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"THE HEIGHT OF THE TIMES"

A CHAPTER with this title in Ortega's *The Revolt of the Masses* develops the conception of a climactic moment in a period of history. It is reached when men begin to feel that their lives are superior to what was possible in the past—the past, indeed, seeming mere preparation for what they have achieved. Ortega quotes as pertinent a passage from his earlier essay, *The Dehumanization of Art*, to typify this attitude:

> We feel that we actual men have suddenly been left alone on the earth; that the dead did not die in appearance only but effectively; that they can no longer help us. Any remains of the traditional spirit have evaporated. Models, norms, standards are no use to us. We have to solve our problems without any active collaboration of the past, in full actuality, be they problems of art, science, or politics. The European man stands alone; like Peter Schlehemil he has lost his shadow. This is what happens when midday comes.

The Revolt of the Masses was first published in Spain in 1930. This was the book which made Ortega famous in the United States when it appeared in America in 1932. Ortega's prediction of the emergence to power of the mass man was so dramatic, and so amply confirmed within ten years, that he has been recognized as one of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century. He concluded this chapter:

> What, then, in a word is the "height of our times"? It is not the fullness of time, and yet it feels itself superior to all times past, and beyond all known fullness. It is not easy to formulate the impression that our epoch has of itself, it believes itself more than all the rest, and at the same time feels that it is a beginning. What expression shall we find for it? Perhaps this one: superior to other times, inferior to itself. Strong, indeed, and at the same time uncertain of its destiny; proud of its strength and at the same time fearing it.

But Ortega also points out that the feeling of having "arrived," of having reached the pinnacle of development, is already a sign of decline, of a static condition. And in the forty-two years since this book was published modern Western civilization has suffered so many challenges and setbacks that only the shallowest of thinkers, along with a few politicians, are still able to claim this "superiority" with any conviction. It is commonplace, today, to speak of the "failure of nerve" and the "loss of confidence" which are coming to characterize the times. It is as though the course of events had drawn modern man to some sort of historical jumping-off place. The momentum of his recent activities seems to compel him to go on, yet he cannot see where he is going. Hence, perhaps, the enormous preoccupation with "futurist" studies and research—undertakings which, for all their elaborate scholarship and computer expertise, seem, to borrow a phrase of Ortega's, "nerveless arrows which miss their mark."

We could here launch into a discussion of the Great Defection, listing the numerous ways in which both young and older people are breaking with the idea of "modernity" and seeking a new alliance with the regenerative forces of the earth. We could speak of the "new religions" and the quest for tribal simplicities and the revival of old pantheistic faiths. These movements and enthusiasms have all surfaced within the past ten years and will doubtless grow into shaping factors of a future social order, but the form that future will finally take remains obscure and it is much too soon to make predictions. At present these movements represent a definite break with the past rather than a new form of historical continuity, and while there is obvious value in recognizing clear differences between culture and counter-culture, for the purpose of discerning directions and understanding the character of new growth, it is equally desirable to bring forward

from the past what deserves saving and can be of service in the years to come.

Accordingly, an effort needs to be made to understand that past, for an understood past is no longer confining. For this purpose another use might be made of the idea of the height of the times. The most useful men in any epoch of history are those who strive to grasp its full meaning. These are the men with encompassing minds who live at the height of the times and create through their illuminations what self-consciousness those times enjoy. Ortega, whom we have been quoting, was such a man. Theodore Roszak, who writes about the present, is such a man. William Barrett, whose book *Time of Need* (Harper & Row, $10.00), has just come out, is another.

William Barrett was an editor and a writer before he became a professor of philosophy at New York University, which may account for the vitality and insight of his prose. In this book he traces the exhaustion of the themes of modern thought, anticipating the moral entropy of the civilization they nourish, showing how modern man has reached the very edge of history, with no place to go, now, except back into myth and new-old conceptions of man's relationships with the world. On the whole, his outlook is a gloomy one, but we might add that he is not to be blamed for this, in consideration of the focus of his book on the arts of the twentieth century. But it has this passage in it:

> Man cannot find meaning in himself, not in himself alone anyway; he must feel part of something greater than himself. And to belong simply to a social group will not do, for then we may be all together but we are just the lonely crowd in a void. No, he must feel that he belongs to something cosmic that is not of man and not of men, and least of all man-made but toward which in the deepest part of himself he can never feel alien. This is not the Nature of the Romantics. We are pushing back here toward something more primal than that. The intimations of deity behind the sublime veil of nature lay too easily at hand for the Romantics. Theism has become too remote for us, one more man-made construction, an abstraction placed over the mystery of things, and above all we must get beyond abstractions even if in the end we shall have to come back to them. God maybe later, but right now we must get closer to the things themselves, particularly the things that are not of man, so that we can discover our lost kinship with them and a cosmos can be born for man again. For man as an alien to the cosmos has always been, and must continue to be, a Nihilist. We have to learn to live again in the presence of mystery that forever baffles the understanding but renews us even as it goes on baffling us. And, let us make no bones about it, this is a nature that cannot be prettily sentimentalized in the manner of some of the Romantics, for lavish as it may be it is also implacable and harsh in the limits it imposes upon us so that at times we must cry out with Faulkner's dirt farmer speaking to his land in a fit of exasperation and love: "You got me, you'll wear me out because you are stronger than me since I'm jest bone and flesh." Yet that was the source out of which came the life-giving energy that created our species in the first place, and ultimately it is the source out of which must come the energy that will carry us beyond Nihilism.

