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A SHADOWY FRONTIER

THE idea of seeking an alternative to the now prevailing positivist scientific world-view—a quest to which we are called by numerous voices—seems less perilous once it is recognized that the thinkers whose ideas have become the main foundation of the scientific edifice were not themselves men of any orthodox persuasion. They were originators who took great risks, strongly intuitive natural philosophers, and science was for them a free inquiry which soared on the wings of imaginative construction as well as explored the ranges of natural phenomena. They were liberators of the mind, not deniers of psychic and spiritual possibility.

This is easy to demonstrate, and the historians of science and the evolution of ideas have done it well. What is not so easy to show is the sort of inner strength they possessed, enabling them to challenge established authority—to live for a time, perhaps for their whole lives, outside the pale of accepted opinion. A man can hardly reveal the sources of his strength through words, although a great writer may exhibit its reality in what he says. Naming things of incalculable value tends to be reductive. A labeled quality is open to assimilation by some familiar theory, and then the idea is divorced from wonder and finitized as a part of a system of "explanation." This is of course a perversion of language, but we live in a time when the zest for objectification and precise definition has subtracted the incommensurable content from most of the words we commonly use, with resulting stultification of the tools of philosophical expression. To speak authentically of egoic strength and the elements which go to make it up could very well require borrowing from archaic language, and this, except for writers of extraordinary quality, might prove stilted and artificial.

A new currency of speech itself, then, is called for, if the search for an alternative conception of "reality" is to become less strange and threatening. A new breed of poets might help in this, and Wendell Berry's essay referring to certain contemporaries (in *A Continuing Harmony*) may afford some encouragement in this direction.

Also needed, in an age of transition, is a more realizing sense of the constant resources of individual human beings—resources which tend to be hidden by the thought-forms of conventional thinking. Actually, by comparison with the psychology of the individual, a "world-view" may be a very superficial overlay which obtains its domination through assiduous publicity and habitual exaggeration of its completeness and importance. The *power* of a world-view over our lives, which makes it the source of the "binding observances" of an age, comes mostly from its docile acceptance by the people. So long as they are persuaded that their survival and their good depend upon their understanding and support of the system, they will quite naturally neglect to understand themselves, crediting the system with achievements that come from much profounder sources in man's nature. So, to look for another world-view is to move from knowledge of the system to self-knowledge, and then, with renewed self-knowledge, to turn with unbiassed or less biassed vision for another look at the world.

Useful in thinking about this aspect of historical transition would be Thomas Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, since great changes in scientific thinking seem paradigmatic of other basic changes in human outlook; and also Jacob Bronowski's essay, "The Logic of the Mind," in the Spring 1966 *American Scholar*, in which he writes of the necessity for self-reference on the part of a scientist, whenever

the system of assumptions on which he is relying breaks down.

To speak of the "constant resources" of human beings is in effect to ask about man's timeless qualities—the capacities and abilities, that is, which make and unmake systems, which support the quest of self-knowledge, and on which the individual draws, often without knowing it, for the inspiration and strength which go into his creative activity. Since we are hardly ready for a "psychology" along these lines, we might consider these sources in terms of their fruits, which are basic conceptions of meaning that men have in all ages, and which become the ingredients of every system. These would include the content of the great myths, which change in form but never die, and metaphysical propositions such as ideas of reality and self, of law or world-process, and of the goals or ends which provide meaning to all activity. Then there are the ideas of good and evil, of death and immortality, and the meaning of dreams. Finally there are conceptions of natural and social structures, involving hierarchy, levels, correspondences, and all the vast variety of life.

All reflective men have feelings and intuitions, hunches and wonderings about the questions which these ideas represent and raise. A system of thought or a world-view represents an historical attempt to settle some of the questions, table some as unimportant or unreal, and provide a dynamics for dealing with the rest. The important consideration, today, is the fact that *we* are not suddenly impoverished when a system breaks down and loses its authority. Men have the same underlying resources they have always had, and the system, for all its grandeur and seeming security, was only a snapshot at a given moment, or series of moments, of a world of thought that is in continual flux.

