VOLUME XXXIII, NO. 2
JANUARY 9, 1980

THE GROUND OF JUDGMENT

WHAT would happen to society—what would happen to our own social and personal relations—if everyone stopped making moral judgments about other people? This question imposes an immeasurable demand on the imagination. It does not seem possible to abandon all assignment of individual responsibility and no longer blame people for doing things that seem to us careless, unjust, or simply *wrong.* But it would be equally difficult to estimate how many evils would disappear if no human ever attacked the character of any one else and said nothing to the discredit of any ethnic or cultural division of mankind. It is not too much to say that some kind of Utopia might result.

Only a brief consultation of history would seem to confirm this prediction. Racism, for example, would disappear entirely. Charges of heresy—now mostly political—would be forgotten. There would still be crime, but no punishment. Instead there would be restraint. People who make a habit of hurting or abusing or stealing from other people cannot be allowed the same freedom that others enjoy. But prisons or places of detention would be regarded as imperfect social expedients, not instruments of "justice." Indeed, one wonders what transformations the idea of justice would undergo in such psychological circumstances.

Here one recalls the Italian criminologist, Cesare Lombroso, who became convinced that mental or characterological traits could all be traced to biological causes. He devoted much of his long career to an attempt to define the "criminal type" in terms of physiology. Clarence Darrow seemed to be of a not-unrelated persuasion. That is, as a strict biological determinist, he believed that heredity and environment shape human beings completely. How then could any blame attach to anyone for what he did? Darrow chose to defend the wretched of the earth not alone from the sympathies of his heart. What significance could "guilt" have for him? The ruthlessly distorting conditions imposed by society made a more reasonable explanation of crime.

The early life of Charles Manson, who at thirty-five stood trial for the Sharon Tate-La Bianca murders, might be offered as proof of Darrow's outlook. Born out of wedlock to a woman who grossly neglected her child, and was later imprisoned for armed robbery, Manson began a life of crime as a small boy. Ten pages of Kenneth Wooden's *Weeping in the Playtime of Others* are devoted to his youthful career in and out of correctional institutions and prisons. Summing up, Wooden wrote:

> Manson did not choose his own pathway to oblivion and crime. It was charted for him, first by parental abandonment and then, in a far greater sense, by the massive failure of the correctional system, particularly those in charge of juvenile offenders. Manson was the product of too many impersonal institutions, too many endless days of solitary confinement, too many sexual assaults by older boys, and far too many beatings by guardians and institutional personnel. . . .
>
> A review of all Manson's prison records reveal some interesting facts: Of twenty-two years in prison, seventeen were spent in federal facilities for crimes that, under state jurisdiction, would carry sentences totaling less than five years. There was never once a serious treatment program for young Manson. .
>
> Manson and countless thousands of children locked away from society during the late forties and fifties became part of the bitter harvest of crime this country reaped in the late sixties and early seventies. What of future children? According to the FBI's annual report, more than 80,000 children under ten were arrested in 1972. Charges were placed against 585,000 children between eleven and fourteen years of age. Without proper treatment, without proper

> care and education, how many future Charles Mansons will emerge from these statistics?

There must be dozens of similar arguments, well constructed with ample documentation. What shall we make of them? Either we believe that people can change for the better—the writer quoted above, Kenneth Wooden, was one who did, becoming an authority on abused juveniles after a lawless youth—or we decide that self-reform is impossible. Either way, the issue is surrounded by puzzles and contradictions. Why do some people change and not others?

Statistics help us hardly at all in such questions. Statistics reveal that problems exist but not what to do about them. Where does moral courage come from? Why are some people simply unable to steal? There are some neighborhoods where you need never close up your house when you leave, and others where unlocked doors (or cars) would be the height of folly. Is honesty a cultural or a personal matter? Almost a century ago, the famous Orientalist scholar, Max Müller, writing in a text for future English civil servants who would serve in India, dealt with the familiar claim that Indians were natural liars by pointing out that the native virtues of the Hindus were intimately connected with their village life. Torn from his home environment and made to testify in the alien circumstances of a British-administered court, he might lie as readily as he would tell the truth at home. An English official, Col. Sleeman, who knew intimately the life of Indian villagers, pointed out that beneath the limbs of the pipal tree (Indian fig), a man practically always told the truth, because the gods, he believed, sat above among its leaves, listening to him. "I have had before me hundreds of cases," Sleeman said, "in which a man's property, liberty, and life has depended upon his telling a lie, and he has refused to tell it."

