

POETS AND COLLECTORS

WHILE books, we are periodically reminded, are not the way, the truth, and the light, the decline in reading, celebrated a few years ago by Marshall McLuhan, and now mourned with what seems great point by Neil Postman, makes occasion for some words in their defense. We find them on the first page of a book filled with anecdotal Sufi sagacity by Idries Shah (Harper & Row, 1982, \$6.95). He writes in *Seeker After Truth*:

It is recorded that a man went to Ahmad Yasavi, the Sufi master of Turkestan, and said:

"Teach me without books, and let me learn to understand without the intervention of a master between me and Truth, for humans are frail, and reading books does not enlighten me."

Yasavi said:

"Do you seek to eat without a mouth, or to digest without a stomach? Perhaps you would like to walk without feet and buy without paying. . . . I could do as you ask only if you could first dispense with physical organs, as you wish to avoid those things which have been devised for the spiritual organs.

"Just think for a moment whether you could use food without an apparatus, approach the Sufis without having heard of them in the words you so dislike, desire wisdom without a source appropriate to your state. "It may be an amusing pastime to think of learning without books as a basis, and experiencing without a teacher. So is it an amusing pastime to think of magic and miracles. Aside from the amusement, what of their permanent yield of the activity?

Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, generated a reverse problem by having a wise Egyptian king denounce the invention of writing and reproach the inventor:

"If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling

them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows."

After telling this story, Socrates points out that written words "seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever." This is his argument for "living speech"—or dialogue—as superior to "dead discourse." Yet Plato, a stern critic of the mimetic poets, was himself a poet, and while he minimized the value of books he wrote a great many of them. What are we to make of this? In his introduction to *Plato*, Paul Friedlander proposed an answer. Plato, he said, was following the deity. "Just as the deity created both the invisible and what is visible to our senses, so he, too, wrote down many things and transmitted others unwritten." Friedlander waxes eloquent:

. . . is not the picture of the old man unforgettable, writing laws despite the failure of all his political aspirations, laws for the founding of yet another Utopia, this time called Crete? Literature, the new form of art, the whole set of dramatic philosophical dialogues a play—what aesthetic passion and seriousness went into this play for half a century. Thus we are perhaps not entirely untrue to his spirit if we interpret, in a preliminary way, the meaning of his written work according to the model of the world of appearances, which, to be sure, is only a *copy* of the eternal forms, but copy of *eternal forms*, though afflicted with all the limitations of transitory existence, yet, to the eye which has learned to see, pointing toward eternal being and toward what is beyond being.

We not only forgive Plato for writing books, we bless him for it. And we may go on to a little thanksgiving for libraries, where his volumes, and many others worth reading, may be found.

In *Nature's Economy* (Sierra Club, 1977) Donald Worster speaks of Joseph Wood Krutch's

"intellectual conversion" to the pantheist faith of ecology, remarking that reading Thoreau (of whom he wrote a choice biography) had much to do with this conversion, although his later life as an amateur naturalist doubtless played the largest part. And it is to Krutch that we go for observations on the services of libraries. In his autobiography, *More Lives Than One* (Sloane Associates, 1962), Krutch tells how as a youth in college in Knoxville, Tennessee, he pored over the files of the *Scientific American*, having decided, by reason of some skill in mathematics, to become a scientist himself. Yet while in the library he came across an old *Literary Digest* in which a critic condemned Bernard Shaw as "impudent." His curiosity excited, Krutch took home *Man and Superman* and read it into the night.

I closed the book to sit for a while reveling in the discovery of what literature could be. This was the light which broke on me on my way to Damascus. From then on and for many years I was more a Shavian than I had ever been a Spencerian.

Now comes the passage on libraries:

The library where I found both the *Scientific American* and *Man and Superman* was not at all "progressive." It offered no "services," celebrated no "read-a-book week," had no "reference librarian," and, so far as I know, never made any effort to persuade people to patronize it. I don't think that, actually, very many people did. Most of its books had not been off the shelf for years, some of them, I am sure, not since they had been removed, water-soaked and charred, from their original home which had burned and never been rebuilt. Nevertheless the books were there, patiently waiting until someone either came to seek out a particular one as I had sought out Herbert Spencer's works or, perhaps, merely to stumble upon it by chance. The most important thing about any library is just the fact that a book can wait there until someone to whom it has something important, perhaps something crucial, to say pulls it down. And one of the most important characteristics of the book itself is just that, unlike a television program, moving picture, or any other "modern means of communication," it can wait for years, yet be available at any moment when it happens to be needed.

