

## THE WHOLE OF THE ARGUMENT

WE keep looking, in these MANAS articles, for ways in which to make explicit the fundamental issue(s) of thought and life in our time, and perhaps at any time (we say "our" time because at any given moment there are particular ways of speaking about things that matter, which may seem to make them different). The content of the inquiry, then, is what it means to be human—what or who we are. "Know who you are" is now a cliché, gotten off with pretentious and shallow rhetoric, yet the implication of the phrase has importance. What did the Greeks think about themselves? What role did Æschylus and Sophocles assign to human beings? Were men embryos, understudies, or merely playthings of the Gods as so often they seemed? What was the lesson intended by the tragedy of Œdipus, who was a good man led in all innocence to commit unforgivable crimes, and then was made to endure their merciless punishment just as though he knew better? Why did the dramatists have the Gods play such mean tricks on mankind?

The career of Prometheus is another example. Moved by compassion, he brought certain extraordinary gifts to humanity, and then for doing it had to suffer torture for a sempiternity. Any modern man involved in a fate like that would certainly feel outraged and complain to the Management, as indeed Job complained under somewhat similar circumstances. Yet no literateur in his right mind would dare to alter the denouements of Greek tragedy. It is better for us to remain bewildered by them—to be puzzled and awed by them—than to edit them according to our conventional notions of justice and right.

Then, as Christians, for close to two thousand years, we have been content to blame our troubles on an ancient War in Heaven. God and Satan contend for our creaturely souls; we have something to do with what happens to us, but not

much. What mere creature could contend against the evil inspiration of a powerful being like Satan? *Errare est humanum*, we say, and bow our heads, hoping to be let off at this and at other times. Then, after some fourteen or fifteen hundred years, the earthly Management of that system—the official interpreters of the Word—became so careless in their procedures, and incidentally acquisitive in their private lives—while burning very intelligent people at the stake (Giordano Bruno, for one), and giving extraordinary innovators (like Galileo) such a bad time—that the best of men decided that some real change had to be brought about. They accomplished it, although at a price. They accomplished it by abolishing the other World which no one, after all, could see with his two eyes, or had met and conversed with its authorities.

Then, because such a mess had been made of our world by official definers of Good and Evil, the tough-minded lovers of freedom and haters of dogma abolished morality, too, intending, as they explained, to give Natural Man a new start. This is of course a vulgarized account of the Enlightenment, but largely what happened in terms of mass opinion. We do have and take part in, today, an age without conviction, without goals that are neither egotistical nor hedonistic. And so, after several generations of actually believing in nothing but our appetites—gross or refined (what paper do you read?)—a great many of us seem ready to succumb to self-disgust, while our political leaders give clear evidence of being ready (for their purposes, whatever they are) to incinerate the world, or a substantial part of it, in the name of freedom, righteousness, and national honor.

How then shall we characterize the present common state of mind, in contrast to the way the ancient Greeks felt about their lives, or the people

of the Middle Ages, or of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during the Enlightenment? Is there anything that can be said about our psychomoral condition that will not evoke a chorus of indignant (although dissimilar) protests which propose quite other generalizations claimed to be more comprehensively applicable? Was there ever a period of history so confused and contradictory as our own?

Looking back through the pages of past issues of *MANAS*, we found a passage in a paper by a psychiatrist, James B. Thompson, an associate of Trigant Burrow, that may possibly serve. Dr. Thompson's subject is recidivism. He wrote:

At the same very early period of his life, each of us as an individual is conditioned to react with a special affective content to the stimulus word "you," or, as he feels it, "I," and the picture or image denoted by this word comes to have more importance than anything in the world. . . . every individual, normal or neurotic, great or small, is preoccupied with thoughts of himself and his advantage. It is obsessive with us. Each one becomes so conditioned that his thought automatically is "how will what is going on at this moment cause *me* gain or loss?" Normal individuals then are conditioned to a self-preoccupation—and to self-acquisitiveness. . . . Naturally, then, if we are all involved automatically in repeated reflex actions that have to do with oppositeness, self-acquisitiveness and competition, the nature of the recidivist is not far to seek, for the problem of the recidivist is but the problem of man's behavior generally.

We might well keep in mind that society has its own crimes which, however, are not recognized as such because they are committed on so large a scale. Society has its mass homicides called wars, its mass-robberies called invasions, its wholesale larcenies called empire-building. As long as the individual's behavior fits in with the mass-reaction it is considered "good" behavior. As long as he does not question by word or deed the validity of the mass-behavior, he may be called a "good citizen." . . .

