VOLUME XXXII, NO. 19
MAY 9,1979

A MAN OF RICHES

FOR how many generations has modern man regarded Claudius Ptolemy as an ignorant old Greek who thought that the sun revolved about the earth, a symbol of the darkness that would be dispelled by Copernicus, after whose demonstrations the achievements of the human race began to be worth talking about? Biographers and historians of science, it is true, are more thoughtful in their treatment of Ptolemy—Dampier, for one, noting that the geocentric theory "was an immense advance over the ideas which preceded it," while the *Britannica* article devotes more than three pages to his mathematical achievements, and E. A. Burtt notes that Ptolemy declared for the same methodology that Copernicus used—claiming that "it is legitimate to interpret the facts of astronomy by the simplest geometrical scheme which will 'save the phenomena,' no matter whose metaphysics might be upset."

Yet this faint praise has had little effect. Ptolemy was *wrong* and Copernicus was *right;* look at all the wonders of science and modern civilization which blossomed after Kepler and Galileo and Newton completed the science of physics—the classic mechanistic physics which ruled until the time of Albert Einstein. Well, yes. But is this immeasurable pride in the achievements of the pioneers of the modern age entirely justified? That is, should we go on saying simply that Ptolemy was wrong and Copernicus right, and feeling complacent about how much smarter and better off we are than people who lived two thousand years ago? A modern physicist recently wrote that "the one thing I am sure of, beyond any doubt, is that the science of the present will look as antiquated to our successors as much of nineteenth-century science looks to us now." This seems a way of saying that, like it or not, we are all Ptolemaists in some respects, and will continue to be. The Copernican revolution may have been a Great Divide in the history of civilization, but other and perhaps greater divides await us in the future. Let's not be so cocky about the progress of a few men of genius were able to accomplish in our behalf.

An article in *Technology Review* for last November brought another dimension of the Ptolemy-Copernicus contrast into view. The writer, Anthony Aveni, who teaches astronomy at Colgate University, compares Old and New World "Naked-Eye Astronomy" (without telescopes), beginning with a quotation from Ptolemy on how he felt looking up at the sky: "In studying the convoluted orbits of the stars," he said, "my feet do not touch the earth, and seated at the table of Zeus himself, I am nurtured with celestial ambrosia."

Which is more important: being "right" with Copernicus because we learned about him in high school, or being able to feel as Ptolemy felt? The question may involve a mixture of values, but is nonetheless worth asking. The *next* Copernican revolution may oblige us to deal with other questions of this sort, one after another. At issue is the quality, the *intensity*, of life, and how it pervades and harmonizes what we do. Dr. Aveni says things worth repeating here:

> Though Ptolemy wrote that phrase two millennia ago, it no doubt aptly expresses the feeling any ancient sky watcher would have experienced when he turned his gaze to the stars and remained transfixed long enough to see the sublime precision of celestial motion unfold. For modern folk the majesty of the firmament is unveiled only through the mastery of a complex instrumentation—one of the products of a technological revolution unsurpassed in human history. Dependent upon our modern sense-extenders, yet awed by the remains of the ancient world, we ask, how could our forebears have constructed the pyramids, erected the statues on Easter Island or carved the Olmec heads without technological assistance? How could they have attained their scientific achievements without the aid of modern machinery? Some of us feel compelled to attribute their mighty endeavors to outsiders, ancient astronauts who long ago traversed the galaxy bearing us the gift of a great science and technology which has since vanished from the pages of history.

> But the loss may be in ourselves. Ancient records tell us that our predecessors scaled great astronomical heights. Because the heavens were a part of their lives, they labored attentively to follow their gods and goddesses, who were symbolized by the sun and the moon, the planets and the stars. They enjoyed an intimate contact with nature—a contact which technology forbids us by creating the artificial environment in which we play out our lives. Indeed, ancient astronomers were nurtured with celestial ambrosia only because they pulled up to the table and helped themselves. In the Old World of the Mediterranean, they created most of the astronomy with which we as historians are familiar. On the American continent, other races, entirely separate from those of the Old World, also created a sophisticated system an astronomy of equal brilliance.

Another comparison made by Dr. Aveni is of interest:

> For Ptolemy (A.D. 150), the heavens consisted of bodies orbiting the earth in divine circular paths. Though his views were modified during the Renaissance (the sun was placed at the center), the orbital concept persists in modern astronomy. The Maya, on the other hand, took the universe to consist of interlocking time cycles, two of which are captured by the maze of numbers (represented by dots and bars) in the lunar-eclipse and Venus tables of the Dresden Codex (A D 1200).

