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THE WRITER'S PLIGHT

REREADING good writers renews respect for them. They reach up and beyond the common life, which is the only way of saying something important about it. What is important? Stance in relation to life is the most important thing, and good writers help one to alter for the better one's stance. How do they do it? Imagination is the chief factor, but a close second is knowing how to think.

Imagination makes it possible to put things together, to relate them, in fresh and sometimes inspiring ways. Thinking enables one to do this with skill and exactitude—the right juxtaposition of words. The writer who thinks well gives the reader confidence in him. He can be trusted—trusted, not believed. He shows how a human being can find his way over difficult and often forbidding terrain. He may make mistakes, go off in a wrong direction, but he doesn't conceal his errors behind pieties. He risks exposure and is willing to pick up the tab. He is not a pretender, If he catches himself in some artificial posture, he has pain.

Lately, in pursuit of such matters, we have been dipping into two good writers—Henry Miller (on D. H. Lawrence, a posthumously published book) and James Agee, who wrote scripts for films (*The African Queen* was one), *Let Us Now Prais Famous Men* (a big book about Southern sharecroppers in the 1930s), and letters to a friend. *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (Houghton Mifflin, 1971) gives insight into the development of a fine writer, but it also makes plain that some mystery is involved. Neither great talent nor genius (least of all genius) should be "explained" in terms of environmental circumstances and human influence. It is of some value to tell how the "x" factor appears, but solving for "x" comes close to being the sin against the Holy Ghost. Miller understood this well. In *The World of Lawrence* (Capra, 1980), written in the '30s, Miller said:

> Lawrence is sometimes regarded as the novelist of psychoanalysis. Though he sometimes used its terminology, however, the point of his books will be missed if they are interpreted pathologically from the point of view of a science which replaces the Fates and Furies of classical tragedy with "infantile experience" and makes it, with its power of deciding events before they have happened, as fatal to dramatic interest as any prematurely introduced *deus ex machina.* In Lawrence's novels, an essential capacity of his characters is the ability to wield power over their own fates, or perhaps the ability to abandon themselves to their fates. . . .
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> For Lawrence wrote *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* without accurate knowledge of the psychological jargon. To my mind again it proves that what is fatally wrong about "psychology" is the systematizing, the huge and ridiculous terminology, the hocus-pocus—bad as any other scientific system, and an end in itself—whereas always the really creative individual possesses a "psychology" of his own, the natural, instinctive, intuitive psychology.
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> This is part of what defines Lawrence as the *magic* type that endeavors to operate on man by contagion. His wisdom was attained through personal struggle, and hence he sets up no codes, no laws, no theories for emulation. For each one his own discovery, through "passionate experience." *The kingdom of heaven is within you.* This is the wisdom perpetually repeated in various ways by the highest types of man throughout history; it is an unfolding of the personality. His Holy Ghost, enigmatic concept, is merely his way of referring to the mysterious source of the self, the creative instinct, the individual guide and conscience, which the psychologists have tried to explain in terms of the "position of the self" in relation to the Ego and the Id.
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> The spontaneous, living, individual soul, this is the clue, and the only clue. All the rest is derived.

At twenty-one, while attending Harvard, James Agee wrote to his friend and counselor, James Harold Flye, an Episcopal priest and former

teacher of Agee as a boy, to explain how the desire to write had displaced his other ambitions:

> It sounds conceited; whether it is or not: I'd do anything on earth to become a really great writer. That's as sincere a thing as I've ever said. Do you see, though, where it leads me? In the first place I have no faith to speak of in my native ability to become more than a very minor writer. My intellectual pelvic girdle simply is not Miltonically wide. So, I have, pretty much, to keep same on a stretcher, or more properly a rack, day and night. I've got to make my mind as broad and deep and rich as possible, as quick and fluent as possible; abnormally sympathetic and yet perfectly balanced. At the same time, I've got to strengthen those segments of my talent which are naturally weak; and must work out for myself a way of expressing what I want to write. You see, I should like to parallel, foolish as it sounds, what Shakespeare did. This is, in general—to write primarily about people—giving their emotions and dramas the expression that, because of its beauty and power, will be most; likely to last. But—worse than that: I'd like, in a sense, to combine what Chekhov did with what Shakespeare did—that is, to move from the dim, rather eventless beauty of C, to huge geometric plots such as Lear. And to make this transition without it seeming ridiculous. And to do the whole so that it flows naturally, and yet, so that the whole—words, emotion, characters, situation, etc.—has a discernible symmetry and a very definite *musical* quality—inaccurately speaking—I want to *write symphonies.* That is, characters introduced quietly (as are themes in a symphony, say) will recur in new lights, with new verbal orchestration, will work into counterpoint and get a sort of monstrous grinding beauty—and so on. By now you probably see what I mean at least as well as I do.

