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THE GENERATING POWER

THERE is profound irony—an irony that seems characteristic of many serious pursuits—in the fact that a man often learns from a book that he cannot learn from books. And this, no doubt, is a basic reason why books will go on being published. They are involved in the *via negativa* of the mind; you need them in order to become free of them. The matter is filled with paradoxes. One man starts reading and has an awakening. Another stops reading and has an awakening.

Curiously, the best books seem to be those of which it is extremely difficult to say exactly what is in them. From the scientific point of view—or what is often taken for the scientific point of view—such books, it might be said, are not worth reading. They are useless if you can't tell what you have learned from them. But we do have abstractions to describe the quality of some of these books. They bring, we say, a feeling of "elevation." That, surely, is a result of reading Emerson. But the difficulty with Emerson—again, from the scientific point of view—is that you cannot locate his *source.* You feel he is "holding something back." Held back, perhaps, is what Emerson is, since neither he nor anyone else can put this into words. But why can't a man with such wonderful words tell something about himself?

Implicit in this question is the expectation of some finality. Words, after all, are capable of expressing at least one kind of finalities—what we call scientific finalities. Sometimes a book dealing with scientific finalities will have a sense of Emersonian incommunicables woven into its text, and then it may seem like a very fine book. It makes you think that science is really getting at the basic meanings. But when you try to nail these meanings down, they melt like snowflakes. In *The Nature of the Physical World,* Arthur Eddington said that he regarded the foundation of the universe as "mind-stuff"—not exactly "mind," nor actually "stuff," but *mind-stuff.* It sounds just right, but try to explain it!

What does such a statement do for the reader? Well, it helps him to gain a sense of personal interconnection with the world. The idea seems to imply that there has been some kind of resolution of the paradoxes, the contradictions, of experience, even though you can't really get at it. What can you *do* with the idea? Not much; or, on the other hand, a great deal. It depends upon what you expect from the verbal communication of a synthesizing idea. The idea could change an habitual feeling of alienation into one of awe. It could add to a man's consciousness of human dignity, to his sense of kinship with the rest of life.

But the longing for finality, for certainty, probably remains. We might call this the scientific instinct, and it is hard to imagine human life without it. Science, we say, is prediction. So science is also settlement. For hundreds of years Western civilization has been attempting to fulfill the mandate of the scientific instinct, on the theory that when we get the main facts about the material universe settled, our troubles, in principle, will be over. We have even revised our history from the story of the exploits of kings and the fortunes of nations into the story of the accumulation of scientific facts. We speak proudly of the Copernican "revolution," applying the language of politics to scientific progress.

This change in our estimate of "real" events has its validity. Because of the effect of scientific ideas about the natural world on religious beliefs, men began to think about themselves in a different way. This laid the foundation for a new politics, and generated great expectations from the possibility of scientific certainty. The Copernican revolution made a lot of old beliefs seem

unimportant or meaningless, but these beliefs, we must note, were nothing like the wonderful intimations of an Emerson; they were pretended finalities—making a kind of pseudo-science—that had been spread by theology. The destruction of these false finalities gave men expansive feelings of freedom, of being able to stretch their minds toward a limitless future. What we need, they said, is to find out the true finalities; then we shall know exactly what to do.

So, for three or four hundred years we have been accumulating and cataloguing scientific finalities about the universe. Lately, however, there has been a disturbing realization. The march of progress in science has not been accompanied by a similar advance in the quality of human beings. It is now widely suspected that progress in science really has nothing to do with the quality of human beings. Finality about the constituents and forces of external nature has no direct application to the nature of man. And we are noticing, also, that the moods and feelings of men are enormously influential on how they study nature and on the use they make of the knowledge they obtain. There is a sense, in short, in which scientific doctrines are written in a curious autobiographical cipher, revealing, when uncoded, various naïve assumptions about the nature of man, his interests, and his good. Science, you could say, is a kind of philosophical game of solitaire we have been playing with ourselves while collecting facts about the outside world, yet a game with very high stakes and terrifying consequences.

Science, a great many men are now declaring, is no substitute for attention to the Emersonian sort of incommunicables. So great importance is beginning to be attached to what is felt to be "real," but which cannot be given definition. The *habit* of definition, of course, remains, and there are various tortured attempts to contain with words what words cannot express—except, perhaps, metaphorically.

Returning to books—the best books, it seems certain, are the books which explain the limitations of books and illuminate the tricky extensions made possible by symbolism. To explain the limitations of books, you have to distinguish between appearance and reality, and this covers very nearly everything that can be talked about. We seem to have had such books for thousands of years. There is the following, for example, in the *Tao Te King:*

> The Tao which can be expressed in words is not the eternal Tao; the name which can be uttered is not its eternal name. Without a name, it is the Beginning of Heaven and Earth; with a name, it is the Mother of all things. . . .
>
> As soon as Tao creates order, it becomes nameable. When once it has a name, men will know how to rest in it. Knowing how to rest in it, they will run no risk of harm. . . .
>
> With music and dainties we may detain the passing guest. But if we speak of Tao, he finds it tasteless and insipid. . . .