Both the accuracy and the complexity of the old New World astronomy are impressive, also its notable usefulness to the Indians, serving agriculture as well as religion. Mayas, Aztecs, Incas, the Hopi and Navajo of Arizona all practiced naked-eye astronomy. They found out what, for their purposes, they needed to know. A passage in Miguel León-Portilla's *Aztec Thought and Culture* will illustrate the intellectual level of the inheritors of the Toltec culture in Mexico:

> The cosmology of the Nahuas is expressed in numerous myths which, like the eternal fire of Heraclitus and the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle, embody observations of universal validity. Attempting to explain the temporal origin of the universe and the nature of its spatial structure, the *tlamatinime* [wise men] clothed their thoughts in the rich symbolism of the very myths which they were in the process of modifying in accordance with their rational discoveries. . . . In mathematics and astronomy, the Nahuatl wise men found direct observation of phenomena necessary to their calculations. It is said that the astronomers used their hands in the manner of sextants to measure the movements of the stars. They could calculate with precision the exact time the sun would rise and set each day. They had an accurate calendar of years and months and an astrology based on a complex of days and hours which they used for casting horoscopes.

This reference to astrology recalls the comment of a scholar that "as far as the Maya were concerned, astronomy was astrology," but, as Aveni remarks, their methods were scientific:

> To be sure, the regularities exhibited by the systematic recording of naked-eye observations of the moon and of Venus gave rise automatically to a scheme for predicting their motion. And the system evolved into a self-correcting, self-cleansing mechanism able to produce predictions of ever greater refinement because it was nourished by continued observation of the related events. In this sense, both the Maya and the Old World astronomers were practicing basic science. For the latter, the scientific explanation of the universe was couched in a framework of interlocking orbits, whereas the former strove for celestial harmony by appealing to the cyclical nature of time.

What if we had been born among the Mayas or the Nahuas of a thousand years ago? Would we have been second-rate humans because the Newtonian heliocentric system was unknown to us? León-Portilla speaks of how the culture of that time was shaped:

> The Nahuatl wise men were not scientists in the modern sense of the word, but in their effort to develop "faces and hearts" [individuation] they conceived as systems a social order, an ethical code, and a theory of history, art, and education. In their totality these institutions constituted the basic foundation of all forms of human life. . . . The Nahuas had two words for education: *Tlacahuapahualiztli*, "the art of strengthening or bringing up men," and *Neixtlamachiliszili*, "the act of giving wisdom to the face." The written sources on the educational practices of the Nahuas are so abundant that a book could be written on that subject alone. Such a book might reconstruct—as did Jaeger's *Paideia* for the ancient Greeks—through the educational system all the richness and profundity of the Nahuatl concept of man.

The school of higher learning for Nahuatl youth was called the *Calmecac,* where instruction was given in the "philosophical" songs of the *tlamatinime* and the arts of chronology and astrology. "This training," Leon-Portilla says, "and the mathematical calculations required by their astronomical investigations prepared the Nahuatl students to attain the supreme level of rational abstraction."

> In teaching all these things, the *tlamatinime* were carrying out their mission of "making wise the countenances of others." On the other hand, the rigidity of life in the *Calmecac* was intended to strengthen the dynamic aspect of the personality—the heart. By following the series of prescribed practices and penances, the human will was given shape and directed toward self-control and discipline. The *tlamati1zime* sought by means of education to endow the face with wisdom and the heart with strength. Several ancient texts explain this objective more fully. One, from the informants of Sahagun, describes the ideal man:
>
> > The mature man
> > is a heart as solid as a rock,
> > is a wise face.
> > Possessor of a face, possessor of a heart,
> > he is able and understanding.
>
> Such was the goal, profoundly humanistic, to which the *tlamatiizime* aspired. That the objective was frequently attained is confirmed by the great historical figures who would make any people proud.

What was the religion of these people? Their highest deity, *Ometéotl,* like *Brahmâ* of the Hindus, creates by thought. Brahma creates by thinking of himself as this, that, and all beings and things. Leon-Portilla explains *Ometéotl's* title of *Moyucoyatzin* as meaning "Lord who mentally conceives or creates himself." This idea of a being to whom "no one gave . . . form or existence" is called "the climax of Nahuatl thought."

Thus naked-eye astronomy was not a tough specialty to be taken up by students good at mathematics, but an area of knowledge intimately connected with human life. The culture, if limited as are all cultures, was not centerless and flying off in all directions. For these peoples of the New World, the Sun was not a body around which planets revolved, but a god around which man's moral as well as physical life revolved, and was nourished by sacrifice. (The human sacrifice practiced by the Aztecs, which the *tlamatinime* opposed, was a corruption of this idea.)