Much of *Time of Need* is devoted to the artistry of writers who press to the limit the revolt against high-sounding abstractions—which is but another phase of the struggle, in the name of humanity, to get rid of the institutional pretense which always leads to betrayal. This struggle reached the "mass" level, we might say, in 1792, when the revolutionary determination to demythologize the world was made official by the decision of the Paris Assembly to establish that year as Year 1, to usher in "a new era of rationalism for the whole of mankind." For a more recent expression, Barrett quotes a well-known passage from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms:*

> I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were sacred were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing were done with the meat except to bury it. There were many

> words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.

The language of elevated feeling was spoiled and the time had come to respect only the concrete, the reality in *things*, as Ezra Pound had maintained. There is this freshness and strength in Hemingway, but he is a no-win novelist whose characters struggle against the void. Barrett reminds us:

> Jake Barnes (in *The Sun Also Rises*) remains as he was, but all the gaiety of those expatriate lives has flickered out like so many ghosts only to leave him alone in his own void of impotence. Frederic Henry (in *A Farewell to Arms*) has fled the war and lost his beloved in death. Robert Jordan (in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*) is killed in the Spanish Civil War. The old fisherman (in *The Old Man and the Sea*) is defeated by the sea, or because "he went out too far," like the hero of a Greek tragedy who has exceeded the due limits fixed for man. It always looks as if the defeat followed from some specific situation within the field of contest where the action takes place. It is defeat by the war, by the bulls, or by the monstrous sharks of the deep. But the specific situation is only a pretext. Any field of activity will do just as well to illustrate the inevitability of defeat. For this defeat is not just the occasional mishap or failure in some field of action but is woven into the fabric of human existence itself. Life is the contest in which even the winner takes nothing.

Man is the Ultimate Stranger, his prayer, "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name. . . " But Nothing, or No-Thing, did not have to mean emptiness and alienation. As Barrett says:

> The Chinese Taoists found the Great Void tranquilizing peaceful, even joyful. For the Buddhists in India, the idea of Nothing evoked a feeling of universal compassion for all creatures caught in the toils of an existence that is ultimately groundless. In the traditional culture of Japan the idea of Nothingness pervades the exquisite modes of aesthetic feeling displayed in painting, architecture, and even the ceremonial rituals of daily life. Yet Western man, up to his neck in *things*, objects, gadgets, and the business of mastering them, recoils with anxiety from any encounter with Nothingness and labels any talk of it as merely "nihilistic" (in the pejorative sense of this word, as implying some kind of moral delinquency or slackness).

Abandonment of myth, then of abstraction, and finally even of "things," has meant for the West loss of meaning. The growing sense of this loss of meaning is traced by William Barrett in Hemingway, Camus, Kafka, Beckett, and in the work of Picasso and Giacometti. In a comparison of Faulkner with Shakespeare, he shows that Macbeth, from one of whose speeches Faulkner takes the title of a novel (*The Sound and the Fury*), does not reflect Shakespeare's multi-faceted view of life, but only that of Macbeth, a self-defeated man. Life, Macbeth declared, "is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Yet Faulkner adopted this outlook "and tried to produce a work of art whose very form would be an incarnation of Macbeth's judgment." Barrett asks:

> Do we suffer more than the Elizabethans that our art is required to take this extreme form? Probably not. The glittering age of Elizabeth was also filled with terrors: plagues and pestilences, tortures, and cruel oppressions—which we of a latter day would most likely be unable to bear. Two centuries of Enlightenment have not made us happy, but they have produced some humanitarian inhibitions that still glimmer here and there in the modern world. Besides, it does not make sense to speak of sufferings as neutral quantities that can be measured off one against another. Suffering varies, but each case is absolute for him who suffers. We suffer not more but differently from the Elizabethan. Our suffering is more confused. We have so much more information and material power than that earlier age, and yet we still suffer. That too confuses us. The centuries of the Enlightenment had raised the expectation that some day suffering would be eliminated from the human condition; but suffering still persists, and among those too who are not in material want, and so we are again confused and uncertain about the goals which modern civilization has proposed for itself. Both his religion and his culture prepared Elizabethan man to encounter suffering. His religion told him to expect that life

> would be a vale of tears, and his culture instructed him that to everyone, no matter how lofty his station, a fall from fortune may come. When affliction falls upon the Western man of today, he is startled out of his wits as if something had gone wrong with the whole scheme of things, where nothing like that was ever supposed to happen, and so, again, he becomes more confused and uncertain of himself. To use a biological metaphor: we become almost like people who have been brought up in such a sterilized environment that we have lost our natural immunization and become defenseless against attacking bodies. So we suffer differently; and our suffering consequently demands a different kind of art in which to express itself.