The *Laws of Manu*, quoted by Müller, gave the philosophic background of Indian belief:

> Evil-doers think indeed that no one sees them, but the gods see them, and the old man within.
>
> Self is the witness of Self, Self is the refuge of Self. Do not despise thy own Self, the highest witness of man.
>
> If, friend, thou thinkest thou art self-alone, remember there is the silent thinker (the Highest Self) always within thy heart, and *he* sees what is good and what is evil. (*What India Can Teach Us.*)

This is a point of view that has little attention these days. The idea that humans have both a higher and a lower self seems too metaphysical, too clear-cut, too moralistic. There is plenty of evidence for this polarity, but it manifests in bewildering ways. We know, if we are observant, that we are at our best when we are not thinking about being "good," and while the moral sense comes out very strongly when we see somebody doing something cruel or unmistakably unjust, we know how quickly it departs in the presence of a strong desire of our own. Feeling quite evidently sets the stage for the dramas of morality; feeling supplies reason with its premises and admits the validity of logical calculations only after given its head. Life seems too complicated to allow the supposition that both saint and sinner are in us, locked back to back and hardly talking things over. So, putting aside for the moment the contentions of the moralists, we might turn to the artists, the poets, for their view of the contrasting polarities in man. They look on human life with a craftsman's eye, concerned with the object of their art. Musing on the qualities of Leonardo da Vinci, Paul Valéry was led to say:

> The human characteristic is consciousness; the characteristic of consciousness is a process of perpetual exhaustion, of detachment without rest or exclusion from everything that comes before it, whatever that thing may be—an inexhaustible activity, independent of the quality as of the quantity of the things which appear and by means of which the man of intellect must at last bring himself deliberately to an unqualified refusal to be anything whatsoever. . . . It is impossible that the activity of the mind should not in the end force it to this ultimate, elementary consideration. Its multiplied movements, its intimate struggles, its perturbations, its analytic turns on itself—do these leave anything unchanged? Is there anything that resists the lure of the senses, the dissipation of ideas, the fading of memories, the slow

variation of the organism, the incessant and multiform activities of the universe? There is only this consciousness, and only this consciousness at its most abstract.

Our *personality* itself, which, stupidly, we take to be our most intimate and *deepest* possession, our sovereign good, is only a thing, and mutable and accidental in comparison with this other most naked ego; since we can think about it, calculate its interests, even lose sight of them a little, it is therefore no more than a secondary psychological divinity that lives in our looking glass and answers to our name. It belongs to the order of Penates. It is subject to pain, greedy for incense like false gods; and, like them, it is food for worms. It expands when praised. It does not resist the power of wine, the charm of words the sorcery of music. It admires itself, and through self-admiration becomes docile and easily led. It is lost in the masquerade and yields itself strangely to the anamorphosis of sleep. And further, it is painfully obliged to recognize that it has equals, to admit that it is inferior to some—a bitter and inexplicable experience for it, this. . . .

Is it not the chief and secret achievement of the greatest mind to isolate this substantial permanence from the strife of everyday truths? Is it not essential that in spite of everything he shall arrive at self-definition by means of this pure relationship, changeless among the most diverse objects, which will give him an almost inconceivable universality, give him, in a sense, the power of a corresponding universe?

A moral objective is realized, apparently a by-product:

He feels himself pure consciousness, and two of that cannot exist. He is the I, the pronoun of universality, the name of *that* which has no relation to appearance. Oh, to what a point has pride been transformed! How it has arrived at a position that it did not even know it was seeking! How temperate the reward of its triumphs! A life so firmly directed, and which has treated as obstacles to be avoided or to be mastered all the objects it could propose to itself, must, after all, have attained an unassailable end, not an end to its duration, but an end within itself. Its pride has brought it as far as this. And here its pride is consumed. Pride, which conducted it, leaves it, astonished, naked, infinitely simple at the pole of its treasures.

The way to get rid of pride, Valéry seems to be saying, is to set one's sights beyond its inadequate fruits. Then one does not overcome pride in order to be virtuous, but by entering a region of being where it simply falls away. This, one might say, is the morality beyond morality, understood by the artist, but which makes the moralist fear that he will be disarmed. The duality of good and evil is still there, but turned into some sort of raw material of the business of life. Morality, for Valéry, seems a sphere tangent to the work of the artist, not the stuff of man's being.

But this business of life, how is it conducted? Well, as Descartes affirmed, man *thinks.* But Descartes, Ortega insists, was over-confident. We have the *power* of thought, but often fail to use it effectively. Thinking is not given to us a whole and perfect faculty, but as a tool to be developed. As Ortega says in *Man and People:*

Man is never sure that he will be able to exercise thought—that is, in an adequate manner; and only if it is adequate is it thought. Or, in more popular terms: man is never sure that he will be right, that he will hit the mark. Which means nothing less than the tremendous fact that, unlike all other entities in the universe, man is not and can never be sure that he is, in fact, man, as the tiger is sure of being a tiger and the fish of being a fish.