Gaston Bachelard, distinguished philosopher of science, in the first chapter of his book, *The Philosophy of No* (Orion, 1968), would confront science with its incompleteness and endeavor to draw out from scientists some admission of the sources of what they do. The Philosophy of No is the scientific philosophy of continual self-correction on the part of science. The new discovery says "no" to past error. Bachelard finds scientific thought to be a collection of ideas at widely dissimilar stages of maturity, and he wants scientists and his readers to be thoroughly aware of this. Early in the book he writes:

> From scientists we shall claim the right to distract science for an instant from its positive work, from its will toward objectivity, in order that it may uncover such subjective residue as may be left in the strictest of its methods. We shall begin by asking scientists questions which will be seemingly psychological, and we shall go on to show them little by little that all psychology is of a piece with metaphysical postulates. The mind may change its metaphysics, it cannot do without metaphysics. We shall therefore ask scientists: how do you think? what are you groping after? what trials do you make, what errors? upon what impulsion do you change your opinions? why do you remain so terse when you speak of the psychological conditions of *new* research? Give us, above all, your vague ideas, your contradictions, your fixed ideas, your unproved assumptions. You have been dubbed realists. Is it so certain that this massive, jointless philosophy, devoid of dualism, devoid of hierarchy, really corresponds to the variety of your thoughts, the freedom of your hypotheses? Tell us what you are thinking, not as you *leave* the laboratory, but during those hours when you quit ordinary life to *enter* scientific life. Give us not the empiricism of your evenings, but the vigorous rationalism of your mornings, the *a priori* of your mathematical dreaming, the urge behind your projects, your unadmitted intuitions. If we could thus extend our psychological inquiry in this manner, it seems almost self-evident that the scientific mind would also appear to be in a state of psychological dispersion and hence to be in a state of philosophical dispersion—after all, every philosophical root originates in a thought.

If Bachelard's inquiry could win from every scientist the candor and self-exposure it invites, there would soon be no formidable structure of anti-human positivist assumption to be overcome and abandoned, for the practice of science would turn into the sort of undertaking that needs and wants no "establishment," and which would, for the first time in its brief history, experience an

evergreen sort of growth, with no bleak winters of reaction followed by sudden breaks with the past such as Kuhn describes. But this is probably utopian, although distinguished individuals will always work toward this sort of science, whatever the habit of the rank and file. Maslow, for example, practiced the openness that Bachelard hoped to obtain, and may have accomplished a revolution in psychology as a result.

Freud is often regarded as a major architect in shaping the modern world-view, and this is surely the case so far as conceptions of man are concerned. But as Roszak points out in *Where the Wasteland Ends*, Freud accepted from his contemporaries the resources from which he constructed the philosophic grounding of his contribution; he listened to himself for the psychodynamics of his system but forced his conclusions through a mechanistic filter in order to make psychoanalysis as "scientific" as possible. Roszak writes:

> A confirmed nineteenth-century positivist, Freud took the objective to be nature as defined by science, the *real* external world of empirical fact and mechanistic determinism. The subjective, on the other hand, was a mixture of two elements: sexuality—the playful, non-utilitarian "pleasure-principle"; and fantasy—a broad category in which Freud included dreams, myths, reveries, religion, and art. In so far as the latter were not acting as sexual disguise, they were mere wishful thinking and essentially infantile. They must, therefore Freud thought, be outgrown in childhood or at least subordinated in their influence. He was, for example, proud of his daughter because in her childhood she had never believed in fairy tales.

The much wider resources available for depth psychology are suggestively described by L. L. Whyte in his important book, *The Unconscious Before Freud.* Much richer conceptions of man's inner life are provided by earlier writers, but in Freud's time the barriers to such thinking were not of the sort he cared to attack. He must have seen these barriers as defining the true path of science, since he remarked to Binswanger: "Man has always known that he has spirit . . . it has been for me to show him that he is instinctual."

Roszak continues:

> What Freud never wished to face squarely was the fact that the line we draw between the world Out There and the world In Here must be predicated on metaphysical assumptions that cannot themselves be subjected to scientific proof. Such assumptions are grounded in capacities of consciousness which may differ widely from age to age, culture to culture person to person. Different experiences, different metaphysics different metaphysics, different realities. Freud chose the course of least resistance. He simply endorsed the prevailing worldview of scientific positivism and went on from there. Art was mere wish fulfillment. Religion was "illusion" that had no future. External reality was recalcitrant and inhuman. Alienation was man's fate. Sanity was "acquiescence in fate."

