

## NOWHERE ON EARTH

DURING his stay at Brook Farm, the New England utopian community started by the Transcendentalists in Emerson's time, Nathaniel Hawthorne was disturbed by what seemed to him the unreality of the "reformist" state of mind. Looking back at the experience there, he wrote: "I was beginning to lose the sense of what kind of world it was, among innumerable schemes of what it might be, or ought to be." A while later he added: "No sagacious man will long retain his sagacity if he lives exclusively among reformers and progressive people without periodically returning into the settled system of things to correct himself by a new observation from that old standpoint."

Well, that's one way of thinking about the contrast between the vanguard and the rank and file. There are of course reformers of different sorts. Some are concerned mainly with changing themselves, while others feel duty bound to alter "public opinion." Then there is the frothy instability of shallowly held opinions which have hardly any effect on people's lives. Analytically considered, the matter becomes complicated, as shown by a somewhat melancholy passage in a letter from a reader:

I have been having a little bit of undefinable trouble with the "small-and-soft" path as it is generally presented and followed in this country. (As I live in a part of the country that is literally aswarm with exurbanites like myself, who tell me they are "into" the land, solar technology, et cetera, perhaps I have had a little overdose.) I am bothered I think, by the fact that, as with everything else in America, the small-and-soft movement has been largely co-opted by a new budding priestcraft of technicians—I am getting so tired of hearing people talk about their passive systems comparing the efficiencies of this or that wood stove. Even though it is cold country, the preoccupation with "adequate insulation" seems disturbingly symbolic. There is about the whole movement, as I have seen it, too much of the "retreat from un-understanding" that marked Candide's final decision to stay in his corner and "cultivate his own garden" and to hell with the rest of the world. Small

will be beautiful only when it is matched by a corresponding spiritual growth, I think; and if small and soft technology and the decentralization of the city-focus only leads us back to the spiritual smallness that has so often been the hallmark of town life, then we will have probably gained nothing, and the impetus will again pass into the hands of the Utopians with their grand dreams.

Another aspect of the situation has attention in Murray Bookchin's letter to *Rain* for last April:

Ecology is being used against an ecological sensibility, ecological forms of organization, and ecological practices to "win" large constituencies, *not to educate them*. The fear of "isolation," of "futility," of "ineffectiveness" yields a new kind of isolation, futility and ineffectiveness, namely, a complete surrender of one's most basic ideals and goals. "Power" is gained at the cost of losing the only power we really have than can change this insane society—our moral integrity, our ideals, our principles.

Here, the heavy hand of the past—or of past habits of mind—reveals its power. You are, let's say, in the health food business. If you want to tap the mass market, you need to appeal to the masses, and this means pressing the same emotional keys that the producers of conventional foods use to market their sugary and adulterated concoctions. Well, not really the same keys, since health food is supposed to make you well and keep you well, while that other stuff is advertised as creamier, tastier, and to be found on the tables of the elite. But the ads look alike, sound alike, and eventually, one feels, the health food claims will be equally unbelievable. Yet in the beginning, people in the health food business really cared about the well-being of their customers, and doubtless many of them still do. But while the founders were genuine pioneers, their successors have found it necessary to copy modes of marketing based on consumer hopes and fears instead of simple product excellence. It's the only way to survive, they'd probably say. Even if the products remain substantially better, they are promoted by fad, gussied up in fancy packages, and identified by a special set of "organic" clichés.

Is there any way to avoid this systematic compromise affecting even the best of movements for change? Not, perhaps, so long as change involves a continuing distinction between leaders and led. While the leaders, the really good ones, are without self-interest, the led are mixed in character, or they wouldn't need to be led. "If I could lead you out of the wilderness," Eugene Debs said to an audience of working men a long time ago, "somebody else could lead you back into it again." "Leaders," in short, may be embarrassed, if not betrayed, by their followers.

Writing in *Community Comments* for November, 1957 (organ of Community Service, Inc., in Yellow Springs, Ohio), Arthur Morgan showed how the past affects changes of every sort. A lifelong student of the values of community life, Morgan became convinced that only fundamental and widespread development of character would be able to resist the tendencies which drag innovations down adapting them to common mediocrity. It was for this reason that he placed so much emphasis on the values of life in small communities, where, he had found, the better human qualities are fostered by face-to-face relationships. He meant by this that in small communities individuals are *able* to act in behalf of the good of others and make their intentions felt. His experience and thinking about how this works is embodied in *The Long Road*, available from Community Service, Inc. (P.O. Box 243, Yellow Springs, Ohio 45387). In his brief essay in *Community Comments* he said:

After centuries of seeming inactivity some new development may seem to start things off toward new goals. Then the world looks open, and we seem free to take any course we will. Yet what emerges then will have been largely determined by what went on during the long "uneventful" period. If no great pattern has been formed through the long years, then new opportunity, though free from external restraint, will chiefly reproduce the pattern of the past.

