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A DISCIPLINE OF MIND

THE writer is an explorer. Unlike, however, the geographical explorer who conforms his adventurous investigations to the world's terrain, the writer has the freedom—and necessity—to create his own path. He is persuasive to the extent that his destination seems worth pursuing and the landmarks he identifies suggest that he is going in the right direction. Reading his book is a way of agreeing to go with him, at least part way. The docile reader follows willingly, sometimes uncritically, and lets himself be carried by the writer when the going gets mushy or rough. The writer, of course, having invented—although not out of nothing—the route he has taken, either is or feels well supported by the country he traverses. What to some readers may seem useless side excursions are for the writer instructive elaborations of his sense of direction. Time spent in way stations are not interruptions and delays but necessary interludes of stocktaking and study of alternative paths for the morrow. The reader may ask himself, why does the writer climb that hill to look ahead, when he already knows he is on the right track? Later he may acknowledge that the view was worth the climb.

The parallel between a book and an exploration may prove fruitful so long as we keep in mind that the book is a work of the imagination while the shape of a journey—any journey on earth—is already half established before it is begun. We know something about traveling around, how it may best be accomplished, what provisions to take along, and whom to choose if we need a guide. There may be little argument about the starting point, and at least general agreement about the destination, although it may be poorly defined. But the exploration proposed by a book lacks these securities. There will be those who say that we don't need to go any place, or least of all where the author suggests. Others will agree on the journey, but insist on striking out in the opposite direction. And still others will contend that the point of departure is misconceived; that we need launching pads instead of a wagon train.

Yet great books gather great audiences. Their logic, presented invitingly, persuades. Their assumptions, at first resisted, are adopted after reflection. The images used to develop their themes become familiar and used as tools of everyday thought. Their goals or visions set vibrating silent strings of longing. An idea which clashes with common belief becomes a lever which raises to view unconsidered possibilities. There are these lines in an obscure play by Shakespeare:

> Why should my birth keep down my mounting spirit?
> Are not all creatures subject unto time?
> There's legions now of beggars on the earth,
> That their original did spring from Kings,
> And many monarchs now, whose fathers were
> The riff-raff of their age. . . .

A similar call was made in 1776 by Thomas Paine. In *Common Sense* he set out to rouse the colonists to fight for Independence, appealing at once to their manhood and to their love of freedom, while ridiculing the English king to whom by tradition the people were devoted. In an essay published by the Library of Congress in 1973 (in *Fundamental Testaments of the American Revolution*), Bernard Bailyn speaks of the great impact of Paine's writing on the Americans, nine months after the first skirmishes of the war for independence. The Harvard historian says:

> What strikes one more forcefully now, at this distance in time, is something quite different from the question of the pamphlet's unmeasurable contribution to the movement toward independence. There is something extraordinary in this pamphlet—something bizarre, outsized, unique—quite aside

> from its strident appeal for independence, and the quality, which was recognized if not defined by contemporaries and which sets it off from the rest of the pamphlet literature of the revolution, helps us understand, I believe, something essential in the Revolution as a whole. . . .
>
> The great intellectual force of *Common Sense* lay not in its close argumentation on specific points but in its reversal of the presumption that underlay the arguments, a reversal that forced thoughtful readers to consider, not so much a point here and a conclusion there, but a wholly new way of looking at the entire range of problems involved. For beneath all of the explicit arguments and conclusions against independence, there were underlying, unspoken, even unconceptualized presuppositions, attitudes, and habits of thought that made it extremely difficult for the colonists to break with England and find in the prospect of an independent future the security and freedom they sought. The special intellectual quality of *Common Sense*, which goes a long way toward explaining its impact on contemporary readers, derives from its reversal of these underlying presuppositions and its shifting of the established perspectives to the point where the whole received paradigm within which the Anglo-American controversy had until then proceeded came into question.

Paine's method—the path he chose—becomes clear in what he said about the royal line of England:

> England since the conquest hath known some few good monarchs, but groaned beneath a much larger number of bad ones; yet no man in his senses can say that their claim under William the Conqueror is a very honorable one. A French bastard landing with armed banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascal. It certainly hath no divinity in it. . . . In England a king hath little more to do than to make war and give away places; which, in plain terms, is to impoverish the nation and set it together by the ears. A pretty business indeed for a man to be allowed eight hundred thousand sterling a year for, and worshipped into the bargain! Of more worth is one honest man to society and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived.