Lao-tse took a chance and wrote a book about what cannot be written about. A great many men have been grateful to him for doing it, even though they cannot tell you precisely what he means; and, in fact, they are embarrassed to describe what happened to Taoism when it became a popular religion. To write about the incommunicables is obviously a dangerous thing to do. Buddha wrote nothing. Jesus wrote nothing. Yet almost no one who discusses the problem of knowledge will suggest that Buddha and Jesus were ignorant men with nothing to teach. An understanding of the incommunicables has identifiable side-effects which we can point at without being able to explain.

This is the sort of problem which men of the modern world have almost no experience in dealing with. It is a problem which becomes historically manifest with general intellectual exhaustion. On the other hand, this problem cannot be approached at all without critical use of the mind. Feeling, by itself, is imperial. It dissolves the parameters of criticism. The men

who told us that knowledge of the external world would solve all human problems were filled with the most glorious feelings. No one could have slowed them down.

There are other books which deal with this subject—Plato's, for example. Plato gives careful attention both to the expectation of finality from science and to the dubious benefits of books. In the *Phaedo* Socrates tells how he was lured into scientific studies by the promise of Anaxagoras that "mind" was the explanatory principle of all things:

> I lost no time in procuring the books, and began to read them as quickly as I possibly could, so that I might know as soon as possible about the best and the less good.
>
> It was a wonderful hope, my friend, but it was quickly dashed. As I read on I discovered that the fellow made no use of mind and assigned to it no causality for the order of the world, but adduced causes like air and æther and water and many other absurdities. It seemed to me that he was just about as inconsistent as if someone were to say, The cause of everything Socrates does is mind—and then, in trying to account for my several actions, said first that the reason why I am lying here now is that my body is composed of bones and sinews, and that the bones are rigid and separated at the joints but the sinews are capable of contraction and relaxation, and form an envelope for the bones with the help of the flesh and skin, the latter holding all together, and since the bones move freely in their joints the sinews by relaxing and contracting enable me somehow to bend my limbs, and that is the cause of my sitting here in a bent position. Or again, as if he tried to account in the same way for my conversing with you, adducing causes such as sound and air and hearing and a thousand others, and never troubled to mention the real reasons, which are that Athens has thought it better to condemn me, therefore I for my part thought it better to sit here, and more right to stay and submit to whatever penalty she orders. Because, by the dog, I fancy that these sinews and bones would have been in the neighborhood of Megara or Bocotia long ago—impelled by a conviction of what is best!—if I did not think that it was more right and honorable to submit to whatever penalty my country orders rather than to take to my heels and run away. But to call things like that causes is too absurd.

Here, a great many things are settled by Socrates, but principally the idea that knowledge must be knowledge of what is best for man. Socrates goes on to explain that he feared that too great a preoccupation with physical knowledge would blind him to more fundamental issues, and he tells Cebes that his all-engrossing interest is the care of the soul. This means trying to get at the Emersonian incommunicables. For Plato, scientific investigations were useful to school the mind in abstract thinking. Plato was well acquainted with the scientific knowledge of his day and some modern enthusiasts of science have concluded that the Platonic interest in science was but useful preparation for the subsequent achievements of Aristotle. However, as Werner Jaeger says in *Aristotle* (Clarendon Press, 1934)

> The Academy of Plato's later days did indeed get through a great mass of material, and this environment no doubt made it possible for an Aristotle to learn by his own efforts the significance of empirical facts, which later became so integral to his researches; but . . . Modern academies and universities cannot claim Plato as their model. The notion of a systematic unity of all the sciences was totally foreign to him, and still more so was its realization in an encyclopædic organization of all subjects for purposes of teaching and research. . . . The sheer necessities of his speculation about concepts did indeed lead him to develop the method of division, which later became enormously important for Aristotle's attempt to get an empirical grasp of plants and animals, as well as of the mental world. But Plato himself was not concerned to reduce individuals to a system. . . . The many classifications of plants, &c., that Epicrates speaks of . . . were not pursued from interest in the objects themselves, but in order to learn the logical relations of conceptions; this is illustrated by the quantity of books put forward in the school at this time with the title of *Classifications.* In classifying plants the members no more aimed at producing a real botanical system than Plato in the *Sophist* aims at a historical study of the real sophists.

