

## IN POETIC RHYTHMS

READING in a new book, *Visions from San Francisco Bay* (Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1982, \$14.95)—although not really new; it was first published in Polish in 1969 by Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet who has been teaching at the University of California in Berkeley since 1960—led to wondering about the meaning of "civilized," for that seemed the best way to describe Milosz' work. Indeed, it was this feeling about the Polish writer, a result of reading his *The Captive Mind* (Knopf, 1953), that led us to ask for a review copy of the essays growing out of his life in California. Its content seemed a meditative combination of pain and compassion. He had endured five years of Nazi occupation in Warsaw, where he lived, "the most agonizing spot in the whole of terrorized Europe." Then came the Red Army, which he saw march into the city, followed by the establishment in Poland of the "New Faith"—dialectical materialism as interpreted by Lenin and Stalin. Milosz resisted its enchantment, and finally broke with the Warsaw government, settling in Paris. *The Captive Mind* tells why. But that book also looks into the minds of Polish intellectuals who did not break with the government, but became its servants and spokesmen. Milosz wrote of these captive minds, not exactly with sympathy, but with an insight which leads, not to agreement but to understanding. Agreement was not possible for Milosz, who was and is a civilized man.

What then is it to be civilized? A paragraph on this subject in the *Britannica* says:

It is instructive to note that the word civilization is by no means an old one. Boswell reports that he urged Dr. Johnson to insert the term in his dictionary in 1772, but Johnson refused. He preferred the older word "civility." This, like "urbanity," reflects the contempt of the townsman for the rustic or barbarian; it is an invidious term, although in a way justified by the fact that only where cities have grown up have men developed intricate civilizations. The arduous

and dispersed tasks of the hunter, shepherd and peasant folk do not afford the leisure, or at least the varied human contacts, essential to the generation of new ideas and discoveries. But modern anthropologists have pointed out that peoples without cities, such as the tribes of Polynesia and the North American Indians, are really highly "civilized," in the sense that upon sympathetic examination, they are found to have subtle languages, ingenious arts, admirably suited to their conditions, developed institutions, social and political; religious practices and confident myths, not better and no worse substantiated than many that prevail today among the nations of Europe. All these betoken and presuppose a vastly long development.

Well, this makes a beginning in seeking the meaning of "civilized," but does not touch the qualities we had in mind, qualities we had hoped one adjective might fittingly cover. First, then, a civilized mind has something worth saying to say. Milosz writes as an exile from his homeland—he must always write his poems (as he did this book) in Polish—and he brings to the American scene the riches of European tradition, literature, and experience, yet open and ready for the experience of America. He writes as a friend to both, enlarging the understanding of both through contrasts he draws. He has a poet's power with words, yet he is never "extravagant." It becomes evident that he knows the value of restraint. He is consciously modest, yet his modesty does not diminish the force of his insight or his integrity. His life has been both fortunate and unfortunate—fortunate in the endowments given him by family and education, unfortunate in the oppressive events of his time. He is acutely intelligent, yet this seems to bring him embarrassment, since so many have not had his opportunities to learn, to see, to understand. Which is to say that he accepts the full responsibilities of a civilized man, a writer and teacher. His readers profit by these qualities.

What does this usefully self-conscious man say, for example, about religion?

Religions are totalities with structures of their own, and they resist the changes occurring around them as a church tower on a square resists the vibrations caused by the rush of traffic. However, they are not completely protected from the movement which surrounds them and which gradually crumbles them. Just as the physical church has ceased to be the focal point of a city, so has the religious system once embracing philosophy, science, and art been cut off from those disciplines, and the new systems are ill-disposed to religion. The civilization in which I reside denies religion, but the preservation of appearances, the multitude of extremely well organized churches, and their financial power, keeps the situation opaque. Every day of my life, with its swarm of perceptions, trains me in anti-religion, and I am unable to find any intelligible purpose in gigantic neon signs proclaiming "Jesus saves" in a sinister landscape of concrete coils, crushed scrap iron in automobile graveyards, factories, peeling shacks. If people did not put all this here, then who did? It was done by people and yet not quite—people cut off from themselves, overtaken by the petrified excretions produced by their own interactions. I turn on the radio in the car and again am unable to connect man as an intelligent being with this gibberish of sermons, incitements, and incantations side by side with jazz and concrete music. Truly, the language speaks through them more than they speak the language, and this makes for the omnipotence of self-perpetuating form. All that remains is to trace the effects of my being exposed to a mass of symbols that allow for no coherent arrangement. . . . I think of ancient Rome and it seems to me that the circle has closed, that I am a spectator at the time when the ground had already been prepared for Christianity, though now, in turn, Christianity is itself perhaps no more than one of many dying cults. It is the same now as in Rome when there had to have been a raging turmoil of competing gods, gods everyone knew to be hollow, mere figures of speech, and the more that knowledge spread, the more avidly were the purely linguistic ceremonial forms clutched at and used for mutual reassurance.

