

## THE MYTHIC ELEMENTS

MYTHS provide human beings with symmetries of meaning which are felt to be true and divined to be necessary, but seldom grasped in sharp, applicable focus. Prometheus is still in chains; we hardly move around without hearing the links rattle. Yet some day he will be unbound: the promise comes from a source higher than Olympus, and we believe it. So mythic prophecy lightens our burdens. The Millennium will surely dawn; the Golden Age has a presence in all useful dreams of history, and no man survives for long without some idealizing claim upon the future, even though it be only of a little white house in the country, with a few chickens scratching inside a friendly picket fence.

The practical act needs this balance, a connection with some sort of vision. Take away the vision and action loses measure, for then the vision, being denied, pours its unused energies into some insatiable drive for "progress." A life without vision invokes only angry, hostile gods.

How does a man begin to realize that he has become a Prodigal Son, except by mythic whisperings? Sooner or later, these whisperings are heard. The world doesn't generate them, although it sometimes seems to. They are not independent phenomena. They don't come out of the naked sky, nor from the clash of armies. They come, by common report, from wherever we happen to look when we lift up our eyes. A myth, it seems, can come from almost anywhere—anywhere, that is, that we can identify substances and figures and movements which reflect the mythic longing in ourselves. So the language of myth changes with the regions inspected by eyes filled with longing.

It is the temptation and sometimes the sin of learned men to engage in shallow manipulation of the symbols of which myths are constituted. This

one, a scholar may say, has meanings imagined from fear. Or a political leader, subject to similar temptations, may see that he can draw on the power-potentials of unutterable hope by recalling that Christ was born in a stable.

But men *have* to make use of symbols; they can't help it! Indeed they cannot, and the danger lies in doing it for them. Since myth is a key to meaning and therefore the invitation to action—often irreversible action—great responsibility settles on the shoulders of anyone who thinks himself competent to devise myths for human belief. For one of the things myths intimate, however ambiguously, is the locus of power. They also hint at the garb of righteousness. When you put power and righteousness together, and subtract the ambiguity, then myth enters history like a ruthless invader—a jealous Jehovah or an offended Zeus. Animated by partisan myths, men make it clear that they know how to put things right. They set out to *finish* things before the time for finishing has arrived. Only in drama, which is conscious representation of the workings of myths, do we encounter instruction, outside of history, in the misapplications of righteousness and power. One thinks of the slack-jawed remorse of the men lined up at the bar in *The Oxbow Incident*. They had defended the rights and dignities of free men, according to Tradition. Pitiless as Nature, they had imposed the penalty of theft. But their guiding myth was incomplete. It had not warned them against misleading appearances and the intoxications of power. Then they learned that there had been no theft.

Manifestly, we are into something so fundamental that even the most comprehensive definitions are inadequate. Myths are everywhere. The poet's reverie is his private myth, and he is very careful in exposing it, since even a slight allusion may turn into some unwanted doctrine,

some easy dogma about the nature of things. Cherishing the multiple promise of ambiguity, and also its protections, he will often refuse to tell you what he intended. Make of it what you will, he says. For himself, he knows and he doesn't. An honest man will not claim to have deliberated Aeolian scores, nor will he afterward set words to sounds which ought to have an independent meaning.

The instinct of the artist is never to iron out mysteries, but only to give them appropriate order. For the man who obliterates the presence of mystery commits an intolerable offense against both his fellows and his art. He is saying, in effect, that other men lack the competence to discern hidden meanings. Oh, these men who justify their Vulgate by a democracy of unstriving, a scripture of the obvious!

On the other hand, what is schooling but a modelling by teachers of the unravelling of mysteries? In manageable stages. The practice of science, that is, is unravelling them, while the humanities order them. Science is the dispelling of ambiguity where ambiguity is unnecessary and a distraction. It is the reduction, you could say, of unimportant myths in order to free human attention for the important ones. It devises spinning wheels.

But already, we see, we risk infinite regress into paradox. For myths have or may conceal many dimensions. The Newtonian cosmos is that *aspect* of the whole, great Kosmos which can be reduced to an unambiguous world-machine. Obviously, the cosmos has other aspects, and these may be neglected as we pursue the wonders seen and done, with others yet to be done, by our unambiguous science of the world-machine. So any little equation, neatly solved, is both a truth and a lie, or can be, depending upon whether you use it or read it. The solution is a small truth, but the claim of what has been solved may be a thumping lie. Even within science itself this analysis holds.

Such problems inhabit every explanation men make to one another, on any subject—a situation which awards extraordinary virtue to the myths which are inaccessible to familiar techniques of proof. A proved myth always belongs to the past. It is truth by reduction.