Jaeger ends this section by pointing to Plato's objective:

> The knowledge which according to Socrates makes men good, and that which is commonly called scientific knowledge, are distinct. The former is creative, and can only be attained by souls that have a

> fundamental affinity to the object to be known, namely, the good, the just, and the beautiful.
>
> There is nothing to which Plato right down to the end of his life was more passionately opposed than the statement that the soul can know what is just without *being* just. This, and not the systematization of knowledge, was his aim in founding the Academy.

In passing, and in irritation at the failure of the modern world to give attention to Plato, Jaeger observes that "it is not surprising that, in view of the gulf between him and all other science, both ancient and modern, he has been called a mystic and expelled from thought"—although acceptance of this judgment of him makes it "very hard to understand why he has had such a great influence on the destinies of human knowledge." Jaeger's comment was written in 1923, long before the recent reforms in scientific epistemology began, and when there was little hint of the present Platonic revival. Indeed, such books as Robert Cushman's *Therapeia* (Chapel Hill, 1958) make it plain that in a very real sense modern thought is now hastily trying to catch up to Plato.

Another book of particular value, Paul Friedlander's *Plato—An Introduction* (recently issued as a Harper paperback, $2.75), helps to disclose what Plato thought about the problem of communication. Although he spent his life writing on philosophy, Plato was skeptical of the value of books. He made Socrates repeat a fable in which Ammon reproaches Thoth for inventing written characters: "You produce the illusion of wisdom among the disciples, not truth." Plato had far greater faith in communication through dialogue, and some matters, he felt, ought not to be written about at all. When Dionysius of Syracuse bragged that he had set down the essence of the Platonic philosophy, Plato rejoined at length, in his seventh letter:

> This much I can certainly declare concerning all these writers or prospective writers, who claim to know the subjects that I seriously study, whether they claim to have heard it from me or from others, or discovered it themselves: it is impossible in my opinion, that they should understand anything at all about the subject. There does not exist, nor will ever exist any treatise of mine dealing with this subject. For it does not admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to and communion with a subject, it is suddenly brought to birth in the soul as a light kindled by a leaping spark and thereafter nourishes itself. . . . Whenever one sees a man's written compositions—whether they be the laws of a legislator or anything else in any other form—these are not his most serious pursuits, if the writer himself be serious; rather, those pursuits abide in the fairest region he possesses. If, however, these are really his serious efforts, it is not (as Homer says) the gods, but mortal men 'who have utterly ruined his senses'."

Yet Plato wrote books all his life, and he must have believed it was worth doing. But over and over again he warned his readers, through things said or hinted in the dialogues, of the dangers in taking what is said literally. "No reasonable man," says Socrates in the *Phaedo*, "ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them." He hopes only to intimate truth by analogue, and the strength of the argument is always in its ethical, not its scientific, content. Often the "scientific content" of a dialogue has a plainly improvised character, serving symbolic communication rather than descriptive accuracy. Plato regards his writing as a kind of "play"—not unlike the "play" of the Artificer through whom, in the *Timæus*, the world comes into being. It is play, but with a very serious intent.

Like Lao-tse, Plato knows that he is taking chances in writing anything down, but he does it as a calculated risk. Concerning matters about which his followers could become dogmatic—as for example what happens after death—he resorts to myths that seem made up at the moment, and through his art he becomes the competitor of Homer and the mimetic poets whom, it seems evident, he would replace by offering a less delusive art. "Again and again," Friedlander says, "Plato's written work is mimesis, but it struggles against being nothing but mimesis." He adds: "And where it seems to represent most strongly a pure work of art, it must not ultimately be read as such, but as an 'existential' document. . . ."

Friedlander concludes his chapter on Plato's written work with a delicately poetic passage of his own:

> Human life is a play, man a plaything—yet what ethical strength did the old Plato, who said this, expend upon this life and with what a sense of responsibility did he always look upon it as a task! Legislation a play—but is not the picture of the old man unforgettable, writing laws despite the failure of all his political aspirations, laws for the founding of yet another Utopia, this time called Crete? Literature, the new form of art, the whole set of dramatic dialogues a play—what æsthetic passion and seriousness went into this play for half a century! Thus we are perhaps not entirely untrue to his spirit if we interpret, in a preliminary way, the meaning of his written work according to the model of the world of appearances, which, to be sure, is only a *copy* of the eternal forms, but a copy of *eternal forms*, though afflicted with all the limitations of transitory existence, yet, to the eye which has learned to see, pointing toward eternal being and toward what is beyond being.

So we come back to the question of what one can learn from books, and to the longing for certainty. For Plato, after his warning about writing, this becomes a question of what other men can learn from Socrates. Delusion on this score is prevented by Socrates' explanation of the Oracle's decision that he is the wisest man in Athens. Socrates says this can be true only because he recognizes his own limitless ignorance. Yet here there is a kind of deception—a deception the reader must overcome for himself. The young men follow Socrates about because they *know* he is wise. Friedlander puts it well:

> The Platonic Socrates manifests the Socratic secret and the Socratic irony, which expresses and bridges the tension between the ignorance of his words and the knowledge of his existence. . . .

