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THE ILLUSIONS OF POWER

OVER-KILL is a stubby word which exactly conveys what its users intended—an execution of human beings far beyond the estimated "need." The term belongs to the morally indifferent language of technical expertise, which deliberately neglects or suppresses implications that might evoke normal responses of human feeling. Expertise is uncontaminated "thing" language; when applied to men it becomes the speech of cool misrepresentation and betrayal, and general acceptance of it amounts to self-betrayal. In humanist criticism, however, it acquires a double meaning. Added to the "thing"-meaning is an expression of shock at the technological capacity to kill, at the expectation of using it, and horror at the casual statistical language employed to describe this "achievement" of organized society.

Over-kill is a word without an antonym. There is no succinct way of suggesting an opposite capacity because no opposite capacity is known to us. The opposite of over-killing would be the provision of more abundant, or perhaps "over-abundant," life. Politicians used to speak of achieving "a more abundant life" but that was only a slogan, not anything we know how to do.

This sort of parallel could doubtless be made in many directions. We have expert knowledge concerning how to do a great many things which, sooner or later, have anti-human consequences, and we have expert criticism concerned with the fact that these things ought not to be done, but we have neither knowledge of nor experience in how to change the quality and direction of activities which are becoming manifestly destructive to all the world. So, naturally enough, we elaborate on the expert criticism; that, at least, we know how to do.

Actually, one might argue that expert analysis and criticism of the existing state of human affairs and the conduct of life long ago reached the "over-kill" stage, and is now becoming wasteful, if not paralyzing in effect. Most if not all of the counsels based on criticism point to the need for power on the part of well-intentioned people, so that they will be able to stop other people from doing the bad things they are doing. Power, after all, is universally regarded as the essential condition for any positive action; yet, on the other hand, *getting* power—power sufficient to command obedience in the modern world—tends to mean acquiring the power to kill. And this, in turn, in the practical necessities of the military experts, works out to be capacity for *over-kill.* Killing is only the climactic application of coercive power for "good," and who will dare to be prudent or cautious at this stage? There is too much at stake.

This is a reason why we ought not to use the expression over-kill in relation to an excess of criticism. The word implies that limited, balanced, maturely controlled killing is a proper objective in the affairs of a people—a really monstrous conception, which is not only morally false but practically unworkable, as may be seen from the hideous consequences of this doctrine, now in application in the policies of a number of nations. Balanced, maturely controlled criticism is a good thing; the same adjectives, applied to *killing,* are senseless and even obscene.

We shall simply say, then, that after a certain point in the development of criticism, a law of diminishing returns comes into operation. "Criticism," of course, is too vague a term for getting at this problem. All criticism, including appreciation, arises from a comparison of what is with what ought to be; there are, that is, *normative* considerations involved. And there are widely varying subjective considerations, depending upon what the critic hopes to

accomplish and on the person or persons he is speaking to. A drawing teacher, for example, may say to a student that he ought to *look* at the hand of the model the student is sketching in charcoal. Or he may simply say something encouraging; or the best help, in some cases, may be for him to say nothing at all. Dozens of little judgments drawing on what he knows of the student's potentialities, his awareness of the different orders of excellence in a drawing and of the various levels of learning involved, will affect what he actually says or does.

Our example is a simple one, effective because the variables in the situation are known and familiar. While all these variables involve incommensurable factors—such as "what is art?" and "how do people really learn from teachers?"—these elements are what artists and teachers have resolved to live with. They afford the wonder as well as the limitation of what is to be done. So teachers devise ways to help people to gain skills and to grasp something of the meaning of the creative act, using criticism as a manageable and indispensable tool. But no teacher with any sense would deal with a child as he deals with an adult. The child sees differently, puts wholes together differently, "gets the point" at a level that is right for him, but not the same as the levels of adult comprehension. The teacher, that is, will not say something to the child that is cognitively or emotionally beyond his reach.

Are there or ought there to be similar rules for the criticism that adults offer to one another? This is a terrible question. Adults are *adults,* we say; they are *responsible.* Or we could say that there are certain moral principles which oblige us to accept *in some sense* the proposition that all men are equal in their capacity to hear and profit by criticism. It is morally offensive to "talk down" to people. Even if it is commercially profitable to deal with adults on the assumption of their emotional immaturity and susceptibility to suggestion, for the purpose of selling them things they don't need, or would be better off without, we still declare the principle of equality; we have this rule of one man, one vote, and, in relation to social self-determination, if that goes then everything we stand for goes.