What did men like Ptolemy and the wise men of the Nahuatls have that we lack, despite the splendor of the heliocentric theory? Call it an intensity—or the possibility of an intensity—of life which the separation of knowledge from the actual meaning of existence puts beyond us. In this sense, we are all Ptolemaists without a vital center of gravity. To obtain that wonderful feeling known to the ancient sky watchers—my *feet do not touch the earth, and seated at the table of Zeus himself, I am nurtured with celestial ambrosia*—one must break through the tangled web of modern negation, remaking the world into a living organism. There are some able to do this—a few—but they are hard to locate and harder to identify.

Yet they exist, although compelled to live against the grain of the age. One thinks of the painter, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). He was a man driven by the sterility of his time into submersion in the arts. Van Gogh was filled with unashamed intensity. He gave up experiments at being a preacher—a tradition in his family—and started painting at twenty-seven. Ten years later he died, after suffering from attacks of madness, by his own hand. Between 1880 and 1890 he produced about 840 paintings and 850 drawings and watercolors. Of all his paintings, only one sold during his life In 1883, while living at The Hague, he wrote:

> In my opinion, I am often *very rich.* Not in money, but (not every day, mind you) rich because I have found my vocation, something for which I can live with heart and soul, and which gives life inspiration and meaning. . . . Now about the time still left to me for working, I think I may assume without being premature that this corpus of mine will, *quand bien même,* carry on for a while,—say for another six to ten years. So I shall go on as an *ignoramus,* but knowing this one thing: *Within a few years I must perform a certain work.*

And from Arles in 1888:

> To be a link in the chain of artists we pay a heavy toll in health, youth and freedom, and we benefit not at all by it, no more than does a horse

drawing a coachload of people who are out to enjoy the Spring.

Again from Arles:

> I can do without Our Dear Lord, both in my life and in my painting, but, weak as I am, I cannot do without some thing greater than myself, namely, my life, my creative potentiality. . . .
>
> And in a painting I would wish to say something comforting like music. I would wish to paint men or women with something of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we seek in the radiation, in the vibration of the coloration we effect.

Few if any artists worked as hard as van Gogh. During the last seventy days of his life he produced seventy paintings and more than thirty drawings, with little diminution in the excellence of his work.

What can we know of this man? Besides his art and his extraordinary letters (see *Van Gogh—A Self-Portrait*, edited by W. H. Auden), there is this comment by a friend (about 1877):

> Van Gogh out of temper! Never, not once did I observe in his character the least little bit of an indication of an evil quality or inclination. He lived like a saint, and was as frugal as a hermit. In the afternoon, at the table, the three of us would eat with the appetite of famished wolves; not he, he would not eat meat, only a little morsel on Sundays, and then only after being urged by our landlady for a long time. Four potatoes with a suspicion of gravy and a mouthful of vegetables constituted his whole dinner. To our insistence that he make a hearty dinner and eat meat, he would answer, "To a human being physical life ought to be a paltry detail; vegetable food is sufficient, all the rest is luxury."

Charged by his brother Theo with having "changed," he wrote in reply (in 1880):

> Well, that is not quite true. What has changed is that my life then was less difficult and my future seemed less dark; but the inner state, my way of looking at things and my way of thinking, has not changed. If there has been any change at all, it is that I think and believe and love more seriously now what I already thought and believed and loved then.
>
> So you would be wrong in persisting in the belief that, for instance, I should now be less enthusiastic for Rembrandt, or Millet, or Delacroix, or whoever it may be; the contrary is true. But, you see, there are so many things which one must believe and love. There is something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare, and of Correggio in Michelet, and of Delacroix in Victor Hugo; and then there is something of Rembrandt in the Gospel, or something of the Gospel in Rembrandt—whichever, it comes to the same if only one understands it properly, . . . And in Bunyan there is something of Maris or Millet, and in Beecher Stowe there is something of Ary Scheffer. . . . I am fond of Sydney Carton in Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*. . . . And I think that Kent, a character in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, is as noble and distinguished a personage as a figure by Th. de Keyser. . . . Not to say more. My God, how beautiful Shakespeare is! Who is mysterious like him? His language and style can indeed be compared to an artist's brush, quivering with fever and emotion. But one must learn to read, just as one must learn to see and learn to live.
>
> So you must not think that I disavow things—I am rather faithful in my unfaithfulness and, though changed, I am the same; my only anxiety is, How can I be of use in the world?

A man who knew van Gogh in his youth, when serving as a missionary to a mining region in Belgium, gave this character sketch:

> He no longer felt any inducement to take care of his own well-being—his heart had been aroused by the sight of others' want.
>
> He preferred to go to the unfortunate, the wounded, the sick, and always stayed with them a long time; he was willing to make any sacrifice to relieve their sufferings.
>
> In addition, his profound sensitivity was not limited to the human race. Vincent van Gogh respected every creature's life, even of those the most despised. A repulsive caterpillar did not provoke his disgust; it was a living creature, and as such, deserved protection.

