his life, can go back to the old sectarian beliefs. He is, so to speak, turned loose upon the world—a world with no snug harbors of any sort, and no enclosing and assuaging faiths. It is as though the age that has died is not the age of institutional religion, although it seems to be, but the age of external authority and prescribed and managed belief. For science, after all, has been a kind of external religion for the great majority of those who have relied upon it for their "salvation," since they had no more personal experience of the laws of nature than the most "fundamental" of believers have in the miracles of religion.

This is not to suggest that the cycle of scientific inquiry has been without value. The discoveries made concerning the materials and dynamics of the natural world and the resulting store of information and skills making possible the manipulation of "things" have led, finally, to the realization that this sort of knowledge does not touch and can not relate to the realities of man's life as a human being, but affects only his physical existence. As Dixon wrote some thirty-five years

ago: "The attempt to derive the self from atoms and the void, from space and time, to deny it any constructive role in the system of nature, has not failed for lack of unceasing and desperate effort." The failure arose from the intrinsic impossibility of what was attempted—"you cannot explain the self in terms of the not-self." This is the sum and substance of the depressing inadequacies of our military means, our technological genius, our poverty-breeding affluence, and our feelings of terrible emptiness at the center of our lives. The fault never lay in science itself, but in what was expected of it, as a replacement for responsible inquiry into the meaning of existence.

So it is a time for new beginnings for all men—for all men, that is, who are able to see the lessons of history and to feel the invitation to an independent life of the mind—without, we might add, benefit of the clergy. Why should there be no help available from "specialists"? Because, in questions having to do with final matters, reliance on authority is always a weakness. No one can eat, walk, or swim for another human being, nor can anyone *know* for another human being. People can join to make explorations together, but each one must learn to do his own climbing, and to accept his own risks.

Yet there have been men worthy to be called "teachers." What is the test of a teacher? He will be one who, like the Buddha, cautions those who listen to him to accept nothing that he says simply because he says it—one whose chief interest is to *free* men from any outside dependency. Here the greatest difficulty may be in the expectation that independent certainty can be had quickly or with little effort. Learning to know what we are able to know may be much less difficult than giving up certain habits of mind which stand in the way of all authentic knowing.

REVIEW
KENTUCKY IDYL

WHEN a man steps off the beaten track into some wilderness area, how does he feel about entering the untouched world which is now all about him? Is he shy, as a child might be, wondering if he ought to apply somewhere for "permission" to proceed? Does he wear at least some of the guilt of his kind, and know that, as a man, he is almost certainly to be regarded by all nature's sentience as an interloper? Does he make an instinctive resolve to leave everything just as he finds it?

What would happen to the world—man's world as well as nature's—if a substantial portion of mankind were to be overtaken by the feelings of a "natural religion" of this sort? How many of all the other "revolutions" we demand would become irrelevant, if men would return to the bosom of nature in this mood, as contrite prodigal sons?

These questions might go on and on, yet they would soon raise "practical" counter questions, based on the claim that we can no longer afford to think about nature primeval, but must devote all our talents to conserving and "managing" the resources of nature for the sake of sheer survival.

Yet a man who reads the papers, these days, is entitled to be skeptical of modern management. Nothing has a human scale, any more, and the larger projects—those of the government, for example—depend increasingly on coercion, whether in the management of prisons or of foreign policy. It is becoming hard to find a young man who looks forward happily to going to work for an established institution. He has too many reasons to think that just around the corner will be foul-ups, not sunshine. So it is not in the least remarkable that a great many of the coming generation—the most intelligent of its members, according to report—are refusing to work for certain kinds of established institutions. Naturally enough, they are drawn to education, so that already the teaching profession is overcrowded with candidates—at least in California. Government is hardly an attractive employer, these days, so what is left but the frontier?

But there is no longer any frontier. Wherever you go, you can find talented drop-outs studying maps, gathering information about land, and getting a bit discouraged. The object is to simplify life, and already the technological scheme of things, along with inflated land values and taxes, has made it difficult to return to the simple life. It can be done, but persistence, determination, and a good share of ingenuity are required. You have to go where hardly anybody wants to be, from a commercial or managerial point of view.

Well, people are compiling "how to" manuals about these problems, and books like *Living the Good Life* by Scott and Helen Nearing (Schocken) are having a sudden second wave of popularity. *Something* dramatic is going to happen, with so many people absolutely determined to get away from compulsive buying and selling, from artificial "standards of living," from power politicking and from the conscripters for military service.