But curiously, if we turn to the new pessimism of the Existentialists, we find a much bleaker outlook than that of, say, the ancient Stoics. There is a terrible loneliness in the modern Existentialists, a stipulated alienation from all but the naked reality of the private self, and acceptance of impenetrable isolation. There is a desperate heroism in their resolve to remain human at any cost, but how much more inviting, by contrast, the measured acceptance of misfortune and human stupidity in Marcus Aurelius or Epictetus, who at least believe themselves or try to be on good terms with the universe or what is durable in it, if not in harmony with some of its ephemeral manifestations. One of the chief difficulties experienced by modern man comes from the fact that he has cut himself off from the world around him. He no longer knows how to get along with the rest of life and the non-human aspects of things, and meanwhile the experts are failing him on every front and they, being in the hands of the politicians, can be expected to go on failing him.

We have spent too much time counting our blessings and need now to list our defects. Our education, it seems, must once more begin at the beginning, for the fact is that in a number of basic respects we do not know as much as any "primitive man" knew almost without being taught. Mr. Barrett speaks to this point:

> Our civilization still rests today on the great discoveries made by early man: how to plant seeds and till the earth, how to weave cloth, fire pottery, and smelt metals. (Also to ferment plants for alcoholic drinks which for some puritanical reasons anthropologists seem sometimes to pass by.) This is a banal item of schoolboy knowledge, and therefore we do not reflect upon it. I am enormously impressed, however, because I am unable to do any of these things. If civilization were to founder, I would not even know how to set about rediscovering these arts. I have planted, but the seeds were bought in a store; imagine beginning with grasses in the field, sifting out the proper strains until eventually one got the seeds of wheat. Walking out of doors I occasionally pick up curious stones, but I don't know which are metallic and haven't the least idea how I would go about extracting the metal if it were there. And the leap from flax to cloth is beyond my powers of imagination. Dear reader, do not be blasé and underrate prehistoric man before you ask yourself whether you too could accomplish what he did. On this point the intellectuals of the Enlightenment were very rude guests: they lived in the house that archaic man made possible for them, ate his bread, used his metal in their forks and knives, wore his clothes, drank his wine—and all the while scorned him as a creature of darkness.

Very nearly all of us have absorbed this incredible conceit, simply by going to school and reading the papers. We have the idea that history records the emergence from that darkness of modern man, and that practically everything of importance that has happened, happened since the French Revolution, when life really began. So it is no wonder that, with the Great Defection under way, "history" is suddenly at a discount. History is not only a trick played on the dead, but a collection of spurious promises made to the living. We don't have to believe it any more, and we don't even have to read it.

So, with history at a discount, a great restoration accompanies the great defection—the restoration of myth. With the sense of reality drained from the Enlightenment idea of history—the story of Our Progress—a great many things are bound to change, including both art and literature. Barrett remarks that the realistic novel grows out of the modern consciousness of history, and that if our confidence in this outlook is

destroyed—"if the historical situation is understood simply as a variation on some archetypal theme—then the preoccupations of the realistic novel also become irrelevant."

In a closing chapter, after showing how modern writers have been trying to structure myths in their work—even Eliot attempted this, and *The Waste Land*, he says, "succeeds in being the myth of the mythless man"—Barrett asks the question, Why myth? This is his answer:

> Science does not give us the unity of experience that we need and want. It dismembers and fragments, and goes on dismembering and fragmenting, because that is its job. Nor can we find this unification in philosophy, which in any case has ceased to attempt it since Hegel. And even if a philosophy were to put such a unity before us, it would not be enough: we are concrete creatures of flesh and blood, and we want the concreteness of the symbol in order to hold our experience together. Here the imagination enters as the vivifying bond between the abstractions of the intellect and the diffuse particulars of sensation. The image vibrates with meanings, inexhaustibly so, but at the same time has the vividness of actual experience. And since we are temporal beings, we need images that also develop in time—hence stories.
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> The stories must tell of the most universal and at the same time the most intimate matters we all live through, but never fully comprehend. The myth thus speaks of the unknown both in the cosmos and ourselves. It stands on the edge of that darkness, both within and without, that we shall never escape. Why then do we need myths? Because despite all our progress, and our vaunted accumulation of knowledge we are still children in the dark who have to make up stories so that we will not be so alone, that the darkness itself may become more familiar and friendly, and the poor shreds and patches of our life be pieced together.