Right here, tied in with this obvious contradiction between private practice and public principle, may be the elements of an explanation of both the ineffectuality and the excesses of general social criticism. A fundamental moral principle seems to stand in the way of making our criticism relate in intelligible ways with normative considerations. In the relationship between teacher and pupil, no such third factor is involved. We could bring one in, of course, and harm or corrupt the teaching relation. For example, the teacher could hint to the student that God or the Market would not approve of what he is doing, and leave him cowed or apprehensive. In this case, the student might be moved to take up theology or merchandising for guidance in his art. This, however, spoils our point, which requires the assumption of a good teacher who thinks of art as capable of disclosing its own meanings.

In social criticism, however, there is almost always a third factor—the issue of power. Most social criticism is concerned with the misuse of power. The reader is expected to understand that if he accepts the critic's argument it becomes his duty to influence power to change its ways. But people have different feelings about their relation to power. The tough-minded minorities who claim to be "politically mature" usually regard effective points of criticism as little more than muscle to be used in their drive to power. They make no bones about what is for them the most important fact of life—that nothing good can be done, no evils corrected, save through the power they seek. It follows that criticism which cannot be turned into a weapon in the struggle for power is totally uninteresting to them. Functionally, then, for such individuals, there is no truth except truth as means to power. This rather gross application of the Baconian principle is everywhere at work today. The most immediate verification of our proposition, in behavioral

terms, lies in the record of the politics of the totalitarian states, and in the policies of all states in their totalitarian-tending aspect. In its fully developed form the language of Power is just as unfeeling and anti-human as the language of Things.

It should be evident that criticism aimed at controlling and bettering the uses of power, but which ignores or glosses over the problem of *access* to power, is eventually regarded as ineffectual—mere rhetoric. It may not seem that way to the specialist critic, who, you might say, is only a "scientist," someone you consult about how things work, or why they don't work. If a corporation calls in a technician to correct a defect in its product or a breakdown in its services, the technician writes a report and renders his bill. So if, in response to moral impulse, he broadens the field of his commentary to the social scene, he is doing quite enough, it seems to him, in calling attention to massive irrationalities. There is nobody he can bill, and it is generous of him to give his time to work for which no client will pay. And since he knows what he is talking about, he really *tells* the people.

But "the people," alas, just lie there and bleed. They have come a long way away from the New England town meeting. The town meeting exercised the power of the people in an unspecialized society and it worked quite well. The people's loss of power is itself a subject of many works by critical specialists, and some of the things these experts say are doubtless valuable, but what they are really—that is, implicitly—recommending is a kind of moral regeneration that would probably take at least two or three generations to accomplish, even if we were to begin right now; and there are other specialists with other warnings and proposals standing ready and eager to siphon off even the slightest bit of power the people recover, as the means of stopping certain already lethal practices, and you can hardly blame them for wanting to do this.

The fact is that nobody but a few Gandhians and Tolstoyians are saying what needs to be said: that only the knowledge, the norms, and the criticism that do not evoke the promise of coercive power can do the human race any lasting good. Ninety-nine per cent of all the criticism focuses, finally, on the misuse of power, and if publishers didn't have editorial rules against printing expressions of total pessimism and despair, a large part of it would probably end by saying that there is hardly any hope. But what this criticism ought to end with is a clear statement of the fact that the misuse of power has a direct relationship to the common *reliance* on power. The time may come when the critics will realize that if they haven't said this, they haven't said anything important.

Actually, there are convincing studies making this point, although it comes out somewhat indirectly. One of them, by a psychiatrist, gives ample evidence to show "the unacceptability of disquieting facts." A human being, in other words, can use or profit by just so much criticism; after that, he doesn't—*can't*—hear any more.

This is an appeal for specialist critics to give as much attention to growth- and learning-processes as they do to the crucial warnings they have to communicate. Perhaps this is asking too much. It may be that for a specialist to become a generalist—to start speaking simply as a human being—~s enough for any man to accomplish as a change in the direction of his life. Perhaps it is the responsibility of others to figure out how to make the criticism count for something, to make it *work.* Take for example two paragraphs selected for quotation by Harrison Brown (in the *Saturday Review* for June 6) from René Dubos' new book, *Reason Awake: Science for Man:*

> The present century is called the technological age not because there is a great abundance of machines and man is dependent upon them, but because we accept the fact that our lives are the manifestations of consequences rather than the expressions of purposes. . . .

> Despite our scientific and technological triumphs, we suffer from loss of nerve and have become a conservative society satisfied with continuing our present course. We are no longer willing to construct models of possible futures that we really desire, despite the fact that our willingness to let science and technology proceed on their own course generates nightmares of reason.

