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FARTHER THAN MOST

FEW writers have faced the problem of knowledge with the courage and tenacity of Albert Camus. He recognized that the supreme human quality is the longing to understand, yet found understanding of the human situation to be beyond his capacity. The pain of this realization seems written on his face. The human situation is, he thought, absurd; yet his hunger for meaning was so strong that he felt compelled to try to generate meaning out of the confrontation with absurdity. Not to submit to the senselessness of existence is the heroism of which a man stripped of illusions remains capable.

Why did Camus think the world without meaning? Was this feeling the residual conclusion of scientific skepticism? Since the universe of Galileo and Newton contains no human qualities, is not rational man only an intruder here, a feeble, flickering light of mind in an endless continuum of darkness? The inhuman and brutish events of midcentury European history could have seemed to Camus a final confirmation of the insignificance of human hopes. Where was the evidence that man's efforts and ideals count for something? The loneliness of Camus seems to embody all the present disenchantments of Renaissance Man, raising them to Promethean dimensions.

One does not easily ignore either his doubts or the pain he experienced. He sets the problem in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Otter Essays* (Vintage, 1959):

> Of whom and of what indeed can I say: "I know that!" This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. The world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. I can sketch one by one all aspects it is able to assume, all those likewise that have been attributed to it, this upbringing, this origin, this ardor or these silences, this nobility or this vileness. But aspects cannot be added up. This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. Forever shall I be a stranger to myself. In psychology as in logic, there are truths but no truth.

Here Camus echoes David Hume, but with a difference. There is melodic beauty in the Frenchman's prose—something Hume had never known. Camus will tell the truth as he sees it, but lyrically. But this, one might say, is not the naked truth: he has adorned it. Well, another view may be taken of such things. Could there not be realities which are mutilated, drained of life, when told about in the dead language of objectivity?

This is Camus' account of the world:

> These scents of grass and stars at night, certain evenings when the heart relaxes—how shall I negate this world whose power and strength I feel? Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that the world is mine. You describe it to me and you teach me to classify it. You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge I admit that they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multi-colored universe can be reduced to the atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know.

Reduced to poetry? To airy nothings—does he mean? Perhaps Camus wants the stuff of mind or self to reveal itself in the solid garb of sense perception. Why is the strong feeling of being a subject not enough reality for him? Perhaps this is his trouble—he wants mind to appear as unambiguously as matter. But paradoxically, he also wants matter to appear as mind. He says:

> The mind's deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man's unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal. The cat's universe is not the universe of the anthill. The truism "All thought is anthropomorphic" has no other meaning. Likewise, the mind that aims to understand reality can consider itself satisfied only by reducing it to terms of thought. If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled. If thought discovered in the shimmering mirrors of phenomena eternal relations capable of summing up themselves in a single principle, then would be seen an intellectual joy of which the myth of the blessed would be but a ridiculous imitation. That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. But the fact of that nostalgia's existence does not imply that it is to be immediately satisfied. For if, bridging the gulf that separates desire from conquest, we assert with Parmenides the reality of the One (whatever it may be), we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve.

It is this *diversity of things* that makes Camus desperate. How can things be many in themselves and one in the mind of man? The many, taken by themselves, are reasonable enough—reasonable in the sense that we can count them, manipulate them, and make them serviceable. It is what they are about, what they *mean*, that lies outside the human ken.

> That universal reason, practical or ethical, that determinism, those categories that explain everything are enough to make a decent man laugh. They have nothing to do with the mind. They negate its profound truth, which is to be enchained. In this unintelligible and limited universe, man's fate henceforth assumes its meaning. A horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds him until his ultimate end. In his recovered lucidity, the feeling of the absurd becomes clear and definite. I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together. This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless universe where my adventure takes place. Let us pause here. If I hold to be true that absurdity that determines my relationship with life, if I become thoroughly imbued with that sentiment that seizes me in face of the world's scenes, with that lucidity imposed on me by the pursuit of a science, I must sacrifice everything to these certainties and I must see them squarely to be able to maintain them. Above all, I must adapt my behavior to them and pursue them in all their consequences. I am speaking here of decency. But I want to know beforehand if thought can live in these deserts.

We are left with this question. Camus has no private encouragement to offer: his logic, in relation to the "givers" he finds acceptable, seems bullet proof. His bleakly heroic solution is found in the Myth of Sisyphus, in the interval when Sisyphus starts down the hill, burdenless, yet knowing he must go on forever, pushing the rock nearly to the top, then losing control and seeing all the labor of his mighty effort wasted in a moment or two.