There is surely a sense in which Socrates both knows and does not know—that sense which lines much of what he says with irony. There is a glint of wisdom even in Socrates' denials of wisdom; yet when a dialogue is moving toward high climax, it may break off with an almost raffish comment. Friedlander writes:

> Is it not astonishing how Plato veils with irony the highest truth he wants to show? When, in the *Phaedo*, he is approaching the archetypes, he says, "If there is such a thing as we constantly babble about, the beautiful, the good, and all the forms of this kind"; and elsewhere he speaks of them as the things "much prated about," as if he intentionally chose derogatory terms. The discussion in the central part of the *Republic* goes still farther. It was shown earlier how long the discussion evaded the last and higher form, and how insistently these deviations are pointed to as the "highest fulfillment" is approached. But despite tense expectations this highest perfection is not reached. Socrates appears as one who does not know. "How would it be right to speak of that about which we have no knowledge as if we did have knowledge?" When his listeners declare themselves content with this conditional account of the good, he adds ironically: "So am I more than content. I am afraid it is beyond my power and with the best will in the world I should only make myself ridiculous." This is the ineffability of the highest Platonic vision, symbolized by the irony of Socratic ignorance. At last "the good" appears as something "beyond being and essence, exceeding in dignity and power." At this point Glaukon interrupts with some amusement: "By Apollo, what a demonic hyperbole" (or: "What an extravagant exaggeration"). And Socrates replies: "It is your fault, you forced me to say what I think." This reveals . . . most clearly the impossibility and necessity of a complete communication.

The keynote of this book by Paul Friedlander is Plato's seventh letter, particularly the passage we have quoted. It reveals Plato as a teacher who grasps the limitations of both writing and speech, yet perseveres against all obstacles to arrive at a clarity which is not misleading. Plato is thus a teacher who convinces that the incommunicables are real, by using an art of thought, and by generating a sense of their actual presence in the figure of Socrates. A Platonic revival can only mean that there will be more books written without false finality, but with this generating power.

REVIEW
THE REAL RECONSTRUCTION

THE drama of the Black Power movement brings a peculiar testing to the people of the United States. The meaning of this expression ranges all the way from the simple idea of control over one's own life to the most apprehensively perceived implications of militant black nationalism. The racial separatism of a portion of the black community is particularly hard for the thoughtful white to bear, since it gives him no access to fellowship with a black man, on the basis of their common humanity. So the "test" is of the capacity to understand the historic inevitability of widely varying reactions by black people to the hundreds of years of their painful experience in the United States.

The almost spontaneous reaction of a white man who not only professes but endeavors to act with brotherhood toward people of another color, when shut out in this way, is that *they* ought to be different—they ought to recognize and accept *his* goodwill. His rejection, simply because of his "whiteness," is surely another kind of racism, he feels. Technically, he is right. It is another sort of racism. But since overcoming the deeply engrained attitudes of racism is manifestly a long and painful process, the white advocate of fellowship, on the basis of common humanity, has also to admit that not all white men feel as he does. He has to admit that his personal feelings in the matter do not at once change long-established social customs, nor do they abolish patterns of economic exploitation which for centuries have burdened Negroes with a veritably heroic task of independent self-recognition. A black man not equal to this heroism can hardly be expected to react toward any white man *as an individual.* All his reflexes have had another training. When it has been ground into him all his life that what he suffers results from a fact totally outside his control—his color—it is only natural that he respond in "group" terms. His color is the primary reality impressed upon him by his environment.

The white sympathizer has to find in his own experience the same sense of relentless fate, in order to understand the black nationalist's position. Suppose, for example, the white man reflects on how comfortable it is for him to be white, in this society, and then decides he will no longer enjoy this automatic felicity. He soon discovers that he *can't* abandon it. The benefits of his whiteness are in nearly all the institutions of the time, and in all the habitual social attitudes of most people. He sees that he, too, is helpless, in this respect. And this practical impotence is the opposite number of the black man's impotence in respect to living above the consciousness of his color. Individuals may be able to do it, but it is not yet a *social* possibility.

In a book which presents a wide spectrum of opinion about the meaning of Black Power—*The Black Power Revolt* (Porter Sargent, $5.95), edited by Floyd B. Barbour—a quotation from a statement by Malcolm X, toward the end of his life, illustrates the sort of experience which can be expected to change this general situation. In 1964 Malcolm X made a pilgrimage to Mecca. When he returned to Chicago he said:

> In the past, I have permitted myself to be used to make sweeping indictments of all white people who did not deserve them. Because of the spiritual rebirth which I was blessed to undergo as a result of my pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca, I no longer subscribe to sweeping indictments of one race. My pilgrimage to Mecca . . . served to convince me that perhaps American whites can be cured of the rampant racism which is consuming them and about to destroy this country. In the future, I intend to be careful not to sentence anyone who has not yet proven guilty. I am not a racist and do not subscribe to any of the tenets of racism. In all honesty and sincerity it can be stated that I wish nothing but freedom, justice and equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—for all people.