The ideal myth, then, is one that illuminates the present but cannot be consumed by public demonstrations. It is like a rainbow which, if too much talked about, appears in another part of the sky.

The field of a familiar myth is staked out by cultural inheritance. Revolutions always proclaim a new field, and so take time. Men must learn to feel at home in the new field. And in the movement of men's minds from one field to another—during the interval of unattached liberation between them—strange and wonderful things may happen. A few men try to imagine myths with chameleon potentialities—which change without changing; which require no great cruelties against those who cannot see the new colors coming into view. This is nothing more nor less than the restoration of ambiguity, which makes it possible to say to the stalwart and confident that the new myth isn't quite what they think it is. Such men give a Blakeian attention to what is soft-pedalled by the new myth. A swing of the pendulum, they propose, is not something that happens only once, nor always in the same direction. But their voices are usually silenced by the roar of Progress. Men tramping to meet Destiny hear mainly a martial strain. The flowers beneath their feet are not saved. Other fragilities, too, are swept into apocalyptic chapters of future history.

Who has a myth that can reconcile love and justice? Tenderness and strength? We cleave to these often opposite (in practice) considerations in terms of their pure abstractions, their shooting, parabolic curves. We could not know them unapprehensively save in splendid, incomparable isolation. And so they spur our history along, with only a change of names—Manifest Destiny, a

World Safe for Democracy, and now, perhaps, Black Power. There is truth in all these mythic elements, but who is ready, ever, to estimate the cost of their imperial triumph? Or to anticipate the accounts to be settled when their extremes meet in inner space?

Is there a myth for ordering other myths? To maintain their symmetry? That will not drain away their ambiguity into some new sewer of power and submission?

There may be such a master myth, but in times like these it can, if it exists, only be repeated mouth to ear. Or in some hardly audible counterpart, perhaps by a poetic code. Could such tendrils of imagining ever grow into consensus?

The point is, all men seek these balancing mythic elements. Every public myth, as it wears into commonplace acceptance, requires private corrections. And if we could bring these equilibrating processes into some quiet theatre of common reflection, they could be encouraged—not organized and directed, but encouraged.

But how would we distinguish between people who are secretly pressing bias and the ones who are learning, mainly, to respect the promise of their imagination? Well, it would not be possible to tell, a lot of the time. And it might be best not to be able to tell. For if we could, the temptation to straighten other people out might be too great to resist. There may even be suitable and necessary forms of ignorance, giving developmental exercise to the virtue of patience—patience and the refusal to judge.

We can't settle these matters. We can affect such situations only indirectly, through attitude. Growth-processes do not respond to tinkering and manipulation, which are for machines. Growth needs time and space, some nourishment, a hands-off policy, and the exemplary presence of other living things.

Once we had instruction from the stars, in a sort of astrology of being. We learned from the

repose and the turbulence of nature. We saw the endless alternations in the natural world and found ways to ride along with them—to go when they go and stop when they stop. The world was rich in analogues and human life was understood to have a contrapuntal relation to the themes of natural being. Both were destiny-seeking, and men wove tapestries of mythic meaning in and around them. Would it be good to restore such relations between man and nature?

The testimony regarding this question is not very controversial. But great distances now separate us from the world of nature. Its field has become a void containing rude, mechanical operations. The new myths permit no dialogue with the world. They are written in strawboss language, the formulas all in the imperative mood. People who think stones are only for standing on or throwing have lost contact with the graces of nature, within and without.

Yet we are still men. Every man is still an instance, however withdrawn or self-mutilated, of the mythic dimension. He still has an inner sky where Apollo might on invitation disport himself, and inner caverns where Pluto still rules, although, like Proteus, changing his form and potency with the fashions of depth analysis. How should we establish the value-levels and symbolize the dynamics of a new mythology?

Was recourse to the Oracle of Delphi the outcome of a controlled experiment or only an exercise in gullibility? What shall we say to people who ask why it is that both Napoleons and Buddhas walk the earth? Can men really embody abstractions and thereby give instruction in them? Why should we be shy about asking such questions?

The camp-followers of history also need explanation. Hegel cared little for camp-followers; he said practically nothing about individuals. But Buddha cared as much for them as anyone, and his mythology had no dust-bins for unimpressive and neglected souls. Why is the

ethical canon without authority in modern theories of knowledge?

Is life a drama in which only the featured players are real? Camus replied to this question with a myth of antiheroes—an intermediate refutation. Then the sudden appearance on the scene of a host of more energetic "strangers" who will not be camp-followers and whose world allows no space to camps, no role to Mars—is this a spontaneous mythic correction? What does it mean?