Music, after writing, was Agee's second love. He played the piano well. In the summer of 1932 he wrote to Father Flye. Now he was twenty-three, living in New York, with a job on the staff of *Fortune:*

> When you get down here again I'll have my phonograph working—not here but in my office, to play at night. An empty skyscraper is just about an ideal place for it—with the volume it has. Something attracts me very much about playing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony there—with all New York about 600 feet below you, and with that *swell* ode, taking in the whole earth, and with everyone on earth supposedly singing it; all that estranged them and all except joy and the whole common world-love and brotherhood idea forgotten. With Joy speaking over them: O ye millions, I embrace you . . . I kiss all the world . . . and all mankind shall be as brothers beneath thy tender and wide wings.
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> In all this depression over the world, and the whole Communist thing, I get two such feelings as strongly as I have the capacity for them: one the feeling of that music—of a love and pity and joy that nearly floors you, and the other of Swift's sort, when you see the people you love—any mob of them in this block I live in—with a tincture of sickness and cruelty and selfishness in the faces of most of them, sometimes an apparently total and universal *blindness* to kindliness and good and beauty. You have a feeling that they could never be cured and that all effort is misspent—and then you also know the generations of training in pain that have made the evil in them, and know that it would be more than worth dying for. . . .

Well, Agee wanted to be a writer, but the wanting was not as important as what he wanted to say to give articulate expression to his feelings, while guarding against the misuse of human feelings and loyalties. In 1938, two years after his work which resulted, with Walker Evans' extraordinary photographs, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, he wrote to Father Flye about the sharecroppers, saying,

> I'll grant, certainly, plenty are apathetic or brainless, or cynical, or "dishonest" or all these and more, and with plenty of these there would be no use hoping anything, but they are whatever they are through conditions and a world (material and of ideas) which might have been better: this includes all damage done their "moral fibre"; and it would seem to me obvious that it would take a few generations of patience and not of moral blame to clear them off. Too many *causes* are disregarded or thought too lightly of as against a more easy feeling that by and large people get what they deserve, or fairly close to it, and the great majority which lies between John Green and someone entirely "worthless"—is too quickly passed over, as I feel you did, saying in effect, "no doubt some are deprived through misfortune or sickness, or poverty, for which they aren't responsible." These are the same whom the cotton lords describe as shiftless and no good.

The agony of the poor, and their courage, which he came to know at first hand, made him

look into Communism and share some of Marx's views, but he also wrote to the mentor of his youth: "Those I appear to be taking sides with—Communists, scientists, etc., take a lot too much for granted in one direction; I feel you take a lot too much for granted in another; others still more; in the middle, a great majority of people keep on suffering under diseases they never asked for and will never understand." Less than a month later he wrote:

> With basis of *Snobbery on the Left* I have for so long been in intense agreement that I almost regret he wrote it; I wanted to. I hope I still shall as part of some effort to lay out or suggest the terrific and generally overlooked destructiveness which comes through general ambiguities of meanings of words, actions, concepts, most particularly moralideas; and through the narrow-frontedness and lack of self-skepticism of all organized reformers and revolutionists. What hell is worked, for instance, under banner of such words as "love," "loyalty," "honesty," "duty," and their opposites; what are the different meanings of the word "pride"; which seem most destructive of evil and why and how; which may not be; which are not; which are "obligatory," "constructive," and for good? I have had and still have some [reason?] to guard against a form of inverted snobbery in myself, i.e., an innate and automatic respect and humility toward all who are very poor and toward all the unassuming and non-pompous who are old. I'd rather not be without some form of this respect toward them, but it's very dangerous and can easily be false.

Then, in 1947, he wrote:

> Two very differing heroes of mine have died lately: Gandhi and Sergei Eisenstein. Gandhi seems to me the best reason why this is not merely the horrible Dark Age it certainly is, but also one of wonderful accomplishment,—and conceivable hope for the future. Eisenstein is the perfect image of the Promethean type in this time. Well I can't write about them.

Even these few extracts from the letters of James Agee show how right Miller is—"The spontaneous, living, individual soul, this is the clue, and the only clue. All the rest is derived." The world, perhaps, is best defined in terms of its nations and institutions—although we doubt it—but human beings are prior to institutions and should *never* be identified with or by them. The vice of classification is anti-human. Institutions are no more than the necessary compromises we make with our own shortcomings and imperfections, but they don't *define* us. Nothing that can be classified with any finality has much to do with what is real in human beings.