The industrial revolution illustrates this principle. Before it occurred, life for the average man was a hard grind. With steam and machinery there came immense increase in productivity of labor. Had there been in men's minds a great pattern of purpose, life and action, the lot of men everywhere might have been quickly bettered with diffusion of education and

general culture, and great increase of human dignity and purposefulness.

However, the new, prosperous industrialist saw no picture to imitate other than that of the privileged feudal baron. That imitation led him to create an industrial feudalism with ostentatious wealth for the few and grinding servitude for the many. For lack of a slowly developed great and fine pattern of a new society, there was lost to both high and low for a long period the joy of a great adventure in building a new world, and there followed a long, bitter class struggle. The lack of that vision still clouds our economic life.

Morgan writes in terms of the whole society regarded as a unit. Another slant on the period he considers is provided in a *Nation* (May 24) review of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. The reviewer, Bruce Kuklick, after describing Zinn's account of the oppressions suffered by so many over a period of five centuries, wonders why this writer seems unable to explain why "the people" could not obtain the freedom they longed for. The critic says:

His [Zinn's] story is of continuous expressions of class consciousness and solidarity. For Zinn, the workers, the poor, the oppressed know who their enemies are, and their history is one of persistent and recurring attempts to throw off the oppressors' yoke. Yet they never succeed; indeed, Zinn effectively admits that they've failed again and again by noting how successful "the system" has been at containing or transforming protest. How do we explain the people's constant failure and the elite's constant success?

Zinn's text is so blunted that it has only mechanistic answers to this question. The ruling group found "a wonderfully useful device," the symbols of nationhood; "the profit system" began to look overseas; the system had "an instinctual response" for survival; "American capitalism needed international rivalry and demanded a national consensus for war, and "the system" always responded to pressures by "finding new forms of control."

It seems evident that, apart from the tenacity and cleverness of the designers and users of "the system," the lack of what Morgan called "a great pattern of purpose" is still the basic explanation for the failure of the oppressed to reconstruct society. Individual vision has not been lacking; in the United States we have had, in the nineteenth century, the inspiring conceptions of Edward Bellamy and Henry

George; but the preoccupations of personal need and ambition, of getting and spending, got in the way of the spread of ideas in behalf of the common good. The lives of the great majority remain untouched by these influences.

Indeed, reflection is called for on how little we know about how people actually become receptive to such inspiration. This may be the only sort of "progress" that is worth talking about—a progress in which "pushing" by others accomplishes little or nothing.

Still another formulation of the problem of social change—in this case toward a peaceful world—is provided by Bob Overy in *Peace News* for April 18. How can the ideas and energy of nonviolent revolution be spread, is the question he considers:

Just as pacifists, with their high individual morality, have tended to get stuck in their immediate social circle and personal self-image, failing to break out to build a larger pacifist politics, so there is a danger that nonviolent revolution will stagnate too.

There is a difference between "revolution" and "revolutionism"—the first is a historical process and event, the second is a desire to promote this process and event. The reason why I refer to "nonviolent revolutionists" rather than "nonviolent revolutionaries" is because I see much more the desire to make nonviolent revolution at present than a convincing explanation of how it is going to be done.

At present nonviolent revolution leaves out on a limb "nonviolent revolutionists" who are stuck in a "revolutionist subculture" but in conventional settings where we live and work. Our values differ from those of our fellows at numerous points, yet if we make links and try to play an influential part at work or in the local community we become vulnerable to the criticism that we are "liberals" getting sucked into the dominant institutions. Nonviolent revolution does not yet have a clear notion of what action is "progressive," that is "going in the right direction," and what is not; it lacks an adequate theory of how to work on the "inside" and "at the margins" of the institutions it criticises; it lacks charity (and political sensitivity) towards those who for various reasons can go with it only part of the way.

Moreover, for individuals spending years of their lives in nuclear families, in suburban neighborhoods, in conventional jobs, it seems especially pretentious and even a little absurd to call

themselves "nonviolent revolutionaries"—and so they fall back on marginally safer labels like "radical pacifist," "alternative socialist" or "nonviolent anarchist"; that is, they accept psychologically that they are part of a permanent minority banging away, rather than a potential revolutionary movement.