In a letter from Mecca, he wrote to friends at home:

> Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people *of all colors and races* here in this ancient holy land the home of Abraham. . . . There were tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over the world. They were *of all colors,* from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans, but were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe could never exist between the white and non-white. . . .

This is the sort of experience a white-skinned American cannot "arrange" for his black brothers. Money won't buy it, laws cannot enforce it, and individual longing cannot produce it. The inherited psycho-social forces on this continent have been aimed in the opposite direction for hundreds of years. In an essay on Richard Wright which appeared in the *Antioch Review* in the summer of 1945, Ralph Ellison quotes a Negro critic, Edward Bland, on the fact that the white community seldom treats the Negro as an individual, but only as one who has a black skin and belongs to a black-skinned group. This has had the effect of driving Negroes into a pre-individualistic state of mind in self-defense. To avoid disaster, the black man has had to behave somewhat as he is perceived. Ellison writes on the psychological factors involved:

> This pre-individual state is induced artificially—like the regression to primitive states noted among cultured inmates of Nazi prisons. The primary technique in its enforcement is to impress the Negro child with the omniscience and omnipotence of the whites to the point that whites appear as ahuman as Jehovah, as relentless as a Mississippi flood. Socially it is effected through an elaborate scheme of taboos supported by a ruthless physical violence, which strikes not only the offender but the entire black community. To wander from the paths of behavior laid down for the group is to become the agent of communal disaster. . . .

Ellison shows that consciously breaking out of this confinement has in the past been a rare and difficult thing, possible only to men of very strong character and lucid intelligence, and who have also had some kind of "accident" in their own lives that helped them to see themselves as individuals. Richard Wright is one illustration of this liberation—which led him to a lonely life of endless confrontation and inescapable pain. Such individuals are driven to oppose in their own people the defensive stereotypes they have of themselves, while fighting the stereotypes of blacks originated by the whites for the purposes described. Ellison continues:

> In the South the sensibilities of both blacks and whites are inhibited by the rigidly defined environment. For the Negro there is relative safety as long as the impulse toward individuality is suppressed. (Lynchings have occurred because Negroes painted their homes.) And it is the task of the Negro family to adjust the child to the Southern milieu; through it the currents, tensions and impulses generated within the human organism by the flux and flow of events are given their distribution. This also gives the group its distinctive character. Which, because of Negroes' suppressed minority position, is very much in the nature of an elaborate but limited defense mechanism. Its function is dual: to protect the Negro from whirling away from the undifferentiated mass of his people into the unknown, symbolized in its most abstract form by insanity, and most concretely by lynching; and to protect him from those unknown forces *within himself* which might urge him to reach out for that social and human equality which the white South says he cannot have. . . . The pre-individualistic black community discourages individuality out of self-defense. Having learned through experience that the whole group is punished for the actions of a single individual, it has worked out efficient techniques of behavior control.

The Black Power movement, more or less self-consciously, has set itself the task of *reversing* this process. At its highest level it is essentially a repudiation of the pre-individualistic self-image and a declaration of independent individuality for black people—something which, obviously, can have noticeable confirmation only through control over the practical aspects of their own lives. Seeing this as a totally natural result which would be true of any group eliminates "race" from the analysis. What sort of man can believe in his own individuality, yet suffer its negation by all the social circumstances which surround him? As

Stokely Carmichael puts it in the book under review:

> Black power can be clearly defined for those who do not attach the fears of white America to their questions about it. We should begin with the basic fact that black Americans have two problems: they are poor and they are black. All other problems arise from this two-sided reality: lack of education, the so-called apathy of black men. Any program to end racism must address itself to that double reality.
>
> Almost from its beginning, SNCC sought to address itself to both conditions with a program aimed at winning political power for impoverished Southern blacks. We had to begin with politics because black Americans are a propertyless people in a country where property is valued above all. We had to work for power, because this country does not function by morality, love, and non-violence, but by power. . . . In Lowndes County, for example, black power will mean that if a Negro is elected sheriff, he can end police brutality. If a black man is elected tax assessor, he can collect and channel funds for the building of better roads and schools serving black people—thus advancing the move from political power into the economic arena. . . .
>
> Integration . . . speaks to the problem of blackness in a despicable way. As a goal, it has been based on complete acceptance of the fact that *in order to have* a decent house or education, blacks must move into a white neighborhood or send their children to a white school. This reinforces, among both black and white, the idea that "white" is automatically better and "black" is by definition inferior. That is why integration is a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy.

