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A KIND OF TOXEMIA?

A FEW weeks ago it was suggested here that the problems of our society keep repeating themselves. The reader of a paper like the *Nation*, it was said, can hardly help but notice, through the years, the similarity of the ills and evils to which the *Nation* contributors draw attention. Their monotony gets discouraging.

But what if these problems are not really correctable in the form that we identify them? Suppose they are actually no more than symptoms of less obvious disorders?

It was after reading through the *Nation* for Sept. 6 that the troubles described, on page after page, began to look like symptoms of common tendencies and characteristic attitudes, instead of problems that can only be attacked "head-on."

A sampling of some of the *Nation* stories may justify this conclusion.

First, then, the opening paragraph of an editorial titled "Corporate Crime Wave":

> Disclosures of large bribes paid by U.S. corporations to foreign officials and political parties in pursuit of lucrative arms contracts, along with massive illegal corporate campaign contributions in domestic politics, constitute, in the judgment of Ray Garrett Jr. of the SEC, "the second half of Watergate, and by far the largest half." As these disclosures have seeped into the press—they have not generally been headlined nor have the networks made much of them—numerous symposia have been held on the ethics of business executives, or the lack thereof. These symposia indicate the existence of a state of mind which is itself a part of the problem. A fairly typical response from a business executive is the statement of the chairman of Ashland Oil: "I felt I was doing what was being done generally," which is perhaps the oldest and stalest alibi for conduct known to be improper.

The editorial concludes:

> What we face is a major constitutional issue which has been growing in importance for decades: how to control—how to govern—the large corporation, particularly the multinational corporation. Although we have talked for yeas about the problem of making the American corporation socially responsible, nothing much has been done about it. As Nader and his associates point out, "when pillars of respect become pillagers of the community," then the ability of government to govern is challenged. The issues involved, brilliantly discussed in Christopher Stone's new book: *Where the Law Ends: The Social Control of Corporate Behavior*, should command the highest priority. . . .

But is this problem—really "a state of mind"—best defined as "a major constitutional issue"?

Our next sample is from an article titled "They Sell Books, Don't They?" After demonstrating the excessive preoccupation of both publishers and book stores with sales to the mass market, the writer concludes:

> So, the answer to the question—They Sell Books, Don't They?—is yes and no. Yes, if "they" means chain stores, paperback distributors, book clubs, mail-order and remainder houses and other mass-market outlets. Yes, if "books" means best sellers, paperbacks, books by celebrities and retainers of celebrities, books no more than three-to-six months old, books which fit pre-established categories and current trends.
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> The answer is no if "they" means independent booksellers who, by many accounts, are a dying breed. No, if "books" means oddball books, unprofitable books, first novels, poetry, anthologies, books of local interest, books from small presses. No, too, if "books" means those which cannot be summarized in three sentences for talk-show audiences. . . . Hanging in the balance between yes and no are 30,000 new books published each year and more than 400,000 backlist books still in print. Even if their number is reduced, which seems unlikely, they will increasingly be subject to economic censorship by the mass market.

It may be "rational" for publishers and booksellers to go after the mass market, but it is

also subversive of the quality of books—since, as Erich Kahler shows, "rationality grows at the expense of reason." With the emphasis on rationalizing technical functions—to get more production and wider distribution—rationality is increasingly detached from its human source, and in the ensuing transformation of consciousness becomes "completely independent of, indeed radically opposed to human reason." This is a way of putting an end to good books.

Next comes a story on the Red River dam project of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which conservationists and many Kentuckians regard as a mortal threat to the "Grand Canyon of the East." The Engineers' argument for building this dam is called an "outdated benefit-cost" analysis, of which the *Nation* writer says:

> The case for Kentucky's Red River Dam has been demolished by economics Prof. David Richardson of the University of Kentucky. He shows, for example, that the Corps figured major flood damages at 3.5 times the value of all the crops in the area. Richardson also demonstrates that the Corps's methodology further exaggerates flood frequency and damage, that it used dissimilar reservoirs for comparison of recreation benefits, and assumed unrealistically high growth rates in projecting water demand. By correcting these errors alone, Richardson swings the benefit-cost ratio from positive to negative.

The *Nation* writer also cites the work of a University of Wisconsin professor who found that 147 Engineer Corps project proposals were accompanied by "a consistent and persistent overstatement of benefits and understatement of costs." Half these projects would not be built if accurate benefit-cost analysis were provided. (Another exhaustive study of the arrogance and stubborn ignorance of the Army Engineers is provided in Arthur Morgan's recent book, *Dams and Other Disasters,* published by Porter Sargent in 1971.) Commenting on the Army Engineers' claim of benefits to be gained from the Red River dam, the *Nation* writer says: "Such distortions typify the bureaucratic twist which the Corps habitually gives to its analyses."

