

## THE PROBLEM OF BLAME

THERE is hardly a man who, when you speak of pain and suffering, will not understand what you mean. Suffering is a major element of the common lot of human beings. We have intuitive—that is, direct—knowledge of pain. It is like love or hunger. The unsettling giddiness of a sudden affection, the persistent ache of longing for food—these experiences do not need much description for them to be identified, since they are forms of universal experience. So with pain. Even the apparent exceptions, men whose lives seem fortunately circumstanced in every way, often carry secret burdens. A man may hide his pain the way other men hide their weaknesses, ashamed, perhaps, of his vulnerability, but so long as he is human he feels the pain.

It is natural, therefore, that if you are able to speak or write convincingly of a means to abolish pain, you will command a large audience. This region of inquiry is not unlike other generalized areas of investigation. The physicists, for example, are in search of a unified field theory—a conception of the physical universe which grows out of a very few basic and interrelated ideas of causation. Given such a theory, the physicist could make some simple statement which would be valid for *all* physical phenomena. We know intuitively why the physicist wants to be able to make such a statement. It would make him master of his field. He would have knowledge and power, which means free exercise of his will within the limits, or, according to the scope, of natural law. This is freedom, an ultimate human fulfillment.

A unified field theory of pain would promise similar satisfaction—perhaps the capacity to live a painless life. But we have no unified field theory of pain and are not likely to get one, or even to look for one openly, for quite a while. The hope or expectation of a unified field theory depends

upon the idea of putting the scientific method to work.

Putting the scientific method to work on the world of physical experience is a great cultural achievement of our time. We believe that it is possible to obtain a unified account of the processes and laws of the physical world. But there is no such confidence, as yet, in respect to the world of subjective experience. Pain is a subjective experience, not a "thing." It is related to things, but not in any consistent or one-to-one ratio.

Some kinds of pain, of course, are more "thing-like" than others, and these pains we expect to understand and control, in some measure have already controlled. The history of medicine records the conquest of pains in this category.

There is a natural tendency to want to work with things you feel that you can control, or learn to control. So, in the modern age, there has been a tendency to relate as much as possible of human pain to things—to, that is, conditions which we think we have some competence to change. We might say that the revolutionary movement of Western civilization, besides being a major struggle to establish conditions of freedom and justice, was also a heroic effort to define pain in terms of the physical conditions which seem to produce them.

Was the revolutionary movement of the West "successful"? The answer to this question depends upon what you mean by success. If you mean by success the establishment of a new set of socio-economic and political relationships, more representative of what men regarded as "the good" at the time of the revolution—any of the revolutions of the West—then a measurable success may be claimed. But if success is to be defined in terms of subjective longings, then we

have to admit that the objectives of the revolution were somehow misrepresented to us. That is, the revolution didn't do for us what we hoped it would do. We still have pain. The revolution may have displaced old causes of pain, but other causes have since appeared.

If you wanted to make a metaphysic out of this situation, you could say that pain is a constant element of human life—even, perhaps, a "need," although this is probably an unduly pessimistic view. But at this point we hardly know enough about either ourselves or our pain to construct this sort of metaphysic. The fact is that we once believed in this metaphysic, in the form of Christian theology. "Conceived in iniquity, born in sin. . . ." Pain, on this basis, is a part of the theological dispensation. One of the functions of the revolution was to throw out this dispensation and to propose a view of human life promising human beings more control over the causes of their pain.

The old idea that we got rid of was that men are created and thrust as souls into- a world which is filled with misfortune and suffering, as a kind of probation preliminary to eternal life in a state of bliss. This was a unified field theory. If you got a fever and died, this was God's will—His way of taking you off to a more blessed condition. Or perhaps you would go to Hell in punishment for your sins. In any event, you didn't need to seek for an explanation of the pain. You had one for pain of any sort. It was God's will. There were pockets of rational ideas and relationships in this theory, about which men could reason, but the overall picture was quite incomprehensible in terms of human reason and reasonable ideas of the good. If you pressed the theory with rational analysis, it broke down.

But it wasn't just the irrational character of the theological account of human pain that made it break down. The aggressive attack on theology came because the religious explanation of pain was being used to make men passive victims of exploitation. A man can put up with a lot of

irrational elements in his experience. He has to, since we know so little about the world. But when a unified field theory of pain is used to make him lie still while other men tramp on him, he is bound to rebel.

He will rebel, and is also likely to come up with a boot-heel theory of reality. He is likely to say that the matter boot-heels are made of is the real world, and that political arrangements which prevent some men from stepping on the faces of others are the kind of arrangements which will give the least pain.