In addition, there are factions within the movement:

Even within the small circle who lay claim to the nonviolent revolutionary label, there are disagreements about nonviolence: that is, whether nonviolence is a tactic or a principle. Some have been drawn to favour nonviolence on pragmatic grounds, that it is the only or the best conceivable way to make a successful revolution; others assert that nonviolence is a principle which should be adhered to irrespective of the advantages that other political methods might achieve. The dispute is irresolvable because those who favour nonviolence as a principle—from Gandhi onwards—are continually drawn into reinforcing their position by showing that nonviolence actually works better in practice.

These are some of the "ifs, ends, and buts" which beset people who want to free themselves (and the world) of the confinements and bad habits of conventional societies. The question is: How do you live in this world yet practice the conceptions of the ideal world which you believe ought to be? More than two thousand years ago, in his *Republic*, Plato set this question rhetorically. At the end of Book IX, Socrates says that the philosopher will undertake to live according to the ideal principles of the utopian city of his dreams—which he and his friends have been discussing—even if its realization on earth seems remote or practically impossible.

And in matters of honors and office too [Socrates declares] this will be his guiding principle. He will gladly take part in and enjoy those which he thinks will make him a better man, but in public and private life he will shun those that may overthrow the established habit of his soul.

Then, if that is his chief concern, he said, he will not take part in politics.

Yes, by the dog, said I, in his own city he certainly will, yet perhaps not in the city of his birth except in some providential juncture. I understand, he said. You mean the city whose establishment we have described, the city whose home is the ideal, for I think that it can be found nowhere on earth.

Well, said I, perhaps there is a pattern of it laid up in heaven for him who wishes to contemplate it and so beholding constitute himself its citizen. But it makes no difference whether it exists now or ever will come into being. The politics of this city only will be his and of none other.

That seems probable, he said.

Interestingly, in an article written in 1941, Gandhi considered the compromises of principle with which a believer in nonviolence might be confronted. He began with an example:

A certain khadi bhandar received an order for woollen blankets from the military. The bhandar authorities asked me whether they could accept it. I replied that they could.

The question of principle raised was whether it did not amount to helping the war.

As a matter of abstract principle, it will have to be conceded that the acceptance was a breach. But in that case, we must leave India and every country engaged in the war. Because we help war in purchasing the very food we eat. We do the same when we travel by train or buy postage stamps. Our use of the currency itself is an aid to war. In fact we are hardly able to do any act which is free from the taint.

The truth is that no one is able to act upon a great principle, like that of non-violence, in its entirety. Like the geometrical line, it can only be imagined, but never drawn. In practice, we have to be content with drawing only such fine lines as we can with our instruments. There is no wall that can be called "straight" according to Euclid. It is the same with ahimsa [harmlessness]. We must put it into practice as best we can.

It would have been easy for me to forbid the sale of the blankets. It was a question of only a few thousand rupees, a small amount for an establishment whose turnover is in lakhs. But the prohibition would have been a matter of shame. Where should I draw the line from which such prohibitions should commence? If I were a grain merchant, should I decline to sell it to soldiers? Or, if I were a chemist, should I refuse to sell quinine and other drugs to them? If I should, what could be the reason for my doing so? Does my ahimsa prevent me from entertaining such customers? In other words, does it require me to look into the occupations of my customers? The clear reply is that provided I deal in goods which conduce to the welfare of society, I may not look into the occupations of my customers. This

means I may sell my innocuous articles even to soldiers.

Much earlier, Gandhi's friends wondered why Gandhi nursed the wounded in World War I. Admitting that in a way he was "helping" the war, he said in explanation:

But I found that, living in England, I was in a way participating in the War. London owes the food it gets in wartime to the protection of the Navy. Thus to take this food was also a wrong thing. There was only one right course left, which was to go away to live in some mountain or cave in England itself and subsist there on whatever food or shelter Nature might provide, without seeking assistance from any human being. I do not yet possess the spiritual strength necessary for this. It seemed to me a base thing to accept food tainted by war without working for it. When thousands have come forward to lay down their lives only because they thought it their duty to do so, how could I sit still? A rifle in this hand will never fire. And so there only remained nursing the wounded and I took it up.

Gandhi reasoned closely about what *he* should do. He hoped others might do likewise, but there was little or nothing of the "holier than thou" in his nature. He didn't worry about the press. The intensity of his life brought the press to him, giving him a chance to explain.

And Gandhi, you could say, never lost sight of "the settled system of things" which Hawthorne said reformers need to keep in touch with. He, no more than Socrates, lived in the clouds. But one might also say that a certain moral genius is required to work out such delicate balances between what is and what might be.

