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PROGRESS REPORT

WHEN a great river changes its course, the people who live along its banks experience disaster. Their habits and livelihood are violently interrupted. They may have been warned—that's what we have specialists for, and flood control engineers—but the advice of specialists is seldom heeded. (Look at the way people eat, and notice how often towns grow up in the shadow of volcanoes.) So, when sudden change comes, the pain it brings gets the most attention. There isn't much serious inquiry into causes because the explanation may prove unpalatable. The present apparently irresistible cycle of inflation is an example.

Psychologists would probably say that seeing what is really happening—what it means—requires us to get far enough away so that we can see the factors involved. This seems sensible, but a distant view may lose sight of the details of individual human experience. Explanations from afar may have statistical accuracy, but they are like an astronomer's version of history, which deals in events that occur over millions of years. His history is not human history; what he knows has little effect on our present decisions. The astronomer has magnificent dispassion—something we all need—but his science affords no human penetration or light on what happens in our lives.

What we call understanding overcomes this dilemma. It is gained by learning to do both things at once—make both kinds of observation, from close by and from afar. And the scientist's dispassion is required. Understanding almost never becomes widespread or popular except in retrospect, after interest has subsided and been forgotten. You don't, that is, find much understanding of what is going on in the daily papers. For that, you need the distance of interpretive weeklies or monthlies with small circulation. Of course, their interpretations may not agree. Understanding, after all, is almost always the product of a single mind—an individual way of combining distant and close-up views. But since there are a lot of single minds working at the interpretation of events, sometimes a rough consensus of understanding develops, a general grasp in which a number of interpretations are united in harmony. They fit and support each other. The new book, *Stepping Stones,* put together by Lane de Moll and Gigi Coe, is a fine example of such a consensus concerning the meaning and direction of the vast socio-economic and moral changes now affecting all countries of the world. (There have been other such collections—one good one is *Time Running Out? Best of Resurgence,* made up of reprints of material published during the first ten years of *Resurgence,* including keynoting articles by E. F. Schumacher, Leopold Kohr, and John Seymour; and another, *Blueprint for Survival,* a proposal for Britain's future, but applicable elsewhere, appeared in the *Ecologist* for January, 1972.)

Understanding, of course, is very different from knowing scientific law or fact. Understanding is inseparable from the human qualities of hope, aspiration, direction-finding and direction-choosing. Scientific law and fact are selectively used as tools, but understanding is an essentially subjective reality experienced by individuals and only by individuals, and in different ways. It is, in short, peculiarly human in that understanding is inventive, synthesizing, and cannot be compelled. It is always fresh and alive when it first occurs—even old truths, or what we suppose to be old truths, glow with reanimation when they are marshalled from a new point of view.

The literary form for expressing understanding is the essay. An essay is not a

scientific paper. A scientific paper recites what is held to be an indisputable conclusion or asks for help (other research and confirming or disconfirming experiment) in reaching one. The purpose of the scientific paper is to add to the solid ground of established scientific fact or knowledge.

An essay is addressed to meanings. The essay is the record of a human's thinking about meaning. Joseph Wood Krutch wrote essays, and Lewis Mumford writes them. Occasionally scientists start with facts and launch into essays. Essays are attempts at understanding, often adventurous attempts. They hazard an explication of meanings—they imply positions taken, goals established, attitudes assumed, providing a rationale for purposeful action. It follows that the conclusions of an essay are practically always arguable.

This is commonly thought to be a weakness. What is the good of writing about matters that can't be nailed down? How can you go to the public with a mere *essay* to persuade people that this or that ought to be done? An essay is not a contribution to scholarship. It has no footnotes, weaves no impressive network of supporting facts, but simply presents some thoughts about meaning.

Is this really a weakness? Has the essay unrecognized strength? The tendency of relying wholly on facts—no one does this, of course; uncriticized notions of meaning are always smuggled into purely factual discourses—seems to make deliberate thinking seem unnecessary. We don't need to think any more—we have a computer! It can't be wrong! Of course, this claim may be true. The computer may never be wrong unless it is misused. But when it is not misused all meanings are left out of its calculations. Its competence is in the manipulation of neutral quantities, and what cannot be quantified cannot be computed.