But there are vast regions of human experience left untouched by this theory and these arrangements. Since after the revolution there was no longer any unified field theory for man's subjective experience, each man was left to construct his own private metaphysical theory. He didn't call it that, or even suspect he was philosophizing in a vague way, but he couldn't help doing it. For the most part, he made a private theory of escape from pain. Usually, his private theory borrows from some portion of the public myth—the health, wealth, and prosperity myth of the acquisitive society. In its simplest terms, the theory is that if he can acquire X number of dollars, he will find the means to drive all pain away. Or, if he is socially minded, he will plan to raise X millions of dollars by taxation in order to eliminate certain obvious causes of pain to the population as a whole, or of pain suffered by a depressed segment of the population.

Getting the money, in this theory, is like getting to heaven in the theological theory, only, as the eighteenth-century philosophers proposed, heaven is now going to be established on earth.

It is easy to see, now, why it became important to relate the pains of men to the physical world and to controllable conditions of the physical world. Men were learning how to control the forces of the physical world. They were, that is, making *progress*. They wanted with all their hearts to drive away pain. Given men in the full strength of vigorous life and achievement,

working hard at a program which left monuments all about, how could you expect of them anything but a great reluctance to suppose that their efforts might be unsuccessful in the elimination of pain?

Complex difficulties in this situation are created by the fact that *some* pain is directly due to controllable physical circumstances. We know this, having both brought pain to ourselves and others, and removed it. When we are unsuccessful in removing pain, it is natural to look for the cause of our failure. And in assigning this cause, we maybe partly right, wholly right, or wholly wrong. The eagerness of our hearts and the discipline of our minds have each a part to play, here. When Marx promised an end to the evils of bureaucratic authority, predicting that the State would "wither away," his heart triumphed over his mind, which should have known better. When earnest American patriots make it plain that they believe that a fall from power in Moscow of the Communist Party is the key to a serene and peaceful future for the people of the United States, they exhibit a similar weakness.

Another aspect of this problem is illustrated by the slavery issue of the American Civil War. A great moral issue of this war lay in the determination of many Northerners to bring about the emancipation of the Negroes from the bonds of slavery. The abstract ideal of this contest was the vision of a society in which men are equal in the eyes of the law. The war was fought and the law was changed, but subtler forces governing human relationships kept most of the Negroes from enjoying their freedom in a manner appropriate to the ideal. That part of the struggle is still going on, and the blame for injustice to the Negro is being transferred from the bad laws of the South to those people in the South who try to frustrate just laws and the rule established by Supreme Court decision.

The fact that the struggle for ideal conditions—many struggles, at various levels, for ideal conditions—still goes on, and will continue as far as we can see into the future, contributes to

the tendency of men to suppose that conditions are the sole important cause of human pain.

On the other hand, the closer a given society gets to what in the past have been defined as "ideal conditions," the more possibility there is of the study of pain as some sort of independent reality of human experience—independent, that is, of the more familiar forms of conditioning. The first step of investigation in this direction is naturally toward the psychological basis of experience. If, after a man's physical pain is lightened by changing his economic circumstances, he is still made unhappy by other elements of his life, such as "guilt feelings" and frustrated longings for apparently unattainable goals, a new category of pain-producing conditions hoves into view. The man must now be freed from his pain-producing beliefs. Now we say that it is not just the world, but what he thinks about the world, that brings him pain.

Our objectives are suddenly doubled. Not only must we remake the world into a non-pain-producing environment, but we must improve our knowledge of the world to a point where we no longer suffer the consequences of vain imaginings. Now we begin to say that the elimination of pain depends upon "knowing the truth." All the books about "maturity" and about "self-help" are concerned with knowing the truth. They don't talk about how to change the world with science and politics, but how to change your world by thinking the right thoughts about it.

The objective is now to have a pain-free life, growing out of some sort of personal reconciliation with the psychic realities of existence. And so, instead of stern-faced men standing with guns in their hands at the gateway to freedom and justice, you have bright-faced men exuding adjustment and peaceful minds to point the way. And in epochs which overlap, such as the present, you have both kinds of men. You have Norman Vincent Peale and Fidel Castro. But you also have men of great stature who try to live in both worlds, and who sometimes do so

with some success. You have Albert Schweitzer and M. K. Gandhi.