Many years after my experience with Shaw, the historian Carl Becker told me about a similar experience of his own. He had been born in a tiny

Iowa community by no means highly intellectual. But it did have a small library, presided over by a stern-faced woman of more than middle age who must have been wise though probably not well trained. By chance he pulled down from the shelf a bulky novel and read the first sentence which happens to be one of the most famous of opening sentences: "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Something about that statement, he did not quite know what, aroused his curiosity and he took the volume to the librarian's desk. "Is this a good book?" he asked.

In Nineteenth Century Iowa, Tolstoi was known, insofar as he was known at all, as a rather "dangerous" writer—certainly not food for babes. But the librarian did not tell him that it was "not for his age group." She gave him a good long look over the top of her spectacles, hesitated a moment, and then said, "Well—it's a very *strong* book."

He took it home and there his intellectual life began. He had taken the first step on the road which was to lead him to a professorship at Cornell University and the writing of a series of historical studies of real importance. The second most important thing about this little Iowa library was a wise librarian. But the most important thing was the fact that the book was there. That library would have been justified by its fruit even though no one else had ever read its copy of *Anna Karenina*.

If we knew the intellectual history of all the people who *have* an intellectual history, we should find, I suspect, that something like this happened to a great number of them. At least I know that after I read *Man and Superman* I was never the same as I had been before.

From books, which are mostly prose, we move to poetry. What is poetry? Years ago someone called it "the language of the gods," and Emerson, with a similar inspiration, said in the essay on Art:

Good poetry could not have been otherwise written than it is. The first time you hear it, it sounds rather as copied out of some invisible tablet in the Eternal mind, than as if arbitrarily composed by the poet. The feeling of all great poets has accorded with this. They found the verse, not made it. The muse brought it to them.

Put words into a line of poetry and you invoke the octaves of their meaning. The gods, we may assume, always spoke in this way since, being gods,

they saw as evident and real the connections disclosed by metaphor. So what they spoke was not poetry to them; they had no need of it; their natural speech was a parallel of the world, inner and outer, in all its splendor. Poetry became known to us only through the invention of prose, which was later, much later. Our language, Emerson said, "is fossil poetry." When the meanings of words are nailed down, they die into terms. You can then trust them as definitions and forms of measurement, but they are good for little else.

In *Poetic Diction*, which Owen Barfield composed for publication in England in 1928 (now available in a later edition from Wesleyan University Press), the author borrows from Shelley a brief passage from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*: "Neither are these (metaphors) only similitudes, as men of narrow observation may conceive them to be, but the same footsteps of nature, treading or printing upon several subjects or matters." Whereupon Barfield declares:

This is the answer. It is these "footsteps of nature" whose noise we hear alike in primitive language and in the finest metaphors of poets. Men do not *invent* those mysterious relations between separate external objects, and between objects and feelings or ideas, which it is the function of poetry to reveal. These relations exist independently, not indeed of Thought, but of any individual thinker. And according to whether the footsteps are echoed in primitive language, or later on, in the made metaphors of poets, we hear them after a different fashion and for different reasons. The language of primitive men reports them as direct perceptual experience. The speaker has observed a unity, and is not therefore himself conscious of *relation*. But we, in the development of consciousness, have lost the power to see this one as one. Our sophistication, like Odin's, has cost us an eye; and now it is the language of poets, in so far as they create true metaphors, which must *restore* this unity conceptually, after it has been lost from perception. . . .

Reality, once self-evident, and therefore not conceptually experienced, but which can *now* only be reached by an effort of the individual mind—this is what is contained in a true poetic metaphor; and every metaphor is "true" only in so far as it contains a reality, or hints at it. The world, like Dionysus, is torn to pieces by pure intellect; but the poet is Zeus;

he has swallowed the heart of the world, and he can reproduce it as a living body.

Even in our own century we have had linkages with a past in which all men, although not poets, spoke in poetic rhythms as the natural speech. In *Preface to Plato* (1963) Eric Havelock recalls:

T. E. Lawrence, describing the muster of an expeditionary force of Arab warriors, observed the improvised verses which accompanied the line-up, and the rhythms which assisted the organization of the forward march. These procedures were not the result of some special addiction to heroism on the part of the Arabs; they were not Homeric in our narrow and emasculated sense, meaning simply romantic. Rather they were truly Homeric in their functional necessity.