That Whirl is King, having kicked out Zeus? Or that the legend of Prometheus is getting around? Well, his shackles are still formidable, and Zeus knows other tricks of control.

The old myths seek new incarnation while their inadequate copies and edited versions are torn to pieces by iconoclasts. (Who released to Nechayev the Hammer of Thor?) So there is once again a War in Heaven and the terror of changeling myths seeps into our lives. Are the Pied Pipers of the time shaping up a generation of men without countries, people with no roots in the earth, or will these wanderers actually be able to homestead on a more transcendental terrain?

But a man can, without being sure of anything else, walk around and do his necessary things, carrying in his mind the tentative myth that he is growing for himself. Whatever he must do, there is a mythic element potential in him, and it can give his action larger meaning. He can always work on this. He will use his myth, even if he doesn't work on it, but if he doesn't work on it, he will experience unnecessary and inexplicable pain. And then, as we know, he may begin to devise a myth with scapegoats in it. The most terrible and destructive angers of history have this origin.

Private myth-making is the only gyroscopic principle available to men who want to remain individuals, these days. Its necessity is a sign of the times. Nor is the practice so very hard to teach. A man who makes a little self-reference—who consults the growing organism of his myth—

before he says what he thinks has an effect on other men. They notice that he has something in reserve. And he notices that his myth grows only from private consultation. Some say we need a Dr. Spock for the care and nourishment of infant myths, yet it is simple enough to help them grow. One need only to stop and reflect, to refuse to be swept *anywhere* by an external force, and to learn that bending with the wind is not the same as having no roots. Conforming to necessity is not the same as abandoning the options we have because of a high wind or hurricane warnings. Some space always remains between alternatives, so long as we remain human. The man who won't look for the space declines to be human. It must be admitted, however, that finding it sometimes seems only a passage from death-camp to existentialism.

Yet space of this sort is always a human creation. It exists through our myths. It is a space which widens from a stretching imagination and narrows when we say we have no choice. A man's myth becomes his self-fulfilling prophecy, inevitably subject to the blandishments and delays of time. A good myth helps to balance out these frustrations, while Nature, when she is in good shape, brings harmonizing occupations and preoccupations.

One man says, Oh, what a wide land, with so much solitariness in it! Another thinks, I am *alone*. The private myth gives polarity to intention. The polarity creates a field, and the field becomes space for action.

We are born into a finite world from which much ambiguity has already been removed for our practical benefit and survival. The baby gets fed. The floor is solid, the roof sound. The milk has the right temperature. Yet the nurture of a child is still filled with mystery. Science does not collapse the dimensions within dimensions seen in a baby's eyes. The tissues of a baby's face reflect an inner, mobile intelligence. A waving arm declares flight. The baby's cry is an invocation of power—and it *works*. It works because someone hears. Human

life is a continuous conjuration. There are responses to necessity and responses to vision, and human beings are always making both, while the secret of human becoming lies in distinguishing between the two. Myths provide the sort of objectivity we need for doing it.

The parameters of vision and the parameters of necessity are interdependent variables, within the slowly changing continuum of matter, space, and time. When vision lags, necessity grows. It can grow out of all proportion. It is *necessary*, we say, to spend most of our money on war. It is *necessary* to keep what's left of our money in banks and vaults, and have it watched by men with guns. Myth turned against itself is myth which stereotypes and then ignores the strength potential in vision. Vision's last resource is the subjective monument of martyrdom.

Why are some men able to live more by vision than by necessity? They don't oppose the necessity of other men, but only its intolerable exaggerations, and only when they must. The subtler myths deal with this kind of relation with other men by means of the chameleon coloring of all true mythic elements. Will you be a Thoreau or a Clarence Darrow? *Can* you be a Thoreau or a Clarence Darrow? Who knows? A man hardly knows until he tests. By testing he finds out how to be himself. And he won't ever test if his mythic elements lie around weak and unused. He may have heard epithets applied to myth-making. He may be swayed by table-talk at home. He may have abdicated without knowing it. And when a lot of people fall into such habits, Necessity reaches out and fills their emptiness. It fills and paralyzes, making them look for outside saviors. It puts dark obsessions in the place of aspiring dreams. And then the statistical sociologists collect data and report on the laws of human behavior. They graph the uniformities of the common failure of imagination, but call them by other names.

Well, we have a myth applying to this situation. Every generation documents in its own

way the case of the Grand Inquisitor. You can hardly win against that case in the courts He instituted. Your evidence is not admissible; it isn't "real." Meanwhile his resources of persuasion are not yours, and anyway you wouldn't use them.