Well, if you can't classify human beings, what can you say about them?

You can say what Dostoevski said about them. Indeed, you can say what James Agee said about them, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* In a way, this book became Agee's obsession. He was twenty-seven when he went to Alabama with Walker Evans to write about "Three Tenant Families." He loved the book but wished that it had not had to *be* a book. It was too important to be just another "book." He loved the people he portrayed and apologized to them for the need to take their pictures. He was fighting from the word go against the culture that made his subjects what they were, made him what he was, and made the relation between them so difficult to achieve in human terms. But they did it.

Agee struggled, as any artist will struggle, to break out of the conventional framework of the time and to say something that could not be lost in the shuffle of culture as usual. He wrote in his Preface:

> The nominal subject is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families.
>
> Actually, the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity.
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> The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera and the printed word. The governing instrument—which is also one of the centers of the subject—is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness.
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> Ultimately, it is intended that this record and analysis be exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched, no relevancy avoided,

which lies within the power of remembrance to maintain, of the intelligence to perceive and of the spirit to persist in.

Of this ultimate intention the present volume is merely portent and fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue. Since it is intended, among other things, as a swindle, an insult, and a corrective, the reader will be wise to bear the nominal subject, and his expectation of its proper treatment, steadily in mind. For that is the subject with which the authors are dealing, throughout. If complications arise, that is because they are trying to deal with it not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously. . . .

This is a *book* only by necessity. More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell.

James Agee smoked too much, drank too much, neglected his health, and died of a heart attack at forty-five. He let the times pull his life out of shape, but he maintained a balance in his mind and heart that puts most of the rest of us to shame. Henry Miller, without doubt, indulged other intoxications. But he said things that needed to be said when nobody else was saying them. For example (in *The World of Lawrence*, written more than forty years ago), he said:

The phrase in my head which keeps repeating itself obsessively is: *no creative men in the world today! Not one!* No oceans, like Shakespeare and Dante, to swim in. Inland seas there may be; great lakes even. But no oceans! Not even a great river—an Amazon, or a Mississippi! Certainly no new oceans. There are, on the other hand, great critics emerging—monstrous, fascinating beings, hideous freaks of nature. Like those rank, perverse plants in the tropics which drain the sun and soil of vitality, men who give themselves up to the examination of life, and of art. Critics, biographers, historians, philosophers, psycho-analysts, statisticians. *All one!*

When I regard the truly formidable, the horrible monstrous activity of these types, the lust with which they slay and devour, I realize that even such "failures" as Rimbaud, Nietzsche, Dostoevski, Van Gogh, Proust, Cézanne, etc., are no longer capable of being spawned. Even as "failures" there was about these men a magnificence! At least they were trying to *do* something. At least they were trying to *utter* something! There was in them the germ of greatness. Not the flower, perhaps—but the germ of something. . . .

Miller speaks for himself, in relation to his subject:

I have tried to make it clear to myself what I think and feel about Lawrence, so that he won't bother me any more. Perhaps everything I have to say could be put in a small paragraph, a sentence even. If I were a great enough individual I should be able to let it go at that and rest content. But apparently I am not. If I were very great I should be able to forget the whole thing and remain silent. But I am neither great nor sensible. It gives me tremendous satisfaction and pleasure to have gone into this thing in such great detail. .

One of the things that came to my mind, as I started writing afresh, is a phrase which I seem to have encountered repeatedly in Lawrence's writings—"what I am *trying* to do." It is very reminiscent of Cezanne who was always trying to *realize* something. It is a phrase which touches me deeply, for the reason, most likely, that I am in the same boat. This *trying* seems to be the creation itself. And it is this effort to go beyond oneself, to surpass, to say, to do the impossible, which makes certain men a subject of eternal debate. It mars everything they do, makes them "failures," as the smooth-tongued critics would say. And yet it seems to me that it is only these men who count, who really affect us and influence us. They strive to go beyond "art" into life again. They come through the other side of art into a world of reality which is too much for them—not simply because they find themselves isolated, but because they are in deep and unknown waters. There are no rules, laws or conventions to guide them. There is only conscience, and this conscience is sadly troubled. They speak two tongues, and one tongue contradicts the other. They are themselves baffled and bewildered. In the vernacular they can make themselves understood, and though they want very much to be understood, yet they are unable to employ this common language where they are deeply concerned. What they most deeply wish to convey to the world is rendered then in a hermeneutic language which estranges them. They are marked out as anomalies, sports, freaks, antisocial, incommunicative beings. And these, by the irony of fate, are the very men who have a supreme desire to communicate with others. It is the saddest plight into which any man can fall.