What are these paragraphs about? They are only superficially about science and technology. They are really about the failure of the imagination, about passivity, lack of will, and loss of responsibility. René Dubos is not a careless observer given to extreme statements. Yet he feels justified in characterizing modern man in this way. No amount of *power* can help people in such a condition. It is the expectation that power will help them that has *put* them in that condition. Further criticism, to accomplish any useful result, must take this elementary reality into account. To put the matter simply, further criticism, to count, will have to include simple, normative conceptions and positive courses of action open to individuals—things they can do that will not depend upon persuading or coercing others to join them—activities, in short, that have the same role as the spinning wheel had in Gandhi's program of regeneration for the vast village population of India. The problem, in *psychological* terms, is the same.

Criticism is already so far ahead of the step-by-step primitive necessities of any conceivable solution that it has little discernible relation to existing options of individual human behavior.

Consider two examples of clear and indisputable recent criticism—an article by Wayne H. Davis in the *New Republic* for Jan. 10, and a paper by John McHale, published by the Bureau of Business Research, of the University of Texas at Austin. Mr. Davis teaches in the school of biological sciences at the University of Kentucky, and Mr. McHale directs the Center for Integrative Studies, State University, Binghamton, New York.

Writing on "Overpopulated America," Mr. Davis documents his contention that the people of the United States are at least twenty-five times as destructive of the natural environment as the peasants of India who live simple lives. The consumption/pollution rate in America is such that by the end of the century, the people will have used up or dirtied so much of the land (to say nothing of air and water) that extreme emergency conditions will be upon us. Following are some of Mr. Davis' milder paragraphs:

> If our numbers continue to rise, our standard of living will fall so sharply that by the year 2000 any surviving Americans might consider today's average Asian to be well off. Our children's destructive effect on their environment will decline as they sink ever lower into poverty.
>
> The United States is in serious economic trouble now. Nothing could be more misleading than today's affluence, which rests precariously on a crumbling foundation. Our productivity, which has been increasing at about 3.2 per cent a year since World War II, has been falling during 1969. Our export over import balance has been shrinking steadily from $7.1 billion in 1964 to $0.15 billion in the first half of 1969. Our balance of payment deficit for the second quarter was $3.7 billion, the largest in history. We are now importing iron ore, steel, oil, beef, textiles, cameras, radios, and hundreds of other things.
>
> Our economy is based on the Keynesian concept of a continued growth in population and productivity. It worked in an unpopulated nation with excess resources. It could continue to work only if the earth and its resources were expanding at an annual rate of 4 to 5 per cent. Yet neither the number of cars, the economy the human population, nor anything else can expand indefinitely at an exponential rate in a finite world. We must face this fact *now*. The crisis is here. . .
>
> The tragedy facing the United States is even greater and more imminent than that descending upon the hungry nations. The Paddock brothers in their book, *Famine 1975!*, say India "cannot be saved" no matter how much food we ship her. But India will be here after the United States is gone. Many millions will die in the most colossal famines India has ever known, but the land will survive and she will come back as she always has before. The United States, on the other hand, will be a desolate tangle of concrete and ticky-tacky, of strip-mined

> moon scape and silt-choked reservoirs. The land and water will be so contaminated with pesticides, herbicides, mercury fungicides, lead, boron, nickel, arsenic and hundreds of other toxic substances, which have been approaching critical levels of concentration in our environment as a result of our numbers and affluence, that it may be unable to sustain human life.
>
> Thus as the curtain gets ready to fall on man's civilization let it come as no surprise that it shall fall first on the United States.

There may be more hopeful readings of the facts assembled by Mr. Davis, but even the most optimistic interpretation will still point unequivocally to the spartan remedies and immediate self-denials he proposes—requirements which *no* democratic political order can be expected to impose. Involved is an attitude toward life which external power never has been able to induce.

Mr. McHale puts of record the complete futility of international rivalries and familiar forms of military "security," in the light of present technological development. He shows that beneath the externalities of competition and exploitive policies, all genuine progress has grown out of cooperation, and that the complex interdependence of today's industrial network the world over has completely changed the conditions of survival: "From this time on, no nation may go it alone in terms of self-sufficiency of materials or know-how. The game is *nonzero sum*—success and gain are predicated on all winning." This writer, who is a specialist in world resources and economic processes, leaves no doubt that the national sovereignty which operates in patterns of aggressive self-interest is a thing of the past. He gives numerous examples of international interdependencies, then comments:

> We preserve the illusions and accept the problems as if they were inevitable—that men need to compete by destroying each other and each other's countries. The reverse is actually true—no nation today can actually even wage war unilaterally without access to the cooperative networks of global technologies, materials, and information services which make this possible. And, of course, paradoxically, as the latter grow m importance and in complex interdependence, they, in effect militate against such disturbances.
>
> We may well reflect that, even at this stage, if all access to such internationally sustained services as telephones, airlines, and health information were shut off, no developed nation today could survive for more than a few days. This is amply illustrated by even local power failures, airline strikes, etc. This web of international services and interlocked organizations represents a trend and commitment whose real power is as yet unrealized.
>
> We increasingly recognize, therefore, that many of our global problems are now transnational problems—for which there are no national or political solutions. They clearly require the assumption of a new range of initiatives—of applied social designing—of social invention at the global level.