Milosz, a modern man, equipped with both sophistication and doubt of his doubts, yet a poet whose vocation is to speak for himself, recites his religious wonderings:

Standing by a swimming pool, I watch the breeze knock a beetle into the water. Sparkling in the

sun, the surface of the water ripples with the beetle's awkward movements; below—a transparent blue abyss reaching to the tiled bottom of the pool. I toss the beetle a small leaf, but instead of catching it, it waves its legs wildly, and the leaf floats away, repelled by the current made by the beetle itself. This depresses me, for I am wearing clothes and cannot save him; if I return here in a quarter of an hour, the beetle will be dead. Perhaps this is an allegory of my fate. Chance rules the inexpressible multitude of individual creatures, and even assuming that there are higher creatures here beside me, as unknown to me as I am to the beetle, and they have the impulse to take pity, our meeting depends on chance, just as it did for the beetle in the unused opportunity offered him through me. Since the earth has lost its privileged position between heaven and hell, since man has lost his as one of the elect, and since everything is subject to the law of cold causality that assumes the features of chance in relation to the individual's fate, there is not much hope that my end will be different from the beetle's. If the beetle is not immortal, then the immortality of my soul seems a usurpation and offends me.

There is this revealing passage:

You suspend your judgment and you sing along with the others in church, precisely because you doubt your ability to unravel all those intricate questions. Only I have difficulties, only my mind remains empty no matter how many times I try to extract something from my imagination. The others here beside me have no such difficulties. Though I will not admit it to myself, each one of them is thinking the same about me. And thus collective belief accumulates from the disbelief of individuals.

From another part of the book:

What is the trap we are caught in today? My childhood was marked by two sets of events whose significance I see as more than social or political. One was the revolution in Russia, with all its various consequences. The other was the omen of Americanization, the films of Buster Keaton and Mary Pickford, the Ford motorcar. Now there is no doubt that Americanization has carried off complete victory: Americanization means the product of forces not only lower than man and not only outstripping him, submerging him, but, what is more important, sensed by man as both lower than and outstripping his will. Who knows, perhaps this is a punishment for man's claims on the forbidden. The more God abandoned space, the stronger became the dream of building the Kingdom of God here and now with our

own hands, which, however, condemned man to a life of getting and spending. Fine, why should it be any other way? The only question is whether our two-fold nature can endure a static reality, and whether we, if forbidden to reach out beyond that reality and beyond our nature, will not go mad, or, to use the language of the psychiatrists, succumb to an excess of "problems." It may well be that we are healthy only when trying to leap from our own skins, in the hope of succeeding from time to time.

One begins to like what this man says, following his speculations, appreciating his questions. He is, so to speak, agnostic, yet thoughtful gnostics are likely to feel at home with him. For the gnostic has to raise the same questions or remain only a true believer. Man, he suggests, has a recurring need for "becoming." What more fundamental article of faith?

The Descent of God and the Ascension are two of the spatial poles without which religion becomes pure spirituality devoid of any toehold in reality, a situation not to man's measure. One of the Soviet astronauts said in an interview that he had flown very high but had not seen God anywhere. It is not clear whether one should smile at this or not, for those who kneel and raise up their eyes differ from the astronaut only in that they would wish to shift the spheres of heaven further away—a billion light years away, to where the universe ends—but they are unable to carry out that operation; their faith is a struggle between an instant of intuition and an hour of indifference or weariness.

What could be more fascinating than to look into their minds at that struggle between the desire to believe and the inability to, as when you have almost caught a butterfly but end up with a handful of air. I do not understand why we have allowed ourselves to be cowed by fashion and have relinquished important fundamental inquiries so that only churchmen, intimidated and constrained by their defenses, will at times admit to their religious troubles.