But Sisyphus will go on. He is a man, capable of defiant continuity. He is ready to spend eternity pushing his rock. The rock knows nothing, but Sisyphus knows: "He is stronger than his rock."

> Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too [like Œdipus] concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

The interesting thing about Camus is not this utterly grim philosophy, but the fact that we want to keep on reading him. The threat in his logic cannot diminish the pregnancy of his prose. The chief reason we read Camus, it seems, is that he seeks no plausible escape. He makes a home of his integrity; he is not intimidated: he generates meaning out of himself. He deals with the great philosophical questions, taking their

answerlessness as his answer. He is no evader, no simplifier, no hider behind either science or religion. He prefers to go down to defeat, if he must, rather than ignore the great questions.

What is in Camus' heart is also in ours. The tools of analysis he uses are the ones that we have inherited. And from Camus we learn that what can be done with these tools isn't very much. He exposes their inadequacy. He draws upon no secret resources. The inner light of the mystic is not his—not yet, anyway. If, then, midstream, modern thought is bankrupt, hopeless, with nothing to say to a man who asks the great questions, that man, having no further resource than his own integrity, will reveal the insolvency of the age in unmistakable terms. His defeat, then, is luminous with his effort and with his determination to be honest. He has the victory of Sisyphus to comfort him. He speaks to us with his courage, not his result.

There seems a sense in which, like the dramatists of the absurd, Camus holds up a mirror to the modern world and exclaims, "Say it isn't so!"

Another light on Camus was given by a reviewer in the *London Times Literary Supplement* some years ago (Aug. 25, 1966). After a survey of his work and career, this writer puzzles over Camus' enormous popularity in France, England, and America:

> In art, he believed that form should be subordinated to subject matter, while in philosophy he clung to the even older idea that there is such a thing as "human nature." In politics he was a moderate, in religion an agnostic, in art an admirer of classicism. His interests were undoubtedly "modern": suicide, absurdity, revolt, guilt, anguish and the failure to communicate. What so many of his readers fail to realize—and it was a failure that caused him some annoyance—was that in almost every case he was concerned to criticize the "modern" attitude rather than provide reasons for clinging to it. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* he came out against both physical and philosophical suicide, and constantly insisted that "the absurd" was only a point of departure. In *L'Homme Revolte* he stressed the importance of moderation in revolt rightly understood, and put forward what a number of critics rightly saw as a plea for the best bourgeois values. In *La Chute* he was virulent in his denunciation of the idea of absolute guilt, and in *L'Exil et le Royaume* he dealt with the theme of separation largely to emphasize the possibility of communication. Indeed, the volume ends on a most striking image of a man recovering his feeling of community with his fellows. Compared to Sartre, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Fellini or Antonioni, Camus seems almost to come from another century. The stranger. The outsider. The nineteenth-century liberal.

What shall we say about this evaluation of Camus? From one point of view, the critic assembles paradoxes. He finds Camus' best qualities associated with cultural attitudes commonly described with pejorative terms. To speak of "bourgeois" values is to suggest that the values are either pretentious or petty. To call a man a nineteenth-century liberal is to imply his reliance on socio-moral clichés. These odious comparisons are probably deliberate on the part of the *TLS* writer. He converts his appreciation of Camus into an occasion for inviting his readers to take a second look at their habits of judgment. He is saying: If you think highly of Camus, you ought to ask yourself why, since, if you read him carefully, you will find that "he was, in many of his views, almost irredeemably square."

An explanation of Camus' "inconsistencies" may lie in the fact that he was able to distinguish between good qualities and their institutional externalizations:

> Camus does put an unanswerable challenge to the Christian thinker, and it is misleading to think that this challenge can be avoided. . . . The review which Camus published in 1943 . . . throws an interesting light on his agnosticism by showing how ready he was to appreciate the human quality of certain believers while at the same time clinging to what he himself called his own "passionate unbelief." . . . he shared many of the preoccupations of his Catholic friends, but was never tempted to share their solutions. In the same way that he condemned both Franco's policy in Spain and the repression of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 for democratic reasons, so he rejected both Catholicism and communism

> because of their "pretension to the absolute." Perhaps more than anything else, it is his suspicion of absolutes which provides the thread that links together all the political and philosophical essays published in this volume.

The paradoxes continue. Here is a man who does not affirm beliefs, yet commands high respect—who involves his readers by the quality of his unbelief. What does Camus cleave to? We go on feeling that, deep down, somewhere, he has a solid base, a ground of hope that he may reveal. We want to know, too, why a man so suspicious of absolutes can be willing or find it necessary to deal without intermission with ideas held important by those who do believe in absolutes.