Yet it is hard to see how it will work, or would be, if it were not for certain themes which run quietly through the whole of human history, and which may, in times when we need them most, come to the surface. We are thinking of the serenities of a Lao-tse, and of a Henry David Thoreau, which now speak to us as though they had been written for our ear. A book which fully qualifies as belonging to that tradition is Wendell Berry's *The Unforeseen Wilderness,* published this year by the University of Kentucky Press ($6.95), with a portfolio of photographs by Gene Meatyard. The book is called an essay on Kentucky's Red River Gorge, but it is much more than this. It would be misleading, perhaps, to say that Mr. Berry is an expositor of the religion of nature, but this is as accurate as anything we can think of to say. His writing is a Taoist expression which generates the feeling of an abiding faith

without a single cant phrase or familiar piety. The book reproduces the brooding presence of a man who seeks to know himself in the matrix of the natural world. As he says at the beginning, thinking of a clear pool he found in the Red River:

> In a place of such purity and beauty, free to men along with other creatures, but not manmade and beyond the powers and the understanding of men, what is there to do but perform some gesture of humility and gratitude before the mystery of creation? But we have no saying or ceremony that is appropriate. It is the modern muteness and paralysis. Such religion as we have had has aimed us strictly Heavenward; along with our exploitive economic values, it has prepared us to voyage to the moon and into space, not to be fully and humanly at home in the rocky dells of the Red River Gorge.

The book alternates between description of hiking, canoeing, and camping along the Red River and asides concerned with the failure of most men to overcome their isolation from the natural world. It is impossible to live in harmony with this or almost any other river without being driven to the realization that civilization is a psychological as well as a physical barrier to any encounter with the world on its own terms. Once, in the past, men shut themselves out of the world by the preoccupations of supernatural religion, thinking more of the next world than the one which gives us our present life:

> Now we have the figure of the tourist photographer who, one gathers, will never know where he is, but only, looking at his pictures, where he *was.* Between his eye and the world is interposed the mechanism of the camera—and also, perhaps, the mechanism of economics, having bought the camera, he has to keep using it to get his money's worth. For him the camera will never work as an instrument of perception or discovery. Looking through it, he is not likely to see anything that will surprise or delight or frighten him, or change his sense of things. As he uses it, the camera is in bondage to the self-oriented assumptions that thrive within the social enclosure. It is an extension of his living room in which his pictures will finally be shown. And if you think the aspect or atmosphere of his living room might be changed somewhat by the pictures of foreign places and wonders that he has visited, then look, won t you, at the pictures themselves. He has photographed only what he has been prepared to see by other people's photographs. He has gone religiously and taken a picture of what he saw pictured in the travel brochures before he left home. He has photographed scenes that he could have bought on postcards or prepared slides at the nearest drug store, the major difference being the frequent appearance in the photographs of himself, or his wife and kids. He poses the members of his household on the brink of a canyon that the wind and water have been carving at for sixty million years as if there were an absolute equality between them, as if there were no precipice for the body and no abyss for the mind. And before he leaves he adds to the view his empty film cartons and the ruins of his picnic. He is blinded by the device by which he has sought to preserve his vision. He has, in effect, been no place and seen nothing; the awesomest wonders rest against his walls, deprived of mystery and immensity, reduced to his comprehension and his size, affirmative of his assumptions, as tame and predictable as a shelf of whatnots.
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> Throughout their history here, most white men have moved across the North American continent following the fictive coordinates of their own self-affirming assumptions. They have followed maps, memories, dreams, plans, hopes, schemes, greeds. Seldom have they looked beyond the enclosure of preconception and desire to see where they were; and the few who have looked beyond have seldom been changed by what they saw. Blind to where they were, it was inevitable that they should become destroyers of what was there.

This book can easily stand by itself as the exquisite record of a place, but the reader is helped to understand the writer's intent by knowing Wendell Berry's earlier volumes—*The Long-Legged House* and *The Hidden Wound.* These are works of deliberation, the thought of a man intent upon finding out all he can of the fabric of the country where he was born and grew up, and of the minds and feelings of the people who lived there. Everything Berry writes has a kind of "centering" quality. He wants to know what he is, and all his pilgrimages have this intention, whether into nature or the historical past. One thinks of the theory of psychoanalysis, that by examining the palimpsest of old thoughts and feelings, one comes to recognize the roots of all the little

involuntary things one does, and thus, by knowing them, begins to be free of these influences or to accept them more consciously. But Berry needed no "therapist" for this undertaking; it was rather the health of his spirit that led him to pursue the inquiry, which has more of the character of an inner odyssey than a psychoanalytical session. One might say that this is what psychoanalysis will become if it ever grows up.