William Barrett is no latent mystic; he says little of Plato, does not mention Plotinus, and has not attempted to look over Blake's shoulter when the poet is filled with visionary experience, although he understands why Hemingway sought renewal in the Michigan woods and knows that Faulkner found his freedom and his measure in the Mississippi wilderness. So myth, for him, is not quite Logos mediating between Nous and Cosmos, although he repeats the claim that myth is what holds "everywhere, for everybody, and at all times." And he knows that myths are the stories that men live by, and that whatever enters the lives of human beings must come in through the portal of the mythic verities in which they currently believe.

The myths, one could say, are the costume pieces of metaphysical systems. They are the abstractions of metaphysics, filled out, in the round, given the dimensions of life. Toward the end of this book, Barrett speaks of the will-to-power which is "the metaphysical frenzy which lies at the basis of the famous 'dynamism' of modern civilization, which has transformed the planet and thrust the whole of mankind into a new era of history, and which in the discontent of our own period perhaps has come at last to doubt itself." This is the metaphysics, he says, "which hides behind modern Humanism," and which isolates man from nature. The root, said Marx, is man; but what, Barrett asks, is man rooted in?

The arts and myth, Barrett believes, have better answers than either science or philosophy.

REVIEW
IRISH INDEPENDENCE

READERS with a touch of the Irish in their heredity, or just an interest in these extraordinary people, will be enchanted by Brendan Lehane's *The Quest of Three Abbots* (Viking, 1968) . Whether by historical accident or a whimsical egoism which set them off from all other Europeans, the Irish had their golden age at a time when the rest of the Western world was sinking into the Dark Ages. The true cultural background of the Irish in pre-Christian times is practically unknown, for the Druids kept their secrets well. Since the Roman conquerors of Britain left Ireland alone, the Irish never knew the heavy hand of centralized authority, and while the Druids were banned from the Roman empire, Mr. Lehane says—

> In Ireland they lived on, as mysterious perhaps to the inhabitants as they have proved to posterity. Their lore may have contained historic traditions of the race, and doctrines of life and the cosmos close to the similarly guarded teachings of Pythagoras. If they inherited the knowledge of their British predecessors their understanding of astronomy and mathematics was remarkable; for recent researches at Stonehenge and other megalithic sites have suggested that these are uncannily precise instruments for measuring heavenly movements. All that can be ascertained is that they awarded numinous power to number, riddle, paradox; and that the oak tree and mistletoe played some part in their rituals.

Patrick is said to have converted Ireland to Christianity during the middle years of the fifth century. After a description of the quarrels among Irish kings and chiefs at this time, Lehane says:

> Christianity arrived and soon throve in this atmosphere of skirmish, chivalry, primeval velour and squalid brutality. It is hard at first to see why it should have done. It is hard to see why it so easily replaced the esoteric dominion of the Druids, whose authority pervaded every aspect of life and society. The answer must lie in two phenomena. One was the refined variety of the new religion that reached Ireland—the monastic form from Wales and Gaul. The other was—must have been—the character of the Irish. It was in the substance of this character that Christianity was to act as a fermenting yeast.

The author suggests that the mix of practicality with a visionary love of dreaming in the Irish made Christianity take root among them. And they apparently took its unworldly promise and its rules for achievement far more seriously than did the continental Christians. There were also other considerations:

> If the success of Christianity was helped by the nature of the Irish, it benefited no less from the form in which it reached Ireland. The monastic variety of the religion was quite different from the hierarchical, diocesan structure of the established Roman church. It kept more of the simple, explicit prescriptions, and more of its attractive, half-mythical content than the judicial hand of Rome encouraged. Moreover, monasteries did not obtrude on the lives of those who wanted no change. They were self-sufficient communities of men, or women, under the rule of an abbot or abbess. They preached virtues that were not far removed from the respected standards of Irish society—Christianity was always adaptable—and like the monasteries of Egypt they offered a welcome change to those who were tired of squabbles. Most important, they were organised, apart from a division of the sexes (which was perhaps not universal) much like the units of the society they came into. A tribal group under a chief with a fairly fixed territory was in form not so different from a monastic community. . . .
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> Ireland had always been outside the Empire. Towns were unknown, and the whole country was split into hundreds of tiny units based on family ties. No Roman soldier ever landed on Irish shores to enforce the civil framework on which the Church had been constructed. The basic theology percolated into the character of the nation; some of its ideals did too, the love of scholarship and the idea of material renunciation. But the centralised authority was not to find root in Ireland for hundreds of years. Ireland remained a country of scattered clusters, and took monasticism to itself like an heirloom.

