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OPTIMISM OR PESSIMISM?

E. F. SCHUMACHER's *A Guide for the Perplexed* came out late in 1977, a little after he died of a heart attack (on September 4). It was for him to be the book of books. During his life he reached conclusions about what people needed to do in order to save the world from immeasurable disaster and to save themselves from personal defeat. Like a few other humans, he was a man who, once he had found something out, began to act on it. This is one of the secrets of greatness. After protracted visits (as an economic consultant) to Burma and India, during which he began to see that the sort of aid given to these countries was not what was needed, he formed the Intermediate Technology Group in London in 1965. Another secret of greatness lies in knowing how to get things done, and Schumacher also had this quality. The full record of his achievements must await publication of a good biography (now under way, we have been told), but a book by his associate, George McRobie, a co-founder of the Intermediate Technology Group, *Small Is Possible*, gives some idea of its accomplishments—in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, and several African countries.

Schumacher's inspiration was Gandhian, as becomes clear in *Small Is Beautiful* (published in 1973). He wrote:

> Methods and machines cheap enough to be accessible to virtually everyone—why should we assume that our scientists and technologists are unable to develop them? This was a primary concern of Gandhi: "I want the dumb millions of our land to be healthy and happy, and I want them to grow spiritually. . . . If we feel the need of machines, we certainly will have them. Every machine that helps every individual has a place," he said, "but there should be no place for machines that concentrate power in a few hands and turn the masses into mere machine mincers, if indeed they do not make them unemployed."

Small things, Schumacher maintained, are beautiful for a variety of reasons, the first being that they are within reach of the poor. Another reason:

> Small-scale operations, no matter how numerous, are always less likely to be harmful to the natural environment than large-scale ones, simply because their individual force is small in relation to the recuperative forces of nature. There is wisdom in smallness if only on account of the smallness and patchiness of human knowledge, which relies on experiment far more than on understanding. The greatest danger invariably arises from the ruthless application, on a vast scale, of partial knowledge such as we are currently witnessing in the application of nuclear energy, of the new chemistry in agriculture, of transportation technology, and countless other things.

Technology on a human scale, he pointed out, leaves ample room for creativity. It extends human capacities instead of turning people into automatons. Finally, there is the moral judgment:

> Economically our wrong living consists primarily in systematically cultivating greed and envy and thus building up a vast array of totally unwarrantable wants. It is the sin of greed that has delivered us over into the power of the machine. If greed were not the master of modern man—ably assisted by envy—how could it be that the frenzy of economism does not abate as higher "standards of living" are attained, and that it is precisely the richest societies which pursue their economic advantage with the greatest ruthlessness? How could we explain the almost universal refusal on the part of the rulers of the rich societies—whether organized along private enterprise or collectivist enterprise lines—to work toward *the humanization of work?* It is only necessary to assert that something would reduce the "standard of living," and every debate is instantly closed. That soul-destroying, meaningless, mechanical, monotonous, moronic work is an insult to human nature which must necessarily and inevitably produce either escapism or aggression, and that no amount of "bread and circuses" can compensate for the damage done—these are facts which are neither denied nor acknowledged but are

> met with an unbreakable conspiracy of silence—because to deny them would be too obviously absurd and to acknowledge them would condemn the central preoccupation of modern society as a crime against humanity.

Here is sufficient explanation of why conventional economists seldom mention Schumacher's name, and why he developed so large an audience in the counter culture and among the disenchanted, and, here and there, those who combined human decency with a grasp of what he was saying.

We return, then, to his *Guide for the Perplexed,* the book in which he tried to set out his underlying philosophy, disclosing the assumptions and processes of reasoning which led to his course of action. It is a small book of only 140 pages, structured as an account of the ascent to self-awareness. He knew what he wanted to say about this progression and found in various books quotations which seemed to him to say it best. Plotinus, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, and Jacques Maritain are Westerners he draws upon, and in the East he quotes from Taoist, Buddhist, and Islamic texts. A few perceptive moderns are also briefly cited. The most valuable part of the book, however, toward the end, seems entirely his own.

Guide for the Perplexed was widely reviewed, as would be anything Schumacher wrote, and the *New York Times* obtained the comment of Harvey Cox, a Harvard Divinity School theologian. While an unqualified admirer of *Small Is Beautiful,* Prof. Cox claimed that in *Guide* the author "violates his own advice." He said in the *Times* (Oct. 7, 1977):

> I kept feeling that something urgent was being said about how the reductionist logic of modern science has indeed misled us and is useless when it comes to the most perplexing questions we face. Ironically, however, the man who has taught so many of us the virtues of modesty and restraint has resorted to a kind of scatter-shot and overkill. Not only has he tried to do too much in one small book—repudiate scientism, reinstate the hierarchical mode of thinking, reclaim the perennial philosophy—but the firepower he has concentrated is so mixed and so massive that his original point frequently gets lost.