The health and beauty of this book are hard to reproduce. The flow of a good book is like the flow of a good life—it has a non-specific excellence. Criticism, on the other hand, is extremely quotable, because it is particular. Yet good criticism will always do what Mr. Berry does—refer the reader to natural, non-specific balances for the true remedy. For example:

> The conservation movement has become almost exclusively a matter of power struggles between agencies and corporations and *organizations* of conservationists. The agencies and corporations are motivated by visions of power and profit. The conservation organizations are motivated by principles which very largely remain abstract, since the number of people who can *know* a place is necessarily too small to protect it, and must therefore enlist the aid of people who do not know it but are willing to protect it on principle.
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> I should make it clear that I recognize the need for the conservation organizations, and that I am emphatically on their side. But the organizations, by themselves, are not enough. If they are to succeed in any way that is meaningful, or perhaps if they are to succeed at all, their work must be augmented by an effort to rebuild the life of our society in terms of a decent spiritual and economic connection to the land. That can't be done by organizations, but only by individuals and by families and by small informal groups. It will have to be done by leaving the cities and the suburbs and making a bond with some place, and by *living* there—doing the work the place requires, repairing the damage other men have done to it, preserving its woods, building back its fertility and its ecological health—undertaking, that is, the labor, the necessary difficulty and clumsiness of discovering, at this late date and in the most taxing of circumstances, a form of human life that is not destructive.

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COMMENTARY
THE KINDS OF TRUTH

AFTER a long exile, the term *soul* seems to be slowly returning to usage in present-day expression. We cannot claim Dixon (see page 7) as a leader in this revival, since he wrote thirty-five years ago, but the word seems now to fall into place more naturally, as though some substantial background of meaning were there to support it.

This is hardly the case. The present popularity of the term grows rather from some deep feeling that we *ought* to have a meaning for "soul," since life and thought without any conception of existence beyond matter and body have proved barren and sterile affairs.

Yet some care should be exercised in the use of such words. The order of things and events which we experience passively and without effort requires one sort of vocabulary—we might call it the language of fact. But there is a vast category of realities which remain hidden unless we generate for ourselves the corresponding stuff of their meaning. This knowledge is dependent upon works of the imagination and mind, and may be identified as a higher order of knowledge. It doubtless has subdivisions which we only vaguely apprehend.

We know, of course, the familiar distinction between public and private truth—public truth being truth that is made evident through external demonstrations. For a long time we have submitted to the methodological rule of science that a matter that cannot be exposed to this sort of public recognition cannot become knowledge and is therefore either fanciful or unimportant. But we are now becoming aware of the fact that this rule ignores the reality of man's inner life and removes the basis for all the subtler forms of growth or becoming possible to individual human beings. It is this awareness which welcomes the return of "soul" to our language, as a kind of declaration of independence of aspiring human intelligence.

Yet we have many tendencies of mind inherited from the days of defining everything worth talking about in terms of public truth, and could easily fall into the habit of speaking of matters such as "soul" as though they belonged to the objective world of inert things. This would be a gross self-deception. We know nothing of "soul" and "consciousness" in this way, and the propensity for supposing that we do has been responsible for all the pretenses of religious orthodoxy, the assurances of creeds, and the group professions of faith. To repeat these easy assumptions would invite another reaction of resentful and protective materialism.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
HEARN AS TEACHER

EVERYONE has a favorite "story," and ours is a tale by Lafcadio Hearn, included in what may be the loveliest of his books, *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields*, published by Houghton MifBin in 1897. This story delights people of every age and is especially good for reading aloud. There are some "big" words in it, but this does no harm, since the meaning comes out for all. We once had the idea of arranging or promoting publication of this story, with pen and ink drawings, as a little gift book for children, but after finding an illustrator and a book designer—Hearn deserves the best in typographic dress—we discovered that someone else had truncated the tale and brought it out on the conventional children's book market, so we put the idea aside. Anyway, the story is called "A Living God," and it is about a little boy, his grandfather, and a tidal wave.