Since the review section of the Sept. 6 *Nation* is largely devoted to issues of labor and the labor movement, several books on this subject have attention. A radical journalist reports on a study of a New Left organization in Detroit—the League of Black Revolutionary Workers. The reviewer summarizes developments under the leadership of James Forman:

> In "Formanism," as it came to be called, New Left Politics reached a climax in the black, working-class context. . . . Under Forman's leadership, the league took on a national scope. A Black Economic Development Conference in 1969 launched plans for a multifaceted program based upon finances to be dragooned out of the white community in accordance with the demands of a "Black Manifesto" that Forman had written. A Black Workers' Congress was convened in Gary, Ind., in 1971.
>
> Beneath the glittering expectation was an internal collapse. In a way, the league had been doomed all along in any situation short of revolutionary conditions, for like the old Industrial Workers of the World it preached hostility toward all existing institutions and thereby failed to provide itself with any stable base.

The *Nation* writer concludes with a general comment on the book under review:

> *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* is important, finally, because it helps to make sense of a historic phase of battles won and lost, but *lived*, part of a cumulative revolutionary experience. Georgakis and Surkin [the authors] show the culture of a movement, its personalities, its verve and its final lack of depth in the perspective of the long haul. The superficiality of any specific element of the American Left is, as the authors imply, no necessary indication of irrelevance to the nation's intellectual life as a whole. As the Left-Socialist agitator Frank Bohn warned in 1910, superficiality is natural in a young and fast-paced country with no certain traditions: "It affects the Socialist movement, the newspapers, the magazines, the professions, the arts. . . . But out of the blundering chaos in our labor movement and the sap-soaked adolescence of American radical intellectuals grows our Socialist movement. Where else should it spring from?" Our position today, even within an aging empire, is not so different, nor should we expect it to be.

Another *Nation* review is of Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, in which this passage appears:

> One human tendency—frequently a human failure—is the need to form groups. Groups, both natural and organized, have always won Lessing's contempt. Obeisance to class or family loyalty, the communal conformity of social dubs and political parties, endless afternoons spent by women tied to tea and gossip, Europeans pitted against Africans young generation against old, male against female—all of these deny individuality and throw up impenetrable barriers. In Lessing's future, the group mentality has spawned bands of roving teen-agers, later joined by adults, all willing to shirk responsibility for mass action and mass destruction. In the eyes of Lessing's narrator, they have
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> " . . . relinquished individuality, that was the point, individual judgment and responsibility, and this showed in a hundred ways, not least by one's instinctive reaction in an encounter with them, which was always a sharp apprehension, for one knew that in a confrontation—if it came to that—there would be a pack judgment."
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> It is rule by the horde, and terrorization, an extension of perceptions articulated in Lessing's other books. The outrage to any kind of privacy, the insult to human dignity, swell menacingly under the gaze of a novelist who, in literature and life, seeks the "small personal voice."
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> The collapse of communication is also exacerbated by the circumstances of tomorrow. Incomprehension reigns between different segments of the population, and between them and the authorities. These last are the "Talkers," manipulators of a post-Watergate rhetoric, who fly far above the troubles of a disintegrating earth, holding conferences which solve nothing. Language is the casualty in the game the narrator sees everyone playing, a charade against a hated power structure—and against themselves.

Of the protagonist of this latest novel by Doris Lessing, the reviewer says:

> Watching her suffer under and give into the demands of love, the narrator sees decades of feminism contradicted and finally reversed; observing the girl's forays into the outside world, she realizes that the tyranny of the majority has usurped the place of cooperation. Lessing passes sad judgment on the future of such cherished causes as feminism and socialism.

Why, one wonders, does the champion of the humanity in the individual so often feel obliged to turn against the movements organized in behalf of humanity in the mass? Have we really any understanding of this problem, except for suspecting that it may be the key to many others?

Our final *Nation* sample is from a review of *The Idea of Fraternity in America* by Wilson Carey McWilliams. The book seems largely concerned with explaining why this ideal has so little effect:

> According to Professor McWilliams, the influence of the liberal, Lockean tradition on American social, economic and political life is manifest in our inordinate emphasis on self-interest based upon the belief that man is a private, asocial and apolitical being; in the belief that politics is "the result of scarcity and conflict," and that "the logical aim of politics lies in limiting conflict" while we pursue material well-being and our private, selfish interests, and finally in the conviction that the checks and balances of the competitive process are the best mechanism for facilitating the pursuit of our private, selfish interests. . .
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> Unhappily, the older institutions and customs which furnished a social base for the religious tradition have been slowly eroded. And although the cultivation of fraternity and a sense of genuine community, McWilliams tells us, is "a permanent social and psychological necessity of human development," it is "discouraged and inhibited by the institutions and processes of our modern industrial society." . . .
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> Our social, economic and political systems contain "a bias toward individualism, a hostility to communities, an assumption that material well-being and technological advances are in the high interests of man." The liberal, Lockean tradition proposed to discard fraternity as a necessary means to human development and as a norm in everyday social and political life . . . the liberal tradition and its stress on the competitive ethos, its concern for material power and its atomistic individualism have come to permeate all aspects of American life with disastrous consequences. One such consequence is the sense of isolation—social and spiritual—that is felt by increasing numbers of Americans.

