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THE MIXED BLESSINGS OF SOPHISTICATION

A MONTH ago—in Review for April 17—the (anti-McLuhan) objections of Mrs. Sylvia Angus to "the notion that method or medium is more significant than content" were quoted from her article in the *Saturday Review* (March 16). Mrs. Angus nowhere came out for art as "propaganda," nor did she declare it a proper medium for moralists. What she said was that excessive preoccupation with form makes it difficult for writers to "come up with significant meanings of comprehensions of their world."

Yet her article brought this hoity-toity response from another teacher of English (*SR*, April 20):

> Most of us in university English departments spend a good deal of time getting freshmen to understand that significant literature seldom if ever has a "message," that a poem is not a sermon, that the author is not trying to teach them anything. . . . To say that the medium is the message may be an overstatement bordering on critical heresy, but to say the medium is only a means of conveying a message is a betrayal of art to the Philistines.
>
> What is the "message" of *Oedipus Tyrannus*—that one should not marry one's mother, or that one should not be too curious? What is the "message" of *King Lear*, *Paradise Lost*, or *Moby Dick?*

This seems a rehearsal of a very tired argument. No one likes to be preached at in some pretense at "art"; on the other hand, what would be the point of reading books which offer no "intelligible vision of reality"? The real question is rather, when, why, or how does the artist turn his vision into an overt attempt at persuasion? And what legitimacy, if any, is there in doing this? Some very good writers have openly declared such intentions. Does their art always suffer as a result?

One thinks, for example, of George Orwell. And, of course, of Tolstoy. People say that when Tolstoy became too ardent a preacher, the quality of his art went down. This is possibly true, but the solution may not be the stern prohibition of "messages." If this were the case, then great scriptures could not be regarded as great literature. We need to wonder, instead, what makes such great literature great.

The depth of this inquiry is an excuse for not attempting a formal answer; and, in the space available, an oblique approach may be more fruitful. What explains, for example, the intensity of the modern resistance to "messages"? It is, we think, an accumulated natural reaction to endless proselyting for imitative morality. No one seriously complains about the moral content of the Sermon on the Mount. The ethical import of the *Dhammapada* raises no serious hackles in modern man, although he may prefer to call it a psychological instead of a moral classic.

It is only the counterfeit sermon that we dislike, not its glorious original. There is some violation of our basic intuitions of the good in all preachy communications. If we understood this violation better, we might be able to dispense with most of the labored distinctions between ethical and æsthetic values, and to terminate the argument about the medium and the message.

Would it be wrong to say, for example, that the offense of presumptuous moralizing is peculiarly a *modern* problem? In any event, it is certainly necessary for a modern writer of strong moral conviction to take this problem into account, while ancient moralists were usually able to ignore it. A modern moralist has to disarm his readers of the suspicion that he is a moralist! Yet there are hints of a critical view of moralizing in Confucius' objections to pretentious ceremony, and in Lao-tse's reproaches to Confucius. Doubtless other instances could be found in ancient writings, but you have to look for them, while facile imitation of moral vision—the rhetoric

of conversion and aggressive persuasion—seems essentially modern, even a lucrative profession of the times. Perhaps this is a result of nearly two thousand years of missionary, proselytizing religion, pursued with arrogant sectarian certainty. In any event, there is general agreement that writers and artists are far more useful citizens—even better educators—than most of the people who set out to exert "influence" deliberately. We now suspect that the man who doesn't want to "teach" us anything is probably a man with something to teach. His reluctance to "impart" begins to be recognized as a basic respect for other human beings. Such a man usually has something to say.

What, then, is sophistication? In its good sense it is, perhaps, the sort of perceptiveness which, when misused, makes possible the skillful practice of hypocrisy. It enables a man to recognize, identify, and expose the subtleties of what Plato called "double ignorance." It is the penetration necessary to know the signs of the counterfeit expression and the self-serving pretense. When corrupt, sophistication leads to exploitation of the moral instincts of mankind. It is then the capacity for deceit, leading inevitably to self-deception. Actually, if we knew how to distinguish between self-deception and the simple making of mistakes we could probably do away with a large part of the criticism published today, since it would have no point. Making mistakes is simply human, but deceit is anti-human. Bad moralizing cannot distinguish between the two. Neither can bad criticism.

There is also a middle-ground sort of sophistication which lacks positive insight but easily exposes the foibles of the "true believers" and provides entertaining accounts of "the games people play"—a kind of moralizing which becomes highly popular by making no demands on anyone. Add the tough-minded, "value-free" scientific criticisms of religion and the angry ardor of radical political movements preaching materialism, not as "morality," but as the stark reality of "brute facts," and you begin to have some idea of obstacles a modern moralist must cope with before he can expect to get a hearing. He inhabits a terrain littered with the debris of refuted moral claims, the bare bones of exposed dogmas, and worn-out arguments for exclusive, sectarian truth. There is a sense in which Kenneth Keniston's diagnosis of today's alienated youth applies to the entire, critical heritage of the West:

> They are philosophers with hammers; their favorite intellectual occupation is destruction, reduction, pointing out inconsistencies, chicaneries, hypocrisies, and rationalizations—whatever, in others and themselves.