Speaking for himself, Milosz, some sort of humanist we suppose, prefers the devout and God-fearing individual "to a restless mocker who is glad to style himself as an 'intellectual,' proud of his cleverness in using ideas which he claims as his own though he acquired them in a pawnshop in exchange for simplicity of heart." He may properly share some of Simone Weil's suspicion of

theologians, yet he expresses feelings that would be identified as "religious" by one thoughtful theologian (Wilfrid Cantwell Smith), and A. H. Maslow would have endorsed his wish to share in piety. He says:

Piety has no need of definition—either it is there or it is not. It persists independently of the division of people into believers and atheists, an illusory division today, since faith is undermined by disbelief in faith, and disbelief by disbelief in itself. The sacred exists and is stronger than all our rebellions—the bread on the table, the rough tree trunk which *is*, the depths of "being" I can intuit in the letter opener lying in front of me, entirely steeped and established in its "being." My piety would shame me if it meant I possessed something others did not. Mine, however, is a piety without a home: it survives the obsessive, annihilating image of universal disjointedness and, fortunately, allows me no safe superiority.

Milosz as a sightseer of America makes equally good reading. He gets about in a car, like the rest of us, and has acquired as much or more knowledge of California, both geographical and cultural, than many natives possess. Robinson Jeffers and Henry Miller have each a chapter; and so does the automobile. There is little about cities, except for this:

Sacramento, a large city, and just another Desert Center spread over many square miles, has little appeal for me, and I would certainly not want to live there. It was there that a student, a young simpleton, asked me how life in Sacramento differed from life in a concentration camp. I had to assure him gently that there was a great difference, gently because even any persuasion would be lost on a person unable to distinguish between a pinprick and the rack. This young idiot had never faced starvation, he took a bath every day, drove a car, an old one but his own; he could take the works of Lenin and Mao Tse-tung from the library, and so he had forgotten what has first place in the hierarchy of human needs. He had forgotten, as well, how he had come to be where he was. For him the prosaic but tidy little houses, the lawns, possessed the weight of things which exist in and of themselves. Even if he did sometimes imagine his part of that hot valley between the hilly coast and the foot of the Sierras in its former innocence—two hundred years back, more or less, when Johann August Sutter's fort stood there—it was only to grimace in contempt: was it worth it?

For Milos', driving around America causes him "admiration for man, and compassion." All that he sees suggests some kind of contrast. The desert with "its heaps of rocks, its sands, the dried salt-lake beds, all its hostile beauty," as he passes like a conqueror, makes him realize, "I could have been a man or a woman who crossed—after how many days or weeks?—the rocks and deserts I had seen, walking alongside an ox-drawn wagon or traveling on horseback."

Though I see it with my own eyes, I cannot believe that people were able to master and tame this geological monster, tethering its body with ropes of highways, and what highways they are. The motel in a wild landscape of basalt blocks and yellow grasses has clean bedsheets, a comfortable bed, a bathroom with hot water. The waitress, the boy at the gas station in a little town surrounded by an area the size of Switzerland or Holland and inhabited by rattlesnakes and coyotes, are as standardized as their counterparts in the metropolis. But what if all this could not have been achieved except at the cost of their minds? Who would want to do what they do, be stuck where they are? Not me. But, after all, they are toiling for me, instead of me. . . .

He visits California's redwood forests, noticing how they are diminishing, and that the struggle of the conservationists to save them is "none too successful for the simple reason that the wood from one such giant can make twenty houses."

A lover of the forest, I turn my eyes away from the hideous destruction on the mountain slopes where the saws have passed. The ecological balance is destroyed, this forest will never grow back. Or was that part of the cost, too? So people could work and earn money in the sawmills, and so that something that the maps call Arcata could be built near those sawmills? The shores of San Francisco Bay were once tree-shaded, Indians once hunted wildfowl in its waters; camouflaging their heads with leaves, the Indians would swim over to a flock and grab a duck or wild goose by the leg. Now the hope of profit requires that those shores be filled with garbage to extend the area usable for construction, and wastes from factories are poisoning the water. Is this irrational and inevitable, or irrational and not inevitable? It is easy to see that the automobile multiplies our questions because it allows us to be ubiquitous.

In a chapter which begins with the text—"Due to lack of interest tomorrow has been cancelled" (Graffiti in the men's room of a Berkeley student restaurant)—the author states his position:

My principal concern is the unacknowledged, barely conscious premises of my own thinking, or anyone else's. Besides belief in evolution, those premises include a negative evaluation of the direction of one's country, society, and civilization is taking. It is somewhat strange to write this while living in a country that has achieved the greatest economic power in history, but—judging by the rage and contempt emanating from books, paintings, and films—never before have so many people taken up indictment as a pastime. Although I feel a certain kinship with them, it is that precisely which inclines me to mistrust myself somewhat, for their activities are a mirror in which I can easily see myself.

A conviction of the decadence, the rotting of the West, seems to be a permanent part of the equipment of enlightened and sensitive people for dealing with the horrors accompanying technological progress. That conviction is as old as modern art. Here a single reference, Baudelaire's *cit  infernale*, will suffice. However, as soon as we assume that a regression is in fact occurring, the question arises—a regression from what, where is that ideal state of equilibrium and vigor for which we are supposed to yearn?