In this broader setting, the egocentricity of the overtly antisocial or criminal individual appears in a different perspective. Criminals merely present an exaggerated form of the ego-preoccupation that characterizes the individuals of our normal society,

and in our attempt to deal with them, we are confronted with a problem in community behavior.

In the absence of a clear accounting of this community problem, we can only expect the supply of anti-social individuals to continue to pour into our courts and prisons; and we cannot hope that our present legal and correctional procedures will fundamentally alter the behavior reaction of the individuals whom we have called repeater criminals. Our responsibility, then, is to reckon broadly with those factors within ourselves which determine anti-social trends throughout society and of which the behavior of the recidivist is but one aspect. (*American Journal of Psychiatry*, November, 1937.)

Dr. Thompson's jarring but on the whole accurate diagnosis of what we call our "social" problems seems far more valuable than the usual pages of statistics on crime, drunkenness, drug use, personal and family disorders the large-scale studies of environmental decline, pollution, waste, and the appalling preparations of all the powerful nation-states for either nuclear or "conventional" war. All these analyses are implicit in what he says; he goes one step further, offering an answer to the question: *Why?*

It is obviously necessary, however, to add that not *all* human beings behave or are motivated in the way that he describes. There is always the much smaller, contrasting population made up of people who live by the laws of moral excellence, who by their example shatter the stereotypes of statistical definition of human behavior. We don't know why there should be these glorious exceptions—and on rare historical occasions even exceptional cultures of human beings—yet they have existed, and exist. Perhaps, if we push the diagnostic activity a step farther, we can say: People behave according to the way in which they think of themselves, which leads to the question. What is the best way to think about ourselves?

We have two criteria for considering this question. One is: What way of thinking about ourselves will produce the best over-all result? The other is: What is the *true* way of thinking about ourselves? The questions represent the choices we have in judgment. One could be called

pragmatic idealism, the other "scientific." We should like of course to believe that what produces the best result (or what we think would be the best result) is the same as what is actually true, but can we be *sure* of this?

The scientist says (or most of them used to say): Never mind what you hope or believe or want to be the case; find out the facts of the matter, and then, perhaps, we'll know enough to talk about ethics and all that. The idealist replies: But we can't wait until all the facts are in; don't you see the likelihood that we shall destroy ourselves if we wait much longer in deciding what are the nature and obligations of being human? As the years go by the argument of the idealist becomes increasingly persuasive, yet the old question, Is it true?, haunts our idealist speculations. This has a weakening effect on modern thinking, so that, with good reason, the search for truth rather than benign metaphysical invention continues.

There are other ways of formulating this great debate, concerned with what may prove to be the one great issue of both thought and modern civilization. Where, it must be asked, do we get our rules for living? Can we get them out of ourselves—from our vision and highest dreams—or are the real rules all out there, in the known and to-be-discovered laws of nature?

The argument for deciding that the laws of nature are not only the best, but all we need, has its persuasion. Its advocates say: You can't trust human speculation and longing. People weight their arguments with sentimentality, and worse, with prejudice and habit fortified by centuries of blind belief. In order to be *sure*, you have to get rid of all those sources of self-deception. So leave fallible man out of your equations: just study nature and the laws of life. Once we find out how the system of nature really works, the way to solve our problems—what you call "moral" problems—will become quite clear. Get rid of the world of transcendental causes—that way lies nothing but obscurantism.

But this also says, by implication, Get rid of your moral inhibitions, do what you want, what comes naturally. And now we realize that what has come naturally for us has been, in Dr. Thompson's words, "self-preoccupation" and "self-acquisitiveness," with all the multifarious consequences of rampant *selfishness*. What other word is there to describe the common behavior—the behavior prevalent enough to give those awful tables the sociologists compile their frightening bottom lines?

Actually, we had clear warning from a brilliant if flawed nineteenth-century philosopher of what now has happened—or is happening more and more. Hannah Arendt's explanation of what Nietzsche meant by "God is dead" shows his foresight. What was "dead" was the ancient conviction that there are "eternal truths" above our world of the senses, and that by strenuous search they can be known:

What is "dead" is not only the localization of such "eternal truths" but the distinction itself. . . . The sensual, as still understood by the positivist, cannot survive the death of the supersensual. No one knew this better than Nietzsche who, with his poetic and metaphoric description of the assassination of God in *Zarathustra*, has caused so much confusion in these matters. In a significant passage in *The Twilight of Idols*, he clarifies what the word meant in *Zarathustra*. It was merely a symbol for the supersensual realm as understood by metaphysics; he now uses instead of God the words *true world* and says: "We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we also abolished the apparent one." . . .