Who will *hear* Mr. McHale? Not those, certainly, who look to power to secure the conditions of survival. Not those, obviously, who think we have dangerous human "enemies." Yet not to hear men like Mr. Davis and Mr. McHale may be to choose not to survive. How, then, are the counsels of these men to be converted into options which exist on a human scale?

REVIEW
RECENT MYTH-MAKERS

MYTHOPOESIS, in the definition made by Harry Slochower in his book of that name, is the art by which mythic material is transformed by the artist-writer, and sometimes given a transfiguring meaning. What before had been only the colorful role of pageantry is turned into a vehicle which dramatizes the individual heroic act. The quality of mythopoesis is measured by human intuitions of its unfolding validity. The use of fantasy does not in the least interfere with its persuasive power. Magicians, monsters, happenings in worlds either above or beneath ours, are all acceptable and delighting, the only requirement being that they satisfy certain "rules" of mythic action and becoming. What are those rules? Well, they hardly bear explaining. They are based upon profound human feelings of what is orderly and right. Yet the order and rightness applies in a world of the imagination set free.

The myth projects the meaning of life in dramatic sequences. It is a form of generalization which clothes abstraction with wonder. Its simplicities are rich in jeweled detail. The senses are engaged by splendor while the underlying meaning is planted as a seed-idea to swell and grow at its appointed time. So a myth, especially a myth in the hands of a great artist, is bread cast upon the waters. Making a myth is a fertility rite of the mind.

The resourcefulness of a good writer is always a pleasant surprise. How, one thinks to oneself, could anyone reanimate old mythic material, today, to any benefit? And then someone does it—with grace and skill. You would have thought it no use trying—like the crazy proposal of reading Plato against a jazz background. *Impossible,* you say, but Sidney Poitier made it work—on the Warner Bros. record 1561.

A comparable achievement in mythopoesis is found in *The Last Unicorn* (Viking and Ballantine) by Peter S. Beagle. Mr. Beagle also wrote A *Fine and Private Place,* a novel about death which recalls similar wonderful inventions—the play, *Outward Bound,* by Sutton Vane, and Anthony West's novel, *The Vintage,* both concerned with what happens after death. The "doctrines," if they can be called that, in these various interpretations of death are very different, but they share a common inspiration in the fact that they all abide by the "rules" that must govern even the freest flight of the imagination.

But why, one should ask, do modern writers resort to fantasy, when nobody believes in "these things" any more? One reason for the vigorous revival of fantasy is that what most people commonly allow themselves to believe in is a worked-out vein for the writer of originality and promise. And in *The Last Unicorn* Mr. Beagle makes a beautiful case for thinking that today's prosy, impoverished "beliefs" are totally inadequate in relation to the realities which underlie the forms of experience men are now obliged to undergo. He has, for example, a real *Harpy* in this story, and when you think about the way harpies behave and how they treat everything and everyone else in the world, you realize that there could hardly be a better way to generalize the obsessive war spirit of the present. The compulsive persistence of today's wars *ought* to be mythically personified, since it so plainly has a malign psychological identity—a force like the cruelty of mobs and the madness of crowds. Conceivably, there is quite as much "truth" in the mythic personification of collective psychological phenomena as there is in, say, Jacques Ellul's contention that modern technology, once it gets going, turns into an autonomous and uncontrollable proliferation of technical means without regard for human hopes, fears, or common sense. This is a *harpy* phenomenon.