Mr. Lehane's book is about the expansion of Irish Christianity, and about the activities of the monks in the monasteries through whom, speaking of the Dark Ages, a modern historian has said, "Ireland became the most vital civilising force in the West." Lehane says:

> Ireland, in every age, is best known through the lives of individuals—figures sometimes comic, or fanatic, or rumbustious, or humble, never as coldly motivated as an abstract of national trends would suggest them to be. There is, however, one motive common to these three—Brendan, Columba and Columbanus. They are searching compulsively for something unworldly, for their own idea of God, for a refuge from earthly things, for the Promised Land, for perfection. The quest drives each one outwards, far from his home and people, to bring his gifts, oddities and aspirations to other countries and races. So Ireland itself was carried abroad, and the history of the country refused to resolve itself in Irish territory.

Brendan, with a monkish crew, took ship for a proselytizing mission and may have sailed as far as Iceland. This was early in the sixth century. During the rest of his life he established what became famous monastic houses in Ireland and Wales. Columba, born in 521, had the best education his times could afford, in Latin and history. He was a model student and learned the poetic art from men who "wrote the best poetry of the dark centuries." It was characteristic of him that when his abbot, Finnian, wanted him ordained a bishop, the officiating prelate performed the wrong ceremony, and Columba decided he was not meant to be a bishop and refused consecration for the rest of his life. Externally granted status meant little to the Irish. After a legal dispute in which Columba was worsted, the young scholar fomented a war in which many men were killed. Oppressed by his guilt, Columba pledged himself to perpetual exile. He set out for England and the Scottish isles, and established a great monastery on Iona. Then he undertook the conversion of the Picts, providing the people with "medical knowledge and improved agricultural methods, and above all a satisfying, though exacting routine for life in a small community." Both Brendan and Columba lived to be eighty. The work of Columba spread over England and Scotland. Aidan, trained at Iona, founded the famous monastery of Lindisfarne.

Columbanus, born in 543, may have been taught by both Brendan and Columba. He knew not only the Latin of Christian authors but the books of the great pagans, too. Resolving to go to France as a missionary, he settled at Luxeuil, in eastern France, where he brought the culture, discipline and order of the Irish monasteries. From this center colonisers went out to found mission houses throughout France, Germany, and Flanders, in one of the most chaotic and bloody periods of European history.

These Irish monks, Mr. Lehane says, kept alive the old traditions, tirelessly copying manuscripts, and they revived pagan classics that would otherwise have been lost through continental prejudice. Modern European languages owe something to the Irish monks, through the preservation of good literary usage by their scholarly labors. What finally put an end to the influence of the Irish? Their work could not be wiped out, but its spirit was destroyed by the demand of the Pope and his emissaries that the Irish abbots conform to the customs and interpretations, and finally, the rule, of Rome. The climax of the struggle of the Irish to maintain their independence came with the synod of Whitby in 664, when Wilfrid, the Roman spokesman, cornered Colman, bishop of Lindisfarne, and defeated him with overpowering arguments of undeniable orthodoxy. It was then that the tradition of Irish Christianity began to die. There was to be only one more great Irish thinker belonging to the Dark Ages—John Scotus Erigena, who was perhaps the greatest of them all. But Erigena came later, in the ninth century, and he drank at Neo-Platonic springs. His best work was of course ordered destroyed by the Pope, but enough has survived to give some indication of the philosophic splendor of his thinking.

COMMENTARY
THE LUDDITE MYTH

IF you think that the Luddites were a band of principled wreckers who saw a threat to humanity in the invasion of the weaving craft by machines, and decided to oppose this evil by destroying the machines, you are about ninety per cent wrong. This is the mildly shocking information provided by Malcolm I. Thomis, a lecturer in history at the University of Sterling, England, in *The Luddites*, just issued in paperback by Schocken ($2.75). Northrop Frye has remarked that science cannot enter popular culture except in the form of myth, and this seems equally true of history. For it is with some reluctance that we gave up the myth of the Luddites—a romantic conception shared, we suspect, by practically everyone who has not yet read Mr. Thomis' carefully written book.

This book probably will not slow down saboteurs who feel they are acting in a great tradition established by the heroic Luddites. But the fact is that the Luddites did not really slow down the Industrial Revolution; they did themselves little good; and they made no lasting contribution to the interests of labor; yet none of these negative judgments can diminish the reality of their courage and of, for a time, their moral solidarity. But even this needs qualification, since the period in English history in which their supposedly novel form of protest occurred (1811-16) was also a time of poor harvest and depression, and very poor business in the textile industry by reason of the war with the United States, which ruined the export market. On the whole, the people who broke the machines chose this form of action because it was an obvious way to be effective against unjust employers. Most of the machinery they broke was of a type that had been in operation for many years, sometimes through much of the eighteenth century. And machinery-breaking was not new, either, but a familiar recourse of angry, underpaid workmen. One small group of skilled craftsmen, the Yorkshire croppers, who practically controlled the important finishing process in the making of cloth, *were* being displaced by mechanized operations, but only for them does the usual explanation of Luddite wrath apply. The croppers were between three and five thousand, while the handloom weavers amounted to some 200,000. The general replacement of handlooms by steamlooms did not come until later—mainly, it seems, because the power looms were not yet perfected.