Milosz explains that he is not an "activist," and there seems reason, in his case, to be thankful for that. That he is on the Right Side is not at issue—he knows good from bad. But defining the good in terms of objectives for righteous action—the project finds him filled with uncertainties. Which is again cause to be thankful. The poet must be careful—very careful—to preserve the character given him by Shelley, to remain the *unacknowledged* legislator of the world.

It is the poet's art to see through his own eyes, to declare what he cannot help but know, and to develop as best he can that symmetry of mind and feeling which makes his feelings trustworthy, his vision in concert with the vistas generated by the opening inner eye of his time. When more of us feel compelled to say what we have to say in poetic rhythms, there may be a little more hope for the world.

## *REVIEW*

### WORKER MANAGEMENT

IT puts quite a strain on the imagination to try to picture, in its various dimensions, an ideal economic community—or rather, the economic aspect of an ideal community. What would it be like? A few years ago the people who get out *Rain*, in Portland, Oregon, distributed a poster with a drawing of such a community. It was pretty inviting, and such anticipations may help to keep hope alive, but getting there from where we are would have about the same problems as getting our modern industrial managers to embrace the system of Henry George.

What is fundamental, given the ideal in contrast with our present situation? The chapter, "Buddhist Economics," in Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* comes very close to answering this question. We are all weighted down with an excess of "things," far more than we need. And our economic system now rests its hope for recovery on selling more things to everybody, so that we can put people back to work making them. Some industries, we tell ourselves, should be altogether abolished, starting with nuclear armaments. Then, think of all the competitive products you encounter in a supermarket—ten or twelve of them, likely to be about the same in quality, and two or three would be more than enough. When the Sears catalog gets to be a pamphlet of, say, forty-eight pages instead of the size of two telephone books, with all those "supplements," too, "economics" might begin to take a back seat in our lives, cut down to appropriate size in the scheme of things. What we want is the economic arrangements of "just enough," and a transforming education in what "enough" means. How to get such arrangements is the problem, yet it can be done, or a dramatic beginning can be made. Read, for example, *Living the Good Life* (Schocken) by Scott and Helen Nearing; also their *Search for the Good Life* which is even better. Read, too, Harlan Hubbard's *Payne Hollow* (Eakins Press, 1974) for

another pattern of high living on a little. Then, for systematic thinking. Richard Gregg's article "Voluntary Simplicity," *MANAS* for Sept. 4 and 11, 1974, might be best of all.

These were thoughts provoked by reading in a new book, *Workplace Democracy and Social Change* (Porter Sargent, 1982, \$20.00) by Frank Lindenfeld and Joyce Rothschild-Whitt, editors and contributors. As they say in their introduction

It is the perspective of this book that the fundamental source of the problem [the dissatisfaction of people with their work], and its potential solution, centers on the issue of *control*: of the conditions of work—in short, control over the whole labor process. Control may be hierarchical, as when those who manage and those who do the work are permanent and separate sets of people. Or it may be democratic, as when those who do the work of the organization are the same as those who set its goals and policies. Hierarchical control is so much a part of our society it is sometimes difficult to imagine that work could be arranged in an altogether different manner. This book is about people who have managed to create work organizations in a different range. From lawyers to garbage collectors, from free school teachers to plywood workers, from journalists to insurance workers, many people have seized the opportunity to build democratic workplaces.

How do they do it? In some cases they *start* that way, as in the extraordinary case of the Mondragon manufacturers in Basque Spain; or change to that way, as in the case of an insurance company in Washington, D.C. Sometimes the workers are able to take over bankrupt or failing companies, turn them around, and operate them successfully. Sometimes the employers introduce a little worker control because technology has made the work so dull and uninteresting that nearly everything begins to go bad on the production line. Such work not only makes things, it makes morons.

The foundation of our economic system is systematic self-interest. This has various effects, one of the most noticeable being that working people are treated like things, mere means to other people's ends. The real, long-term solution is of

course developing another motivation for production, which means, actually, turning the whole consumer society around. It is worthwhile to try to imagine how many of the problems of balancing production and consumption, of workplace relationships, of authority and management would disappear if basic attitudes toward "things" and "owning" were altered in terms of intelligently modest production and consumption for *use*. Meanwhile, some working people are trying to ameliorate their working conditions. The book is about this.