Poetry is the language of the ringing resonances of life. The more splendid and faithful the ideas to be conveyed, the more the writer is drawn to the use of poetic images and periods. The greatest literature of antiquity spontaneously adopted this form. And modern writers, when overtaken by the muse, do the same. The Gettysburg Address is a poem. To be "creative" is to embody, not imitate, the lines and rhythms of nature. We think of poetry as something artificial, even mannered, but this is only because of the insistent translation of our knowledge or our theories into the flat literalism of the Newtonian cosmos. And, naturally enough, we take vital words from poetry to enliven our language. As Barfield says:

"If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character," wrote William Blake, "the philosophic and experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, and stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round." Like some others of the mystics, he had grasped without much difficulty the essential nature of meaning. For all meaning flows from the creative principle, whether it lives on, as given or remembered, or is re-introduced by the individualized creative faculty, the analogy-perceiving, metaphor-making imagination. In Platonic terms we should say that the rational principle can increase *understanding*, and it can increase true opinion, but it can never increase *knowledge*.

Jean Paulhan, in some notes given to Wallace Stevens (published in Herbert Kohl's *The Age of*

Complexity), spoke of the need science has of poetry, in order to rise above itself.

It comes to this, that philosophers (particularly the philosophers of science) make, not discoveries but hypotheses that may be called poetic. Thus Louis de Broglie admits that progress in physics is, at the moment, in suspense because we do not have the words or the images that are essential to us. But to create illuminations, images, words, that is the very reason for the being of poets.

Barfield attempts the reconstruction of the history of language:

. . . poetic values abound, as *meaning*, in the early stages of those languages with which we are familiar; this meaning has then been traced back to its source in the theocratic, "myth-thinking" period, and it has been shown that the myths, which represent the earliest meanings, were not the arbitrary creations of "poets," but the natural expression of man's being and consciousness at the time. These primary "meanings" were *given*, as it were, by Nature, but the very condition of their being given was that they could not at the same time be apprehended in full consciousness, they could not be *known*, but only experienced or lived. At this time, therefore, individuals cannot be said to have been responsible for the production of poetic values. Not man was creating, but the gods—or, in psychological jargon, his "unconscious." But with the development of consciousness, as this "given" poetic meaning decreases more and more, the individual poet gradually steps into his own. In place of the simple, given *meaning*, we find the *metaphor*—a real creation of the individual—though, in so far as it is true, it is only re-creating, registering as *thought*, one of those eternal facts which may already have been experienced in perception.

In short, the one who *lives* his poetry is not aware of it, or rather, it is not poetry to him.

In order to *appreciate* it, he must also exist, consciously, outside it; for otherwise the "felt change of consciousness" cannot come about. Now nothing but the rational, or logistic principle can endow him with this subjective—*self*—consciousness. . . . The absolute rational principle is that which makes conscious of poetry but cannot create it, the absolute poetic principle is that which creates poetry but cannot make conscious of it.

Shelley said in *A Defence of Poetry*:

In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellence of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of their union.

Barfield, however, stresses the need for the modern poet to be strongly rational, since his creations are conscious acts.

If the poetic is unduly ascendant, behold the mystic or the madman, unable to grasp the reality of percepts at all—a being still resting, as it were, in the bosom of gods or demons—not yet man, man in the fullness of his stature, at all. But if the passive, logistic, prosaic principle predominates, then the man becomes—what? the *collector*, the man who cannot grasp reality of anything *but* percepts. And here at last a real distinction between poet and scientist, or rather between poetaster and pedant, does arise. For if the "collector"s' interests happen to be artistic or literary, he will become the connoisseur, that is, he will collect either *objets d'art* or elegant sensations and memories. But if they are "scientific," he will collect—data; will, in fact, probably go on doing so all his life, to the tune of solemn warnings against the formation of "premature syntheses."

Our final quotation from Barfield sums up his contention, and at the same time gives evidence of his own poetic capacity:

. . . without the continued existence of poetry, without a steady influx of new meaning into language, even the knowledge and wisdom which poetry herself has given in the past must wither away into a species of mechanical calculation. Great poetry is the progressive incarnation of life in consciousness. . . . Over the perpetual evolution of human consciousness, which is stamping itself upon the transformation of language, the spirit of poetry hovers, forever unable to alight. It is only when we are lifted above that transformation, so that we behold it as present movement, that our startled souls feel the little pat and the throbbing, feathery warmth, which tell us she has perched. It is only when we have risen from beholding the creature into beholding creation that our mortality catches for a moment the music of the turning spheres.