Roszak's book amounts to a dialogue with the reader concerning alternative views issuing from other metaphysical assumptions. This makes it a rich inventory of the inner resources of human beings. He draws on literature and his own imagination, not cultist doctrines. In his discussion of dreams, for example, there is the following:

> What if, without resort to artificial technique, the dark mind [the mind during sleep] broadens of its own accord into universality and we re-enact each night the mythical identities of man?

Comes the obvious question: Supposing this to be true, who will set limits to one's speculation? What are the controls for a wild and free subjectivity?

One could be bold and answer that the disciplines of the soul itself can provide limits and establish control; but it might provoke less opposition to ask instead: Who told Blake where to end the precise lines which he so admired? The artist controls himself or he is no artist but a technologist with a rule-book supplied by somebody else. Why do poets burn some of their works and cherish others? Are a man's thoughts about his inner life of so little importance that he

can entrust their guidance to some authority other than himself?

What is dogma but a limit set by someone else? All the great questions, finally, are subjectively raised and subjectively settled. Only the side-effects and consequences of these operations attain to the distinction of being objectified.

Suitably, then, Roszak continues his wondering about dreams:

> What if . . . ? A question that cannot expect an answer. In what spirit can I raise the point with you but as an interesting speculation? The adventures of the dark mind are among the most commonplace facts of daily life. Yet no sooner do we probe their meaning than we find ourselves brought to a halt at the utmost limits of awareness; and nothing I can say here will take you across that shadowy frontier. Let the fact take hold before you read further: by no act of will however strenuous, can you now reclaim from all your life more than a few scraps of your dreams. You *cannot.* If I were to suggest that in your dreams miracles of self-discovery take place, that in the ocean-bottoms of sleep you have found your way to sacred ground . . . if I were to submit that this had happened to you—to *you*, last night—you would be incapable of verifying or refuting the suggestion. That is what it means to be at the boundaries of consciousness—or rather of orthodox consciousness. Here, in part, is what our alienated normality requires of you, this scornful neglect of the dark mind which leaves you stranger to so much of your own experience, and which, even now, may be counseling you to pay these trivial mattem no attention . . . these senseless dreams . . . this vacuum of existence called sleep.

Well, we can measure brain-waves and rhythms and know *something;* perhaps so, but Roszak is speaking of a possible amnesia, of forgotten or opaqued-out splendors of the inner life, and there are old traditions which suggest this view, such as those recorded in the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad.* Gaston Bachelard's later works form another approach to such matters, in his study of the waking dream or reverie.

Have these investigations to do with self and the understanding of self? They do indeed, since they are concerned with what a man can find out about his own resources and potentialities at first hand, and with the help, perhaps, of texts which consider man as a self-determining, self-educated being or intelligence.

Since Roszak proposed that in dream we may re-enact the mythic identities of man, we might inquire into the nature of myth. The best definition of myth that we know of is provided by William Irwin Thompson in *At the Edge of History.* It is a mistake, he suggests, to think of myth as inevitably an ancient or "primitive" form of thinking or expression:

> There may indeed be a "mythopoeic mentality," but it is not restricted to precivilized man, but is to be found in geniuses as different as Boehme, Kepler, Yeats, Wagner, Heisenberg, and that student of Boehme's theory of action and reaction, Isaac Newton. Myth is not an early level of human development but an imaginative description of reality in which the known is related to the unknown through a system of correspondences in which mind and matter, self and society, and cosmos are integrally expressed in an esoteric language of poetry and number which is itself a performance of the reality it seeks to describe. Myth expresses the deep correspondence between the "universal grammar" of the mind and the universal grammar of events in space-time. A hunk of words does not create a language, and a hunk of matter does not create a cosmos. The structures by which and through which man realizes the intellectual resonance between himself and the universe of which he is a part are his mathematical, musical, and verbal creations. Mediating between Nous and Cosmos is the Logos.

In a religious society, Thompson says, myths are sacred traditions which tell the people who they are and where they come from. To do violence to their myths is to cast them into limbo. The latter half of his book is devoted to discussion of the myths which Westerners are hurriedly improvising to fill the vacuum of meaning in their lives. The value of Roszak's book lies in its account of how William Blake read the meaning of the eighteenth century in the myths he created, embodying ancient Neo-platonic conceptions of progressive awakening in a new imagery, and

fusing individual and social responsibility in a way that has hardly been improved upon since. The applications of Blake's mythic analysis to the present give breadth and depth to *Where the Wasteland Ends.* The richness of myth and its capacity to satisfy our hungers is shown in the enormous popularity of the thoughtful books on the subject—as for example Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* of some years ago.