It may be, of course, that certain basic changes in the focus of attention are needed in order for us to think of "truth" in this way. When, in the eighteenth century, Dr. Johnson kicked a

cobblestone and let his tingling toes declare the common man's ontology, epistemology, and even value system, he spoke for the intellectual tendency of the entire Western world. But in the twentieth century, we don't have our pain from stumbling around on unevenly paved streets. The pain now comes in at another level, entering our consciousness with the help of books like *Silent Spring* and the warnings of a growing chorus of believable Cassandras who are putting into words what everyone is beginning to feel. One of these articulate ones, Josephine W. Johnson, wrote recently:

> . . . a vast throng of people are working night and day, destroying all they still call their native land.
>
> Who are these people? Who are the destroyers? Breathes there a man. . . . Try and breathe. Who pollutes the air? Who fouls the rivers? Who cuts down the trees, builds houses on the stripped hillsides? Who poisons the sheep, shoots the deer, oils the beaches, dams the rivers, dries up the swamps, concretes the countryside? Who bulldozes homes, builds missile sites, pours poison wastes underground, slabs over mountain tops, rocks the earth with explosions, scars the earth with strip mines?
>
> Who is doing this? Who is responsible for this anarchy and ruin? Is it the revolutionaries, the black militants, the draft refusers? Is it the college students, the pacifists, the hippies? Who is taking our country away from us before our eyes?
>
> It is the well-dressed, law-abiding, patriotic and upright citizens who are taking our country away from us. In the name of saving us, protecting us, and civilizing us, statesmen and generals, scientists and engineers, businessmen and Congressmen, are making us a people without a country, dead souls and exiles. And we are paying them to do it.

This, in its own way, is the stuff of which dark, end-of-the-world myths are made, which will be believed because of the inescapable truth in them. It is the task, the necessity, the obligation and high calling of the mythopoetic writer to help us to identify ourselves in such situations of psychological bondage. He puts his art in the service of showing how we think, how we believe, how our faith in appearances deceives us, and he does this in forms of generalization that have far greater potential clarity than anything the psychologists can say about the matter. Why does he have this clarity? Because he does not ignore the heroic element in man. This is only a way of saying that the great psychologist is always a great artist. Feeling what he does, he has no option in the matter. He must make it evident, somehow or other, that "objective reality" is always what we feel it to be, and that, right or wrong, we stake our lives on what we feel, sometimes losing everything as a result. The re-education of feeling is plainly the only way to clarity and vision.

Secrets like these are revealed in *The Last Unicorn.* The true art of mythopoesis, you could say, lies in revealing unbearable secrets bearably by exposing them in a fabric woven of impossibles. The impossibles make the cipher that protects the secrets from profanation and the hearers of the tale from despair. But the impossibles also take down the guard of the tough-minded Dr. Johnsons, so that the wonder of the heroic and the magically true gets under their skin and infects their skepticism with a benign sleeping sickness. It happens to them without their knowing it. This is magic enough for any despairing age.

In *The Last Unicorn,* this wonderful creature, both less and more than human, immortal yet choiceless as Boyle's law, is trapped and captured by a shabby side show and put in a cage. The people come to see:

> Rukh's iron voice came clanging through the wan afternoon. "Gatekeeper of the underworld. Three heads and a healthy coat of vipers, as you can see. Last seen above ground in the time of Hercules, who dragged him up under one arm. But we lured him to light again with promises of a better life. Cerberus. Look at those six cheated red eyes. You may look into them again one day. This way to the Midgard Serpent. This way."
>
> The unicorn stared through the bars at the animal in the cage. Her eyes were wide with disbelief. "It's only a dog," she whispered. "It's a hungry, unhappy dog with only one head and hardly

> any coat at all, the poor thing. How could they take it for Cerberus? Are they all blind?" . . .
>
> "And the satyr," the unicorn continued. "The satyr is an ape, an old ape with a twisted foot. The dragon is a crocodile much more likely to breathe fish than fire. And the great manticore is a lion—a perfectly good lion, but no more monstrous than the others. I don't understand."
>
> "It's got the whole world in its coils," Rukh was droning. . . .
>
> Then, as though her eyes were getting used to the darkness, the unicorn began to perceive a second figure in each cage. They loomed over the captives of the Midnight Carnival, and they were joined to them: stormy dreams sprung from a grain of truth. So there was a manticore—famine-eyed, slobbermouthed, roaring, curving his deadly tail over his back until the poison spine lolled and nodded just above his ear—and there was a lion too, tiny and absurd by comparison. Yet they were the same creature. The unicorn stamped in wonder.

"Spells of seeming," the unicorn said to her friend, a frustrated, left-back magician. Speaking of the old woman who owned the show, she said: "She cannot make things."

> "Nor truly change them," added the magician. "Her shabby skill lies in disguise. And even that knack would be beyond her, if it weren't for the eagerness of those gulls, those marks, to believe whatever comes easiest. She can't turn cream into butter, but she can give a lion the semblance of a manticore to eyes that want to see a real manticore there—eyes that would take a real manticore for a lion, a dragon for a lizard, and the Midgard Serpent for an earthquake. And a unicorn for a white mare."

People puzzled by the Kantian doctrine of the thing-in-itself should brood over stories like these. And the strange, Leibnizian tenet, "The monads have no windows by which anything may go in or out," even though each one, in its own partial way, reflects a version of the world, is curiously illuminated by the transformed beholdings of the carnival crowd. The people see only by the light of what they are.