It is also of interest that the Luddite activities came at a time of food riots, and that the machine-breaking seemed to touch off a wave of criminal activities which had no relation to the highly motivated acts of the workers.

It is one thing to admit that the Luddites were not, could not be, "successful," but to be made to realize that, for the most part, they were not even "real" Luddites is more difficult to bear.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
BLACK MOUNTAIN

LAST week, in a review, we gave a brief account of a community college started by social reformers—Commonwealth College, located near Mena, Arkansas, which lasted for seventeen years (1923-1940). This week we have for attention an article on another community college which pursued its course in deliberate isolation from the larger society, yet is now believed to have had immeasurable impact on American culture, and is often referred to as a place where some kind of educational miracle took place—Black Mountain College, which lasted twenty-three years (1933-1956).

There is very little material in print on Black Mountain. The first major notice came with praise of the college by Louis Adamic in *My America* (1938). What one read, mostly, as time went by, was bated-breath tributes to the achievements of the students who went there. Then, a few years ago, there was announcement that a fund had been set up to find out why Black Mountain exerted such an extraordinary educational influence. We don't know if anything came of that proposal—actually, it is irritating to think of the money that becomes available for "research" into the secrets of such past achievements, when, while Black Mountain was a going concern, the teachers had somehow to survive on allowances of $7.27 per month. This was the average drawn by the faculty during the first year!

In any event there is now or will soon be available what promises to be a fine book on Black Mountain—*Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community,* by Martin Duberman—published by E. P. Dutton. Some excerpts from this book appear in the Summer 1972 issue of *Change.* In his introduction, Mr. Duberman says:

> At its best Black Mountain showed the possibilities of a disparate group of individuals committing themselves to a common enterprise, resilient enough to absorb the conflicts entailed, brave enough, now and then, to be transformed by its accompanying energies. At its worst, the community consisted of little more than a group of squabbling prima donnas—many professional, others in training. Black Mountain proved a bitter experience for some, a confirmation of Emerson's view that "we descend to meet"—that close human association compounds rather than obliterates the drive toward power, aggression and cruelty. For others Black Mountain provided a glimpse—rarely a sustained vision—of how diversity and commonality, the individual and the group, are reinforcing rather than contradictory phenomena. . . .

Reading only the extracts provided in this long magazine article makes it plain that it would be foolish to hope to put together another Black Mountain as a result of careful study of the original. Black Mountain became what it was because of the presence of several strong, imaginative, and determined individuals. Any other sort of generalization about the place is seen to be risky after absorbing Mr. Duberman's perceptive account and evaluation. The persons that seem to have been most influential were John Andrews Rice, the leader of the founding group, Josef Albers, who came from the Bauhaus, and Charles Olson, the poet. John Wallen, a young psychologist who spent two years at Black Mountain, working against various counter-currents to strengthen the "community" aspect of the adventure, spoke of the difficulties which arose from the origins of Black Mountain. He told Duberman that he doubted if an institution like Black Mountain, "born in revolt and rebellion," could ever develop "a positive goal that will unify the people within it . . . the whole life style at Black Mountain was essentially a rebellious life style."

Black Mountain began as a secession from Rollins College (in Florida) of John Rice and several professors and instructors, along with fifteen students, including the president of the student body and the editor of the campus paper.

Rice believed that teachers should determine the policy of a school, not a board of trustees composed of businessmen. Rice was fired from Rollins and the others resigned, and they and the students started a new college in North Carolina, teachers and students pooling their private book collections to make a library for the school. It was a college with no trustees, no president, no dean. Just teachers. At the outset they refused to plan too much. As Duberman says:

> The one idea most commonly agreed upon was that "living" and "learning" should be intertwined. Education should proceed everywhere, not only in classroom settings which in fact, at least as usually structured, are among the worst learning environments imaginable. A favorite slogan at Black Mountain was that "as much real education took place over the coffee cups as in the classrooms," and a central aim was to keep the community small enough so that members could constantly interact in a wide variety of settings—at meals, on walks, in classes, at community meetings, work programs, dances, performances, whatever. Individual life styles, in all their peculiar detail, could thereby be observed, challenged, imitated, rejected—which is, after all, how most learning proceeds, rather than through formal academic instruction. "You're seeing people under all circumstances daily," as Rice put it, "and after a while you get to the point where you don't mind being seen yourself, and that's a fine moment."