In other words, once the always precarious balance between the two worlds is lost, no matter whether "the true world" abolishes the "apparent one" or vice versa, the whole framework of references, in which thinking was used to orient itself, breaks down. In these terms, nothing seems to make sense any more.

There are now two ways in which "nothing seems to make sense any more." First there is its obvious meaning—our world is falling apart, more or less. The center doesn't hold. People are unable to believe one another. Diplomacy is

admittedly no more than lying. Decency and honorableness are *never* assumed, but their opposites. We, for example, talk about the Russians as though they were absolutely incapable of meaning what they say, or of doing the right things, and then, as a British commentator remarked recently, our representatives speak of "the need for 'fair and equitable' agreements with these Charles Mansons of global diplomacy." "Gentlemen," as Mumford put it years ago, "you are mad."

The other way of recognizing that nothing makes sense any more is by logical analysis of the prevailing world view. A fine example of this reasoning was recently provided in the Winter 1983-84 *American Scholar*, in a review by Joseph P. Fell of the works of John William Miller, who taught philosophy at Williams College from 1924 to 1960, a man virtually unknown to American readers because during his life he published only four essays. "At a time when others were abandoning philosophical idealism," the reviewer says, "he sought to revise it." He sought to vindicate the reality of the ideal world, the humanly real world, in contrast to the world of the senses from which the scientists attempt to find out all that can be known. His chief point is, in a way, the same as Nietzsche's—*both worlds are required* for thinking in any productive sense. Prof. Fell says:

[Miller] frequently reminds the reader that the objective or natural, an impersonal order, occurs in consequence of a human will or demand or it doesn't occur at all. The "paradox of cause" is that in a world that comprised only natural causation, natural causation could not be disclosed. Subjective purpose and objective nature are mutually implicative, or their relation is "dialectical." To attempt to understand the personal entirely in terms of the impersonal is to rule out of court the very will and understanding that demand a stable and independent environment, thus launching the idea of an impersonal order in the first place. Those, such as B. F. Skinner, who wish to have an ordered environment but discredit the human agency, fail to recognize their own inevitable role in disclosing that environment.

This is the whole of the argument. Time may be required to get used to it, but the logic seems impeccable. Miller goes on to say, however, that for authentic recognition of the part played by our will and consciousness, we need the objective world and its impersonal order as the arena of self-realization. Neither is prior to the other; both generate the other; and the reality of being human depends upon both.

Naturalisms arise out of the need for an environment independent of all purposes, one of ascertainable causes and predictable effects. Subjectivist and objectivist philosophies each arise from a demand that must be met, yet each destroys the other if it takes itself to be the whole story. The recognition that one needs *both* "purpose-control" and "cause-control" is the strong suit of the philosophy of dualism, which refuses to sacrifice cause to purpose or purpose to cause. . . . [Miller] argues that knowledge does not depend on completeness and absolute certainty. Insist in advance that truth be final and incorrigible and you doom yourself to skepticism. Philosophy must come to terms with finitude, contingency, the accidental. He wanted, he said, to "affirm the moment," to give "ontological status to finitude."

Miller argued, Fell says, that "if you want an order that owes nothing to man, you'll end up with no order at all."

The genuinely basic and formative historical crises, whether in science or society, are philosophical—not conflicts in detail but those in which one conception of the order of the whole is pitted against another. Here originality comes into play. Such constitutional disputes are "the loci of radical disagreement." Philosophy is the history of these conflicts, a fate that thought must undergo once it has committed itself to the search for intelligibility and lawfulness. . . . Miller . . . holds that "the chaos of today [nihilism and skeptical relativism] is the historical consequence of a metaphysical lapse . . . a consequence of the account of the world that the learned propagate. For them the actual has no authority and rates no reverence because it is not recognized."

Two kinds of nihilism drive us to acceptance of Miller's position—the nihilism of the nation-states, which must be seen as veritable insanity in any framework of common sense, and the nihilism

which results from the scientific reading of ourselves out of the universe, in the interest of a supposed mechanistic certainty. After all, we are what we are—conscious, purposeful, willing beings; we are other things too, which get in the way of our best intentions, but first and foremost we are meaning-seeking and meaning-realizing intelligences. This reality is not something we have dreamed up in a moment of fantastic longing but a primary fact of life. And this conclusion is not a conclusion but the starting-point. One abdicates from humanity by leaving it out—or trying to leave it out, since this cannot be done. We can only *say* we have done it, which leads to the nihilism of which Miller (or Fell) speaks.

We need to go on from there, and to expand the meaning of our identity, develops a "science" of decision-making for ourselves, while using the objective science of cause-and-effect for understanding the working of the world of things. We need to give full content to the meaning of such terms as "soul" and "mind," and to work out the ground of such fields of inquiry as "morality" and "responsibility." Much pioneering work along these lines has already been done, entirely by those who *start* with the facts of human consciousness instead of trying to work backwards from our bodily equipment. Who are the pioneers? In our view, they are the ones we give regular attention in these pages.