It is a plight that some writers—usually the best of them—invite.

REVIEW
AN INTERMEDIATE OUTLOOK

THE modern world—the world of thought, that is—seems to be backing into metaphysics from the heights of physical science. This, for some, will be regarded as a climactic development and the beginning of a new and better age; by others it will be seen as a failure of nerve and threaten the abdication of science. The book that inspires this comment or speculation *is Entropy,* by Jeremy Rifkin with Ted Howard (Viking Press, 1980, $10.95), a volume which will appeal to many readers as an elementary text on the Law of Karma, although expressed in the cultural vocabulary of our time. Hazel Henderson calls it "the epitaph of economics," and Willis Harman says: "If we fail to understand it we will not correctly understand the problems of energy supply, pollution, inflation or unemployment." That Rifkin conceives the law of Entropy—the second law of thermodynamics, which declares that the universe is ineluctably running down—in metaphysical as well as physical terms becomes evident toward the end of the book. He says:

> After a long, futile search to find out where we belong in the total scheme of things, the Entropy Law reveals to us a simple truth: that every single act that occurs in the world has been affected by everything that has come before it, just as it, in turn, will have an effect on everything that comes after. Thus, we are each a continuum, embodying in our presence everything that has preceded us, and representing in our own becoming all of the possibilities for everything that is to follow.
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> Because every event that ever was or will be is interconnected, we share an ultimate responsibility for the infinite past and future. What we do in this world reverberates into the remotest corner of the universe, affecting everything else that exists. How we choose to live our lives is not only our own individual concern. It is of concern to everything, because our actions touch everything.

Rifkin goes to some pains to show that the hardly palatable threat of the heat-death of all things, and the continual degradation of order, is ominous only in the framework of modern empiricism and the "progressive" doctrine which insists that we must expand, grow, and acquire, endlessly, or collapse and die. If we start our thinking with the world's finiteness and its now manifest limitations, taking these realities as basic givens of experience, then we can begin to conceive both our selves and nature in another light.

> The whole world is temporary. In its finiteness, we experience our own. In its vulnerability we experience our own.
>
> Yet we desperately search for immortality in this finite world while knowing there is none. There is a nihilism in our search. The finiteness of the world is a constant unpleasant reminder of our own. We tear into everything around us, devouring our fellow creatures and the earth's treasures even while telling ourselves that it is progress we are after. It is, in truth, our immortality we seek. It's as if we were determined to destroy every last reminder of this finite world in the hope of ridding ourselves of the painful awareness of our own temporary nature. . . . Only when we learn to accept the finite nature of the world can we begin to appreciate how precious this gift called the earth really is.
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> There are those among us who are willing to accept the finiteness of the physical world but who believe that the entropic flow is counterbalanced by an ever-expanding stream of psychic order. To these people, the becoming process of life is synonymous with the notion of an ever-growing consciousness. In the Newtonian scheme, human consciousness is perceived as moving on an uphill grade against the downward journey of the entropy flow. Eventually, it is believed, humanity's collective consciousness will expand to a point where it will escape the physical plane altogether, overcoming the Entropy Law in a kind of cosmic metamorphosis. Piercing through the physical veil of existence, the collective human consciousness will then begin a steady ascent into the ethereal world of spiritual enlightenment.

There are various parallels of this idea, given in other terms, in contemporary thought. The most notable, perhaps, is the definition by A. H. Maslow of human health as *transcendence.* Of equal interest are the several anticipations of the emergence of metaphysical thinking during the past century. One example would be the philosophic declarations of Pierre Duhem,

scientist and thinker, whose reflections were presented in *Science* for April 23, 1954. He said:

> Physical theory never gives us the explanation of experimental laws; it never reveals realities hiding under sensible appearances; but the more complete it becomes, the more we apprehend that the logical order in which theory orders experimental laws is the reflection of an ontological order, the more we suspect that the relations it establishes among the data of perception correspond to real relations among things, and the more we feel that theory tends to be a natural classification.

In speaking of the value of physical theory, Duhem added:

> . . . the physicist is compelled to recognize that it would be unreasonable to work for the progress of physical theory if this theory were not the increasingly better defined and more precise reflection of a metaphysics; the belief in an order transcending physics is the sole justification of a physical theory.