We might take two illustrations, first the insurance company, the company known as IGP—International Group Plans—"the \$60 million, worker-managed insurance corporation just ten blocks from the White House in the financial heart of Washington, D.C." This account is provided by Daniel Zwerdling

Most important, IGP is a firm where rank-and-file employees really do exert fundamental powers. For example, 85 per cent of the workers turned out for the 1977 board of directors election, an enviable turnout in any political campaign.

"Look, just say we are completely in charge of our own jobs from day to day," a claims clerk told me. "I mean that individuals like myself, making close to (IGP's) minimum wage, make decisions on our own that could affect a whole insurance plan, such as whether certain people are eligible to receive claims or not—decisions which only a manager could make at any traditional insurance company."

The board of directors election was sheer political drama, for the incumbent board was staging a coup of sorts, trying to impose more traditional corporate work styles. Board members were proposing widespread layoffs in a company that forbids laying workers off. The workers' policy would be to institute across-the-board pay cuts, rather than layoffs, with the highest percentage cuts for those with the highest salaries. The cuts would be considered loans, to be repaid by the company at 6 per cent interest. The board wanted to bring back worker-attendance records in a company where keeping track of attendance is forbidden. And the board wanted to give management the power to fire workers in a company where firings are controlled by a worker court.

But the entire board was ousted, and the workers elected a new board with "democratic" views. "It was a major showdown, a turning point," one insurance clerk told me. "The people—and democracy—won."

Not all the workers like the responsibilities working for IGP entails, but enough of them do to keep it going—as they say—at a profit. How did an outfit like IGP get started in the first place? One man with imagination did it, Zwerdling says.

James P. Gibbons, the current president, founded IGP in 1964 with three partners and an IBM 1401 computer. Gibbons had earned a reputation in New York as a spectacular insurance salesman, and now he wanted to try a new marketing concept. Instead of using a sales network to sell insurance from door to door, IGP would sell group health insurance by computerized class mailings to members of groups—from the Air Force Sergeants Association to the staff of *Family Health* magazine. The idea took off, and, in five years, Gibbons had 100 employees handling \$10 million in premiums.

Gibbons says he considered business just a way to make a living while he pursued more cosmic visions of social and political change. He marched—and was twice arrested—in antiwar, antipoverty, and civil rights protests, and says, "I was marching for the power of people to control their own lives.

"I had always thought I'd sell the business and use the money to set up some sort of foundation, like the Stern Fund or something, and give money to political causes," Gibbons says. He's sitting at his desk, which is one among many in a large room; there are no executive offices at IGP. "But then I started thinking, 'What's the point? Set up another foundation that is trying to change the very people and system that gives us all our money?' It occurred to me that what we really had to do was create an economic institution that was self-sufficient. And that," Gibbons says, "is when I became consciously committed to making this company a self-sustaining living model of social change. What I've done," he says, "is to create the first corporate power structure in this country which the employees have the power to change as they want. I'm not talking anything short of a total revolution."

The whole story is told by Daniel Zwerdling. It makes exciting reading, as do most of the other chapters on varying degrees of workers' control in many sorts of enterprises.

The producers' co-ops in the small Basque city of Mondragon grew out of the perceptive collaboration of a priest with Basque tradition. The first firm was started in 1965 by five men; eleven years later "the system had grown to sixty-five firms with 14,665 members." They make furniture, machine tools, and heavy equipment. They started a school where students can support themselves with production while devoting five hours a day to their educational program. They also started an R & D center serving all the firms. They developed a League for Education and Culture and a credit union. The priest, Don José Maria Arizmendi, guided the workers to their present understanding of what they are doing, without focusing attention on himself. "He stirred people *to think and act*," and not to become dependent on him. He showed the Basques how to develop their natural capacities for enterprise and fraternal association. Today the workers are consciously dealing with the contradiction between production line monotony and human development, studying what the Scandinavians have done in this direction, designing autonomous work groups. The leaders, the writers of this chapter say, "are not simply following a doctrine laid down by a remarkable founder but are building a learning system that facilitates their adaptation to new problems and new conditions."

There are problems and impasses for many of these movements, as well as successes. Their significance lies in the diversity of the attempts and the new efforts that keep starting up.

## *COMMENTARY*

### THE SERVICE OF THE POET

IN the concluding quotation from Czeslaw Milosz, in this week's lead (see page 7), the poet asks: "where is that ideal state of equilibrium and vigor for which we are supposed to yearn?"

The question is as old as any of the great philosophical questions—largely unanswerable questions, it may be, because they are of an order that requires each human to find an answer for himself. Yet since we are not entirely separate from each other—since our development is as much a collaboration as an individual striving—we consult with one another on such matters. One source we look to is the scripture, the world's inheritance. Yet even the greatest of scriptures are, in a sense, mere hearsay, although impressive enough, and we know that hearsay is very different from knowing for ourselves.