Integration, in other words, will be acceptable as an embodiment of democratic equality when it is no longer regarded as some kind of generous "favor" by one race to another, requiring "patience" on the part of the beneficiaries. *The Black Power Revolt* has twenty-four contributors, all of whom are engaged, in various ways, in the struggle for black power. The movement needs to be understood as a socio-historical process pursued by human beings who are discovering their own humanity and individuality under the distorting circumstances created by the dominant society. When those circumstances are no longer distorted by the social and psychological inheritances of racism, the problem of "black nationalism" will disappear. Until it does, the man who cannot understand the surging, militant energy of the black nationalist movement may not be a racist, but he is forming his judgments according to the categories of expected human behavior provided by the racist past of his civilization.

COMMENTARY
TWO "FANTASY WORLDS"

WRITING in *Dissent* for the Autumn of 1964, Paul Jacobs put his finger on the fundamental issues lying behind what many white people call the "problem" of black power. Ultimately, or humanistically, these issues have nothing to do with race, but with deep-rooted attitudes which ought not to be generalized in terms of color. Mr. Jacobs said:

> . . . we have become insensitive to poverty, and only too willing to accept myths to account for its continued existence. *The poor are still objects to us, objects to be studied. . . .*
>
> Thus the great challenge of the next decade cannot be met by any governmental program alone although such programs are an essential framework in which to operate. Only people can meet this challenge, people who now live inside the communities where the victims of poverty and prejudice live, or people who will go, freely, into those communities, leaving behind on the dresser, the superfluous contents of their intellectual wallets. And unless we meet this challenge, the next ten years will find the country even more divided than it is today, and those ten years may then be known as "The Brutal Decade."

This may help in understanding the present, but much more valuable is Mr. Jacobs' comment on his own state of mind while he was gathering material for a first-hand study of the conditions endured by the unemployed. He decided that he would live in a slum, leave his money behind, work as a laborer or a dish-washer, in order to find out how it feels to be poor. But he found that *he couldn't do it:*

> . . . no matter how I try to get some sense of what life is like for the poor by traveling the country as an unemployed worker, living in shabby skid row hotels, sitting in dreary casual labor offices, working as a dish-washer or stooping over tomato vines, I can get only glimpses of what it means. No matter how little money I take with me, I cannot know what it is like to really have very little money. It doesn't really matter that my sheaf of credit cards is left at home on the dresser when I put on my old clothes to go out as an unemployed worker, for I know that I can escape this ugly life *at will.* And that is my great handicap in understanding the poor for, unlike me, the poor cannot exercise their free will to escape. They are trapped, separated from our conception of a decent life not, as I am, by a bus ride or a telephone call, but by a gap so wide that my normal life is only a fantasy world to them.

And that is the reason why, most of the time, when a white man expresses an opinion about what black people ought to do, it is a piece of immeasurable impudence to black men, no matter how nicely he says it: If he did understand how it feels to be trapped in a prison of racial prejudice, he would almost certainly keep still, or say what he thinks needs to be said to the white population.

CHILDREN

. . . and Ourselves

THE PRACTICE OF AN ART

FREDERICK, by Leo Lionni, is the completely delightful story of a mouse who puzzles the other members of his family by what seems an unmousian sloth. "Frederick, why don't you *work?"* they asked.

"I do work," said Frederick.

"I gather sun rays for the cold winter days."

Well, Fred busies himself in such mysterious ways until winter comes, and then, when the food runs out, and when the small talk of his family no longer distracts, he works the magic that was in him from the beginning, but which nobody could understand.

Frederick would be just right for children old enough to have any kind of story read to them. The illustrations are just right, too. (Pantheon, $3.50.)

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Two weeks ago, in "Children," Richard Du Wors was quoted on the follies of comma-counting in the name of literature. Wondering whether such pursuits can *ever* be justified, we recalled the chapter, "Studies of Extraordinary Prose," in Lafcadio Hearn's *Talks to Writers* (Dodd, Mead, 1927). Nearly everything that Hearn says in this book teaches the would-be writer something he might actually use. In this chapter he starts out by proposing that there are two ways of writing artistic prose. One grows out of careful observation and utterly simple description. The other reflects the nuances of feeling excited in the writer, and depends chiefly on his inner sense of beauty. To illustrate the first sort of prose Hearn quotes a long passage from the Norse Sturlunga Saga. Then he says:

> Now, do you observe anything peculiar about this very human document? I think you must appreciate the power of it; but I doubt whether you have noticed how very differently from modern methods that power has been employed.
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> In the first place, notice that there are scarcely any adjectives; altogether there are nine or ten—suppose we say ten. There are two and a half pages of about three hundred words in a page. . . . That is to say, there are about seven hundred and fifty words, and there are only ten adjectives in the whole—or about one adjective and a fraction to every hundred words. I think that you would have to look through thousands and thousands of modern English books before you could find anything like this. And there is no word used which could be left out, without somewhat spoiling the effect. This may not be grace; but it is certainly the economy of force, which is the basis of all grace.