There are two ordeals by combat which claim an attentive ear. One is the struggle of a man with himself; the other his contest with his times. Convincing portrayal of the struggle with oneself is a matter of art, of intuiting or somehow grasping how the opposing forces in human nature are ranged, and then embodying the issues faithfully and showing the outcome. Isaiah Berlin's essay on Tolstoy's inner struggle, *The Hedgehog and the Fox,* is a good example of this art. To tell about the struggle a man has with his times—which may be a projection of the inner conflict—requires a deep sense of humanistic values along with knowledge of cultural history. Camus' contest with his times is illustrated in the first quotation (above) from the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer, revealing his constitutional incapacity to become a partisan during a partisan age. He had to go behind the fashionable forms of social virtue, to look for timeless excellences ignored by the stereotypes of either angry or complacent moralists. So, as the *TLS* writer says, "the picture of Camus that emerges is that of a man who was generally right but always defeated." No party could tolerate him.

Such a man is bound to be lonely. Camus took on, you could say, a superhuman task, and of course he failed. He wanted to extricate the essentials of being human from the clutches of every sort of established opinion, and this, surely, is to be at unrelenting war with one's times. An outsider.

Well, how can a man speak effectively to his contemporaries while rejecting the habitual attitudes and judgments of his time? This achievement, no doubt, can be accounted for only by showing that he was and had to be an original artist. He had to be a poet, in Harold Goddard's sense, or in Gaston Bachelard's. For the poet, only the first time counts. When he says it, it rings with truth, but when someone else repeats it the truth is somehow diminished. There is a popular gain, however, since this reduction of the truth makes it more widely acceptable; but then, a little later, careless imitators and clever exploiters turn it into a social lie. If, then, the language of a time is shaped mainly by what a great many people have already said, the man committed to the discovery of meaning *has* to be at war with that time, an unresting rebel. He has to purify each idea each time he uses it, by giving it a fresh embodiment.

But what about Camus' skepticism or agnosticism? What were his affirmations? How can we share a conviction which rests on invisible supports?

Here we have trouble. Much of *The Myth of Sisyphus*—including the several essays published under that title—is hard to understand. Running along beneath the sentences and paragraphs is a moral energy that is hardly identified. You are often not sure of what Camus means. But then you may decide that this is inevitable; a nameless plant is still a plant growing in the field. A breeze is still a breeze, even when of undetermined direction. The sense is there, even though it cannot be *all* there. A man may set down "I" or "you," yet be quite unable to tell you all he means by "I" and "you." But the strength of his conviction is real. Camus, you feel, was a kind of hero. An unarmed hero, a man who had only his deepest feelings for a guide.

He was suspicious of absolutes, we are told. Having this suspicion, he disarmed himself. He

entered the lists with his bare hands. Yet he was generally right. We must look at the matter again. Who can define absolutes safely? Surely Sisyphus, who would not give up, had some kind of absolute. He was stronger than his rock. If we could understand this strength in Sisyphus—or in Camus—we should perhaps not need to bandy arguments about absolutes. Was not Prometheus, Sisyphus' alter ego, chained to *his* rock on the other side of the hill?

Conceivably, in the middle years of the twentieth century, as a child of his times, Camus felt that he could only work on the iconoclastic side of the street. The man-made world was coming apart, requiring an uncompromising break with the beliefs out of which this failing world was fashioned. Camus wanted to go back—he did go back—to the radical beginnings of thought. Man is a surd. He makes sense to himself, but only to himself. The self he experienced was not capacious enough to include the diversities of the world. In consequence, the world makes no sense to man. But he is *conscious* of it, and this consciousness is his reality, his Ariadne's thread. The consciousness produces his pleasure, which passes, and his pain, which continues. To understand no more than this makes life absurd. But the absurd is only a beginning: we must go on from there. Camus didn't get very far, but he went farther than most—far enough to affirm that a man should choose to live, not die, and to be neither victim nor executioner. To a man of reason, living when Camus did, that could even sound like a paean of hope.

REVIEW
A MEASURE OF CIVILIZATION

A SMALL book, published in 1903, containing the reflections of an unidentified Chinese diplomat concerning Western civilization—probably unavailable except in the larger libraries—has come our way. It is a somewhat mysterious book, since the Englishman who wrote the foreword to the American edition (issued by McClure, Phillips & Co.) is also anonymous. In fact, everything about this remarkable work is obscure except the—to us—prophetic insight of the writer, who set down these reflections only a year or two after the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion. His purpose, as he explains, was to acquaint the English people with the Chinese point of view. Presenting the outlook of educated Chinese under the title, *Letters from a Chinese Official*, he said in an introduction:

> A long residence in England gives me some right to speak of your institutions; while absence from my own country has not disqualified me to speak of ours. A Chinaman remains always a Chinaman; and much as I admire in some of its aspects the achievement of Western civilization, I have yet seen nothing which could make me regret that I was born a citizen of the East. To Englishmen this may seem a strange confession. You are accustomed to regard us as barbarians, and not unnaturally, for it is only on the occasions when we murder your compatriots that your attention is powerfully drawn to us. From such spasmodic outbreaks you are apt overhastily to infer that we are a nation of cold-blooded assassins; a conclusion as reasonable as would be an inference from the present conduct of your troops in China to the general character of Western civilization. We are not to be judged by the acts of our mobs, nor even, I may add, by those of our Government, for the Government in China does not represent the nation. Yet even those acts (strongly as they are condemned by all educated Chinamen) deserve, I venture to think, on the part of Europeans, a consideration more grave, and a less intemperate reprobation, than they have hitherto received among you. For they are expressions of a feeling which is, and must always be, the most potent factor in our relations with the West—our profound mistrust and dislike of your civilization. This feeling you, naturally enough, attribute to prejudice and ignorance. In reality, I venture to think, it is based on reason; and for this point of view I would ask the serious and patient consideration of my readers.

This "reason" of more than seventy years ago probably attracted little attention in either Britain or America. Today it has the appeal of a startlingly accurate evaluation of the dynamics of Western civilization—even more applicable, as the English sponsor of the letters suggests, to Americans than to Englishmen, since by the turn of the century America had "become, in a sense peculiar and unique, the type and exemplar of the Western world." The charge of this English writer is in its way not less impressive than the case made by the Chinese official. Inviting the attention of Americans to the letters, the Englishman said:

> . . . it is impossible not to recognize that the destinies of Europe are closely bound up with those of this country; and that what is at stake in the development of the American Republic is nothing less than the success or failure of Western civilization. Endowed, above all the nations of the world, with intelligence, energy, and force, unhampered by the splendid ruins of a past which, however great, does but encumber, in the old world, with fears, hesitations, and regrets, the difficult march to the promised land of the future, combining the magnificent enthusiasm of youth with the wariness of maturer years, and animated by a confidence almost religious in their own destiny, the American people are called upon, it would seem, to determine, in a pre-eminent degree, the form that is to be assumed by the society of the future. Upon them hangs the fate of the Western world. And were I an American citizen, the thought would fill me, I confess, less with exultation than with anxious and grave reflection. I should ask myself whether the triumphs gained by my countrymen over matter and space had been secured at the cost of spiritual insight and force; whether their immense achievement in the development of the practical arts had been accompanied by any serious contribution to science, literature, and art whether, in a word, the soul had grown with the body, or was tending to atrophy and decay.

In his third letter, the Chinese official examines, not the claims and intentions, but the product, the average man, of Western civilization,

since it is the determination of Westerners, as he points out, to "civilize" the Chinese. What sort of man does this spokesman for the Orient find the typical Westerner (in this case an Englishman) to be?

> I see one divorced from Nature, but unreclaimed by Art; instructed, but not educated; assimilative, but incapable of thought. Trained in the tenets of a religion in which he does not really believe—for he sees it flatly contradicted in every relation of life—he dimly feels that it is prudent to conceal under a mask of piety the atheism he is hardly intelligent enough to avow. His religion is conventional, and, what is more important, his morals are as conventional as his creed. . . . Deprived on the one hand of the support of a true ethical standard, embodied in the life of the society of which he is a member, he is duped, on the other, by lip-worship of an impotent ideal. Abandoned thus to his instinct, he is content to do as others do, and, ignoring the things of the spirit, to devote himself to material ends. He becomes a mere tool, and of such your society is composed. By your works you may be known. Your triumphs in the mechanical arts are the obverse of your failure in all that calls for spiritual insight. Machinery of every kind you can make and use to perfection; but you cannot build a house, or write a poem, or paint a picture; still less can your worship or aspire. Look at your streets ! Row upon row of little boxes, one like another, lacking in all that is essential, loaded with all that is superfluous—this is what passes among you for architecture. Your literature is the daily press, with its stream of solemn fatuity, of anecdotes, puzzles, puns, and police-court scandal. Your pictures are stories in print, transcripts of all that is banal, clumsily botched by amateurs as devoid of tradition as of genius. Your outer sense as well as your inner is dead, you are blind and deaf. Ratiocination has taken the place of perception, and your whole life is an infinite syllogism from premises you have not examined to conclusions you have not anticipated or willed. Everywhere means, nowhere an end! Society a huge engine, and that engine itself out of gear. Such is the picture your civilization presents to my imagination.