So a man walks around in the world of blind necessities—some of them his own, some belonging to other people—but he carries his vision in his head. Sometimes he can bring a little of the vision down into life. Sometimes it has to stay in his head; it may need some correction; and meanwhile he has to increase its intensity just to keep going. It is his balance principle—the only one he'll ever get. The balancing or mythic elements are something he has generated for himself and must move around for himself. They are the instruments of his becoming in the world.

## *REVIEW*

### ONE SORT OF PSYCHOLOGIST

THE problem of what can be delegated or left to specialists, and what cannot, is a central issue of our times. It is doubtless a central issue in all times, but seems especially urgent, today, by reason of the extraordinary authority pressed upon specialists and the equally extraordinary demands made of them. There is a strong likelihood that if we become able to resolve the chief messes of the present, this will be partly because of the enlightenment and self-reform of distinguished specialists who turn our problems back to us in a more comprehensible shape. When men who work in an identifiable field, involving specific "disciplines" which lead to specific conclusions, decide to return our problems to us, they often do it in an illuminating way—by converting the language of their specialty into the common human tongue. They illustrate for us the classic role and contribution of special studies. And we may think that they originally became specialists—whether they knew it or not—in order to unbecome specialists later on. In any event, something of the commitment of their specialization survives the translation of their work into generality, giving it substance you can bite into, and this is the increment of genuine scientific progress.

Something of this sort seems evident in the work of Henry A. Murray, who is interviewed by Mary Harrington Hall in the September *Psychology Today*. The best way to determine what sort of psychologist Henry Murray is, is to study how he uses abstractions. Does he use them to dispose of important questions, to "settle" them—or to open them up? Dr. Murray's article reprinted in the back of the magazine, a study of Herman Melville first published in 1951, has this passage:

The habit of a psychologist is to break down the structure of each personality he studies into elements, and so in a few strokes to bring to earth whatever merit that structure, as a structure, may possess.

Furthermore, for reasons I need not mention here, the technical terms for the majority of these elements have derogatory connotations. Consequently, it is difficult to open one's professional mouth without disparaging a fellow-being. Were an analyst to be confronted by that much heralded but still missing specimen of the human race—the normal man—he would be struck dumb, for once, through lack of appropriate ideas.

If I am able to surmount to some extent any impediments of this origin, you may attribute my good fortune to a providential circumstance. In the procession of my experiences *Moby-Dick* anteceded psychology; that is, I was swept by Melville's gale and shaken by his appalling sea dragon before I had acquired the all-leveling academic oil that is poured on brewed-up waters, and before I possessed the weapons and tools of science—the conceptual lance, harpoons, cutting irons, and whatnots—which might have reduced the "grand hooded phantom" to mere blubber. Lacking these defenses I was overwhelmed. Instead of my changing this book, this book changed me.

There comes now an account of what Dr. Murray found in *Moby-Dick* and in Melville, traversing wide territories of thought, including our immediate American and European past, with assimilation, in pertinent measure, of such figures as Milton, Goethe, Blake, Hobbes, and Keats. It is a flowing investigation of the efforts of the shapers of Western culture, with particular insight into Melville's diagnosis of Ahab's almost cosmic failure:

As Lewis Mumford has said so eloquently, Ahab is at heart a noble being whose tragic wrong is that of battling against evil with "power instead of love," and so becoming "the image of the thing he hates." With this impression imbedded in our minds, how can we come out with any moral except this: evil wins? We admit that Ahab's wickedness has been canceled. But what survives? It is the much more formidable, compacted wickedness of the group that survives, the world that is "saturated and soaking with lies," and its man-of-war god, who is hardly more admirable than a totem beast, some oral-aggressive, child-devouring Cronos of the sea. Is this an idea that a man of good will can rest with?

Rest with? Certainly not. Melville's clear intention was to bring not rest, but *unrest* to intrepid minds. All gentle people were warned away from this

book "on risk of a lumbago or sciatica." . . . He had not written to soothe, but to kindle, to make men leap from their seats, as Whitman would say, and fight for their lives.

Dr. Murray's essay is richer than any quotation can suggest, and as a brief exegesis of the various philosophic readings of *Moby-Dick* it probably ranks with the best in literary criticism on the subject. Yet it is also psychology. It is *humanist* psychology, since the generalizations which are the tools of its practice have always an X at their heart—to say that Ahab was Satan, but not Prometheus, is to say that he *might have been* Prometheus.

This use of symbolism is a way of sharing with William Blake the conviction that all the gods are within, and of declaring that the task of psychology is to identify these presiding deities by means that other branches of science have not used. In the interview, for example, Dr. Murray says:

There are some university departments where they think that if you're seriously interested in literature you're no psychologist; that you should be turning to physics and statistics for your inspiration.