We don't know what Mrs. Angus's critic would say about Tolstoy as a writer with a "message," but as an artist who was able to survive the energetic iconoclasm of the nineteenth century, Tolstoy became an enormously attractive moral force. As George Steiner tells us:

> Men and women all over the world undertook pilgrimages to Yasnaya Polyana in quest of illumination, and in the hope of receiving some message of oracular redemption. Most of the visitors, Rilke being a notable exception, sought out the religious reformer and prophet rather than the novelist whom Tolstoy himself had seemingly repudiated. But the two were, in fact, inseparable. The expounder of the Gospel and the teacher of Gandhi was by virtue of an essential unity—or, if we prefer, by definition of his own genius—the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina.*

Perhaps the thing to say about Tolstoy is that, as both artist and man, he had the integrity to struggle with this problem of having a "message," and if he could not solve it, extraordinary by-products of his attempt made him acceptable as both moralist and artist to a very great number of people. The habit of some critics seems to be to condemn him for trying, instead of noticing his occasional success. What, indeed, would have been Tolstoy's stature as an artist if he had been able to suppress in himself the longing to know moral truth and to communicate it? The thing to do with Tolstoy is to inspect his struggle with every possible sympathy instead of turning away

from him because he had a "message," and because, now and then, it showed rather nakedly.

In a lecture to his Japanese students at the University of Tokyo, Lafcadio Hearn said of Tolstoy's book, *What Is Art?:*

> One of the most important things for a literary student to learn is not to allow his judgment to be formed by other people's opinions. I have to lecture to you hoping that you will keep to this rule even in regard to my own opinion. Do not think something is good or bad, merely because I say so, but try to find out for yourself by unprejudiced reading and thinking whether I am right or wrong. In the case of Tolstoi, the criticisms have been so fierce and in some respects so well founded, that even I hesitated for a moment to buy the book. But I suspected very soon that any book capable of making half the world angry on the subject of art must be a book of very great power. Indeed, it is rather a good sign that a man is worth something, when thousands of people abuse him simply for his opinions. And now, having read the book, I find that I was quite right in my reflections. It is a very great book, but you must be prepared for startling errors in it, extraordinary misjudgments, things that really deserve harsh criticism. Many great thinkers are as weak in some one direction as they happen to be strong in another.

Where did Tolstoy get his moral power? This is an area over which we could circle for a long time, without ever finding a place to light. The following from Kenneth Rexroth may be helpful:

> The startling thing about Tolstoy is precisely that he was completely unalienated and at the same time disbelieved utterly in all the principles which were the foundations of his society or, rather, of the conflicting societies in which as a nineteenth-century Russian he had to live. He did not believe in feudalism, the Czar, or the church. He did not believe in capitalism nor in socialist revolution. Neither did he believe in the special subculture of the international artistic community in revolt against bourgeois culture.
>
> Tolstoy disbelieved in the Social Lie, whatever form it took. He was able to reject in what might be called a nonpathological manner because he had power whereas Baudelaire had none. The society was his society, and he knew it—from the inside out, from the top down.

Rexroth also points out that Tolstoy knew all the skills and tricks of the professional writer, but that when he used them they were not "tricks." What is contrivance, after all, but putting into a story something that does not naturally belong there, but might fit perfectly somewhere else? A kind of faithfulness to life is involved. One can believe that this faithfulness also takes away the "message" onus from a great writer's "vision of reality"—yet the message is there.

Or, you might say that moral expression *works* in art—it does not intrude, but enriches and even becomes the heart of the matter—when its insight is really first-hand. Even if a great many writers take their moral perceptions at second-hand, this is hardly an argument against insight or a "message." It would probably suit most readers if we would stop entirely using the word "message," since its meaning has been much cheapened by easy reference, even to the point of being irreclaimable, like the word "God." Yet when criticism presses this complaint backward into an argument against any moral intentions on the part of a writer, the result is ridiculous—tantamount to demanding dehumanization of the artist. There is a sense in which a man cannot *help* being a moralist.