"I hope not completely lost," Cox adds, since "Schumacher surely has something important to say."

Well, it would have been more useful, surely, if the critic, instead of picking at a writer for putting together too large a bouquet of quotations, to have extricated the good and important things from the text. Prof. Cox makes a passing reference to Schumacher's discussion of problems that can't be "solved," only coped with, but neglects the essential comparison of the "Two Types of Problems," the content of the book's last chapter. Here Schumacher divides human life into two orders of experience, the one bringing finite problems which have solutions, the other involving us in situations which cannot be resolved but must be outgrown. These latter problems have incommensurable elements in them, and they are only made worse by attempts to reduce them to finite terms. The point of the comparison is to show that the modern world is continually worsening all its problems by trying to deal with the "unsolvable" problems with the methods of science. Science can have nothing to do with immeasurable or undefinable realities. The unsolvable problems are the natural conditions of a life in which growth, and not "problem-solving," is called for.

Schumacher's illustrations are clarifying. He begins:

> We know that there are *solved* problems and *unsolved* problems. The former, we may feel, present no issue, but as regards the latter: Are there not problems that are not merely unsolved but insoluble?
>
> First let us look at solved problems. Take a design problem—say, how to make a two-wheeled, man-powered means of transportation. Various solutions are offered which gradually and increasingly *converge* until, finally, a design emerges which is "the answer"—a bicycle—an answer that turns out to be amazingly stable over time. Why is this answer so stable? Simply because it complies with the laws of the Universe—laws at the level of inanimate nature.

The design and making of a bicycle he decides to call a "convergent problem." It is a problem which is solved by doing what we know how to do the elements of a bicycle are definable, its principle limited and knowable. Time is required, but we are continually formulating such problems and turning them over to the engineers to solve, which eventually they do.

But curiously, while our physical lives may become simpler through the solution of these problems, they also become more complex. And solving the convergent problems does not make us either wiser or happier, just more comfortable and, as we say, "efficient," for a time. Schumacher continues:

> It also happens, however, that a number of highly able people may set out to study a problem and come up with answers which contradict one another. They do not *converge*. On the contrary, the more they are clarified and logically developed, the more they diverge, until some of them appear to be exact *opposites* of the others. For example, life presents us with a very big problem—not the technical problem of two-wheeled transport, but the human problem of how to educate our children. We cannot escape it; we have to face it, and we ask a number of equally intelligent people to advise us.

Well, some of the experts will speak of the importance of discipline and order. Teachers can't teach what they know, and the young can't learn from them, unless there is enough authority and obedience to allow teaching and learning to proceed. But other educators will say that while the nourishment of learning is needed, the children have to develop under their own steam. Learning, they point out, is a creative act, and the children need room and scope in performing it. "In other words," as Schumacher says, "education as seen by this second group calls for the establishment, not of discipline and obedience, but of freedom—the greatest possible freedom."

> If our first group of advisers is right, discipline and obedience are "a good thing," and it can be argued with perfect logic that if something is "a good thing," more of it would be a better thing, and perfect discipline and obedience would be a perfect thing . . . and the school would become a prison house.
>
> Our second group of advisers, on the other hand, argue that in education freedom is "a good thing." If so, more freedom would be an even better thing, and perfect freedom would be an even better thing, and perfect freedom would produce perfect education. The school would become a jungle, even a kind of lunatic asylum.
>
> Freedom and discipline (obedience) here is a pair of perfect opposites. No compromise is possible. It is either the one or the other. It is either "Do as you like" or "Do as I tell you."
>
> Logic does not help us because it insists that if a thing is true its opposite cannot be true at the same time. It also insists that if a thing is good, more of it will be better. Here we have a very typical and very basic problem, which I call a *divergent problem*, and it does not yield to ordinary, "straight-line" logic; it demonstrates that *life is bigger than logic*.

Well, some will say, Of course, we know that. You do have to compromise, to provide limited freedom and sensible rules. But defining these relativities is far from easy, as various sorts of schools around the country make plain. Required are teachers who are both sympathetic and rigorous, and these teachers need the freedom to exercise discretion. They need the latitude to suspend the rules as well as to work within them. As Schumacher puts it:

> Love, empathy, *participation mystique*, understanding compassion—these are faculties of a *higher order* than those required for the implementation of any policy of discipline or of freedom. To mobilize these higher faculties or forces, to have them available not simply as occasional impulses but permanently, requires a high level of self-awareness, and that is what makes a great educator. . . .
>
> "How do you make people better?" That this is a question constantly being asked merely shows that the essential point is being missed altogether. *Making* people better belongs to the level of manipulation, the same level at which the opposites exist and where their reconciliation is impossible.