Physics is the monarch of the exact sciences, and full of wonders. But it's concerned with inanimate entities which in my opinion do not constitute fitting models of psychology.

In its practical applications, physics accelerates the lust for money and material power—the peak of which is nuclear energy—coupled with the temptation to use it, which may prove irresistible. The probability of mankind's committing suicide by homicide is enormous, but it is not taken seriously. It is not a hot truth for most of us, not hot enough to convert us to a redeeming, antithetical philosophy or religion.

A developing and enduring love affair is the best model for psychology, and here the hippies have a message for us. But it looks as if the love-ins are outnumbered by the hate-ins, and America is becoming a breeding ground of killers—preparing a climate of feeling conducive to pressing buttons that will terminate all joy, if not all life, on earth.

This seems a good place to recall some other papers by Dr. Murray. He has given considerable

thought, not only to the possibility of a button-pushing finish to the human race, but also to the responsibility of modern psychology for the uncritical acceptance of button-pushing solutions. His address before the International Congress of Applied Psychology in Copenhagen in 1961 became the report of an allegorical trial of academic psychology. Socrates conducts the prosecution before Olympian judges presiding in some celestial region, the earth having been rendered almost unlivable by the effects of "a biological, chemical and nuclear war between the U.S.S.R. and the United States . . . started inadvertently—by the push of a button during a small group's momentary panic." In his summation, Socrates said:

I should like to ask what proportion of psychologists were observing and conceptualizing on the basis of two or more conflicting personalities, each operating as a directed system of beliefs, emotions, wants, and higher mental processes? Did, or did not, a goodly number of psychologists, insisting on the utmost scientific rigor, shun the complexities of personality and, in search of a higher pecking status, plant their minds in biology, physics, statistics, symbolic logic, or methodology per se? And among those psychologists who observed and tested persons, did or did not, a rather large percentage conceive of personality as a galaxy of abstractions in a vacuum, . . . giving little indication, in any case, of how a person would proceed, and with what outcome, in a vehement transaction, let us say here, with a specified type of ideological antagonist?

The Socratic indictment goes on, showing that reductive academic psychology founded its norms for human behavior on the statistics of conformity and mediocrity, thus lending the authority of science to the complacent standards of the "dominant" culture. Socrates concludes:

In short, immortal judges, would you, or would you not declare that quite a few psychologists—with no terminology at all to represent better-than-average personalities—added what influence they had to the general trend of denigration which reduced man's image of himself to the point of no revival, stripping it of genuine potentiality for creative change, the only ground there was for hope that people could do anything but what they actually did do?

It is abundantly clear that Dr. Murray is in revolt against psychology as a technology of behavior which ignores those distinctively *human* qualities and capacities lying at the root of all motivation. He works, instead, with abstractions about human behavior which include the various crossroads of human decision. Statements about man which do not encompass the ardors and climaxes of autonomous decision become, almost automatically, items for the handbook of managers who want technical assistance in manipulating a plastic, human mass.

There are, we all know, lonely pangs which attend autonomous decision. A humanistic psychology is a psychology that supports man in his loneliness. It strengthens him. It helps him to recognize and prepares him to endure the human condition.

The pangs of decision are painful enough. But much worse, in the end, are the penalties exacted of men who avoid decision, who let themselves be coerced and cajoled into the behavior patterns schemed out by some alien "management." For then the many small occasions for individual decision, having been ignored, add up to cumulative totals of inaction, and these turn into historical forces whose terrible necessity excludes individual decision. It is now *too late* for men to act as human beings. And the new management, seeking power, explains that the glories of individuality can be recovered only by denying them for the time being. What was once an opportunity to choose is now reduced to a compulsion to agree. Then only men of great moral genius and natural charisma are able to show that the lost invitation to choose may have a leavening presence even in the compulsion, humanizing the acts of revolution. Gandhi showed how to renew individuality under the conditions of desperate necessity.

Dr. Murray was one of the first to arouse his colleagues to such ends. It is time, he said, to get out of our methodological limits in order to have an encounter with *Man*. The tools devised for the

practice of academic psychology make no contact with the nature and potentiality of what we are examining. The parts of the human machine, with which we have gained some familiarity, reveal nothing about the capacities and responsibilities of the operator.

In a paper published in the April, 1940, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Dr. Murray used the psychoanalyst's deep involvement with the pain and longing of human beings to show that academic psychology was denying itself any recognition of this level of human reality. Then, taking his critical, humanist stance on the new plateau, he continued:

. . . the question is, have the Freudians allowed the id enough creativeness and the ego enough will to make any elevating declaration? What is Mind today? Nothing but the butler and procurer of the body. The fallen angel of the soul has been put to route by the starker theory of the soulless fallen man, a result—as Adam, the father of all philosophy, demonstrated for all time—of experiencing and viewing love as a mere cluster of sensations. Little man, what now?