Writing to his brother in 1882, from The Hague, he explained what he meant by the word "artist"—

> "Always seeking without absolutely finding." It is just the opposite of saying, "I know, I have found it."
>
> As far as I know, that word means, "I am seeking, I am striving, I am in it with all my heart."

Whatever happened to van Gogh, he was a man who had recovered from the Ptolemaic myopia of modern life.

REVIEW
OUNCES OF PRACTICE

WE have for review two books on the problems of doing good, both—not at all by coincidence—concerned with Quakers. One is Susanna Hoe's *The Man Who Gave his Company Away* (London: Heinemann, 1978, £5.90), a biography of Ernest Bader, founder of the Scott Bader Commonwealth; the other, *Quaker Experiences in International Conciliation* by C. H. Mike Yarrow, issued last year by Yale University Press ($10.00).

Who are the Quakers? As a religious movement Quakerism began with the inspiration of George Fox (1624-1691), son of an English weaver, who was filled with the conviction that "Christ Jesus" spoke to him in his own heart. "With this radical and simple answer," Mike Yarrow says, "he preached to the people and confronted the authorities." Not remarkably, the behavior of the Quakers was found to be irritating and even objectionable by many people. Their belief that all men, not just the higher classes, have in them a spark of the divine led to a refusal to uncover their heads in the presence of nobility. Quakers would swear no oaths and would use no arms. In 1660 they gave this other-worldly explanation to Charles II for their refusal to participate in wars:

> We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fighting with outward weapons for any order or under any presence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world. The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so at once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it: and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth, will never lead us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ nor for the kingdom of this world.

By reason of their reliance on an inner inspiration, there is natural independence of thought among the Quakers, Mr. Yarrow says:

> No one person or group can speak for the Society of Friends. There are many voices, more or less in tune, and most Quakers are careful to qualify their statements: "This is a Quaker point of view," not *"the* Quaker view." . . . The guidance of the inner light brought the negative witness against war and the positive efforts for achieving the life that does away with war. Interpretations of the basic testimony have varied from century to century and many Quakers as individuals have not held to the testimony, but regularly constituted Quaker bodies have consistently upheld the position against war and in all periods have directed efforts toward human reconciliation.

He provides this brief outline of Quaker history:

> Despite severe persecution, the Quakers persevered in their evangelism, gathering some one hundred thousand converts in England, Ireland, the American colonies, and to a lesser extent in the German states, Holland, and France. Toward the end of the first three decades, as conversions tapered off, it became evident that all of their efforts would not bring the kingdom of God on earth in the seventeenth century. The natural reaction was to withdraw from involvement in the evils and injustices of the world and carry out the Quaker way of life as closely as possible with each other, keeping the witness alive, so that at some time in the future the truth might prevail. While this tendency toward withdrawal led to a period of so-called quietism, the Quakers did not set up separate communities like the Mennonites and other pacifist groups. There was always a strong testimony that the Lord's business was carried out in the world and Quakers had a mission to work in society, running their business honestly establishing schools to educate the young, using their talents to develop labor-saving devices, extending the scientific knowledge of truth, working for reform of prisons, mental hospitals, and other institutions.

The fundamental belief of the Quakers, which may be the genius of all their undertakings—and the source of their staying power—is put in a few words:

> The central concept of Quakerism to this day is that each person has the capacity to respond to God. As a modern Quaker author puts it, Friends "express this opinion variously, sometimes giving it a secular expression as the dignity, worth or preciousness of the individual personality. More often the expression is religious, 'that of God in every man, the seed within, the Light within, or the Christ within.' However expressed it means that there is something of infinite worth in every individual, and that there is an active

or latent striving and capacity for creative and harmonious living in every personality."

After three centuries of labors for peace and reconciliation, the Quakers have earned universal respect and trust. It is widely recognized that they have no self-interest in their enterprises. In awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to British and American Quakers in 1974, the chairman of the Nobel Committee said: "Theirs is the message of good deeds, the message that men can come into contact with one another in spite of war and in spite of difference of race." He added that their work gave "hope of laying a foundation for peace among nations, of building up peace in man himself, so that it becomes impossible to settle disputes by the use of force."

The practical value of this recognition is seen again and again in Mike Yarrow's book. The Quakers, it is widely felt, are people who seek no private advantage. A casual response to Quaker attitudes might be, "Who are these people who seem to claim to be so much more righteous than the rest of us?" And since they are human, Quakers may indeed on occasion sound like very self-righteous people, but against this impression is the spontaneous gratitude others may feel toward them when they come bearing gifts to people who really need their help!