The extraordinary thing about the present, as an epoch of history, is that it is a time when men are able to question seriously concerning their private burden of pain. The shortcomings of any single theory of the causes of pain are becoming quite obvious to thoughtful individuals. Material conditions have been eased so widely that it is no longer possible to make them bear the entire burden of the cause of human pain. Freedom of thought is sufficiently well established to make it difficult for the educated individual to blame ancient myth-makers and theologians for his psychological woes. Yet he has them. He has them, and at the same time he has a lately acquired ability to distinguish between his externally caused and otherwise-caused pains. Now he is experiencing a new kind of pain—new in the sense that we now have a name for it. We call it Existential pain, the built-in pain of being human. And now we have to ask how much of this existential pain is really necessary or inevitable, and why is it necessary or inevitable. And if it is necessary or inevitable, whom or what shall we blame for imposing it upon us? Or perhaps "blame" is a bad word to use in such an inquiry.

At this point many men will say, "Don't try to push these problems off on me." They will say that the questions are not "real," or are "too big." They will tell you that they must get on with the constructive work of the world, and then they go off to the convention or back to the clinic, carrying with them their secret pain in their hearts, like a changeling they cannot disown, but refuse to recognize. And they work and *work*, wondering if it will ever go away.

Why should they try to fool anybody about their pain? They have it, the same as everyone else. Do they want to pretend to be experts at Living? Do they want the rest of us to believe they have found out all the important answers? Do they think that if they keep on pretending they can convert the world to their shallow utopian

dream which has no crucified saviors in its past, no Promethean agony, no murdered Gandhis and no martyred Brunos? Where is the shame in feeling pain? What great and good and wise man ever denied that he felt pain?

It doesn't make you into a harsh Calvinist defender of eternal damnation to admit the fact of existential pain. Try to write a good story without having pain happen to any of the characters. Who can imagine a great life, love, or death without pain as a part of its experience? Who can suppose that a Beauty-Rest mattress is the climax of the Cosmic Plan?

It is time to let go of the Pleasure Principle as the Criterion of the Good. This, after all, is only one of the better-dressed-up arguments of the Grand Inquisitor. Why should we let him win the argument and waste all Dostoevski's pain to prove it false? The real argument is not about whether there is a God, but about whether there is a *Man*.

Well, then, how do you separate existential pain from the other kinds of pain? For theory, you do it with metaphysics, in some abstract account of the nature of man which provides a rational basis for thinking that there may be different "orders," so to say, of the experience of pain. You could propose, for example, that there is the pain of disease, which comes from infection—a pain which is at least ameliorated by the reduction of the agents of infection through sanitation, and by a care of the physical organism which helps it become disease-resistant. Then there is pain which arises from the fact that human beings are capable of love, and that to love is to risk the deprivation of love. It is of the nature of human life that all longings are not instantaneously fulfilled, and some longings may be of a nature that can never be fulfilled. Conceivably, the longings which persist without final fulfillment may be an expression of the primal drive of evolution, a process which is essentially without end. Related, no doubt, to the pain of love is the pain of creative acts. Creation involves extraordinary effort by human beings—one might

even say "strain." Perhaps there is a way to create without effort and pain—the way the wind "plays" over a meadow, or as a rainbow lights the horizon—but these effects of the cosmic kaleidoscope seem to be essentially different from the deliberate works of human beings. Finally, there is the pain felt by men who find themselves helpless to prevent the suffering which arises from ignorance and superstition, and from blind anger. They may be able to help, in time, but the suffering exists now, and it is a real agony for countless human beings. This brings unavoidable pain to those who feel love for others.

If these are the data of human suffering, then there is the question: Do such things take place in a rational universe? In other words, do they represent some over-arching meaning of life, or are they only accidents in the career of a single planet, without a principle of fulfillment operating in them?

There are various systems of metaphysics which provide at least tentative answers to this question. But we do not obtain our conviction about such matters from metaphysics. Metaphysics supplies only a kind of chart of what one hopes are the rational alternatives. The conviction is gained from the intuition of our own being. Men have moments when they feel that their lives are woven into the life of other men, when they will acknowledge no good which is not also the good of all. There is this inward reaching after transcendental symmetries which cannot be suppressed or set aside. There are climactic moments in the experience of beauty, or what men call holiness, which make time seem to stop short in homage to eternity, when all past and future are somehow in the present, extending everywhere, and yet without extension. The arts forever seek to confine this rapture and then to set it free, in a great movement which represents all motion and the whole of life. There is a perpetual defiance of death in the highest aspirations of human beings, a declaration of independence of all decay.

Who are the beings who so announce themselves? What is their inner descent? Where are they going, on this endless pilgrimage which is now and then confirmed by the ends which turn into beginnings?

And what, then, is the cocoon of silken dreams which gives shape and dimensions to a being who now and then stretches out to inhabit, if only for an instant, such dimensionless depths?

And what is his relation to all those others like himself, whom he sometimes joins in warm fraternity, and at other times destroys with the steel of his hardened heart? To all those others with whom he shares lies and lying as well as truths and hoping?