This, one could say, is a proposition which Jeremy Rifkin has set out to verify and confirm in his book on the physical theory of entropy, along with presentation of a vast amount of material evidence for a metaphysical reality behind the second law of thermodynamics. He shows how entropy works in the fields of economics, agriculture, transportation, urbanization, military affairs, education, and health, contrasting the present course toward disaster with the vision of a society based upon full recognition of the true conditions of life, with wholehearted adaptation to their requirements. This is of course the new kind of human science, a region filled with uncertainty and problematic issues. Yet here, too, there have been pioneers who foresaw the day when metaphysics would be made the foundation for a better understanding of man. William James, sometimes called the Father of American Psychology, was one who recognized the implicit denial in scientific psychology of essential human qualities and who knew that it would one day have to give way to a candidly metaphysical discipline. In his *Psychology: Briefer Course,* James wrote:

> A psychologist wants to build a *science;* and a science is a system of fixed relations. Wherever there are independent variables, there science stops. So far, then, as our volitions may be independent variables, a scientific psychology must ignore that fact, and treat of them only so far as they are fixed functions. In other words, she must deal with the *general laws* of volition exclusively, with the impulsive and inhibitory character of ideas; with the nature of their appeals to the attention; with the conditions under which effort may arise, etc.; but not with the precise amounts of effort, for these, if our wills be free, are impossible to compute. She thus abstracts from free-will, without necessarily denying its existence. Practically, however, such abstraction is not distinguished from rejection; and most actual psychologists have no hesitation in denying that free-will exists. . . .
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> When, then, we talk of "psychology as a natural science," we must not assume that that means a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground. It means just the reverse; it means a psychology particularly fragile, and into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint, a psychology all of whose elementary assumptions and data must be reconsidered in wider connections and translated into other terms.

Borrowing from the laws of thermodynamics, Rifkin has supplied an intermediate language for evolving the metaphysics of human relations. The language is infected with a hangover from its origins, giving the reader a feeling of inconsistency from time to time. In a chapter toward the end the author says:

> Once we begin to understand the vast social and economic implications of the second law of thermodynamics, we come to understand that our existing world bears absolutely no relationship to the way the world actually works. Our daily lives—our work, our play, our consumption, our very thoughts—lose their certainty, their grounding. We become strangers in a strange land. All of a sudden what used to be a clear and solid reality becomes fantasy, no better contrived than the Wonderland of the looking-glass world visited by Alice.
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> And yet, we resist the new orientation placed upon the world and our lives. Even as we are lured by the wisdom that emanates from an entropic world view, we struggle to keep our minds from being subverted by a vision whose import we can scarcely fathom. This is only natural, for we are being

> challenged to discard the safe and familiar myths that govern our existence. For many, of course, the prevailing myths have already lost their allure. Millions of Americans, some out of choice, others of necessity, are already adopting bits and pieces of the low-entropy philosophy and life-style. Increasingly, high-entropy concepts such as "material progress at any cost" and "bigger is better" no longer command the allegiance of as many inhabitants of the modern technological state as they once did. Some of these alienated heirs of the Newtonian world view will thus naturally welcome the liberation that comes from a shift in reality toward the entropy world view.

We see what Mr. Rifkin means, but taken literally "entropy world view" means the "heat-death" world view, a most unengaging conception. Why not call it the Promethean World View? But this will take time. We cannot jump into a mythic-metaphysical philosophy of life without taking the intermediate steps, using the logic that we have learned from science and had confidence in for lo these many years. There are a great many issues for us to think through, gradually learning to say, instead of negentropy or anti-entropy, the synthesizing capacity of creative intelligence, our Promethean endowment.

COMMENTARY
AN OBSCURE COMPARISON

THIS week's Frontiers begins with a brief reference to *Rhythms of a Himalayan Village* (Harper & Row, $9.95) by Hugh R. Downs. The author spent two years living in Gompa Zhung, located in a valley six days on foot from Tibet, two weeks from India, and five days from any road on which a car can be driven. The people are Sherpas, which means East-People. Westerners think of the Sherpas as bearers and mountain guides, but this is a small part of their lives. They are artists, farmers, and Buddhists.

A theme running through the book is that the Sherpas have a *traditional* culture, which means that they live according to an inherited scheme of meaning, structuring very nearly everything they do. Traditional societies may be conceived of in contrasting ways. In some traditional societies the essential meanings of the inherited culture have been largely forgotten, making the patterns of life a matter of habit. In others, the meanings are continually renewed by reflection. The Sherpas seem to belong to the second class. Mr. Downs says:

> The Latin root of tradition, *tradere*, means to hand over: one of the most valuable characteristics of our species is the ability to pass on our experiences. The knowledge that is handed over in traditional societies is of two sorts. People learn how to make fires, to farm, and to build houses; in addition, they learn something of themselves.
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> Sherpas explicitly recognize this bifurcation of knowledge by referring to outer and inner wealth. Those who have attained inner wealth are rare, even among the Sherpas.