But the old witch, Mommy Fortuna, who operates the carnival, has caged one mythic creature that is *real*—the harpy. She says to her barker: "No other witch in the world holds a harpy captive, and none ever will. I would keep her if I could do it only by feeding her a piece of your liver every day."

A little later, the unicorn makes the old woman cry. "Speaking of livers," the unicorn said, "real magic can never be made by offering up someone else's liver. You must tear out your own, and not expect to get it back. The true witches know that."

Magical truth is no more than psychological truth raised to a higher power. This is the secret of the mythopoetic writer, and the depth to which he realizes it determines his runic resources. His protection against serious persecution—being burnt at the stake or pursued by the FBI—lies quite simply in the fact that most people, when you say, "psychological truth," add *only* psychological truth, and think of mythic story-telling as a kind of fun and games.

COMMENTARY
A COMMENT ON "CRITICISM"

IN the last few pages of his latest book, *New Reformation* (Random House, $5.95), Paul Goodman discusses different kinds of criticism. For some purposes he finds the "genetic method" useful. To apply it, one needs a knowledge of history. When there is trouble in some area, it may be essential to know how the trouble originated—how the functions which are now breaking down worked before the trouble developed; and this means "taking into account some simplicities of the past." As he puts it:

> The case is analogous to localizing an organic function, e.g., seeing. As Kurt Goldstein used to point out, we cannot localize seeing in the eye or the brain—it is a function of the whole organism in its environment. But a *failure* of sight may well be localized in the cornea, the optic nerve, etc. We cannot explain speech by the psychosexual history of an infant; it is a person's way of being in the world. But a speech defect, e.g., lisping, may well come from inhibited biting because of imperfect weaning. This is, of course, what Freud knew as a clinician when he was not being meta-psychological.

Goodman's point, here, is that coercing or inauthentic ways of dealing with failures only put off the solutions and make the failures more complicated. And while the historical analysis may not reveal the answer, "it is useful to remember the simpler state before things went wrong." He adds:

> This is the therapeutic use of history. As Ben Nelson has said, the point of history is to keep old (defeated) causes alive. Of course, this reasoning presupposes that there is a nature of things, including human nature, whose right development can be violated. There is.

But what Goodman says also points up the dangers of over-confidence when we have *localized*—or think we have localized—the cause of our lapses and troubles. To find a local cause of failure is not the same as understanding natural human function. It does not give us a comprehensive account of the needs and necessities of the right development of human nature. And our common approach to problems—which is the problem-solving approach: when we have pain we look for specific remedies—tends to neglect entirely the larger and basic question of how "right development" takes place. This question is at root philosophical and seems nonspecific in relation to our pain.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

GAMES FOR CHILDREN AND GROWN-UPS

A LONG time ago, we read somewhere about the effects of several generations of poverty and want on the children of Appalachia. Something that almost never happens happened there. The children forgot the games that older ones always teach the young as they come along. Probably there is a lot in print on the "socializing" values of these games—ring-around-a-rosy, hopscotch, and mumbly-peg—and the dozens of other ways, varying in city and country, that children have of playing with one another, but here we'd like to speak of them simply as means by which the qualities of being human flower in the young. It seems best to think of games and play as natural elements of every child's life. Only when they have been deprived of these practically spontaneous relationships, held in solution by the normal human community, do we have to think of teaching children how to play games as some kind of treatment or "therapy." And that, of course, is what it becomes, since people who know about children see that their lives are mechanistic and passive, their eyes dull, and that there is little or no joy in their daily round. They can't *be* children any more—no more than a lovely flower can grow on the rock-hard surface of a city lot where people pile their junk and spread the odors of sterility, waste, and failure. So, in this case, a few people who knew and cared about children went down to Appalachia to teach them how to play games.

But persons like that can't do everything that is needed. They can teach the children games and see a little happiness come back into their faces, but they can't change the conditions in Appalachia. So they grit their teeth and smile and try to be joyous while showing the children how to play. There is really nothing else for them to do. Perhaps the children they help will grow up stronger and make some changes in Appalachia. The least you can say is that they have a chance to remain human a little longer.

Teachers have been doing things like this and consoling themselves with the fact that doing what they can is better than doing nothing, for a long, long time. Doing more is up to the adult community. There is a difference, however, between children and the adult community. You can really do things for children. Children aren't as deeply into the kind of life we lead as adults are. Hope and wonder haven't died in them.