## REVIEW

### "THEY DON'T KILL ANYONE"

FOR this week's review we have material from two magazine articles—one in the Indian journal, *Gandhi Marg*, for last June (1983), the other, the lead paragraphs of "Talk of the Town" in the Dec. 12, 1983, *New Yorker*. Both articles have to do with the underlying themes of culture. The *Gandhi Marg* piece, by Anil Kumar Karn, is titled "Conscience-keeping on the Scale of History: A Case Study of Socrates and Gandhi."

It's hard to imagine a contemporary American writer discussing "Conscience-keeping." Much more likely would be notation of the almost total absence of conscience as a factor to be taken seriously in American life—as, for example, the article by Thomas Powers in the January *Atlantic*, "What Is It About?" He means, what is all the talk of the threat of nuclear war really about, a question that becomes pertinent because many of the writers on the subject ignore its *substance*—the full horror of the death and destruction—the plain idiocy of planning for such a war: in short, they ignore what amounts to the moral bankruptcy of Western civilization. The Baconian orientation of modern times leaves no room for considering moral awareness as a factor to be taken seriously as a historical force. It would be most extraordinary, in other words, for an article in an American magazine to begin by declaring its intent "to assess the relative strength of the conscience-keepers vis-a-vis other forces in human history"—the words of Mr. Karn's first sentence. Such a purpose rests for its interest and validity on a shared metaphysical assumption—that moral ideals are an essential reality in historical causation.

The Indian writer has no difficulty in making this assumption, which has foundation in traditional Indian philosophy and in the outlook of M. K. Gandhi. He proceeds:

Human life has been regulated either by physical might or by forces guided by rational calculations or

by spiritual powers. However, none of these regulating factors has ever had absolute sway in human history. They have operated dynamically in society, each having its own turn. Historically speaking, their turn did not occur at regular intervals. It did not follow any law of regularity. But it is also a historical fact that they have come into the position of domination more than once. When one of them dominates the human relations in any part of human society, the other two forces remain passive. In comparison to the other two forces, the spiritual power has been a weaker force in human history. So far, the social life of human beings has been dominated by a combined strength of intellectual power and physical might. As a result, conscience-keepers, who derive their strength from spiritual power, have been forced to play a passive role. And, thus, they have been ineffective in guiding the course of human history in the desired direction. . . .

What does this writer mean by a "force in human history"? The advent and influence of Gautama the Buddha in Indian history might be taken as an example. A reading of Edwin Arnold's exquisite poem, *The Light of Asia*, would show the immeasurable cultural impact of the Buddha on all Asia. And there is also the testimony of a Chinese diplomat, Dr. Hu Shih, who as China's ambassador to the United States said in 1942:

It is a well-known historical fact that India conquered and dominated China culturally for twenty centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her borders. This cultural conquest was never imposed by India on her neighbors. It was all the result of voluntary searching, voluntary learning, voluntary pilgrimage and voluntary acceptance on the part of China.

The real explanation was that the great religion of Buddhism satisfied a need keenly felt by the Chinese people of the time. . . . Ancient China had only a simple conception of retribution for good and evil: but India gave us the conception of *Karma*, the idea of absolute causation running through past, present, and future existences.

The meaning of the Buddha's teaching as a force in history acquires substance in this address by Dr. Hu Shih:

For more than a thousand years, from the first century A.D. down to the eleventh century, Chinese

pilgrims continued to travel by land and by sea to India to seek its scriptures in their original texts and to study under living masters of the faith. Some of these pilgrims spent decades in India and brought back thousands of manuscripts which they devoted their lives to translating and interpreting to their fellow countrymen. Buddhist teachers and missionaries who came to China throughout the ages were always honored and eagerly listened to.

Americans have hardly anything in their past to correspond to this experience, unless we count the Puritan shaping of the New England mind as similar, and there is a great difference between Buddhist thought and self-righteous Protestant zeal. Actually, the neglect by American historians of what the Indian writer speaks of as "spiritual power" has hardly been even noted by scholars of historiography, save one outstanding exception, Freclerick J. Teggart, who taught at the University of California (in Berkeley) earlier in this century. In a preface to one of his books (*Rome and China*) he said:

I may point to the great religious movements associated with the names of Zoroaster in Persia, Laotzu and Confucius in China, Mahavira (founder of Jainism) and Gautama Buddha in India, the prophets Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, Thales in Ionia, and Pythagoras in southern Italy. All these great personages belong to the sixth century B.C., and their appearance certainly constitutes a class of events. Yet though the correspondence of these events has frequently been observed, no serious effort has ever been made, so far as I have been able to discover, to treat the appearances of these great teachers—within a brief compass of time—as a problem which called for systematic investigation. But without this knowledge how are we to envisage or comprehend the workings of the human spirit?