With how much of his pain must he learn to make peace? If he knew this, he might know many other things. Most important, perhaps, for our time, he might discover the comparative uselessness of blame. He would certainly find this out if he were to seek and reach a level of existence where blame is totally without meaning.

## REVIEW

### HOW COMPLICATED WE ARE

WE don't like to appear to side with the cynics in any evaluation of the human situation, but there are times when some of the oddities of today's culture should be isolated for critical regard. The statisticians inform us that we are definitely living longer, these days. While the ancient Roman had a twenty-five-year life expectancy, men today average out at sixty-seven and women at seventy-three. But the more time available, the faster all the smart people seem to want to go. Then, too, the harder you work at making money, the more you are apt to need to buy tranquilizers, barbiturates, etc., to cope with the famous "tensions" of the times.

On this subject we have been saving two arresting passages from Edmond Schiddel's *The Devil in Bucks County*, a novel portraying a hopped-up treadmill of \$40,000-a-year living in fashionable suburbia. Here we have a description of the role a dutiful wife may play, anticipating her husband's varying chemical needs:

"Take your vitamins," Lillian reminded him.

"Did."

"Got your Miltown?"

"Yes, but I took a Dexamyl when I got up."

Lillian never took anything herself and always had to remember to ask one more question: "Pill or spansule?"

"Spansule."

This was information of importance. A Dexamyl *spansule*, as she had learned from the medical literature accompanying the prescription, was a sustained-release capsule containing dexedrine and amobarbital, designed to relieve tension and anxiety, distributed among hundreds of tiny pellets with varying disintegration times, whereas a Dexamyl *pill* had to be taken four times a day. This told Lillian two things, one good, one bad: one, Bill would operate for six to eight hours at maximum efficiency; two, by the time he came home—if he came—the effect of the medication would have worn off and he would be jittery and tired. He also would be able to drink, and would drink, one or two more than he

usually had before dinner. What he would take tomorrow was anybody's guess; he might take either Dexamyls or one of his tranquilizers, or both, depending on many things.

During his long commuter's ride to New York City, Bill attempts some budgeting to find out how his money dribbles away. His liquor bill was \$2,686 for the year, the pharmaceuticals cost \$750. Thinking over this part of the unbalanced balance sheet, he indulges in morose philosophy:

He tucked the sheet back into the lid compartment of his case, noticing, as he did so, that he had a slight hand tremor which reminded him that his Dexamyls and tranquilizers were not infallible; sometimes, if he smoked too much, or worried in spite of them (was there a drug that could really stop worry, really live your life for you, short of a knockout drop?) he developed a tremor. Amobarbital and dextroamphetamine sulfate were wonderful, often—he knew these jawbreaking names as exactly as he knew the first names of his co-workers; you took them so you wouldn't think about money and could give full attention to the show, which enabled you to make the money you were supposed not to worry about. The hell with it! Getting up, he made his way to the water cooler and swallowed a Miltown (meprobamate, he reminded himself, as it went down) so he would be up to Eddie and the day.

Robert S. de Ropp, chief of chemistry for a leading English pharmaceutical firm, has recently come out with a book called *Man Against Aging*, in which he reveals that longevity will always be largely unpredictable. During the time of Charles I, when the average life-expectancy was approximately thirty-three years, "Old Parr" was going strong at 140, and continued well until the age of 152. At that time, the Earl of Arundel unfortunately honored Old Parr with a lord's dinner and his demise followed immediately. Before this grand exit, Parr's diet had been one of cheese, milk, coarse bread and some alcoholic sour whey. On this basis, one could easily conclude that too much food or an unbalanced diet is the cause of the body's despair. Yet a Dane, Christian Drakenberg, lasted for 146 years of hard, manual labor—from which one might conclude that we don't have enough exercise. On

the other hand, the famous Venetian, Cornaro, lived 102 years with a daily intake of wine exceeding the ounces of food consumed! Perhaps this could be taken to indicate that we don't drink enough juice of the vine. The formula for longevity seems a highly individual matter, like everything else of importance to human beings.

Reviewing de Ropp's *Man Against Aging* for the July 11 *New Republic*, David Cort puts such complexities in context:

The parts of the human body have different calendars. The ear is mature and begins to decline at the age of ten, the eye soon after, the male sex function at 18, the muscular system at 25, the sense of taste at 40, the sense of smell at 60; while the liver and adrenals normally show very little degeneration. The whole show depends on the arterial system and the heart. Their job is impaired by hardening of blood vessels, narrowing of blood channels and the drying and hardening of the jelly-like mixture that lies between the cells. . . .