Well, all things considered, that may be the cost of *getting* a really improved society. And as Spinoza said, the really good things cannot possibly be easy to achieve. Revolutionists, nonviolent or any other kind, might well study the patience with others shown by Socrates and Gandhi

## *REVIEW*

### A BOOK WORTH READING

PHILOSOPHY declares that thought is the supreme reality and thinking about thinking the ultimate human activity. Some of the books about philosophy give the impression that philosophy is something you do when you take a college course or have the leisure to read a little something on the subject. Serious philosophic inquiry is not at all like that. The best books suggest that one becomes consciously philosophical when one begins to be really human—to make conscious choices in life.

Ortega, in *Man and Crisis*, makes this clear:

If history, which is the science of human lives, were or could be exact, it would mean that men were flints, stones, physiochemical bodies, and nothing else. But then one would have neither history nor physics; for stones, more fortunate, if you like, than men, do not have to create science in order to be what they are, namely stones. On the other hand man is a most strange entity, who, in order to be what he is, needs first to find out what he is; needs, whether he will or no, to ask himself what are the things around him and what, there in the midst of them, is he. For it is this which really differentiates man from a stone, and not that man has understanding while the stone lacks it. We can imagine a very intelligent stone; but the inner being of the stone is given it already made, once and for all, and it is required to make no decision on the subject; it has no need, in order to go on being a stone, to pose and pose again the problem of self, asking itself "What must I do now?" or, which is the same thing, "What must I be?" Tossed in the air, without need to ask itself anything, and therefore without having to exercise its understanding, the stone we are imagining will fall toward the center of the earth. Its intelligence, even if existent, forms no part of its being, does not intervene in it, but would be an extrinsic and superfluous addition.

The essence of man, on the other hand, lies in the fact that he has no choice but to force himself to know . . . to resolve the problem of his own being and toward this the problem of what are the things among which he must inexorably have that being. This—that he needs to know, that whether he likes it or not, he needs to work to the best of his intellectual means—is undoubtedly what constitutes the human condition.

We have for review a book which embodies this view of philosophy—*Equilibrium* (Guild of Tutors Press, Los Angeles, 1980, \$6.95) by John Cantwell Kiley. Reading it is an arduous but often pleasurable

exercise of the mind. We began consideration of it by quoting Ortega because the Spanish philosopher shows that finding and keeping our equilibrium is the unavoidable business of human life.

But now we must amend our opening statement. Thought, that is, is not always "supreme." Like Parabrahm, it is supreme and not supreme—supreme as cause, not supreme as effect. We can think anything we like, but once we have thought, something of our future has been determined by the thought. Our thoughts make our confinement, even as the Buddha declared in the opening verses of the *Dhammapada*. Yet in this way, too, our freedom is formed, for what would we know of freedom without some contrasting confinement? Limitless freedom would have no opposite, and there is no grasp, no understanding, of anything which lacks an opposite. Indeed, without an opposite it cannot be a "thing."

Our thoughts, then, are endless transactions between finite cause and effect. They are, as John Kiley suggests, subjective movements which seek the restoration of relative freedom—all we can have in the circumstances. But a revision of circumstances may give us more.

Philosophy seeks liberation from the prisons made by mind. That is the whole content of Dr. Kiley's book. Its value springs from his use of confining situations which are familiar to us all. We know what he means. For example, in his chapter on *Equilibrium* he says:

The mind of anyone is always real. I do not mean that it is real the way the brain or intellect is real; the mind is a moment by moment invention of the intellect, i.e., it is the intellect engaged in thinking. Thinking is just one of the intellect's cognitive activities, including sensing, imagining, remembering, knowing by conception, knowing by intuition, conscious and unconscious awareness. Thinking reveals the intellect's ability to reflect on its own contents—on its own images and concepts—and to transform them into ideas. Ideas are concepts cut loose from their connection with the objective world. Once this has been done, ideas become true mental entities, for they now have *only* a mental existence, an existence which derives from and depends upon mental activity. In this sense thoughts or ideas are creations of mind, more properly productions or "fictions."

It must not be supposed that fictions are not real. They are very real. The person who flings himself off the Golden Gate bridge is not in flight from nothing but from some definite reality. Yet for all that, the suicide is really in flight from his thoughts or, more accurately, from the pain which such thoughts give him. It is not the unbearability of the world but the unbearability of his *perception* of it which prompts the suicide's trip to the bridge and over the rail.

Suicide, in Dr. Kiley's view, is a desperate act in quest of equilibrium—the suicide wants to cancel out his pain.

If the psychotic's mind is in equilibrium no less than the healthy person's, it may be asked: What is the difference between them?