This preface has seemed in order because we want to look at some essays—one in particular—about changes now going on. The great river of mankind seems to be altering its course. The signs are many—the pains upon us. What is really happening to the human race? Is it something to be coped with and endured, as with an earthquake or a tidal wave? Or is it a process to be understood and helped along? These questions may be related to objective happenings, such as the great conflicts of this century, which have had such far-reaching effects. But what about the waves of subjective change? Are human beings causes as well as objects of history? Can they originate? Do they *learn?*

For an initial topic take the issue of war and peace. World War II provoked a lot of essays, probably because for so many that war, as it went on and on, became an erosion of the human sense of meaning. A growing conclusion about war is the senselessness of it. We begin with reasons for going to war, but after a time they become hard to remember, and finally it seems clear that no one really benefitted. War *worsens* mankind.

There are those, then, for whom the decision to try to put a stop to war is a natural result of thinking about it. During World War II some young men in a conscientious objector camp in California issued a little weekly paper called *Pacifica Views.* The title's meaning was plain. Many Californians live in sight of the Pacific—and pacific means *peaceful.* As the war drew to a close one of them set down his ruminations about the war resisters of his generation—where they had come from, what they were thinking, and how their ideas had been changed by the war. Conscientious objectors, this writer pointed out, were originally of two sorts—religious and social (or philosophical). The religious c.o.'s were mostly members of the Peace Churches—Quakers, Brethren, Mennonites—but there were a lot of Methodists, too. (Classification by institutions is always misleading, but it may help a little.) The social or political objectors were usually socialists who felt that Gene Debs had shown the way during World War I. In the c.o.

camp, the writer pointed out, these two quite different minorities found a common ground—their opposition to war. Starting with unrelated assumptions, the men were thrown together under detention and they began to talk things over. The result was perhaps predictable. The men with religious background began to see the logic of the social thinkers. And vice versa. The camps became a melting pot of strongly held convictions. The two groups leavened each other's views, fertilized each other's thinking. As the *Pacifica Views* writer said:

> . . . when revolutionists acknowledge the contradictions between international brotherhood and modern war—even "revolutionary" war—they are moving toward the same balanced position as the socially conscious religious pacifists. Class hatred wanes in the presence of pacifist principles, and a new kind of "radicalism" begins to emerge.

Now comes the conclusion drawn in this brief essay:

> In this synthesis of extremes, we witness the birth of a new Minority. Its members are destined to remain an enigma to the public for some years to come, and they will probably be a source of confusion to both Peace Church pacifists and old line radicals. It is certain that the American Legion will not understand them at all!
>
> What is he, this New Minority Man? Is he a new breed of radical who uses the language of politics, yet scorns its conventional grooves? Is he the exponent of a revolutionary religion, some bizarre sectarian product of the war's hysteria?
>
> No, he is none of these things. And when the Majority finds out who he really is, he will not be popular. For he is working for objectives which are both moral and practical—an impossible synthesis, the Majority will exclaim. His ends will be easily identified as revolutionary but his reasons for working toward them will unite moral content with critical penetration; in short, he will be "dangerous." He will make the spokesmen for the Majority uneasy. They will not be able to laugh off the finger of moral judgments he wags in front of their noses, because he will have a definite program tied to it. But if they listen a while, they will learn that he is not trying to take away their kingdom, that he is inviting them to help gain a better one—better for all. He is the New Revolutionary who does not conform at all to the popular ideas of what a revolutionary ought to be. . . .
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> How surprising and how fine it is, then, for the pacifist to be discovered working alongside the radical who talks of specific revolutionary changes; and how fine a thing it is, also, that those "radicals" who were supposed to care nothing for "moral values" are now revealed in company with pacifists, all laboring together to end war, oppression and inequality.
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> This New Minority must grow!

This was written nearly thirty-five years ago in the spring of 1945—and the generalizations may seem somewhat vague and narrow gauge today, as a result of the numerous transformations which have affected the radical movement since that time. Yet their validity seems clear, the little essay not of negligible value. It would be almost a generation before full-blown Gandhian political thinking infiltrated the West, further transforming the peace movement, and still more years before the currents of pacifist thinking would unite with decentralist, communitarian conceptions, and broaden into a fairly coherent social outlook, having strong environmental and ecological planks, with a "nature" philosophy implicit in the resulting whole. This outlook had, meanwhile, absorbed various infusions of Eastern thought and religion—Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi, and Taoist—which deepened the thinking of the time. Meanwhile the Vietnam War imposed its extreme provocations—leading, on the negative side, mainly to self-disgust for the country as a whole, but also to a positive search for feelings of beinghood beyond the scope of nationality.

