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# SOMEWHERE ARE SEEDS

IF, now and then, you dip into what seems the best of contemporary thinking, you may get the impression that a far-reaching alteration in feeling and attitude is hastening toward some sort of climax. The interests of humans are changing; the focus, now, is on the connections between things—which is to say their *meanings*—and not on the things themselves. It follows that the charged term in present discourse is the metaphor—the partial discloser of meanings once hidden or unknown. To say that one thing is like another is to grasp after meaning, connection, order. Poetry seeks meaning in living flow, while prose is the language of static exactitude, requiring a fixed vocabulary. Precise description of things is in the end tiring and barren. It is doubtless a necessary function, but concerns only the things done, finished, belonging to the past. It tells what is secure for standing still but gives no directions for future movement.

There are of course analogues among finished things having to do with direction-finding: the compass for example. The compass is handy for locating more things to see, define, and catalog. But human action has another dimension involving only secondarily the how of our travels. *Why* should we go in one direction and not another? This philosophical question requires reference to a range of meanings.

So, today, as confidence and complacency go into precipitous decline, there is insistent attraction to philosophical mysteries. What, we wonder, is the world really like? What are we doing here? How can we make sense out of our lives?

The important metaphors relate to this inquiry. All the professions, all the high specialist callings, seem to be turning—in the persons of their most distinguished representatives—to this wondering about the meaning of human life. And because professionals and specialists are practical men, required to do things that *work*, they have the habit of taking whatever they do quite seriously. They do not belong to the caste of thinkers who, by academic tradition, are allowed to be either learnedly frivolous or grandly irresponsible because, after all, their tenured work will find no testing ground of practice.

The architect is a natural candidate for combining the practical with the ideal. The architect designs and erects dwellings, places where humans live and act. Yet his calling is saturated with symbolic modes. Monuments reach after the timeless while serving earthly purposes. So, as we might expect, the thinking of architects, when they feel pressed to wonder about the meaning of human life, is likely to bear fruit. In the 1975-76 (double) issue of the *Structurist*, a magazine concerned with meanings in art (published at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada), Alfred Caldwell concludes a richly provocative discussion, "Structure in Time and Space," by saying:

> The world is like a dream in which all the tragedies of mankind are in reality only the illusions of nightmares. For man himself makes every possibility, and also every collapse. To repeat: man even makes nature, the idea of the Universe the idea of time and space. And man makes hope. There is hope to the last charge. There is hope at the 59th minute of the 11th hour. There is no hope in the stars—not one electron is worth. There is only hope in the *soul* of man. There is hope, delicate hoofed, to stand against eternity, stare down the sun, and leap from crag to crag, and so go past imploring chaos.

Mr. Caldwell is speaking of matters which are beyond definition, yet they are understood. The understanding may be haunted by obscurity, elusive in substance, yet so real that we cling to it

as to life itself. Hence the value of metaphor, which is all we have to satiate those crucial and cruel hunger which are never satisfied—which come to us as the tangle of longings some have called Promethean unrest. This is not the language of *Homo faber,* but the speech—if for us only a kindergarten and first-reader version—of the gods. It supplies our beginners' vocabulary for saying what little we can about the ranges of human becoming. What sort of place is the world of our becoming? It is a place where the moments of time gather in the bosom of eternity, and where some modes of becoming lead on to others, while some invite premature darkness and night:

> After all it is only for existence with its rounds and occupations. The ship moves in the fog keeping close to the shore. The mother loves the child; the lovers, each other The farmer plows the field; the plowshare glistens, while the slow earth ripples up like waves. The brick-layer lays the brick, tapped to the line with a click of the trowel. The carpenter planes the board; the lisp of the plane, the knife set meticulously to the grain. The plane understands the board, and the board understands the plane. The judge of horses places his hand on the horse, on the quiver of the neck; and something passes between the man and the horse, and the horse and the man. It is not Utopia. For Utopia ends in monsters, war, concentration camps, ant society a leper colony. What passes is merely the tact of existence—earnest, spontaneous, going about its business, sufficient to itself, as nature, as the hawk high in the summer sky, suspended, wheeling, wings unmoving.

But what *is* the business of existence, including ours? The question is banal. It violates the poetry, invading the melodic line with a discord of prose. Yet the answer is somehow there, in the whole composition—there, but safely in cipher. A poem is not a formula but a species of magic—archetypal, perhaps—a finite resonance of a timeless vibration that has hope of endlessness only from the hearing seated in regenerating minds. To strain one's ears is better than asking questions. To make a poem is better than compiling irrefutable proofs of mortality. This is one secret the artist has learned, which makes him kin or child of the philosopher.