Is this the way all educated Chinese then viewed the e then viewed the West? No, he says, not at all—because the Chinese of that day were "constitutionally averse to drawing up an indictment against a nation." But the writer has done so under strong provocation. Next he examines the fruits of industrial progress in the West, calling attention to the technological unemployment which results when the labor of men is replaced with machines. Little has been done, he finds, to meet the needs of those put out of work by "progress."

> This, indeed, is not surprising, for it is your custom to subordinate life to wealth; but, neither, to a Chinaman, is it encouraging; and I, at least, cannot contemplate without the gravest apprehension the disorders which must inevitably ensue among our population of four hundred millions upon the introduction, on a large scale, of Western methods of industry. You will say that the disorder is temporary; to me it appears, in the West, to be chronic. But putting that aside, what, I may ask, are we to gain? The gain to you is palpable; so, I think, is the loss to us. But where is our gain? The question, perhaps, may seem to you irrelevant, but a Chinaman may be forgiven for thinking it important. You will answer, no doubt, that we shall gain wealth. Perhaps we shall; but shall we not lose our life? Shall we not become like you? And can you expect us to contemplate that with equanimity? What are your advantages? Your people, no doubt, are better equipped than ours with some of the less important goods of life; they eat more, drink more, sleep more; but there their superiority ends. They are less cheerful, less contented, less industrious, less law-abiding; their occupations are more unhealthy both for body and mind; they are crowded into cities and factories, divorced from Nature and the ownership of the soil. . . .
>
> And when I look at your business men, the men whom you most admire; when I see them hour after hour, day after day, year after year, toiling in the mill of their forced and undelighted labors; when I see them importing the anxieties of the day into their scant and grudging leisure, and wearing themselves out less by toil than by carking and illiberal cares, I reflect, I confess, with satisfaction on the simpler routine of our ancient industry, and prize, above all your new and dangerous routes, the beaten track so familiar to our accustomed feet that we have leisure, even while we pace it, to turn our gaze up to the eternal stars.

Toward the end of this little book the official quotes from a British administrator who spent years in China, who said of the Chinese people: "They believe in right so firmly that they scorn to

think it requires to be supported or enforced by might." Commenting, the writer says:

> Yes, it is we who do not accept it that practice the Gospel of peace; it is you who accept it that trample it underfoot. And—irony of ironies!—it is the nations of Christendom who have come to us to teach us by sword and fire that Right in this world is powerless unless it be supported by Might! Oh, do not doubt that we shall learn the lesson! And woe to Europe when we have acquired it! You are arming a nation of four hundred millions! a nation which, until you came, had no better wish than to live at peace with themselves and all the world.

Much has happened in the seventy-two years since this was first published. China has been through numerous ordeals, and emerged a very different China from the one here described. Meanwhile both Europe and America are from overtaking necessity feeling the compulsion to change, making the once backward and seemingly otherworldly counsels of the Chinese official sound like the voice of tomorrow. His most searching comment is that the West does not embody a moral order, but "only an economic order."

> Among you no one is contented, no one has leisure to live, so intent are all on increasing the means of living. The "cash-nexus" (to borrow a phrase of one of your own writers) is the only relation you recognize among men.
>
> Now to us of the East all this is the mark of a barbarous society. We measure the degree of civilization not by the accumulation of the means of living, but by the character and value of the life lived.

* * *

Well, we have discovered, before going to press, that this little book is a hoax. But after some deliberation we decided that it is a very good hoax, deserving notice on its merits. Our original feeling about it—and we had a suspicion or two—was that the sense in the letters was very fine, no matter who wrote them, and that stands. But there is still some mystery. In the edition (perhaps in print) issued in Tucson by the Omen Press in 1972 a final note in about four-point reveals that the book was "written by an anonymous American posing as Chinese." Nothing more. Omen Press thought it worth republishing and we think it worth reviewing. It did come out early in this century. The first (McClure) edition lists a copyright in 1903, and the Tucson edition says it was first published in 1907.

COMMENTARY
IMPROVER OF NATURE

LEAFING through James Flexner's *Doctors on Horseback* (1937), we happened on a chapter dealing with Benjamin Rush and decided to check what Oliver Wendell Holmes said about him (see Frontiers). Holmes's strictures grow pale in contrast to the lurid facts. "It is impossible," Rush grandly declared, "to calculate the mischief which Hippocrates has done by first marking Nature with his name and afterward letting her loose on sick people." His own system, he was proud to say, "rejects undue reliance upon the powers of nature, and teaches instantly to wrest the cure of all violent and febrile diseases out of her hands."

