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"WHAT DO I FEAR? MYSELF?"

WE live in unsettling times, but it is not enough to say this. The course of events is so disturbing that we are continually driven to ask who or what is at fault. Our confidence in what we know is shaken, our conception of knowledge itself up for trial. The world and the individual are at odds. We are obliged to consider a fateful question: Can one at odds with the world go on living? What possibility is there for an individual to have a life of his own—one with meaning and some kind of promise, however frail—in a world where bad things are happening all the time?

Ethics tells us that we live in community—that without relationships, good or bad, human life has no meaning, and what could be worse than that? The very framework of reason suffers blow after blow, driving us to dialogue with ourselves. This is more than "a matter of life and death." We live and we die, a truistic certainty. Life is upon us, we are in it, and death, however distant, inevitable. So death, while not a pleasant prospect, is not a remediable evil, and might even be a not-understood good. If we think that natural processes are good, then death which is among them has its place in the scheme of things, although what it means remains undetermined.

No, a larger issue is at stake: Is the life we are constrained to live *without meaning?* The possibility is intolerable, and so we try to think, to ask questions of ourselves.

At this level of our being, the questions are without answers. That is, the answers we may arrive at—if our thinking is honest and good—can be no more than tentative. They are answers which will always need improvement, perhaps with unimagined changes of implication, as time goes on. But if thinking—this sort of thinking—is bound to leave us in uncertainty, why pursue it? Because, as Socrates put it, the unexamined life is not worth living. And consider: Is not the idea of an end to thinking a withering thought?

This conclusion, however, is far from being reached by a majority. It comes to people in ones and twos. Yet in the present it is coming to more and more. The pressures of the times are having an effect on our psychic processes, and unknown factors may also be at work. How shall we formulate the issue in familiar terms? We might say that we Americans—or we English, French, or Germans—are beginning to wonder if there is a substantial difference between being American, English, French, or German, and being a human being? Is there a life apart from the vicissitudes of history, a life, that is, which endures and perhaps uses the events of history without being their creature or their "object"? Is it possible to think of nationality as something like, say, being in the third or fourth grade?

What sort of metaphysical superstructures would be required in order to consider seriously this idea? They exist, or have been erected by thinkers of the past. Is it possible that we may evolve similar structures in the present or the future?

If we should, and if a human community were the result, then what would go into the newspaper of that community, supposing it wanted one? The question is fair, since a community of people who live examined lives would still have things to say to one another, and events that need reporting; the sun and the sky and the earth would not disappear.

The question is, also useful, since it encourages the kind of thinking we are obliged to do. How is this thinking identified? Well, we might start by saying that there are two kinds of thinking, or, as Hannah Arendt suggests in an article of rare excellence ("Thinking and Moral

Considerations," *Social Research,* Autumn, 1971), there is a fundamental distinction "between thinking and knowing, between reason, the urge to think and understand, and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge." Here, by "knowing," Hannah Arendt means the scientific sort of knowledge—the only sort of knowledge we have thought worth having, for centuries. If you ask a man who knows how to build a machine, and is doing it, *why* he is doing it, he will probably look at you with puzzlement. He is obviously satisfying the market for machinery; that, initially, is good for him; then the machine will make other things to be sold, and that, he will explain, is good for everybody. Yet there will be those who question this conclusion—not reject it, but question it.

Today, nearly all our forms of "knowing" have been called into question. The very meaning of our knowledge is subject to doubt. The people who have been making machinery—some of them—are wondering about the sense of what they are doing. To wonder in this way, Miss Arendt points out, is in a sense to withdraw from the world, to suspend practical, completable operations and to ask what they mean. After noting this, she says:

> These remarks may indicate why thinking, the quest for meaning—rather than the scientist's thirst for knowledge for its own sake—can be felt to be "unnatural," as though men, when they begin to think, engage in some activity contrary to the human condition. Thinking as such, not only the thinking about extraordinary events or phenomena or the old metaphysical questions, but every reflection that does not serve knowledge and is not guided by practical purposes—in which cases thinking is the handmaiden of knowledge, a mere instrument for ulterior purposes—is, as Heidegger once remarked, "out of order." . . . The whole history of philosophy, which tells us so much about the objects of thought and so little about the process of thinking itself, is shot through with intramural warfare between man's common sense, this highest sixth sense that fits our five senses into a common world and enables us to orient ourselves in it, and man's faculty of thinking by virtue of which he willfully removes himself from it.