The reason why this form/content argument seldom gets very far off the ground is that it involves, ultimately, far-reaching philosophical and metaphysical questions such as the nature of man, the purpose of life, the origin of good and evil, and the meaning of the moral struggle in the lives of human beings. We don't mind short-run discussion of some of these questions, so long as they are kept anecdotal or situational—unembarrassing and undemanding. And the basically agnostic and skeptical frame of modern thought also prevents any really thorough investigations. The metaphysical systems of the distant past are like towers in the mist to us; they have their symmetries, their wondrous elevations, but seem quite inaccessible. We might like to make some experimental visits to such places, and

to climb to higher levels, but we don't know how to take with us the tools of our critical sophistication. The ancients didn't seem to allow for this, so they remain wonderfully *other*, while exerting persistent attraction. Just possibly, with the help of writers who, step by step, try to enter into these ancient views—who discover that, after all, it was not the philosophic affirmation of the ancients that created modern skepticism; but the follies and deceits of their incompetent imitators, the theologians—we shall find that they lend support where we are weak, light up what is now dark, and deceive no one who is not secretly eager to deceive himself.

Let us look at another "moralistic" writer, another man with a message—George Orwell. While *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* may be regarded as an unpleasant book—unpleasant in the sense that it involves catastrophe rather than tragedy; it offers no catharsis, holds out no hope of growth and reconciliation, but only degradation and despair—it has its distinction as a kind of sequel, as George Steiner says, to Dostoevsky's chapter on the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov.* Orwell is at any rate one of the memorable writers of our time. Just after the war, he wrote of himself in a little magazine called *Gangrel:*

> What I have wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, "I am going to produce a work of art." I write it because there is some lie I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an æsthetic experience. Anyone who cares to examine my work will see that even when it is downright propaganda it contains much that a full-time politician would consider irrelevant. I am not able, and I do not want, completely to abandon the world-view that I acquired in childhood. So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about my prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take a pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information. It is no use trying to suppress that side of myself. The job is to reconcile my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on us.

Well, Orwell was no Tolstoy, yet it becomes clear that the unblinking honesty of the man forged both his art and his moral appeal. Lionel Trilling, in *The Opposing Self,* makes this quality the keynote of his essay on Orwell. Considerably more than "honesty" is involved. As Mr. Trilling says:

> . . . there are not many men who are good, but there are few men who, in addition to being good, have the simplicity and sturdiness and activity which allow us to say of them that they are virtuous men, for somehow to say that a man "is good," or even to speak of a man who "is virtuous," is not the same thing as saying, "He is a virtuous man." By some quirk of the spirit of language, the form of that sentence brings out the primitive meaning of the word virtuous, which is not merely moral goodness, but also fortitude and strength in goodness.
>
> Orwell, by reason of the quality that permits us to say of him that he was a virtuous man, is a figure in our lives. He was not a genius, and this is one of the remarkable things about him. His not being a genius is an element of the quality that makes him what I am calling a figure.

Mr. Trilling practices the good kind of sophistication, here. He leads us past the naïvetés, the over-simplifications, and the moralistic bludgeonings which have made clichés out of simple adjectives such as "good" and "virtuous" and discloses the "primitive meaning" of what he wants to say about Orwell.

George Woodcock wrote a critical evaluation of Orwell as a writer for the December 1946 issue of Dwight Macdonald's *Politics.* He helps us to understand the feeling of despair with which Orwell leaves the reader in books like *Nineteen-Eighty-Four.* Of Orwell's account of his own purposes as a writer, quoted above, Woodcock says:

> It indicates the honesty and indignation that inspire [Orwell's writing], the concern for certain humanist values, the perception of fraud and the shrewd eye for pretense; it also shows, perhaps less

clearly, the *superficial* nature of Orwell's work, the failure to penetrate deeply into the rooted causes of the injustices and lies against which he fights, and the lack of any really constructive vision for the future of man. . . .

Orwell's role is the detection of presences and injustices in political life, and the application to social matters of a very rough-and-ready philosophy of brotherhood and fair play. He plays, somewhat self-consciously, the part of the "plain man," and in this fulfills a necessary function. A hundred Orwells would indeed have a salutary effect on the ethics of social life. But the "plain man" always has limitations, and the greatest is his failure to penetrate below the surface of events and see the true causes of social evils, the massive disorders in the very structure of society, of which individual evils are merely symptoms. . . . There are times when the general superficiality of Orwell's attitude leads him to sincere but unjust condemnation of people or groups, because he has not been able to understand their real motives. His attack on pacifists because they enjoyed the unasked protection of the British Navy, and his "demolition" of Henry Miller for leaving Greece when the fighting started are examples of this kind of injustice. Orwell has never really understood *why* pacifists act as they do. To him passive resistance during the war was at best "objective support" of Fascism, at worst inverted worship of brutality; he fails to see the general quality of resistance in the pacifist's attitude, the resistance to violence as a social principle rather than to any specific enemy.

Then there is this conclusion in Woodcock's article:

In one of [Orwell's] essays there is a portrait of Dickens which might not inappropriately be applied to Orwell himself.