But nobody wants or is able to *do* anything for the adult community. Well, that isn't entirely true; people do try to help their community, and a few of them know how, but a great deal more is involved than teaching other people how to play games. Games are only the childhood introduction to forms, rules, and meanings; they are absolutely necessary for the young, but as a preoccupation of adults they represent a condition of arrested development.

People who still want only to play games when they are adults are really in pretty bad condition. If they are so unfortunate as to be "affluent," they go through the repertoire of games at a rapid rate, and hire clever people to make up new ones for them to play. The complication and ingenuity of the games creates an artificial excitement, and quite large business enterprises subsist on the desirability of staying excited all the time. After all, excitement conceals the fact that the games have no real meaning. Eventually, however, boredom creeps in. Feelings of unhappiness have to be disguised by ingenious psychological cosmetics which enable people to pretend to be happy and feel excited a little longer.

But the fact is that these people are sick—something like the children in Appalachia. They have forgotten how to be adult humans. They've been playing at being "children," and maybe they needed to do this for a while, but the time comes when nothing will really work unless they decide to grow up. They look around for help, and it is discouraging for them to discover that the few who have set a good example in growing up didn't ask for or get much help. Growing up is really finding your own way.

A society based on "success" and material progress does almost nothing to prepare the young for recognizing this. A few years ago an English teacher in a California state college realized that his

students were so tied up with misconceptions about what they were in college for and what they were supposed to "learn," that he couldn't teach them anything at all. So, for two weeks, he had them play leapfrog up and down the aisles between the desks—things like that. He taught them "games," you could say, to restore some firsthand feeling of what spontaneity is like. It helped. Not much, but it helped. How can anyone listen to what a poet has to say, if all his spontaneity is gone? And if he can't hear any poetry, how could he ever write some?

So the boys and girls played for a while. They got a little untied. The teacher let them be children, not just for a day, but for two weeks.

Wow! one of them said. He was in some kind of shape to read a book by Thomas Wolfe. Not Whitman. That would be expecting too much. Wolfe was a sort of boy-Whitman who didn't grow up. His editor was the adult in the matter.

It became evident to a number of people that this sort of thing is really a general need of almost the entire middle-class population. In fact, it became a great professional opportunity, since games for adults—a refresher course, you could say, in what it felt like to be a child, when you could say any old thing you wanted to—need experienced managers. Somebody has to lead people around until they get the idea. The *best* manager, of course, is the fellow who works himself out of a job—makes the people independent of him. Yet there are always those who like to be led around, who, as we say, need *help*. As Henry Anderson put it recently, "They go to church, or to psychiatrists, or to cocktail lounges, or to encounter groups and 'marathons,' in search of their lost human nature."

For some time now, it has seemed that the popularity of encounter groups reflects a state of mind in which people—some of them, at least—are willing to think of themselves as being as helpless and deprived as the children of Appalachia. They have made a fashionable game out of learning how to loosen up their feelings—just getting *ready*, you might say, to behave like human beings. If you can actually *cry* at the wonder of it all, you don't have to do anything else. You don't really grapple with meaning; you just get ready to. And you get so "untied" that you can't get together by yourself at all, any more.

Yet the fact is that some kind of "encounter" seems to have been at the root of the inspiration of nearly all creative people. Blake had his vision—more than one of them—and so did Tolstoy. There are undoubtedly "happenings" which make things glow with potential meaning. But the second time you set up the circumstances of the awakening it begins to be secondhand, and the third time—well, it turns into a ritual. Is there something wrong with rituals? This is too big a question to be argued summarily here, but the fact is that the ritual is always and only preparation; when it is mistaken for the real thing its forms become barriers to what it was intended to invoke. And then, after these forms are fixed in social practice, all sorts of undesirable concomitants begin to appear. The emotional reaction against ritual that played so large a part in the Protestant Reformation was an authentic revolt against emotional self-deception, against an easy path to comfortable complacency in the face of screaming contradictions. Rigid cultures bound up in habits whose meanings have been forgotten are usually fanatically loyal to ritual. The role of ritual is only for the child in the man. It has no place when a man begins to know for himself or to create. An artist bound by ritual may develop some pleasing echoes, display some nice pageantry, but his work will have no life of its own.

No doubt there is a way for people to meet with one another, to stir one another to more perception than is possible for a man all by himself. Artists have been doing this for thousands of years; and so have thinkers and seekers. Education is neither more nor less than a means of organizing such ways of meeting, and when the young are involved, some kind of "drill" has proved useful. But the education is never in the drill, which gives only a little order, and some invitation, perhaps, to learning. The drill is the circumstances, the setting, not the thing itself. All drill and no learning is the confident administrator's dream, and ritual is affective drill. It is for people who need managers, who don't know that their *psyches* are really their own.