Here Miss Arendt is emphasizing how unusual, how rare, real thinking—thinking about meaning—actually is; so rare that it may be called "out of order" by comparison with the way we commonly use our minds. And that is the point: the way we commonly use our minds is getting us deeper and deeper into trouble. But today real thinking is becoming less exceptional. An increasing number are preparing themselves to do the thinking which separates them from the way the world works, the way we have tried to make it work. This raises fundamental questions.

Anticipating the need for help in such thinking, Hannah Arendt proposes Socrates as a model to examine. She doesn't go to Socrates for answers, but for evidence that telling the difference between good and evil, between right and wrong, is within the capacity of all human beings, regardless of intellectual skill, although such skill may contribute useful communication about real thinking. Necessary, however, is a certain moral hunger—an interest which persists although no finality can be reached. The main purpose of thinking is to "unfreeze" our settled conclusions about meaning, and to consider alternatives, not to gain answers of a "scientific" sort. She writes:

> Socrates, however, who is commonly said to have believed in the teachability of virtue, seems indeed to have held that talking and thinking about piety, justice, courage, and the rest were liable to make men more pious, more just, more courageous, even though they were not given either definitions or "values" to direct their further conduct. What Socrates actually believed in in such matters can best be illustrated by the similes he applied to himself. He called himself a gadfly and a midwife, and, according to Plato, was called by somebody else an "electric ray," a fish that paralyzes and numbs by contact, a likeness whose appropriateness he recognized under the condition that it be understood that "the electric ray paralyzes others only through being paralyzed itself. It isn't that, knowing the answers myself I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself." Which, of course, sums up neatly the only way thinking can be taught—except that Socrates, as he repeatedly said, did not teach anything for the simple reason he

> had nothing to teach. . . . It seems that he, unlike the professional philosophers, felt the urge to check with his fellowmen if his perplexities were shared by them—and this urge is quite different from the inclination to find solutions to riddles and then to demonstrate them to others.

But the quest for meaning, which, as Hannah Arendt says, "relentlessly dissolves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules," has inherent dangers. Without anything to put in the place of former beliefs, the mind may simply turn against them, declaring their opposites as "new" values. This she calls nihilism, the negative result of thinking.

> There are no dangerous thoughts; thinking itself is dangerous, but nihilism is not its product. Nihilism is but the other side of conventionalism; its creed consists of negations of the current, so-called positive values to which it remains bound. All critical examinations must go through a stage of at least hypothetically negating accepted opinions and "values" by finding out their implications and tacit assumptions, and in this sense nihilism may be seen as an ever-present danger of thinking. But this danger does not arise out of the Socratic conviction that an unexamined life is not worth living but, on the contrary, out of the desire to find results which would make further thinking unnecessary. Thinking is equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed.

From the viewpoint of the state and its administrators, thinking is plainly by nature undesirable. It questions every authority, examines every assumption, weighs every belief. Thus the thinker is by definition a trouble-maker. He lacks docility, disturbs conformity. He will not repeat, after Adam of St. Victor—

> Of the Trinity to reason
> Leads to license or to treason
> Punishment deserving.
> What is birth and what procession
> Is not mine to make profession,
> Save with faith unswerving.
> Thus professing, thus believing,
> Never insolently leaving
> The highway of our faith,
> Duty weighing, law obeying,
> Never shall we wander straying
> Where heresy is death.

The language may belong to the twelfth century, but the caution and sentiment are found in every period, not excepting our own. There are unbreakable rules for those who seek a mass audience, just as there are rules for rulers whose power comes from popular consent. At every moment of history there are what Ortega called "binding observances"—the opinions, usages, and assumptions which can be affirmed without needing further support. As Ortega says in *Man and People:*

> The binding force exercised by these observances is clearly and often unpleasantly perceived by anyone who tries to oppose it. At every normal moment of collective existence an immense repertory of these established opinions is in obligatory observance; they are what we call "commonplaces." Society, the collectivity, does not contain any ideas that are properly such—that is, ideas clearly thought out on sound evidence. It contains only commonplaces and exists on the evidence of these commonplaces. By this I do not mean to say that they are untrue ideas—they may be magnificent ideas; what I do say is that inasmuch as they are observances or established opinions or commonplaces, their possible excellent qualities remain inactive. What acts is simply their mechanical pressure on all individuals, their soulless coercion. . . .
>
> There is, then, a radical difference between the private opinion of a group—however energetic, aggressive, and proselytizing—and public opinion, that is, opinion actually established and in observance. For the latter to assert itself, no one has to bother to maintain it; of itself, and without any need for defenders, *so long as it is in observance,* it predominates and rules, whereas private opinion has no existence except strictly in the measure to which one person or several or many people take it upon themselves to maintain it.