Here Ortega is declaring that the problem of man is to be himself. We might say, then, that it is his undeveloped side, his lesser self, which gets in the way, because it is made of materials opaque to his essential consciousness. These materials need to be refined, reconstituted, and changed from obstacles into instruments. His task is to learn how to think accurately and wisely, evolving his intellectual "organ" in the process. Ortega repeats himself to make sure he is understood:

Far from thought having been bestowed upon man, the truth is—a truth I cannot now properly support by argument but can only state—the truth is that he has continually been creating thought, making it little by little, perforce of a discipline, a culture or cultivation; a millennial, nay, multi-millennial effort, without having yet succeeded—far from it!—in finishing the job. Not only was thought not given to

> man from the first, but even at this point in history he has only succeeded in forming a small portion and a crude form of what in the simple and ordinary sense of the word we call thought. And even the small portion gained, being an acquired and not a constitutive quality, is always in danger of being lost, and considerable quantities of it have been lost, many times in fact, in the past; and today we are on the point of losing it again.

Instead of telling us to be "good," Ortega gives the human enterprise the quality of a splendid, even heroic, adventure. At the same time he throws light on the uneven character of historical progress—our apparent inability to consolidate gains.

> To such an extent, unlike all the other beings in the universe, is man never surely *man;* on the contrary, being *man* signifies precisely being always on the point of not being man, being a living problem, an absolute and hazardous adventure, or, as I am wont to say: being, in essence, drama! . . .
>
> While the tiger cannot stop being a tiger, cannot be de-tigered, man lives in perpetual danger of being dehumanized. With him, not only is it problematic and contingent whether this or that will happen to him, as it is with the other animals, but at times what happens to man is nothing less than *ceasing to be man.* And this is true not only abstractly and generically but it holds of our own individuality. Each one of us is always in danger of not being the unique and untransferable *self* which he is. The majority of men perpetually betray this *self* which is waiting to be and to tell the whole truth, our personal individuality is a personage which is never completely realized, a stimulating Utopia, a secret legend, which each of us guards in the depths of his heart. It is thoroughly comprehensible that Pindar summarized his heroic ethics in the well-known imperative: "Become what you are."

Adopting Ortega's account of the human condition makes life something of an odyssey, and to think of ourselves and others in this light may encourage a great deal of patience, both for others and ourselves. It fits, moreover, with our secret longings and our recurring if not frequent intuitions concerning what we are doing here. It is a view which crops up again and again in the work of those who demand that the ordeal of human experience be made to make sense. In the West it was maintained by Plato among philosophers. In our own time, Simone Weil appealed to her readers by saying that the individual who rejects the contagion and collective frenzy of the age thereby reaffirms, "on his own account, over the head of the social idol, the original pact between the mind and the universe." That pact—call it the Promethean mission—is to make the light and fire of mind the ruler of man's world. The need is to resist the concerted weaknesses and habits of material existence, shaped by the law of Things instead of the order of Reason. This is the struggle to which Arjuna was called by Krishna—to regain his lost kingdom—indeed, to become what he was. Arjuna was vouchsafed a vision of the far-off goal of human life, while the wisdom of that vision was given, through his madness, to King Lear.

The "Enemy," in this endless Mahabharata, is no "person," but the blindness of embodied existence. In the hands of poets, the enemy may be called Duryodhana, or identified as Goneril-and-Regan. It does not matter much, for they are only symbols of the rationalizations men practice when tethered within the confining circle of an egocentric life. For the philosophic thinker, this is the origin of all "sin." As Erich Kahler has observed: "Reason is a human faculty, inherent in the human being as such; rationality is a technical function, a technicalization and functionalization of the ways in which reason proceeds." It is quite possible, he points out, for this rationality to be detached from its parental source and inspiration, and in its arrogance to become radically opposed to the balance and insight of reason.