"He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry*—in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our soul." The open fighting, the generous anger, the freedom of intelligence, are all characteristics of Orwell's own writing. And that very failure to penetrate to the fundamental causes of social evils, to present a consistent moral and social criticism of the society in which they lived, which characterized the nineteenth-century liberals, has become Orwell's own main limitation.

This seems a just criticism. There is no complaint that Orwell has been pressing a "message" upon us, but only that his "vision of reality" is too circumscribed, his attack upon what is not sufficiently illumined with intimations of what might be. Yet Orwell, it seems clear, did as well as he knew how, using all his experience as grist for his mill. He understood himself pretty well, knew what he was doing, and applied his conception of human obligation to the limit of his capacity. It is this, surely, which develops the best possible form for the content that is to be embodied, illustrating how a man's sense of responsibility as a craftsman may shape his work into a vehicle of those authentic virtues of which Mr. Trilling speaks. So there is a double sort of morality here—of both craftsman and man—providing the double communication of the writer as both artist and human being. George Woodcock has this passage on Orwell's literary craft:

Orwell's writing is fluent and very readable. There is probably no writer in England today who has gained such a colloquial ease of expression, at the same time without diminishing the quality of style. Even his journalistic fragments, unimportant as they may be from any other point of view, are distinguished from the work of other journalists by their excellent style. In his novels and books of reportage, Orwell has an intense power of description. If one compares *Burmese Days* with, say, Forster's *Passage to India*, the sharper vividness with which the surface aspects of Oriental life are conveyed in Orwell's book is quite impressive. Yet this faculty of description is combined with, and perhaps balanced by, a great economy of effect and wording which gives a clean and almost athletic effect to Orwell's writing. There is no unnecessary emotion, no trappings of verbiage and superfluous imagery, no place—even in the more purple passages—where one can feel that a paragraph is unnecessary or that the book would have been as good if it had been omitted. *Animal Farm* is, of course, the best example of this virtue; no one else could have given the whole bitter history of the Russian failure in so condensed and yet so adequate an allegory.

There are, then, these close correspondences between a man as an artist and the same man simply as a human being, looking for truth and the good. The integrities of the human quest, the self-reliances practiced, the refusal to compromise, the determination to know for oneself—all these qualities appear in secular modes in the practice of his art. And most important of all is his attitude toward other human beings—that balance of love, respect, and understanding on which everything he thinks and does is based. Here, surely, is hidden the secret of the relation of form to content, and of plea to vision, which makes a man's work truly his own—something that both is, and is not, a "message." He has simply lit up what he sees. It is very much as Goethe said:

> . . . the original teachers are still conscious of the insoluble core of their project, and attempt to approach it in a naïve and flexible manner. The successors are inclined to become didactic, and their dogmatism, gradually, reaches the level of intolerance.

REVIEW
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WAR

IN his introduction to *From Arrow to Atom Bomb* (Perpetua paperback, 1967, $2.45), Stanton Coblentz states his purpose:

> . . . most surveys of warfare have concentrated on physical manifestations—which certainly have been blazingly apparent. But in order to know what war really is, and how and why it acts as it does, one must look beneath the physical mask to the psychological truth; one must analyze the conscious and subconscious impulses, the incentives and deterrents, the instilled habits of mind, the traditions, the mass motivations that underlie all mass combat.

The book ranges over a vast extent of history, from hypothetical beginnings in the Old Stone Age to World War II. It looks at the stylized and hardly bloody conflicts of primitive peoples, the military establishments of ancient empires, the exploits of conquerors such as Alexandar, Caesar, and Tamerlane, then turns to the religious wars of Europe, the conquests of colonialism, the nineteenth-century wars of nationalism, and reaches finally the "total" wars of the twentieth century. There is enough detail to horrify almost any reader—especially in the accounts of the religious wars, for none seems so pitiless as these. After explaining that he has attempted to cover the fundamental human experience of war the author says: "From this panorama, it is my hope, some conception of the hidden or inner nature of warfare will emerge, some realization of whether we face a task that is hopeless or one that, with the admission of new light, offers some prospect of success despite the formidable obstacles."

Mr. Coblentz may not have succeeded in exposing "the inner nature of warfare," but he has written a useful book. He gives the reader endless vignettes of the states of mind and feeling of men who make war. He finds no particular scapegoats; he identifies recurring themes in the claims of war-makers; and one of his conclusions, hardly to be avoided, is that ignorance is at the root of this immeasurable evil. But the reader may conclude that we still do not know enough about man to put an end to war.

The author has provided a psychological case history—the story of an aberration or a terrible disease. This is one way of thinking of war, and no man can read this book and be content to call war "normal." Yet what is "peace"? What is man's natural project on earth, from which war is surely an insane departure? On the answer to this question, there is no noticeable agreement among men.