REVIEW

THE GESTATION IS OVER

THERE are occasions when the quality of an article or essay in a current magazine, coming in on the day for writing a book review, displaces all other candidates for attention. What is this quality? It is a combination of beauty and depth. The beauty, of course, is not intentional—intentions of this sort produce only a mannered effect—but a charm which comes with the right words for the right ideas, put together in a way that defies alteration. The beauty may be either intimate or stately, depending upon the topic.

In *democracy* for the Winter of 1983, David Ablos, a sociologist now teaching at Seton Hall—who as a child grew up in an American city—says in his beginning:

I knew instinctively even then that Mexicans were supposed to disappear into the anonymity of the city. Anything that made us stand out in bold relief, such as a shouting Mexican, made us all uneasy. As a preschool child nobody had given me talks about American society, the melting pot, or Anglo-Saxon values. They didn't have to. I and others like me received the message in a thousand nonverbal ways: differences in food, clothing, speech; sense of fear. I wanted to be like them and envied their clean homes and orderly lives. Many years later in Mexico I learned that although I had become a professional person with standing in the United States I was considered a "poncho," an Americanized Mexican born in the United States, a displaced person with no real culture or homeland.

Prof. Ablos turns this irony into the vision of culture of another sort. Since his article is several pages long, we skip to the end, where this vision reaches its climax. He says

We will not be saved by power and stability but by the capacity for change. We can be a people characterized by resistance, a subversive, through whom a different spirit speaks. We can manifest humanity's hope of renewal. We cannot afford to be absorbed, fused, or bought off. To hang on to our Indian-Spanish past is to reaffirm festival, the body, death and rebirth, the erotic, the present here and

now, the love of the other, and the resources within our creative selves.

That this anticipation is itself a utopian festival in no way diminishes the reality of the vision—for, after all vision is to be striven after, though it can never be finally reached. To realize vision completely would find us with no place to go.

There are universal resources to be rediscovered in our Indian and European heritage that speak of hope, creation, love, and community. It will be our task to educate ourselves to these sources of transformation both those within our Indian/Hispanic roots and those that are to be discovered here in our new land. To bring together countertraditions from both cultures is to affirm that our sources speak in all times and places. We are the crucibles of the new incarnation of the sources. If none of us are at home in the system we have ourselves and each other once again; it is all that we have, and it is more than enough. . . .

And now we are ready, finally, to redefine, to transform our solitude. The quality of this solitude is fundamentally different from that of docile solitude; the retreat that we speak of here is temporary not permanent. It is a withdrawal into ourselves to seek the strength and creativity to return to our people to make concrete and act out the vision that was revealed to us in our solitude. This is a solitude with a transformative purpose. Our time has come not because we are on the cover of *Time* but because our period of gestation is over. Again we are called upon to be the fathers and mothers of the divine by giving birth to the divine child—our new selves—so that we shall be as gods, co-creators made in the image and likeness of God. . . .

In the final analysis the most revolutionary people in a time of breakdown will be those persons who can create new relationships among strangers. Whoever shares with Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, or Cubans a consciousness of wanting to build a society in the service of others—these people too will belong to *La Raza*, *Boricua* and *el Pueblo*. In this way the original meaning of such phrases will have been transformed.

This is a forgotten but now revived part of the original American Dream, as set down by Thomas Paine. It was sung again by Walt Whitman, and this teacher about men and women

and societies renews its life, drawing on Octavio Paz and Ralph Ellison. Another expression was by Frantz Fanon in the closing pages of *The Wretched of the Earth*. Visions are fated to expand but then contract in human associations. The time for another great expansion has arrived, and it is salutary that its lyric expression now comes from those who, from personal experience, have sensed its need and occasion before a great many of the rest of us.

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Gary Zukav's *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (William Morrow, 1979) is not a book we feel able to "review," yet its content is such that we want to tell a little about it. It is an "explanation" of quantum mechanics without any math, something we and others have thought to be impossible. Zukav succeeds. Possible readers of it are due an explanation of the title, which made us suppose for a time that it was about dervishes who whirl in circles. Wu Li (pronounced Woo Lee), a Chinese teacher of T'ai Chi told the author, means "Patterns of Organic Energy," and that Zukav decided, was the best definition of physics he could hope to find, so he took it for his title, adding "Dancing" because the particles (or waves) are always snaking or jumping around. The "Masters," the physicists, are the people who started studying physics before the rest of us.