The complex of rationalizations, whether of an individual or society, is the basis for everyday human decisions. The distance of these habits from the thinking which once shaped them is the measure of their departure from *reason.* Little if any of such habits has been justified by deliberate reflection on what they serve and whether or not they should be replaced. As Ortega says:

> Man commonly lives intellectually on the credit of the society in which he lives, a credit that has never been questioned. Only occasionally, in regard to one point or another, does anyone take the trouble to go over the account, to submit the accepted idea to criticism and reject or readmit it, but this time because he has himself rethought it and examined its foundations. . . . Society, the collectivity, does not contain any ideas that are properly such—that is, ideas clearly thought out on sound evidence. It contains only commonplaces and exists on the basis of these commonplaces. By this I do not mean to say that they are untrue ideas—they may be magnificent ideas; what I do say is that inasmuch as they are observances or established opinions or commonplaces, their possible excellent qualities remain inactive. What acts is simply their mechanical pressure on all individuals, their soulless coercion.

Since within society there are always conflicting groups and outlaw individuals such as murderers and thieves, society cannot be conceived as a "unity."

> So-called "society" is never what the name promises. It is always at the same time, to one or another degree, *dis-society,* repulsion between individuals. Since on the other hand it claims to be the opposite, we must radically open ourselves to the conviction that society is a reality that is *constitutively* sick, defective—strictly, it is a never-ending struggle between its genuinely social elements and behaviors and its dissociative or antisocial elements and behaviors.

Society, in short, is not and cannot be, in the foreseeable future, a unified harmony. In the nature of things, it is a turmoil of opposing forces imperfectly controlled, not reconciled, by the abrasive super-ego of the State. So, too, is the schismatic life of the human individual. How few there are who have achieved unity within themselves! Patience is a practical necessity for us all.

REVIEW
PSYCHOLOGIST THINKING

GOOD psychologists are almost always good writers. They are, that is, skilled in the use of metaphor, allegory, analogue, and myth. Must they not also deal with facts? But there are no pure or naked facts. Every fact is born of two parents: some facet of experience and an idea. As Whitehead somewhere said, there are only idea-facts. Thus facts, too, like dreams, are offsprings of metaphor and myth.

What is a good writer? He is an explorer of meaning. His adventures gain the symmetry of human life, but the great writer has not only a common touch but also a way of connecting the common touch with high and exhilarating reaches of the imagination. He does not—cannot, would not—tell all, but he nonetheless reveals in a way which makes the reader partner in discovery. We begin to inhabit the wonders generated by his mind; we feel increased. This expansion of being is a form of happiness, so that fine writers, we say, both teach and inspire.

No serious writer, then, can avoid being a psychologist, since the continuing drama of life is played by ourselves. Eschylus was a psychologist. So were Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Herman Melville. The riches of literature, of the humanities, are the riches of self-knowledge—what little we have. We prefer great writers—or ought to prefer them—to professors of psychology. We prefer them because they engage our attention in ways that we can follow. There is a parallel in what they do to living a life. For this reason we feel at home with the work of great writers. Their feeling about knowledge is what we are able to feel about it, that it is not a lot of technical stuff but ideas we can grasp and use.

Writers do introduce us to subtleties we had been unaware of, and these, as we confirm them, become a sort of "fact," but they are living facts, not collections of inert items. They grow and lead to perception of other subtleties. We call the work of such writers "seminal." As we read them, our minds come alive and leap to octaves above and below. We are, as we said, increased by such reading. We may also be burdened by it, but the tasks set by stimulation are partly defined by ourselves, and we don't feel put upon. Only as we make the tasks our own does anything of importance happen.

The writer who is a psychologist undertakes to understand more of all this. If he is a good writer, he makes you part of the enterprise, inviting you to feel like a colleague. He doesn't write "down." He may have information you lack, but you could, you feel, go after and get it if you wanted to. He will probably provoke you to do this in some direction.

These reflections occurred after some rereading in Julian Jaynes's *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Houghton Mifflin, 1976, $12.95). The title is formidable and we have been trying—unsuccessfully—to think of a simpler one. The author is endeavoring to tell us what happens when we begin to take charge of our lives—decide how life and things ought to go, and then to move, by coping with one situation after another, in a chosen direction. That's what he means by consciousness; that it is present when we are self-conscious and trying to make decisions in what we hope and believe is independent judgment. There was a time in human history, Dr. Jaynes believes, when we didn't run our own lives at all. We did what the Gods, or our hallucinations of the gods, or our nervous systems, told us to do. He calls the agency for this behavior the bicameral mind, a term which ordinary dictionaries don't help to explain. But he shows with great clarity what he means by using the behavior of the characters in the *Iliad* as illustrations. In Homer, he says,

> There is . . . no concept of will or word for it, the concept developing curiously late in Greek thought. Thus, Iliadic men have no will of their own and certainly no notion of free will. Indeed, the whole problem of volition, so troubling, I think, to

> modern psychological theory, may have had its difficulties because the words for such phenomena were invented so late.