Rice seems to have been equipped with a tough-minded, sardonic honesty and a hatred of every sort of slogan. He believed in freedom, but he understood that freedom worth having had to be earned:

> In Rice's view, some of those who had joined the Black Mountain experiment didn't even want freedom for themselves—though they were the last to know it. They had thought out the premises of freedom, knew what conclusions followed, and were firmly convinced that they believed in both. But it was all in the realm of logic and abstraction. When such a person was actually placed in a climate of freedom, he discovered that he couldn't function in it, that the intellectual structure he had built in defense of freedom was quite at variance with his own emotional needs. Such people came to Black Mountain, in Rice's words, thinking they wanted "something new and different" but really wanting "the old things changed enough to make them feel comfortable." They failed to understand that "there is no comfort if you really believe in liberty. You're just not going to have any comfort, you're going to have conflict."

Duberman discusses Rice at some length, pointing out inconsistencies and ambiguities, but here a sample of how he taught seems more important. Rice was faculty adviser for one of the new students, Doughton Cramer. On a warm fall morning, the two sat in rocking chairs on a porch, and Rice said to Cramer:

> "You are now entering college for the first time. You have a whole new world before you. What are you interested in studying?" Cramer didn't know what to answer: "Interest had never decided my choice," he later recalled, "but I remembered that I had enjoyed history in school so I stuttered out, 'W-well, history is sort of fun'."
>
> "What phase of history do you like?" Rice asked.
>
> Cramer was again at a loss; he'd never given the matter much thought before. Suddenly he had an inspiration: the Depression then at its height had considerably affected his own life, so he answered, "I want to know what caused the Depression and how future depressions can be prevented."
>
> Rice laughed—perhaps because it pleased him to see again how easy it was to start the process of self-propulsion in education, but perhaps, too, out of amusement at the grand designs of the young and the limited resources of the community. "You've given the college a large order!" was all he said.
>
> After some discussion, they decided Cramer should take Lounsbury's course on American history and study economics with Helen Boyden, whose Vassar and Radcliffe training had also included history and art. Following Lounsbury's death, Boyden suggested that he replace the American history course with one in Greek history with her. He agreed, Rice joined them for discussions on Greek cultural life, and Cramer never forgot "the excitement and nervous stimulation when we sat about and discussed, with great seriousness, the meaning of Justice, the Good, Tolerance, Moderation. . . . Mr. Rice acted as Socrates and attempted to catch us up when we made unfounded assumptions. For the first time in my life, I began to realize how sloppily words were used." Every Sunday evening, they read a Greek play aloud, discussed its significance for the Greeks and for the modern world, and had refreshments—"so

> the evenings were totally satisfying, providing food for the body as well as for the mind."

The Europeans who taught at the school had rigorously high standards of workmanship, which brought some conflict with the more community-oriented members of the group. There was the spirit of an aristocracy of achievement among the Europeans, mostly artists. But Rice believed that essential lessons could be learned through the arts:

> Rice felt the arts essential in developing individuals capable of choosing, because "they are, when properly employed, least subject to direction from without and yet have within them a severe discipline of their own." They taught, in other words, that the worthwhile struggle is the interior one—not against one's fellows, but against one's "own ignorance and clumsiness." The integrity an artist learns when dealing with materials translates into an integrity of relationship with oneself and with other men; "just as the artist would not paint his picture with muddy colors, so this artist would see clear colors in humanity; and must himself be clear color, sound, form, the material of his art."

Absolutely nobody had an easy time at Black Mountain, and there is apparently much to be said that is critical of the school. Yet even those who spoke harshly about their teachers admitted how precious were the things they had learned. Robert Creeley, who taught there for a while, told what it meant to him:

> He found a community at the peak of intensity—and on the verge of disintegration. And he found—at least ultimately—what he "never had expected to find: an actual educational organization that was dependent upon the authority of its teaching, not any assumption about that teaching . . . the students were completely open, there was very little qualification offered them, as to their coming in." In the years since, Creeley has taught in many places, from secondary schools to universities, but he found that first experience at Black Mountain extraordinarily decisive: "I never learned more let's say, about teaching as an activity than I did there. . . . I never found a more useful context for being a teacher than I did there."

It was hardly possible, however, for Creeley to see all this at the time.

Mr. Duberman's book will be one to mine, not one to make "decisions" with about Black Mountain College.

FRONTIERS

The "Business" of Growth

LAST week's lead article quoted from *A Blueprint for Survival,* published last January by the English magazine, *The Ecologist.* We now have reports on some of the comment *Blueprint* elicited. *Resurgence* for March-April gives the highlights of the response in the London *Economist* (Jan. 22), in which the deputy editor identified *Blueprint's* contentions as "the Malthusian argument . . . a trendy load of high-class economic rubbish." The *Resurgence* writer summarizes the counter-claims of the *Economist* editor:

> It appears that "perfected genetic engineering" will probably enable us to "turn ourselves into species of six-inch-high men" and besides, "We already know how to make carbohydrates and fats by direct synthesis . . ." Raw materials? Electronic sensors plus observation platforms such as space satellites, deep sea equipment and computers will reveal vast new reserves, and where they don't "we are increasing our powers of putting matter together molecule by molecule. . . ."