> What Gods would have guessed that the little particle of knowledge about the Universe—that trifle called science—would prove too much, and so send man hurtling to death and doom? Courageous man with stars and aeons spinning in his brain; touching and comic man, with tears and laughter done; involved and subtle man, cornered in dread circumstance of war and armageddon; hopeful man soaring in the air, brought down, felled like a tree, enduring man, broken like a mountain, cleft to the core, shattered and weathering to sands and drifts past all semblance; happy man, by himself betrayed; creating man, singing Shiva man of colors nailed to the mast, of engines and towers in the sun—with finally not even a requiem by the brown red mound of the turbine's rust; immortal man, a skeleton unhinged, bleached and helter skelter—and none to mourn him for the grandeur that was he; and none to mourn him, returned to earth's ancestral substance. Not the wind or the sea bird's cry.
>
> Or else—even now somewhere secret seeds are scattered and man begins anew.

The human condition is not really different from the condition of the world. The human condition is enwrapped in ceaselessly intruding mortality—visible to all; what is not visible is the eternal rebirth. To see the human condition and to grasp and fulfill it; to know it—the poets seem to say—is to transcend it. But the only foretaste of transcendence that we have while mortared into the world by our mortality is this longing which makes us know without doubt what the poet is declaring. Alas, it is not enough.

Yet we are invited only to admit and accept that we live in a universe of life. Death and decline are processes of life. Their meaning lies in their services to life. Mr. Caldwell speaks of "the corruptibility of societies, their overwhelming tendency to be subverted":

> Only when that reality becomes evident is it possible to explain the incorrigible inconsistencies of affairs and civilizations. Every civilization is a house divided against itself. For mankind is two mankinds, juxtaposed and intertwined in a bewildering complexity, which is life. Scientific problems are in themselves always dear, for they deal with exactitudes. Technological questions are child's play. It is only life which is unclear. That is why it is life

> which requires art. The stars require nothing. Life is unclear because it is a combination of what we call good and bad—or more properly stated: Creation and Destruction, Shiva and Durga. So it is only life which is important, and nothing else matters. It is only life which is ever great enough to be tragic.

What are the themes expressed here? They are the windings through time of the threads of eternity called consciousness—Mr. Caldwell calls them souls—penetrating all the layered alterations of existence. What can we do with such ideas? Nothing, absolutely nothing—or, perhaps, everything. Here is an example of what Hannah Arendt, speaking of Sorrates, named "resultless thinking." It has no object but the contemplation of meaning. It will build no houses, capture no markets, win no wars. It is a way, poetically, of uniting the timeless with the finite; the infinite with the moment, the now. It is also the highest art—the use of man's capacities as act of celebration and devotion—above, as we say, the battle. This is art which prevents the world we make from turning into a routinely profaned place, a hell of concerted misunderstanding. It is art of which it is justifiable to say:

> Art is the expression of man as the Universe, or said in the more usual word, man as nature, and that nature is what we mean when we say the nature of things. No society can ever exist without man. This nature of man is just as mysterious and just as terrible as the nature of time and space, of mass and energy. Precisely as our perceptual equipment cannot comprehend the final nature of the Universe, so is man really incomprehensible—and to ourselves, poor creatures. Always the ultimate cause behind cause remains unanswered.
>
> Just as the Space-Time-Mass-Energy continuum is the structure of the Universe, so art, we may say, is the structure of man. Man makes everything. Man himself has made man; he has superseded genetics. Man is no animal, one to die in the field with a few moans. Man is creator, palpably absurd as he is, and he dies as creator. For man himself is a work of art, a centrifugal cosmos.

There is a part of us that responds gladly to this sort of writing. What, precisely, is Mr. Caldwell talking about? He is not discoursing about things, but reproducing certain of the rhythms and continuities which may be discerned in living processes. He is therefore considering "reality," but not a reality you can touch, taste, or rub shoulders with. He is talking about what is there, will always remain there, no matter what happens or who comes and goes. He is exhibiting the constancies in a world of continual change. We feel a spontaneous kinship with what he says—and, let us note, his language is metaphysical: beyond the physical. Our human reality is beyond the physical, however much our physical existence is involved in and dependent upon material things.