In the same volume are some of Hearn's best essays. There is his study of the Buddhist conception of Nirvana and an extraordinary attempt to penetrate for the reader the feeling aspect of the memory of past lives. Then, there is Hearn's retelling in English, from the Japanese records dating from early in the nineteenth century, of the story of the rebirth of Katsugoro, a Japanese boy who remembered his previous life, and whose recollections were verified by Japanese officials. The written reports of all those involved—from the members of both families and the priests and officials who learned the facts of the case—are reproduced by Hearn.

Hearn was not only a distinguished writer; he was also a fine teacher, as his *Talks to Writers* makes plain, and he was especially sensitive in his understanding of children. In one of the briefer sketches in *Buddha-Fields*, he repeats what was told to him by an eleven-year-old girl, once the member of a prosperous and happy family. Then, in succession, her father died, her mother, and soon after her brother, who had become the family's sole support. The child completed her tale, then rose from the mat on which she had been sitting. Hearn moved to sit in her place, but she made a sign to check him. A friend explained:

> "She wishes," he said, "that the master will honorably strike the matting first."
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> "But why?" I asked in surprise,—noticing only that under my unshod feet, the spot where the child had been kneeling felt comfortably warm.
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> Manyemon answered:—
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> "She believes that to sit down upon the place made warm by the body of another is to take into one's own life all the sorrow of that other person,—unless the place be stricken first."
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> Whereat I sat down without performing the rite, and we both laughed.
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> "Iné," said Manyemon, "the master takes your sorrows upon him. He wants"—(I cannot venture to render Manyemon's honorific)—"to understand the pain of other people. You need not fear for him, Iné."

Hearn had had so much pain in his own life that he did not find it difficult to enter into the hearts of others. In many of these essays, there are delicate passages concerned with the young. In the chapter called "Dust," Hearn muses how "dust," of which all things are made, has been through endless transformations, and is not just "dust," but a population of unthinkable multitudes of experience. Then he writes:

> The cooing voice of a little girl dissolves my reverie. She is trying to teach a child brother how to make the Chinese character for Man,—I mean Man with a big M. First she draws in the dust a stroke sloping downwards from right to left, . . . then she draws another curving downwards from left to right, . . . joining the two so as to form the perfect *ji*, or character, *hito*, meaning a person of either sex, or mankind: . . . Then she tries to impress the idea of this shape on the baby memory with the help of a practical illustration,—probably learned at school. She breaks a slip of wood in two pieces, and manages to balance the pieces against each other at about the same angle as that made by the two strokes of the character. "Now see," she says: "each stands only by the help of the other. One by itself cannot stand. Therefore the *ji* is like mankind. Without help one person cannot live in this world: but by getting help and giving help everybody can live. If nobody helped anybody, all people would fall down and die."

> This explanation is not philologically exact; the two strokes evolutionally standing for a pair of legs,—all that survives in the modern ideograph of the whole man figured in the primitive-writing. But the pretty moral fancy is much more important than the scientific fact. It is also one charming example of that old-fashioned method of teaching which invested every form and every incident with ethical signification. Besides, as a mere item of moral information, it contains the essence of all earthly religion, and the best part of all earthly philosophy. A world-priestess she is, this dear little maid, with her dove's voice and her innocent gospel of one letter! Verily in that gospel lies the only possible present answer to ultimate problems. Were its whole meaning universally felt,—were its whole suggestion of the spiritual and material law of love and help universally obeyed,—forthwith, according to the Idealists, this seemingly solid visible world would vanish away like smoke! For it has been written that in whatsoever time all human minds accord in thought and will with the mind of the Teacher, *there shall not remain even one particle of dust that does not enter into Buddhahood.*

Since this book is titled *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields,* it is natural that the themes of Buddhist belief and philosophy should recur again and again. In a chapter on Japanese folk songs, Hearn points out that all Japanese culture is saturated with the idea of reincarnation, and he contrasts this with the occasional treatments of the subject in Western literature:

> Perhaps those pieces which reflect the ideas of pre-existence and of future rebirths will prove especially interesting to the Western reader,—much less because of poetical worth than because of comparative novelty. We have very little English verse of any class containing fancies of this kind; but they swarm in Japanese poetry even as commonplaces and conventionalisms. Such an exquisite thing as Rossetti's "Sudden Light,"—bewitching us chiefly through the penetrative subtlety of a thought anathematized by all our orthodoxies for eighteen hundred years,—could interest a Japanese only as the exceptional rendering, by an Occidental, of fancies and feelings familiar to the most ignorant peasant. Certainly no one will be able to find in these Japanese verses—or, rather in my own wretchedly prosy translations of them—even a hint of anything like the ghostly delicacy of Rossetti's imagining:—
>
> I have been here before,—
> But when or how I cannot tell:
> I know the grass beyond the door,
> The sweet, keen smell,
> The sighing sound, the lights along the shore.
>
> You have been mine before,—
> How long ago I may not know:
> But just when at that swallow's soar
> Your neck turned so,
> Some veil did fall,—I knew it all of yore.
>
> Yet what a queer *living* difference between such enigmatically delicate handling of thoughts classed as forbidden fruit in the Western Eden of Dreams and the every-day Japanese utterances that spring directly out of ancient Eastern faith!

Hearn, it seems clear, embraced the philosophy of Buddhism. At the end of this consideration of folk songs, he gives some of his reasons:

> I remember that when I first attempted, years ago, to learn the outlines of Buddhist philosophy, one fact which particularly impressed me was the vastness of the Buddhist concept of the universe. Buddhism, as I read it, had not offered itself to humanity as a saving creed for one inhabited world, but as the religion of "innumerable hundreds of thousands of myriads of *kotis* [I koti = 10,000,000] of worlds." And the modern scientific revelation of stellar evolution and dissolution then seemed to me, and still seems, confirmation of certain Buddhist theories of cosmical law. . . . By its creed the Oriental intellect has been better prepared than the Occidental to accept this tremendous revelation, not as a wisdom that increaseth sorrow, but as a wisdom to quicken faith. And I cannot but think that out of the certain future union of Western knowledge with Eastern thought there must eventually proceed a Neo-Buddhism inheriting all the strength of Science, yet spiritually able to recompense the seeker after truth with the recompense foretold in the twelfth chapter of the Sutra of the Diamond-Cutter. Taking the text as it stands,—in despite of commentators,—what more could be unselfishly desired than the reward promised in that verse,—*"They shall be endowed with the Highest Wonder"?*

In his own way, Hearn contributed to that synthesis of East and West, and we are far from having learned all that he can teach.

FRONTIERS

The Threat of Uniformity

USUALLY, when the blessings of small community life are urged, and craftsmanship *is* honored for its contribution to individual development, we are told that the ideal of a harmonious pastoral life is no longer practical—that the family farm has been economically unfeasible for some fifty years, and that the general urbanization of society requires a further concentration of modern industrial methods in agriculture. Small community enthusiasts are called sentimentalists who are unwilling to face the massive problems of the population explosion or to recognize the boon of technological productivity.

The Spring 1971 bulletin of the New Alchemy Institute East (Box 430, Woods Hole, Mass. 02543) has a paper by John Todd in which these contentions are considered from what may be called an enlightened scientific point of view. After a brief summary of the problems brought by the increasing use of pesticides and of nitrate fertilizers, on which many of the high-yield single cash crops depend, this writer turns to what are regarded as the dramatic recent advances in agriculture:

> The most notable achievement of the green revolution has been the creation of new, high-yield strains of rice, wheat and corn. World agriculture has in the space of a few years been made more efficient, and in the short run, more productive because of these super grains, particularly the Mexican semi-dwarf varieties of wheat. They represent a triumph of the modern plant breeder's art, but they are in no way a panacea to the world's food shortage. The grain revolution has an Achilles heel; the new varieties, grown in increasingly vast acreages, are causing the rapid extinction of older varieties and a decline in diversity of the germ plasm in nature. The genetic variability which initially enabled the new types to be created is threatened, and the very foundation of the new agriculture is being eroded. In Turkey and Ethiopia thousands of local wheats have become extinct over the last several decades and the phenomenon is widespread. It is possible that the genetic variability of wheats could be irreplaceably lost and Erna Bennett of F.A.O. has stated recently that "The world is beleaguered as far as its genetic resources are concerned." Some of the most influential agricultural experts are deeply aware of the problem and are attempting to create the necessary "gene banks" before it is too late. It has been suggested that the race to save our genetic resources may be hampered by another biological fact of life, namely that seed storage may not be enough as "reserves" of the original microclimates and ecosystems may be required if the viability of the local strains are to be maintained.