There is also the question: Wouldn't any human being, sincerely trying to live up to an ennobling ideal, give such an impression? How could he avoid it, in a world which accepts or even tacitly approves an opposite course of behavior? Well, he could perhaps avoid it by sheer moral genius. A few have done so. But that seems a great deal to ask of ordinary human beings. It would be much more sensible to settle gladly for the value of what the Quakers actually do, and ignore the passing vanities of those who are trying to be as well as do good. Most of us, after all, long for a world in which it has become "impossible to settle disputes by the use of force." And it is vastly encouraging to find a body of ordinary people who give this ideal their best try, throughout their lives, no matter what the resulting failures or embarrassments. This is evidence of a splendid quality in human beings—say, a hundred thousand of them—affording proof a lot more impressive than the data assembled by would-be anthropologists who describe the habits of the "naked ape" to convince us that aggression and hostility are ineradicably inscribed in our genes.

Mike Yarrow picks three Quaker efforts to achieve peace, or an approach to peace, to tell about. Given his way, he would have titled his book: "Some experiences of Quakers acting as unofficial, self-appointed, powerless intermediaries between national-state antagonists in crisis situations: to wit, the conflict of the two Germanies from 1961 to 1973; the war between India and Pakistan in 1965; and the Nigerian Civil War, from 1967 to 1970: with reference to the Quaker background of religious testimony and active work against war; described and analyzed in the light of contemporary studies of conflict analysis." A good reason for reading this book, then, would be the fact that hardly anyone knows that the Quakers were hard at work, trying to reduce human suffering or the continuation of slaughter in these three disaster areas of modern history. One learns that the role of a compassionate third party in any dispute on the verge or in the midst of armed violence is the walking of a hair line on a rough and dangerous terrain. Why do the Quakers do it? Why don't they stay home and mind their business? Well, maybe they'll feel able to, some day. It would surely be better for the communities torn by conflict to learn to solve their own problems. That would be more "natural," and save people like the Quakers a lot of trouble and pain. But if you look up the record of Quaker achievements—and you have to look it up; they don't blow their own horn—it becomes very difficult to wish they had stayed at home.

One learns, too, that it is something of an art to get along with people who are very angry and

in no mood for "conciliation." Skills don't make good human beings, but skills result from the lives of good human beings. So there are things to be learned from this book about dealing with human nature. One of them is the need to see others in ourselves, and ourselves in others.

Ernest Bader is an unusually successful businessman who tries the patience of his friends—not all of them saints—and at the same time earns their irreversible respect. He is a Swiss-born Quaker who came to England before World War I. While on the way to becoming a leader in the manufacture of plastics, he dreamed of an enterprise in which workers would share in both ownership and the social responsibility which goes with the accumulation of resources. He figured out how to give his business away to the people who worked for him, but it took nearly half his life to do it, and today, close to ninety, he is by no means completely satisfied with the result. The late E. F. Schumacher said in the Foreword he contributed to Susanna Hoe's book:

> As a businessman, he [Ernest Bader] did not put his heart in an icebox and hand himself over to the calculating intellect. How embarrassing it has often been to witness his outbursts of passion—and then his remorse. But these outbursts were never over trivialities of one kind or another: they invariably related—at least in my experience—to matters of crucial importance, such as the principles on which his industrial enterprise should be based. Capitalistic enterprise was for profit first and for service only as a kind of afterthought. This would never do. Nationalization could not be the answer, as it meant handling living enterprises over to dead-hand bureaucracies. This, also, would never do. A New Model had to be evolved.

This book is the story of how Bader's model came to be. It is a story of endless problems and their imperfect solution. But what is easy to forget is that these were the problems of a human being determined both to share and to do good. *He* had the dream, and he didn't want it watered down. Toward the end Susanna Hoe puts the situation in a few words: "The man who wants to free the world, to create conditions whereby no man is the boss, no man is the employee, is the man who, by his own nature, needs to be the master." No one can resolve such difficulties except by sheer genius, and then he can only resolve them for himself. The point, however, is that this struggle becomes enormously instructive to the rest of us. A still more important point is given by Fritz Schumacher at the end of his foreword:

> I am sure the books that have been written on these matters have cost more money than the whole of Ernest Bader's enterprise is worth. But are they *worth* as much as this one enterprise, this one (although not unique) existential jump from theory to practice? Speaking only for myself, I will say that for me this one ounce of practice has proved to be of greater value than all the many tons of theory. . . .

