VOLUME XXI, NO. 10
MARCH 6, 1968

THE FLIGHT FROM ABSTRACTIONS

SOME day, perhaps, we shall have orderly knowledge about what happens in human beings when great idea-systems crumble and lose their authority. We know something, of course, about these changes. The relativist historians have made careful studies of thought and behavior under the influence of ruling ideas of Man and Nature. Carl Becker's comparison of epoch-making conceptions—the medieval with those of modern times—in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* is a classic illustration of "objectivity" toward human affairs, made possible by the static security of an urbane skepticism. Becker, you might say, was fortunate in living in a time when a sophisticated, doubting intelligence could practice the arts of historical inquiry on a still solid foundation constructed by energetic men of conventional faith. Hardly anyone thought of questioning the stability of critical scholarship in Becker's day. The euphoria of Progress gave general assurance that modern man knew what he was about, and it was hardly necessary to support with argument what everybody already accepted.

A general feeling of this sort—that things are right with the world, that the major cultural institutions have a firm grip on the problems of man and society—is very difficult to objectify because it involves countless unexamined assumptions and habitual reliances on the way things are. Precisely because this feeling is never looked into, it supports the sense of freedom and well-being of the great majority. And for the same reason, when the general "faith" begins to show signs of faltering, all those who are still riding along comfortably on the assurances felt by the past generation find the symptoms of change incomprehensible. Often, they invent demonologies to explain what they cannot understand.

There are, in short, elaborate systems of unrationalized emotional allegiances which unite people with their daily undertakings, their goals and the mechanisms for reaching them, and no culturally achieved common understanding or justification of these allegiances exists. It follows that when a generation of young gives evidence of wanting to break away from the familiar patterns of life, *their* reasons or explanations find nothing to relate to in the body of conventional thinking. They cannot make themselves understood by exploring areas which have been totally ignored by the earlier generation. The "pressures" felt by the two generations come from fundamentally different sources.

A changed polarity of being and awareness seems to be involved. This comes out in the forms of expression that *are* available to the young—various "folk" activities, and curiously ephemeral alternatives to conventional life, none of which seems to have much substance in comparison to the old confidences and assumptions. So "communication," as we say, breaks down. There is a lot of handwringing and impotent wondering on the part of parents, who feel themselves challenged, not in terms of "ideas," about which they might be able to argue, but at the level of taken-for-granted habits and "practical" matters concerning which, they believe, there should not be any argument at all.

We have only a few clues as to what is actually happening. The obscurity of the change is due to the enormous disparity between what we think we know, and the actual knowledge we possess as individual human beings. For example, we speak—that is, our magazines and press speak—of our extensive scientific knowledge and point to the world-changing applications of this knowledge during the past hundred years. But "we" don't really have this scientific knowledge,

ourselves. We witness its effect and enjoy something of its fruit. And one of the most notorious facts of life for scientists themselves, today, is the complete impossibility of any one man acquiring more than a small fraction of the totality of scientific information now said to be available about the nature of the world. What "we" have, therefore, is not knowledge, but is a new kind of faith in authority—an authority supported by many concrete achievements in the transformation and improvement of our material environment, and elaborated on by a special sort of journalism devoted to admiring and celebrating the work of scientists and technologists, as they create, before our eyes, the evidence of the progress of the human race. This is a *general* idea about the modern world—so widely held, so commonly relied upon for justification and explanation of what modern men and their leaders do, that occasional dissent or criticism has hardly any effect at all on the public confidence.

The psychological processes involved in developing the idea of progress are well described by Northrop Frye in *The Modern Century:*

> The basis of the conception is the fact that science, in contrast to the arts, develops and advances, with the work of each generation adding to its predecessor. Science bears the practical fruit of technology, and technology has created, in the modern world, a new consciousness of time. . . . the pace of news, with telegraph and submarine cable, helped to dramatize a sense of the world in visible motion, with every day bringing new scenes and episodes of a passing show. . . .