Mr. Downs studied painting with a Buddhist monk. He learned a lot of things, cooking and gardening along with painting techniques. But he discovered no notable secrets. The idea of finding out something special made the monk laugh at him. His book, in any case, seems pretty special—a compendium of Buddhist moral psychology and history, with rather wonderful photographs throughout. For some readers the most interesting thing will be the opportunity provided for comparison of Sherpa ways with life in the West. If there is one thing that can be said with certainty about our civilization, it is that it is non-traditional. But since we are all human beings, there are interesting parallels between East and West. Telling about a ritual in which two men took part, Downs remarks: "Although to one unacquainted with the hierarchical structure of Asian societies, the difference in social status between these two men might indicate inequality, both men regard social status as a fleeting and impermanent illusion. A person proves his substance through the selfless performance of his job, whatever it might be, rather than through his ability to switch jobs." The parallel, quite differently expressed, is found in a review article of a few weeks ago (Oct. 8) which quoted an account of a Chicago agency for giving emergency help to people in crisis (runaways and drug victims). The staff of forty-one persons tried hard to practice "non-hierarchical equal power for every member," but without much success. The writer, however, pointed out that

> the anguish of radical collectives over the idea of equal power derives from a confusion between ends and means. Because the ends for which we value equal power are so rarely achieved in the modern nation-state, we seldom experience a time when equal power is not useful. It therefore easily appears as an end in itself. Traditionally, however, equal power has been seen as a means to other ends.

The story of the Buddha, briefly given by Mr. Downs, concludes under the Bo Tree, where, "in quiet meditation, he found the answer in himself, not in a system."

> *Budh,* in Sanskrit, means to understand or awaken; *buddha* means awakened; so from this point on, he was called the Buddha. The Buddha is the foundation of all the myriad deities in the lamaist pantheon. All represent parts of the awakened mind and therefore are not worshiped, but discovered within oneself.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
AN ELOQUENT FACE

IF we ever had a school—or if we had the energy, the youth, the courage, and the practical know-how to start one—the first picture we would put up on the wall would be a photograph of Abraham Lincoln. The ingredients of a full education are in the face. It contains both the mystery and the reality of a human being. The MANAS editorial sanctum has had a picture of Lincoln on the wall from the very beginning, but the picture is much older than 1948, having been carried around for years by one of the editors. Originally, it was probably cut from a page of the *New York Times Book Review,* perhaps in the 1920s or early 30s. Now, after all that time, it is creased, stained, and mottled, yet its quality hardly diminished. It says a great many things you can't say in words about a human being.

How much better it would be, instead of testing children (or adults) with a Rorschach blot, to ask them to look at that face and tell what thoughts occur.

The occasion for these reflections is the publication of a book of photographs of the Civil War President—*The Face of Lincoln,* compiled and edited by James Mellon, 201 pages, published by Viking at $75.00. Needless to say, we don't have the book, and don't expect to get it, although looking through it would be a treasured experience.

Getting back to the part a picture might play in a school: Surely every youngster who grows up in America needs to say something or write something about Lincoln's face, as well as know and remember something about the part he played in American history. But how do you write about a picture, or a picture book? What do you say besides, just *look* at it!?

Well, the *New York Review of Books* for August 14 has a review-essay which takes off from the Mellon book, and would make a fine answer to this question. One answer, that is. It illustrates some directions in which the imagination might go in writing about a picture—that is, a face. Effective illustrations are indispensable in education. You can't teach much without them. So Lincoln Kirstein's discussion of *The Face of Lincoln* might serve as one illustration of how to write about a face, with several passages quoted from earlier sources giving other responses to Lincoln's face. In one place the reviewer speaks of pictures of the clean-shaven Lincoln, which are least familiar. He tells about the people—including an eleven-year-old girl—who urged him to grow a beard. He did, in 1860, but in 1859 a Wisconsin journalist wrote:

> He looks as if he was made for wading in deep water. He looks like an open-hearted, honest man who has grown sharp in fighting knaves. His face is swarthy with very deep long thought-wrinkles.

Kirstein adds of the beardless Lincoln:

> Searching his face, one finds no hint of discreet narcissism or coquetry. His "ugliness" or asymmetry could be read as a rallying ensign of mid-America, then interpreted as West, new frontiers with endless energy and unsophisticated franchise. His head, topping his height and stance, radiated dark magnetic force. Railsplitter turned townee, a lanky pioneer assumed the black alpaca of the circuit-rider and he appropriated the standard uniform of a professional politician. Had he posed for Avedon, Cecil Beaton, or Karsh of Ottawa, his mask would have cracked their cameras. Cosmetic hype was beyond the lens of Brady or Gardner. John Hay, Lincoln's secretary, watched him staring at an ostentatious fraud; he looked through the man "to the buttons on the back of his coat." As Mellon shrewdly deduced, there are no grins, but while Grant and Sherman fulfill their terrible promises, there is the rising flicker of a smile. Forty seconds or more then required for the photographic process forced rigidity; there are a few blurred hands and faces. A metal head-brace ensured the static pose. What is remarkable in dozens of these pictures is the apparent relaxation in posture which extends to a double portrait with his son Tad.