COMMENTARY
HEARN AS TEACHER

HEARN on poetry and story-telling shows why we often recommend him as a teacher of writing (see "Children"). Discussing "composition," he says (in *Talks to Writers*):

> The poet or story-teller never gets the whole of his inspiration at once; it comes to him only by degrees, while he is perfecting his work. His first inspiration is only a sudden flash of emotion, or the sudden shock of a new idea, which at once awakens and sets into motion many confused trains of other interrelated emotions and ideas.

He tells of a Japanese artist who always began with the tail when he drew horses. He wondered, why doesn't he begin with the head, as we in the West do?

> But upon reflection, it struck me that it could not make any difference whether the artist begins at the head or the tail or the belly or the foot of the horse, if he really knows his business. And most great artists who really know their business do not follow other people's rules. They make their own rules. Every one of them does his work in a way peculiar to himself; and the peculiarity means only that he finds it more easy to work that way. Now the very same thing is true in literature. And the question, "How shall I begin?" only means that you want to begin at the head instead of beginning at the tail or somewhere else. That is, you are not yet experienced enough to trust your own powers. When you become more experienced you will never ask the question; and I think that you will often begin at the tail—that is to say, you will write the end of the story before you have even thought of the beginning.
>
> The working rule is this: Develop the first idea or emotion that comes to you before you allow yourself to think about the second. The second will suggest itself, even too much, while you are working at the first. . . . The most wonderful work is not the work that the author shapes and plans; it is the work that shapes itself. . . .

Elsewhere, after identifying Sir Thomas Browne as the father of English classic prose, he speaks of the simplicity of Scandinavian writers, remarking that because their work contains nothing artificial it will never decay, and saying, finally, that "if we have to make a choice between their perfectly plain style and the gorgeous music and colours of Sir Thomas Browne, I should not hesitate for a moment to tell you that the simple style is much the better."

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
REPORT FROM CONNECTICUT

SINCE this week we have in mind mostly complaints, it seems a good idea to start with a little fun. A high-school girl taking a "writing" tutorial in the Hammonasset School, Madison, Conn., announced that she loathed Gertrude Stein's poetry. The teacher said, "Well, write a story about that." The result was fairly impressive. It began:

> A rose is a rose is a rose.
>
> And I have a dozen of them sitting right in front of me so I can prove it. Or argue with it, because I can't stand roses. Or Gertrude Stein. Or Max for sending me a dozen of them.
>
> Aside from the flowers themselves, of course, I have a reason for being a bit fed up, but I might as well stick with roses, while I'm in the mood. Basically, roses are dull, they're a literary cliché. My lips are not rose-red, they're chapped and I seem to be developing a mustache. I wish he'd sent me daisies. . . .

This is a fair sample—or a better than fair sample—of the prose Thomas West has been able to elicit from his students in what used to be a rather sleepy beach town in Connecticut. The work of these youngsters seemed good enough to publish as encouragement to other teachers and parents who wonder why there isn't more good writing by the young. Mr. West has an answer, which seems about right, but before we start his and our complaints we should give the end of the girl's story about Max and his roses. Lovelorn and rejected, the disconsolate youth took an overdose of barbiturates. He was rushed to the hospital, and later she went to see him:

> He was lying on his back, looking pale and puffy. His eyes without glasses were small and anxious.
>
> "I blew it."
>
> "Good," I told him.
>
> "Do you realize what a failure I am? I can't win you over, I can't even remove my petty, egotistical presence from this earth without messing it up. I'm a failure."
>
> "Good. Better you blew it, Max. Graveyards are anti-ecological." (I thought that would get him.)
>
> "Oh no, I was to be cremated. I made sure."
>
> I turned away to cram my present for him into a vase by the bed.
>
> "Roses! OH, my love, we really *are* soul-mates!" He leaned over to smell them.
>
> "Max," I said. "Don't mention it."

Who are the students who learn to write with such uninhibited freedom? They come from a couple of dozen Connecticut cities and towns, such as New Haven, and also the township of Killingworth, near Madison, about which, a century or so ago, Hawthorne wrote so engagingly. At Hammonasset School—

> The students' ages range from thirteen to twenty. Many of them are receiving scholarship aid; many are working their way through, and not very many are from upper-class families.
>
> From such variety, I can count on one constant: all of them have had English grammar, from one to six years of it, and that fact has absolutely no relation to their ability to write English prose.

What has been wrong?

Answering a similar question, Harold Goddard cited the game of baseball and told how boys learn to play. You don't start with a treatise on the wood used for bats. Mr. West uses a bicycle:

> When I bought my daughter that first bicycle, I let her ride it. No second thoughts; just "Here you are. Have a whirl." I never once took her by the hand, led her to the machine, and had her name its parts for forty minutes, five days per week for seven academic years. . . .
>
> Yet as a teacher of English, I was loath to let my students write. It was so obvious (everyone told me, from my father's father to the grammarians with whom I worked): grammer first, stories later. Parts of speech, numbering eight (yes, eight. Not eighty or eight-hundred. Eight.) were studied, memorized, restudied and memorized again, tested and re-tested, learned and un-learned and angrily tested once more—for seven school years, grades three through nine.