It seems clear from this book that men who make war have false ideas of themselves and of their good. Yet this is only a truism. We know, we may say, that these ideas are false because they lead to hideous mistakes—to terrible suffering, to unspeakable cruelty, and to massive, isolating indifference toward man's inhumanity to man. It is often argued that the need for conflict is part of the texture of human nature, but does this really require the depravity of modern war?

Are there, indeed, "natural" and "unnatural" wars? Can we speak of a kind of "evolution" of man in relation to war, pointing to the possibility that war *becomes* unnatural when its futility grows plain? This is a way of saying that a time comes when the martial virtues are no longer virtues, but only atavistic imitations of ancient valor. Can we argue that the natural course of human development should bring—or have brought—the discovery that non-violence is the right way to resolve the differences among men? Gandhi, at any rate, seems to have had such a view.

But Gandhi, personally, was deeply convinced of a profound philosophy of meaning in human life. He had, that is, a particularized conception of the meaning of peace which he embodied at several levels of application. There was the metaphysical level of ancestral Indian philosophy, which gave him his moral dynamics. There was the practical level of Constructive Work—the village program, the practice of Sarvodaya and Basic Education. And there was,

finally, the influence on other men of the spirit of nonviolence.

Whether or not we are willing to accept Gandhi's philosophy, we must admit the reality of this background for his analysis of the problem of war, and recognize the crucial importance of certain leading ideas concerning the nature of man. These ideas are indispensable factors in Gandhi's philosophy of peace. While reading Mr. Coblentz' book, one feels again and again that it is at this core-situation—in man's idea of self, and of himself in relation to other men—that the problem of war must be understood. This becomes plainest in connection with religious wars (to which the wars of the twentieth century belong). After describing some of the more merciless military policies of Philip of Spain, the author comments:

> However, it is safe to say that no qualm disturbed the serene conscience of Philip. To slay heretics was not, to his mind like killing men; it was more like hunting man-eating beasts. His outlook, through training and inclination and by the precept and example of his age, had been so conditioned that it was no easier for him to look upon a dissenter from the faith with reason, mercy, or justice than for some modern legislators to regard an alleged Communist sympathizer with a clear-seeing compassion.

Similarly revealing is a quotation Mr. Coblentz takes from John C. Miller (*Origins of the American Revolution*), who writes on the difficulty of persuading the British to let their American colonists go:

> British propagandists found that one of the most effective ways of silencing the advocates of conciliation was to remind Englishmen of the low birth and general inferiority of the colonists; and, in consequence, every effort at compromise broke upon this inflexible conviction that it would be an insufferable humiliation to treat the colonists as equals.

Nationalism, as Mr. Coblentz defines it, is an elaborated version of this belief in the superiority of one's own nation. Nationalism embodies "an easily understood set of rules":

> (1) My country can do no wrong.
>
> (2) My country is the world's greatest, its people the world's choicest, its accomplishments the world's most brilliant.
>
> (3) My country, by virtue of its superiority, has a right to push and shove the lesser inhabitants of the globe.
>
> (4) My country has a right to self-determination, and must resist to the last drop of blood any abridgement of this natural law.
>
> (5) No other country has any right to self-determination if it gets in the way of my own.
>
> (6) My country has unlimited sovereignty. It must be ready at all times to punish any other nations who falsely imagine they have the same privilege.
>
> (7) My country must be ready to fight for its honor. The word honor is subject to being construed as we decide.
>
> (8) My country must maintain an army, navy, and air force to enable it to protect its honor.
>
> (9) Every citizen shares in the distinction gained by my country when it protects its honor, just as he shares in the glory (though not necessarily in the dividends) of the companies that float the national flag above foreign oil or mining concessions.

In his last chapter, the author points out that politicians and statesmen are continually acting in relation to matters of which they know practically nothing. He urges that "only qualified men be enabled to make the decisions," and argues for more education of political leaders, with grounding in social science, economics, history, psychology, ethics and philosophy. Well, the fact is that Mr. Coblentz wants to put philosopher-kings in charge, but he doesn't seem to realize that our method of education does not produce them. Further, it is not the practice of modern peoples to put philosopher-kings in charge. There lies our real problem.