What will be the emotional effect on the average person of learning that the measure of his lifetime probably lies in the 60,000 miles of blood-vessel capillaries in his body? What is anybody to do with a conscious responsibility for a system that would run quarter-way to the moon? Would we want to know the facts of life, even if they were really available?

Yet the whole matter of the aging and then shutting off of life is perhaps the central one for everybody.

According to de Ropp, at the time of death most human organs are good for another fifty years—"if only one factor in the body could be changed; and the problem is to find that factor." But for each individual that "one factor" may be different, and indeed it seems likely that each one has different connectives between his emotions and the functioning parts of his body. The prospects for longevity, therefore, may be obscured by statistics, unless you are content to accept your role *as* a statistic.

Perhaps some day it will be discovered that every negative emotion—jealousy, greed, hate or fear—has an immediate corrosive action on some vital part of the body. If tranquilizers induce a

temporary euphoria, so far as such emotions are concerned, the body may last considerably longer, but whether this does the soul much good is a moot question—a question not entirely unrelated to the point raised recently by the Bishop of Exeter in an address to the British Medical Association (*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, June 23). The Bishop wanted to know whether it was "morally right" to attempt to prolong life in one whose *human* faculties have all but gone. The Bishop was talking about the aged and the senile, but his question has wider implications. What sort of a life, for instance, *deserves* tranquility?

## COMMENTARY

### A TIME OF WAITING

A PASSAGE in J. B. Priestley's *Literature and Western Man* which did not get into our Frontiers article is helpful in understanding certain of the gloomier aspects of modern literature. The author is speaking of the plays of the French dramatist, Henri René Lenormand:

He [Lenormand] is chiefly the dramatist of inevitable degeneracy, . . . of a sinister determinism and fatalism . . . This is not the great world of tragedy, with its clean bright edge; it is a world of small characters, helpless against a creeping corruption. . . . Lenormand, unlike greater dramatists, cannot make us feel what is being destroyed is of any high value. His central characters are not unreal, but, destined to be victims, they have no large hold on life. There is no size to this drama, no spring of poetry; it creeps through a black ooze of pessimism. . . .

Of course, not everything Mr. Priestley says here of Lenormand can be directed at other dark pessimists of contemporary literature, but these ills are widespread. The characters of Tennessee Williams, for example, all seem to move toward inevitable doom. They are victims in the clutch of invariably degrading circumstances. There is really no hope for the people you are attracted to in *The Fugitive Kind* (film version of *Orpheus Descending*). They are like children trying to live wholesome lives in a world that hates wholesomeness. You could say in Mr. Williams' behalf that at least he will not pretend that the world is a wholesome place, that there is more positive honesty in his view of Man (and Woman) as Victim, than in some merry nonsense sliding over the slick surface of corruption. But it is time that someone should begin to find a way out.

Perhaps the drama will have to wait a while before it can explore possibilities of this sort. Perhaps the forms of revolt must become more explicit before we can have good plays to illuminate the alternatives which lie ahead. Sometimes, however, we suspect our writers of too easy a submission to the fascinations of defeat, and of an almost sentimental attachment to the

"little people" who are continuously betrayed. Are we never again to have "the great world of tragedy, with its clean bright edge"?

The secret of great tragedy, as of all great art, no doubt, lies in an implicit feeling for high human ends, and in a sense of proportion, growing out of philosophy, concerning the forces which affect the human struggle. There is no body of significant thought, today, on these questions. We have the pain which should spur men to such thought, but it has not yet had the necessary effect. So, as Mr. Priestley says, "We must wait." But while we are waiting we can do some of the other things Mr. Priestley suggests.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves

### NOTES IN PASSING

WHEN Barbara Moore, an English naturopath, staged a successful hike from one end of England to the other—subsisting on honey, water, and dried fruit—she inadvertently stirred enthusiasm for the disciplines of on-your-own-feet marathons. As Roger Lloyd remarked in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* for March 10, the cross-country highway from John o' Groat's to Land's End is "becoming inconveniently crowded." Seven hundred persons entered a recent walking race over this course, no doubt drawn by the winner's prize of £1,000, but also attracted by an interest in showing that travel is possible without motor-driven wheels. Thus England, in a mild Charles Atlas-Vic Tanny mood, has reawakened the shades of the old pilgrimages from Winchester to Canterbury immortalized by Chaucer.