There is a sense in which Dr. Murray insists, after Thoreau: "Wisdom does not inspect, but behold. We must look a long time before we see." He continuously calls attention to the shortcomings of any specialist reduction. As he says in the current interview:

Psychoanalysis has provided convincing explanations of numerous abnormal states that date from childhood; but it has not proved capable of describing the supremely healthy, effective, joyous or creative aspects of an ongoing personality.



## *COMMENTARY* AESOP'S TEAM

THE hare must leap—that is the way his muscles are constructed. The tortoise covers the ground, too, but at the slower pace determined by his physiology. Both have the course to traverse, and both will reach the goal, in the end, or there wouldn't be any race, nor fable to be understood.

A teacher is a man equipped with both sorts of muscle, giving him comprehension of the potentialities and necessities of both hare and tortoise. The hare is always leaping to breakthroughs, but the teacher knows that a world with only hares in it would be made of flashing, unfilled-in abstractions—a cold, inhuman place often structured more by vanity than by a decent regard for travelers who believe in carrying the weight of the world on their backs.

The weakness of the tortoise is that he commonly develops a stolid contempt for hares. It is *good* to go slowly, to stay close to solid ground, he says to himself. He may even arrange deadfalls for leaping hares, who sometimes do not look where they are going. The hare, he declares, is a creature afflicted by nervous twitches, and if hares will not accept the therapy we have planned—well, there are sterner methods for slowing them down.

The teacher understands these tendencies, too, and is hard put to explain that a world populated by both hares and tortoises gets its reality and its morality as much from the differences as from the similarities between them. A harmony of life, he tries to show, comes from the balance of *opposing* forces, not from the triumph of only one kind, which would collapse the field and end the race.

So a teacher is a man without partisan righteousness. He sees the beauty, the brilliance, the promise of the hare's abstractions, but knows that they will remain barren unless the tortoise gives them flesh and blood. The teacher runs with both, continually changing pace. And he is always

having to vary the fable, to show the virtue in both, but never taking sides. Yet he is also in the race, and because he sometimes leaps with the hares and sometimes inches with the tortoises, the development of *his* muscles looks pretty eccentric, even "abnormal," to those who believe only in competition and victory.

Well, that's the trouble with a fable. Being a story about fixed and unchangeable natures, it lets you think that hares can never appreciate tortoises, nor tortoises ever leap like hares.

# CHILDREN

## ... and Ourselves

### ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGNER EDUCATION

[This is the first part of another of Robert Jay Wolff's lectures on education in design, first given in 1948.]

#### I

CONTEMPORARY DESIGN finds itself in the strange position, today, of being widely accepted at the same time that it is almost universally misunderstood. Those of us who have been knocking on the door the past many years are finally being invited inside, but unfortunately for all the wrong reasons. We are told that the struggle is over, that so-called modern design is here to stay, that nonconformity must be either the result of a lack of talent or a neurotic disposition. That it might have something to do with insight, integrity and vision is passed over. What, we are asked, are we complaining about? We've been taken up in a big way, haven't we? What about the chrome-covered automotive masterpieces that are coming out of Detroit? What about the snappy new plastic radio cabinets, the streamlined storefronts, the recent art-conscious magazine advertisements? What about them? In the opinion of the powers behind current industrial design, only a crackpot would say that things have not changed and that actually the kiss of death is taking over where the boot left off. With all due respect to the excellence of the architecture of the Museum of Modern Art, there is something heartwarming in the picture of that fine old crackpot, Dr. Albert Barnes of the Barnes Foundation, leaning on the reception desk at the Museum smoking a cigarette, and replying to the lady who tells him to put it out, "Hell it's a bar, isn't it?—it looks like one."

How did we get this way? How, in this day, when New York's 57th street is going frantically abstract and national magazines are streamlining their cover pages, did we get this way? As a matter of fact, it's an old story. We are doing

exactly what our great grandfathers and every generation since them has been doing. It's an old disease. We are addicted to machines and yet we hate the sight of them.

Streamlining, the bastard offspring of the functional forms of ship and airplane design, in this sense is an expression of the pompous and academic aesthetics of the worst that nineteenth-century thinking could give us. This is the concept that insists that art is celestial and that man and nature and reality (reality in our case is the machine) are sordid and that the function of art is to purify this situation. This principle, before streamlining made its appearance, found its highest expression in the hypocritical innocence of the naked nymphs that adorned the walls of the old-time saloon. The worst of abstract and non-objective painting to the detriment of the best is in this tradition of self-deception and escape. To this day, and even more today than ever, the artist and designer is being called upon not to give order and meaning to reality but to devise ways and means of escaping it. The great movement that got under way with the founding of the Bauhaus in 1919 to challenge this entrenched habit still goes on. We, here, among other things, are a part of that movement and before we go further in formulating its application to design education we should stop and examine how it came about.