Indian writers who have not allowed Western standards of historiography to dominate their work are naturally inclined to conceive of history as largely affected by such influence. Mr. Karn concludes his study of Socrates and Gandhi by remarking that while the influence of Socrates seemed only transient, his example is still a guide for the most civilized of mankind; and while Indian culture has remained "exploitive and millions of people are still starving," Gandhi's

example has still a place in the mind of the common people.

What might parallel such civilizing effects among the American people? The *New Yorker* writer begins with a comparison:

Commonly, people remark that the Founding Fathers of this nation outshine our present-day politicians; unlike a lot of truisms, this is true. Gaze upon our current leaders of every stripe and party, and then try to imagine that when America was a collection of tiny cities and wide empty spaces it enjoyed the guidance, at roughly the same time, of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Paine. Since they did not lead the world's most powerful nation, they did not exercise strong influence on world events, nor did they bring unequalled prosperity to their countrymen. And they were unenlightened about the importance of being perceived as "sincere" or as "charismatic" or as "nice guys." (Several of them, in fact, were not nice guys.) Under these circumstances, they turned for their power, their stature, to a source that seems to us flimsy, but has proved instead to be sturdy: ideas.

These men, in short, were thinkers—rationalists in the best sense of the word. Their language, their lifelong devotion to principles, proves this. And they had the grace and decency to assume that their countrymen were likewise endowed, able to respond to proposals and appeals based on ideas.

Men of similar quality today—they do exist—are on almost starvation rations. They have, so far, only small audiences—yet the audiences, too, exist—and because they are men and women of principle they do not give up but keep on doing what they feel able to do, and with surprising cheer. The *New Yorker* comparison continues:

These men thought new thoughts and put their insights together into new systems; actual ideas—as opposed to pseudo ideas, like tax-indexing or M-X basing modes—sprang full-blown from their powdered heads, and not half-baked from their think tanks. In their rush to think about things, they worked out scientific notions (Franklin and Jefferson we remember on this score, but even fiery Tom Paine hoped in his heart of hearts that his fame would rest as firmly on his pioneering design for an iron bridge

as on his "Rights of Man") and social programs (the circulating library, the fire department). But mostly they hatched political ideas, one after another. No. 10 of Madison's Federalist Papers is among the world's classic works of political theory; a few days after its publication, Federalist Paper No. 11 emerged. When the Articles of Confederation turned out to be unsatisfactory, many of the same men cranked out the Constitution and drew up the Bill of Rights. Today, politicians aren't supposed to think about such things—it might not leave them enough time to run up government deficits and increase nuclear arms. "Political scientists" (a term that lost its meaning when Franklin died ) occupy themselves only with fine-tuning, with streamlining the way things get done. Here and there, the odd academic or two does have a new idea or two, and so, no doubt, do quite a few other people, who lack the means to disseminate them. But most of us—either blind enough or despairing enough to think we already live in the best of all possible worlds—neither seek out these new notions nor pay them heed when by chance they reach our ears.

As comment on our times and evaluation of where we are missing out and neglecting our destiny—Paihe and the others were explicit enough—this seems exactly right. Does the "Talk of the Town" writer have suggestions?

Yes, he does, and one very good. He speaks of books by Gene Sharp—in particular *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Sharp, who runs the Program on Nonviolent Sanctions at Harvard, the writer says, has taken the ideas of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and some others, "and worked them out, in much the same way that the Founding Fathers took ideas from men like Locke and turned them into a government." He lists almost countless examples from recent history of nonviolent resistance to oppression—various techniques, "such as marches, strikes, and sit-ins"—which "are peaceful (they don't kill anyone) but not passive." This kind of struggle, Sharp says "is rooted in people's capacity for stubbornness, not their capacity for turning the other cheek."

It makes no sense, the *New Yorker* writer says, to pick the weapon that your opponent can wield most effectively—which is violence. And if

the knowledge compiled by Sharp could be spread around, "then unhappy people in a hundred and more places might decide on such tactics before someone could hand them an assault rifle."

If people here and elsewhere began to think of nonviolence as the norm, or even as a possible norm, and of blowing things up as the aberration, the front pages would soon be very different. . . . Nonviolence may be filled with difficulties but wars are filled with dead people. . . . Somehow, we have convinced ourselves that we are not up to changing the world. We have a million computers generating unprecedented brainpower; we have technology in such abundance that our abilities know few limits; and yet we lack the faith and inspiration to believe the most profound idea of the Founding Fathers, and also the simplest: the world is ours to shape.