COMMENTARY
THE NEW RADICALS

READERS who wish to bring themselves up to date on the material in this week's Frontiers will find help in two recently published paperbacks—*The New Radicals* (Random House, $1.95) by Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau; and Jack Newfield's A *Prophetic Minority* (New American Library, 75 cents). A summary of Newfield's volume in the London *Times Literary Supplement* (April 18) provides light on the question raised by Ivanhoe Donaldson (see Frontiers):

> *A Prophetic Minority* is . . . the work of a committed man, involved as a student, reporter and citizen concerned with the issues of the New Left. He writes from inside the events, and his biographical sketches of leaders in the Movement such as Stokely Carmichael, Staughton Lynd, Carl Oglesby, Tom Hayden and Robert Parris emerge from first-hand experience. . . . Mr. Newfield traces SNCC in action, through its central figures, and back to Amite County, Mississippi, "the ninth circle of hell," where in 1961 the great Robert Parris attempted a SNCC pilot voter-registration project. It is a brilliant reporting of an appalling story of poverty, terror and love. Robert Parris compared the condition of this area to Camus' plaguestricken Oran, adding: "When you're in Mississippi, the rest of America doesn't seem real. And when you're in the rest of America, Mississippi doesn't seem real." His is the tragic story of a lonely man trying to find a way of acting creatively for change in a society bent on destructive stasis, and a way of leading without incurring the guilt of followers mutilated and slaughtered.

More should be known of the efforts of Robert Parris and of what he was attempting to do.

Of Students for a Democratic Society, the *Times* reviewer, says:

> It is middle-class, non-Marxist, analytically concerned with self and group therapy, and the nearest to *kibbutz* that the Movement has produced. Leaders are non-leaders, and projects non-projects. Its outstanding figure, Tom Hayden, warned against leadership dependence and his concept remains primary. His achievement so far is the Newark Community Union Project, a slum self-help community which, if fully followed up by local citizens, might have done something to lessen the emptiness of the Newark riots of 1967. . . . Tom Hayden's Newark project derives from the SDS belief that "the individual should share in social decisions." . . . "participatory democracy" now has to begin with the founding of a "counter-community" before the poor can begin to make decisions at any further level beyond immediate need.

In one place the reviewer makes this general comment:

> . . . in a world riddled with persecuting ideologues and ideologically brainwashed societies, the altruism of the New Radicals is nothing less than exemplary. No American ideological platform was producing anything comparable to the Freedom Rides, the protest against Kennedy's Cuban policy and the defense of the San Joaquin Valley workers.

The *New Radicals* by Jacobs and Landau has 80 pages of introduction, 240 pages of New Left documents, and a chronology of events from May, 1954 to December, 1965. Both the vision and the contradictions of the new radicalism receive impartial attention, judging from the London *Times* review.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THE FALSE SOVEREIGNTY OF GRADES

THE dreams of an ideal educational relationship often falter and fail when confronted by the realities of modern public schools and the children who have been diminished by their methods. When someone who wants to teach encounters the suspicious and silenced young, he may not know what to do. In a new magazine, *New Directions in Teaching*, co-edited by Trevor J. Phillips, Sam D. Andrews, and Reginald Carter (Department of Education, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio 43402), we found the following by Kenton Craven (University of Wyoming):

> Robert Frost once said that when he taught at Amherst he was constantly upset about non-participation. So he resolved to go into the classroom and sit still, silent, until someone had a question. It didn't work out. He usually lost his temper because no one spoke up, and launched into a lecture. I think Frost was being a bit idealistic in expecting the untutored to have questions outside particular contexts against which they could react. And I am not sure we can force the silent student to speak *meaningfully* by bullying him.

Well, Robert Frost was probably more poet than teacher. He couldn't think of anything to do. We knew an English teacher at Los Angeles State College who encountered much the same problem, but he invented a remedy. For two weeks or more he had the class forget about English and play games in his room—leap frog, and other active cavortings, until, finally, they loosened up. Tolstoy did things like this, too, at Yasnaya Polyana.

Elsewhere in *New Directions in Teaching* (the first issue—September, 1967), Frank Lindenfeld, a sociologist at L.A. State, writes on the distorting influence of giving "letter" grades:

> . . . undergraduate colleges serve increasingly to train students in technical skills and in the art of conformity to the demands of authority so that they will be better able to fit into jobs upon graduation. Also, they serve as massive sorting and screening devices whereby students who pass through the system are graded and ranked for the benefit of agencies that use college graduates.
>
> My argument is that the faculties of our colleges should use what power they have to attempt to *shift the emphasis of our colleges back toward education and away from training.* There is frequently an inherent contradiction between the requirements of education and that of processing students for the benefit of outside agencies.
>
> This contradiction may be seen most clearly in the nature of our competitive grading system. Letter or number grades are now used to help determine into which programs or jobs graduates will be admitted, and at what levels. Recently, grades and class rank have also been among the criteria examined by draft boards in deciding whether or not a student should be inducted into the army.
>
> The competitive grading system tends to interfere with students' education by instilling in them a motivation to learn for the sake of getting grades instead of for the sake of the knowledge. It is this grade hunger, by the way, which lies primarily at the root of the problem of cheating on exams. Further, the pressure for grades which parents and professors inflict on students, and which they learn to inflict on themselves, generally results in an unhealthy learning atmosphere and sometimes leads to emotional disturbances among students.
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> The heart of the matter is that many students do not go to college because they want to further their education, but rather they come because those who control the admissions to certain jobs have decided that the college degree would be the minimum entrance requirement. This leaves a difficult motivation problem for us professors. We make students learn through the threat that unless they do what we ask of them we will not let them through the gates into the middle and upper status jobs in our society.