There is formal metaphysical language—the kind of language used by the schoolmen—and there is spontaneous metaphysical language in which poets are at home. Poets, being makers, create this language as they go along. It is harder to follow than the formal language for the reason that it is in continual evolution by the poet. The reader must share in the daring and invention of the poet; like the writer, he must go out on some limb of his own in order to understand the poet. There is always this hazard in the use of poetic language; and, for the reader, the hazard that the poet may be lost in some box canyon of egoism and self-intoxication. (See the essays of Joyce Carol Oates and Wendell Berry.)

But relying on formal metaphysics also has its hazards. The need to make it one's own may not be obvious or compelling. The possibility of drifting along in some current of group opinion is always a danger. And systems of metaphysical thought, having a social character, can become corrupt and deceive an entire population. Yet both the poetic and the formal metaphysics are indispensable tools for thinking about the higher reality accessible to human thought: the meaning expressed by structure of the world.

Art is metaphysics embedded in visual metaphor. For the artist is always making declarations about the world. Art, as Mr. Caldwell says, is communication; and if its content

is less than sublime, it suffers an inner decay. Mr. Caldwell believes that we are reaching the nadir of a decline in the making of art in our society—and except for those like himself who are setting going currents in the opposite direction, he seems completely right. He makes this commentary:

> The popular notion of art as impracticality may be a part at least of what is wrong. In a word, why, notwithstanding vast national heavings and sighings—and all those billions of dollars—there is very little genuine art actually produced. That there is very little is obvious fact that no literate person should deny, and probably few do. . . .
>
> Today the artist can do just about anything he pleases. That is why a new art can be invented every Monday morning. Incompetence is so easily disguised by novelty. The greatest personal shortcoming can masquerade as a flair for originality. We are presented on every hand with the plainest absurdities, and always dressed up as something new—let us say, at random, a simulated pool table on a hundred acre field, or say, where the artist merely stands in the exhibit hall and he himself is the work of art.
>
> The old sense of the work of art as saying something—a message if you will—becomes every day less and less. The message is that there is no message. It is the point of total silence, and therefore of total nihilism, at the bottom of an abyss where there is terrifyingly nothing, nothing at all, to say. It is zero communication. A catalogue of a group of painters doesn't talk about the meaning of the paintings. It discusses perhaps the personality of the painter and his claim to originality. The uncomfortable truth is that, without a special talent for self-deception, many times it is almost impossible to read any meaning at all into the paintings. The painter is playing a game of solitaire. Far worse, it is a game where the rules are made up as the game progresses. Every player wins. Walt Whitman said: "To have great poets, there must be great audiences too."

This is an account of art in our time—a very bad time for art. And what is bad for art is bad for man. Have there been no good times that we can recall? Mr. Caldwell has several epochs to offer as examples of times when art was worthy, often great:

> Jacob Burckhardt pointed out the difference between Athens and modern times. Life itself was clear. People had something to say to each other and said it. Burckhardt added: "There was room for the subtlest allusions as well as the crassest wit. There was no Philistia in shirt sleeves one day, and flashy social functions the next. Athens has no tedious pages." To paraphrase—there was no public relations build-up of cocktail parties, that is, none of what the redoubtable H. L. Mencken somewhere called the technique of "boob-bumping."

When people begin to see these things, and put them as clearly as Mr. Caldwell does, a certain defiance of the omnipresent decline is on the way. Not very many such expressions are needed to change the current of the stream. The pain of all this fraud and pretense is often enough to stir revolt. With the pain comes hunger, and after the hunger comes act.

What sort of act? Act within the framework of a new sense of proportion, a deep instinct or intuition of the fitness of things. Simplicities are no longer thought of as a peasant-like affront to sophisticated intelligence, but have the same longed-for quality as a drink of cold water from a mountain spring. The classical balances emerge once more as the rule of life. It takes times, of course, and some endurance of laughter and mockery. But the health that is in simple things—"the lisp of the plane; the knife set meticulously to the grain"—is recognized as the earthly presence of a higher harmony. What lies behind simplicity and natural beauty is seldom spoken of openly by those who find their way to these things, because of an innate taste for what is right and good. The taste is in us all, but is deadened or has suffered a perversion. And after the pain there come explicit warnings to avoid extravagant speech about mysteries—something to be attempted only by those impelled by mantic inspiration, the ones who *have* to speak. Lifetimes of preparation are needed to speak well on such subjects. There must be maturity in innocence—a stage of development we know hardly anything about.