Hearn points out that there is no description in the Saga—"Houses are mentioned and rocks and boats, and a fight is narrated in the most masterly way; yet nothing is described." Yet imagery appears for the reader, in spite of this lack of description. Further, "there is no emotion, no partiality, no sympathy expressed." Hearn exclaims:

> . . . what a wonderful art this is to create emotion in the reader's mind by suppressing it altogether in the narration! This is the supreme art of realism,—about which you may have heard a great deal in these past few years. I know of only one writer of the nineteenth century who had this same realistic power,—the late French story-teller de Maupassant. In the days before his brain weakened and madness destroyed his astonishing faculties, he also could create the most powerful emotion without the use of a single emotional word or suggestion.

To notice how adjectives add to and how they may weaken an account is a practical sort of "counting"—it makes the student aware of the feeling-tone of words, by themselves and in sentences. He begins to see how the short, Anglo-Saxon words bring strength, and how the inflected words with Latin endings sometimes take away the power of a sentence, especially when they come at the end. A little later in this chapter Hearn compares the work of Bjornson, who contributed a saga-like style to modern Scandinavian literature, with Baudelaire, who wrote a prose "suitable only for reveries, dreams,

philosophical fancies." Thus a discussion which begins with counting adjectives ends with much subtler matters, yet the counting, as an introductory device, was effective.

The enormous value one finds in Hearn as a teacher is that he always speaks to his listeners as a craftsman, and he assumes that they will become practitioners of the craft. He speaks directly to the creative potentiality in students, and he seems always to connect this with the realities of individual subjective response. In his chapter, "The Value of the Supernatural in Fiction," he insists that the fantastic element in prose need not be antiquarian in a scientific age, giving his claim a psychological justification:

> The mystery of the universe is now weighing upon us, becoming heavier and heavier, more and more awful, as our knowledge expands, and it is especially a ghostly mystery. All great art reminds us in some way of this universal riddle, that is why I say that all great art has something ghostly in it. It touches something within us which relates to infinity. When you read a very great thought, when you see a wonderful picture or a statue or building, and when you hear certain kinds of music, you feel a thrill in the heart and the mind which in all times men felt when they thought they saw a ghost or a god. Only the modern thrill is incomparably larger and longer and deeper. And this is why, in spite of all knowledge, the world still finds pleasure in the literature of the supernatural, and will continue to find pleasure in it for hundreds of years to come. The ghostly represents some shadow of truth, and no amount of disbelief in what used to be called ghosts can ever diminish human interest in what relates to that truth.

"Ghostly" has a rich meaning for Hearn, since he points out that the old English had no other term for either "spiritual" or "supernatural," and both these words, as he says, are not English but Latin. "Everything that religion today calls divine, holy, miraculous, was sufficiently explained for the old Anglo-Saxons by the term ghostly."

The dream, Hearn believes, is the source of some of the greatest works of the imagination. Many of the wonders of literature reflect the immediacy of dreaming:

> Do we not pass through the air in dreams, pass through solid substances, perform all kinds of miracles, achieve all sorts of impossible things? I think we do. At all events, I am certain that when, as men-of-letters, you have to deal with any form of supernatural subject—whether terrible, or tender, or pathetic, or splendid—you will do well, if you have a good imagination, not to trust to books for your inspiration. Trust to your own dream-life; study it carefully, and draw your inspiration from that. For dreams are the primary source of almost everything that is beautiful in the literature which treats of what lies behind mere daily experience.

Hearn is one of the few practicing artists who writes with precision about form and technique, yet manages, along the way, to communicate his own deep sense of inspiration and to speak of the sources of originality in a way that invites the student to seek them within himself. He conveys the delicate balance between the subjective and the objective that must be present in a work of art—the final responsibility of a teacher.

FRONTIERS

An Abstract Concession

MANY years ago, in his Introduction to Frederick Lange's *History of Materialism* (Harcourt, Brace, 1905), Bertrand Russell laconically stated the view of most sophisticated scientists:

> In our own time, the old battle of materialism persists chiefly in biology and physiology. Some men of science maintain that the phenomena of living organisms cannot be explained solely in terms of chemistry and physics, others maintain that such explanation is always theoretically possible. . . . The controversy may be expected to last a long time, since, even if the mechanists are in the right, they are not likely soon to find explanations of all vital phenomena of the sort their theory postulates. It will be a severe blow to the vitalists when protoplasm is manufactured in the laboratory, but they will probably take refuge in saying that their theories only apply to multi-cellular organisms. Later, they will confine vitalism to vertebrates, then to mammals, then to men, and last of all to white men—or perhaps it will be yellow men by that time. Ordinary scientific probability suggests, however, that the sphere of mechanistic explanation in regard to vital phenomena is likely to be indefinitely extended by the progress of biological knowledge.