Well, as often said here, endurance sports provide excellent psychological training, but the Aldermaston marches have a broader significance than either present marathons or the religious journeys of Chaucer's time. On this subject Mr. Lloyd writes in the *Guardian*:

The current desire to walk for miles could easily become a revival of the true art of pilgrimage, which in every age has been one of the most potent fortifications of the spiritual realities of our human nature. But the true pilgrim must journey to bear witness to a cause he thinks worthy, and he must do it in company with others. Moreover, his chosen point of departure and the end of his journey ought to be chosen so as to underline the purpose he has in making it. The journey last Easter of scores of people whose purpose was to protest against nuclear warfare was one of the most recent examples of the true pilgrimage. It started from Aldermaston where hydrogen bombs are made, and it ended at Trafalgar Square, a stone's throw from the site of real decision. It was a corporate performance and, for many, a far from trivial test of endurance. One girl known to me who tramped miles did so because she felt she must make her protest, and this seemed the best way of doing it. She also discovered what she had not

expected, that it was for her one of the deepest spiritual experiences she had ever known, and this because, as she said in a letter, "the spirit of comradeship was simply terrific."

We wonder how many young people have vague longings for some sort of symbolic striving unrelated to economic and professional competition. Especially in the United States would such a yearning find expression difficult. We have, if anything, too much transportation for too many people, and too much to pay for it. A case in point: Beautiful Mount San Jacinto, its peak long a goal for Southern California hikers, is now to be topped by a tramway. And you will be able to buy cocktails at both ends.

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At this point, perversely, we are reminded of a passage from Stephen Birmingham's *Young Mr. Keefe*, a novel concerned with the "elite-beats." The story turns out to be something of a morality tale in disguise. Jimmy Keefe is always fighting the social pressures which lead him away from calmness or solitude. When his young wife leaves him because of a complicated misunderstanding, he finally goes to the mountains for reflection, but before he leaves he has to face a characteristic problem of "overprivileged" young men:

He unfolded the letter and read it. It was very short. It advised him that a son, William Warren Keefe, had been born Sunday morning, November third. Mrs. Keefe and the child were doing nicely. That was all. . . .

At the door of the apartment, he stopped. He stood there with his hand gripping the doorknob. He had a sensation now that he knew. It was a feeling that went everywhere within him. It was behind his eyes, in the corners of his mouth, in his stomach, and in his fingers. Mostly it was the aching dryness in the corners of his mouth. He wanted a drink. It was very simple. He smiled, examining this feeling vicariously, exploring it. He had not had it for a long time. With a peculiar excitement, he felt it spread. He released the doorknob and reached slowly toward his back pocket for his wallet. He had plenty of money, really. He thought of the little bar nearby. There was a package store on Fourteenth Street. His heart pounded. A pale, floating shape passed before

his eyes, then vanished: a drink. He half turned toward the steps.

He was not aware of resisting. He was not aware of fighting anything. But looking down the shadowy steps, he knew that he was not going. He was not going yet. It was not strength, not fortitude, he knew. But he was not going yet. There was too much to think about. He turned back to the door, opened it and let himself in. He pushed the door closed behind him and leaned against it, not with a sense of triumph, but of despair,

A New York *Times* (April 24) report by John A. Osmundsen tells of the efforts of Dr. Fremont-Smith to form a "bridge of concern" between Russia and America in behalf of young children:

Dr. Frank Fremont-Smith told how he had reasoned that there must be a bottom to the chasm between East and West that diplomacy tries to bridge and that it might be easier to cross on that bottom if it could be found. . . .

Dr. Fremont-Smith said when he repeated his request for participation in the program he wrote the Soviet academies: "We have reached a point in history now where no nation can any longer protect its own children or guarantee their survival."

He explained that the only way this might be possible would be for nations to join hands and protect each other's children. He said that a first step toward this could be made through the World Mental Health Year program, part of which is devoted to problems involving children.

Dr. Fremont-Smith said that the Russian scientists responded with "We didn't know you were interested in anything as important as this."

If those scientists can transmit that enthusiasm to the men who will decide whether the Soviet Union will participate in the mental health program, Dr. Fremont-Smith said, his theory will have passed a crucial test.

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The *New Republic* for June 27 has a thoughtful editorial on "Subsidizing Private Schools." Back in 1947, the Supreme Court held that tax money expenditure for bus travel to parochial and other non-profit schools was permissible (*Everson v. Board of Education*). Recently Connecticut's highest court repeated this

judgment. Now the ruling is up again for Supreme Court review and, in the opinion of the *New Republic's* editorial writer, a reversal may be expected, for the intervening years have lent emphasis to Justice Rutledge's dissent on the *Everson* decision.

Both Justices Black and Douglas have indicated a general willingness to acknowledge errors in any decisions in which they have participated, and may now agree that Rutledge's position, as stated in opposing the majority opinion (five to four) in the *Everson* case, should prevail. On that occasion, Justice Rutledge said:

Two great drives are constantly in motion to abridge, in the name of education, the complete division of religion and civil authority which our forefathers made. One is to introduce religious education and observances into the public schools. The other, to obtain public funds for the aid and support of various private religious schools. . . . In my opinion both avenues were closed by the Constitution. Neither should be opened by this court. The matter is not one of quantity, to be measured by the amount of money expended.