Confucius may have reached it.

The Master said,
"At fifteen I had my mind bent on learning.
"At thirty, I stood firm.
"At forty, I had no doubts.
"At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven.
"At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth.
"At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right."

Walter Lippman, who quotes this in his *Preface to Morals,* remarks that "to follow what the heart desires without coming into collision with the stubborn facts of life is the privilege of the utterly innocent and of the utterly wise." In between is the human condition.

Interestingly, Mr. Caldwell has an artist's version of this wisdom:

> Hokusai, the greatest and the most original of the Japanese print artists, outlined his life:
>
> "Since the age of six I have painted a great variety of objects. At so I had already published a prodigious series of drawings. Yet all I had produced before I was 70 is unimportant. At 73 I began to understand nature, the animals, the grass, the trees, the birds, fishes and insects. At 80 I will have made further progress, and at 90 I will have penetrated into the secret of things. At 100 I shall be even better, and at 110 point and line will come to life." Signed—Hokusai, "the Old Man Foolishly Enamoured of Drawing."

More than patient waiting played a part in the contentment of these men of the East. Their patience was no mere waiting; rather, it was the felt certainty that, "even now, somewhere, secret seeds are scattered and man begins anew."

# *REVIEW*
## A VOICE THAT CARRIES

IT may be a poor start for notice of *The Power of the People* (Peace Press, Culver City, Calif., $15.00), by Robert Cooney and Helen Michalowski, to say that it would make a fine coffee-table book, but having this pictorial story of the American struggle to end war around where people will see and look at it might be its best possible use. In the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, the writer of the entry under Conscientious Objection said that the list of conscientious objectors "includes most of the intellectual and moral innovators in history." If you look through the pages of *The Power of the People*, verification of this claim becomes vivid.

But the title, we think, might be changed. The book would be more accurately called "The Power of a *Few* People." Conscientious objectors and real pacifists have always been few. This book, you could say, is a fine vindication of what they attempt, since it shows how much handfuls of determined people can accomplish. The faces of these few are worth looking at. You see their bodies, too, sometimes the cushion for police blows, sometimes the symbol of calm, unshakeable determination, as in the case of Dorothy Day, sitting on a little stool on a farm worker strike line in California in 1973, waiting to be arrested. You see this small lady sitting there, quietly—you see her through a narrow opening defined by brawny sheriffs' bodies, police sticks, and hand guns.

The book begins, appropriately enough, with Chief Seattle's speech in 1854, when the Suquamish tribal lands were transferred to the federal government. The ground of all peace-making is the sanctity of life, and Seattle understood this far better than the white men he addressed. He spoke of the sweet smell of the air, of the haven of the land, and of the white man who "treats his mother the earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads."

How does one make the words of such a man reverberate across decades and centuries until they become truth triumphant?

> There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the unfurling of leaves in spring or the rustle of insects' wings. But perhaps it is because I am a savage and do not understand. The clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lonely cry of the whippoorwill or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night? . . . .
>
> So we will consider your offer to buy our land. If we decide to accept, I will make one condition: The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers.
>
> I am a savage and do not understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie, left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage and I do not understand how the smoking iron horse can be more important than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive.
>
> What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected. . . .
>
> Teach your children what we have taught our children that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of earth. If men spit upon the ground they spit upon themselves.
>
> This we know. The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. . . .
>
> Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see.

There are a thousand ways to say such things, and when a man of peace does not repeat them in the vernacular of his time or place, his voice does not carry.

The story of the peace movement in America begins in the seventeenth century in New England. It had a religious inspiration, yet the insistence on

behaving without harm to others was at once social. The Quakers were leaders in the early peace groups, who in the nineteenth century saw the close connection between peace and freedom—specifically, that there could be no peace while men of another color were bought and sold like beads or sheep. To reject violence and killing is to take a position where one sees more dearly in all directions.

The text of the book on this is fine, and it is good to look at the faces of men like William Lloyd Garrison and Henry David Thoreau. And then, a little later, to read about and see some heroic women—the Grimké sisters, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott. The rise of the modern State and the acquisitive society during the nineteenth century made the practical circumstances of the peace movement, while the Civil War, which introduced conscription, shaped the forms of opposition to war.