Starting in the fifties, sudden impacts of change came one after the other, lickety-split. First there was Senator McCarthy, who was able for a time to intimidate a whole nation with his casually invented lies. The Korean War pleased nobody, got nowhere, except to lay the basis for socio-political disintegration in the Orient and some corruption at home. Then came Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the stormy thrust of environmental criticism which followed. Barry

Commoner pointed out that since 1945, with large-scale introduction of plastics in manufacture, pollution began to become lethal for the planet. Polluted water, polluted beaches, polluted air were matched by polluted thinking about the war in Vietnam, and then there was Mr. Nixon's brazen fiasco and after that the sudden increase in the price of fossil fuels, followed by the onset of a cycle of inflation which, if it continues, will reduce ninety-five per cent of the population to a vast proletariat hardly able to get enough to eat. The conclusion:

We are doing *everything* wrong!

Are there essays that will help us to keep up with the meaning, if any, of all this? Has anyone been able to get far enough away to recognize the shape of a destination emerging in all this confusion, yet remain close enough to the grain of everyday life not to get lost in flights of abstract extrapolation?

There have been dozens of critically useful books, both factual and theoretical, among the latter such impressive studies as Jacques Elull's *The Technological Society* and Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man.* With a little looking around, one could name a number of others of this sort, but while they have their value as shock treatment, such books don't keep us up with the changes in human beings. They tell us only what is happening—being done to people as objects.

What are the same human beings, some of them, doing as subjects? Understanding would mean seeing how what they are doing fits with what is happening—how we are attempting to get back into control of our lives—and this means deciding, step by step, what sort of life would be one that we *can* control.

There is one essayist who has done remarkably well in this area—making a report on contemporary thinking and feeling, and on the actions to which it leads. Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture*, published in 1969, drew together many of the tenuous and fragile threads of psychological change in the United States. He undertook a most difficult enterprise identifying what is healthful, wholesome, and constructive in a scene filled with excesses, extravagances, and self-indulgent extremes. The good things going on beneath the surface of a mass society are sometimes almost impossible to get at. If any one individual begins to do something that is intuitively appealing, humanly serviceable, and obviously worthy of some kind of emulation, hardly a month or two goes by before someone else has copied and packaged the idea for peddling in the growth centers or even on newsstands and in the stores. Yet the good thing was there and evident at the beginning, and is perhaps still there, even though people who know its value have stopped naming it in self-defense. Finally, despite all the flotsam carried on the waves of change, it is possible to realize that differing good things happening are also joining at the level of their roots, making common cause and sharing their strength and inspiration.

Roszak's new book, *Person/Planet* (Doubleday, $10.95) matures some of the hopes, continues some of the doubts, and adds to the evidence presented in *Counter Culture.* It is more of an essay than the earlier work, and therefore perhaps more valuable. It may not be more "acceptable," since what the author attempts is again very difficult. Roszak is like an experienced educator who tries to comfort the distracted and anxious parents of an adolescent, and at the same time to give what explanation he can for the behavior of their incomprehensible child. He is saying, in a number of ways, There may be a swan in that ugly duckling you're so worried about!—and then adding: Would you know a real swan if one comes along? The essay quality runs all through the book. Mr. Roszak writes in an open attempt to thread the turmoil of modern life with skeins of meaning, not claiming to have great certainty about anything in particular, but making his own decisions and giving his reasons. The book is thus intensely personal, yet it also has the admirable impersonality of controlled emotions

and a disciplined and impartial mind. There is tenderness all through, but no sentimentality.

Roszak is a historian; for him history is the study of the dreams and longings of human beings, and of the various ways in which they have been confined. The important action to study is how people try to free themselves in order to realize their dreams.

Historians, naturally, write back-and-forth books. They know enough about the past—past greatness, past follies, past insight, past stupidities—to be able to light up the present by this exploration of past history. It is all in behalf of going forth into the future with vision armed by common sense.

One question seems asked again and again in *Person/Planet: What would we be doing if we knew what we were doing?* The things that a few people are already doing seem to work pretty well. What, then, do these people know?

This can hardly be told, of course. What people actually know is beyond speech, as both Lao tse and Kierkegaard have pointed out. Yet an artful approach remains possible. You try to see what is timeless in what they do, and if you can say something about that, it may prove an aphorism worth remembering. When this sort of essay-thinking is pursued, great simplicities sometimes emerge, and when distilled from obsenation of the current scene they do not seem hackneyed at all. This is a way of giving new life to the Eternal Verities, which prevents people from saying they have heard about them before. Oh *that,* is the familiar reflex. Yet "that" may be the truth and the heart of the matter.