We have here an interesting convergence of the outlook of the Founding Fathers and the inspiration of Gandhian conscience—nonviolence.

## *COMMENTARY*

### WHAT SHOULD WE SAY?

THE burden of this week's lead article is simple enough. It asks the question: What can we say to one another that will actually do some good?

We know from history what a great many people have thought important: To make up formulas and codes of law that will regulate human behavior. Americans have taken this obligation very seriously; we are, it has been said, "a nation of lawyers"; yet we also have as much disorder and crime as any place on earth. What is wrong, then, with our government by law? Perhaps the mistake has been that we have misjudged the sphere of control that is possible by law—have expected laws to accomplish what only another sort of persuasion can effect.

Consider, for example, the extract (in "Children") from John MacDonal which tells about the twelve-year-old boy who has killed a grackle, and why he will never kill another bird. Suppose there were a book which could exercise this sort of persuasion against all killing: Would the nation's schools adopt it as a text? It would almost certainly be rejected for the nationalist reason that such feelings might interfere with the country's right to make war. But a better reason would be that there can be no such book. Formulas and codes do not touch the inside of human beings, and that is where, as in the case of the twelve-year-old, all such changes take place. But only anarchists are willing to rely on these changes; the rest of us fear what might happen if there were no coercive law at all.

So, meanwhile, what should we say to one another?

Again, history instructs us that the message of the Buddha had extraordinary impact on all Asia, and this impact is now being brought to the rest of the world by the influence of Gandhi and his followers. Yet it needs transmission in a verity of idioms—as for example is illustrated in the quotation from the *New Yorker*.

It seems fair to say that the master of idiom—a technical description of what results when writers study the hearts of human beings—speaks most directly to us all. Reading Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Blake and Thoreau, Mumford and Ortega, and essays by Wendell Berry, persuades us of this.

What should be added? Very little we suspect. Perhaps nothing at all.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves VIRTUES OF FICTION

READING, lately, in a popular novel—a very good one of the detective story genre—we came across some "character analysis" of a penetration not likely to be found anywhere else, outside of fiction, that is. This is not, of course, the first such discovery. Looking back, we recalled a similar passage in a John D. MacDonald thriller (about Travis McGee—*The Dreadful Lemon Sky*) which illustrates the imagination of a good fiction writer. McGee's friend, Meyer, is relating an experience when he was twelve years old. He had shot a bird with his new twenty-two, a birthday present.

The grackle lay in my hand, and all that fabulous iridescence was gone. It had a dirty look, the feathers all scuffed and wet. I put it down hastily on the damp grass. I could not have endured dropping it. I put it down gently, and there was blood left on my hand. Bird blood. As red as mine. And the pain had been like mine, I knew. Bright and hot and savage.

Travis, the gun was an abstraction. A tiny movement of the finger. A cracking sound. A smell. I could not comprehend a gun, a bullet, a death until the bird had died. It became all too specific and concrete. I had engineered this death and it was dirty. I had given pain. I had blood on my hand. I did not know how to escape myself, to go back to what I had been before I had slain the bird. I wanted to get outside the new experience of being me. I was, in all truth, in solemnity, filled with horror at the nature of reality. I have never killed another bird, nor will I ever, unless I should come upon one in some kind of hopeless agony. . . .

Those young people . . . have never killed their grackle. They have not been bloodied by reality. They have shed the blood of a West that never existed. They have gawped at the gore of the Godfather. They have seen the slow terminal dance of Bonnie and Clyde. They have seen the stain on the front of the shirt of the man who has fallen gracefully into the dust of Marshall Dillon's main street. It is as if I had walked into those woods and seen a picture. They do not yet know, and may never learn, what a

death is like. . . . It is emotional poverty, with cause and effect in a state of dissociation. . . .

This sort of writing stirs the network of association of the reader, reinforcing his own "grackle" experiences, the lessons that should never be forgotten. Another novelist, Jessamyn West, generalizes the same idea. She wrote in *Redbook* years ago (January, 1963):

Death on the screen is so easy a matter. The fast draw the quick collapse. We are never permitted to see very much of the man who is going to die. We must not learn to care for *him*, to feel that *his* death matters; otherwise our enjoyment of his violent end will be weakened. We must never see him as a fellow who planted radishes, made kites for his kids or patted a dog on the head. . . . There are many intelligent thoughtful people who believe that there is too much violence on our movie and television screens and that it is particularly bad for children to see it. But what is really wrong is that the children do *not* see it. They see only the pleasure of landing the blow without ever imagining the pain of receiving it, without even imagining that the one who receives the blow is capable of suffering pain.