Ortega's analysis seems impeccable, yet one must note that it applies in full force only during the "normal" times of collective existence. The burden of our discussion or argument is that the present is by no means normal—that the need to dissociate ourselves from the binding observances of our time, which are plainly on a course of self-destruction, is ever more widely felt. Thus, while

thinking undoubtedly has its dangers, the hazards of non-thinking may be far worse. Of non-thinking, Hannah Arendt says:

> By shielding people against the dangers of examination, it teaches them to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society. What people then get used to is not so much the content of the rules, a close examination of which would always lead them into perplexity, as the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars. In other words, they get used to never making up their minds. If somebody then should show up who, for whatever reasons and purposes, wishes to abolish the old "values" or virtues, he will find it easy enough provided he offers a new code, and he will need no force and no persuasion—no proof that the new values are better than the old ones—to enforce it. The faster men hold to the old code, the more eager they will be to assimilate themselves to the new one; the ease with which such reversals can take place under certain circumstances suggests indeed that everybody is asleep when they occur. This century has offered us some experience in such matters. How easy was it for totalitarian rulers to reverse the basic commandments of Western morality—"Thou shalt not kill" in the case of Hitler's Germany, "Thou shalt not bear false testimony against thy neighbor" in the case of Stalin's Russia.

To what sort of thinking, then, would Miss Arendt have us devote our minds? In what way is Socrates an ideal model? He will not lead us to any conclusion; that, he has explained, is not his end or task; he simply wants us to think for ourselves as though no human ever thought that way before. Before answering she sets the stage by quoting from Plato's *Gorgias:*

> The two positive Socratic propositions read as follows. The *first*: "It is better to be wronged than to do wrong"—to which Callicles, the interlocutor in the dialogue, replies what all Greece would have replied: "To suffer wrong is not the part of a man at all, but that of a slave for whom it is better to be dead than alive, as it is for anyone who is unable to come either to his own assistance when he is wronged or to that of anyone he cares about." (474) The *second:* "It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that 1, being one, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict *me."* Which causes Callicles to tell Socrates that he is "going mad with eloquence," and that it would be better for him and everybody else if he would leave philosophy alone.

What has happened in the world recently, to reduce in noticeable measure the agreement of "all Greece" with the reply of Callicles? One thing is plain: the immeasurability of the "wrong" now in the foreground of possibility has become evident. While no doubt many of those who have come out for unilateral disarmament did so because they felt that an unarmed nation would be less likely to be bombed, there are others who are determined to separate themselves as much as possible from a policy which contemplates using nuclear weapons on others. This idea has become unbearable for them. There are things which are simply not allowable, that we can find no justification for. One writer who has adopted this position is Jonathan Schell, in *The Fate of the Earth*, a significantly persuasive book.

In the other "proposition" which concerns the inner harmony of a human being, there is a sense in which Socrates, when he says, "being one," must have meant "being two." We *do* hold dialogue with ourselves. We can suffer shame with no witness but our conscience. Man is a two-in-one, Hannah Arendt says:

> For Socrates this two-in-one meant simply that if you want to think you must see to it that the two who carry on the thinking dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be friends. lt is better for you to suffer than to do wrong because you can remain the friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer? Not even a murderer. What kind of dialogue could you lead with him?

Only the dialogue which Shakespeare let Richard III have with himself after his crimes:

> What do I fear? Myself? There's none close by.
> Richard loves Richard: that is, I am 1.
> Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:
> Then fly. What from myself? Great reason why—
> Lest I revenge upon myself?
> O no! Alas, I rather hate myself

> For hateful deeds committed by myself.
> I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not.
> Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.

There seems little to add, although Hannah Arendt remarks that this dialogue with oneself occurs only when we are alone. In mixed company conscience usually remains silent. It is when we go home with only ourselves for company that the voice of conscience is heard.

So, to tell the truth, this is the idea or question we started out with, but did not ask. Instead, we asked if one at odds with the world can go on living. The real question is rather: Can one at odds with himself go on living?

> If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always much too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.