A true essayist is one who enables us to see old truth in a fresh setting, perhaps with a sense of personal discovery. One quotation from this book must suffice here—a passage on the present longing for and pursuit of self-discovery:

> Our evaluation of these experiments in self-discovery ultimately depends upon how we interpret the moral and spiritual need that underlies them. If that need is seen as essentially healthy and necessary, if we can recognize in it the emergence of a popular appetite for the self-knowledge that has always been the prerequisite for a wise and humane community, then perhaps we can forgive these early personalist gestures their awkwardness and repetitiousness. After all, we deal here with an experience that must be undergone in each person's life: a story many times to be repeated, and inevitably by many who can only stammer. After a fashion which nobody could have foreseen, the situational groups, the new therapies and religions, the counseling encounters are the Socratic spirit of philosophy carried into the streets and the market place—of course, with too few masters like Socrates himself to guide the inquiry, with too many profiteering sophists ready to move in on the demand. But nothing will do more to reduce this historical movement to a mere passing fad than the crushing intolerance of intellectuals who will hear nothing less from their fellow human beings than literary glories, or the fickle attention of journalists for whom self-discovery (like Black Power, women's liberation, ecology, and a score of causes before it) must soon become yesterday's news. A journalist's ink, we must remember, is nine parts embalming fluid. . . .
>
> I suggest that the ethos of self-discovery is now passing through [an] early stage of development, filtering into the popular consciousness along many crude and crooked channels that also offend cultivated tastes. But riding this turbulent wave is a deepening sense of personhood which is apt to become the politics of the postindustrial revolution, the crisis that awaits us beyond the withering away of megalopolis and its ecocidal economics.

Person/Planet is subtitled "The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society."

REVIEW
ON READING AND WRITING

GOOD books sometimes provoke questions which ordinary reading fails to raise. This may be partly the result of the usual habits of reading. The present-day reader seldom gives a book his full attention, seldom takes the writer seriously. He knows that not many writers deserve to be taken seriously, which means, of course, that there are now far too many books and that reading is often little more than a nervous habit maintained by the desire to "keep up," or to pass the time in a respectable way.

But a really good book has the power to cut through these superficial layers of the mind and enlist our capacity to think. This is because the work of a fine writer puts together things we have been thinking about inadequately, reaching conclusions that illuminate. A single sentence may hit the mark so impressively that we feel driven to go back and read the preceding pages to see how the writer got there. Great writers oblige us to become serious readers. We can't understand them without doing so.

What is understanding? It is a transformation that takes place in the mind. The world is made a bit more orderly as a result. There is probably no such thing as *final* understanding, since to know "everything" would mean a stop to knowing, and that—if you think about it—would be an awful fate. But we know that there are successive levels of partial although comprehensive understanding. This must be so, or words such as competence and maturity would have no meaning. A human may be quite capable in some ways but not in others. Otherwise we couldn't formulate and set goals of achievement.

Back to the very good book. We have accounted for its excellence and why we are led to read it carefully, but what may or should result? Do we, the day after reading a great book, feel in some way transformed? This sometimes happens. Gandhi told of the effect on him of reading passages in Tolstoy and Ruskin, but we need to add that Gandhi was a man who answers to John Schaar's definition of a great actor—one who, when he grasps the meaning of a true idea, feels an overwhelming need to act on it. When the great actor realizes a truth, it becomes a part of his being. There is for such individuals little distinction between knowing and acting.

This, we are obliged to note, doesn't really have much to do with reading books, but the point is that such individuals, when they do read, view the resulting discoveries with the same gravity with which they respond to all other vital experience. And such individuals, again, soon learn the high cost of fuzzy or ineffectual thinking since they have the habit of acting on their thinking. A power of mind comes naturally as the result.

Can we generalize about these matters? How, in the case of a fine writer and a responsive reader, does the influence work? What is the best a writer can do, and what, in principle, should the reader attempt?

Tom Paine's fiery essay, *Common Sense*, may serve as an example. Paine was a superb writer and he wanted to tell the American people, the colonists, why it was important for them to cut their ties with the mother country. For many of the settlers in the New World, the prospect of revolt against England presented a conflict of cherished values. They had been hurt in two ways by the policies of the king and the parliament. Their property rights had been invaded and their dignity as self-determining persons had been reduced. These are extreme provocations which together affect both sides of human nature. On the other hand, the king of England was traditionally *in loco parentis* to his people, wherever they were. The idea of revolution violated the centuries-old reverence of Englishmen for their sovereign.