The TV screen wherein only bad men die, and then neatly and with dispatch, dulls and kills the imagination—and whatever destroys the imagination limits and ultimately destroys man.

This is what the artist knows—knows to the core of his being—and which the world of practical affairs very largely ignores. A lot of people are protesting "the bomb" these days. But will they protest the stultifications of the mind which make possible a society willing to accept "security" from an array of bombs? People say they want a peaceful world, but are they willing to try to become people for whom violence is psychologically impossible? Will they take Blake or Thoreau for their model of the right sort of human being?

The passage we spoke of at the beginning—which started these recollections—is in a novel (*Innocent Blood*) by P. D. James, an Englishwoman who has few if any peers in her art. Would that the "serious" writers could learn from her! The passage is an account of the disenchantment of a teacher of sociology in an

English college, unrelieved by any spurious "optimism." One must look elsewhere for that quality.

He had always disliked the hiatus between academic years when the detritus of the last term had scarcely cleared away, yet the next was already casting its shadow. He couldn't remember when the conscientious performance of duty had replaced enthusiasm, or when conscientiousness had finally given away to boredom. What worried him now was that he approached each academic term with an emotion more disturbing than boredom, something between irritation and apprehension. He knew that he no longer saw his students as individuals, no longer had any wish to know or communicate except on the level of tutor to student, and even here there was no trust between them. There seemed to have been a reversal of roles—he was the student, they the instructors. They sat in the ubiquitous uniform of the young: jeans and sweaters, huge clumpy plimsolls, open-necked shirts topped with denim jackets, and gazed at him with the fixity of inquisitors waiting for any deviation from orthodoxy. He told himself that they were no different from his former students, graceless, not very intelligent, uneducated if education implied the ability to write their own language with elegance and precision, to think clearly, to discriminate or enjoy. They were filled with the barely suppressed anger of those who have grabbed for themselves sufficient privilege to know just how little privilege they would ever achieve. They didn't want to be taught, having already decided what they preferred to believe.

What has happened to a society which a perceptive writer finds it legitimate to describe in stereotypic terms? Why are the "exceptions" so extraordinarily few? Is it part of a sociologist's job to try to explain this? This teacher was *tired* of his students:

He had found himself talking to them like an irascible schoolmaster . . . : "I've corrected some of the grammar and spelling. This may seem bourgeois pedantry, but if you plan to organize revolution you'll have to convince the intelligent and educated as well as the gullible and ignorant." . . .

Mike Beale, chief instigator of student power, had received back his last essay muttering under his breath. . . . Beale was incapable of an invective which didn't include the word "fascist." Beale had just completed his second year. With luck he would

graduate next autumn, departing to take a social-work qualification and find himself a job with a local authority, no doubt to teach juvenile delinquents that the occasional minor act of robbery with violence was a natural response of the underprivileged to capitalist tyranny and to promote political awareness among those council-house tenants looking for an excuse not to pay their rents. The academic machine would grind on, and what was so extraordinary was that essentially he and Beale were on the same side. He had been too publicly committed and for too long to renege now. Socialism and sociology. He felt like an old campaigner who no longer believes in his cause but finds it enough that there is a battle and he knows his own side. . . . He was becoming increasingly irritated by the sensitivity of colleagues, unsure of themselves, feeling morbidly undervalued, complaining that they were expected to remedy all the ills of society. He only wished he could cure his own.

Who but a novelist would *dare* to put into print a portrait of this sort? Yet who, without such character sketches, has any real hope of grasping the quality of present-day society? This applies to England, of course, and in the U.S. the nuances have other tendencies and coloring, but the grinding-down effect of working within institutions where hardly anybody is able to believe in what the institution stands for—or what it is said to stand for—is almost certainly characteristic of all of Western civilization.

For a multitude of reasons, the moral energy of the age is no longer to be found in its big organizations, and even the little ones are wondering what they should do. For generations the good novelists have been making this plain.

## *FRONTIERS* "Nothing Is Too Late"

TWO or three times in the past we have given attention here to the Chipko Movement in India, a grassroots effort on the part of villagers to save the once luxuriant forests of the slopes of the Himalaya Mountains, now seriously denuded by logging operations, with consequent erosion and flooding of settled areas. We are glad to be drawn once again to this subject by an article in *International Wildlife* (January-February 1984) by David Alexander, a journalist stationed in Bangkok, Thailand (with photographs by John Everingham). Such reports are good evidence that the plight of the planet is the intimate concern, not only of educated ecologists and environmentalists, but also of poor villagers who are immediately dependent on their natural surroundings for everyday needs. Such stories need to be told again and again.