FRONTIERS

Some Quotations on "Art and Politics"

A SYMPOSIUM on "The Writer's Situation" in No. Nine of the *New American Review* has passages from contemporaries we should like to repeat, but only after setting the problem more clearly with some earlier material. In his life of John Sloan, the American painter, Van Wyck Brooks quotes the following from Sloan:

> It may be taken as an axiom that the majority is always wrong in cultural matters. . . . Politically I believe in democracy, but culturally not at all. . . . Whenever a cultural matter rolls up a majority, I know it is wrong.

Hardly any practicing artist would disagree with this, yet at the same time might find substance in Shelley's claim that poets are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." But how does this work? The resistance of the artist to "public opinion" is traditional and often necessary. Could there be a democracy which would refuse to exercise "majority control" in cultural matters? Perhaps it will be argued that we have such a democracy, but long ago, in *Democracy in America,* Alexis de Tocqueville described the sort of pressures the artist feels from majority opinion:

> The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it (majority opinion) to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people.

In the *New American Review* symposium, Russell Banks finds good writers now unable simply to tell "stories" any more as a means of "confronting the amoral, non-human, self-seeking alternatives in their lives." He sees the beginnings of this feeling in the work of Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, and Emily Dickinson, and represented in the twentieth century by Cummings, the early Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, and Henry Miller. After quoting Robbe-Grillet—"To tell a story has become strictly impossible"—Banks says:

> One has found oneself in the middle of an historical episode that does not allow one the innocence of moral or metaphysical certitude, and as a consequence, each individual act of consciousness is a redefinition of the nature, worth, and meaning of one's existence. Any writer who would do more than merely divert himself and his reader must therefore swear a new allegiance—he must commit himself to a continuous ongoing discovery of self. He must forswear his old allegiance to story-telling and commit his voice not to tell the "truth," but to reveal in his work the conditions that permit continued existence. Nothing is separate from existence, least of all art, and therefore the artist must allow himself to run the same risks in his work that he and all other men are forced to run in their lives. He must convince us that, at the moment of sitting down to write, he is about to discover anew the terms of his own continued existence, and insofar as he shares with his reader a specific historical situation, his discovery will be his reader's as well.

It might be thought that the contribution of Hugh Seidman, a poet, throws light on Shelley's meaning:

> It is clear that poetry has no purpose, in the way that all creation is ultimately purposeless. It is just here that the poet is strongest, for that which is without purpose can never be made expendable, and implies the largest possible freedom. I do not think of this as art for art's sake while the world falls around our ears. It is only because the poet is so conscious of the world that he knows how important his freedom is if that world is ever to function correctly. He holds to what most men are only too willing to relinquish, with only his own sense of rightness to help him. He proceeds on a way that the very civilization he lives in is committed to destroy, just as it is prepared to destroy the bodies of millions in the name of ideals it has never understood nor practiced.
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> That the question of politics and art is even posed indicates how far we are from any real solution to the situations that have so plagued us for the last six thousand years. Insofar as art or politics is an expression of the creative they are essentially of a like phenomenon. Unfortunately, when the word politics is mentioned, all sorts of definitions take over depending upon who is speaking. We must understand that most political acts are useless on an overall scale because they are perpetuated by those

> who have not fully realized how much of what they fight they themselves contain; or if they have grasped this, are unable to apply this knowledge in the exigencies of the moment. In this sense the artist, or any man, should have nothing to do with politics. But we might also speak of politics as trying to bring about true changes in the nature of institutions and ways of thought. In this regard, the poet is always in the vanguard because he is working through the paths of creation and change that seek to illuminate existence by an act of beauty and knowledge that has not forfeited its emotional content. He is trying to define a life, realizing that this definition is useless to himself once it has been formed. Any revolution or political action that does not acknowledge this situation is fated to repeat the horrors we live with as second nature.

The poet in the present society, Mr. Seidman adds, has the role of "renegade or outcast." He may be diminished by this as an artist, so that his work cannot exercise the influence it might. "I think," he concludes, "that this situation is characteristic of a people who have succeeded in divorcing knowledge from any kind of reverence for the natural world which brought the knowledge forth."

The idea that "poetry has no purpose" needs explanation. This is the same as saying that acts which are ends in themselves have no purpose. They have a meaning, but no end exterior to the display or realization of that meaning. They are symbolic of the self-sufficiencies in life, the goalless realities. They have to do with being rather than doing. Poetry is needed for speaking of such acts since the ordinary meanings of language are entirely concerned with "doing," and poetry is a use of language which frees it of ordinary meanings. This seems clear from what Hugh Seidman says.