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution the humanistic conscience of Western man has been colliding with the standards and stereotypes of machined mass production. The effect of this collision has varied all the way from helpless acceptance, through passive resistance, to violent reaction. André Breton, the spokesman of Surrealism, tells of the conflict within the individual as a struggle between two realities, external reality and internal reality. We have seen how this struggle escapes no one and how the high-school educator is brought face to face with it in children whose earlier creative vitality and aesthetic impulses, their internal reality, have been gradually shut off and atrophied by the growing

weight of an external reality that has no place for these particular human factors in its workaday pattern, and which relegates them to the unessential areas of hobbies and pastimes or tolerable eccentricity. We spoke of the split that occurs when a child reaches this stage, somewhere around the age of twelve. We can see its counterpart in society, starting with the substitution of the machine for the handicraft standard. We can see this split growing throughout the past century and a half, a conflict between society's inner reality, its humanistic aspirations stemming from the Renaissance, and its outer reality, our machine civilization, now grown to ponderous proportions. Man's attempts to heal this breach, up to the time immediately preceding the First World War, were based on the conviction that the split was hopelessly incurable, that the machine could never be made to serve man's inner needs and that humanism, beyond accepting the material blessings of mechanization, should have no part of it but on the contrary should protect itself and its ideals by isolation and resistance to integration. How this persists into our time is never so eloquently expressed as when the new walls of a Tudor type bungalow rise to enclose a kitchen by General Electric and plumbing by Kohler.

Though Architecture will play no immediate part in planning the specific ingredients of a workshop program for secondary schools, we will do well to study its recent history, for the various forms it has taken throughout this epoch become visual signposts of the human problem, and also the keys to knowledge, self-criticism, and constructive action in almost all fields of human endeavor. This is the underlying thesis of Siegfried Giedion's great book, *Space, Time and Architecture*, and that is the reason it has been recommended as valuable source material for the teacher of design from kindergarten on up. There is nothing in the large catalogue of human expressiveness that so completely reflects men's aspirations and frustrations than the spaces and forms within which he encloses himself.

How, then, did our ancient humanistic culture express its revolt against the new machine culture through the medium of architecture? A revolt punctuated here and there throughout the nineteenth century by courageous attempts to come to terms with mechanization, and in the twentieth century to create the means to equilibrium and integration?

Giedion says: "There are whole decades in the second half of the nineteenth century in which no architectural work of any significance is encountered. Eclecticism smothered all creative energy." (This is the same eclecticism which in spirit we could bring into the present-day design classroom to smother all creative energy in the form of tasks prescribed by conventional acceptances from streamlining to gingerbread decoration.) Giedion goes on to say that "it was just at this time that an unprecedented wave of building activity swept over Europe. Its cities took on the shapes from which we still suffer today." The age of iron construction has accomplished miracles of engineering and unintentional beauty in the great utilitarian structures of the international expositions, of London in 1851, and Paris in 1855 and 1878. However, the inability to separate the creative power of humanism from its traditional and by now irrelevant forms crops up almost anywhere else where man sets his hand to build. For the first time since the baroque vision broke through the limitations of Renaissance perspective, the means to a new mastery of space was at hand. These means were used exclusively toward utilitarian ends while the structures which were created for activities in which the dignity of the individual was involved were for the most part horrors of compromise and tricky deception. We are all familiar with the iron and steel structures which hide their shame of the materials that hold them up with façades of marble and hand-cut stone, designed to resemble anything from an ancient Greek Temple to a French Renaissance chateau. We have only to walk to the nearest bank to encounter this phenomenon. The disease

has been world-wide and persists to this day. It is the disease which tells us that we cannot achieve beauty and dignity and truth with the tools and materials of our times, that these implements will serve only materialistic ends—ends which supposedly should be good enough for most of us. As for those who want more, it is necessary to borrow from history. It is significant that the only place in the home of today where you are sure of finding design that has not been filched from another age is the kitchen.