REVIEW
IRISH ANGUISH

THE role of myth—of human belief in an archaic ancestry of gods and heroes—is the subject of William Irwin Thompson's *The Imagination of an Insurrection*, first published by Oxford University Press in 1967 and now available in another edition from the Lindisfarne Association ($7.95), R.D. 2, West Stockbridge, Mass. 01266. What is the meaning of heroic struggle and sacrifice, the themes of national myths and legends, and what, on the stage of contemporary events, do we make of them, rightly or wrongly? The subtitle of Thompson's book is "Dublin, Easter 1916," which for the Irish means the climactic tragedy of a long struggle for independence from Britain, the emotional resources for which were fed by the poets and writers of the Irish Literary Renaissance. An insurrection led by poets and their followers broke out in Easter Week, 1916, and was put down in six days by British troops, with summary execution before a firing squad of sixteen Irish leaders, three of whom were poets.

Thompson says in his Preface:

> The Irish revolutionaries lived as if they were in a work of art, and this inability to tell the difference between sober reality and the realm of imagination is perhaps one very important characteristic of a revolutionary. The tragedy of actuality comes from the fact that when, in a revolution, history is made momentarily into a work of art, human beings become the material that must be ordered, molded, or twisted into shape.

A comment at the time by an Ulsterman scholar, Eoin MacNeill, professor of ancient Irish at University College, Dublin, is cited by Thompson:

> MacNeill was repelled by the sacrificial cult of the poets and the presuppositions of the militarists that an offensive was always the best strategy. What he felt was disguised in all the mystical and military rhetoric was the simple fact of murder; it was murder to lead one's own men into a hopeless slaughter; it was murder to walk out into the street and begin shooting passing soldiers and policemen.

For MacNeill, the Easter Rising was an abortive pretense at a military act. He said:

> If the destruction of our nationality was in sight, and if we come to the conclusion that at least the vital principle of nationality was to be saved by laying down our lives, then we should make that sacrifice without hesitation. It would not be a military act in any sense, and it does not come within our military counsels.
>
> To my mind, those who feel compelled toward military action on any of the grounds I have stated are really impelled by a sense of feebleness or despondency or fatalism or by an instinct of satisfying their own emotions or escaping from a difficult and complex and trying situation . . .
>
> We have to remember that what we call our country is not a poetical abstraction, as some of us, perhaps all of us, in the exercise of our highly developed capacity for figurative thought, are sometimes apt to imagine—with the help of our patriotic literature.

"No man," MacNeill said, "has a right to seek relief of his feelings at the expense of his country." This was the hard-headed moral common sense of the matter. But had the poets only made fools of themselves? Their sacrifice caused even the hard-headed to wonder and examine their consciences. William Butler Yeats, who was of much subtler mind than both the mystical patriots and the tough-minded strategists, was driven to ask himself questions. He had in his early days written a play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a mythical and violent heroine of Irish tradition. His purpose—the chief purpose of the Irish Literary Renaissance, which he led—was to generate and restore Irish respect and enthusiasm for their historic and literary past. Years later Yeats wrote:

> All that I have said and done
> Now that I am old and ill
> Turns into a question till I lie awake night after night,
> And never get the answers right.
> Did that play of mine send out
> Certain men the English shot?

This is a question which Simone Weil felt was fundamental—that literary criticism turns into moral judgment, and that the living words of a writer have consequences for which he must stand

responsible. The question underlies Thompson's book, in which he reveals its facets. A similar question confronted Gandhi when it was claimed that the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* provided classical justification for war and military enterprise in behalf of a legitimate end. But Gandhi read another meaning in the Gita, as have many others since. Thompson requires his readers to consider this issue, showing that the one who feels vindicated in violence is at least a simplifier, at worst a blindly partisan interpreter.

Musing about the course of Irish history, Thompson says:

> Imagination had been satisfied in the blood sacrifice of the Rising. The poets had done their part, now it was time for the realists to take over. . . . If imagination had been far beyond reality in the Rising, reality caught up with a vengeance in The Troubles. . . . The English soldiers who were hired to put down rebellion, the notorious "Black and Tans," had gone through the horror of trench warfare only to return to an England where they were useless and fit only for the ranks of the unemployed. Naturally hardened by these experiences, they found attractive the wages offered for subduing Ireland by terror. But . . . they themselves were terrified. Trained by trench warfare to expect the enemy to be in front, the British soldiers were frustrated in their attempts to deal with an invisible army in which a civilian walked up, murdered a British officer, and then disappeared into a crowd of His Majesty's subjects who had not seen a thing. . . . In The Troubles fact replaced myth, and our own moral judgments tragically have come to terms with the success of the *Realpolitik* methods they (the romantic rebels) might condemn.