There is a lot of repetition in this book, necessary and useful. You at least know what the author intends to say, even though it takes a while to understand him. For a sample of his prose there is this, from the middle of the book:

We have come a long way from Galileo's experiments with falling bodies. Each step along the path has taken us to a higher level of abstraction: first to the creation of things that no one has ever seen (like electrons), and then to the abandonment of all attempts even to picture our abstractions.

The problem is, however, that human nature being what it is, we do not stop trying to picture these abstractions. We keep asking "What are these abstractions of?", and then we try to visualize whatever that is. . . . We gave up our old picture of

the (Bohr) atom so easily because we assumed that it would be replaced by one more meaningful, but equally as lucid. Now it develops that our replacement picture is not a picture at all, but an unvisualizable abstraction. This is uncomfortable because it reminds us that atoms were never "real" things anyway. Atoms are hypothetical entities constructed to make experimental observations intelligible. No one, not one person, has ever seen an atom. Yet we are so used to the *idea* that an atom is a thing that we forget that it is an idea. Now we are told that not only is an atom an idea, it is an idea that we cannot even picture.

Well, Mr. Zukav can't picture it but he does rather well in exposing its anatomy by other means. He invents fables, recalls myths, and finds metaphors that may be better than pictures because they are less "concrete." Finally, some physicists think highly of his book.

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The last in the series of five books on Freedom by Krishna Chaitanya has arrived from its Indian publisher, Manohar (2 Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi 110002, India, 175 Rupees). The title is *Freedom and Transcendence*, with content that is in some ways a contrapuntal harmony combining the recent "break-throughs" in Western science and thought with the themes of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Upanishads*. The series began years ago with *The Physics and Chemistry of Freedom*, followed in succession by *The Biology of Freedom*, *The Psychology of Freedom*, *The Sociology of Freedom*, and now concluding with *Freedom and Transcendence*. The author says in his first chapter:

We exist, in the truest sense of the term, only when we live striving to realise our values which stem from our nature and from the nature of the world from which we have evolved. But the existentially indifferent Cartesian statement [We exist, but in what mode do we exist?] became, for a long while, the ideal of science. It expelled values like beauty from the world, a minor offence of course when it had already expelled the psyche which could meaningfully explain that beauty. . . .

[During the past years of this century] science has been emancipating itself from scientism and moving closer to the humanities and value-recognition; old intuitions are again becoming acceptable. Plato equated the true, the beautiful and the good. The Vedic poets of India, similarly, felt that the world was an ordered system which was good since it helped the survival and growth of life and created beauty too as an autonomous value. "Firm-seated are the foundations of Eternal Law. In its lovely form are many splendid beauties. By Eternal Law they give us long-lasting nurture. By Eternal Law have the worlds entered the universal order." This need no longer be considered as mere sentimental poetry.

This book is another instance of the coming together of East and West.

COMMENTARY US CONCEPTUALISTS

How do we define the world around us? The answer seems clear from the sample of thinking given by Gary Zukav in the next column. We define it in terms of what we see, hear, or are told about it. That is to say, all that we know of the world is what it excites in our states of consciousness.

This makes it seem that the solipsists—the "philosophers" who say that "the self knows and can know nothing but its own modifications and states"—are right. But this is ridiculous! Not even the solipsists really believe it, because they are continually encountering the "otherness" of the world. They only define their experiences in terms of the stimuli to consciousness, and these experiences by no means accurately represent what is experienced. Every time anyone makes a mistake, and admits it, he demonstrates the otherness of the world.

We can say, then, that we have only limited access to the world. If this is the case, then the meaning of an obscure statement by Leibniz becomes clear. In saying that the soul has no "windows," he meant that we don't look out on the world, but see its partial reflection in ourselves, in our states of consciousness.