Paine reached into the psyches of his adopted countrymen and grasped their half-conscious qualities of self-reliance, learned on various frontiers, and made men realize they could govern themselves, that they *ought* to govern themselves. Paine made his own passion for liberty infectious. He played on the extremes in his own nature—rage at England's oppressions and a generous love of mankind. In *Common Sense*, he filled the cup of reason with the emotions of his heart and poured them out in prose, as Bailyn puts it—"in arresting prose—at times wild and fierce prose, at times lyrical and inspirational, but never flat and merely argumentative, and often deeply moving—and directed as a polemic not so much at the conclusions that opponents of independence had reached but at their premises, at their unspoken presumptions, and at their sense of what was obvious and what was not. . . ." Actually, Paine's vision went far beyond the hopes and expectations of even the most radical of the colonists. Right at the beginning of *Common Sense*, in his second paragraph, he revealed his conviction that government itself was an evil, and how necessary he was not sure:

> Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the bowers of paradise. For were the impulses of conscience clear, uniform and irresistible obeyed, man would need no other lawgiver.

Prof. Bailyn says:

> The verbal surface of the pamphlet is heated, and it burned into the consciousness of contemporaries because below it was the flaming conviction, not simply that England was corrupt and that America should declare its independence, but that the whole of organized society and government was stupid and cruel and that it survived only because the atrocities it systematically imposed on humanity had been papered over with a veneer of mythology and superstition that numbed the mind and kept people from rising against the evils that oppressed them. . . . The pamphlet sparked into flame resentments that had smoldered within the American opposition to England for years, and brought into a single focus the lack of confidence in the whole European world that Americans had vaguely felt and aspirations for a newer, freer, more open world, independent of England, which had not, until then, been freely expressed.

Paine kept his eye on a far-off utopian horizon, moving from the dream to the practical steps to be taken. He cried out:

> O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.
>
> I have never met with a man, either in England or America, who hath not confessed his opinion, that a separation between the countries would take place one time or another. And there is no instance in which we have shown less judgment, than in endeavoring to describe what we call the ripeness or fitness of the continent for independence.
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> As all men allow the measure, and vary only in their opinion of the time, let us, in order to remove mistakes, take a general survey of things and endeavor if possible to find out the *very* time. But I need not go far, the inquiry ceases at once, for the *time hath found us.*

For Paine, the enterprise of writing meant a matching of values—he appealed from his own deepest concerns to related qualities in the people he was writing for, showing that at root they were the same: thus showing the thing to do. This was the path he followed, and his mind, filled with historical analogies, anecdotes, filled out the picture of the path, making it seem the highway of courage, decency, and hope which every man ought to take. There was a magnetism in his prose that made a natural moral environment for what he said. His driving conviction left behind the "either-ors" and the "what-ifs" of more cautious and closely reasoning patriots. His personal integrity gave moral consistency to the *ad hocs* and *ad hominems* of his argument. Who can help but be glad that Thomas Paine was there, on the scene, to write *Common Sense* in 1776?

The temper, focus, and vista of Paine's mind are made plain by some paragraphs at the conclusion of *The Rights of Man* (Part 2), written in 1792:

> Government is but now beginning to be known. Hitherto it has been the mere exercise of power, which forebade all effectual inquiry into rights, and grounded itself wholly on possession. While the enemy of liberty was its judge, the progress of its principles must have been small indeed. . . .
>
> The best constitution that could be devised, consistent with the condition of the present moment, may be far short of the excellence which a few years may afford. There is a morning of reason rising upon man, on the subject of government, that has not appeared before. As the barbarism of the present old governments expires, the moral condition of the nations, with respect to each other, will be changed.

Well, we have gone a little on the way Paine's "book" takes us, trying to understand his decision of what to say, how to communicate his vision, and how to give his argument a practical cast. One more perspective on his work is needed, and we find it in Prof. Bailyn's essay:

> In the weeks when *Common Sense* was being written the future—even the very immediate future—was entirely obscure; the situation was malleable in the extreme. No one then could confidently say which course history would later declare to have been the right course to have followed. No one then could know who would later be seen to have been heroes and who weaklings or villains. No one then could know who would be the winners and who the losers. . . .History favored Paine, and so the pamphlet became prophetic. But in the strict context of the historical moment of its appearance, its assertiveness seemed to many to be more outrageous than prophetic, and rather ridiculous if not slightly insane. . . .