The task, then, is to distinguish convergent from divergent problems, and never to try to solve the one sort of problem with the means of the

other. But in life, of course, the two are mixed, and then neither solution will work without some application of the other solution also. In such situations exquisite judgment, extraordinary patience, and the freedom to try different things are necessarily involved.

In the spring of 1981, Haim Gordon, a teacher at Ben Gurion University in Israel, attempted an experiment in "peace-making" by bringing together a group of twenty participants with about equal number of Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs, and Egyptians, to carry on Buberian dialogue for mutual understanding and fellowship. Gordon's object was to "diminish existential mistrust between Jews and Arabs." Tensions, he said, are "high." "The four wars in three decades, the hatred and the dread, the stereotypes of the former enemy, the anguish, the rage, the fear, the suffering—all these are poignantly revived." The discussion by Gordon of what happened during this encounter—which was ongoing for weeks and months—is of great interest. The participants were working on a divergent problem. Here we turn to the report of an Islamic woman, Riffat Hassan, who teaches at the University of Kentucky in the United States, for the most penetrating comment. She tells (in *Teachers College Record* for the Fall of 1982) why, in her view, the Education for Peace project could not succeed. It was "because the dialogue that is the means of this education is, in some ways, incomplete and inauthentic." She explains:

> Dialogue between Jews and Arabs is a virtual impossibility in Israel given the fact that Jews and Arabs are not equal in that society and that the Israeli Arabs are in a particularly vulnerable position, being mistrusted by many among Israeli Jews as well as Palestinian Arabs.
>
> Not only is Dr. Gordon aware of this fact of inequality between Jews and Arabs in Israel, but he is also committed to preserving that inequality. His statement on this point is clear and candid. He says: "As initiator of the Education for Peace project I firmly believe that Israel should be a Jewish state, and not a Palestinian or secular state where Jews and Arabs live together. . . . In other words, like most of my fellow Jews, I accept the sociopolitical structure of Israel as a Jewish state in which Arab citizens will continue to be a minority whose national aspirations will not be realized."
>
> One of the basic questions that haunt a number of sensitive Jews and Arabs in the project is: If the inequality in status between Jew and Arab in the larger Israeli society is to remain unchanged, what then is the purpose of teaching Jews and Arabs in the project the art of relating to each other as if they were equal? I remember a young Jewish woman in the project telling me with a lot of agony: "I feel as if the project is a game that we play. We pretend that we are all equal while all the time we know that we are not. Sometimes I feel that it would be kinder to stop pretending, to simply accept the fact that we are living in an unfair society, an unfair world." And I also recall the words of a young Arab man who spoke perhaps for many in his group when he said, "I feel that the real purpose of the project is to give us an opportunity to express our anger so that we would be emotionally neutralized and become passive."
>
> The I-Thou mode of relating requires that the I and the Thou treat each other justly, not being exploitative or manipulative in any way. Where justice is lacking, the I-Thou dialogue degenerates into an I-It mode of communication.

Yet in her conclusion Riffat Hassan tempers this judgment with appreciation:

> With all its imperfections, the project has provided a setting—perhaps the only one in Israel—where Jews and Arabs can meet as persons and not as stereotypes. It has also taught its members the art of confronting much that is difficult to accept, thus releasing them from the bondage of repression and passive suffering. The project has made its members aware of both the need for and the possibility of acquiring deeper knowledge and wisdom as well as greater maturity and strength of character even within the constraints imposed on them by the larger reality that encompasses them. I believe that each Jew or Arab who has entered the project with commitment has learned from it and has somehow become more fully human as a result of engaging in dialogical encounter with other Jews and Arabs. All of this constitutes a considerable good and all of this I personally value. However, what is for me the highest good that has come out of the Education for Peace project is that it has provided to a few human beings—Jews and Arabs—the opportunity to transcend the enmity and alienation of the ages and to

> be able to love the other despite all that separates them. This seems to me to be the project's greatest vindication.

Here the Islamic lady seems to be saying that, for unusual individuals, transcendence is shown to be possible even under the prejudicial circumstances endured by Israeli Arabs and sensitive Jews who lack the power to put an end to the inequalities. Parallels of this situation exist all over the world, and the problems which exist in Israel are noticed here mainly because of the useful commentary provided in the *Teachers College Record.*

Schumacher wrote his last book in an effort to make clear that the only way we can go on living with insoluble problems is by the inner solvent of brotherly attitudes, especially in relationships where there is continued injustice. The evil of injustice is never to be ignored, nor glossed over and hidden, but understood in its numerous presences, seen and unseen. He says at the end:

> The art of living is always to make a good thing out of a bad thing. . . . This then leads to seeing the world in a new light, namely, as a place where the things modern man continuously talks about and always fails to accomplish *can actually be done.* The generosity of the Earth allows us to feed all mankind; we know enough about ecology to keep the Earth a healthy place; there is enough room on the Earth, and there are enough materials, so that everybody can have adequate shelter; we are quite competent enough to produce sufficient supplies of necessities so that no one need live in misery. Above all, we shall then see that the economic problem is a convergent problem *which has been solved already;* we know how to provide *enough* and do not require any violent, inhuman, aggressive technologies to do so. There *is* no economic problem and, in a sense, there never has been. But there is a moral problem, and moral problems are not convergent, capable of being solved so that future generations can live without effort. No, they are divergent problems, which have to be understood and transcended.