Well, Mr. Kirstein is remarkably knowledgeable and incredibly skillful—his work far, far beyond what anyone still in school could

do, yet this last comment shows what a noticing intelligence can make of a simple thing like a brace to hold the head still. Such background creates a frame for gems of quotation. Walt Whitman said of Lincoln and his face in 1863:

> I think well of the President. He has a face like a Hoosier Michael Angelo, so awful ugly it becomes beautiful, with its strange mouth, its deep-cut, cries-cross lines, and its doughnut complexion.

To which Kirstein adds:

> Lincoln's self-awareness sprang from biomorphic factors also reflected in his physical stature and the unmeasured love and hate he magnetized. His aura, from the start, was prophetic, his preoccupations metaphysical. Suffering endured stoked his energy with penetration and foresight often hidden from contemporaries. He is now available to us, as never before, through the research of historians and these restored pictures. We come to realize how he put suffering to use; as pressure grew, moral muscle turned Herculean. Life on the frontier, surly litigation, local politics where elementary manners were the custom of the community, comprised civil war in miniature, a post-graduate course in polity which no Yale or Harvard ever offered. At first hand before he was thirty, he was intimate with every condition in small which later he would face as monstrous.

You have to know something about Lincoln to write about his pictures as Kirstein writes. He didn't use the pictures for a crystal ball and dream up what he says. But the pictures have done something marvelous, if intangible, for what he is able to say:

> As we search the photographs, beardless to full-whiskered, we watch a man not forty, who might be ten years younger, develop into an ageless *ancient*, which indeed was what two young secretaries named him. He could be considered no worldly success until relatively late in his career, but he is unlike many failures in that adversity reads less as mischance than as apprenticeship. The superiority of Abraham Lincoln over all other statesmen lies in the limitless dimensions of a conscious self, its capacities and conditions of deployment. This sprang from a nature endowed with prescience, conscience, and power which, as Edmund Wilson wrote, place him as supreme statesman, parallel in gift and genius to the greatest artists and scientists.

Isn't all this making "too much" of Lincoln? No, it isn't. It is the combination of his qualities, so striking and so rare, that drew so much from so many. There cannot be harm in calling extraordinary attention to an extraordinary man, especially now that devotion to mediocrity and comfortable ordinariness is at its height. It will always be important to wonder why the planes and jutting promontories of his face have the power to evoke the words so briefly sampled here. And what do we see in a man's or a woman's eyes, that touches something beyond space or time in ourselves? How or why can we have such a feeling? What does it announce about ourselves, and why are such questions, which can hardly be answered, vital to us all, but especially to the young, to ask?

If we had the habit of prayer, we should most certainly say, "Please, O Principle of Integration, let there be more writers like Lincoln Kirstein, who reveals a human heart and mind without fuss or embarrassment."

A final quotation from his collection is an extract from an address by William H. Herndon, Lincoln's law-partner, after his death:

> Mr. Lincoln's perceptions were slow, cold, precise, and exact. . . . Everything came to him in its precise shape—gravity and color. To some men the world of matter and of man comes ornamented with beauty, life, and action, and hence more or less false and inexact. No lurking illusion—delusion—error, false in itself, and clad for the moment in robes of splendor, woven by the imagination, ever passed unchallenged or undetected over the threshold of his mind. . . . He saw all things through a perfect lens. There was no diffraction or refraction there. . . . He was not impulsive, fanciful, or imaginative, but cold, calm, precise.

Yet he was the man who wrote the Gettysburg Address.

FRONTIERS

Both Food and Meaning

READING, recently, in Hugh R. Downs' *Rhythms of a Himalayan Village* (Harper & Row), in which the author tells of the extraordinary hospitality and friendliness of the people of a Sherpa village in northeastern Nepal, and of their practice of the Buddhist religion, we began to wonder if it would be possible, anywhere in the United States, to make a Sherpa visitor to this country feel equally at home. There are no doubt a few places where they might be comfortable, and understand the ways, if not the words, of their hosts, but how would you locate them? And if you did find one or two such places, it might be indecent to tell where they are.