The myths speak to our condition as, again for example, does Giordano Bruno's conversion of the tale of Actaeon's encounter with Diana into a luminous explanation of the psychology of mystical enlightenment. Why do we find this help in myths? Because they are concerned with the reaches and realities of consciousness. And, as William Thompson says at the end of his book:

> Western Civilization is drawing to a close in an age of apocalyptic turmoil in which the old species, collectivizing mankind with machines, and the new species, unifying it in consciousness, are in collusion with one another to end what we know as human nature. . . . we are at one of those moments when the whole meaning of nature, self, and civilization is overturned in a re-visioning of history as important as any technological invention.
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> Birth is a cry of joy and a scream of pain: the environment that sustained us for a time is now crushing down and pushing us out. But death, too, is a scream of pain and a cry of joy, and so we cannot be certain that we are headed for one and not the other. Birth and death are ultimately confusing; to make sense of them we will have to make our peace with myth.
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> We will have to come right up to the edge to find out where we are, and who we are. At the edge of history, history itself can no longer help us, and only myth remains equal to reality.

REVIEW
WALTER BENJAMIN

WHEN, in September of 1940, Walter Benjamin, a German-Jewish writer, was prevented by the police from crossing the border from France into Spain, on his way to the United States, he took his own life. Hearing of his suicide, Bertolt Brecht is reported to have said that this was the first real loss Hitler had caused to German literature. At the time of his death Benjamin was comparatively unknown. The high opinion of his work among the distinguished few who were his friends—such as the poet Brecht and the scholars Gerhard Scholem and Theodor Adorno—began to be understood only after publication of the two-volume edition of his writings in Germany in 1955. In America appreciation of him came in 1968 with the appearance of a book of his essays, *Illuminations* (Harcourt, Brace & World), edited by Hannah Arendt. Miss Arendt's introduction is characteristically engrossing and provides a sketch of Benjamin's life with musing comments on his difficulties. This Introduction is at once a study of the personal struggle of a perceptive human being and a review of the common problems and dilemmas of German Jewish intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century.

Why did Benjamin remain an "unknown" during his lifetime? Miss Arendt believes that, in addition to his own bad management of his career and the ill-fortune that pursued him to the end, he had the unassimilable distinction of being both original (unclassifiable) and right, most of the time. No one could deal critically with Benjamin as belonging to some category of writers, since his work did not submit to comparisons. Evaluation of him required active exercise of intelligence. As Miss Arendt put it:

> The trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be *sui generis.*
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> Posthumous fame seems, then, to be the lot of the unclassifiable ones, that is, those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification. Innumerable attempts to write a la Kafka, all of them dismal failures, have only served to emphasize Kafka's uniqueness, that absolute originality which can be traced to no predecessor and suffers no followers. This is what society can least come to terms with and upon which it will always be very reluctant to bestow its seal of approval. To put it bluntly, it would be as misleading today to recommend Walter Benjamin as a literary critic and essayist as it would have been misleading to recommend Kafka in 1924 as a short-story writer and novelist. To describe adequately his work and him as an author within our usual framework of reference, one would have to make a great many negative statements, such as: his erudition was great, but he was no scholar; his subject matter comprised texts and their interpretation, but he was no philologist, he was greatly attracted not by religion but by theology and the theological type of interpretation for which the text itself is sacred, but he was no theologian and he was not particularly interested in the Bible; he was a born writer, but his greatest ambition was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations; he was the first German to translate Proust (together with Franz Hessel) and St.-John Perse, and before that he had translated Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens,* but he was no translator; he reviewed books and wrote a number of essays on living and dead writers, but he was no literary critic; he wrote a book about the German baroque and left behind a huge unfinished study of the French nineteenth century, but he was no historian, literary or otherwise; I shall try to show that he thought poetically, but he was neither a poet nor a philosopher.