Paine wrote about government and social structure, helping to bring far-reaching changes at the end of the eighteenth century. The most noticeable evils of the day were political, and he proposed that the remedy was for the people to take back the responsibilities of rule and govern themselves. This, for some of his readers, was a shocking idea. It went against the grain of what they had been taught. Paine wrote to help them recover what he believed they knew about themselves from the inside—their capacity for self-rule. In general, he succeeded. The Constitution that resulted from the collaborative efforts of the Founding Fathers worked rather

well for a time, even though, today, we see that the assumptions by the people of responsibility of another sort was lacking, and that the time has now come for another great reform, not so much in law as in the order of our lives, and in our ends and means.

We look, therefore, at another book, one addressed to our condition in the present. The book is Wendell Berry's *A Continuous Harmony* (1972), in particular the essay, "Discipline and Hope," also called "The Politics of Kingdom Come," a lecture given at the University of Kentucky on Nov. 17, 1971. Berry compares what is with what was, and with what might be. The recollection of what was comes from Thomas Jefferson, who wrote to a friend about the condition of American society as he saw it in 1814:

> . . . we have no paupers, the old and the crippled among us, who possess nothing and have no families to take care of them, being too few to merit notice as a separate section of society. . . . The great mass of our population is of laborers; our rich . . . being few, and of moderate wealth. Most of the laboring class possess property, cultivate their own lands . . . and from the demand for their labor are enabled . . . to be fed abundantly, clothed above mere decency, to labor moderately. . . . The wealthy know nothing of what the Europeans call luxury.

Berry's account of "what is" comes from the work of twelve southerners, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930)—a declaration "for the agrarian way of life as opposed to the industrial." Labor, they said, has been made lowly, the saving of labor "pure gain," with only the material products of labor regarded as good. We have more time to consume, and many more things that are made for consumption. In the rush to produce things, as the highest good, "the tempo of our labors communicates to our satisfactions, and these also become brutal and hurried." We pay the penalty in "satiety and aimlessness." Berry then says:

> The outcry in the face of such obvious truths is always that if they were implemented they would ruin the economy. The peculiarity of our condition would appear to be that the implementation of *any* truth would ruin the economy. If the Golden Rule were generally observed among us, the economy would not last a week. We have made our false economy a false god, and it has made blasphemy of the truth. So I have met the economy in the road, and am expected to yield it right of way. But I will not get over. My reason is that I am a man, and have a better right to the ground than the economy. The economy is no god for me, for I have had too close a look at its wheels. I have seen it at work in the strip mines and coal camps of Kentucky, and I know that it has no moral limits. It has emptied the country of the independent and the proud, and has crowded the cities with the dependent and the abject. It has always sacrificed the small to the large, the personal to the impersonal, the good to the cheap. It has ridden to its questionable triumphs over the bodies of small farmers and tradesmen and craftsmen. I see it, still, driving my neighbors off their farms into factories. I see it teaching my students to give themselves a price before they can give themselves a value. Its principle is to waste and destroy the living substances of the world and the birthright of posterity for a monetary profit that is the most flimsy and useless of artifacts.

In another paragraph, Berry echoes Paine:

> The going assumption seems to be that freedom can be granted only by an institution, that it is the gift of the government to its people. I think it is the other way around. Free men are not set free by their government, they have set their government free of themselves, they have made it unnecessary. Freedom is not accomplished by a declaration. A declaration of freedom is either a futile and empty gesture, or it is the statement of a finished fact. Freedom is a personal matter; though we may be enslaved as a group, we can be free only as persons. It is a matter of discipline. A person can free himself of a bondage that has been imposed on him only by accepting another bondage he has chosen. A man who would not be the slave of other men must be master of himself—that is the real meaning of self-government. If we all behaved as honorably and honestly and as industriously as we expect our representatives to behave, we would soon put the government out of work. . . . The most able are the most free.

Paine would have agreed, yet in his time, as in Plato's, people were engrossed in political activities and issues. That was where, for them, morality originated. Plato knew that political morality was only a coarse analogue of individual

morality, and worked toward this recognition with his myths. Paine wanted to free people of politics as much as of the tyranny of kings. That was Gandhi's objective too. Fortunately or unfortunately, both Paine and Gandhi had "the redcoats" on their side as negative factors of persuasion. We must, they said, get rid of these invaders, so that we can be free to be the kind of people we are capable of being. But after the invaders were gone—in both cases—the people became preoccupied with "things."