He concludes:

> The English gave in, to a degree, for on December 6, 1921, [came] the Anglo-Irish Treaty that gave limited independence to the south only. The situation was acceptable only to a bare majority, and a minority felt that it was better for Ireland to die than for Ireland to lose her honor. . . . The movement that had sanctified violence in the figures of Cathleen ni Houlihan and Cuchulain was destroyed by violence; the land that had dismissed evil as an un-Irish thing was overwhelmed by it. The romantic movement that had followed upon the death of Parnell was at an end.

But not, as we know, the violence the romantics had embraced.

What was George Russell's response to the Rising? He wrote in the *Irish Homestead* in May, 1916:

> Most of us in Ireland feel as if the soul had been out on some wild nightmare adventure during the past month, and the intensity of that nightmare emotion had lasted over the awakening and left us shaken and made it almost impossible to settle down to the business of life, which, however, will not be denied and makes its implacable claims upon us all. We have, however moved by emotion, to go back to work.

George Russell, the Irish poet and painter, better known as "A.E.," in 1897 joined the organization of Sir Horace Plunkett devoted to stimulating and fostering agricultural cooperation among Irish farmers. He spent many years of his life in this work, becoming editor of the *Irish Homestead.* Thompson devotes a chapter to A.E. whose theosophical vision was combined with everyday practical labors in behalf of Irish agriculture. The chapter is a comparison of Yeats with A.E., but also an account of the development of A.E.'s thinking, as revealed in two of his books, *The National Being* and *The Interpreters.* In *The Interpreters* A.E. tries to find a politics consistent with ethics. "How," he asks, through one of the characters who take part, "can right find its appropriate might?" The question, Thompson remarks, "is the great question that Ivan Karamazov put forth: Can the golden age be justly brought about if it must come at the cost of the murder of a single babe?"

Another of the "interpreters" says: "You will find that every great conflict has been followed by an era of materialism in which the ideals for which the conflict was ostensibly waged were submerged." Thompson comments:

> This was certainly true of the Civil War in Ireland, as it was true for the Reign of Terror in France, Bolshevik Russia, and modern Cuba. A.E. and Yeats watched the executions that occupied post-revolutionary Russia when the socialists began killing

the men who stood in the way of the love of Man. Brehon [another interpreter] sees this negative after-image as something not merely restricted to revolutions but common to all wars.

"By intensity of hatred nations create in themselves the characters they imagine in their enemies. Hence it is that all passionate conflicts result in the interchange of characteristics."

"We become what we hate" is a *Yoga* maxim, but the notion is really common sense dressed up in a loin cloth, for hate is as severe a form of bondage as love. If one hates something, he is not free of it; if one hates something with the full force of his being, then the hated object blocks out everything else in sight, until the individual has been distracted from the values he cherished in opposition to the hated object. . . . Brehon's position has its base in common experience, but the summit is definitely beyond the common level of experience, for it points upward to an almost Buddhistic state of non-attachment to human life. Since violence destroys its agent, Brehon concludes that nations must wage psychic and moral wars to conquer as Christ and Buddha conquered.

A.E. concludes *The Interpreters* with a poem, "Michael," which is fashioned, Thompson says, after the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which, "For the initiated reader, Krishna (Cuculain) is the *Brahman* speaking to the worldly self, Arjuna (Michael) or *atman.* . . . Michael acts, but not for the fictional loves and hatreds, that patriotic men require." He can fight the English dispassionately, knowing that the slayer and the slain "may be knit in secret harmony." This, Thompson says, "is what the Easter Rising meant for a mystic."

COMMENTARY
A CHANGE OF HEART

CONCERNING the teaching of virtue, Hannah Arendt (see page 2) says that Socrates "held that talking and thinking about piety, justice, courage, and the rest were liable to make men more pious, more just, more courageous, even though they were not given either definitions or 'values' to direct their further conduct." This may be the case. Certainly those who absorb the content of the Platonic dialogues are benefited by study of the high themes and inquiries pursued in Plato's writings.

Yet there may be another way of teaching virtue, without ever using the word. Virtue is also the natural expression of the intrinsic qualities of human beings, the fulfillment of their best potentialities. The creation of a framework in which there is natural encouragement of this fulfillment is an indirect approach which may even not be regarded as "teaching," yet which has obviously beneficent influence.