But *can* we know for ourselves? This is the question that has been ruled out of consideration by the objectivist methods of science, but is now returning in various ways, as scientific agnosticism loses its grip on the modern mind. Metaphysicians and mystics have had things to say on this question, and one who wishes to understand Western history at this level might begin with a study of Plotinus—both metaphysician and mystic; go to Spinoza and Leibniz, and perhaps Hegel, for the best of metaphysical constructions in Western history.

Then there are the poets, in whom discovery in relation to the great questions seems largely spontaneous, as in the case of Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth, and some others. The difficulty with poetry is that it often combines romantic egotism with transcendent vision. Plato warned against this, yet he was himself a poet of incomparable skill in the use of imagery and words. And we are inevitably drawn to the work of great poets who, in their several ways, call attention to the area of tension in human life created by the gap between the actual and the

ideal. This, as Harold Goddard points out, is the essential meaning of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Today, it is becoming natural to ask: What does the fine poet reveal about the potentialities of human nature? What does he tell us about *ourselves*? The souring world of self-interest and economic disaster may drive us to renew this question without the habitual reluctance of the past. Future historians may eventually speak of our time as an epoch of self-discovery, when not only philosophers addressed this question, but all the thoughtful of common humans. We are natural lovers of freedom, but until now have had little inclination to wonder about the best way to put our freedom to use.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves A LANCELOT OR TWO

A CERTAIN embarrassment often attends writing about books which—one hopes—will be of interest and value to the young. "The young" is an all-inclusive abstraction and personifying it calls to mind particular youngsters who prefer video games to reading anything. Then there is the further fact that each week (or nearly each week) we keep on recommending books and articles—more, probably, than anyone will want to read. Readers, too, are abstractions. Yet, by the friendly law of averages, the readers seem to like suggestions. They write in and say how much they are getting out of this or that book.

This is preface to attention to a book for nearly all ages—*Knights* (Schocken, 1982, \$24.95), offering the drawings of Julek Heller, which are splendid, and a text by Deirdre Headon, which is equally good, or even better. The pictures make the book a show piece filled with the melodrama of King Arthur and his court, Siegfried and the Nibelungen Hoard, Roland, Oliver, and Charlemagne, with notes on chivalry, armor, helmets, and noble steeds. Can this book compete with the lethal "activism" of video games? Who knows? But a brave attempt to make it compete seems in order.

The mythic lore of Western civilization is the foundation for a feeling appreciation of Western literature. Good reading without this feeling is like being without a dictionary. The child who knows something of the Greek myths, the Norse legends, the tales of Arthur, Lancelot, and Galahad, has some hope of becoming a human who was not just born yesterday—and the stories he reads as a child become a rich source of imagery in adult life. Their transcendental dimension, the strong presence of evil as well as good, the magic of Merlin, the spells of ambitious mothers and step-mothers, Odin's ring, the quest for the Holy Grail—all have to do with the

capacious mysteries of human nature. We don't cast spells—or think we can't—yet most of us go through life under their influence. We all need, like Brunhilde, to be awakened from a long sleep. We all need to learn how to get nature on our side—like the lad in Grimm's Fairy Tales who was helped by the ants to separate all the flour mixed with a hill of sand in a single day, saving his life and winning the princess for bride. How does one befriend ants, creatures which seem to appear only in the wrong places? What is it, in Henry Beston's wonderful phrase, to be "on the side of life"?

See what Camus did with the myth of Sisyphus: once read, never forgotten. There is a Sisyphus in each of us. Camus' Sisyphus does not escape; he still has to push the rock up the hill; and then, in the moment of success, watch it roll back down. But he found a Sisyphusian content. Is this believable? Yes. How are we able to find content? Well, myths are complementary. There is a Prometheus in us too. Humans are complex beings with various identities. This is what makes self-knowledge so difficult, so splendid when attained. The stories about the knights are concerned with this peak achievement, but they are adventure stories, too. With a good story which has an undertone of hidden meaning—hidden but always there—you do your own moralizing. Nothing can be called literature unless it permits and encourages you to do your own moralizing. And if you sit in the Siege Perilous, you *have* to do it.

What is Deirdre Headon's prose like? It is straightforward, unpretentious, with a quiet dignity. She lets the story choose the words. In the tale of Siegfried, the hero has broken every sword the bad sorcerer (who plans to use Siegfried's strength and derring-do to make himself rich) has forged for him. Siegfried shatters them, one after the other. The sorcerer is so mixed up inside that he can't make a good sword.