## *FRONTIERS*

### A Plain Man's Guide to Literature

WE give our notes on J. B. Priestley's *Literature and Western Man* (Harper, \$6.95) this title for the reason that, as you read him, you realize that all his opinions are essentially his own, and may take particular interest in seeing how a perceptive and widely-read man shapes his evaluations of Western literature. A book like this gives a plain man self-confidence and an appetite for reading—which, no doubt, was about what Mr. Priestley desired of his work.

But this book is hardly an easy one to review, for the volume is itself one great review. Going through it, you watch eagerly for titles you have read, in order to be *with* Mr. Priestley for at least some of the time. This is the discouraging part. There are so many books obviously worth reading that you haven't read. Even so, something of extraordinary value emerges in trying to keep up with the author. You get a sense of the role of the writer in Western civilization. He is a man, you might say, who insists upon seeking symmetry in a badly skewed world. If symmetry is there, he shows it to you; if it is not there, he tries to make his story provide it, as a general corrective to the condition of the world.

Not every writer, of course, feels this way about his work. But that is the way Mr. Priestley feels about it and his judgments issue from his feeling. He is himself a working writer with a long record of efforts to illustrate the symmetry of being—contrasting what is with what might be—so that he is a part of the project, and not merely its historian.

After you finish *Literature and Western Man*, you are likely to sit back and wonder at the entire great and colorful caravan of story-telling, drama, and poetry that has moved across the centuries, and to speculate about what it all means—as though some process quite different from the "progress" men talk about were somehow being fulfilled. Mr. Priestley has a seriously

discouraging conclusion about the present age, but it is fair to add another conclusion of one's own, saying that he has described a chrysalis of confinement which the creative men of the world will soon find a way to *burst*.

Indeed, Mr. Priestley has something to say about what must be done. At the close of the book, he writes:

. . . we have no religion and, inside or outside literature, man feels homeless, helpless, and in despair.

We must wait. Even if we believe that the time of our civilization is running out fast, like sugar spilled from a torn bag, we must wait. But while we are waiting we can try to feel and think and behave, to some extent, as *if* our society were already beginning to be contained by religion, as if we were certain that Man cannot remain even Man unless he looks beyond himself, as if we were finding our way home again in the universe. We can stop disinheriting ourselves. We can avoid both the *hubris* and the secret desperation of our scientific "wizards that peep and mutter." We can challenge the whole de-humanizing, de-personalizing process, under whatever name it may operate, that is taking the symbolic richness, the dimension in depth, out of men's lives, gradually inducing the anæsthesia that demands violence, crudely horrible effects, to feel anything at all. Instead of wanting to look at the back of the moon, remote from our lives, we can try to look at the back of our own minds. Even this *As If* will do something to bring our outer and inner worlds, now tearing us in two, closer together, more in harmony. . .

The reference to religion by Mr. Priestley is not representative of an inclination to any sort of orthodoxy, but rather a sign of his engagement with central human problems. We would know of this engagement from his own books and plays, if not from the present study, but here his personal attitude toward life informs all his criticism. A rich and generous humanism is a major criterion in his estimate of literature, although there is plenty of respect for craftsmanship wherever it occurs. The passage on religion and what Mr. Priestley means by religion is as follows:

Religion alone can carry the load, defend us against the de-humanising collectives, restore true personality. And it is doubtful that our society can last much longer without religion, for either it will destroy itself by some final idiot war or, at peace but hurrying in the wrong direction, it will soon largely cease to be composed of persons. All this, of course, has often been said, but generally it has been said by men who imagine that the particular religion they profess, their Church greatly magnified, could save the situation. I think they are wrong, though I would not for a moment attempt to argue them out of their private faith. If such a faith, a Church, a religion, works for them, well and good. But I have no religion, very few of the major modern writers we have been considering have had any religion; and what is certain is that our society has none. No matter what it professes, it is now not merely irreligious but powerfully anti-religious. And if we all joined a Christian Church tomorrow, the fundamental situation would be unchanged, because no Church existing today has the power—and we could not give it this power by joining it—to undo what has been done. We should be acting on a conscious and not an unconscious level, and the forces from the unknown depths that religion, if its symbols have the right magical potency, can guide and control would still be without guidance and control. For the symbols no longer work, and they cannot be made to work on a conscious level. (The stammering helplessness of the Churches during this age of war and more war and now, the final horror, a nuclear arms race is proof that, whatever they may do for this man and that woman, they are now among the institutions contained by our society, compelled to follow every lunatic course it takes.) No matter what is willed by consciousness, that which belongs to the depths can only be restored in the depths: the *numinous* lies outside the power of collectives, cannot be subject to state decree, created by a resolution at an international conference, offered to all shareholders and employees by the board of Standard Oil or General Motors.