And now Wendell Berry writes his books to draw attention to where the enemy really is—in ourselves. Since a real book is a work of imagination, and Berry is a man of imagination, his books are having effect. *The Unsettling of America* (Sierra Club, 1977) would be a good book to read after reading *Common Sense.* "Discipline and Hope," from which we have been quoting, has been reprinted in Berry's *Recollected Essays*—1965-1980 (North Point Press) and is still in print. Toward its end he says:

> What I have been preparing at such length to say is that there is only one value: the life and health of the world. If there is only one value, it follows that conflicts of value are illusory, based on perceptual error. Moral, practical, spiritual, esthetic, economic, and ecological values are all concerned ultimately with the same question of life and health. To the virtuous man, for example, practical and spiritual values are identical; it is only corruption that can see a difference. Esthetic value is always associated with sound values of other kinds. . . . beauty is wholeness; it is health in the ecological sense of amplitude and balance. And ecology is long-term economics. If these identities are not apparent immediately, they are apparent *in time*.

Our physical explorations have about used up the objective terrain, from atoms to the closest planet—the dead moon. The moon is probably dissolving, the atoms have already done so. But the area explored by the imagination may be where the truth we need resides. Selecting books in which the imagination shows a reliable course becomes possible through discipline of mind.

REVIEW
GETTING TO KNOW PEOPLE

AS one turns the pages of Ross Parmenter's latest book, *Stages in a Journey* (Profile Press, 1982, $14.00), one may wonder (as we did) why the account of a bus ride in rural Mexico, or the detail of a church built in the sixteenth century gets so tenacious a hold on the reader's attention. The explanation is probably that the author wants so much for you to feel what he felt, see what he saw, that you begin to do both, and because his writing is *direct.* In one place, for example, he tells about the guides he encountered in those sometimes enormous Mexican churches. Of the ones who had "training," he says:

> The men were apt to whip you through so fast that you had little opportunity to look for yourself. By the earnestness of their talk they obliged you to give them the appearance of your undivided attention, even if you only understood one word in ten. And often enough, if your eye did get a chance to stray to something that aroused your curiosity independently, the men would not know the answer for anything not covered by their prepared spiel. I hadn't found one who had given the impression that personal interest had led him to do any investigating on his own. For inspecting purposes, I preferred the silent, uninformed ones who deserted you.

What was Parmenter doing in Mexico? This Canadian-born music critic on the *New York Times* had been released from his stint in the service during World War II, as a medic in the Air Force, and, with a seventy-six-year-old retired school-teacher named Thyrza was wandering through Mexico in his companion's ancient Chevrolet. This was the first of six trips to Mexico for Parmenter, between interludes of work in New York and publication of a few books. Why did he go there? Fresh out of the army, he didn't know what to do next, and he wanted time to find a reason for whatever he chose. Writing, it turned out, was not only his trade but his vocation.

We first came across Parmenter's work in 1950, in *A Plant in My Window,* the story of his romance with a tired and almost deceased *philodendron,* which he learned how to revive. The attention-gripping character of his writing was then evident, and appears again in his later books. Loving and watering and repotting a veritable cliche of a house-plant doesn't sound engrossing, but Parmenter makes it so. Then, in 1968, came his *The Awakened Eye,* which distinguishes between looking around and *seeing.* By this time the writer had learned to draw, and with drawing came the capacity to see as he had never seen before. He gets this across to the reader, and what it meant to him, making the MANAS reviewer remark in passing: "It isn't specialized knowledge we need, but some correction of the darkness that our times have been laying on us for lo these many years."

Next we reviewed Parmenter's *School of the Soldier* (1981), in which he tells what he learned about human nature while in the army—and the curious sense of freedom which came with the confinement and being ordered around. He didn't study war; he was a conscientious objector who chose to be a medic. The present book, *Stages in a Journey,* begins with his loose-ends stage after getting out of the army. Somebody said, "Go to Mexico," and he went. At the end of the book he says:

> I had set out, halfheartedly, to learn *about* Mexico, but I had ended by learning *from* Mexico. And what I found out that Mexico, or perhaps I should say the Mexicans, had taught me was that it doesn't really matter where you go, or what you do. Or even who you are. What is important is your attitude towards life.
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> In the conscious part of my search I had sought my answers where I was never likely to find them—in environment, in occupation and in identity. And the answers had come to me effortlessly in the times I had abandoned the search and come to look upon the world with Mexican eyes.

Well, what did he find out about Mexicans during his six visits? He gives this account of his learning:

> In seeking the distinctive Mexican traits I had listened carefully to the opinions of others. One school of thought listed them as instability, capriciousness and emotional volatility. But in contrast I had heard others, especially admirers of the Indians, say their great traits were endurance, immutability and stolidity. I had found evidence of all these traits, but, as the contradictions themselves indicate, none seemed universal. I had therefore ruled them out for purposes of generalization. Also, since I had never found the Mexicans had any characteristic that Americans lacked entirely, I ruled out the idea of differences in kind. But I had found differences in degree. Again and again I had been struck by Mexicans of all classes having three endowments more abundantly. What I had found they had in larger degree than either Canadians or Americans were courtesy, affection, and love of beauty.