What did Paine do? He set about to demonstrate what John Adams would declare almost a half-century later: that the revolution was

already accomplished in the hearts and minds of the people before the first shot was fired. What did this mean? It meant that the colonists had become self-reliant and omni-competent as a result of their experience in coping with frontier life. It meant that they had gained the habit of making their own decisions. It meant that they were grown-up men and women. It meant that the umbilicus that united them with their English past had been severed by the way they lived their lives. Paine made them realize this, using language they could understand. He awoke them to their *sense* of independence and put two and two together before their eyes. You're men, aren't you? he said. Not children bound to a rascally king by old-world apron-strings! A sort of By-Jupiter-he's-*right*! response came from his readers—who were numerous enough to swing the balance in public opinion, as George Washington noted after the war was over and the colonies had become an independent nation.

How did Paine do it? He practiced an art of generalization which touched nerves of self-awareness. He knew the modes of people's lives and thinking in that time, and he had the passwords for entering their minds. To people used to hauling their own water, chopping their own wood, growing their own food, and managing their own communities, he said:

> In England a king hath little more to do than to make war and give away places; which in plain terms is to impoverish the nation and set it together by the ears. A pretty business indeed for a man to be allowed eight hundred thousand sterling a year for, and worshipped into the bargain!

What man of common sense could fail to get the point? Paine also said:

> Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

What man of concern for his fellows could remain deaf to this appeal?

But how could the few generalizations possible in a brief pamphlet evoke such extraordinary response? He compelled his readers to take him seriously. Writing on this question, Bernard Bailyn gives an explanation we are inclined to adopt:

> The great intellectual force of *Common Sense* lay not in its close argumentation on specific points but in its reversal of the presumptions that underlay the arguments, a reversal that forced thoughtful readers to consider, not so much a point here and a conclusion there, but a wholly new way of looking at the entire range of problems involved.

That is what only a few generalizations can do, when they are made at the right time and reach readers who take them seriously. A familiar generalization by Victor Hugo is to the point: "There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world; and that is an idea whose time has come."

By what means do generalizations affect the mind? Well, a generalization is an idea which backs off from experience—any particular experience—in order to contain or name an *order* of experience. If it backs off too far, its logic, even if elegant and valid, becomes weak. We cannot *feel* its impact. Great writing includes generalizations which hold our attention while lighting up and relating much that we had not noticed or thought of. In other words, it spurs some exercise of imagination by the reader, who begins to fill in the generalization with recollections and particular experiences of his own. In short, he *thinks.*

What gives life to generalizations? Apt metaphors and similes help. Then there is the sort of generalization called allegory or myth. One thinks, for example, of Dostoevsky's Legend of the Grand Inquisitor. He invented a happening in sixteenth-century Spain as a way of getting at the mind-control of managerial tyranny in its historic form of priestcraft. Has anyone ever set on paper so searching an analysis of human nature, so revealing an account of its weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and of the justifications men make

for undertaking to control the moral decisions of others, through means foul as well as fair?

All the major problems presented by human relations seem implicit in this tale of a few pages in *The Brothers Karamazov.* The Grand Inquisitor was the most astute of the behavioral scientists, you could say, the model for all subsequent engineers of consent or administrators of the total welfare state. The modern advertising agency is an institutional neophyte by comparison with the expertise of the Inquisitor's approach to what he claimed to be human welfare.

In how many ways are the old man's self-justifications now echoed in plausible explanations for the careful regulation of other people's hopes, wants, expectations, and dreams?

You—the Inquisitor said to the returned Jesus—you require of these poor, copy-cat human beings that they turn into *heroes,* and where is the evidence that they are in any way capable of this?

The charge is something like that of the Chorus to the Titan in *Prometheus Bound:* Didn't you *know* that those sheep-like people to whom you brought the fire of mind and accompanying moral responsibility—didn't you know they weren't *ready* for such burdens? And Prometheus replied, Yes, I knew. But I could not bear, he in effect added, to leave them to continue as sheep. The condition was intolerable.

What is the long-term effect on mankind of having such stories to tell to one another, to wonder about across centuries and millennia? Does anyone know? It is better simply to ask: What would we be without them?

Or, in place of an answer, to repeat Olive Schreiner's beautiful "dream" of the Hunter—a story which lays a wreath of tender compassion on the open grave of the still-living Prometheus—the god immortal in pain?