> I do not sleep well when I think back on all those wasted years. I do not sleep at all when I know that my past behavior in English classes is being repeated by scores of thousands of English teachers across the land.

Now, needless to say, he is doing something quite different—getting them to wr*ite.*

> As a teacher of writing, my duties are first, to provide an atmosphere of trust; second, to allow freedom of expression third, to encourage confidence; fourth, to identify with the discipline involved in the craft of writing by continuing to write my own material; fifth, to be available for individual assistance; and sixth, to keep hammering home the essentials of good writing: namely, honesty; intellectual toughness; the correct use of metaphor; supporting generalities with concrete examples; consistency of tenses; development of a stronger working vocabulary; use of detailed observation; use of the senses; grammatical clarity, etc.
>
> I do not use a text. Even if one existed, I would not use it. Would an experienced teacher of painting use one? (*Our Students Can Write,* The Hammonasset School, Madison, Conn., 1978.)

One must agree; no texts. But a book or two is never amiss. Our favorite—often mentioned here—is Lafcadio Hearn's *Talks to Writers,* made of Hearn's lectures (in English) to students of the University of Tokyo. This book isn't a text; it is filled with inspiration, and the reader without noticing it absorbs a great deal about what makes writing good. Then, as Mr. West says, *practice* is the key.

Now for our complaints. We know of a ten-year-old boy who is in the fifth grade of what seems a good public school. But, so far as we can see, his English instruction has been carefully designed to make him *hate* the language. It isn't entirely the teacher's fault. She has to use the texts provided by the school—the school or the district, which is enormous—and the text this boy has been given seems largely devoted to getting him to use a "pronunciation key" of the sort you find printed on the end-sheets of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. What could be more calculated to trap a ten-year-old in boredom than insistence that he learn those strange symbols of vowel and consonant pronunciation, which probably not one tenth of one per cent of adults have mastered or retained?

Grade school education these days seems to rely on endless repetition. His arithmetic book gives not just a few examples of how to add fractions, but *hundreds* of problems! The idea must be that unless the child can do it in his sleep, he isn't learning. All this homework steals his time. Of course, if it takes him away from the TV there may be a real gain, but the assumption seems to be that the child is sure to find arithmetic dull and uninteresting, so that he has to do nine times more actual work than should be necessary to get it into his head. Very clever conditioners, these textbook composers.

The right way to learn arithmetic—the right way to learn anything—starts with discovering that you *need* it. Why should anyone—child or grown-up—spend hours learning something for which he has no use? So, naturally enough, we say to the child: "Well, you don't see the need now, but you will later on, so study hard in school!"

As we said, it isn't all the teacher's fault, or even the text book people's' although both could probably do better. The basic trouble is with a culture or civilization in which you don't learn something, you buy something, when you have a need. The connection between learning and satisfying needs remains almost unknown, academically speaking.

One thing teachers might do is ignore or reduce the sometimes ridiculous "scholarly" practices—such as lots of footnotes—required in children's reports. Fake scholarship teaches nothing but faking scholarship. Teachers might absorb a little daring from Bucky Fuller, who found that only the freedom of poetic expression could give form to what he had to say in *No More Secondhand God.*

FRONTIERS

Another Kind of Frontier

THE American character, Frederick Jackson Turner proposed, has been shaped by life on the frontier. "To the frontier," he said, "the American intellect owes its striking characteristics"—including coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; a restless energy and dominant individualism; a practical turn of mind which seizes expedients—and a "masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends." After quoting this from Turner, who was his teacher, Carl Becker said in *Everyman his own Historian.*

> On the frontier, where everything is done by the individual and nothing by organized society, initiative, resourcefulness, quick, confident, and sure judgment are the essential qualities for success. . . . The frontier develops strong individuals, but it develops individuals of a particular type, all being after much the same pattern. The individualism of the frontier is one of achievement, not of eccentricity, an individualism of fact rising from a sense of power to overcome obstacles, rather than one of theory growing out of weakness in the face of oppression. . . . Altogether averse from hesitancy, doubt, speculative or introspective tendencies, the frontiersman is a man of faith: of faith, not so much in some external power, as in himself, in his luck, his destiny; faith in the possibility of achieving whatever is necessary or he desires.