Why, he asks, "is the average Mexican more courteous than most North Americans?"

> What factors allow Mexican affections to develop to the point where one is tempted to say Mexicans are more affectionate by nature than we are? And why do Mexicans care so deeply for beauty?
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> The questions remained entangled for me, so I ceased tugging at them and turned to the promising free end.
>
> It was the awareness that Mexicans have a passion for symmetry. This had swept over me at Mitla, when I saw the same care for orderly arrangement that led a market woman to place her bananas in concentric crescents, or to pile her tomatoes in neat pyramids, was evident in a higher and more intellectual form in the building of her highly civilized forebears who flourished before the coming of the Spaniards. I had seen the same passion for symmetry in other ruins too and in other markets. In plazas I had seen it manifested both statically and dynamically; that is, in both the symmetrical ways the paths were laid out around the bandstands and in the ordered ritual of the movement patterns of those who used the paths. In countryside I had seen it in the planting of the maguey. And it was a dominant characteristic of the decoration of the native handicrafts. One saw it in their baskets, their blankets, their pottery—in almost everything they made, in fact. . . .
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> A passion for harmonious relationship—this was the realization that unraveled the whole skein. The Mexicans have a passion for harmonious relationships. All the characteristics I had been thinking about follow from this. The passion to arrange concrete objects in symmetrical patterns is just part of this larger passion, for once they are arranged in a beautiful and orderly fashion they are no longer untidy things that infringe on one's peace. . . .
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> Politeness, too, is a natural consequence of the desire to live harmoniously with others. So is affection. For true harmony among humans is something distinct from the smooth operating of mechanical parts that merely tolerate each other. It is a flexible, creative, and mutually enjoyable interplay that can only be achieved by love. And since beauty is a harmony mysteriously made manifest, the love of beauty also results from this central passion for harmonious relationships.

One begins to see why Ross Parmenter holds your attention. You hadn't thought about far-off peoples in this way. We know that Mexico has a terrible national debt, and that international bankers are getting worried. We know that Mexicans come across the border to work in our fields. We know that they have had plenty of revolutions, and that Mexico City has a high elevation where American ballet dancers soon get out of breath. But what are the people—everyday people—like? We have little or no idea. We are actually starved for that kind of knowledge of countless fellow human beings, among them, say, the Iranians, who are angry at us and make us angry at them. What do we know of Iranian scriptures, their philosophic treatises, their architecture, the houses of their peasants, the heritage of their poets? And *who* are the Lebanese? If the State Department really cared about our relations with other countries, it would try to find a dozen or so Ross Parmenters and send them out to write articles and books and put all their copy in the Congressional Record for ad lib reprinting. This might do as much or more for us than a nuclear freeze; it could in time make nuclear war ridiculous instead of just horrible and "unthinkable." Getting ready for the unthinkable seems now to have become a pastime for politicians.

But governments will never put living Pied Pipers of peace to work; they do all they can to keep them quiet, sometimes putting them in jail.

Parmenter gives to people the sort of respectful attention that Thoreau gave to flowers and birds and turtles. After one of his sight-seeing trips he got on board a bus "full of music."

> Eight young fellows were singing to the accompaniment of the guitars two of them were playing. I had to shake my head to believe it. I thought I had stepped into a Walt Disney movie of Latin America. But I had to accept it as being real. The young men were flesh and blood and that singing wasn't coming from any sound track.

They weren't peasants but city dwellers—their clothes showed that—and later, in a *cantina*, they explained that they were students in the normal school in Mexico City. They were preparing to be teachers. "Will you teach at universities?" he asked them. *"No, en escula primaria,"* they said. One of them declared that "Mexico's greatest need was for education." Another said they were indifferent to historic places, but went on the sight-seeing tour "to get to know their national monuments so they could teach other Mexicans to be proud of their heritage." The great need of the country, one of them said, was for primary schools.

> Because they wanted to help their country, they had decided they could be of greatest service if they devoted themselves to giving instruction in such basic subjects as reading, writing and arithmetic. After graduation, they would go out to teach in rural districts.

Little by little, Parmenter came to see it wasn't so bad to be poor.