Why pick this book for review when there are a dozen or so new books waiting for attention? Mainly because this writer has undoubted power to stir the mind of the reader, even if you read him at random. His ideas have a multiplier effect. He has a way of discussing something that is familiar and taken for granted so that unconsidered possibilities emerge. Take for example the essay on translation, which was the introduction to his own translation of the volume by Baudelaire. The task of the translator, he suggests, is far more than a practical resolution of the conflict between literal rendition and the "freedom" necessary to convey the spirit of an original work. The translator must also in some measure enrich his own language with the spirit and possibilities of

another tongue. He takes from Rudolf Panuwitz the following statement as constituting the best expression of this view:

> Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English, into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of foreign works. . . . The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible, to what extent language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect; however, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly.

A review-essay on the works of the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov becomes a reflection on the forces which affect changes in the forms of literature. Leskov, Benjamin says, is a storyteller, and to call him this is to increase his distance from ourselves, for storytellers are a vanishing breed. Storytelling belongs to an oral tradition, and the story used always to have instruction in it of some sort, a counsel, sometimes practical, sometimes moral. Benjamin says:

> Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This however, is a process that has been going on for a long time. . . .
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> The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. . . . In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. Even the first great book of the genre, *Don Quixote*, teaches how spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest of men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom.

Benjamin was a very unorthodox sort of Marxist—as he would have to be, since at the same time he was a strange sort of Zionist, but what he took from Marxism seems here not much more than an awareness of the impact on culture of technological advance. This awareness appears again in an essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which searches for the psychological consequences of mass production techniques. For text he quotes the following from Paul Valéry:

> Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.

Since Benjamin's essay first appeared in 1936, the quotation from Valéry must have had an earlier date, although it may now be found in *The Conquest of Ubiquity* issued by Pantheon in 1964. In any event, what Valéry says is no longer prophecy but fact.

Much of this essay is devoted to an analysis of film, with a particularly interesting contrast drawn between the stage actor and the film actor. But there is also ample discussion of the effect of lithography on the fine arts. "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art," Benjamin says, "is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Because the qualities flowing from this uniqueness are a subjective influence, they are often left unconsidered, yet they are nonetheless withered by the mechanization of reproduction. In the words of the essay:

> This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements.

Benjamin goes on to develop this connection, showing the relation of film to mass movements, converting the sight of the individual to the impersonal eye of the camera, which is adapted to bringing the masses "face to face with themselves." A final comment is that "mass movements, including war, constitute a form of human behavior which particularly favors mechanical equipment."

A particularly pleasant and entertaining essay is the one on collecting books, which was Benjamin's private indulgence. (A final misfortune, perhaps increasing his feeling of the futility of trying to survive, came when, shortly before his death, the Gestapo confiscated his library.) In defense of private libraries he wrote:

> I fully realize that my discussion of the mental climate of collecting will confirm many of you in your conviction that this passion is behind the times, in your distrust of the collector type. Nothing is further from my mind than to shake either your conviction or your distrust. But one thing should be noted: the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter. I do know that the time is running out for the type I am discussing here and have been representing before you a bit *ex officio*. But, as Hegel put it, only when it is dark does the owl of Minerva begin its flight. Only in extinction is the collector comprehended.

COMMENTARY
A READER'S DREAM

HOW nice it would be if there were some means of detecting among the 36,000 books published every year in the United States the ones which are worth reading! We have lie detectors and bomb detectors and other clever identification devices, but little to help us locate the works of the mind which Hannah Arendt calls *sui generis*—so original and good they can't be classified.

Technologists are working hard on information storage, and six years ago John Platt wrote about an optical-microscope system that could put the contents of all the 20 million books in the world into twenty average-size volumes—a Universal Library that might become available, complete with projection microscope, for maybe $5,000. But this doesn't really help much, because there is still the problem of which books to read, and the new ones—36,000 of them—keep coming out every year.

There would be indexes, but the true value of books is in their organism of thought, not in the "parts" that can be indexed. Reviews of current books, moreover, often miss or give short shrift to the best books, which sometimes become popular years after by some kind of luck.

And the indexes would be compiled according to some established or declining world-view, tending, therefore, to become barriers to imaginative heterodoxy or practical instruments of thought-control—the filtering nervous system of a unified intellectual collective.