While the desperate course of world events and other driving intensities have pushed the argument between the vitalists and the mechanists out of the journals of opinion, it still crops up in the writings of critics who try to get at the background-causes of our moral confusion. Thus Joseph Wood Krutch, in his article, "Is Life Just a Chemical Reaction?", in the *Saturday Review* for May 4, discusses suggestively what happens to the minds of people who suppose that it is. A biologist reader of the *SR* comments in a letter in the May 25 issue. Replying to another of Mr. Krutch's questions—Does increased mechanistic knowledge render useless a need for vitalism?—he argues that "mechanism, as we are coming to know it, merely rejects superstitious vitalism, not an inherent presence of vitalistic principles of life." Then he says:

> Might I remind Mr. Krutch that by its very nature, vitalism cannot be proven by man and science, whereas mechanism *must* become increasingly understood. Of course man will know all of nature, of life, of its chemistry. But increased mechanistic knowledge of man does not deny free will, does not imply "an inevitable predetermined decision." Somehow, not subject to the scrutiny of science, the ultimate biochemistry of the brain *must* be subject to man's "living principle," a vitalistic property.
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> This complex union must somehow enable the biochemistry of control mechanisms to freely select between choices. This I believe. This I cannot prove. Science cannot prove me right or wrong. In fact, the very term "science" should not be a part of the discussion.

For all its abstract philosophic generosity to Vitalism, this seems an assertion that there cannot be any science except mechanistic science; that there cannot be any proofs but "scientific" proofs. Should this be the case, then we are going to have to find an entirely new way of thinking about certainty. For the fact here neglected is that science has acquired a virtually theological authority during our recent history. For all practical purposes, scientific opinion is for a great many people the only criterion of what is real and worth our attention, and what is not. Having recognized this, we need to realize, also, that the mechanistic approach to knowledge employs abstractions to take out of the world of nature and life anything that they define effectively, and then calls the resulting definitions "scientific knowledge." But those abstractions ignore the very essences of meaning and value for human beings. The vitalist, you could say, insists that there must be a better way to study the phenomena of life and consciousness. But since he remains unable to offer the same kind of precise, repeatable results that the mechanists get with their techniques, he is treated as Russell describes him—like a man in flight from invading reality.

William James, writing as a scientist many years ago (in *Psychology: Briefer Course*), dealt

with the philosophic aspect of this question much more intelligently:

> A psychologist wants to build a *Science;* and a science is a system of fixed relations. Wherever there are independent variables, there science stops. So far, then, as our volitions may be independent variables, a scientific psychology must ignore that fact, and treat of them only so far as they are fixed functions. In other words, she must deal with the *general laws* of volition exclusively; with the impulsive and inhibitory character of ideas; with the nature of their appeals to the attention; with the conditions under which effort may arise, etc.; but not with the precise amounts of effort, for these, if our wills be free, are impossible to compute. She thus abstracts from free-will, without necessarily denying its existence. Practically, however, such abstraction is not distinguished from rejection; and most actual psychologists have no hesitation in denying that free-will exists. . . .
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> When, then, we talk of "psychology as a natural science," we must not assume that that means a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground. It means just the reverse; it means a psychology particularly fragile, and into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint, a psychology all of whose elementary assumptions and data must be reconsidered in wider connections and translated into other terms.

James openly declared in his introduction that he was going to practice "physiological psychology" because "the only way to make sure of its unsatisfactoriness is to apply it seriously to every possible case that can turn up." It was James's ultimate purpose, apparently, to put the mechanists to flight by this means. The difficulty, however, was that he failed to anticipate how determined psychologists—and other mechanists—would be to ignore any of the "independent variables" that might intrude. Not until the humanistic psychologists of the present came along, noticeably, say, at about 1950, have the realities of human subjectivity had any scientific attention worth talking about.

The real question is: Is there a dynamics of freedom that can be studied? Must purposive psychology and vitalistic biology wait, as James seemed to think, until the bankruptcy of the mechanist methodology is clear to all, and then take over as shy receivers who have been qualified, at last, only by the collapse of conventional science?

What we need now, as spur to the design of a science which encompasses individual volition and independent subjectivity, is a more complete awareness of what the mechanistic image of man, as model and proposed identity, *has done to human beings*, because of the enormous authority of "science." The mechanistic methodology, as its significance leaked down to the common man, became the gospel of human impotence, the anatomy of victims, the politics of manipulation, and the psychology of self-defeat.