Well, is it possible to generalize a diagnosis from these examinations of symptoms in the *Nation* for Sept. 6? Taking the reports and reviews together, can we say something about the human condition in America—something that might not be justified from regarding these stories one by one?

An effort in this direction reminds us of the strong reproach we received from a medical doctor, about eighteen months ago, because we quoted approvingly a statement by the nutritionist physician, Henry G. Bieler. Bieler maintained that most diseases are the manifesting symptoms of a deeper, more general ill, which he and some others (see John H. Tilden) have called Toxemia, which means, simply, poisoning. In *Food Is Your Best Medicine* Dr. Bieler said that he had learned from years of research and medical practice that "when the strain of faulty living habits, reliance on stimulating drugs, incorrect diet and poor environment have broken down the filters of the body, a toxemia develops which results in what is commonly known as disease." He then drew this conclusion:

> The basic cause of disease, therefore, is the toxemia. The name of the disease describes the damage done by the toxemia. This belief goes back to ancient days, and it is opposed to the attempt to overcome disease by either powerful and dangerous drugs or risky surgery. The treatment of toxemia, such as I have discussed with you in these pages, is extremely simple: it is not dramatic; it does not cure over-night. But *cure* it will if the patient cooperates with both nature and with his physician.

Is there, then, a parallel to this analysis in the various "diseases" described by the contributors to the Sept. 6 *Nation?* Is there some kind of "toxemia" of the human spirit which damages the tissues and disorders the functions of our individual and common life, resulting in the particular diagnoses these writers set forth in some detail? Is there a basic ill that can be given a single name, such as Toxemia?

Probably not, unless we are willing to go out on a limb the way Dr. Bieler did. The medical critic of our review of Dr. Bieler's book wrote at some length to emphasize that the idea of toxemia is not "scientific." Yet what Bieler had said seemed so reasonable that we asked a local M.D. about it. He explained that so many "variables" enter as hypothetical causes into the toxic condition of the human organism that the precise sort of laboratory testing and identification of disease entities which qualifies diagnosis as "scientific" is hardly possible. Toxemia, therefore, is a vague term which covers too much, scientifically speaking, and therefore means too little. And doctors, it is often argued, shouldn't use it for this reason.

Well, Dr. Bieler used it with some profit for his patients, according to report. And if you try out his ideas you may be persuaded that toxemia has a meaning—as certain a meaning, at least, as the word "health," which is also exceedingly vague, and probably impossible to define "scientifically."

What then can we say about the possibility of an underlying common ill behind the *Nation* stories? It may be too risky—and premature—to try to name such an ill, yet a basic trouble may nonetheless exist. The McWilliams book talks about the pervading belief in self-interest, with conflict and competition the means of satisfying its demands. The editorial tells about the bribery and deceit practiced by big business—simply as a matter of course—because competition is fierce and it is necessary to win. "Everybody's doing it" is the common and "natural" justification—from Mr. Nixon's plumbers down, or up, as one prefers. "Winning" at the expense of everything else has been the rule in the West for centuries. The Army Engineers need to be right, publishers have to sell more books—never mind their quality. Never mind that the need to gain power makes people trust only in numbers, so that they give up their independence in order to "belong." Never mind if winning reduces the winners to powerlessness, through the strict conformity victory requires, and

reduces the losers to powerlessness through the hostility they feel toward all existing institutions.

Surely, the people of all classes, in all walks of life, have been taking some kind of poison for a long time.

What can we say about this poison? Well, we can say that people wouldn't take it unless they were convinced it was good for them. The poison, in short, is in the way we think of ourselves, of human beings generally.

So, the diagnosis becomes both philosophical and practical. On the philosophical side: If you have a disruptive, antagonizing, alienating conception of self, you are bound to establish goals which, as they are pursued, generate an order of experience which makes you think that conflict, competition, and dog-eat-dog isolation and self-interest are the laws of life. And, as Prof. McWilliams says, you decide that "the logical aim of politics lies in limiting conflict," in order to facilitate "the pursuit of our private, selfish interests."

Toxemia of the human spirit?

The practical side of the diagnosis falls to thinkers like E. F. Schumacher, who point out that delusion in the area of material welfare leads to the wrong methods—to the worship of bigness, to reliance on power, and to seeking security in unlimited acquisition—all attitudes which are now proving to be self-destructive.

How, then, do people change the way in which they think about themselves? What are the safeguards against a whole new set of self-deceptions in the search for philosophic truth? Judging from the *Nation* sampling of our problems, these are the questions that need attention.