Something else is clarified: the Kabalistic or Hermetic claim that the human being is a microcosm of the world, the macrocosm. We have in ourselves, in our minds or library of consciousness, a spectrum of awareness corresponding to all the facets of the world. This means that we can either be deluded by, or actually know, the world, in and through ourselves. What do we call the delusions? We call them concepts, since concepts are not the world but only generalizations of our perceptions of it. Our minds, then, as the sum of our concepts, constitute a sphere intermediate between ourselves and the world. The most important thing about concepts is that they are

subject to improvement. They are also subject to dissolution. Definitions go out the window when we meet and join with the "thing-in-itself." They are replaced by the act of being what we know. Kant said this was impossible, but Kant, for all his acuity, was a Newtonian thinker. He thought we had no access in ourselves to "reality." So he said that definitions depend on the categories of time, space, and causality. He was of course right. But perceiving by becoming abolishes perception. Then we are *what* we know. And then the Kabalists are shown to be right.

This is the substance of the Zen argument against thinking. It stands in the way of becoming. It does indeed. Yet thinking is the only ladder we have for developing theories of becoming. The Zen masters seem to leave this out of their denunciations of concepts. Kill the Buddha, they say, meaning that the artificiality of our conceptions of the Buddha must go before we are able to become the Buddha. And they, too, are right.

But this is a shocking impatience with a quite normal state of human development. You can't kick over the ladder until you get to the top. It is also ruthlessly unkind, since most people feel that they *are* their concepts and are hurt when the theoretical ideal of the Buddha or Christ is mocked in this way. Nietzsche did the same thing for the West in declaring that "God is dead." On the other hand, maybe we need a few shocks! The issue is pedagogical.

CHILDREN ... and Ourselves ON ENVIRONMENTS

IN *Time and Art of Living* (Harper & Row, 1982, \$14.95) Robert Grudin, who teaches English at the University of Oregon, makes this report:

A well-known author was once asked to talk to a group of grammar school children about the art of writing. Instead of speaking to them about inspiration, self-discipline, esthetic theory and other abstractions he concentrated surprisingly on the physical aspects of his work. Simply but with much detail he described his study, its lighting, his desk; he showed them the pads and pencils he used; he spoke of when and for how long he did his writing each day. The children were fascinated. In all likelihood they had never before been offered such a vivid connection between their own and the adult world. What the author had done was appeal to their own universal and instinctive delight for the materials of work. He knew their own implements—the pads, fresh blackboards, pristine boxed chalk and delectable white paste were wonderful to the children not only in themselves but as the immediate vehicles of expression and achievement. He was aware of this because, as an independent writer, free to organize his own time and space, he was still susceptible to the same wonder and delight. But for most of us others, this is mere nostalgia.

This is one of Prof. Grudin's pleasanter comments, which seem mostly directed at the follies and bad habits of mankind. Is he, the reader feels prompted to ask, some sort of Olympian become perfect in all ways, since his remarks are so unerring? Yet, like the Stoic disdain for the ways of the world, the comment is valuable. He continues the above:

Our working environments, which exert compelling influences on our performance, are foisted on us by corporate purveyors whose imaginations do not extend beyond the common denominators of drudgery. When budgets allow, they are decked out with carpets, random padding and generally useless space. We treat them much the way taxi drivers treat their cabs. Whenever possible, we ignore them; and, in that this voluntary oblivion constitutes a loss of touch with our environment, it is worse for us than

positive distaste. . . . Add to this the commutation, the allegedly refreshing "breaks," the epidemic proliferation of media, the increasingly large number of things which each year we are told that we ought to do, enjoy, fear or possess, and our general ignorance of the value of open time, and you will no longer wonder why we are lazy, distressed and unproductive, both as individuals and as nations.

Speaking of writers, the ones we like to read seem able to create their own environment—that is, what they write has the power to surround what they say with the native atmosphere of their minds, making the reader feel that he is visiting a good place. Thoreau is perhaps best at doing this. He comes in like a brisk breeze or a strong wind which blows away the trivia, making room for his health and even his wealth. It is difficult to read "Life Without Principle" without feeling that you have been for a swim in a mountain lake, cold but invigorating. Ortega, in another way, less sublime but equally engaging, does the same thing. After a while you begin to feel a little like a Spanish grandee of the mind. Ortega is the fellow in the next chair, talking to you. You have been taken into his richly appointed mind and allowed the privileges of a respected guest.

Ortega, incidentally, has useful things to say about the environment of ideas. In *Concord and Liberty* he writes about the "history of philosophy," declaring it to be impossible. The historian gives us an account of abstract ideas gleaned from thinkers of the past, offering and inviting criticism, as though generalizing formulas could give us insight into the life's convictions of men who lived two thousands years ago. But to understand their truth, he said, we must incarnate into their lives, feel as they felt, and realize that, if they were true philosophers, what they gave expression to was for them a matter of life and death.