The problem of knowledge, so far as the past is concerned, is not a matter of storing "everything," but of selecting what ought to be carried forward into the future. Computer records may be misleading because last year's retrieval net will be revised this year, and next year's will be different, too. Knowledge is a *living* thing. It is effectively stored only in the undescribable faculty we call "human understanding." A change in our understanding does not change the past, but it reassembles the elements of our knowledge of the past, enabling us to be selective and to throw out a lot of dead wood. But learned men have been known to throw out the most important things—like the Freudian anthropologist who studied the dreams of "primitive peoples" and found in dreams by the Navajos evidence of an Œdipus complex, but in reporting on this discovery failed to comment on the fact that nine of the dreams were prophetic!

Perhaps we are better off without any magical way to tell a good book from an ordinary one. If good books had halos, technology would find a way to simulate them, and that would really be a bad thing.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
MAGIC AND MYTH

WE have just finished reading a book labeled "escape" literature for young people—say, twelve-year-olds—and, having enjoyed it immensely, feel a growing resistance to calling it "escape" and thinking of it as only for "children." The book is *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula LeGuin, first published by Parnassus Press in 1968 and now available as an Ace paperback for seventy-five cents. The librarian who characterized it as "escape" also reported that it is increasingly popular among girls of junior high age, and that if you had to "type" it you could say it was somewhere between the Lloyd Alexander books and Tolkien.

Our quarrel with the word "escape" as applied to this and some other books lies in the view that fantasy may permit a writer to say a great many things he wants to say, and which need saying, but which cannot come out well in a "realistic" setting. Everyone has an inner life of mystery and mythic wonder, and there is a sense in which the richer that inner life is, the better the individual will be able to cope with the so-called "practical" world of facts. Fantasy might be called the exercise of the right to dream, and the fantasy which becomes much more than "escape" is a fruit of the development of the mythopoeic faculty or power. High discipline is required to make a proper myth, for there are rules to be observed, lost meanings to be recovered, and wonderful possibilities to be intimated. Books for adults with a fantastic element in them that give evidence of these qualities are Anthony West's *The Vintage* (about a life after death) and Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn.* If these books are to be named "escape," it can only be in the sense of an escape from the unutterable dullness of conventional assumptions about "reality."

Nor is this to say that mere "escape" has no place in the scheme of things. Returning to books for children, we used to think of Lord Dunsany as an unparalleled master of escape literature. We learned recently that he is no longer read. His *Book of Wonder* is not in the children's collection of our local library, nor is it in print, and two librarians needed to be told "who" he was. Although specialists in children's books, they had never heard of him.

Our recollections of reading Dunsany, many years ago, recalled an experience like walking through a window looking out upon another world where time stopped entirely—time, responsibility, and even fussy things like right and wrong were left behind. It seemed a small, unpunishable sin to read Dunsany, for in his enchanted regions the distinction between licit and illicit delights was lost entirely. You knew there could never be a place like that, for every child is, after all, an inveterate moralist and knows better than to believe Dunsany. So Dunsany was indeed escape.

But Ursula LeGuin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* is not. This is the story of a boy born in an island which nurtures a high proportion of wonder-workers, for wizards are magicians who have powers beyond those of ordinary men. He early demonstrates his potentialities as a weaver of spells and is taken in hand as an apprentice by a mature wizard who begins his instruction in the elements of the craft. What does the medium of fantasy make possible in this tale? It enables the author to show that while one who wishes to become master of the enchanter's art must learn to its fullness all the lore of all the categories of knowledge about the earth and its inhabitants, his real struggles and his crucial encounters are with himself. Yet the events of his progress are projected on a screen of external adventures and relationships, and there is never any cloying moralism in the telling of the tale. The story is good and delighting because it is "true" in some very important senses. Time-honored elements of the tradition of magical practice become themes in the story—the power in "names" is one of them, and the need to know the difference between white and black magic another.