Teachers, Mr. Lindenfeld thinks, ought not to be calm about all this. They should work toward the long-term goal of eliminating grades entirely. While he has various suggestions about intermediate steps along the way, his objective is clear:

> It is high time for professors to listen to their own buried consciences and to engage in a collective effort to turn our colleges back toward their primary function of education. The grading systems currently in use are outmoded, unnecessary, and harmful for the process of education; and we should find the courage to abandon them forthwith.

But what about professional people like, say, doctors? Would you want to be treated by a man who got through medical school on a pass-fail basis? Well, the irony here is that medical schools have discovered that the best doctors are not the ones who earned the highest grades as medical students! Bright manipulators of concepts are not necessarily best at treating the ills of human beings; certain non-testable qualities are much more important. The bureaucratic measurements of ability just don't work in the humanities, and medicine is surely one of the humanities—it has to do with human pain.

The whole theory of grading is wrong, you could say. Not the occasional test or quiz to find out what areas of learning need attention, but the supposition that these minor investigations disclose human worth or usefulness to society.

Perhaps professional and technical training programs do require examinations; you wouldn't want to sail in a ship guided by a man who had faked his knowledge of navigation; but what have such matters to do with education?

But there is also, as Mr. Lindenfeld says, the fact that the students themselves want the grades, in order to get jobs with them. The whole society insists on the validity of this sort of competition, and how is a nineteen-year-old or a twenty-year-old to resist such pressure? No wonder a good, unacquisitive game of leap frog up and down the classroom aisles led to some healthy self-revelations!

This situation could probably be helped in time if there were more experimental educational centers—let's stop calling them "colleges"—which gave no degrees; where, if a student goes to one of them, it becomes evident that his primary intention is to learn, and the primary intention of the teachers is to teach. The contrast of such centers with the usual institutions of higher learning would be a wholesome influence. There would be of course a money problem. Maybe such students would be willing or want to make their living with their hands, and would not even think of offering their intellectual abilities for sale on any "market." Only a few people pursuing this conception of life and learning would set an example with influence far beyond their actual number. The temper of the younger generation suggests that there might be more than a few candidates for education of this sort, if they could find a way to feed and clothe themselves while going to school. Needless to say, such schools would also have an inductive effect on the standards of existing public schools and state institutions.

Meanwhile, Kenton Craven, in a hypothetical conversation with a student, offers a view of grades which helps to clear the air in another way:

> "Grades are important. They are important to you, the student, because the world says they are, and in worldly matters the world is the best judge. They are important because every man wants guides to measure himself by. And they are important because the voluntary relationship between the student and teacher, engaged in a meaningful pursuit of knowledge, ought to result in some quantitative conclusion—how did we do? Bureaucracy has determined that I mark you as a letter, or level. In this course I will do everything possible to avoid that banality and that system of inhumanly mute symbols. Ultimately I must give you the mark; but I hope that within the context of the course our mutual dialogue on your progress may bestow more meaning on that symbol for us, at least, and in the process, perhaps aid you in raising your mark. . . ."

Well, Mr. Craven thinks something is left out, here, and doubtless there is. But what he does, in this discussion, is abolish the *sovereignty* of the grading system. He renders unto Caesar, but explains how worthless the requirements of Caesar are, from any truly educational point of view. This sort of influence is needed, too. We are going to have imperfect mass institutions for a long, long time, so that leavening influences are needed, as well as new beginnings. Eventually, by such activities, all the sovereignties of both system and institution will be reduced to the status of tools and conveniences, and then we will know how to use them without fear and without reproach.

FRONTIERS

Dialogue on the Left

THE Autumn 1967 issue of the *American Scholar* printed the taped report of a discussion between representatives of the Old Left and the New Left—Dwight Macdonald and Richard Rovere on. the one hand, and Tom Hayden of Students for a Democratic Society and Ivanhoe Donaldson of SNCC, on the other. The choice of participants seems excellent, since Macdonald and Rovere are probably the most penetrating thinkers and writers of their generation, while Hayden and Donaldson speak out of the grain of New Left activities and have the credentials of their accomplishments.