While the traditional peace churches—Friends, Brethren, Mennonites, and a few smaller groups—continue in their resistance to military service in the present, a more broadly based moral, philosophical, and social rejection of war came into being during World War I with the Anti-Conscription League and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. These groups, along with some others, were formed mainly by extraordinary women—reformers, feminists, and peace advocates. Jane Addams was the most famous. Two others were Tracy Mygatt and Frances Witherspoon who, with John Haynes Holmes and Jessie Wallace Hughan, founded the War Registers League in 1923. This non-sectarian association was needed because the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Christian pacifist organization, "could not relate to nonreligious COs." Another strong current of influence which shaped the thinking of war objectors in those days was the example of Eugene Debs, the Socialist leader who opposed the draft for World War I and was imprisoned until President Harding pardoned him in 1921.

During the first quarter of this century the links between peace and social justice became increasingly evident, so that the book broadens out to include the women's suffrage movement and the labor movement. After the first world war was over, the no-compromise peace groups—made up of people who would refuse to support any war—settled down to work steadily toward the day when there would be no war. "This is the time," Jessie Hughan said, "for us to work fast, not when the war comes." It was a time when Albert Einstein supported conscientious objection, and when, in England, the Peace Pledge Union started out with a hundred thousand people pledging they would support no war.

With the coming of World War II, the peace movement was sorely tested. While the core of serious pacifists held firm in their position, the crimes of the Nazis and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor were enough to persuade a great many that this war was "different."

> If any war could be called a "Just War," then World War II seemed it. The pacifist community, recognizing the threat of fascism long before the U.S. government, had protested the persecution of the Jews at a time when the Roosevelt government feigned ignorance of its happening. Much of the early anti-Hitlerism was later called "premature anti-Nazism." Many pacifists, even absolutists like Evan Thomas, recognized the moral dilemma that pacifism presented against a regime like that of Hitler. Speaking of his friends who abandoned non-violence to fight fascism in Europe, Thomas wrote, "Emotionally, I can understand fully why they did this, and I have felt myself that evil such as Hitler represents must be resisted." But how? Thomas asked. "Following the last war," he continued, "I saw enough actual discrimination and brutality in this country to realize that people like Hitler were not unique. I had to make up my mind at that time what I considered to be the best form of resistance to that sort of thing. . . . I came to the conclusion . . . that violence is no answer to tyranny, exploitation or brutality."

We are up to the beginning of World War II and not even half way through the book. The rest of its pages are devoted to events which many living persons will remember—the C.O. camps established by the government and run by the peace churches, what happened to C.O.'s who accepted alternative civilian service and to those who didn't, what the men in prison accomplished for prison reform—and the change in the peace movement as a result of the atom-bombing of Hiroshima. Finally, in conclusion, there is the story of the massive opposition to the war in Vietnam. (The address of Peace Press is 3828 Willat Ave., Culver City, Calif. 90230.)

An example of how other movements for freedom and justice grew naturally out of or were closely associated with the peace movement is available in a book just restored to print, *Jailed for Freedom* (Schocken paperback, 86.95), written by Doris Stevens in 1920. The introduction, by Janice Trecker, to this account of the American Suffragist (votes for women) movement begins:

> Between June 1917 and the spring of 1919, over five hundred women were arrested for carrying banners demanding the right to vote. Almost one hundred and seventy of these women served prison sentences, and they, along with their colleagues who escaped imprisonment, were attacked by mobs, subjected to official harassment and vilified in the press . . . women were brought out of the infamous Occoquan Workhouse half dead of starvation, they were force fed, beaten and subjected to all sorts of physical neglect and psychological pressures for "obstructing traffic" and "blocking sidewalks." Their sentences for these trifling crimes ran as high as seven months. At the same time, no charges were ever filed against members of the mobs who attacked the suffragists, destroyed their banners and broke up their marches.

# *COMMENTARY*

## LIFE AND TIME

PUTTING the fact, as said, that North Americans watch television "an average of six hours per day" together with Thoreau's judgment that "the mind can be profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things," leaving only the senses of children unprofaned, the editor of the *Structurist* (see page 1) asks some pertinent questions:

> How are our sensibilities, and especially those of the young who are weaned on television and are the "children" if our technological age, being affected? Is our visual perception of space, color, light and form undergoing resulting transformations? How do the homogenizing tendencies of our electronic culture affect art itself, not only its creation and future development, but all of the institutions concerned with the education, preservation and promotion of art? What has happened to the aesthetic education of man which Schiller and others saw as our fundamental need and hope? Is the conception of art as liberator of our imaginative and creative powers rapidly disappearing? Is the role of the artist as seer who broadens our vision and helps us see and feel reality more deeply being threatened? If, indeed, our sensibilities are being brutalized, and if the survival of art depends upon the education of our vision, how can our children to whom we must look for any future renewal, develop and preserve an "unprofaned" awareness?