For example, in this week's Frontiers John McKnight tells about the diverse effects produced in a Chicago neighborhood by the establishment of a rooftop greenhouse: the "virtue" in some rather diverse people came to the fore through participation in the growing of fresh vegetables. Of the members of an old people's home who took part, the home manager said: "It has changed the very nature of how these people feel about life." Working in the greenhouse had a similar effect on a group of juvenile delinquents, who "became more responsible to each other and to the community because of their responsibility for something natural." All these things, McKnight says, "happened from the greenhouse."

There seems a lesson of profound importance in this experience and demonstration. Social critics are continually pointing out, usually in the forlorn last chapters of their books, that the good things so many would like to see happen, in both this country and elsewhere, require a fundamental "change of heart" in a great many people. A change of heart is, in Platonic terms, the strengthening of virtue. The greenhouse, for those who became involved, was the right matrix for this development. The greenhouse, then, might be taken as a symbol of the sort of influence we need, given form in countless ways, to bring "a whole new life" to people. Moreover, it stands for an activity in which all those working for change can take part.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
DISAPPEARING ADULTS?

THE virtues of Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Delacorte, 1982, $13.95) are notable, especially the clarity and bite of his prose. Then, he has a way of taking various indisputable (or almost indisputable) facts and joining them in a way that presses the reader into revising his opinions. He is a specialist, you could say, in pointing out how our modes of perception affect or even determine what we think. He has been studying for years the effect of TV imagery on watchers, comparing it with the qualities developed by reading, and reporting his findings in articles and books. Freedom and impartiality of mind are obviously dependent on correcting the biases implicit in the way we acquire feelings and ideas, and Mr. Postman reveals these biases for the consideration of the reader. He, of course, has his own "biases," but he does his level best to tell you what they are. Such a writer wants to find out rather than win.

Knowing that his book, to be influential, must compete with the media he examines, he writes with a corresponding pace—he is never "heavy"—yet preserves the symmetry of clear intellectual intentions, and he drives his important points home with unexpected twists.

His main contention—that children are profoundly affected by the way we think (or don't think) about them—seems true enough, and the harvest of asides in the development of this thesis is rich in disconcerting insights that make the book provocative from beginning to end. The weakness of the book is that he seems over-persuaded that how we regard children makes them what we think they are—after all, thinking about a cabbage doesn't make it into a dahlia and starlings are starlings by whatever name. Yet humans in their psychological dimension in a very real sense recreate both themselves and others, and this half-truth with its implications has so much to teach us that the reader, forewarned by the author, can only be grateful.

What, for example, resulted when Christian teaching became available to everyone who learned to read, after Gutenberg (d. 1468)?

> With God's word so accessible, Christians did not require the papacy to interpret it for them. Or so millions of them came to believe. "Christianity," writes Lawrence Stone, "is a religion of the book, namely the Scriptures, and once this book ceased to be a closely guarded secret fit only to be read by priests, it generated pressure for the creation of a literate society." The Bible became an instrument to think about, but also an instrument to think with. For if ever there was an instance of a medium and a message coinciding in their biases, it is the case of printing and Protestantism. Not only did both reveal the possibilities of individual thought and action, but polyglot versions of the Bible transformed the Word of God as revealed in the medieval Latin Bible into the *words* of God. Through print, God became an Englishman, or a German, or a Frenchman, depending on the vernacular in which His words were revealed. The effect of this was to strengthen the cause of nationalism while weakening the sacred nature of scripture. The eventual replacement of love of God with love of Country, from the eighteenth century to the present, may well be one of the consequences of printing. For the past two centuries, for example, Christians have been inspired to make war almost exclusively in the interests of nationhood, God has been left to fend for himself.

There is a lot to be said for writing and reading, although, while accepting it, it would be well to review *Plato's* severe questioning of both arts in the *Phœdrus*, and, for a modern critic, Coomaraswamy's *The Bugbear of Literacy*. After echoing Plato's judgment in saying that "the tendency to regard the printed page as a sacrosanct voice of authority is almost overwhelming," Postman recites some of the benefits of printing:

> It led to a reorganization of subjects, an emphasis on logic and clarity, an attitude toward the authority of information. It also led to new perceptions of literary form. Prose and poetry, for example, become distinguished by the way in which words were distributed on the printed page. And, of course, the structure of the printed page as well as the portability and repeatability of the printed book played a decisive role not only in the creation of the essay but also in the creation of what became known as the novel. All of which is to say that we can never underestimate the psychological impact of language's massive migration from the ear to the eye. To be able to *see* one's own language in such durable, repeatable, and standardized form led to the deepest possible relation to it.