Is this pessimism, or is it optimism, or an outlook that goes beyond both?

REVIEW
THE AXIS OF DELIVERANCE

MARCO PALLIS, an Englishman born in 1895, a musician, a mountain-climber, a student of Buddhism, told in *Peaks and Lamas* (London: Cassell, 1939) how, early in this century, he went to a land bordering Tibet to climb in the Himalayas, and how, gradually, while resting from these exertions in Buddhist monasteries, he was drawn to study their religious philosophy. His comparisons of Eastern and Western culture are fascinating reading. We usually think of Tibet as a theocratic country where there are more priests per capita than anywhere else. Yet in Ladak, in East Kashmir, on the Tibetan frontier, where the people are Tibetan and Buddhist, subject "ecclesiastically" to Lhasa, Pallis found so much personal freedom, serenity, and happiness that their lives seemed idyllic. Yet already the cultural imperialism of the West was under way. He saw an empty "Flit" can in the sanctuary of a temple and a "ginger-beer" bottle on the altar of a private chapel. Some worthless trinket from abroad, Pallis realized, was likely to be given a place of honor, "next to the most supreme works of genius, without noticing the least incongruity." In defense of this apparent lack of taste, Pallis wrote:

> Even in the Athens of the Periclean age, if suddenly one cinema, one chain-store and one radio station had been opened, I wonder whether the whole edifice of Hellenic civilization would not have come toppling about the ears of its creators, as surely as one machine-gun would have mown down the victorious hoplites of Marathon. Even a Phidias might have been momentarily taken in and a Zeuxis have exchanged his brush for a camera. One somehow suspects that Socrates would have seen through it all and stood firm; but he could always have been given his overdose of hemlock a few years earlier.

This is the sort of perceptive and fair-minded writer that a reader is likely to trust when it comes to evaluative accounts of far-away peoples. His latest book, A *Buddhist Spectrum* (Seabury Press, 1981, $9.95) has things in it which inspire the same confidence in his capacity to explain the religious philosophy of the Buddhists. The book is made of ten essays, some comparing Christianity with Buddhism, others examining the subtleties of Eastern metaphysics. The first essay, "Living One's Karma," brings to the fore aspects of this foundation doctrine of Buddhism which are easily neglected by Western habits of thought, even though the term, "Karma," has become a commonplace. He says:

> People speak of prosperity as if they had a right to it regardless of their karma, and of adversity as if it were something in which they had no stake, but here again it is necessary to discriminate in the light of the respective karmic fruits. For the man of insight, a form of prosperity tending to increase distraction (though this does not always happen of course) must be reckoned a drawback from the point of view of fruits, whereas an adversity that serves to open one's eyes must be accounted more of a boon than a punishment; merit might earn a blessed pain, where an unfavourable karma would place one in prosperity as a stage on the way to hell.

This is strong medicine, not likely to be reached for by those whose idea of good is defined by health and prosperity. What profit, they will ask, can come from a teaching that might take away exactly what I want? A Buddhist would reply that learning what is worth wanting is very nearly all that we accomplish in the weary round of life after life. Mr. Pallis goes on, giving an example from the arts of the West:

> I remember an occasion some years ago when I sat listening to Wagner's music-drama *Die Walküre.* It was the scene where Wotan, chief of the gods, is about to sentence his daughter, Brunhilde, the celestial warrior-maiden, to deprivation of her godhood for having disobeyed his command to side with Hunding, and in his person with the laws of conventionality, against Siegmund, who here stands for the cause of spirit versus the letter and as the exception which proves the rule. This story was taken by Wagner from an ancient German myth, a symbolical narrative that is to say, and as such charged with a metaphysical message that the composer must have felt instinctively even if he did not consciously penetrate its every meaning.
>
> The crux of the story is that Wotan, to punish his daughter, turns her into an ordinary woman; by

> this token, Brunhilde is caused to exchange a state which, though it bespeaks superior powers, remains peripheral, in favour of the human state, which is central. Thus the seeming punishment becomes a real reward. As a further result, according to the myth, Brunhilde, now a woman, becomes the spouse of Siegfried, type of the Solar Hero and let us not forget that traditionally "solarity" is an attribute of the Buddha himself. If we translate the episode into Buddhist terms, Brunhilde's good karma, due to her having shown true discernment when faced with a crucial choice, won her a place on the axis of deliverance. This is the essential point; the "punishment" is only incidental. This all came to me in a flash, as I sat under the spell of that glorious music, which thus served as an *upaya*, as a catalyst of wisdom hidden in old German and Scandinavian mythology, which otherwise I might never have discovered for myself.