And Jacob Needleman, in a recent book, raises similar questions. The religions of the East, from which, nowadays, so many Westerners are picking and choosing, were born, adopted, and sustained in a very different environment from

ours. Can we borrow from those religions ad lib without paying attention to the framework of the daily life of those who, centuries or millennia ago, believed in and practiced them? Can a plant grow without the soil to which it is accustomed? Will a cutting from even the Bo tree ever bear flower and fruit if stuck in blacktop?

This brings us to a book on how to tell stories to children, by Marie Shedlock, *The Art of the Story-Teller*, first published in 1915, and by Dover in 1951. In a foreword Anne Carroll Moore tells us that Miss Shedlock was born in Boulogne in 1854 and died in London in 1935, then says: "No one who heard Marie Shedlock tell a story in English or French will ever forget the music in her voice, the quality of her diction, her inimitable gesture, the sheer magic of her presentation of a complete drama in miniature." Another teacher said: "Personally I recall Miss Shedlock's story-telling, as I recall Patti's singing, Edwin Booth's acting, and Paderewski's playing, but there is nothing with which I can compare my recollections of Marie Shedlock's winsome personality and glowing friendliness." This is introductory to a passage by Miss Shedlock on what might be called the "environment" of the story one tells—what is generated by the teller as its surrounding of feeling. She begins by speaking of the need for simplicity:

In short, the simplicity we need for the ordinary purpose is that which comes from ease and produces a sense of being able to let ourselves go, because we have thought out our effects. It is when we translate our instinct into art that the story becomes finished and complete.

I find it necessary to emphasize this point because people are apt to confuse simplicity of delivery with carelessness of utterance, loose stringing of sentences of which the only connections seem to be the ever-recurring use of "and" and "so" and "er . . .," this latter inarticulate sound having done more to ruin a story and distract the audience than many more glaring errors of dramatic form.

Real simplicity holds the audience because the lack of apparent effort in the artist has the most comforting effect upon the listener. It is like turning

from the whirring machinery of process to the finished article, which bears no traces of the making except the harmony and beauty of the whole, which make one realize that the individual parts have received all proper attention. What really brings about this apparent simplicity which insures the success of the story? It has been admirably expressed in a passage from Henry James' lecture on Balzac:

"The fault in the artist which amounts most completely to a failure of dignity is the absence of *saturation with his idea*. When saturation fails, no other real presence avails, as when, on the other hand, it operates, no failure of method fatally interferes."

The effect of saturation is to show that the story—or whatever you are telling about—is *worth* telling. Children always know when you are just "going through the motions," and of course adults do, too. A really good telling won't have any "and so forths" or "et ceteras" in it. There is a sense in which you are actually bursting with the tale.

An essential of speaking to any audience, any person, is to give evidence of respect for the listener. That counts more than anything else. Absolute geniuses may not need to "prepare," but the rest of us do, and the care we take in preparation is a sign of respect, not only for the audience, but for what one has to say. Saturation also covers a multitude of shortcomings. Miss Shedlock illustrates by telling about an inexperienced girl who was asked to tell a story to some very small children:

When she began, I felt somewhat hopeless, because of the complete failure of method. She seemed to have all the faults most damaging to the success of a speaker. Her voice was harsh, her gestures awkward, her manner was restless and melodramatic; but, as she went on I soon began to discount all these faults and, in truth, I soon forgot about them, for so absorbed was she in her story, so saturated with her subject that she quickly communicated her own interest to her audience, and the children were absolutely spellbound.

FRONTIERS Work and Leisure

THE most important product of our work is not the changing of raw materials into the TV's, houses, and hamburgers that we produce. The main reason we work is to change *ourselves*. It is *we* that want to be warmer, drier, or happier, and we work either to produce these changes directly or to indirectly make them possible. Since the way we work to provide food or shelter can at the same time contribute directly to our happiness and well-being, it seems absurd that we frequently choose work patterns that destroy skills, self-respect, security, health, and happiness.