The idea of an autonomous moral agent, of a *nous* the *psyche* should listen to and obey, doesn't emerge in Greek thought until Plato. This, you could say, is the entire burden of the Platonic dialogues. Running your life according to principles you have adopted through determined reflection—this is the virtue that Socrates exhibited and elaborated to anyone who would listen. And then he asked: Can virtue be taught? This is consciousness looking at consciousness, about the most difficult—and possibly rewarding—activity there is. It is like trying to get on top of everything, so you *can* take charge, and then to stand above what is getting on top, the strain of which almost abolishes the project. But it doesn't ruin it entirely, since we keep on trying. Dr. Jaynes's is a book of this sort.

Well, we said that good psychologists are good writers. *The Origin of Consciousness* begins with these words:

> O, what a world of unseen visions and heard silences, this insubstantial country of the mind! What ineffable essences, these touchless rememberings and unshowable reveries! And the privacy of it all! A secret theater of speechless monologue and prevenient counsel, an invisible mansion of all moods, musings, and mysteries, an infinite resort of disappointments and discoveries. A whole kingdom where each of us reigns reclusively alone, questioning what we will, commanding what we can. A hidden hermitage where we may study out the troubled book of what we have done and yet may do. An introcosm that is more myself than anything I can find in a mirror. This consciousness that is myself of selves, that is everything, and yet nothing at all—what is it?
>
> And where did it come from?
>
> And why?

The book goes on from there, traversing cultural history through the access of literature, with the author making points and asking questions all the way. We call this book seminal because as you read it you keep wanting to write the author letters asking, say—What do you think of Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato?* Or about Hannah Arendt's paper, "Thinking and Moral Considerations"? Alan McGlashan's *The Savage and Beautiful Country?* These, too, are seminal works, or have been for us. Well, each reader will have his own list of questions, because of the endless variety of life. In the human realm, no individual's discovery matches up perfectly with any other discovery; yet there are wonderful family resemblances, intriguing resonances, and cross-fertilizations galore. A good psychologist spurs you to look inside yourself—an enormous dark cavern with a few little flickers here and there. He is saying in effect: This is what you have to do, and he gives excellent reasons for why you must do it. With such a writer, you may often leave him to go in some other direction, and he may leave you behind on many occasions. And there will be areas where you are not sure what he means. Of course. This is a study in which there is no certainty except the importance of independent looking and the excitement of parallel findings. The search for self-knowledge has the thrill of moving forward in unstable equilibrium, joined with the hazard of losing your balance again and again.

The question which pervades this book—surviving a great deal of scholarship and scientific criticism and findings—is whether or not we shall ever be able to locate in ourselves the same solid authority that we long ago found in the declarations and instructions of the gods. All modern history can be interpreted as the prolonged and strenuous effort to work out an answer to this question.

> We sometimes think, and even like to think, that the two greatest exertions that have influenced mankind, religion and science, have always been historical enemies, intriguing us in opposite directions. But this effort at special identity is loudly false. It is not religion but the church and science that were hostile to each other. And it was rivalry, not contravention. Both were religious. They were two giants fuming at each other over the same ground. Both proclaimed to be the only way to divine revelation.

> It was a competition that first came into absolute focus with the late Renaissance, particularly in the imprisonment of Galileo in 1633. The stated and superficial reason was that his publication had not first been stamped with papal approval. But the true argument, I am sure was no such trivial surface event. For the writings in question were simply the Copernican heliocentric theory of the solar system which had been published a century earlier by a churchman without any fuss whatever. The real division was more profound and can, I think, only be understood as a part of the urgency behind mankind's yearning for divine certainties. The real chasm was between the political authority of the church and the individual authority of experience. And the real question was whether we are to find our lost authorization through an apostolic succession from ancient prophets who heard divine voices, or through searching the heavens of our own experience right now in the objective world without any priestly intercession. As we all know, the latter became Protestantism and, in its rationalist aspect, what we have come to call the Scientific Revolution.

The analysis continues, close and searching. Later, he says:

> Science then, for all its pomp of factness, is not unlike some of the more easily disparaged outbreaks of pseudoreligions. In this period of transition from its religious basis, science often shares with the celestial maps of astrology, or a hundred other irrationalisms, the same nostalgia for the Final Answer, the One Truth, the Single Cause. In the frustrations and sweat of laboratories, it feels the same temptations to swarm into sects . . . and set out here and there through the dry Sinais of parched fact for some rich and brave significance flowing with truth and exaltation. And all of this, my metaphor and all, is a part of this transitional period after the breakdown of the bicameral mind.
>
> And this essay is no exception.