The psychotic consciousness has been "captured" by the mind. It is as though . . . Huckleberry Finn had entered the library of Mark Twain, tied up his creator and carted him off to his raft for a trip down the Mississippi of the mind. In this capture, consciousness has been drawn tightly into itself by mind, so that its contact points with the world outside of thought have been reduced to an absolute minimum. It stands, as it were, like an inverted pyramid, touching the "ground" of the objective world only at the point of the apex. It lacks the broad stability of the healthy mind, which is solidly connected at many points of its base with the outside world. The psychotic's mind has an internal equilibrium, a consistency binding all its fictions into a coherent mass, but is unstable relative to the "ground," to the objective world. This instability is indicated by the irrational behavior of the psychotic, his susceptibility to being overturned by faint provocation or trauma. . . .

The mind is not the whole reality of the person, even if the mind lays claim to it by thinking such a grand idea. Is it possible that any person even for one moment would tolerate his own idea posing as himself? Yes. Furthermore, when there has been too much toleration of such kind, madness sets in.

It must be asked why a person permits the usurpation of himself—for that is what it is—and the installation of a self-produced fictional scenario in his place. It is because of the susceptibility of the person mixed with the expectation of pleasure that the internal "theater" of his mind affords him.

Why do we go on making up these "productions" and getting entangled in them? Can't we see that they are never adequate and usually come to grief?

But those productions are what "life is about"! And furthermore, the world is not a place where you can successfully do nothing. We have to act. Dr.

Kiley doesn't mention the *Bhagavad-Gita*, but there seems a sense in which his discussion of this question is out of the *Gita's* idea of the renunciation, not of action, but the fruits of action, although he uses other language. He says in his last chapter:

Yet it is simply not true that all the world's a stage. The stage hides, suppresses, squeezes out the greater reality. It shrinks it down, and, by dramatizing it, makes it into a performance. It materializes it, to put it simply. The world, life, reality are obviously too big, too inclusive, too real. They need to be cut down, which means, to be "staged."

The stage is necessarily a truncation of the totality, a spotlighting of a selected aspect of that totality. . . . Yet the totality is totally present everywhere. Since it necessarily is the reality of everything real, its totality is everywhere. This can be stated as a fact, but it is not capable of being seen or comprehended by any human intelligence. It is nonetheless true.

And because the human mind cannot apprehend the real in its totality, it quite understandably affirms the importance of sensible things, indeed, affirms their sufficiency and absoluteness. Such things, it is thought, stand alone; they just are. This is an attempt to invest particular things with the actual totality, to fill a vacuum so intuitively abhorrent to the human intelligence. This is the Skinnerian "nothing but" reductionism, affirming a presence which is only bodily and physical. . . .

Finally, he says:

The totality is always in full equilibrium, in full balance, with itself. Nothing can happen to it: The only thing that can "happen" to the real is what is already real. The real is everything it can be or ever needs to be. It is the Godhead.

It is extremely difficult for terrestrial human consciousness to understand this great truth. At best, there can only be a flickering glance, a dim view as in a darkened mirror. Materiality of consciousness, what we have called the "game mentality," prevents it. . . .

The game mentality is the standard consciousness. Its claims to truth are notorious. Yet the real truth lies outside and beyond it. Chuang Tzu said it perfectly:

Great knowledge sees all in one  
Small knowledge breaks down into the many.

John Kiley says it rather well himself. His book is worth reading.

## COMMENTARY

### THE USES OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

THE question of which dreams can be made to come true—and how this may be done—is raised by the discussion in this week's *Frontiers*. S. E. Parker argues that the theory of the class struggle is a false dream. It is not, he says, "the royal road to utopia," it will not "lead to the abolition of exploitation and the establishment of a classless society." The failure, it seems likely, is due to the impossibility of building a harmonious society with the energies of anger, bitterness, and antagonism. Partisanship is not a principle that serves social unification and growth.

A social dream, to be realized, needs to be shared by all. Yet there are manifest obstacles. The organized self-interest of groups leads to partisan dreams, as Arthur Morgan shows in his analysis of the social effects of the industrial revolution (see page 6). The prosperous industrialist, he points out, "saw no picture to imitate other than that of the privileged feudal baron," leading him to "create an industrial feudalism with ostentatious wealth for the few and grinding servitude for the many." These conditions are still with us, as a reading of such books as *Global Reach*, *Food First*, and *Human Scale* makes plain. And as Morgan says:

For lack of a slowly developed great and fine pattern of a new society, there was lost to both high and low for a long period the joy of a great adventure in building a new world, and there followed a long, bitter class struggle. The lack of that vision still clouds our economic life.