He was a convinced advocate of bleeding to cure fevers—which, he said, were all the same—and in one case drew, nine pints of blood from a patient, in keeping with the doctrine that the patient should be bled for as long as the symptoms continued, even if four fifths of the blood in the body should be drained away.

Rush was also a patriot, one of the few among the colonists who from the first believed in independence. Flexner says Rush gave some notes to Tom Paine, urging him to write for independence, and that *Common Sense* was the result. Rush had a checkered career in the service of the Continental Army, becoming angered by mistreatment of Washington's troops, which he tried to correct through intrigue. But even his patriotism armed his medical activism. He held that American patients should be bled more than foreigners, since Americans were stronger and more virile! Rush's method of curing fevers by "depletion," Flexner says, became the dominant American practice. His influence lasted in the back country almost into the twentieth century, until Sir William Osler gave it the *coup de grace.* Flexner's concluding comment is that Rush "shed more blood than any general in history."

In this week's lead, Isaiah Berlin's study of Tolstoy, *The Hedgehog and the Fox,* is suggested as illustrating a man's struggle with himself. In Berlin's formulation, Tolstoy vainly attempted to reconcile his longing for unified explanation with the stubborn diversities of experience—to make facts and intuitions agree. A better choice might be Tolstoy's *My Confession,* which tells of the agony he experienced in freeing himself of the common assumptions he had been living by. He was torn by the same questions as those which harassed Camus sixty years later. There seems a sense in which this struggle, which many independent thinkers seem to go through—with varying outcomes—is also a struggle with the times: the ideas of the times as reflected in oneself. The *Bhagavad-Gita* might be regarded as presenting an archetypal original of this ordeal.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

NEW STUFF FOR THE WORLD

IN *Far Away and Long Ago* W. H. Hudson tells about his boyhood and youth in the Argentine. He was born there in 1841 to an English sheep-raiser and a mother from New England, and spent his life until he was twenty-nine wandering and working on the pampas. In his essay on Hudson in *Alphabet of the Imagination* (Humanities Press), Harold Goddard suggests that Hudson's idea of education was not to help the boy become a man, but "to find the secret of letting the man remain a boy." Of his childhood, Hudson wrote:

> I remember with gratitude that our parents seldom or never punished us, and never, unless we went too far in our domestic dissensions or tricks, even chided us. This, I am convinced, is the right attitude for parents to observe, modestly to admit that nature is wiser than they are, and to let their little ones follow, as far as possible, the bent of their own minds, or whatever it is they have in place of minds. It is the attitude of the sensible hen towards her ducklings, when she has frequent experience of their incongruous ways, and is satisfied that they know best what is good for them; though, of course, their ways seem peculiar to her, and she can never entirely sympathize with their fancy for going into the water. I need not be told that the hen is after all only step-mother to her ducklings, since I am contending that the civilized woman—the artificial product of our self-imposed conditions—cannot have the same relation to her offspring as the uncivilized woman really has to hers. The comparison, therefore, holds good, the mother with us being practically stepmother to children of another race, and if she is sensible, and amenable to nature's teaching, she will attribute their seemingly unsuitable ways and appetites to the right cause, and not to a hypothetical perversity or inherent depravity of heart. . . .

Hudson was fascinated by birds. When a child he would disappear for long hours, making his mother wonder where he had got to. She followed him one day and found him, "standing rapt and motionless, watching and listening to the birds." Silently she went away, knowing that this was a moment when her son should be left alone. Hudson never lost this quality of being able to watch and listen. He went to England when he was twenty-nine (after the death of his parents), and there he continued to study nature, especially birds. His wife took in boarders and gave music lessons, for it was not until middle life that Hudson gained anything like recognition. "Indeed," says Goddard, "his genius is not yet appreciated." The sharpened senses acquired in childhood and youth remained alert in later years:

> "Hudson once told a friend of mine," writes Edward Garnett, "that if he watched a London sparrow he could distinguish it from all other sparrows when it came again." He could often, too, discriminate the voices of individual birds of the same species, just as you and I recognize and distinguish the voices of our friends. . . . And out of these instincts developed his capacity to enter into the very souls of what we in our condescending fashion are pleased to call the lower animals. "If cows could talk," a little girl of seven or eight remarked to me as she and I stood watching two of those placid creatures chewing their cuds under a tree, "if cows could talk, nobody knows what new stuff would come into the world." Her observation was a very philosophical one, and it would indeed be both delightful and enlightening if cows could learn to speak our human language, preferably English. But that seems Utopian. So in the meantime it appears necessary, if we would set up communication with the animals, for us to learn their language. And that is precisely what W. H. Hudson did, especially in the case of birds. With the result that a great deal of new stuff came into the world.