Whatever you may think of Dr. Jaynes's central thesis—which will be a mother lode for some readers—one thing is absolutely clear: He is a distinguished restorer of psychological science to the Humanities. Which means that he puts us on our own as human beings.

COMMENTARY
PSYCHOLOGICAL WONDERINGS

THERE may be psychologists who have adopted the insights of poets such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Whitman concerning what Edith Cobb (see "Children") calls "the creative significance of the child's perceptual world-making," using them to enlarge our understanding of human nature and its endowments, but if so we have never come across their work.

Why is it, for example, that the child's approach to life is so much more interesting, and fruitful, than the adult's? What do we lose when we grow up, and why should this wonderful ability to enter into life whole-heartedly be natural during the years of immaturity, and so difficult to achieve or recover later on? Does this tell us anything about human beings generally?

If we invoke common sense instead of relying on the focus of pathology (on which so much of psychology is based), we might suppose that childhood is a time of *beginnings* during which (by instinct?) the meaning or purpose of human existence is understood. That is, in the morning we look out on the day with certain objectives in mind. We know what we are going to do. But then, as we proceed, we get distracted, involved in merely instrumental projects, and drawn into box canyons by glamorous goings-on. We grow fascinated by technique and its synthetic dramas and petty rewards.

Is this in some sense the story of mankind—of the whole human adventure?

The child's life, of course, encompasses an octave of experience different from the adult's. This qualification has to be entered whenever we compare the two. Children are also naturally egocentric, carelessly cruel in ways that would seem vicious in an adult. So we learn from them by using imaginative parallels rather than direct application of what they seem to know. The genius of the child is exercised in the world of the senses, as Edith Cobb suggests. The poet, when he is able to retain or recover the sense of wonder that belongs to children, exercises it in the world of mind and the quest for meaning. Whitman had this ability, making us marvel at his triumphant vision, whatever the unevenness of some of his work or his life. Julian Jaynes gives it expression in the opening paragraph of *The Origin of Consciousness* (see Review on page 3).

Do we, almost from birth, carry around with us the evidence of what we are, the instructions for what we came here to do? A most unscientific question, of course. Too big, too metaphysical, too "mystical." Yet it speaks to our hearts, to our minds in those fragmentary moments when we are drawn by some trope of the spirit to wonder whether we are fulfilling "the original pact between the mind and the universe." (Simone Weil.) Some day, perhaps, we shall have a science that does not shrink from such proposals. That will be a time when the quality of our being finally declares itself and can no longer be ignored. Now only a few premonitions of this feeling come to us, but they are getting stronger and stronger!

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
SELF AND THE WORLD

THIS week we have been reading a pæan to childhood, an informed and knowing pæan by a woman of cultivation, maturity, and insight. Edith Cobb, a friend of Margaret Mead (who wrote the introduction), is the author of *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (Columbia University Press, 1977), a slender book of about 100 pages that is filled with the riches of an exploring mind. You soon recognize the quality of the writer, not only from what she says, but from the other writers she draws upon. The theme of the book is given in the last chapter in a quotation from an unknown author:

> To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood, to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearance which every day for perhaps forty years has rendered familiar:
>
> With sun and moon and stars throughout the year
> And man and woman.
>
> This is the character and privilege of genius.

Edith Cobb was an amateur who, because she never gave up her amateur standing, came to know and understand more than most professionals, and her work is wholly free of professional mannerisms and apparatus. She used the intellectual framework of the times, but mainly as a launching pad. She knew children from working with them in hospitals and schools, and the primary realities of these encounters meant more than anything she read in books, although she read a great deal. These resources, taken together, made her not only a discoverer of the meaning and promise of childhood, but also a wise and serious critic. She said, for example, that "In their awareness of the creative significance of the child's perceptual world-making, Coleridge and Wordsworth, like Goethe and Blake, were far ahead of the twentieth-century psychiatric schools that have concentrated entirely on the role of childhood as it appears in psychopathology." She is interested in the distinctively human qualities of the child, which for her illustrate the capacity for transcendence. There is this passage on play:

> The important distinction, however, is that while other animals do play, the human child's play includes the effort to be something other than what he actually is, to "act out" and to dramatize speculation. Practice play and even "pretense" of a sort are to be found in animal play—as, for example, when dogs pretend to fight yet are prevented by "social inhibition" from serious biting. But a dog never tries to become a horse, a train, a bird, or a tree, while a child may imagine himself to be any one of these organisms or things at will. Unless the child (or the adult) is emotionally ill or schizophrenic and cannot, therefore, establish boundaries to his own body image, the gift of early plasticity in human nature includes the ability to resume the role of selfhood at will.