COMMENTARY
THE MATTER OF RULES

NOTHING is said, in this week's lead article, about the uses of language, perhaps because the best language is that which comes spontaneously to the writer's mind by the attraction of his ideas. Finding the right words is not so much an art of selection as having a large enough library of words stored in memory. Yet this is misleading, since great poetry has been written by persons of limited vocabulary. Rules, in the practice of any art, cannot have more than second-degree validity, since the art is a means of outwitting limitation.

Hearn, in *Talks to Writers* (Dodd, Mead, 1927), speaks of the prose of the old Scandinavian writers and repeats a story from the Sturlunga Saga, about 750 words. In the entire episode, there are only ten adjectives. "No description," Hearn says "—not a particle of description." The verbs and the action create the imagery. Other and later writers achieve nuance by the use of descriptive words, but not the Norse in their prose. So, when strength is called for, follow the Norse.

Then, also, there is the choice between the stubby, emphatic, often mono-syllabic Anglo-Saxon words and those from the Latin with their inflections. At the end of a sentence the Latin-derived words dribble their life away with little syllables of qualification, while the Anglo-Saxon stomp the period in place. And that is *that*, they say.

But how alien to scheme about such constructions, when it is for something that happens well only when it comes naturally! The art of arts is in forgetting itself, in becoming artless.

There are two "rules" involved here, the first being, "The worst enemy of art is technique," the other, "There is no art without technique."

But if we are to indulge in the dangerous practice of rule-making, we should say that in writing, at least, the first principle must be: Have something to say. Otherwise the words will say, "Look at me," instead of, "Consider this." The most important part of editing is getting rid of the "me." (But all rules work properly only after they have been converted into instincts.)

Not many books on writing are worth reading; we rely on Hearn, and Strunk and White's *Elements of Style.* However, a new book by Gabriele Lusser Rico, *Writing the Natural Way* (Tarcher, $9.95), is filled with splendid quotations which illustrate the inimitable character of good writing, showing the power of language which transcends rules.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
PICTURES—NO BOOK

IN the Fall 1982 *Et cetera* (of which he is the editor) Neil Postman compares the Humanities with Electronic Entertainment (his title is "The Vegasizing of America"), saying that "something quite extraordinary is happening in America, and most of it is connected to the electronic plug."

> To be specific, electricity has brought about a fundamental change in the forms of public communication, and, as a result, has altered the entire meaning of cultural life. Moreover, if we apply the standards of those who lay claim to a humane sensibility, this new situation is alarming, disgraceful, and embarrassing all at once. To say it as plainly as I can, American culture is being transformed into one long and uninterrupted show business act. The one city in the United States that symbolizes the condition to which the electronic media lead us is, without any doubt, Las Vegas, Nevada. If any of my readers can, later, suggest educational remedies for what I shall describe, I for one, will be greatly obliged.

There is no remedy, to our way of thinking, save by cutting the Gordian knot (the wiring), and getting rid of djinn it brings into the living room.

Since Neil Postman is probably the most articulate and persuasive of the media critics, we suggest a trip to the library to read him entire in *Et cetera*, organ of the International Society for General Semantics. Here we can give only a few choice quotations. One of them:

> I do not use the phrase, The Age of Show Business, as a metaphor. I mean it to be taken literally. . . . it is in the nature of television to transform every aspect of life into a show business format. . . . the business of television is to *show*. TV, by its nature as a visual medium, must forego abstraction, logic, and exposition. . . . With the coming of television, arguments become largely irrelevant, and for an obvious reason. Whether they like it or not, our political leaders today must give us *themselves* rather than their talk. How they stand, smile, fix their gaze, perspire, show anger, etc. overshadows—in fact, largely obliterates—anything they might say. The visual image, not subjects and predicates, is now the basic unit of political discourse. That is why those aspiring to political office must now employ "image managers." . . . Television has changed the symbolic arena in which politics is expressed and understood. In our time politics is not "The Federalist Papers." It is not the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. It is not even Roosevelt's fireside chats. Politics is a Las Vegas act.

Neil Postman's criticism is well-aimed, unexaggerated, precise. The confirmation of what he says is implicit in the clear application of its meaning. An example:

> Of course, the most striking example of the "show business" model of the world is *Sesame Street*, the highly acclaimed educational show for children. Its creators have accepted without reservation the idea that learning is not only not obstructed by entertainment but, on the contrary, is indistinguishable from it. In defending this conception of education, Jack Blessington, director of Educational Relations for CBS, has observed "that there is a gap between kids' personal and cognitive development that schools don't know how to address." He went on to explain: "We live in a highly sophisticated, electronically oriented society. Print slows everything down."
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> Just so. Print means a slowed-down mind. Electronics means a speeded-up mind. . . . It goes without saying that *Sesame Street* in particular would do very nicely at primetime with both adults and children, not because of its allegedly educational function but because it is a first-class act.