Siegfried told his mother how he could not find a sword strong enough for him to wield. She went to a chest and drew out an object wrapped in a yellowing

cloth. When the cloth was removed, a mighty sword was revealed, but its blade was in two pieces.

"This was your father's sword," said his mother. "When he was killed in battle his sword, Gram, broke in two. Take it and forge it afresh, for your father's sword should now be yours."

Siegfried carried the broken sword to the forge. As he had seen Regin do, he stoked the furnace until it flamed red. Then he heated the broken metal. As he watched its colour turn from silver to red to white, the two broken pieces ran together, and the blade was made whole once again. Then he brought the blade down on the anvil. This time the blade did not shatter—but the anvil split in two.

Well, in the end, after his great victories, Siegfried gets stabbed in the back and dies.

In her grief, the brave Brunhilde commanded a funeral pyre to be built, and there Siegfried was laid dressed in his gold armour with his sword clasped between his hands. Brunhilde was nowhere to be seen. Then, as the first torch lit the pyre, she appeared in her warrior maiden's clothing and mounted on Siegfried's horse Grani.

As the flames soared higher she cried out loud, "My beloved, I come to join you!" and rode fearlessly into the fire. The pyre burned brightly, filling the sky with red and blue flames. But, strange to tell, not a wisp of smoke rose from them, and when the fire was done there was no trace or mark upon the ground to show what a sorrowful occurrence had taken place there.

Is this an unhappy ending? It seems so. You keep wishing or expecting, but then something different happens. What happens to the reader is that you look for another kind of logic—the antiphrasis of a sad or tragic ending. But you know that you mustn't find it too easily. If you do, the story has been wasted.

Some of the knights do bad things for what seem to them good reasons. They make messes of their own and others' lives. Madness or death may result. Then there is the integrity of knights who make mistakes, and of those who don't. All but Galahad made mistakes, and he, who alone found and saw the Grail, was dissolved into death by the intensity of its light. He no longer wished, the story says, to live. Is that what knowing the truth does to you? Is that what Plato meant by saying

that the art of the philosopher is in learning how to die easily?

The really great tales often resemble one another. The story of Lohengrin is also the story of Cupid and Psyche. It says, "Don't define the truth in human terms. It is not, and cannot be, what you think. Don't try to collect rewards." Being human always brings a choice between making and not making deals.

Ordinary education is instruction in making deals. This gets in the way of the truth. Stories which, somehow or other, make us wonder why ordinary common sense needs to be contradicted may be the best of all. They seem to show that there is a right way and a wrong way of contradicting common sense, but leaves the shadows to make a scene requiring brave discovery.

The book does not conceal the dark side of feudal times.

The figure of the gallant and chivalrous knight, pledged to fight evil and injustice is the most popular image of the knight today. The medieval knight did eventually begin to act with courtesy and civilized behaviour, but only towards members of his own class, and the brutal and savage warrior of earlier times was never far away.

A knight did not think it wrong to terrorize people of the lower orders, or to extort money from his retainers so that he could maintain his expensive lifestyle. Indeed, many knights were no more than ruthless bullies and their cruelty was often notorious. One English knight, Sir Bevis of Hampton, killed in his lifetime nearly seven hundred people. But knights were also a mass of contradictions. It is said that after the infamous tenth-century French knight, Raoul de Cambrai, had pillaged a convent, raping the nuns and burning them alive, he suddenly remembered that it was a feast day and fell to his knees in prayer.

Does it blemish the book to have things like that in it? For some, perhaps, not for all. History and meaning often have a hard time getting together, as in the present. Looking around, you might find a Lancelot or two, but no Galahads.

## *FRONTIERS*

### Papers Worth Reading

THE big papers—newspapers and magazines—are filled with stories about national policies, national conflicts, and psychological analyses of political leaders, as though these were the only things important enough to write about. The little papers—journals with small circulation among devoted readers—are concerned with the essential relations between humans and the planet, with the organic roots of good human life. When the little papers become big—if they ever do—our troubles will be about over, since the plans and projects of these papers are life-saving and health-saving, not trouble-making.

*Rain*, one of the good little papers, in its December-January 1983 issue, has an interview with two brothers. David and Mark Freudenberger, who are working in West Africa to establish "sustainable farming systems which incorporate forestry and wildlife management." Part of their inspiration comes from the rediscovery of the wisdom of traditional practice. David said to illustrate:

For instance, western scientists can identify only 16 varieties of millet, while the local villager can identify 54 varieties. That kind of knowledge base, which includes the uses of these millet varieties and the growing conditions required, would take years for western scientists to figure out.