The key idea here is that only embodied humans, who are as likely to go wrong as to go right, are able to work out their salvation. To become a mere woman, an ordinary human, was to seek engagement with destiny, something that gods can no longer do. This is Buddhist reasoning from Buddhist premises. For the Westerner, it may threaten to turn his world upside down.

Pallis has another example of Buddhist reasoning, taken from an interchange with the Dalai Lama in Britain in 1974. (The Dalai Lama is the unassuming head of loosely organized Mahayana Buddhism.)

> Someone had asked him how he felt about the Chinese invaders of Tibet; did he not hate them for the way they had treated and continued to treat his countrymen? The person putting this question doubtless expected some answer to the effect that the Buddha's teaching, like Christ's, excludes hatred and violence, even in return for a great wrong. But what he got was something quite different, of which the matter-of-factness must have astonished anyone used to the habitual emotionalism of Western moralists, for what the Lama said amounted to this: Do the Tibetans stand to benefit in some respect or other from hating the Chinese? Or, alternatively, will the Chinese draw some benefit from being thus hated? And if neither party is to derive any advantage, what's the point, then, of hating?

In another essay, Marco Pallis seeks a Buddhist equivalent of the Christian doctrine of "grace," finding it in what is called "Pure Land Buddhism."

> A certain Bodhisattva . . . was about to enter the state of enlightenment when, moved by compassion, he said to himself: How can I bear to enter nirvana when all the multitude of beings have to stay behind, a prey to indefinite transmigration and suffering? Rather than leave them in that state, I vow that if I am not able to deliver them down to the last blade of grass, then let me never reach enlightenment!" But in fact (so the argument runs) he did reach enlightenment and now reigns, as the Buddha Amitabha, over the Western quarter; therefore his vow cannot have failed of his object; suffering beings can and must be delivered, if only they will have faith in Amitabha's vow and call upon his name.

This, Pallis explains, gives the origin of the practice, so puzzling to occidentals, of the continuous chanting (by some sects) of the formula, "Praise to Amitabha Buddha"—giving up all "self-will" and relying on the Buddha's vows to deliver them. "Who can speak of self-power when he lacks the first idea of what self means?"

However, Pallis says the Pure Land doctrine explains that in the early days of Buddhism, men were stronger, with the capacity to save themselves, but now they "have grown weak, confused, and above all hopelessly passive." Yet this weakness can be turned to good account, the Pure Land teaching says; by relying on the grace of Amitabha's vow.

Surely this can be only a second-class salvation! The idea is to "extinguish" the self in order to be free, but the freedom cannot reach very far unless there had been a vigorous sort of self, one worth extinguishing.

This brings us to the Theravada doctrine of *Anatta*, meaning "no Atma," no self or soul. No Buddhist view is so insistently—one might almost say militantly—asserted as this one. It is closely related to the question of Nirvana. If, as Eastern philosophy maintains, Nirvana is the dissipation of all form, all structure, all objectivity, then how can

there be a continuing soul? As something that has been "evolved," soul certainly has structure. The logic seems sound, and the persistence with which it is presented can be understood since the concept of self commonly involves numerous misconceptions. The Upanishads, Pallis points out, admit the pervasive influence of these false ideas of self, yet say that behind the barriers of illusion there is a "transcendental self," both individualized and universal. It is like, one might say, a cone which has a punctual (individual) existence in the world, yet widens out into all-inclusive infinity in its other dimension—a Leibnizian image.

Pallis leaves the question undecided, as well he may.

> When all is said and done, *anatta* offers itself to our human intelligence as a supreme *koan*, an enigma which by constant meditation carried on in the stillness of one's heart may all of a sudden yield up its secret. It is for a Buddha alone to know what "self" and "selfless" really imply. . . .

Readers who wish to go from a reading of this essay by Marco Pallis to other explorers of Buddhist metaphysics might turn to *The Creed of the Buddha* (John Lane, 1919) by Edmond Holmes, for a helpful discussion of *Anatta*, using several texts to focus on what the Buddha is said to have said. Finally, the intention of the Buddha seems suggested in the remark by Marco Pallis that the doctrine of *Anatta* is the specific remedy for ridding ourselves of a spurious self-consciousness. "True consciousness can be trusted to follow once the obstacles to an awakened intelligence have been cleared from the path."