What sort of visions or dreams *do* come true? The works of great artists might be an illustration. The sustained use of the imagination seems the key to individual fulfillment. Yet we should note that no distinguished artist is ever complacent about his achievements. What he does accomplish seems a result of envisioning a reality that can never be contained by a finite work of art. On the other hand, a limited goal may be within reach, as athletes demonstrate again and again. Olympic record-breaking seems to be a consequence not only of rigorous training and endless practice, but also of the capacity to *imagine* exactly what the athlete has

resolved to achieve. He sees himself doing it, in his mind's eye. Olympic champions have described this process in detail.

Dreams or visions, then, are required, and they must be linked with conceptions of means that accord with natural potentialities. But in social matters, what are the natural potentialities? Social goals call for dreams in concert. The "party line" is a mechanistic version of this rule. Is it really possible for us to "dream together" without stultifying our capacity for originality and independence? This is the question that political theory—revolutionary theory—tends to ignore entirely. Only Gandhi, who disliked the term "revolutionary," though he used it now and then, did not ignore it. Yet he offered his own dream of an ideal social order to his countrymen and to the world. In *The India of My Dreams* he said:

Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a Republic or Panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its own affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. . . .

This society must naturally be based on Truth and Nonviolence which, in my opinion, are not possible without a living belief in God, meaning a self-existent, all-knowing living force which inheres in every other force known to the world but which depends on none and which will live when all other forces may conceivably perish or cease to act. I am unable to account for my life without belief in this ever-living light. . . .

Let India live for this true picture, though never realizable in its completeness. We must have a proper picture of what we want before we can have something approaching it. If there is ever to be a republic of every village in India, then I claim verity for my picture in which the last is equal to the first, or in other words, none is to be the first and none the last. . . .

To model such a village may be the work of a lifetime. . . .

Or many lifetimes. Yet the social dreams of the present seem to be approaching Gandhi's conception in a number of ways. They are indeed utopian, and unrealizable . . . in their completeness. . . .

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves

### THE ULTIMATE CURRICULUM

WITH the confident aplomb of a writer who moves easily from peak to peak of the heights of the time, Annie Dillard, a poet who takes philosophy in her stride, examines the question of what we know about the world, finding that the question has changed into an inquiry into what we know about knowing. The nature of the world has become almost a secondary object. The fundamental focus of the idea of knowledge has changed. We used to turn to the physicists for reliable information about our habitat, but now it is suspected that the habitat is something we make up as we go along. Accordingly, the artists, who lead in making things up, may be the only "realists" of our time. If this is so, they had better get down to business, for most of them, if we can rely on Annie Dillard's report of their doings (in the August *Harper's*), seem to be just playing around.

The point, however, of her discussion, in relation to education, is that self-knowledge is being returned to its original position as the foundation stone of all other sorts of knowing. With a little editing, the new rule for learners seems practically biblical: Seek ye first the kingdom of Self, and all these things shall be added unto you.

Annie Dillard puts the case for the change with a poet's lightheartedness; for her it is *fait accompli*:

John Dewey pointed out, quite intelligently, that philosophy progresses not by solving problems, but by abandoning them. It simply loses interest. The question of "epistemology" is one that the thinkers of this century have not yet abandoned. On the contrary, everybody seems to be working on it. So much interesting work is being done outside the field of philosophy proper, and outside philosophy's terms, that it seems appropriate now to replace *epistemology* with a new term—such as *cognition*—to refer to this new wealth of related topics.

Her list of the investigators is worth repeating:

Examining the structures of human thought and perception are recent thinkers like Paul Weiss and Ludwig von Bertalanffy in systems theory, Thomas Sebeok in zoosemiotics, Gregory Bateson in information theory, Roman Jakobson in semiotics, Noam Chomsky in linguistics, John Eccles and Wilder Penfield in brain physiology, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas in anthropology, Ernst Gombrich in art criticism, and Jerome Bruner and Jean Piaget in psychology. They seek to understand the processes by which the mind imposes order. They seek to clarify the relationship between perceiving and thinking, between inventing and knowing. Microphysicists are interested in these matters, too. Science as a whole, like philosophy, wants to proceed from a firm base. Interestingly, the human effort to locate that base, to set knowledge firmly on the plinth of perception, seems repeatedly to result in everybody's sinking at once.