That is one set of conditions, man-made, affecting our powers of awareness and perception. Other conditions, provided by nature, can hardly be altered, but only recognized and understood. Alfred Caldwell speaks of them in his article:

> Man's perception of time, his consciousness of time's passing—which is the most inexplicable, elusive and awesome phenomenon of our existence—his awareness of his own aging, the aging of his culture, and the entire universe is a capacity unique to man alone. The pre-eminent consciousness of the texture of time covers our lives like a mantle from birth to death. . . . Time alone sifts, selects and discards, confirms or perpetuates all values. . . . The cultivation of great audiences which great art is said to require is contrary to Cézanne's statement that "Art only addresses itself to an excessively small number of individuals." Certain kinds of art can not be recognized instantaneously because of culture lag and looking without seeing, unbelievable in retrospect, can easily prevail. Through the passage of time all human perceptions are modified—maturing or enlarging through reflection or experience—so that encounters with the same art at different times result in different reactions. Such changes are sometimes mistakenly attributed to the work whereas time itself continually alters our vision.

# CHILDREN
## . . . and Ourselves
### DUTY WITHOUT MENTIONING IT

THE issue of "moralizing" is one that continually haunts educational undertakings. Should it be done? If so, how? Can we do without moralizing? One answer might be: Good teachers manage without it, doing something else which makes it unnecessary.

We found a passage on this question in William Butler Yeats' introduction to *Gitanjali*, a book of poems by Tagore, first published (by Macmillan) in 1912. While visiting in India, Yeats talked to a museum curator about Tagore's work and Indian literature in general. As a way of explaining the youthful flowering of Tagore's rare abilities the curator said: "When Rabindranath was a boy he had all around him in his home literature and music." Yeats relates:

> I thought of the abundance, of the simplicity of the poems, and said, "In your country is there much propagandist writing, much criticism? We have to do so much, especially in my own country, that our minds gradually cease to be creative, and yet we cannot help it. If our life was not a continual warfare, we would not have taste, we would not know what is good, we would not find hearers and readers. Four-fifths of our energy is spent in a quarrel with bad taste, whether in our own minds or in the minds of others." "I understand," he replied, "we too have our propagandist writing. In the villages they recite long mythological poems adapted from the Sanskrit in the Middle Ages, and they often insert passages telling the people that they must do their duties."

While Yeats does not comment, this illustration of "propaganda" may have sounded odd to him. In what sort of society would it seem not necessary, and an intrusion, to tell people to do their duty?

In the West, today, we have countless authors who define and press various duties upon us. We have, it must be supposed, no instinct for duty at all. What role has the idea of "duty" for human beings? Duty stands for fulfillment, but it seems to be called "duty" only when we neglect what needs to be done. Duty is that part of fulfillment that for most people doesn't come naturally. The man who performs spontaneously whatever needs to be done by him—who fulfills all his obligations, although, for him, they are not "obligations" but the natural flow of his life—might have difficulty in understanding our meaning of duty.

In the fabulous "good society" of our dreams no one would moralize. No one would tell others what their "duty" is. No one would need to.

But we don't have a good society. All sorts of confusing notions result from assuming our society is a unity. Ortega's definition is probably the one we should use:

> So-called "society" is never what the name promises. It is always at the same time, to one or another degree, *dissociety*, repulsion between individuals. Since on the other hand it claims to be the opposite, we must radically open ourselves to the conviction that society is a reality that is *constitutively* sick, defective—strictly, it is a never-ending struggle between its genuinely social elements and behaviors and its dissociative elements and behaviors.

If we start with this idea, instead of finally reaching it in chagrin and frustration, we may be able to think clearly about moralizing. After all, some of our most admired writers have been essentially moralists—Tolstoy, for example. Tolstoy made moralizing into a majestic art, but it was still moralizing.

Would it be fair to make a distinction between Dostoevski and Tolstoy, to say that Tolstoy makes you feel the pressure of his moral sense, but that Dostoevski helps you to feel the inclination of your own?