REVIEW
THE QUESTION OF THE AGE

AFTER reading Duncan Williams' *Trousered Apes—Sick Literature in a Sick Society* (Delta paperback, 1973, $2.25)—a vigorous inspection, analysis, and rejection of the animalism, brutality, violence, and intrinsic vulgarity in modern literature—we went to Taine and read once more the chapter on the Restoration period in his *History of English Literature.* The question needing an answer is—*Why* this obsessive fashion of devaluating man, this endless celebration of the least admirable of his traits?

Taine wasn't much help; the parallels are not there. An explosive reaction to a generation of long-faced Puritan moralizing and condemnation of even simple pleasures hardly applies to our time, although, in America, we have been slow in wearing out our stilted New England pieties.

Well, why do we need to explain such cultural trends or changes? Isn't it enough to judge them and decide what we ought to do? Apparently not. One of the ills from which we suffer is the idea that men are but offprints of their times, passive products of heredity and environment, and if this view is to be dealt with in behalf of a nobler conception of the human being, the doctrines of inheritance and conditioning must be given their full due, simply in order to find a place at which to *limit* the claims of determinism. For obviously, people do influence one another; the qualities of one generation show up in the next—modified, perhaps, but the continuity is plain. And there are great historical swings of the pendulum. One can hardly consider freedom of choice without measuring its opposite, and conceding relations with it.

What is Mr. Williams' case or indictment? Brief statement can hardly do the analysis justice, but one quotation will illustrate the character of his criticism. Under examination are the themes which dominate modern literature:

> This conjunction of violence and animalism is found to a greater or lesser degree in almost every recent best-seller or theatrical success from Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood,* from Peter Weiss's *Marat-Sade* to John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy.* There was a certain savage irony in the fact that, while one of the worst race riots was taking place in the United States, several local cinemas were showing a film entitled *Devil's Angels,* with the accompanying advertisement: "Violence is their God! and they hunt in packs like rabid dogs." We shall later examine the effects of such "entertainment' on the contemporary mind. Suffice it, at present, to remark that we are teaching savagery and are naively appalled at the success of our instruction. It is perhaps more than coincidental that when Martin Luther King was assassinated, *Bonnie and Clyde,* a film glorifying two perverted killers, was among those nominated for an Academy award. . . .
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> This anti-civilizing trend has been remarked upon by a number of critics and writers. For example, Lionel Trilling, in *Beyond Culture* has stated that "the characteristic element of modern literature, or at least of the most highly developed modern literature, is the bitter line of hostility to civilization which runs through it"; while the novelist, Norman Mailer, openly acknowledges that "whether the life is criminal or not, the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself."

To underline the need for opposing this trend, Mr. Williams quotes in his Epilogue the remark of a reviewer of an earlier edition of his book, who said:

> When the Marquis de Sade . . . originally pioneered the artist s exploration of the darker recesses of human depravity, he could at best hope to influence only a tiny fraction of his fellow citizens. His counterparts today, however, thanks to mass literacy and mass communications, can and do speak to all, their messages of corruption enjoying an ease of instant dissemination, an absence of contradiction and the certainty of vulgarization that immediately transforms them from a minority cult to a mass craving. . . . Of course the artist must be allowed to drive himself mad. But must he be allowed to drive us all mad?

If we accept Mr. Williams' diagnosis as given, how can the artists—these artists—be stopped from driving us all mad? Censorship? Suppression? Neither one really works, except in Russia perhaps, and we do not admire at all the price paid for this control. Counter-cultural currents seem the only possible antidote, but how do you get them going, strongly enough, against the present grain?

Obviously, we need another Blake, another Tolstoy. One might read Foster Damon on Blake and Tolstoy's *My Confession* for light on how such resolves get started in individual writers. It becomes evident that, in addition to heredity and environment, such men have a mysterious *x*-factor in them; once awakened, it generates a counter-current. But how do you stir the *x*-factor into activity?

Prof. Williams seems to think that Western culture has been in decline since the Augustan age. He quotes Samuel Johnson: "Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses . . . advances us in the dignity of thinking beings." Later the author says:

> The news of His [God's] death has permeated, secularized and radically changed every aspect of Western thought and society. The tragic consequences of this awareness are implicit throughout the remainder of this book.

This, one fears, is too simple or too easy an explanation. We need to know far more about this "death of God"—and, happily, we have at hand an excellent discussion of Nietzsche's phrase in a paper by Hannah Arendt (*Social Research,* Autumn, 1971), from which we take the following:

> Just as the crisis in religion reached its climax when theologians, as distinguished from the old crowd of nonbelievers, began to talk about the "God is dead" propositions, the crisis in philosophy and metaphysics came into the open when philosophers themselves began to declare the end of philosophy and metaphysics. Now, this could have its advantages; I trust it will once it has been understood what these "ends" actually mean, not that "God" has "died"—an obvious absurdity in every respect—but that the way God has been thought of for thousands of years is no longer convincing; and not that the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men on earth have become "meaningless," but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility.