Alexander points out that while destruction of India's forest environment began under the rule of the British, the problem has worsened since 1947 when India became free. According to one authority, "no more than 12 per cent of the country's land today remains under adequate tree cover." The topsoil is being depleted. Can it be restored by conservation measures and widespread treeplanting? According to Chandi Prasad Bhatt, a leader of the Chipko Movement, which has planted "more than one million cyprus, walnut, oak, poplar" and other needed trees. "it will take at least 200 years for replanted forests to regain their former glory." Lumbering still oustrips reforestatinn efforts, and meanwhile the population of the Himalayan area has grown from 32 million in 1971 to 42 million in 1981.

The story of the Chipko Movement begins with a drama of extreme disaster. On July 20, 1970, a giant cloudburst poured torrents of water down the sides of a towering Himalayan peak (26,650 feet high), carrying tons of earth,

boulders, and tree trunks into the surrounding valleys.

The Alaknanda River, tributary of India's holy Ganges, rose more than 60 feet. Six road bridges, 24 buses and about 600 houses were swept aside. One entire village was obliterated. Almost 200 people died. Downstream, hydroelectric dams became mired in silt; electricity production plummeted. Floods and landslides had always been a fact of life in the Himalayas, but never had they carried such devastating force.

The stunned mountain people in this region of northern India looked around at the destruction and asked, "Why?" The answer, they realized, was logging. Big commercial companies had felled vast tracts of forest, leaving barren, unstable land in their wake. Afraid for their own survival, the hill people began to fight back. The result was a "people's war" to save their environment, and today, although many problems remain, the people seem to be winning.

Alexander gives some of the highlights of the struggle. In March of 1973 a sporting goods manufacturer sent axemen to the mountain village of Gopeshwar to cut 32 walnut and ash trees for use in its products. The men of the village were off working somewhere so the women mobilized and threw their arms around the trees marked for felling. From this desperate action the movement gained its name—Chipko Andolan—which means "to embrace the trees." The women called out to the invaders, "Before you strike at the trees, strike your axes at our backs." The axemen withdrew.

This story has continuity with a bloody event of two hundred years earlier, when the Maharajah of Jodpur ordered a stand of trees to be felled. Regarding those trees as sacred, the women of the village hugged them tightly and 363 women were hacked to death by the Maharajah's men. Finally the ruler ordered the killing to be stopped. Thus the women of Gopeshwar had precedent for their passionate defense of the trees, and, happily, the sporting goods employees were more civilized.

A year later another company was allotted 2,451 fir trees—a more serious depredation—in the nearby village of Reni. An illiterate woman of 50, with the same name as the woman who led the

defiance of the Maharajah, gathered 27 other women and children. An axeman drew a gun and the women chanted: "This is our mother's home and we will protect it with our might." Again the woodsmen withdrew, and later a forestry report declared that from an ecological point of view the women were right, the fellers wrong. Chandi Bhatt, who had meanwhile organized a treeplanting program, said that the women were following Gandhi's example of non-violent resistance.

Why are the women so concerned about the fate of the trees? Alexander gives the answer in an account of the village of Dwing in the hills (5,000 feet high) of northern Uttar Pradesh:

Dwing's 12 householders depend on the receding, thinning forest. The town has no school or medical facility, and no electricity. From the forest comes firewood for warmth and cooking; pine pith for lighting houses built of wood and thatch; twine to tie up animals that feed off the forest floor; honey, berries, nuts and wild fruits to eat, and mushrooms and medicinal herbs to sell; the material from which to fashion spades, plows and cooking utensils.

Trees were once just around the corner. No more. Dwing's women, who are responsible for basic family needs under the division of labor that prevails in most rural Indian families, must make almost daily seven-hour trips to the forest. They travel steep terrain, each woman burdened with an average of 55 pounds of wood on the return journey. Bent earthwards from the weight of the tree branches and logs on their backs or heads, they trudge wearily home. Chipko claims that some women have committed suicide rather than face this daily struggle.

As a result of the organizing activity of Chandi Bhatt and the publicizing work of Sunderlal Bahaguna, a Gandhian journalist, the Chipko Movement has had a good press and enjoys growing influence. They have a tree nursery, conduct classes of various kinds, and spread the word about the importance of trees to India and the world. Already, in at least one area, Chipko has been able to "reverse some of the devastation and reduce the suffering of the people." Bhatt has said: "It is very late to be working to save our environment, but when you

live here when it's your own home, nothing is too late." In this he speaks for the world.