Yet we are not born with the ability to read. We have to learn it, and this takes time.

> From print onward, adulthood had to be earned. It became a symbolic, not a biological, achievement. From print onward, the young would have to *become* adults, and they would have to do it by learning to read, by entering the world of typography. And in order to accomplish that they would require education. Therefore, European civilization reinvented schools. And by so doing it made childhood a necessity.

This is Neil Postman's fundamental argument, supported in detail. Another contention, which he makes hardly disputable, is that the omnipresence of television in the home is returning modern man to the weaknesses of an oral civilization—to preliterate times—without restoring the virtues of that age. Reading, he suggests, is becoming a lost art, and he has figures to prove it. Why should people read if TV sights and sounds tell us all we want to know? Thus children don't need to become literate adults, and adults are remaining children. This, in effect, does away with childhood as a period of education when the young become adults by learning to read. The author remarks:

> During the period between 1850 and 1950 enormous effort was expended in getting America to become literate, in elevating the values of the literate attitude. But at exactly the same time, electric speed and mass-produced imagery were working together to undermine that effort and attitude. By 1950 the competition between the two symbolic worlds finally became visible and the irony manifest. Like many other social artifacts, childhood became obsolete at the same time that it was perceived as a permanent fixture. I choose 1950 because by that year television had become firmly installed in American homes, and it is in television that we have the coming together of the electric and graphic revolutions. It is in television, therefore, that we can see most clearly how and why the historic basis for a dividing line between childhood and adulthood is being unmistakably eroded.

What space we have left will be devoted to what Prof. Postman says about television:

> Television offers a fairly primitive but irresistible alternative to the linear and sequential logic of the printed word and tends to make the rigors of a literate education irrelevant. There are no ABC's for pictures. In learning to interpret the meaning of images, we do not require lessons in grammar or spelling or logic or vocabulary. We require no analogue to the McGuffey Reader, no preparation, no prerequisite training. Watching television not only requires no skills but develops no skills. As Demerall points out, "No child or adult becomes better at watching television by doing more of it. What skills are required are so elemental that we have yet to hear of a television viewing disability." Unlike books, which vary greatly in their lexical and syntactical complexity and which may be scaled according to the ability of the reader, the TV image is available to everyone, regardless of age.

In relation to our national life, Postman remarks that the legal voting age was established to give the young time to learn to read. How could an illiterate know enough to vote?

> While it may go too far to say, as George Counts once remarked, that the electric media have repealed the Bill of Rights, it is obvious that the making of political judgments in the Age of Television does not call upon the complex skills of literacy, does not even require literacy. How many Americans of voting age have ever *read* anything Ronald Reagan has ever written? Or have read anything written by those who provided him with his ideology?

Noticing that TV news programs focus on disaster, crime, and disorder, Postman suggests that this, after all, only reflects adult life in the present.

> But not all of adult life. There is, for example, the existential pleasure of buying things. Television reveals to children at the earliest possible age the joys of consumerism. . . . Marshall McLuhan was once asked why the news on television is always bad news. He replied that it wasn't: the commercials are the good news. And indeed they are. It is a comfort to know that the drudgery of one's work can be relieved by a trip to Jamaica or Hawaii . . . that one's competence may be established by using a certain detergent, . . . These are the promises of American culture, and they give a certain coherence to adult motivations.

Television, he says, is a present-centered medium, "and it is a reasonable conjecture that adults are being forced by television into acceptance as normal the childish need for immediate gratification, as well as childish indifference to consequences."

FRONTIERS

Twentieth-Century Odyssey?

A HUNDRED years ago the energies of idealistic youth were drawn to the revolutionary political movements of the time. The logic of the attraction was simple enough. The world, they said, was under tyrannous, exploitive, and stubbornly selfish management. Obviously, a new management was required, and to install it political power was a necessity. Well, in some parts of the world, power was gained by the radical generation and states came under the management of leaders who spoke and led in the name of the people—the working class. For various reasons—mainly, present-day critics say, because the radicals shared with the capitalists the assumption that a greater production of commodities is the highest good—state management of human affairs turned out to be as bad (although in some ways better, in others worse) as the bourgeois scheme of "free enterprise."