In short, to deal with the moral bankruptcy of the present, it becomes necessary to understand why those earnest souls who chopped away the foundations of moral reasoning and reflection felt so completely confident of the necessity for what they were doing, and so righteous in pursuing their iconoclastic goals.

Miss Arendt's subsequent discussion is too valuable to omit. She says:

> What has come to an end is the basic distinction between the sensual and the supersensual together with the notion at least as old as Parmenides, that whatever is not given to the senses—God or Being or the First Principles and Causes (*archai*) or the Ideas—is more real, more truthful, more meaningful than what appears, that it is not just *beyond* sense perception but *above* the world of the senses. What is "dead" is not only the localization of such "eternal truths" but the distinction itself. . . . The sensual, as still understood by the positivists, cannot survive the death of the supersensual. No one knew this better than Nietzsche who, with his poetic and metaphoric description of the assassination of God in *Zarathastra,* has caused so much confusion in these matters. In a significant passage in *The Twilight of Idols,* he clarifies what the word meant in *Zarathastra.* It was merely a symbol for the suprasensual realm as understood by metaphysics; he now uses instead of *God* the words *true world* and says: "We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one." . . .
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> In other words, once the always precarious balance between the two worlds is lost, no matter whether "the true world" abolishes the "apparent one" or vice versa, the whole framework of references, in which our thinking was used to orient itself, breaks down. In these terms, nothing seems to make much sense anymore.

It would appear that except for the *x*-factor—which apparently must be left to genius—this key explanation by Hannah Arendt is the basis for understanding the increasingly shallow intellectuality and moral degradation of the times. Why did the makers of Western civilization and modern culture feel justified in thinking they needed only one world—the world of the senses? What had spoiled philosophy and metaphysics for these otherwise highly intelligent men?

COMMENTARY
DISSOCIATION OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

THIS week's "Children" is concerned with the problems and weaknesses in teaching and communication.

What then is anti-human, in education and everywhere else? Whatever stands in the way of the "profoundly emotional apprehension of experience." Or rather, whatever distorts the symmetry of emotional experience, which in education ought to have both fitness and ideal form. What are fitness and ideal form? The artists—a few of them—seem to understand.

In one of his recent thrillers, John D. MacDonald has a passage which illustrates the emotional apprehension of experience by one of his characters. Meyer, Travis McGee's friend, tells (in *The Dreadful Lemon Sky*) about the time he shot a bird with his new twenty-two (a twelve-year-old's birthday present):

> The grackle lay in my hand, and all that fabulous iridescence was gone. It had a dirty look, the feathers all scruffed and wet. I put it down hastily on the damp grass. I could not have endured dropping it. I put it down gently, and there was blood left on my hand. Bird blood. As red as mine. And the pain had been like mine. I knew. Bright and hot and savage. . . .
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> Travis, the gun was an abstraction. Death was an abstraction. A tiny movement of a finger. A cracking sound. A smell. I could not comprehend a gun a bullet, a death until the bird died. It became all too specific and concrete. I had engineered this death, and it was dirty. I had given pain. I had blood on my hand. I did not know how to escape myself, to go back to what I had been before I had slain the bird. I wanted to get outside the new experience of being me. I was, in all truth, in solemnity, filled with horror at the nature of reality. I have never killed another bird, nor will I ever, unless I should come upon one in some kind of hopeless agony. . . .
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> Those young people . . . have never killed their grackle. They have not been bloodied by reality. They have shed the make-believe blood of a West that never existed. They have gawped at the gore of the Godfather. They have seen the slow terminal dance of Bonnie and Clyde. They have seen the stain on the front of the shirt of the man who has fallen gracefully into the dust of Marshal Dillon's main street. It is as if . . . I had walked into those woods and seen a picture of a dead grackle. They do not yet know the nature of reality. They do not yet know, and may never learn, what a death is like. . . . It is emotional poverty, with cause and effect in a state of dissociation. . . .

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
ON TALKING TO CHILDREN

IN a talk given before some teachers at Tel-Aviv in 1939, Martin Buber said:

> If I have to teach algebra I can expect to succeed in giving my pupils an idea of quadratic equations with two unknown quantities. Even the slowest-witted child will understand it so well that he will amuse himself by solving equations at night when he cannot fall asleep. And even one with the slowest memory will not forget, in his old age, how to play with *x* and *y*. But if I am concerned with the education of character, everything becomes problematic. I try to explain to my pupils that envy is despicable, and at once I feel the secret resistance of those who are poorer than their comrades. I try to explain that it is wicked to bully the weak, and at once I see a suppressed smile on the lips of the strong. I try to explain that lying destroys life, and something frightful happens: the worst habitual liar of the class produces a brilliant essay on the destructive power of lying. I have made the fatal mistake of *giving instruction* in ethics, and what I said is accepted as current coin of knowledge; nothing is transformed into character-building substance.