The boy has his downfalls along the way—the first and almost fatal mistake he makes, while under training at a kind of college for wizards, is submission to pride and competitiveness. Desiring to demonstrate his waxing powers, he attempts the prohibited practice of necromancy—succeeding in

calling up the tortured shade of one long dead, but at the same time arouses elemental powers which thereafter beset his course in the form of a malignant "shadow" of himself. The boy—whose secret name is Ged—must now learn to understand the shadow's obsessive presence and find the way to destroy its power over him. The shadow comes and goes, and Ged's magical arts are unable to control it. One of his teachers in the College, called the Summoner for his peculiar skills, often sat with Ged during his long convalescence from the nearly fatal ill his experiment in necromancy had brought. What, asked Ged, was this "thing," this vaporous yet tenacious entity of evil that clung to the thread of his life? The Summoner did not know. Another teacher had said it came from unlife, and still another thought it belonged to the wrong side of the world. But the Summoner added:

> "I know of the thing only this: that only a great power could have summoned up such a thing, and perhaps only one power—only one voice—your voice. But what in turn that means, I do not know. You will find out. You must find out, or die, and worse than die. . . ." He spoke softly and his eyes were sombre as he looked at Ged. "You thought, as a boy, that a mage is one who can do anything. So I thought, once. So did we all. And the truth is that as a man's real power grows and his knowledge widens, ever the way he can follow grows narrower: until at last he chooses nothing, but does only what and wholly what he *must* do. . . ."

The early days of Ged's training, when he was still in the care of his first teacher on his native island, were puzzling to the boy:

> Three days went by and four days went by and still Ogion had not spoken a single charm in Ged's hearing, and had not taught him a single name or rune or spell.
>
> Though a very silent man he was so mild and calm that Ged soon lost his awe of him, and in a day or two more he was bold enough to ask his master, "When will my apprenticeship begin, Sir?"
>
> "It has begun," said Ogion.
>
> There was a silence, as if Ged was keeping back something he had to say. Then he said it: "But I haven't learned anything yet!"
>
> "Because you haven't found out what I'm teaching," replied the mage, going on at his steady, long-legged pace along their road. . . . He spoke seldom, ate little, slept less. His eyes and ears were very keen, and often there was a listening look on his face.
>
> Ged did not answer him. It is not always easy to answer a mage.
>
> "You want to work spells," Ogion said presently, striding along. "You've drawn too much water from that well. Wait. Manhood is patience. Mastery is nine times patience. What is that herb by the path?"

There is plenty of "magic" in the story, but its role is subordinate to the kind of learning and achievement that Ged's first teacher speaks of here at the beginning. In one part of the story, Ged attempts to bring back to life the small child of a fisherman friend, but fails, and very nearly dies himself for having pursued the soul of the child across the barrier of death, too far into the other world, where he was lost in darkness. Then, a pet animal begins to lick his inanimate body, and this draws him back to the world of the living:

> Later, when Ged thought back upon that night, he knew that had none touched him when he lay thus spirit-lost, had none called him back in some way, he might have been lost for good. It was only the dumb instinctive wisdom of the beast who licks his hurt companion to comfort him, and yet in that wisdom Ged saw something akin to his own power, something that went as deep as wizardry. From that time forth he believed that the wise man is one who never sets himself apart from other living things, whether they have speech or not, and in later years he strove long to learn what can be learned, in silence, from the eyes of animals, the flight of birds, the great slow gestures of trees.

The climax of the story comes when Ged overcomes his "shadow," which is the nether aspect of himself. Here are echoes of ancient treatises on the trials of discipleship and the conditions of victory, recalling such hints as may be found in Bulwer Lytton's *Zanoni* and in Eliphas Lévi, and in other sources, including ancient myths. It is of incidental interest to know that Ursula LeGuin is the daughter of A. L. Kroeber, the well-known anthropologist.

FRONTIERS

Gandhi's Collected Works

BY courtesy of the Publications Division of the Ministry of Information, Government of India, we now have in the MANAS library four more volumes of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*—volumes 32, 39, 45, and 46. These are large books running to four hundred or five hundred pages, filled with the writings—books and letters—of modern India's greatest man and teacher. A browsing in these volumes will quickly cure the reader of any easy identification of Gandhi. In fact, the peculiar value of this apparently endless series of books containing Gandhi's work—apart from its historical and conventional biographical interest—is the progressive resistance of the emerging figure of Gandhi to any sort of classification. These books record the day-to-day thought of a man who forged his own being, and who made an immeasurable impact on the world in doing it. There is a sense in which Gandhi formed his resolve in the show-window of history. By his determination to be of service to his people and to the world, he chose a public career, and even his personal growth had a semipublic aspect. Being without vanity, it often seemed appropriate to him to use himself as an illustration that might be helpful to others. He was convinced that others could do what he did, and perhaps do it better.