Hudson may have learned several other wild languages. He obviously mastered arts of non-verbal communication unknown to present specialists in this field. Goddard advises:

> Read his essay, "My Friend the Pig," and before you are done you will be deluded into thinking that you have actually been talking to a pig and will be ready to agree with the author that the pig is the most intelligent and democratic of the beasts, "not excepting the elephant and the anthropoid ape," the dog being unworthy of so much as mention in the same connection. Read "The Toad as Traveller" and receive practical instructions in the art of striking up an acquaintance with a lowly amphibian. Read "The Puma," read it to your small son and daughter, as I

> did to mine—or rather do not read it unless you are willing to be pestered for days with demands for a pet puma, so like an immense kitten does the author's sympathetic treatment make this remarkable animal seem to a child. And so on, up and down the zoological scale from mammal to insect, until we gain such confidence in Hudson's power to penetrate the animal soul that we are willing to take his word for the fact that he has a perfectly authentic case of telepathy between animal and animal.

Hudson, apparently, was one in a million. And have we the right, it may be wondered, to single him out as teacher or educator? This was a man described by his biographer as looking "like a half-tamed hawk which at any moment might take to the skies and return no more to those earthbound creatures with whom he had made his temporary home." Dare we expose children to such manifestly unique beings?

But what are we really after in our contacts with the young? Do we want them to bring some new stuff into the world, or simply repeat after us the little we have been able to do? In *Farther Reaches of Human Nature,* Maslow suggested that if you want to find out what human beings are really capable of, put your questions to superior people. Making studies of populations of "indiscriminately sick and healthy, indiscriminately good and bad specimens, good and bad choosers, biologically sound and biologically unsound specimens," he proposed, will teach us little or nothing about the potentialities of man.

> If we want to answer the question how tall can the human species grow, then obviously it is well to pick out the ones who are already tallest and study them. If we want to find out how fast a human being can run, then it is no use to average out the speed of a "good sample" of the population; it is far better to collect Olympic gold medal winners and see how well they can do. If we want to know the possibilities for spiritual growth, value growth, or moral development in human beings, then I maintain that we can learn most by studying our most moral, ethical, or saintly people.
>
> On the whole I think it fair to say that human history is a record of the ways in which human nature has been sold short. The highest possibilities of human nature have practically always been underrated. Even when "good specimens," the saints and sages and great leaders of history, have been available for study, the temptation too often has been to consider them not human but supernaturally endowed.

One reason for reading men like Hudson and for using them as educators is that they seem to have a conception of knowledge very different from the ordinary idea that it is an accumulation of facts. Goddard quotes from Hudson:

> We are bound as much as ever to facts, we seek for them more and more diligently, knowing that to break from them is to be carried away by vain imaginations. All the same, facts in themselves are nothing to us: they are important only in their relations to other facts and things—to all things, and the essence of things, material and spiritual. We are not like children gathering painted shells and pebbles on a beach; but, whether we know it or not, are seeking after something beyond and above knowledge. The wilderness in which we are sojourners is not our home; it is enough that its herbs and roots and wild fruits nourish and give us strength to go onward. Intellectual curiosity, with the gratification of the individual for its only purpose, has no place in this scheme of things as we conceive it. Heart and soul are with the brain in all investigation—a truth which some know in rare, beautiful intervals, and others never.

Thoreau, too, Goddard suggests, had this idea of a beyond-knowledge condition of man, and also Samuel Butler. All three seemed to think that there is a state in which men graduate from conscious, egoistic knowing, where they do not lose what they know, but transform it into a functional part of their facilities for being.

The charm, the wonder, the splendor of the human at his best may lie in this synthesis which no longer has ingredients or parts. Children, before they succumb to the common schizophrenias, have something of this unity, and some children—a few—are never subdivided. Guarding this radical selfhood throughout ordeals of enlarging self-consciousness ought to be a primary purpose of education.

FRONTIERS

On Getting Sick in America

WE are, as is well known, a pill-taking people. The logic behind pill-taking seems impeccable. One's body (or mind) gets out of balance, so you take something that scientists have found out will restore equilibrium to the affected organ or mood. The strenuous life we lead makes it natural for deficiencies to appear, and pills, compounded by trained chemists, approved by the Food and Drug Administration, and prescribed by the doctor, or by some TV sage, replace what is needed or calm a hyperactive nervous system.