Buber is so right, and the conclusion he reaches so frustrating to us do-gooders! There are all those children who need to see things in proper perspective, so why can't we *tell* them?

Is it that ethics can't be "learned," but must be discovered? That second-hand morality *never* brings one to the threshold of vision? Somewhere John Holt quotes a wise old teacher who said, making the right Dauses. "A word to the wise is . . . . *infuriating."* What Buber said applies to adults, too.

An artist is one who has found out—by guess or by instinct—how to outwit his own didactic tendencies. He sets up discoveries for other people. He has learned how to overcome some—not all—of the subversive qualities of communication.

The Greeks thought and argued about this question. Writing things out, they said, becomes deadly dull. Alkidamas, in a written speech "Against the Authors of Written Speeches," maintained that only the word arising spontaneously from thought is possessed of soul and life. When you write it out, he said, it loses its spirit and is like a painted figure, a mere copy. Plato, who wrote all his life, said the same thing in the *Phaedrus.* He made Ammon reprove Thoth for inventing writing: "You produce the illusion of wisdom among the disciples, not truth."

And that, alas, is what conventions and the conventional wisdom are made of. The illusion of wisdom. Yet we don't seem to be able to do without conventions. They are like the prosthetic devices required by the lame, the halt, and the blind.

The divine madness of the true poet sees through all this and, hardly knowing how, he gives his hearers a wonderful similitude of independent discovery. What else can we mean when we say that a book is "inspiring"?

It takes a moiety of genius to avoid Buber's "fatal mistake."

Since theorizing about such matters might also come close to being fatal, we seek other illustrations. What sort of writing accomplishes the best ends? In his chapter on the literary qualities of the Declaration of Independence (in *The Declaration of Independence,* Vintage, 1942), Carl Becker says:

> Jefferson, as the original drafts of his papers show, revised and corrected his writings with care, seeking, yet without wearing his soul threadbare in the search, for the better word, the happier phrase, the smoother transition. His style has not indeed the achieved perfection, the impeccable surface, of that of a master-craftsman like Flaubert, or Walter Pater; but neither has it the objectivity, the impersonal frigidity of writing that is perhaps too curiously and deliberately integrated, too consciously made. Having something to say, he says it, with as much art as may be, yet not solely for the art's sake, aiming rather at the ease, the simplicity, the genial urbanity of cultivated conversation. . . . The Declaration is filled with these felicities of phrase which bear the stamp of Jefferson's mind and temperament.

Yet Jefferson's art and intention failed him when it came to the (omitted) article on the slave trade, even though John Adams—as a good lawyer and, perhaps, at heart a didactic moralist—"thought it one of the best parts of the Declaration." What happened in this article? Becker thinks there was something missing in the prose. Comparing with it a passage from Lincoln's second inaugural address on the same subject, Becker says: "There is a quality of deep feeling about the first [quotation, from Lincoln], an indefinable something which is profoundly moving; and this something, which informs and enriches much of Lincoln's writing, is rarely, almost never present in the writing of Jefferson."

What did Lincoln have that Jefferson lacked? He had, Becker says, "a profoundly emotional apprehension of experience." And he was able, you might say, to convey the *first-hand* quality of the experience to another. This is a lot more than "art"—art in the service of *eros,* perhaps? A combination of *ethos, eros* and *nous?* Whatever it is, Lincoln had it.

Fortunately, this is an area of inquiry that can be stepped down to a less awesome level. In *Redbook* for January 1963 Jessamyn West (who wrote *Friendly Persuasion*) considers what is wrong with the violence on children's and other TV programs:

> . . . today there exists a conspiracy of doubletalk—a conspiracy to dehumanize the victims and whitewash the process by which they are erased. Death on the screen is so easy a matter. The fast draw, the quick collapse. We are never permitted to see very much of the man who is going to die. We must not learn to care for *him,* to feel that his death matters; otherwise our enjoyment of his violent end will be weakened. We must never see him as a fellow who planted radishes, made kites for his kids or patted a dog on the head. . . . By dehumanizing the action (real people don't die, only the "bad men"), by never giving the proper name to what we see, are we blinded to reality? Is a generation of Americans being prepared for the routine and casual killings of concentration camps, of death marches and saturation bombings, of mass evacuations and 100-megaton explosions? Violence is a big word with sonorous syllables. Do we ever see behind it the small boy with his face blown away? . . .
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> There are many intelligent thoughtful people who believe that there is too much violence on our movie and television screens and that it is particularly bad for children to see it, But what is really wrong is that the children do *not* see it. They see only the pleasure of landing the blow without ever imagining that the one who receives the blow is capable of suffering pain.
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> The TV screen wherein only bad men die, and then neatly and with dispatch, dulls and kills the imagination—and whatever destroys the imagination limits and ultimately destroys man.