Here, surely, is the incalculable value of literature—that it does preserve for human beings some sense of access to "the depths," no matter what the current and prevailing definitions of reality and meaning. The writers are the secular priests of every age, since they deal with the mysteries of human existence. They have no traditional or sacerdotal authority. They persuade

by reason of the intrinsic appeal in what they write, and so offer continuous perspective on the orthodox institutions and opinions in which "the truth" is supposed to be embedded, but never, or almost never, is.

Mr. Priestley turns many of his summaries and comments on the literature of the past into clear insights into the present. He begins his study at the time of the development of printing from movable type, in the latter part of the fifteenth century, observing early in the first chapter:

In the literature of the time there was a similar division, a widening gap, between what was rooted in observation and actuality and what was essentially fanciful and fantastical. As the cities grew and the castles fell before the cannon, as war itself lost its knightly character and became grimly professional, an affair of money and strategy, heavier weapons and gunpowder, more and more people were fascinated by the romances of chivalry, by invincible swords and enchanted forests and castles in the air. So on one side as in France for example, there were the new satirical tales that mocked the ideals of chivalry, there were the strictly realistic political memoirs of a Commynes; and on the other side, created as much for the wives and daughters of the new merchant class as they were for the gallants and ladies of the nobility there were the elaborate romances of Charlemagne and his paladins Arthur and his knights, adventuring in some dream of chivalry. The stories on which these romances were based especially those of ancient Celtic origin, were deeply symbolic and often profound interpretations of life, belonging in essence to myth and folklore. (Of these *Gawaine and the Green Knight* is an excellent example. And indeed not all the old symbolism and the mythical element have vanished from Malory's version of the Arthurian legends, which was finished in 1469 but not published until 1485.)

Now comes the significant judgment:

But what had been once an imaginative penetration into deeper levels of man's being was now, in its guise of romance, floated far above the earth and the roots of our existence into the airy kingdoms of fancy and allegory. So there was now already that division we have come to know only too well, a split only closed by great art, a division between a sardonic "realism," cynically taking the worst for granted, and "romance" that deliberately

loses all contact with actuality, a dream life that tries to reject even the psychological probabilities of our actual dreams. Such a division, a sort of schizophrenic condition of art, is characteristic of an age of transition, a bewildered passage between two worlds. The fifteenth century knew it; and today, with all our fiction, movies and television programmes, we know it again.

There is particular delight for the reader in the way Mr. Priestley throws light on the meaning of cults, fads, and "movements" in literature. Speaking of the so-called *Æsthetic Movement*, "probably beginning with Gautier and ending with Oscar Wilde," he says that while it has received more attention than it deserved, its character is usually misunderstood. It was not really a movement in the arts, but a rebellion and a reproach of middle-class complacency. Thus:

If business men dressed in grey and black, then artists must wear bright clothes. If bankers and ironfounders, busy and important, had to keep sober, then it was an artist's duty to get drunk. If respectability was the badge of this central and dominant class, then the arts and artists must traffic in strange sins. . . . The movement was not fundamentally aesthetic at all, but social. It was devoted to the game of bull-baiting the dominant class that cared so little about the arts. It was the existence and the power of this class that really created the movement, inspired by a resentment of society that had forced literature and the arts away from the centre. This partly accounts for the rather childish irresponsibility, the elaborate naughtiness, the flaunting of absurd affectations, displayed by most members of the *Æsthetic Movement*: they were behaving like children on the edge of a party to which they had not been invited. But it goes deeper than that, for below the resentment is a kind of acceptance. These *æsthetic* writers and painters were in fact behaving, not in accordance with their time-old vocations, which care nothing for such antics, but as the new lords of society, indifferent to these vocations, expected them to behave.

A comment on Ruskin seems also to go to the core, although in another way:

We realise now that Ruskin was often at his worst when writing about *æsthetics* and at his best when dealing with those things he was supposed not to understand and which, in fact, he understood much

better than the experts. Thus, for example, he cut straight to the heart of the matter when he pointed out that the test of a social system is not what wealth it is producing for some members of society, but what kind of men, what kind of human experience, it is producing.

There is no end to such passages, but there is an end to our space for repeating them, so we bring these notes to a close, inviting the reader to go to Mr. Priestley's book for some 500 pages of this sort of writing about the literature of Western Man.