Now children, also, who are growing up too fast, are manifesting the need for biochemical assistance. A couple who operate a summer children's camp in the Province of Quebec recently notified the parents on their mailing list:

> A trend seems to be building. A few parents are beginning to supply their older children with pill kits. We consulted a specialist who works with children in a Montreal hospital. Some of the pills were types that definitely should not be casually self-administered. From now on, if medicines and pills are needed, we prefer to be the sole custodian. . . . To date, we have had no serious problems in this area. The only exception was with two of last year's campers who appeared to take a pill for every little ache and discomfort.

This observation recalled the remarks of Dr. Herbert Ratner on the practice of medicine in America (in a pamphlet published by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in 1962). The United States, Dr. Ratner said, is the best place in the world to have a serious illness, but "one of the worst countries in the world in which to have a non-serious illness." Asked why by the interviewer, he went on:

> Americans look upon health, as they look upon many things, in materialistic terms. They think of health as something that can be bought, rather than as a state to be sought through an accommodation to the norms of nature. . . . as an example we have the healthy appetite. It is an extremely sensitive biological mechanism which, if it is not perverted or seduced, can protect us from overnutrition, undernutrition, malnutrition, avitaminosis, and other nutritional ailments without the need of our becoming chemists, calorie counters, apothecary jugglers, vitamin and food faddists. We also have muscles, and they beg for exercise.

The assumption of Americans, shared by their doctors, Dr. Ratner proposes, is that they need to have things done to them (like surgery), removed from them (like an appendix), or given to them (like medicine), in order to remain healthy. He traces this attitude to revolutionary times, finding its origin in the extreme "activist" temperament of Benjamin Rush, who signed the Declaration of Independence and was Surgeon General of Washington's army. Oliver Wendell Holmes thought Rush typified the excesses of medicine in America. He wrote in 1860:

> If I wished the student to understand the tendencies of the American mind, its sanguine enterprise, its self-confidence its audacious handling of Nature, its impatience with her old-fashioned ways of taking time to get a sick man well, I would make him read the life and writings of Benjamin Rush. . . . His own mind was in a perpetual state of exaltation produced by the stirring scenes in which he had taken a part, and the quickened life of the time in which he lived. It was not the state to favor sound, calm observation. He was impatient, and Nature is profoundly imperturbable. . . . He could not help feeling as if Nature had been a good deal shaken by the Declaration of Independence, and that American art was getting to be rather too much for her—especially as illustrated in his own practice. He taught thousands of American students, he gave a direction to the medical mind of the country more than any other one man perhaps he typifies it better than any other. It has clearly tended to extravagance in remedies and trust in remedies, as in everything else.

Dr. Ratner is in complete agreement with this characterization of American medicine, which shows what the patient expects of his doctor and what the doctor is ready to provide. "The patient wants the physician to be active on an heroic scale and the physician does not disdain this role." This applies particularly to specialists, who have

practically taken over American medicine. There is this unhappy consequence for children:

> The pediatrician, who has been trained to take care of kids with serious and complex sicknesses, ends up spending most of his time seeing well patients in a kind of assembly-line practice. He gives shots, manipulates milk formulas, and all the rest, and in the process he does little for the emotional growth of the baby (and, incidentally, adds greatly to the incidence of drug and cow's-milk allergies). As a result of this kind of practice, he ends up somewhat insecure when he has to take care of a really sick child. It is a peculiar fact that most of the sick children in this country are handled by the general practitioner and most of the well babies by the pediatrician. It should be the reverse.

Asked whether the physician can be expected to "rise above" the typical activism of American life, Dr. Ratner said:

> By virtue of his profession he cannot allow himself to be merely a passive victim of the culture. I would insist here, however, that improvement of the condition of medicine is a shared responsibility; the public shares it with the medical profession.
>
> The terrible thing in this country is that although we have done a masterful job in curbing deaths from many diseases, especially the infectious diseases, we now have a nation of presumably healthy persons who cannot function well because they are full of anxieties.

Dr. Ratner would restore the wider function of the general practitioner:

> Not having a lot of techniques at his disposal, or the itch to exercise an elaborate armamentarium, he isn't seduced into unnecessary activity. It is otherwise with the specialist. Furthermore, the specialist is frequently enchanted by anything new.
>
> Hippocrates nailed down this attribute when he stated: "For they praise what is outlandish before they know whether it is good; the bizarre rather than the obvious." Oliver Wendell Holmes contrasted youth and experience—I can't help coming back to the profound insights of these giants—and pointed out that "the young man feels uneasy if he is not continually doing something to stir up his patient's internal arrangements. The old man takes things more quietly, and is much more willing to let well enough alone."

Well, what does a man learn as he gets old? We have no words for what he learns—no modern words, that is. We don't have these words because we haven't done the thinking their development requires. We've been too busy "doing something" with the objective world.