The trend away from cultivating local varieties to a few higher yielding forms is placing much of the world's population out on a limb. If the new varieties are attacked by pathogens the consequences could be world-wide, rather than local, and plant breeders may not be able to create new strains before it is too late. Such events are not without precedent. An earlier counterpart of the green revolution occurred in Ireland in the 18th century, with the introduction of the Irish potato from the Western hemisphere. Production of food dramatically increased and by 1835 a population explosion had taken place as a result of the land's increased carrying capacity. During the 1840's a new fungal plant disease appeared, destroying several potato crops and one-quarter of the Irish people died of starvation. The recent devastation of coffee plants in Brazil is partly the result of their narrow genetic base and their consequent vulnerability to leaf rust disease. The present corn leaf blight in the U.S. is caused by a fungus which attacks plants that carry the T gene for male sterility and 70-90 per cent of the corn hybrids carry this gene. Despite heavy applications of fungicides, corn blight is spreading with heavy crop losses, and blight resistant varieties may not be available in quantity until 1973 at the earliest. A modern agriculture, racing one step ahead of the apocalypse, is not ecologically sane, no matter how productive, efficient or economically sound it may seem.

There have been other hidden perils associated with the modernization of agriculture, but the loss of genetic diversity is perhaps the most readily analyzable example of analogous changes taking place at every level of society. Since a scientific or technological advance on one level (e.g. the super grains) may be pushing us closer to disaster on another, it is time to look carefully at the alternatives before these avenues have disappeared behind us.

Mr. Todd continues his discussion by giving attention to the increasing dependence of people everywhere on the know-how of specialists, which means, of course, that if they make mistakes, or their methods break down in practice, vast numbers of people will be impotent to help themselves, since the means to do so have been taken out of their hands. As this writer points out:

> A real knowledge of microcosms is essential to understanding higher levels. The basic tenet of this proposal is that to build a viable future for mankind we must begin to place emphasis on restoring microcosms in a meaningful way, be they forests, fields, small farms or communities. If they are healthy, society as a whole will respond, and if they are ill, the human community cannot be well, no matter how much legislation, time and money is directed towards saving it.
>
> Fraser Darling, in his perceptive studies of remote Scottish peoples, showed how self-sufficiency was a positive force in their lives. The most independent communities were far more diverse and socially alive than the single industry towns and those heavily dependent on a life-line to the outside. He also found that they coped far better in their dealings with the world at large. Equally important, the independent communities cared for their environment and were less prone to despoil it for short term monetary gain.

A musing approach to these ideas might suggest that the artificial stimulation of life brought by technological concentration, in agriculture as well as industry, has had a great deal to do with the population explosion itself, and that growth at a much slower, more "normal" pace might have taken place if the frantic pursuit of quantity had not been allowed to displace the existential values which have opportunity to flower in the natural microcosmic environment—in simpler language, the small community.

Another advantage of "smallness" is pointed out by Mr. Todd:

> Proselytizers on behalf of modern agribusiness rarely consider the key role of numerous small farms as a social buffer during periods of emergency or social breakdown. This oversight could well be the result of a lack of civilian research into the needs of a major industrial nation under the stress of severe crises, despite the fact that a disaster could occur. A depression of the magnitude of the one which befell the country in 1929 could well take place, but if one should happen in the 1970's the social consequences would be much more severe. In 1929, a large percentage of Americans had friends or relatives on farms which could operate on a self-sufficient basis during lean periods. Today the situation is alarmingly different as the rural buffer is largely gone and far fewer people have access to the land. The problem is compounded by the fact that today's farms have little resemblance to those of forty years ago, as the modern farm is in no way independent and like other businesses they require large amounts of capital, machinery and chemicals to maintain their operation.
>
> The replacement of large rural populations, their unique social organizations, and the many small farms by agri-businesses operated primarily on the basis of short-term incentive rather than as legacies for future generations, is resulting in a tremendous increase in homogeneity in the countryside. When the land and landscapes become just another commodity, society as a whole suffers. It might not be too serious if the loss of a viable countryside was all that was threatened by modern agriculture, but a close look at present agricultural methods suggests that many of them are damaging to the environment and a loss of biological variability is rapidly taking place.

The New Alchemists are working for the development of concrete restorative programs in the area of biotechnics, and have extensive plans for research which should interest many readers. The focus is on decentralized agriculture and technology which can be adapted to the poorest inhabitants of all regions.