The feeling-tone of this assurance is reflected in the voice of the news-commentator or any sort of "establishment" spokesman—always a man whose tense, confident speech, easy reference to authority, and "everything-is-under-control" intonations generate the resonances of a common righteousness and bring to each listener his share in the popular certainty. "Unctuous" is the word for this feeling-tone, as we are beginning to regard it; "unctuous" now fits the invariable style of the secular faith of our society in the same way that it applied to clerical imitations of a religious faith that was once honestly felt, but is now recalled only by institutional reflex and social habit.

We said that hardly anyone thought of questioning the stability of the scientific outlook back in the days of Carl Becker, but there were a few men who did. As long ago as 1930, Ortega sensed a profound disillusionment with science on the European scene, and in his *Revolt of the Masses* he discussed the resulting moral vacuum for modern man. It was Ortega's view that a man could have no clear ideas, no true sense of orientation unless he recognized the fact of this vacuum and learned to live in a state of admitted ignorance and uncertainty. Another writer of unusual awareness, one whose hard-headed honesty still serves us well, Walter Lippmann, said a little later (in the *Atlantic* for September, 1936):

> For more than twenty years I have found myself writing about critical events with no better guide to their meaning than the hastily improvised generalizations of a rather bewildered man. Many a time I have wanted to stop talking and find out what I really believed. For I should have liked to achieve again the untroubled certainty and the assured consistency which are vouchsafed to those who can wholeheartedly commit themselves to some one of the many schools of doctrine. But I was not able to find in any of them a working philosophy in which I could confidently come to rest.

Mr. Lippmann's uneasiness may not seem directly related to a disillusionment with "science." As a socio-political analyst, he records here his growing distrust of what was once called "Victorian optimism"—which might be described as a morally devaluated vulgarization of the eighteenth-century dream. Yet the idea of progress through science was a central conceit of that time. Lippmann's discouragement grew out of the socially disintegrating effects of the first world war and from the fact that manipulative theories of change seemed to require violations of human freedom. As he put it:

> Everywhere the movements which bid for men's allegiance are hostile to the movements in which men struggled to be free. The programmes of reform are everywhere at odds with the liberal tradition. To

> improve their fortunes they are told that they must renounce their rights. To escape from want they must enter a prison. . . . Thus those who would be loyal to the achievements of the past are in general disposed to be fatalistically complacent about the present, and those who have plans for the future are prepared to disown the heroic past. It is a vicious dilemma.

These views, held by Mr. Lippmann in 1936, are even more pertinent today. And the disillusionment involved is with the entire fabric of assumption of Western civilization. Conceivably, the "two cultures" argument begun by C. P. Snow is an extremely superficial formulation which tends to conceal the deeper ills of the time. The character of these ills may be more clearly revealed by the events of the immediate future than by argument between humanists and scientists.

Two crucial discoveries are implicit in the feelings of the coming generation, although they were explicit in pioneering criticisms made of the practice of science some thirty years ago. One of these discoveries is that the knowledge which brings power is not the same as knowledge which benefits man. The other discovery—hardly more than a psychological corollary of the first—is that manipulative power does not provide men with a sense of meaning.

These are profoundly important discoveries. Why have we been so long in making them? Mainly because the pursuit of truth has not been and is not yet the main concern of most human beings. The mistaking and popularization of the quest for power as the search for truth is back of the terrible *hubris* of modern man. And the success of our civilization in the acquisition of power has been so impressive as to blind us to the difference between power and truth.

For the first signs of these discoveries in the thinking of scientists themselves, we need, again, to go back to the 1930's, when the increasingly abstract character of physical knowledge began to be upsetting to responsible teachers of science. Writing under the title, "The New Dogmatism" (in the *Scientific Monthly* for October, 1937), Francis B. Sumner, then professor of Biology at the University of California, spoke of the increasing factor of blind belief in popular attitudes toward science. Even scientists, he maintained, are subject to this tendency. As a practical consequence of the proliferation of "research" in all directions, he said, "not only do we depend more and more upon authority for our scientific information, but this information, when it reaches us, arrives in the form of abstractions to a large degree divested of living reality." He saw a disturbing psychological parallel between religious dogma and scientific information:

> A worshipper, repeating the "Apostle's Creed," expresses his belief in the "resurrection of the body." A student, reciting in a chemistry class, tells the professor that the "atomic number" of sodium is 11. I do not wish to make too much of this comparison. All I contend for is the probability that to many students "atomic number" is just as much of a dogma as "resurrection of the body," and just as little capable of being translated into terms of human experience. As to the professor—well, there are professors and professors of course. But any kind of instructor in chemistry will tell the student in a few words just what the expression atomic number "means." The number of positive charges on the nucleus of the atom—what could be simpler? And so, I doubt not, could any bright Sunday-school teacher give a verbal account of the resurrection of the body.

Turning to the ingenious analogues used to "explain" the principles of relativity to the layman, Dr. Sumner points out that the illustrations given are completely impossible for anyone to "act out," as in the case where one man is supposed to be able "to read another man's clock or measuring rod, while one or both of the parties are traveling at these furious speeds." Further:

> A disembodied equation may be highly interesting and valuable when we are concerned with pure mathematics, but it hardly serves as a substitute for a description when we are concerned with phenomena of the physical world. At least this is true for the non-mathematical mind. To an unsophisticated naturalist I fear that this argument that a thing may have the properties of a wave and a particle at the same time is too strongly reminiscent of some of the old-time theological arguments for the

> doctrine of the "Trinity." . . . There would seem to be a vast inconsistency between the traditional notion of the man of science with his uncompromising insistence on evidence and his lofty scorn of guesses and unproved assumptions, and the quasi-mystic who tells us all these strange things about space and time and infinity and who describes with such assurance the detailed intricacies of an infinitesimal world forever beyond the range of human observation.

An English professor of astro-physics, Herbert Dingle, wrote in the July, 1937, *Atlantic* on much the same theme. Taking for his subject "Knowledge without Understanding," Prof. Dingle pointed to the abstract obscurantism in various branches of modern learning, including physics, and commented:

> Now it is of the first importance to notice that in all these departments of thought we are dealing, not with difficulties which stimulate, but with impossibilities which crush. The new ideas are not merely hard to understand; they are intrinsically beyond the reach of understanding—or, at the best, beyond the reach of understanding without a long and arduous course of special training which only a few can undertake.

In science of this sort, all men are completely at the mercy of highly trained specialists. And in the case of the new physics, the scientists are themselves at the mercy of the skilled mathematician. For almost everyone, science at this level becomes a matter, not of verification, but of trust:

> The enigmas of modern physics are in no measure explained; they are simply dispelled. The reader is not enlightened; he is drugged. Paradox, instead of being a challenge to thought, becomes a delight to the ear, and whenever the reader feels a question arising in his mind there is always a comfortable assurance ready to preserve him from the dangers of thinking out the answer. . . .
>
> Captivity looks not so bad, then: we can really trust our masters to look after us. And here finally is the proof (in elaborate mathematical formulae), from one safely imprisoned. It is far better even than we dared to hope. We are not merely lodged in comfort; we are hypnotized so that we believe we are free.

Concerning the plight of the "ordinary man," Prof. Dingle had this to say:

> In matters which he has once learned to call "science" his respect for knowledge is abject; the most obvious nonsense is welcomed with joy and wonder if it is only called "mathematics" or "quantum theory." On the other hand, in matters of infinitely more difficulty which are not technically "science," the opinions of experts with first-hand knowledge are deemed absurd, or even criminal, if they conflict with the emanations of his own ignorance.

Prof. Dingle concludes:

> The blind acceptance of authority, as well as the supreme assurance of ignorance, must yield to the active operation of a reason equally conscious of its sovereign powers and of their proper limitations. There is no state of mind more easily exploited by the clever demagogue, charlatan though he may be, than that which exists among us at this moment.