Another *Economist* article sees no need to slow down production since governments can solve pollution and nuclear power will soon be available. As a final reproach, the *Economist* concludes: "And how strange it is that scientists so dissatisfied with the way things are going on earth should wholly ignore the possibilities of escaping to the moon and eventually the planets, there to create a green and more pleasant land."

These replies seem not only trendy, but pretty lighthearted for a hard-headed paper like the *Economist.*

The May *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has a London letter in which the writer quotes the editor of *Nature* as calling the *Blueprint* warnings "half-baked anxieties and mere speculation," and the *Bulletin* correspondent himself declares that while the goals of social behavior need redefinition, "no way forward is possible without an expansion of production and higher rates of consumption." He is convinced that "the 'balance' the ecologists call for can lead only to an impoverishment of the community, hence of the individual." He quotes from the Rector of the Royal College of Art in London the following statement:

> "If the prophets of ecological doom are to be taken seriously, it is arguable that nothing ought to be designed to be made here (at the College) that is not either eternal like a piece of jewelry, or recycled like a milk bottle or a scrapped ship, or demountable like a circus, or capable of degenerating into compost like an old hat."

If these critics of *Blueprint for Survival,* who are doubtless well-bred Englishmen, are so fearful of a no-growth economy, it might do them some good to come and live in America for a while. For preparation, a reading of *Journey Down a Rainbow* by the Priestleys would be just the thing, since this book provides a musing comparison between the no-growth society of the Pueblo Indians and the maniacal development of the fast-growing cities of Dallas and Houston in Texas.

The Los Angeles *Times* for Oct. 1 published an article by John Cohane, a retired advertising man, who reflects on the handiwork of his trade or profession. Looking back on the years he spent in promoting consumption, he said:

> No one ever stopped to think that you could cram only so much coffee, jellied desserts, canned vegetables, margarine, down one throat, could shovel only so many bushels of breakfast food into one kiddy's tummy, could clean one body with soap only so many times a week, . .
>
> Today a rising young ad man or sales executive spends five days a week feverishly trying to convince the entire nation it is sheer bliss to own a second car, a second house, a color TV set, fancy groceries, cases of liquor, the lot. Then he spends his weekends and his evenings in his affluent suburb busily devising ways to keep the less favored out of his playtime orbit, isolated somewhere in the littered landscape or gutted out big cities the ad men have done so much to create.

Mr. Cohane's point is that advertising continually generates desires and expectations that cannot be fulfilled, but his picture of the real priests of the religion of economic growth applies

even more as a support of the argument of the ecologists. At this level, at least, the promotion of growth is totally irresponsible:

> During the 25 years in advertising I can't remember being the slightest bit shocked by the fact that the search for truth and the presentation of truth to the public about the products we were pushing were of no importance to the business. . . . During 25 turbulent years, one cardinal principle emerged. It is the all-important yardstick applied to any consumer message: Don't worry whether it s true or not. Will it sell?
>
> This underlying principle has not only raised havoc in the consumer goods field but has sent American affairs downward at home and abroad during the past 10 years. Armed with highly polished techniques, versed in the use of mass communications, the ad men have carried their "will-it-sell" banner into the political and civic arenas, turning it over to those who are in precarious control of the nation's destiny.

The point, here, is that the growth we are used to, and which we believe we must depend upon to prevent the future from becoming "unbearable," was really created more by these people than by anyone else, and they are also the authors of the spurious doctrine that "gracious living" began when technology made it possible. There were high civilizations before the industrial revolution, and there can be such civilizations again, hopefully, broadened and enlarged by an intelligently managed, selective technology. It is of interest that Arnold Toynbee, who happens to discuss the follies of urban development (high rise apartment houses displacing authentic neighborhoods, etc.) on the same page of the *Times* with Mr. Cohane, observes at the end of his article:

> In the Industrial Revolution, we Westerners made a momentous break with mankind's past, and the Russians and the Japanese have now followed at our heels. The superficial new departure was the mechanization of the production of material goods; the fundamental departure was a reversal of traditional ideals and objectives. Instead of continuing to be ashamed of our greed, we now glorified it. . . . It has taken less than two centuries, reckoning from the Industrial Revolution's starting date, to demonstrate that the modern objective is unattainable . . . for an endless growth of material affluence is impossible, even for an inequitably privileged minority of mankind, in a "biosphere" that is inexorably finite.

Someone with the brain of a "six-inch-high" man might call what Toynbee says "trendy" or "half-baked anxiety," but practically no one else.