FRONTIERS

How We Learned to Grow Grain

IN 1970, the year that we moved here to our farm in the Province of Quebec, we set about to plant some fall rye. After some hassle in getting the seed—nobody here had heard of it—we started ploughing. It was hard work, for us and Maude, the mare. She was about twenty, and only about 1300 pounds, pulling a two-horse plough by herself. We had trouble keeping the plough in the ground. The point was blunt and we had unluckily picked on the hardest and rockiest section of the field, made even more unyielding by the dry condition of the soil. We did a lot of backing up and second and third tries—some patches were ploughed only one inch deep instead of the four inches we were trying for. It took us nearly two days to plough a third of an acre, and then we were fortunate enough to get a nice fall of rain to soften up the ground for harrowing.

We had some manure left over from the previous owner's lack of enthusiasm for agriculture, so we spread it lightly over half the rye plot. Another section we fertilized with muck dug out of the nearby swamp—black, decomposed organic matter that looks like well-rotted manure, but, as we discovered, isn't. And in case we had overdone the fertilizing we left the middle section without anything.

To harrow in the manure we had a two-horse disk-harrow. We hitched a single-tree on the end of the pole and disked with old Maude alone. It was hard work for her, but, taking it slowly, letting her catch her breath, and with the disks at half pitch, she got it done.

With the disk-harrow we worked in the manure and loosened the surface as much as we could until we figured it was ready for seeding. We each (my wife and I) took a large pot of grain and broadcast it by hand. Naturally, doing this for the first time, it was patchy, so we went over it again, sprinkling grain on the spots we had missed. Then we hitched Maude up and went over the whole plot with the disk harrow to bury the seed.

Next we tried to pack the soil by dragging an old car hood loaded with rocks over it. This did pack the soil but also accentuated the ridges left by the disk harrow, so that when the field was finished it had a moderate swell, not serious for the rye, but the following year the hay we had seeded (under the rye) was difficult to mow without biting into the tops of the ridges with the mower blade. (Nowadays I level the field with a finishing harrow and pack it with a roller I made out of a big maple log.)

A couple of days later it rained heavily; then, after a couple more days, the rye was up, germinating quickly in the warm August soil. At first tinged with red, it soon turned a deep green and kept growing until the cold set in. Late in October, after the fall frosts had withered and browned the fields, there was our rye plot still bright green, standing out from almost a mile away. The neighbours could see it from their windows and were impressed, never having seen anything like that before in this oat country.

November brought snow, and that heavy (1970-71) winter brought more—four feet deep in the fields, with temperatures down to minus 30. But the snow protected the rye and didn't melt away until mid-May. Finally spring really arrived and we saw our rye again, a little flatter perhaps, but still green! Straight away it started to grow—rye grows incredibly fast here in spring—and a month later it was heading out, five to six feet high in places.

It didn't take long to see the variations in our plot. While the manured section stood tall, the muck and luck sections were short and patchy, some parts heading out only a foot high, giving us one or two grains in return for the one we had put in the ground. And so we began to learn how to treat our poor soil. We found we didn't have to be afraid of putting on good doses of manure or compost.

By mid-July the kernels were well-formed. At the hard dough stage we decided it was time to harvest. I had seen a grain cradle (like a scythe, but with four long fingers to collect the stalks as they are cut) hanging on an antique dealer's wall and tried to make a copy of it, but I hadn't grasped some of the basic concepts so when I swung my construction through the standing grain it snagged and broke. Then we resorted to the tool that antedates the cradle, which is the reaping hook. I had found an old toothed sickle in a second-hand store, and subsequently read in *Irish Folk Ways* (by E. Estyn Evans, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London) how Irish reapers used them in fields too stony to swing a scythe or a cradle.

I went around the field with the reaping hook, hooking a bunch of stems and cutting them with a backward sawing motion. These I dropped on the ground with the heads together. Adrienne followed behind, gathering the little bundles and tying them into sheaves.

The sheaves should then have been built into stooks or shocks that would shed rain and withstand wind, letting the grain cure or slowly dry as it finished filling out. But we didn't know too much about this and put it straight in the barn. I checked a week or so later to find that it was all heating up and the straw going mouldy. Obviously, more air circulation was needed, so I spread the sheaves about and they gradually dried out. Fortunately, the grain wasn't much harmed by this ordeal. But if it had been buckwheat the kernels would have picked up a strong musty taste.

So we had our crop harvested and cured. How were we going to thrash it? Copying from a picture in *Irish Folk Ways*, I made a flail, cleared a space on the barn floor, spread some old sheets around to catch the grains, and started thrashing. I soon learned how to swing the loose arm, or swinger, over and over, beating the heads. I learned that the grain has to be bone dry or else very frozen to thrash out easily; also that having the heads all together in a sheaf made thrashing by hand a lot easier.