She uses Walt Whitman for guide in rediscovering of the child's state of mind, quoting one of his poems as "a singularly apt explanation of the dynamics of the ecology of the child's imagination":

> There was a child went forth every day,
> And the first object he looked upon, that object he became,
> And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part
> of the day,
> Or for many years or stretching cycle of years.
> The early lilacs became part of this child,
> And grass and white and red morning glories, and white and red
> clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,
> And the Third-month lambs and the sow's pink-faint litter, and
> the mare's foal and the cow's calf.

To distinguish between the potency of the somatic (body) cells and the germ cells, biologists call the germ cells *totipotent*, meaning that they are able to reproduce the whole organism, while the body cells reproduce only themselves. One might say that the human imagination is totipotent in relation to all the possibilities of thought. We can imagine ourselves as being anything at all. The human being, then, is this mysterious combination of thought applying to both self and the world. Edith Cobb takes from Bernard

Berenson his recollection of a childhood experience:

> In childhood and boyhood this ecstasy overtook me when I was happy out of doors. Was I five or six? Certainly not seven. It was a morning in early summer. A silver haze shimmered and trembled over the lime trees. The air was laden with their fragrance. The temperature was like a caress. I remember—I need not recall—that I climbed up a tree stump and felt suddenly immersed in Itness. I did not call it by that name. I had no need for words. It and I were one.

To provide another expression of the same sort of experience, here is a note by Herman Melville at the end of a letter to Hawthorne:

> This "all" feeling, though, there is some truth in it. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair seems like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion.

This idea that we are both the "all" and an individual identity—the "all" feeling comes and goes—is the root of all artistic expression. It accounts for Tolstoy's genius—his art gives form to the tension between awareness of the one, and then the many—and is the archetypal reality of self-consciousness. Edith Cobb finds it first in the child:

> The child's sense of wonder, displayed as surprise and joy, is aroused as a response to the mystery of some external stimulus that promises "more to come" or, better still, "more to do"—the power of perceptual participation in the known and the unknown.
>
> When and how do joy and surprise at self and world first make their appearance? It is certain that through the controlled poise of his own body, through the sense and vision of his own hands moving pieces of his world into structure and pattern, the child first learns to feel the mystery but also the lawfulness of the cosmos within which he lives. He learns that he may make use of the lawfulness of nature's materials.

Edith Cobb knows that the ecology of human beings includes not only the natural environment and social relations, but also the world of ideas in literature. She quotes from John Keats the line, "Many are poets that do not think it," in order to point out that "many are ecologists who do not think it and do not recognize it now." She adds:

> Nor are these two statements, one poetic and the other ecological, unrelated, for both have been true of man as a "thinking reed" in search of true metaphor through the millennia. Farmer or fisherman, hunter or natural scientist poet or explorer, all have had to read nature's behavior ecologically, at different levels of organization and from a poetic viewpoint, in order to achieve a linguistic transformation of perception, an expression of mind's metaphorical relations with nature.
>
> That ecology requires a combination of aesthetic perception and disciplined thinking—a characteristic of true poetry as well—is clearly stated by Charles Elton, who remarked in his work on animal ecology that "there is more ecology in the Old Testament or the plays of Shakespeare than in most of the zoological textbooks ever published!"

Close to the end of her book, there is this counsel to avoid an isolating conception of self:

> For, although the Socratic position "Know Thyself" is unquestionably essential to the long, slow, and only half-realized awareness of the uniqueness of human individuality, this idea is now running rampant in the guise of self-improvement and a detachment from responsibility for anything that occurs beyond the private realm of self-realization. The iconography of man as individual has assumed the appearance of a figure in a collage perched on the surface of a jumbled picture of bread and circuses. Self-gratification as a way of life reigns supreme, often wearing the mask of cultural idealism. Many a young person succumbs to this directive with the best of intentions, only to find that the search comes to a dead end with a mirror image of selfhood and insatiable appetite.

This passage concludes: "It is indeed only in the 'to-and-fro' comparative metaphorical work of creating his image in the world and his fellow men that the individual achieves a true sense of identity and brings the image of selfhood into focus."

FRONTIERS

Confronting Absurdities

HALFWAY through a *Wall Street Journal* story (with a Vermont dateline) on the disillusionments and trials of people who take up farming in midlife, there is this paragraph:

> What's different about the migrants of the 1970s is that they're pulling up roots for noneconomic reasons. Between 1970 and 1977, rural areas had a net gain of 2.6 million people, in contrast to a net loss of three million during the 1960s, says Calvin Beale, a demographer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. According to recent surveys, Mr. Beale says, most of these people made the move to escape the problems of the cities and the suburbs and to secure a better quality of life for themselves and their children. (*Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 9, 1979.)