The temper of radical idealism in the present seems to have reversed the thinking of the revolutionary movement of a century ago. The present radical idea is to start, so to speak, at the bottom instead of the top—to do what we can with the freedom we have, by individual and group power, and without coercive threat. This, in historical perspective, seems a vast improvement over Marxist-Leninism, which apparently has run its course and as an ideology is dying out. The evidence of this change is everywhere, reported in journals of growing readership in America, Europe, and the Far East (in areas where independent publishing is possible). In (the British) *Resurgence* for last November-December, for example, there is an interview with John McKnight, professor of urban affairs at the Northwestern University of Chicago, who works in behalf of communities. He was able, an editorial note says, "to start a number of projects which are examples for cities everywhere." One of them was to demonstrate that rooftop greenhouses would improve the health of the community. Asked how he got started, Prof. McKnight said:

> When our university established an urban research center instead of just choosing academics, they asked two or three of us to come in and become professors. I have no Ph.D., no advanced education. We decided to give it a try. I doubt very much that you can take a group of people who are pure academics and make them very useful to primary community life. Therefore they need to have somebody with them who always turns their heads away from large institutions and centers of power and turns them towards community.

He makes the reversal of social thinking plain:

> We have a theory that all institutions must serve communities or they are illegitimate. In fact in modern countries like Britain and the United States this has become inverted. People say that it is the job of the communities to prepare their members to serve the institutions. If you are not ready to serve in one of these huge institutions the community has failed of its purpose. This is the modern lie. It is a lie so large that it is now for most people the truth. We operate on the opposite premise, that the center of society is the community. That institutions can only be legitimate if they strengthen and serve communities rather than dominate and destroy them.

This is a new idea, a great idea, now finding expression in many forms in diverse places. We might say in passing, however, that it is "new" only in the sense that it is now growing popular. Back in 1921, when Arthur Morgan took over the management of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, he told the faculty he had hired to revive this almost moribund institution that in his view a major function of a college is to be of use to the community which is its home. An obvious need of Yellow Springs was productive small industry—to provide livelihood for the young and to make the town a better place to live and to *stay.* He charged the faculty with the task of inventing industry for the town. They were good men—he had picked them—and they, the chemists, the physicists, the biologists, came up with some splendid ideas which Morgan helped to turn into businesses in Yellow Springs.

Fortunately, his account of these undertakings can be read in *Industries for Small Communities,* a little book still in print and distributed for a small sum by Community Service, Inc. (founded by Morgan), Box 243, 114 East Whiteman St., Yellow Springs, Ohio 45387.

In Chicago, many of the people in the area Prof. McKnight was endeavoring to help had coughs, colds, and fell victim to flu. Why? The medical school people explained that their diet was poor, they couldn't resist germs. They lacked fresh fruit and vegetables. So McKnight and his colleagues began developing rooftop greenhouses—starting with one on an apartment building.

> Then some interesting things began to happen. First, they got food that was fresh. That was helpful. They also grew more food than the person whose house it was on could eat. So, that person could sell it in the community. This helped to build the neighborhood economy, so it was economic development. The roofs were the major places where the buildings lost their heat; this had made the buildings very inefficient and expensive. Now with the greenhouse on top of the roof the heat which had been wasted was used to warm the greenhouse so that in winter you could grow the fruit and vegetables.

There was a multiplier effect:

> Nearby there was an old people's home. They found out about the greenhouses and asked if they could come up and work in them. Many of them had been raised in rural agricultural areas. Now they could grow things and be around plants. This brought a whole new life to these old people. The man who managed the nursing home said to me, "This is unbelievable. It has changed the very nature of how these people feel about life." Then a youth worker, who was dealing with juvenile delinquents, brought some of these boys up and taught them how to work in the greenhouse and they too began to think differently. They became more responsible to each other and to the community because of their responsibility for something natural. The food, economic development, energy conservation, bringing old people back to life and bringing young people back to the community—all of these things happened from the greenhouse.

From the conventional point of view, this makes an Arabian Nights tale; but maybe those tales, too, have a foundation in natural law. Anyway, the synergistic principle was demonstrated with a greenhouse in a Chicago slum. As McKnight puts it:

> Now that [the greenhouse] is a magnificent tool. But if you go to a university they can't help you with a greenhouse. Because they will say it is too simple. If you want to build a huge geodesic dome, which will put a city under glass, they will put their minds to it.

A trust financed the first greenhouse. Then, McKnight says, the greenhouses financed each other. "You can make enough money off one greenhouse to build another. So you just need seed money to get going."