Moralists are proclaimers of the moral ought—we all do it to some degree; and some do it better than others. Most people would probably say that we'll need moralists until the day when all humans are spontaneously wise and good. But most of the time, we don't like being moralized at. Some native right is taken from us when we are told what we ought to do. Yet if you look at the messes in the world, it appears evident that

*somebody* has to speak of these things. Somebody needs to make propaganda for righteousness. The thick-skinned people only hear when you shout at them to get them to see what their lives are leaving out, and how much this is hurting others.

What else can you do? Can it be wrong to drive such moral points home?

Well, there are those—a very few, yet they exist—who have become convinced that there is very little lasting return from going about telling other people what to do. Anyway, who really knows enough to say what other people ought to do? Only the grossest sort of offenses can be clearly identified and made punishable by law. It is not by chance that the best societies rely very little on elaborate legal systems.

Who are the best reformers? The really successful ones are people who involve others in positive projects which transform duties into part of the natural flow of life. A duty, actually, is never perfectly performed until it is no longer an "ought" but something that comes naturally. Only then, you could say, is society no longer "sick."

But this requires the spread of moral genius. It does indeed. Meanwhile, there are the arts, those wonderful halfway houses between Utopia and the way things are now.

Consider, for one thing, the enormous amount of moralizing, these days, about how people ought to treat the earth. Writers explain at length what is righteous, why it is righteous, and what is not righteous at all. They have their reasons—good ones—and they give them. One would certainly hesitate to say that they should keep still. But is declaring these urgencies and reproaches the only thing we can do?

In a small book of poems, *Clearings* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, $2.95 in paperback), Wendell Berry absorbs or transfigures righteousness within an act of celebration. How could anyone who takes to heart the poet's feeling for his farm—and by natural extension all earth—fail to feel his whole "duty" to the land? Here are stanzas from two poems—first, from "History," dedicated to Wallace Stegner; the other, "From Crest":

> All the lives this place
> has had, I have. I eat
> my history day by day.
> Bird, butterfly, and flower
> pass through the seasons of
> my flesh. I dine and thrive
> on offal and old stone,
> and am combined within
> the story of the ground.
> By this earth's life, I have
> its greed and innocence,
> its violence, its peace.
> Now let me feed my song
> upon the life that is here
> that is the life that is gone.
> This blood has turned to dust
> and liquified again in stem
> and vein ten thousand times.
> Let what is in the flesh,
> O Muse, be brought to mind.

Again, an ode to the farm, to the land:

> Going into the city, coming
> home again, I keep you
> always in my mind.
> Who knows me who does not
> know you? The crowds of the streets
> do not know that you
> are passing among them with me.
> They think I am simply a man,
> made of a job and clothes
> and education. They do not
> see who is with me,
> or know the resurrection
> by which we have come
> from the dead. In the city
> we must be seemly and quiet
> as becomes those who travel
> among strangers. But do not
> on that account believe
> that I am ashamed
> to acknowledge you, my friend.
> We will write them a poem
> to tell them of the great
> fellowship, the mystic order,
> to which both of us belong.

If there really is a great day coming, it won't arrive until all the moralists learn how to be poets.

# *FRONTIERS*

## Remedies for Cards and Cars

HUMOR is sometimes the best means of getting a critical idea spread around, especially when the subject is likely to be touchy. Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* is probably the most classically repulsive example of this approach, which wasn't funny at all. But it had its effect.

Now, in the *Saturday Review* for April 2, a letter proposes a remedy for a burden a great many of us bear, although somewhat foolishly, as the letter points out. An imaginary California Congressman is the agent of emancipation in this scheme:

> Congressman Day believes that Christmas cards have become a soulless form of social tyranny, resented by the sender and often ignored by the receiver. He has calculated that, in an average year, 87,000 tons of paper are consumed in the manufacture of Christmas cards. He is disturbed by the fact that, at a time when our forests are being rapidly depleted the American people cut down 2,141,000 trees last year in order to accommodate a convention that most people, if asked anonymously, would prefer not to sustain. Moreover, the postage bill alone for Christmas cards in 1976 came to $130 million.

Moreover,

> Almost half the Christmas cards sent in 1976 carried no signatures or handwritten messages of any kind. The names of the senders are printed on the cards. The procedure was as personal (and meaningful) as popcorn coming out of a vending machine.