COMMENTARY
A PROMETHEAN MEANING

ONE thing about Oriental religion that Westerners find difficult to understand is its low opinion of life on earth. To be freed of the need of further existence—the weary round of rebirth—is regarded as the highest good in both Hinduism and Buddhism. Death is no tragedy, but at the very least the beginning of a time of rest and cessation of pain, while in the West death is regarded as a ruthless imposition by nature, a relentless interruption of the life we hold dear.

There are doubtless several explanations for this difference of outlook, but one that seems acceptable is that the people of India are a very ancient race who have endured far more suffering than Europeans and Americans—more, especially, than Americans, whose civilization is less than three hundred years old.

Another reason would be that in the West achievement is measured in objective terms, while Eastern religion teaches that growth and progress are inner, its fruits carried from life to life until the reward of freedom from rebirth is earned.

This idea throws light on the expression used by Marco Pallis—quoted in this week's Review—"the axis of deliverance." It suggests that only in mortal earth life can souls work out their salvation, earning the peace and bliss of Nirvana.

A Westerner, reading Pallis's interpretation of Brunhilde's choice, might be doubly puzzled. She was a goddess, wasn't she? And immortal, too. Why didn't she stay that way? She was already "saved," and becoming a mortal woman didn't make any sense. Yet this overlooks the fact that her "demotion" to mortality resulted from an act of love—for the gods may submit themselves to the pain of life in the service of mortals who feel lost in the shadowed mixture of light and darkness in the world of conditioned existence. It was indeed a fateful risk for Brunhilde, yet love made the risk welcome.

The risk became for her the *meaning* of the world—its meaning for Siegfried, which she took for her own. So, too, for the Bodhisattva, who refused Nirvana in order to remain as a teacher among men until all had earned their immortality. This is the Promethean meaning of life on earth.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
IF A PIG WANDERED UP

TWO contributors to Joseph Epstein's *Masters—Portraits of Great Teachers* (Basic Books, 1981), Peter Stern and Jean Yarbrough, both former students of Hannah Arendt, writing as a team, sum up her qualities as a teacher:

> Literary sensibility is usually concerned with capturing meaning through imagery and narrative, according to a vision of the beautiful; while philosophy, by way of logical argument, aims at what is true. It was Hannah Arendt's genius to combine these two modes.

This combination, which makes nearly everything she wrote inviting, also throws into high relief her studied effort to do justice—neither to excuse the bad in what people have done, nor to ignore the good—a lesson needed by both young and old. Her book, *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), made up of essays, reviews, and introductions, provides numerous illustrations of this capacity—for example her discussion of the life and work of Bertolt Brecht, whom she calls the greatest German poet of the twentieth century. Yet poets, she says, "can't get away with everything." Even though we may allow them greater latitude than ordinary folk, they remain accountable as human beings. Comparing Brecht with Ezra Pound, she remarks that "Pound could plead insanity and get away with things that Brecht, entirely sane and highly intelligent, was not able to get away with. Brecht's sins were smaller than Pound's yet he sinned more heavily, because he was only a poet, not an insane one."

> There is no surer way to make a fool of oneself than to draw up a code of behavior for poets, though quite a number of serious and respectable people have done it. Luckily for us and the poets, we don't have to go to this absurd trouble, nor do we have to rely on our everyday standards of judgment. A poet is to be judged by his poetry and while much is permitted him, it is not true that "those who praise the outrage have fine-sounding voices." At least it was not true in Brecht's case; his odes to Stalin, that great father and murderer of people, sound as though they had been fabricated by the least gifted imitator Brecht ever had. The worst that can happen to a poet is that he should cease to be a poet, and that is what happened to Brecht in the last years of his life. He may have thought that the odes to Stalin did not matter.

Why did Brecht ally himself with the Communists? This is a question politically righteous persons need to ask themselves, since motives are never irrelevant, whatever the communists say about the unimportance of subjective stance. Hannah Arendt considers the susceptibility of artists to radical intentions and claims:

> Ever since the French Revolution, when like a torrent the immense stream of the poor burst for the first time into the streets of Europe, there have been many among the revolutionists who, like Brecht, acted out of compassion and concealed their compassion, under the cover of scientific theories and hardboiled rhetoric, out of shame. . . . his decision to align himself with the Communist Party is easy to understand, under the circumstances of the time. As far as Brecht was concerned, the main factor in this decision was that the Party not only had made the cause of the unfortunate ones its own but also possessed a body of writings upon which one could draw for all circumstances and from which one could quote as endlessly as from Scripture. This was Brecht's greatest delight. Long before he had read all the books—indeed, immediately upon joining his new comrades—he began to speak of Marx, Engels, and Lenin as the "classics." But the main thing was that the Party brought him into daily contact with what his compassion had already told him was reality: the darkness and the great cold in this valley of tears.