Yet the reader of this report will hardly be able to make up his mind about the "merits" of the arguments presented. What finally emerges is a feeling that the young radicals, without quite saying so, tend to hold the old radicals responsible for all the woes and failures of the age—in the sense that radicals and revolutionaries habitually assume proprietorship of whatever Hope there is for mankind, and when, in the perspective of history, their efforts seem to have amounted to little, the next generation of radicals is likely to take a condescending and very critical view of what they did.

A further difference between the Old Left and the New results from the fact that the world has changed in thirty-five years, and the young radicals see it with different eyes. They are, as is often said, less "ideological." They have the impression from the older generation that what they are doing is seen as not quite "real" because it doesn't fit in with earlier analyses of society and the dynamics of change. The old proprietors of Hope sometimes act as if the young were just playing around, and will show their maturity only when they join the older radical "establishment." The young find this extremely irritating. As Ivanhoe Donaldson said in one exchange:

> Jack Newfield's criticisms and definitions of the New Left, who is Jack Newfield to do this? I mean, where's he been active? Has he done anything—who is he? And you know I would carry that further. For people to tell me it was Michael Harrington's eyes that opened the country up to the question of poverty! What about those thirty million people who have been living in what he wrote about? You know it's just as absurd for him to write about that and for the country to respond to his book as it is for Johnson to go to Asia and talk about it's time to build a new Asia. . . . The attitude toward the New Left is paternalistic. In a country where most people are under thirty, it's the same kind of paternalism that white American society has had toward black people. Adults refuse to understand how people get subverted, get forced into establishments and then aren't able to deal with the questions of change. What is wrong, in fact, with youth thinking this society is a mess, being explosive, being dynamic? We're disgusted with Western society, Western culture, but we are still struggling. We're alienated but still want to do something about it.

It would be a mistake to identify this expression merely as pique. Mr. Donaldson is saying: "We know what to do, and we're doing it. Other people are writing books and judging us according to categories that don't have much validity."

Some of Dwight Macdonald's observations take account of the same facts from a different viewpoint:

> Unless I am mistaken, there is on the New Left a spirit of undiscriminating rejection of society that never really existed on the Old Left, except possibly in the minds of a few doctrinaire Marxists. . . . The Old Left approached the society or community, which is a word I rather prefer, in a spirit that I, for one, find quite congenial. It looked for signs of weakness and of health in particular institutions, and then sought ways of remedying the weaknesses without impairing the strengths. I may be wrong in thinking that the spirit of the New Left is, in this respect, quite different. But I often get the impression that its spokesmen are so filled with disgust and contempt that they feel the kind of analytical exercise that I would consider rational and necessary is, in fact, irrational and unnecessary. This, of course, has generally been the way with revolutionaries. But I would submit that a useful and reflective radicalism has to be informed by cool, tough criticism. . . .

> I'm not saying you have this view but anyway there is a sort of general idea in this so-called New Left that one has more sympathy for China than for Russia, and on the grounds, which I think are completely mistaken, that China is a more revolutionary country, especially in the last year with these lunatic teen-age New Left young Red guards running around. It's true it's much more revolutionary than that nice old comfortable bourgeois state of Soviet Russia. But anyway they seem to prefer China to Russia and they then have also to prefer Stalinist Russia to post-Krushchev Russia, which I think is simple perversity—if it's anything more than that, I'd be very sad. The New Left differs from the Old Left, well, first of all, the one positive way—it is more concrete. And I think this is a very great thing, that they really try to do something themselves, instead of merely making the historical record the way we did in the 30's and 40's. I think that the whole business of SNCC and CARE, and the whole business in Mississippi and Alabama, the way that they tried to do something about the race question in the South, was extremely good, and also Mr. Hayden's Newark project seems to me a very, very good idea. We didn't do those kinds of things. . . .

Well, the discussion goes on: the young radicals don't read; yes they do; they don't respect older heads; yes they do—Fannie Lou Hamer is in another age group. Finally, when Tom Hayden spoke of the necessity of small groups to "fight to control their neighborhood or their institution," so that people "start transferring their belief, their loyalty, their sense of legitimacy to themselves and to their own institution"; and when he said that such activities would begin to produce "the conditions in which national change is possible," Dwight Macdonald exclaimed:

> I want to agree completely with that last speech. Perhaps here's hands across the generations or something, but it seems to me this is very good anarchist doctrine, and I think this is what we should aim for, to get the decisions politically and socially down to the smallest possible unit where people know each other and where they can control their own fate, instead of up in these big abstractions of President and so on. . . .

Here, of course, Macdonald hardly speaks for the Old Left, but is declaring the fundamental Humanism of his book, *The Root Is Man.* Actually, there is a sense in which, through this essay, Macdonald became an intellectual parent of the New Left. But this sketchy summary can in no way be a substitute for reading the *American Scholar* report itself—the vague inconclusiveness of which may be its most valuable contribution to thinking about the future.