Becker writes here of the effect of a natural environment that came to an end, of which Walter Prescott Webb said in 1952:

> The evidence tends to show that the frontier closed in the period between 1890 and 1910. . . . There would seem to be little room to doubt that our entry into a new age, which remains to be named, will be accompanied by basic changes in the nature of the institutions which grew up in the earlier one.

Well, what were the changes that took place? Mr. Webb details the cultural froth which has spread around in the place of the frontier challenge:

> Cooper's Indians are drinking Coca-Cola on the reservation, Tom Sawyer would be lucky to escape a camp for underprivileged children, Russell and Remington would be painting horses that would frighten one—pictures that no saloonkeeper would tolerate, . . . and Walt Whitman would probably turn his savage genius on the frustrations of the democratic vista.

This account of ignominious transition, while engaging, leaves a lot of blanks to be filled in. Describing the decline and fall of the naïve patriotism of her youth, Gloria Emerson wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* for Feb. 11:

> . . . we are a country that admires illegal gain and huge profits, and if men can get away with it, they have our awe and respect. It can hardly surprise anyone that in December, 1937, Harry S. Truman said to his colleagues in the Senate: "We worship money instead of honor. A billionaire in our estimation is much greater in the eyes of the people than the public servants who work for the public interest. . . . We do not recognize that the Carnegie libraries are steeped in the blood of the Homestead steel workers, but they are. We do not remember that the Rockefeller Foundation is founded on the dead miners of the Colorado Fuel Company." None of us read that speech in an American textbook.
>
> We are masters of fraud, yet to say so is "unpatriotic." There is an old, respected tradition of fraud in this country, and not only in baseball do they "steal" bases. Lockheed's bribes shock almost no one; ITT's attempt to defeat the late Chilean president, Salvador Allende, was considered by many a normal "business risk"; General Motors' use of Chevrolet engines in hundreds of thousands of Oldsmobiles created no national fury. We are so accustomed to fraud we practice it ourselves: Think of white, middle-class doctors cheating on Medicaid payments or cheating simply by charging too much for too little, or the middle-class Americans who in between jobs go on unemployment relief for as long as they can while condemning "crime" and the genuinely poor, who are given welfare benefits only as a sedation to prevent their being too disorderly—never as a solution to their stunted and depressed lives.

Something of the meaning of a now emerging frontier is found in these quotations. Today we have a few enormously rich individuals, a few immeasurably powerful corporations, and a growing mass of miserably poor people, all over the world. The frontier was once a series of links

between man and nature, but now it is a tangle of painful relationships between man and man, against the background of a nature tangibly diminished to finite dimensions at our hands. Judging from the performance of the past ten or fifteen years, we don't know how to collaborate with nature for the common good, nor do we know how to give intelligent help to the impoverished millions whose plight is continually thrust before our eyes.

In a discussion of John Kenneth Galbraith's latest book, *The Nature of Mass Poverty*, Walter Goodman (in *Psychology Today* for February) describes the incapacity of Americans to bring help to the hungry poor in other parts of the world:

> The efforts against poverty have not been noticeably successful despite huge expenditures and much hoopla. Galbraith attributes this lack of success to the tendency of people to rely on their own experiences in judging the behavior of others. The upward-bound, commonsense American go-getter asks himself: "What would I want if I were a peasant in Bangladesh?" And, of course, he answers, "I'd want a tractor and some potent fertilizer." He is naturally disappointed when the tractors and fertilizer and so forth unaccountably do not turn Bangladesh into a garden. The well-meaning American may then begin asking testily, "What's wrong with those people?" Clearly something is wrong.

Mr. Galbraith explains part of what is wrong by saying that people who have been ground down by want for generations become unable to respond to demanding opportunity. Instead they "accommodate" to their condition, trying to make "the best of a hopeless situation." How are such people helped? Are we really ready for the kind of effort that is required?

Mr. Galbraith has some suggestions, but the inner character of this frontier was described by Gandhi years ago, in terms that must be understood by those who want to help:

> They [the villagers] are not interested in their own welfare. . . . They don't want to exert themselves beyond scratching their farms or doing such labour as they are used to. These difficulties are real and serious. . . We must have an unquenchable faith in our mission. We must be patient with the people.
>
> We are ourselves mere novices in village work. We have to deal with a chronic disease. . . . We are like nurses who may not leave their patients because they are reported to have an incurable disease. . . :
>
> Those who have settled in the villages in the spirit of service are not dismayed by the difficulties facing them. They knew before they went that they would have to contend against many difficulties, including even sullenness on the part of villagers. Only those, therefore, who have faith in themselves and in their mission will serve the villagers and influence their lives.

People expecting to live on into the 21st century will need this Gandhian understanding if they plan to work on the ever-growing frontier of human pain.