For a poet, a poet like Brecht, the sirens of communist compassion were irresistible.

> And this, of course, was where his troubles, and our troubles with him, begin. He had scarcely joined the Communists before he found out that in order to change the bad world into a good world it was not enough "not to be good" but that you had to become bad yourself, that in order to exterminate meanness there should be no mean thing you were not ready to do. For—"Who are you? Sink into dirt, embrace the butcher, but change the world, the world needs change." Trotsky proclaimed even in exile, "We can only be right with and by the Party, for history has

> provided no other way of being in the right," and Brecht elaborated: "One man has two eyes, the Party has a thousand eyes, the Party sees seven countries, one man sees one city. . . . One man can be destroyed, but the Party can't be destroyed. For . . . it leads its struggle with the methods of the classics, which were drawn from knowledge of reality."

So, in 1929, when Stalin began his program of eliminating all dissent in the Party, Brecht wrote a play defending Moscow because what was needed, he felt, "was a defense of killing one's own comrades and innocent people."

> Brecht never earned less thanks from his friends and comrades than with this play. The reason is obvious. He had done what poets will always do if they are left alone: He had announced the truth to the extent that this truth had then become visible. For the simple truth of the matter was that innocent people *were* killed and that the Communists, while they had not stopped fighting their foes (this came later), had begun to kill their friends. It was only a beginning, which most people still excused as an excess of revolutionary zeal, but Brecht was intelligent enough to see the method in the madness, although he certainly did not foresee that those who pretended to work for Paradise had just started establishing Hell on earth, and that there was no meanness, no treachery they were not prepared to perpetrate. Brecht had shown the rules according to which the infernal game was being played, and, of course, he expected applause. Alas, he had overlooked a small detail: It was by no means the intention of the Party, or in the Party's interests, to have the truth told, least of all by one of its loudly proclaimed sympathizers. On the contrary, the point, as far as the Party was concerned, was to deceive the world.

It was Brecht's "extraordinary intelligence," Hannah Arendt says, "breaking like a light through the rumble of Marxist platitudes, that has made it so difficult for good men to forgive his sins, or reconcile themselves to the fact that he could sin *and* write good poetry."

> But finally, when he went back to East Germany, essentially for artistic reasons, because its government would give him a theater—that is, for that "art for art's sake" he had vehemently denounced for nearly thirty years—his punishment caught up with him. Now reality overwhelmed him to the point where he could no longer be its voice; he had succeeded in being in the thick of it—and had proved that this is no good place for a poet to be.

From another poet, Randall Jarrell, a friend who read English poetry to her by the hour, Hannah Arendt quotes a devastating sentence (in *Pictures from an Institution*): "President Robbins was so well adjusted to his environment that sometimes you could not tell which was the environment and which was President Robbins."

There is this on Jarrell:

> His was not at all the case of the man who flees the world and builds himself a dream castle, on the contrary, he met the world head-on. And the world, to his everlasting surprise, was as it was—not peopled by poets and readers of poetry, but the television watchers and readers of *Reader's Digest* and, worst of all, by this new species, the "Modern Critic," who no longer exists "for the sake of the plays and stories and poems (he) criticizes" but for his own sake, who knows "how poems and novels are put together," whereas the poor writer "had just put them together. In the same way, if a pig wandered up to you in a bacon-judging contest, you would say impatiently, 'Go away, pig! What do you know about bacon?' "

On the poet in general:

> The world, in other words, did not welcome the poet, was not grateful to him for the splendor he brought, seemed unneedful of his "immemorial power to make the things of this world seen and felt and living in words," and therefore condemned him to obscurity, complaining then that he was too "obscure" and could not be understood, until finally "the poet said, 'Since you won't read me, I'll make sure you can't'."

Hannah Arendt, happily, makes sure you can. In one place, speaking of a talented writer's inability to become part of an "influential group," she remarks that with this group of intellectuals, "as with all such entities, only ideological allegiance counted, since only ideology, not rank and quality, can hold a group together." The writer, being an artist, could not understand this. Will there ever, one wonders, be an association of humans bonded by quality of mind, and not ideology, becoming a challenge instead of a refuge, a fraternity instead of a cadre for defense and offense?

FRONTIERS

Ceramic Village

EVIDENCE keeps turning up that architects are men of conscience. This applies to designers, too, and the reason, we have decided, is that people who make things that will be used are naturally led to think about the lives of the people who will use them. The designers are continually tested by how well the things they design work. Another factor enters in. Designers and architects make things which are "wholes." They don't make parts and send them off to somebody else. They complete what they do themselves, and it must *work.* So, designers and architects are likely to be—or become—responsible individuals. Thinking about wholeness requires it. Naturally enough, a sense of responsibility turns out to be an expression of conscience, and conscience is a faculty that tends to look in all directions.