Asked about the application of traditional knowledge to current needs of fuel and food, his brother Mark said:

In terms of the field crop production or the production of food grains, I like to use Wes Jackson's idea that describes how nature is oriented toward the production of polycultures that are perennials, while western agriculture has been oriented toward the production of annuals in monocultures. Monoculture has been the focus of most of the agricultural experiments and research over the past 20 years, but traditional African farming systems were based on polyculture perennials. It integrated a variety of trees and plants to meet the villagers' multiple needs of food, medicines, fibre, fodder, and fuel. In the case of

the nitrogen-fixing tree, acacia albida, the nuts are eaten by animals, the wood is very valuable for firewood, and one can plant crops around the tree. We need to look at what these specific traditional technologies were and how they can be adapted to a more intensive and sustainable type of agriculture. I don't think that we can have the illusion that traditional agriculture is necessarily the most productive, but I think it can teach many valuable lessons in our efforts to realize a sustainable agriculture.

Asked what hope they had for the future, in view of present trends in West Africa, the brothers said:

*Mark:* I think that if you are a practitioner, you really don't think about it. If you struggle with the question of whether or not there is hope, I think you'll become very, very discouraged. Rather, you take encouragement in the little victories that appear every day. You realize that time is running out and that you've got to try your hardest.

*David:* Given certain conditions, change can come about very quickly. Twenty years ago there weren't paved roads or schools in many of the villages I passed through in my travels, which illustrates that things have changed rapidly. We have to keep a historical perspective in mind. Yes, there is a lot that has to be done, but a lot has already been done.

*Mark:* I think that if you sit back and contemplate the enormity of what has to be done, and you see the insane growth of the arms race, you can be discouraged. We don't have the luxury of getting discouraged. We don't have the luxury of being cynical. Not at all! Certainly as Americans we have been given tremendous opportunities of education, power, wealth, the possibilities for affecting change. I don't believe we can sit back and philosophize about whether or not there is hope. That is doomsday politics. We must get on with the work that needs to be done.

Another story in *Rain* tells about a group called Green Deserts, headquartered in Britain, which sends crews to Africa. In the Sudan they work to establish shelterbelts of trees to prevent further desertification, introducing leguminous tree crops to provide animal forage and fuel for cooking. They have devised puppet shows to teach elementary conservation to the people. One show attracted an audience of five hundred.

The importance of such work is made evident by a *Rain* editorial note:

Dry areas cover about a third of the earth's land surface. However, much of the remaining two thirds is unsuitable for agriculture. If we exclude tundra, polar and high mountain regions and consider what percentage of potentially usable land has become desert during the last century, the figures are as follows: In 1872 about 14% was desert; in 1952 this had risen to 33%; and by 1977 it was a staggering 55%. Now, in 1982, almost two thirds of the usable land on earth had become dry and barren.

On the importance of planting trees:

Many productive trees are able to grow in marginal arid lands, in particular a number of the drought-resistant legumes. Research is needed into the potential of these and many other promising species. Agricultural and range management systems based around tree crops will be able to sustain rural communities in arid lands, while at the same time improving the soil for future generations. As predicted world food shortages worsen, it is possible that products from currently little known trees will be accorded substantial importance, providing a much needed economic and ecological boost to many marginal farms.

Another "little" paper—with, one hopes, a big future—is the British *Ecologist*. (It's already big in size.) The issue for last September-October presents two articles that need reading. One is a long and thoroughly documented study of what happened to ancient Greece and Rome as the result of deforestation. Their rulers cut down trees to make masts for ships of war, to construct palaces and residences, and to clear land for planting. With loss of the forest cover, erosion carried away the topsoil. They were warned, mostly by philosophers, but they did not listen. Fairfield Osborn spoke of this cycle of decline in the Mediterranean areas, saying, "the forests have never reappeared . . . because the land has been denuded of its soil." The other *Ecologist* article reports a conversation by the editor, Edward Goldsmith, with Mudiyanse Tenakoon, a Sri Lankan farmer who uses, as much as he can, the traditional methods of his ancient island. He has an acre of rice paddy and a garden. He used to be

self-sufficient, but now must buy things at the store. The interview provides a colorful account of how the people of Sri Lanka used to produce everything for themselves—how they grew different kinds of rice for specific purposes—one high-protein variety for nursing mothers. This was before the high-yield, hybrid varieties reduced the available seeds for 280 kinds to only fifteen or twenty. Tenakoon emphasized that the traditional form of agriculture was a family and community affair, and that it cannot be restored without restoring the traditional family life.