Postman quotes the ABC chairman, Leonard Goldenson, who declares that "we can no longer rely on our mastery of traditional skills" and need "a visual literacy, an electronic literacy, and it will be as much of an advance over the literacy of the written word we know today as that was over the purely oral tradition of man's early history." Postman agrees that "television and other electronic media do not require mastery of traditional skills."

> That is exactly my point, for it means that such skills will be unable to sustain a distinction between mature and childish thought. As for his statement that "visual literacy" will be as much of an advance over the literacy of the written word as that was over the oral tradition, I can only wonder at what sort of

> advances Mr. Goldenson has in mind. Of course, it would be naive to claim that literacy has been an unmixed blessing. But the written and then the printed word brought us logic, history, science, education, indeed the very technology over which Mr. Goldenson presides. What I am saying is that I believe Mr. Goldenson's optimism is wrong, and dangerously wrong. . . . We must consider the possibility that the new media are "cognitively regressive" in that they reduce the range and power of our capacity to abstract and conceptualize.

For what this implies, Prof. Postman quotes from Rudolph Arnheim, who wrote in 1935:

> We must not forget that in the past the ability to transport immediate experience and to convey it to others made the use of language necessary and thus compelled the human mind to develop general concepts. For in order to describe things one must draw the general from the specific; one must select, compare, think. When communication can be achieved by pointing with the finger, however, the mouth grows silent, the hand stops, and the mind shrinks.

Carl Rogers, perhaps the most eminent of living humanist psychologists, discusses nuclear war and the effect of its prospect on our minds in the Fall 1982 *Journal of Humanistic Psychology.* The casual reference to it (by a politico) as "something less than desirable" he identifies as expressing a "socially suicidal mentality." Turning to a new offspring of media technology, Dr. Rogers says:

> This trivialization of the horror of nuclear war is shown in the popular video games of missiles and satellites falling on cities. I observed members of a family playing such a game. The skylines of cities were on the lower edge of the screen; missiles and even more powerful satellites kept falling from the top of the screen and the game was to try to stop them in mid-air and explode them. But often they did get through and a common remark was "Oops, there goes your city!" We are making nuclear war thinkable by treating it as though it were just a game.

Next come some thoughts which, while speculative, are worth considering:

> Within the young, who perhaps ponder more deeply about such things, it often produces a hopelessness. The National Urban League reports that among our young black people between the ages of 15 and 29, suicide has become the number one cause of death. This sobering fact is attributed not only to the lack of opportunity, but to hopelessness about the future. Undoubtedly the possibility of a nuclear war plays a part in that hopelessness.
>
> Last year my granddaughter, Frances Fuchs, taught in a training program for adolescents who had been rejected by their schools. These were obviously not ordinary young people. Yet what she found is significant. Early in the term she asked them to write some paragraphs describing what they envisioned for themselves in five to ten years. The majority of them saw themselves dead in a thermonuclear holocaust or living desperate lives in a harsh, polluted, overcrowded world. Here are a few quotes: "In five years I will either be dead or in the Army or playing lead guitar in a band. I do think the war will come before five years and that most of us will be dead." "I believe in five years if Reagan hasn't gotten us blown up that our natural resources will either disappear or they will be very difficult to get hold of. I really think that in five years I will be dead or really, really bad off."

Many millions of people throughout the world desire peace, Dr. Rogers says, and with them lies the hope of the future.

> If that desire is strongly voiced by massive numbers, it can stop the two governments in their disastrous course. We have evidence of this in my country. It was public protest that eventually stopped the Vietnam war. What is needed is a great popular uprising to bring a halt to the step-by-step escalation toward nuclear war. . . . It is to carry out my personal share of this responsibility that I have spoken out so strongly. I intend to continue. I hope you will join me—and millions of others—in working for a stop to our terrible insanity—the trend toward nuclear war.

FRONTIERS

Reports from Overseas

ASIAN ACTION for July-August of last year, the newsletter of the Asian Cultural Forum on Development, has a long story which begins:

> On December 7, 1941, Japanese military planes flew low over western Oahu through the Kolekole Pass in the Waianae Mountain range and attacked from the land side the U.S. fleet anchored in Pearl Harbor. They sank major ships and caused panic amongst the U.S. military high command.
>
> On December 14, 1981, just forty years later, Japanese have once again invaded Hawaii, seeking out the centers of military power. But this time it is not the military with war planes but Buddhists with prayer drums. This time the invasion is not for war; it is for peace. This time they do not seek to take us by surprise but they surprise us nonetheless. They come to call on us to join with them to "Set the Date" for an end to nuclear arms.