You can bet that the people who dutifully send twenty-five or fifty Christmas cards every year are also the people who laugh at the Tibetan prayer wheel, that poor mechanical substitute for heart's devotion.

Well, Congressman Day is a modern reformer who knows how to overcome habit and prejudice. Aware that all you need, nowadays, to make a proposal acceptable is to run it through a computer, he invokes this modern deity. But first there would be legislation that prohibits Christmas cards. Then, each year, you send the government a list of people to whom you would otherwise send cards; they do the same; and a few days before the Holy Day you get a print-out telling who listed you as a recipient. (Getting yourself off everybody's list could be quietly arranged by paying a service fee of fifty cents.)

The letter-writer, however, while he likes the idea, doesn't think it will work:

> I recognize, as does A. F. Day, the artificiality and overcommercialization of Christmas, of which the greeting card with the printed name of the sender is such a deplorable manifestation. But the notion of computerized print-outs as a substitute is unhappily symbolic of the increasing dehumanization of our society. Bad as it is to chop down a tree, it is infinitely worse to assign to a computer those benevolent and warm impulses of spirit for which Christmastime provides such a needed and rare outlet.

A person as ingenious as this letter-writer might be able to think up a way to abolish funerals.

Amory Lovins, the physicist who seems to have the best understanding of alternative energy options, has a solution for traffic congestion on the highways that makes equally good sense. In a letter to *Not Man Apart* for March-April, he speaks of a vehicle conceived by Jet Propulsion Lab (Cal Tech) designers which would weigh between 1200 and 800 pounds and run on energy-absorbing cells (what on earth are *they?*). This led Lovins to propose "with my tongue only partly in my cheek"—a kinetic energy limitation instead of a speed-limit law:

> For example, small cars might be allowed to drive at 70 mph, medium cars at 55, and big cars at 30. For simplicity, one would use only two or three weight classes, distinguished not only by obvious size difference, but by, say, differently colored license plates, a system that some state police friends think is practical.
>
> There is a precedent: present differences in speed limits between cars and trucks in some places. There is a motive: public safety, road wear, and

> probably direct fuel economy—certainly fuel and other resource economy if the system provides an equitable incentive to use more rationally designed cars. There is a constituency: everyone who, driving a light car at 55 to save gas, resents being passed at 70 by brontosauri.

Other advantages:

> People for whom a car is a way of getting someplace efficiently will be free to do so. People for whom it is a way of letting the yokels gape at their opulence will be able to do that better too, because they will go by slower. Huge trucks will presumably drive *very* slowly, an idea that the Teamsters should like if they are paid by the hour rather than the haul, and the road freight rates might thus rise enough to send most of the long-haul traffic back to railways and containerized airships where it belongs.

Modestly, Mr. Lovins ends with a few reasons why the idea may not work so well, which only increases the impact of these splendid ideas. In fact, the ease with which obviously beneficial plans and programs can be put together by bright people should be evidence enough that our real problems lie elsewhere.

Noting that the MANAS review (Jan. 26) of Donella Meadow's critique of the market system omitted her consideration of ways to replace or correct is system in the interest of justice or fairness, a Chicago reader has suggested some reading for a better understanding of what would be involved: *Economics, Society, and Culture* by Robert Ghelardi, *The New American Ideology* by George Cabot Lodge, *Alienation and Economics* by Walter Weisskopf, and *Work and Community* by Fred Blum. (MANAS has reviewed all but the first-named, funding them good.)

So far as we can see, such works are attempts to reconcile what appear to be the "laws of nature" with feelings of moral obligation. Some writers start out with the purpose of declaring, if they can, the irrevocable rules deduced from the way things are, leaving morality to make patchwork adjustments. Others start at the other end, hoping to correct "nature" by the dictates of ethical insight. Each of these syntheses develops an internal and often persuasive logic, depending upon the facts and factors introduced, with more or less effective criticism of all the other analyses.

The goal, of course, would be the perfect union of ethics with natural law. Serious writers oppressed by the desire to be "practical" naturally seek this goal—how could they aspire to anything less?—but it may be a synthesis only within the reach of individuals. What if every "system" must have its Godelian flaw, compelling the argument to go on and on?

However, there is doubtless a way of thinking about economics which would point to the most sensible and equitable arrangements of which we are presently capable. For those who are interested, our correspondent, Harvey Lyon, 222 West Adams Street, Chicago, Ill. 60606, might be willing to send copies of a thoughtful paper suggesting a program of study.