From the viewpoint of the liberation of India, for which Gandhi labored, the texts in these volumes show again and again that Gandhi believed that political independence would be fruitless without a prior and corresponding regeneration of the people. India's real servitude was not to an external power. His campaign for political liberation was therefore inseparably linked with the struggle to overcome injustices and wrongs embodied in Indian custom, and he naturally opposed the degradation of the untouchables and child-marriage. When a group of high-school teachers jointly asked him to devote himself to advocating a more "spiritual" (*sattvic*) diet together with yoga practices, as an alternative to the campaign against untouchability, he remarked that this campaign was "bringing to light subtle and grotesque ideas held even by men of learning." Following were some of his arguments in reply:

> It is a misuse of the doctrine of previous birth to argue that these people will require generations before they can come up to the level of the so-called higher castes. The Gita teaches us that it is as open to an untouchable as to a learned pundit to attain salvation in the existing birth. If the high-castes are really higher, they should have no fear of association with the untouchables. For the latter can gain only by such superior contact without the former becoming in any way degraded especially when they mix among untouchables for the sake of service and not for the sake of mere sociableness in which there is mutual give and take of vice and virtue. . . .
>
> Equally strange is the argument of the teachers regarding the influence of food on character. I am a keen food reformer, many friends consider me to be fanatical in my zeal for food reform and for reducing one's food to the simplest terms possible. But I know that the teachers are attaching importance to food out of all proportion to the influence it exerts on character.

On the claim that child-marriages were desirable to assure "female purity," Gandhi wrote:

> . . . why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? We hear nothing of women's anxiety about men's chastity. Why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity?

Concerning yoga he said:

> I do not resort to any yogic practice firstly, because I have inner peace without it (It may be wrong on my part to be content with my present lot.) and, secondly, because I have not found a person I could implicitly trust and who could teach me the proper yogic exercises.

This is from Vol. 32, which covers work completed during the period between November 1926 and January 1927. Also in this volume is a section titled "Discourses on the *Gita,"* made up of talks given at an ashram in Ahmedabad during 1926. As the editor's preface to this volume

remarks, Gandhi approached the *Bhagavad-Gita* "not as a sectarian scripture, but as a manual of universal religion and pure ethics." Gandhi's interest in the *Gita* dated from 1903, when he began its study at the suggestion of some friends who were Theosophists.

A preface to another of these volumes (39) observes that he read the *Gita* daily and "discovered in its teaching a way of life that fully answered his needs." His interpretation is essentially anagogic. Speaking of Vyasa, to whom the poem is attributed, Gandhi said:

> A seer such as Vyasa would never concern himself with mere physical fighting. It is the human body that is described as Kurukshetra, as *dharma-kshetra* [field of duty]. Bankimchandra says that it is doubtful whether Draupadi had five sons. It is, however, difficult to decide. Karna had the Sun-god as father. Every one of the characters had a miraculous birth. Whether out of compassion for Duryodhana, or because he was generous-hearted, Karna joined the former's side. Besides Karna, Duryodhana had good men like Bhishma and Drona also on his side. This suggests that *evil cannot by itself flourish in this world.* It can do so only if it is allied with some good. This was the principle underlying non-cooperation, that the evil system which the Government represents, and which has endured only because of the support it receives from good people, cannot survive if that support is withdrawn. Just as the Government needs the support of good men in order to exist, so Duryodhana required men like Bhishma and Drona in order to show that there was justice on his side.

The discussion of the *Gita* occupies 283 pages. Vol. 39 is almost entirely given over to Gandhi's *Autobiography,* some of which he wrote while in Yeravda Prison from 1922 to 1924, and which he completed after his release. It was published in weekly installments in *Navajivan* over the period from 1925 to 1929. Gandhi wrote it at the insistent suggestion of friends, finally deciding that it might be useful if it could be a report of "Experiments with Truth," which was the main title in Gujarati, becoming a subtitle for the English translation. This work is the most widely read of Gandhi's writings and appears in this series complete with appendices and index.

These volumes of Gandhi's *Collected Works* will be a basic resource of the student of non-violence as well as of the scholar, and will doubtless be available in all major libraries in the United States and elsewhere.