Then a passage early in Mr. Downs' text led us to Kentucky. It reads:

> Producing food is the basic activity of all Sherpas, every Sherpa, even one involved in business, has at least a small plot to work, and this supplement feeds the family even when they have no money.
>
> Farming feeds other hungers besides that of the stomach. The earth falls under the special protection of a deity called *Sai-nying-po*, and the farmer assists this force quite consciously and quite proudly. Sherpas like to tell about the exploits of their heroes, who are sometimes farmers. Great spiritual quests, which elicit the highest regard among these people, may occur in the midst of mundane activities like plowing a field. Because myth and daily life are interwoven farming provides both food and meaning.

Those last four words—"both food and meaning"—made the clue that recalled John Lane's report of his visit to Wendell Berry's farm in Port Royal, Kentucky, a place which has both food and meaning for its owner, who does other things besides farm. Berry writes poetry and books, his last, *The Unsettling of America*, devoted to matters of food and meaning. The visitor, an Englishman who wrote of his pilgrimage to Kentucky in the July-August *Resurgence*, goes along with Berry and his son to bring in from the field some bales of hay in a wagon drawn by two Belgian mares. He saw that Berry, too, is a protector of the earth:

> As we were leaving the field Wendell pointed out a a distant place where a skirmish of earth at a field entrance marked heavy use. It was not, perhaps, something I would have noticed myself. It was nothing remarkable. Yet Wendell's grief at this destruction, this impairment of the structure of the soil, reminded me in its sorrow of a letter written to the President by Chief Seattle of the Duvamish Tribe: "Every part of this earth is sacred to my people" he had written in 1855. Like other thinking people, Wendell had learned the prophetic wisdom of these words, but his caring was concerned, as Blake would have it, with minute particulars: the stewardship of a farmer for his own fields, the love of a husband for his wife, the concern of a father for his son. For him charity begins at home. "One must begin in one's own life the private solutions that can only in turn become public solutions."

A family of Sherpas would soon feel that Berry was some kind of kinsman, not only to Sherpas, but to stewards and husbandmen the world around. Afterward the English visitor wrote:

> I thought back to the quiet homestead I had left and the care of a man for the earth, the foundation of life and hope. I was listening to the voice of a lover, a celebrant of the materiality of the world; a practical man whose head, whose hands and heart were engaged in the harmonious construction of an ark. A place of virtue or, as Eric Gill would have called it, a cell of good living in the chaos of our world.

A thoughtful American who goes to far-away places is likely to encounter such cells on his travels and to write about them reverentially—they are so hard to find at home. Yet people around the country, animated by the community spirit and a growing sense of responsibility are beginning to make changes in their personal and social lives. A good paper for keeping track of such developments is *Self-Reliance*, published by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance at 1717 18th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20009. The paper comes out every two months and is $8.00 a year. It tells about various community efforts and the people who get them going, and with what success. Under "Progress Reports" in the July-

August issue, for example, we learn that in New Jersey, five families "pooled time and money to put solar collectors on each of their homes, saving about $800 per system over going it alone." Now the organizers of this venture are looking for similar collaborators "for hooking up to one wind generator." These groups are small co-ops and they hope to grow to statewide dimensions.

In Massachusetts

> Boston Urban Gardeners (BUG) processed organic wastes from several sources last summer to produce soil conditioner for 12 urban community gardens. BUG used a forced aeration technique, originally designed for composting sewage sludge. The process produced about 80 cubic yards of compost before the project ended last September.

Two Berkeley (Calif.) men with experience in recycling have secured a contract with their city to operate its dump.

> After winning the city contract, O'Loughlin and Beatty first changed the name of the dump to the Bay Cities Resource and Recovery Depot. They are now employing eight people, many of them working on their first job. The crew is recycling, among other material, seven tons of iron a day. O'Loughlin and Beatty say they could eventually employ as many as 30 people to work on materials gleaned from the city's solid waste. They'd like to repair appliances, reupholster furniture, and put bicycles back on the road. Such programs would not only recycle useful objects; they would provide people with training and experience.
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> There are more ambitious plans for the future. Tons of lumber that used to be pulverized and pushed into the San Francisco Bay are now kept aside. Beatty wants to use wood chips as fuel for the production of steam and electricity. He would also like to make use of the wind that averages 12 to 15 miles per hour across the landfill.

Maine farmers are getting together in an effort to make the state more self-sufficient in food (now this once prosperous farm state imports 75 per cent of what it eats), and a Texas town has found out how to use its sewage to grow earthworms as the ideal processors of compost. These activities may seem rather mundane in comparison with idylls of Nepal and Kentucky, but cities are not idyllic places and need to make new beginnings however they can.