What is the need of the present? Another cycle of heroic literature. How is this begun? Only a fresh generation of heroic writers can decide.

COMMENTARY
A SCIENCE OF MAN?

AN illusion is a misleading appearance. Since from practical experience we know that we are often deceived by appearances, which leads to painful and costly mistakes, a large part of education is devoted to exposing illusions.

Science is a systematic attempt to define the realities which lie behind illusions. The most familiar example of the successful practice of science is Copernicus' showing that the earth moves around the sun, and that the apparent passage of the sun around the earth—across the sky every day—is an illusion. This discovery had a far-reaching effect. A very powerful religion which had linked its claims to certainty with the idea that the sun moves around the earth was shaken to its foundations by the heliocentric theory. Not until 1835—two hundred years after Galileo's proof of the Copernican doctrine—was this theory removed from the *Index Expurgatorius,* which listed the books that the Catholic Church forbade its followers to read.

Today, however, it is evident that science has itself spread a number of illusions. While practically everyone agrees that the earth moves around the sun, the account science gives of the nature of man is plainly misleading. The claim that "the human experience of willing and choosing is an illusion" subverts the meaning of our lives. The claim is false, yet continues to be made. A large part of present-day learning theory as applied in the schools is actually based on this claim (see the "Children" article).

How is it possible that so many psychologists and educators could be fooled by such an idea? The answer has to be that there is *some* truth in it. Up to a point, the behaviorists are right. But beyond that point their claims about human nature become not only mistakes but are anti-human in effect. During the middle years of this century a small band of psychologists made heroic efforts to win recognition for the reality of the willing and choosing intelligence of human beings. The pioneer of this effort was Abraham Maslow, who died in 1970. Much of his writing was devoted to emancipating psychology from the illusion that man is "nothing but" a collection of conditioned reflexes. The fruit of his work is that man is *both* conditioned (governed by illusions) and free. This seems the only usable foundation for a science of man.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THIS AND THAT, HERE AND THERE

WE try to read regularly John Ball's column—which comes out weekly in *Peace News*—because it has items like this:

> I'm tempted to leap into the burgeoning *Star Wars* debate, but hesitate in the face of the inevitable charges of frivolity that would descend on my head. . . . So I'll content myself with pointing out that the most popular characters in the film, with every child who's seen it whom I've talked to (and I don't know any children over the age of six who haven't seen it, so it's a fair enough sample) are the humanoid robot C3P10, the non-humanoid robot R2D2, and a seven-foot-high hairy anthropoid, Wookie Chewbacca—all non-human, the kind of characters who'd make natural villains in Dr. Who and a thousand horror films. I submit that adds up to a step in the right direction.

A little more should probably be said about this, but it might dull John Ball's frivolity.

John Holt's paper, *Growing Without Schooling,* is getting very rich in good material. He has the desirable kind of naïveté that insists on looking at what goes on in a very direct way. For example, this is the last half of a discussion of B. F. Skinner in *GWS* No. 5:

> In a recent magazine article Skinner asks sadly why we don't use what we already know about controlling human behavior. Oh, but Professor, we do! The trouble is that the "we" who are doing this controlling—military and political leaders, big businesses, advertising men and propagandists, the bosses of the mass media, tend to be people that Skinner (and I) do not much like or agree with. They do not seem to be particularly interested in using their power over human behavior to make a better world—though they probably have high-sounding words to justify whatever they want and do. They are (of all things!) mostly concerned to keep what power they have, and if possible to get even more. And any little tricks that Skinner and his equally woolly-minded behavior-modifying colleagues can think of to control human behavior, these people will be delighted to take over. Go, Professor, go!
>
> What we (and he) would do better to think about is how to help people gain better control over their own behavior, and to resist better all those other people—leaders, bosses, and experts of all kinds—who are trying to control it. This is one part of what GWS is about.
>
> Let me now answer a question that no one has yet asked, but that some surely will. Why bother to condemn Skinner in GWS? What have his ideas, good or bad, to do with taking children out of school?
>
> Just this. Everywhere the schools say (often in a court to which they have brought some unschooling parents [parents determined to teach their children at home]), "We are the only people who know anything about teaching children. Unless you do it our way, you're doing it the wrong way." But their ways of teaching are heavily influenced by Skinner's theories. Many schools and more every year, admit, no, *boast* that they are using behavior modification techniques in their teaching. So anything we can do to show that behavior modification and operant conditioning are the inventions of an essentially shallow and second rate thinker may some day help people to persuade some court to let them teach their children at home.