The questions now being asked with fresh urgency are: "What is absolutely true? What can we know for certain? What is really here?" Little by little we are having to realize "that our *yardsticks* are not absolute, our *mathematics* not absolute." Annie Dillard proceeds, noting the highlights of recent intellectual history to show what has happened to our thinking about the world, and then, of necessity, about ourselves:

Science, that product of skepticism born of cultural diversity, was meant to deal in certainties, in data that anyone anywhere could verify. And for the most part, it has. Our self-referential mathematics and wiggly yardsticks got us to the moon. I think science works the way a tightrope walker works: by not looking at its feet. As soon as it looks at its feet, it realizes it is operating in midair. At any rate, the sciences are wondering again, as the earliest skeptics did, what could be a firm basis for knowledge. People in many of the sciences are looking at their feet. First Einstein, then Heisenberg, then Godel made a shambles of our hope (a hope that Kant shared) for a purely natural science that actually and certainly connects at base with things as they are. What can we know for certain when our position in space is limited, our velocity may vary, our instruments contract as they accelerate, our own observations of particles on the micro-level botch any chance of precise data, and not only are our senses severely



limited, but many of the impulses they transmit are edited out before they ever reach the brain?

Even if we could depend on our senses, could we trust our brains? Even if science could depend on its own data, would it not still have to paw through its own language and cultural assumptions, its *a priori* categories, wishes, and so forth, to approach things as they are? To what, in fact, could the phrase "things as they are" meaningfully refer apart from all our discredited perceptions to which everything is so inextricably stuck? Physicists have been saying for sixty years that (according to the Principle of Indeterminacy) they cannot study nature, but only their own perception of nature: "Method and object can no longer be separated" (Heisenberg). Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington, British Astronomer Royal, said in 1927, "The physical world is entirely abstract and without 'actuality' apart from its linkage to consciousness." It is one thing when Berkeley says this; when a twentieth-century astronomer says this, it is a bit of another thing.

Similarly (and this is more familiar), Eddington's successor, Sir James Jeans, wrote, summarizing a series of findings in physics, "The world begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine." The world could be, then, in Eddington's word, "mind-stuff." And even the mind, anthropologists keep telling us, is not so much a cognitive instrument as a cultural artifact. The mind is itself an art object. It is a Mondrian canvas onto whose homemade grids it fits its own preselected products. Our knowledge is contextual and only contextual. Ordering and invention coincide; we call their collaboration "knowledge."

This is Annie Dillard's *Diamond Sutra*. The Buddha, too, declared that all our knowledge is "contextual," meaning that it is entirely ideas about ideas, although necessary to use for people who have made themselves captives of their own ideas. Toward the end of this scripture, the Buddha observes:

While the Tathagata, in his teaching, constantly makes use of conceptions and ideas about them, disciples should keep in mind the unreality of all such conceptions and ideas. They should recall that the Tathagata, in making use of them in explaining the Dharma, always uses them in the resemblance of a raft that is of use only to cross a river. As the raft is of no further use after the river is crossed, it should be discarded. So these arbitrary conceptions of things

about things should be wholly given up as one attains enlightenment. How much more should be given up conceptions of non-existent things (and everything is non-existent).

Then, asked by Subhuti what name should be given to this scripture, the Buddha replied:

This Scripture shall be known as the *Vajrachdika Prajna Paramita*. By this name it shall be revered, studied and observed. What is meant by this name? It means that when the Lord Buddha named it Prajna Paramita, he did not have in mind any definite or arbitrary conception and so he thus named it. It is the Scripture that is hard and sharp like a diamond that will cut away all arbitrary conceptions and bring one to the other shore of enlightenment.

What think you, Subhuti? Has the Tathagata given you any definite teaching in this Scripture?

No, blessed Lord! The Tathagata has not given us any definite teaching in this Scripture.

Poetry and song are convivial, and Annie Dillard finishes her criticism of scientific "certainties" by saying: "The mind is a blue guitar on which we improvise the song of the world."

Is not the Linnaean system of classification a poem among poems, a provisional coherence selected out of chaos? It has always been possible for artists of every kind to sniff at science and claim for art special, transcendent, and priestly powers. Now it is possible for artists to have and eat that particular cake by adding that, after all, science is in one (rather attenuated) sense "mere" art, art is all there is. I am not saying that writers or painters have made such a claim outright; but in theory it is there to be made.

Well, if they do make it, then, as we said before, they had better get down to business.

## FRONTIERS

### Vision and Fact

IT has been said somewhere, by someone, that anarchist thinkers have 51 per cent of the truth, however urgent their need of the other 49. This seems the case in a tough-minded article by S. E. Parker in *Freedom* (an anarchist weekly published in London). The writer is intent on exploding what he calls the "proletarian myth":

I do not deny the existence of a class struggle. But there is a fundamental difference between the *fact* of the class struggle and the *theory* of the class struggle.

The fact is the undeniable existence of a conflict of interests between employers and employees—whether State or "private." The awareness and extent of this conflict are not so widespread as the preachers of "class war" would like to believe, but it is there and has at times produced better conditions for the employees. It is as natural for the wage-earner to defend his interests as it is for the wage-payer to defend his—and only a fool would deny it.