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## *FRONTIERS* Art And Home

A REVIEWER in the London *Times Literary Supplement* for Sept. 12 extracts from *Richard Strauss and Romain Rolland: Correspondence* (edited by Rollo Meyers) the following from a letter written by Rolland in 1905:

I want to mention the greatest danger which threatens music in Germany. *There is too much music in Germany.* This is not a paradox. I do not believe that there can be a worse misfortune for art than an uncontrolled superabundance of art. Music drowns musicians. Festival succeeds festival.... Concerts, theatres, choral societies, chamber-music societies take up the whole life of a musician. When will he have the time to be alone, to listen to the music within him? These torrents of tactless music penetrate into the last retreats of the soul, dilute its strength, destroy solitude and the riches of secret thoughts.

This, as the reviewer points out, was written long before the mechanical and electronic mass production of sound—the phonograph, radio, etc. Yet Rolland understood the danger in attempting to fill cultural vacuums with the artistic achievements of a few talented and creative people. He also saw that the requirements of "production" gnaw away at the roots of the creative capacity itself.

It is the same in other areas of human expression. The number of books—many of them intended to be "serious"—published each year is overwhelming. How many of them need to be published? How many are worth reading? And what happens to the natural reverence for communications of the human mind when books are virtually missiles aimed at the reader in a constant barrage of publishers' announcements, magazine advertisements, and other promotional devices intended to convince people that their lives will continue barren or incomplete without the latest compendium of facts or disclosure of "insights"?

A man would soon be impoverished in every sense if he took all these claims seriously. So, the entire situation degrades. Appeals for just causes and attention to the best undertakings must learn to compete in a scurrilous market place of "ideas." Some men feel obliged to go "primitive," simply to filter cultural excesses out of their lives. There are countless little optings out by people who act simply in self-defense. They can hardly discriminate—a plight which may cause them additional pain.

All this is not quite a conspiracy against "solitude and the riches of secret thoughts," yet it operates more effectively than an actual conspiracy because it is so "sincere." Conspiracy brings telltale symptoms of plots, while earnest participation in a common delusion has an almost "organic" quality. Which is only to say that the defects of an age of "superabundance"—except for the enlarging patches of degrading poverty that seem its other face—are difficult to recognize *as* defects. People say, We are doing all these *good* things; how can there be anything wrong with our devotion to art, to literature, to keeping up with the finer expressions in life?

There must be some terrible misapplication of principle here, some originally valid but now betraying rule. We say, for example, that it is not enough to have constructive thoughts—that a man must put them to work. And from this we conclude that a thought is not constructive unless it is acted out. So the project becomes one of techniques of externalization. We rush out after screen tests and auditions as though there were no difference between the marketable and the real. And then, because art is long, we set traps for accidental excellences, becoming collectors instead of creators.

Where exhibition, not growth, is the criterion of progress, everyone becomes some kind of talent scout. You find it, you don't develop it. How prejudicial, then, to be born with a special ability! For then the world comes to your door, waving checks and production schedules.

Spontaneous excellences become the prey of the cultural vacuum, and eventually the artist recognizes his own victimization. So there are Dada and other less ostentatious revolts, the high-level pranks of a Picasso, and the exhibition in public of novel "with it" achievements, taking the place of serious criticism.

Meanwhile, human longings for pastoral simplicity are supposed to be met by the suburban tract home, whose designer is given a budget instead of natural limits. Architects are now taught to admire, not the blended harmony of site and structure, but the symmetrical output of a computer which digests the requirements of commercial land use (these having been nicely purified by mathematical abstraction), and adds the weight of all the many production items of householder convenience and current sales appeal. The computer whirs, then hands the designer a nice little coloring book to fill in.

One thinks forlornly, not for serious prescription but for contrast, of the music made and homes erected by a still surviving American people. In the Fall 1960 issue of *Landscape*, Edwin N. Wilmsen tells how a Navaho hogan is brought into being:

Each part of the hogan has its mythical counterpart and there are certain songs that, if sung while building the hogan, will assure long life and happiness to the house and its occupants. To a Navaho, his hogan is more than just a place to eat and sleep in; it has a very important position in his sacred world. The Holy People, the god-like prototypes of man, built the first hogans of turquoise, white shell, abalone and jet.... The hogan of First-Man was made of sheets of sunbeam and rainbow and a man considered his hogan beautiful to the extent that it was well-constructed and to the degree that it adhered to the original model.... The Navaho's esteem of his house (and his womenfolk) is easily seen in the following short song from the House Blessing Way:

It extends from the woman,  
 It extends from the woman,  
 Beauty extends from the rear corner of my  
 hogan,  
 It extends from the woman,  
 Beauty extends from the center of my hogan

It extends from the woman,  
 Beauty extends from the side corners of my  
 hogan,  
 It extends from the woman,  
 Beauty extends from the doorway of my hogan,  
 It extends from the woman,  
 Beauty extends from the surroundings of my  
 hogan,  
 It extends from the woman,  
 Beauty radiates from its every direction,  
 So it does.