What does "operant conditioning" mean?

This is explained in the first half of the item, where Holt points out that "behavior modification" is no novelty despite the fancy language used to describe it:

> The idea of using bribes and threats, rewards and punishments, to get people to do what we want, is very old, and is not made new by calling these rewards and punishments "positive and negative reinforcements."
>
> On the other hand, operant conditioning is a new invention, or at least a very new twist on an old one. It is a way of getting other people (or dogs, rats, pigeons, etc.) to do what you want, without ever showing or telling them what you want. . . . If you are watching human beings, and reward them every time they change their behavior, even in the slightest degree, in the direction of something you want them to do, after a while they will be doing that something you want, without your ever having told them to do it, and, what is even more important (and sinister), without their ever even having *decided* to do it. This is part of what Skinner means when he says, as he does all the time, that the human experience of willing and choosing is an illusion—all that has happened (he claims) is that without being aware of it

> we have been getting some kinds of reinforcements—from the outside. Control those rewards and punishments, he says, and you control human behavior.

This, as John Holt says, is very old stuff. We recall the story of an ancient conqueror who, in order to subdue a rebellious population he had invaded, instructed his ministers to make a lot of luxuries and dissipations easily available to the people. It worked. They no longer thought of any reason to resist his decrees. They were having too good a time.

The conqueror was a practical man who exploited what he had observed about the weaknesses of human nature. William Randolph Hearst was a practical man who wanted to sell people papers. So he added plenty of mental dissipations to a scatter of distorted and diluted news and his high-sounding editorials. This, too, worked for a long time. It works for other publishers today.

Serious theoreticians sometimes encounter the realities of "behavior modification" in a way that makes them stop theorizing. Diderot found himself leaning toward Skinner's view of human nature (by no means a new one) and finally decided that he had better keep still unless he had something more constructive to say. As Carl Becker relates in *Every Man His Own Historian:*

> This was the dilemma, that if the conclusions of Diderot the speculative philosopher were valid, the aspirations of Diderot the moral man, all the vital purposes and sustaining hopes of his life, were but as the substance of a dream. For reason told him that man was after all but a speck of sentient dust, a chance deposit on the surface of the world, the necessary product of the same purposeless forces that build up a crystal or dissolve granite. Aspiration, love and hope, sympathy, the belief in virtue itself,—what were these but the refined products of mechanical processes, spiritual perfumes, as it were, arising from the alternate waste and repair of brain tissue? Freedom was surely a chimera if the will could be defined as "the last impulse of desire and aversion."

That's what Skinner says, isn't it? Placate desire and you have positive reinforcement—use aversion to make people negative in some directions.

Skinner and all those practical people who want bigger markets and more impulse buying have adopted Diderot's theory of human nature. They chop human beings off at about the pants pockets and deal only with the grossest motivations. The higher ones, they claim, don't exist. We are indeed "beyond freedom and dignity" in their hands.

Educators who think this way must also believe that there is no such thing as "moral" education. Yet common sense points out that the most important purpose of teaching is the transfer from outside to within the human being of the reasons for self-control, work, and the pursuit of what is good. The behaviorists, if they are true to their theory, will tell you that this is impossible, ridiculous, not worth any attention. There's nothing there, they say. But Diderot had another view. Becker, in a delightful passage, imagines what went on in the French philosophe's head when he was composing a treatise he finally decided to suppress:

> This very morning, perhaps, he committed to cold paper that desolating doctrine about the will,—"last impulse of desire and aversion." And what is the moral instruction which this philosophy inspires him to convey to his daughter in the afternoon? Something original, surely, something profound, at the very least something unconventional? Not at all. Excellent bourgeois that he is, he tells her to be a good girl!

Well, there is another side to this question. A pleasant atmosphere in the school room and a friendly teacher are wholly desirable "operant conditioning." It has its place, and rewards for good work and staying after school for laziness are not immoral. But just look around to see the results of systematic indoctrination in the idea that humans have no motive unrelated to the pleasure principle!

FRONTIERS

The Question of the Age(s)

WHAT is the *real* frontier, these days? The question is perilous. The meaning of an epoch is seldom disclosed to the actors on the scene. Looking back through history, we have a far better chance of saying what really happened in the past than those who were present. A few sages may have known what they were doing, but they were seldom understood when they tried to explain.