After beating the sheaves on both sides, undoing the string and beating them again, I had gotten most of the grain out. Then I picked up the straw, leaving the grain and chaff on the floor. These I gathered up and winnowed by pouring them from one vessel to another when there was a steady wind blowing. The grain fell straight down while the chaff blew way down the field over the snow. A couple of passes and it was pretty clean.

Then we ground it in our hand-mill and made our first own bread. Fresh grain, freshly ground, produced rye bread with more flavour than we had ever known. Even though our first crop hadn't yielded much more than 50 pounds and was to all intents a failure, we didn't feel we had lost anything.

Since then we have planted grain every year—fall rye, spring wheat, and two varieties of oats, a hull-less variety for ourselves and conventional oats with hulls attached for the animals, also green and yellow (and grey) varieties of dry peas, and lentils, plus a few other things. Not that we always get good crops. This is not really a grain region. Our soil is very poor in places; blackbirds, woodchucks, and weeds give us competition, and we are still learning by trial and error. But our yields are improving as we learn more and as our fertility improves. Last year we harvested over 1,000 pounds of grain and 300 pounds of peas—about enough for ourselves and our animals.

Our methods have modernized somewhat. I bought an old horse-drawn grain drill at an auction for $18 which plants eleven rows of seed at a uniform depth, so that there is better germination and a saving of seed—less of it going down the blackbirds' throats. It is not an essential tool, but useful and seems fairly reliable. We have progressed from the reaping hook to the grain cradle, with a tenfold increase in efficiency in cutting the grain. We have learned how to make stooks and to build the sheaves in tripod form,

making hollow stacks with the heads protected from the rain so that the grain can cure safely. For thrashing I have been using the old thrashing machine that came with the farm and hiring a neighbour with his tractor to help me.

This is something of a dilemma for me. Every now and again I get fed up with the machine and go back to the flail. But then the temptation to save time overcomes me. I don't have much time for hand thrashing in the fall so the sheaves have to wait in the barn until winter. Meanwhile the rats and mice start work by themselves, thrashing and storing it away for their own use. As the machine thrashes about ten times as fast as by hand, it means we can thrash everything at harvest time and make the grain safe from the vermin. It means that anybody else nearby can thrash his grain at the same time—actually, most people wouldn't grow grain unless there was a machine to do the work for them. Also, many modern varieties have been bred for machine thrashing so that the grain doesn't fall out too easily with rough handling or while waiting in the field for the combine.

The problem is that a thrashing machine slowly shakes itself to pieces. *"Il travail tout le temps pour se defaire,"* as Lucien says. ["It works all the time to undo itself."] So, with an ancient machine like mine, we lose a lot of time with breakdowns, and then we spend a lot more time during the rest of the year sorting through the grain looking for little pieces of machinery that might have fallen in with it. So, in the long run, we don't gain much time with the machine (and buying a new one would need twenty years for it to pay for itself in time saved). And I don't much enjoy working with it; it's noisy, dusty, dangerous, and rushed. My problem with machines is that if they are there I will use them, but often to my own detriment. So for the most part I try to isolate myself from them. Most of my work around the farm I do by hand or horsepower.

Several times people have come across me swinging my cradle through the ripe standing grain and made the comment, "Say, you're doing it the hard way." I find myself hard put to explain that for me it is the easy way; that a machine to reap and bind my small acreage would involve much more work (and energy) than doing it by hand. Nor would hiring a combine at $15 an hour save me any time. It would be impossible to expect a man with a combine to make it here on the rare day that the grain is standing dead ripe and bone dry. Generally, in Quebec, the grain is too moist to store straight from the field, so it has to be dried afterwards, somehow. If it is combined too early it shrivels, if too late the blackbirds take their share, and some grains start to fall out while others are laid flat by the wind. Not to speak of the problem of the machine mixing one grain with another as it goes from plot to plot. Anyway, my four or five different grains all ripen at different times. With my cradle and my wife Adrienne's help tying the sheaves, I can reap and bind half an acre by hand in a day. So my two acres take me four days, including stooking, or tripoding. I can harvest each grain at the optimum time, and give it individual treatment. I find this the best and easiest way.

But these explanations fall on deaf ears. This is the Machine Age and the idea that some jobs are more efficiently done by hand is an anachronism (if not heresy), and anyway who in his right mind would not prefer to spend two hours with a machine rather than spend one hour at strenuous physical work!

But the easiest explanation is to say that I enjoy cutting my grain by hand. It is the simple truth—for me it is clean, pleasant, physical work. Doing things by hand is for us a spiritual outlet. It satisfies a need for intimate contact, for communion, with the Source of our existence.

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