The *theory*, on the other hand, is based on the unverifiable belief that this conflict of interests will or can lead to the abolition of exploitation and the establishment of a classless society. Whether the rationale is the Marxist concept of a historical dialectic impelling the class struggle to a final resolution of all conflict in communism, or the Bakunin/Kropotkin faith in the "spontaneous" revolutionary creativity of the masses, makes little difference to the basic notion that the class struggle is the royal route to utopia. However expressed, the theory is a secularized version of the messianic belief in a "kingdom of heaven"—and has about as much evidence in its favour.

No revolt of the proletariat, or their historical predecessors, has ever ended their servility. Their alleged "creativity" and "desire for freedom," *as a class*, is so much populist moonshine and is mostly the product of guilt-ridden upper and middle-class intellectuals who want to expiate their social sins. Kropotkin, who is a typical example of such, repeats over and over again that anarchism is the "creation" of "the people," but he never explains the causal relation between the two. All he does is give some selected historical incidents which *he* interprets in this manner, and these are usually democratic, not anarchist, in character.

The investment of the exploited mass with anarchist virtues, the haranguing of them in minute-circulation papers that they never read, is often merely an elaborate disguise for a moralism which lays down how they *ought* to behave and throws a multi-coloured cloak over how they have behaved, do behave, and will behave—save, of course, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, Karl Marx, or Michael Bakunin, separately or together. . . .

Those who consider that anarchism is organically linked with the class struggle are captives of the socialist myth, of which the proletarian myth is an offspring. Until they can cut the umbilical cord that binds them to socialism they will never be able to come into their full power as self-owning individuals. Self-sovereignty is the essence of anarchism, collectivism its enemy. There just isn't any path to the lemonade springs and cigarette trees of the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

This writer is foursquare against the bad myths, and this is understandable, but what about the good ones? What if, as some rather perceptive writers have maintained, human beings are unable to act except in terms of myth? We have in mind Ernst Cassirer, Carl Jung, and Northrop Frye in saying this.

What is a myth? It is a way of saying: This is the way the world works, or, This is the way human life works. No one really knows how the world works, or cosmologists and economists would not be so much at sea; and no one knows how human life works, or psychologists and sociologists would not be so widely confessing their ignorance and wondering, as some now are, if the mystics may afford them some help.

There are a lot of theories, of course, concerning these matters, but people don't act upon theories without converting them into myths. Northrop Frye devotes several pages in *The Stubborn Structure* to showing how this happens—how a theory has to be transformed into a belief system and charged with feeling (he calls it "concern") before people will act upon it.

Utopia, Mr. Parker suggests, is a myth—"a secularized version of the messianic belief in a 'kingdom of heaven'—and has about as much

evidence in its favour." Well, evidence may not have such decisive importance when it comes to what can actually take place. Take for example an almost miraculous biological fact, the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. To a worm population, the idea of becoming a delicate flying creature—if worms could entertain ideas—would certainly be a most unlikely myth. Yet it happens. In due time it happens. Some hidden designer resculptures the larva into a beautiful insect with wings. Such things, the worm intellectuals declare, can't happen, but they do.

Our example is no new idea. The Greeks were impressed by it and chose their word for butterfly or moth to name the human soul. In mythic language, souls can fly. Mind is a synonym of soul, and minds certainly take flight. What good would be our language if we denied it the freedom of such imagery? Anyway, language would resist and violate any such prohibition because our feelings, hopes, and vision *demand* that we think of the best that humans are capable of in this imaginative way.

Our distinctively human flights, however, are not biological. No one would seriously suggest that we honor an astronaut as we honor Shelley or Walt Whitman. Yet the flights of the poets are unquestionably *real*. They are both mythic and real.

We have these octaves of meaning in the structure of our minds. Mr. Parker seems to think that this is the explanation of delusion, the worst sort of delusion being what he terms the *collectivist* myth. It is hard not to agree. In collectivist myths, "salvation" depends on loss of identity, for that is what conformity (in itself, and not for some sensible purpose) is. What could be more destructive of human possibility? But, on the other hand, does the presence in us of these octaves have an evolutionary function? What are we supposed to do with ideas such as the Second Coming? Just forget them, explaining to one

another that they are only lies invented by calculating priests?

Well, the priests have been known to lie, and some of them try to exact literal belief in myths which were meant, not as substitutions for experience, but provocatives to the imagination. Needed, then, is the critical capacity to distinguish between the lift of vision and the terra firma of fact in human life. The lack of this capacity makes the content of books like Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer*. Its exercise results in books like Plato's *Republic*.