Where did they come? To Oahu, most populous of the Hawaiian islands, and "the most militarily-occupied place in the United States." A quarter of its land is owned or leased by the U.S. government. The *Asian Action* writer says:

> In the struggle for a nuclear-free world the Japanese today are unique. It is unlikely that this will be changed. They have known atomic war in their own country and survived. If nuclear war should come again it is unlikely that there will be survivors—anywhere. That is why it is possible to bring so many of them to the United Nations Special Sessions on Disarmament.

The party of Buddhist chanters performed their ceremony wherever they were permitted, starting with Schofield Barracks. One of the places they visited was the "Omega Station" in Kaneohe. There are eight such stations around the world. A Coast Guard officer ushered them into the control room where they saw machines charting lines. "On one of the walls there was a large poster with a photograph of Albert Einstein and a quotation from him underneath." Another officer explained what they were doing:

> He said that the machines tracing the lines on the rolls of paper are accurate to a millionth of a second, and if they lose their accuracy and their exact timing with each other they can no longer enable ships at sea to fix their own locations exactly. In the course of his explanation he did not mention the way in which the System enables submerged submarines to determine their own exact locations so that they can fire their missiles without having to surface.

The spokesman for the Japanese Buddhists told their Coast Guard guide that they didn't wish to cause him embarrassment but that they would like to chant their prayer in the control room. "Not at all," he said. "Wait here till I go and get some of the other guys."

> He left but was back shortly with eight or ten of his Coast Guard colleagues. They stood quietly and watched as the Buddhists, with us joining in, stood facing the millionth-of-a-second machines (and the Albert Einstein poster) and chanted the prayer for peace.

It may be of interest to readers who never see any Canadian papers to know that in 1977 two men in Ottawa started an organization called Operation Dismantle (64 Melrose Ave., Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 1T9, staffed by a small group of people who work for bed and board. Operation Dismantle is a Canadian version of the Nuclear Freeze movement. It is now proposing a Global Referendum on Disarmament, to be "organized by the United Nations, to give people at last a chance to express themselves on this critical issue."

> The trouble is, ordinary people have no say in the arms question. We've never been asked. We've been left out of a choice that involves our very survival . . . and that's wrong.

Then, from England, comes a new pamphlet, *One Year To Go* (Menard Press, 8 The Oaks, Woodside Ave. London N12 8AR, 90 pence), by James George, who says:

> By the end of 1983 NATO intends to deploy in West Germany, Britain and Italy nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles (like the Cruise missile) too small to be detected by the satellite surveillance systems that have permitted the super powers to negotiate and implement more than a dozen disarmament agreements in the past twenty years.

> Without such reciprocal verification, the introduction of this next generation of highly sophisticated mini-weapons may make it impossible by 1984 to negotiate any significant nuclear disarmament. So where do we begin?
>
> A freeze, negotiated with the Russians, or offered unilaterally to see whether they would climb aboard. Certainly. The risks of not freezing currently seem a good deal more dramatic than the risks of freezing a small proportion of our nuclear overkill. A good place to begin.

Also from England comes Polly Toynbee's interview with the military psychiatrist, Surgeon Commander Morgan O'Connell, who sailed to the Falklands on the *Canberra* and "ministered to the battle-shocked, the seriously injured and the disturbed soldiers and sailors." As reported in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* for last Nov. 14, he said that prevention is what matters. "He spots the men close to breaking, takes them out of action for 72 hours, lets them sleep and sends them back into action." Polly Toynbee muses:

> That raises all kinds of difficult questions for a doctor or a psychiatrist. Is his first priority the patient, or the service? If it is the patient, would he send him into battle at all? And what of the mental state you have to get men into in the first place to get them to fight and risk their lives?
>
> "Yes," he says bluntly, "we indoctrinate them in the forces. Otherwise they wouldn't fight. That's why we cut their hair the same, make them wear the same uniform and march together. We indoctrinate them in order to enhance group cohesiveness. That's how you get people to fight."

She asked him about one soldier suffering from "reactive psychosis"—loss of touch with reality. Why was what happened to him a "mental disease"? The surgeon commander replied:

> You have to remember what his job is. He's losing touch with reality. For as long as he's in this job, this conflict is a problem to him. It handicaps him."

That's one way of putting it. Others might say that he was infected with sanity.