In focusing on the external products of work and failing to consider the more important effects of work upon the worker, we have failed to recognize the essential unity of work and leisure and their true importance to our lives. Good work requires time for patience, thoroughness and quality—time for the worker to explore untried possibilities and to refine and improve familiar ones. It requires focused attention and peace of mind—free from pressures, distractions, and anxieties. Good work requires the worker to gain satisfaction from it and to grow through it. In short, leisure is necessary for good work. Similarly, leisure requires opportunity to do rewarding things; to avoid the boredom, restlessness, and lack of meaning that we associate with "free time." Quantity of work—either in number of hours spent "working," or in amount of "output"—is not an effective measure of either the inner or outer value of work. Our complex and roundabout patterns of production and thoughtless decisions of what to produce result in the seemingly efficient production of unimportant things. We spend, on an average, only about five hours a *week* in productive work. Better purpose in our work is therefore more important today than better efficiency. Producing one good car rather than many junkers, making one important scientific discovery rather than many trivial ones, or writing one good song rather than many

ordinary ones, has greater lasting effect and value. With such work we know our effort has been of more value to others as well as being more rewarding to ourselves. The quality of what we produce is no less important than the quantity.

So much of our work is related to trivial purposes, to dealing with the logistics of unnecessary institutionalization, scale, and quantification, and to secondary purposes like gaining a promotion or becoming famous or infamous that we lose the feel for what meaningful, productive work is. Stress-related diseases have become one of our society's greatest problems, but we fail to connect that with the fact that our work patterns are riddled with anxiety, tension, and stress. As a result, we fail to deal with the basic considerations of security of work and income, and the freedom of pace, purpose and process necessary for peace of mind and good work. Work has become so disconnected from its rewards by how we approach and organize it that we only think of completing it and being free to seek reward in other activities. We have become, as Alan Watts might say, like singers whose only concern is to get to the end of the song. We have lost sight that the joy is in the singing.

Making our work a continuous process of absorbing and rewarding action involves different changes for each of us. Reducing our wants, and thus the income and work we need to produce, can give us the elbow room necessary to evolve secure and rewarding work patterns, free our time from distracting consumption patterns, and to find satisfaction in work itself rather than in secondary products it might provide. Providing for our own needs, or producing and exchanging things directly within our local communities can shift our work to the more tangible benefits of direct production instead of the abstract, fragmented, paperwork-burdened work of institutionalized production.

In our work itself, we need to see what parts are rewarding, what parts are productive, and what parts are not. What does the work produce

in us—growth or frustration, anxiety or satisfaction? And how? What is the value of its external product? Almost all work can be done in ways that broaden busy work and work that is merely mindless and repetitive. The mindless is not necessarily bad. We usually try to pass on to someone else the routine parts of a job, seeking for ourselves the parts of work that are exciting and creative and require our fullest attention. Both kinds of work, however, are important and necessary to us. If properly approached, the mindless parts of a job provide us a wonderful opportunity to draw upon our unconscious and intuitive dimensions while focused on a particular job. They help us meld our hands and minds into one seamless, unified flow. Whether typing or washing dishes or laying bricks, "mindless" work rests our conscious processes, opens our receptivity, allows problems to stew and work in our unconscious, and simultaneously restores and strengthens the unity of our selves and our actions that conscious processes destroy.

Equally important are changes in our attitudes. We need to realize that we can never accomplish all our dreams. Our dreams expand as fast as our accomplishments and stay always tantalizingly out of reach. We should look instead at what we *are* doing, and do it well for its own reward, rather than racing from one thing to another, and leaving each thing poorly done and ourselves in a dither from our haste. We need also to realize that someone else will eventually get done what we don't accomplish. And there may be more important things in life than achievement.

Knowing that we can never finish all of what we dream gives the peace to explore the limitless perfections and possibilities that lie in each thing we do. We can understand and rejoice in the extravagance of a nature that produces the perfect wonder of hummingbirds and wildflowers and snowflakes, and waves breaking on a beach, and put the same wonder into all that we do. Knowing that we can't do everything helps us

develop a bullseye intuition to sense where our effort will have most effect and give the greatest rewards. Our whole sense of accomplishment becomes transformed, as well as what we *do* accomplish.

True leisure requires us to be at peace and at rest with ourselves and our world. So does good work. It involves a deep acceptance and love of all parts of life, and brings a particular relaxedness, freshness, and readiness to work which cannot be confused with the tense activity of most of our familiar work. Leisure is a mental and spiritual attitude, not merely the existence of time left over after work. It means not pushing things but letting them happen. It is, as Joseph Pieper says, a receptive attitude of mind—not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation. Work performed from leisure is renewing and revitalizing. It touches and draws upon life-giving powers, and opens a path of effortless action that lies far beyond the conditions of work that we have set for ourselves today.

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