Well, they're going to go on doing it, no matter what, even though the frustrations of these city people are common enough to give a rural psychiatrist plenty to do. They're going to go on doing it because the time has come for a great change in people's lives, even if the first stages turn out to be extremely painful. The theme of the *Wall Street Journal* story (by Nicholas Ronalds) is the possibility of disaster of the sort which overtook one fiftyish couple who sank $60,000 in 115 acres in Vermont:

> The expected idyllic existence turned out to be a nightmare. The sheep tore down the fence, the cows scampered off, and Daffodil, one of the pigs, kept breaking out of her pen and swimming across the river to Bald Mountain. The calves got sick and died. The farm machinery kept breaking down, and the money ran out. Jane got a part-time nursing job in a hospital in Townshend and Al got work taking care of youngsters in a nearby school for autistic children. The Staibs are selling their farm and moving to a more modest, 15-acre plot of land a few miles away.

There are other examples of multiplying troubles, some of them curiously revealing, as in the case of families who couldn't bring themselves to eat the chickens and other animals they had raised, even though store-bought meat was consumed with gusto. The story ends, however:

> If the Staibs learned their lesson the hard way, the experience didn't turn out all bad. Land values have doubled. Besides, they wouldn't have come if the rewards could be measured in dollars and cents. Now the new, 15-acre farm will provide a chance to make a new start. "Maybe we can do it on a smaller scale," Mrs. Staib says. "I love it, really."

Another aspect of the changes affecting country life is described by Wendell Berry toward the end of *The Unsettling of America*. He tells about a family-size farm he admired for its balance and charm, owned by an old man:

> One morning after I had learned of his death, I stopped at the farm again—in his honor, maybe, or in honor of my own sense of loss. It was a gray, wintry day. The place looked and felt forgotten. It had gone out of mind. Absence was in it like a force. The barn was closed, empty, the doors tied shut by someone who did not intend to come back very soon.
>
> Peering through a crack, I found that I was looking into a milking room with homemade wooden stanchions, unused for years. I knew why: it had become impossible to be a *small* dairyman. I spent some time looking at the old man's horse-drawn equipment. Some antique collector had taken the metal seats off several of the machines; these had become bar stools, perhaps, in somebody's suburban ranch house. For the rest apparently nobody now had a use. Examining the pieces of equipment, I saw that they were nearly completely worn out, patched and wired together like the fences and buildings, made to do—the forlorn tools of a man who had heirs, but no successors.
>
> By the standards of orthodox agriculture, as well as by those of the present economy and culture, this old man and his farm were merely anachronisms, leftovers. The possibility of their existence would seem contemptible, not just to the majority of agricultural experts, but to the majority of influential people of other kinds. And yet we must ask *why*. For no matter what may be said by the current standards of economics or technology or cultural fashion about this old man's life, there is still no legitimate way of withholding respect from him. . . . the old man and his farm together made a sort of cultural unit, recognized and valued in this country from colonial times. And it is still a perfectly respectable human possibility. All it requires is a proper humanity.

A proper humility is in order, too. As Berry says:

> I cannot think of any American whom I know or have heard of, who is not contributing in some way to destruction. The reason is simple: to live undestructively in an economy that is overwhelmingly destructive would require of any one of us, or of any small group of us, a great deal more work than we have yet been able to do. How could we divorce ourselves completely and yet responsibly from the technologies and powers that are destroying the planet? The answer is not yet thinkable, and it will not be thinkable for some time—even though there are now groups and families and persons everywhere in the country who have begun the labor of thinking it. . . .
>
> People who thus set their lives against destruction have necessarily confronted in themselves the absurdity that they have recognized in their society. . . . Once our personal connection to what is wrong becomes clear, then we have to choose: we can go on as before, recognizing our dishonesty and living with it the best we can, or we can begin the effort to change the way we think and live.

It seems fair to say that many of the people now moving to the country, with or without clear understanding of what their new life will be like, are responding to the feelings that Berry describes. They find themselves unable to recover the simplicities of Berry's old farmer neighbor—the grain of modern economic life makes them impossible—but most of them will stay and try to work out other balances. Maybe they can do it "on a smaller scale," as Mrs. Staib said. Meanwhile, such families have the problems of all pioneers: inexperience, ignorance, and eager enthusiasm, compounded with all the usual slings and arrows of a worse than outrageous age.