We have an illustration—a very good illustration—provided by a feature writer in the *Los Angeles Times* (Nov. 10, 1982) who interviewed an Iranian architect and tells about what he has chosen to do. The real story of Nader Khalali, who had successful practices in both Iran and California, began six years ago, three years before the Iranian revolution. Overtaken by conscience, he started wondering how the adobe and mud-brick dwellings of the poor in Iran could be made safe and durable. Adobe is in many ways an ideal building material, cool in summer and warm in winter, and everywhere available. But with heavy rains the roofs cave in and the walls are dissolved into mud.

Khalali disposed of his lucrative Iranian practice, bought a motorcycle, and undertook a pilgrimage looking for a solution, a way to provide sound housing for Iranian peasants. One day, riding along, he saw a large kiln at a crossroads, used for firing pipes to serve as aqueducts. The kiln, he learned from an ancient bystander, had been there for fifty years. "How is that possible?" he asked his informant, since the nearby villages had long since been washed away. "It's fire," the old man told him. The kiln, like the pipes it hardened, had been fired. Khalali went looking for an expert in firing clay, and found an old man named Ali Aga in a pottery near Tehran. The architect explained what he wanted and the old man, who could neither read nor write, was adventurous enough to cooperate. He could, Khalali said, "tell the temperature of a flame just by looking at it."

The idea was to apply the technique of firing pottery to the domed clay houses which are found in thousands of villages throughout the Middle East. For the experiment, he chose a mud hut in a village where there was no electricity. He and Ali Aga rigged a torch that would enable them to fire the dwelling from the inside. Two barrels of kerosene provided fuel. The *Times* writer, Ann Japenga, relates—

> With the villagers' help, they sealed the doors and windows. Then, realizing that the entire house was to become a kiln, Khalali invited the children to make clay figures and fire them inside.
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> On a snowy evening, they lit the torch. The villagers stood watch all night as steam baked out of the clay and filled the sky. Some village women brought pots of potatoes and asked Khalali to cook them on top of the house.
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> An hour after the fire started, Khalali said, hundreds of mice began fleeing from the dwelling. The villagers cheered and chased the rodents with sticks. A benefit of *gelaftan* [Iranian for the craft of firing clay] Khalali hadn't anticipated was that a fired village became pest-free and hygenic.
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> When the firing was done, Khalali said, the old women covered him with hugs and kisses, saying that for the first time in their lives they could sleep on wet nights without fear of cave-ins.
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> Now that he had proved a house could be baked just like a ceramic bowl, Khalali wanted to show it could also be glazed. Out of broken Pepsi bottles and sand, the villagers mixed a crude glaze. The insecticide sprayers every villager kept at home were brought out to apply the glaze.
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> After the glaze was fired, Khalali stood on the roof and looked down into the house. "Everything is shining and sparkling; everything is changed to

> crystal. . . . The walls are unbelievable. The lights are shining and breaking on them as on a piece of crumbled aluminum foil under the sun."
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> While the glaze was still wet, the villagers had clamored to carve their names on the walls. "They wanted to become eternal," Khalali said. He saw his own words immortalized inside the house—EARTH, WATER, FIRE, AIR.

The architect went on to fire a second dwelling, then did eleven more, making the entire village a ceramic neighborhood. Then he built and fired a twelve-room school house nearby.

More recently he returned to the United States, "fired" by the idea of showing Native Americans in the Southwest how to harden their pueblos. He hopes to demonstrate this technique to mud-hut dwellers around the world—in Australia, Africa, and India. When he arrived here, he talked to his friend, Paolo Soleri, architect-builder of the Arcosanti community in Arizona, then sent off the manuscript of the book he had just completed to Soleri's publisher, Harper & Row. (The book is scheduled for spring 1983 publication.) He is now a visiting professor at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. Another book he is working on will be a how-to guide for building and firing adobe homes. He thinks that eventually, this sort of self-help housing will be taken up in the United States, when the economy finally settles on the bottom. At present a Navajo student at Pitzer is preparing to fire hogans on the reservation, and representatives of the pueblos in northern New Mexico have talked to Khalali about the possibility of firing their adobe dwellings.

Meanwhile, he has taken soil samples from the coastal cliffs and palisades of Santa Monica, California, to see whether he can fire such material—to make terra firma, you could say. And with students of the Southern California Institute of Architecture he has been experimenting with firing culverts in Malibu Canyon.

He points out that domed buildings of brick and clay—except for the menace of water—are more durable than modern steel-and-concrete structures, surviving even devastating earthquakes. And they are also beautiful, as shown by the photograph of models used in his classes at Pitzer. If such dwellings begin to dot the landscape of Southern California—where there's plenty of adobe—the region might slowly recover some of its original charm.