The real frontier may now lie in the area of thought which attempts at the same time to recognize both the extreme difficulty of finding out the meaning of our lives and the necessity of making the effort. Who are the ones who succeed best at this? Well, they are the artists. They may not be known as artists, but they do the work of artists.

Consider the writing of Loren Eiseley, who was, as W. H. Auden says in his introduction to Eiseley's *The Star Thrower,* "an archaeologist, an anthropologist, and a naturalist." Auden points out that Eiseley was first of all a human being, before he was any of these other things. His interest was in the art of life. His work makes this quite plain. He was, then, one of the great frontiersmen of our time—those who spoke to us most clearly about the meaning of our lives. This was what he cared about—all the rest was raw material and technique.

One of the chapters in *The Star Thrower* (a collection of Eiseley's writings from varied sources) is called "Walden: Thoreau's Unfinished Business," and we soon see the character of Eiseley's inquiry. It begins:

> The life of Henry David Thoreau has been thoroughly explored for almost a century by critics and biographers, yet the mystery of this untraveled man who read travel literature has nowhere been better expressed than by his own old walking companion Ellery Channing, who once wrote: "I have never been able to understand what he meant by his life. Why was he so disappointed with everybody else? Why was he so interested in the river and the woods? . . . Something peculiar here I judge."
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> If Channing, his personal friend, was mystified, it is only to be expected that as Thoreau's literary stature has grown, the ever-present enigma of his life and thought has grown with it. Wright Morris, the distinguished novelist and critic, has asked, almost savagely, the same question in another form. Putting Channing's question in a less personal but more formidable and timeless literary context he ventures, quoting from Thoreau who spent two years upon the Walden experiment and then abandoned it, "If we are alive let us go about our business." "But," counters Morris brutally, "what business?" Thoreau fails to inform us. In the words of Morris, Walden was the opening chapter of a life, one that enthralls us, but with the remaining chapters missing.
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> For more than a decade after *Walden* was composed, Thoreau continued his intensive exploration of Concord, its inhabitants and its fields, but upon the "business" for which he left Walden he is oddly cryptic. Once, it is true, he muses in his journal that "the utmost possible novelty would be the difference between me and myself a year ago." He must then have been about some business, even though the perceptive critic Morris felt he had already performed it and was at loose ends and groping. The truth is that the critic, in a timeless sense, can be right and in another way wrong, for looking is in itself the business of art.

So, for the balance of this essay, Loren Eiseley "looks" at Thoreau, discerning a few hints of what Thoreau's business might have been, but he does not try to tell us about it in so many words. He will not diminish whatever it was by attempting definition. Was there ever a greater darkness to hide incommensurable realities than precise definition?

Why does the artist avoid flat-out explanation? Because he will not kill the thing he loves. He will not use either the sword of scientific objectification or the kiss of surface sentiment. He does something else, which Joseph Wood Krutch has explained with simple clarity:

> The best and most effective works of art may sometimes be those in which the author is in pursuit of a truth but the only reason for composing a novel or a play instead of a treatise is that the author is

> unwilling to reduce to a formula an insight which he can present only through a concrete situation whose implications he can sense but only sense. Once the meaning of a work of art can be adequately stated in abstract terms it ceases to have any *raison d'être.* It has ceased to be truer than philosophy just so long as—and no longer than—there are truths which elude formulation into laws.

In short, artists are a species of angel unwilling to rush in where the coiners of slogans and the composers of learned treatises dare to tread. What is it that restrain the artist? Whence his dislike or suspicion of formulas? Formulas are so comforting.

Loren Eiseley, the artist, settles for questions rather than answers. In the conclusion of his essay on Thoreau he says:

> A hundred years after his death people were still trying to understand what he was about. They were still trying to get both eyes open. They were still trying to understand that the town surveyor had brought something to share with his fellows, something that, if they partook of it, might transpose them to another world. . . .
>
> How then should the artist see? By an eye applied to a knothole? By a magnification of sand-filled gloves washed up on a beach? Could this be the solitary business that led Thoreau on his deathbed to mutter, whether in irony or confusion, "one world at a time"?
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> This is the terror of our age. How should we see? In what world are we? For we have fallen out of nature and see sometimes more and sometimes less.

We live in an age when outraged nature is crying out, saying that we have been blind for too long. The question, then, is: How can we begin to see more clearly without becoming blind to what our chosen focus leaves out? How can we recognize simultaneously both figure and ground?

The question is plainly metaphysical, and replies are both dangerous and necessary. But they are beginning to come in.