There is, then, in all this, no real "attack" on science, but only an insistent calling into question of the faith in such scientific knowledge as the means to human freedom and human good. For how could a specialty dependent upon extremely rare and difficult skills, of which only a very few men are capable, ever be turned into an actual theory of *knowledge?* Experience has shown that all this sort of knowledge can become, in relation to the rest of mankind, a system of *authority.* It acquires this authority through the prestige of the power it makes accessible to men. But this power is morally neutral, not an enlightening or saving potency. As a defender of science, Dr. A. S. Pearse, a zoologist at Duke University, said in the *Scientific Monthly* for October, 1937:

> Science has not changed the nature of men or of their societies. It has given opportunities, and men have chosen to use these to make themselves better or worse. The false assumption on the part of critics is that a scientific discovery should mean progress for society. The radio gives man unusual ability to communicate over great distances. It may be used to give notice of storms and to keep ships on their courses through dense fogs and thus benefit man; but it is also used to send out misinformation . . . or to spread selfish propaganda. It is not the business of science to make men good.

These are some of the realizations underlying the psychological changes we are now having to

endure. They reach their sum in a withdrawal of faith. The faith was never intellectually justified, but it nonetheless led to a general confidence in all those devices, habit patterns, customs, and rubrics by which the beneficiaries of "modern progress" have lived until the present moment.

Today, the growing loss of faith pulls the pins from the joints in familiar ways of doing things—many of them hardly seeming to be connected with anything so ponderous as "faith in science." Yet the instinct of the young, in whom the change is principally evident, is to pull the pins, to break with the past. They don't feel any validity in these activities. Their subjective reactions were developed during an epoch of harassing doubts, and the unctuousness of all "public" explanations of failure is obvious to them. Northrop Frye has given brief, clarifying statement of the rational ground behind their disillusionment:

> . . . there was an underlying tendency to alienation in the conception of progress itself. In swift movement we are dependent upon a vehicle and not on ourselves, and the proportion of exhilaration to apprehensiveness depends upon whether we are driving it or merely riding in it. All progressive machines turn out to be things ridden in, with an unknown driver. . . . I am saying that no improvement in the human situation can take place independently of the human will to improve and that confidence in automatic or impersonal improvement is always misplaced.

This is an idea of great common sense and startling simplicity. Yet it is in direct contradiction to almost the entirety of the literature celebrating modern progress. It is certainly in contradiction to all the sales promotional propaganda of commerce and industry, and, also, to the idea that "knowledge" is made up entirely of descriptions of the materials and dynamics of the external world.

It is an idea which comes to a focus in the individual's will to understand the meaning of his own life and to live it the best he can. That meaning may be somewhat extended by some kinds of scientific knowledge, but its core is prior to and independent of the abstractions of manipulative power. The core of meaning lies in the search for the good. The individual pursuit of the good is frustrated by reliance upon "experts." It becomes irrelevant in a society devoted to progress that is dependent on various forms of manipulative power. The change in attitude which is sweeping over the Western world, today, amounts to a sudden and by no means fully conscious decision to reject the mutilations brought by the worship of power and submission to technical authority. It is a naïve declaration of independence of the fixtures, machinery, rhythms, and habitual goals of Western civilization. It follows, then, that for a time—perhaps a long time—we shall be living in a world of misfits, incompatibilities, and false starts. It takes time for a new way of life to declare itself and then to create its own forms and necessary conditions.

REVIEW
THE INHERENT REALITY

THE driving intention of Edmund W. Sinnott's latest book, *The Bridge of Life* (Simon and Schuster, 1966), is to establish a conception of "reality" different from the one which has prevailed in Western thought for some three hundred years. In form this work by a distinguished botanist is an attempt to show that biological discovery makes a case for religious philosophy But the lasting contribution of Dr. Sinnott's book will be, we think, its emphasis on the idea of recognizing "reality" where it discloses itself, instead of submitting all natural phenomena to the reductive tendencies of a science that came into being largely as the weapon of men engaged in polemics against the corruptions of organized religion. The data of human experience are not turned into something real by isolating them from all conceptions of value.

A reader who has kept track of Dr. Sinnott's work, through the years, is likely to miss, in this book, the exciting descriptions of plant development which, for him, represent and display the essential wonder of life. As he wrote back in 1936:

> A tiny mass of cells near the stem in a plant molds itself into a minute floral primordium, marks out a central, ovule-bearing region and a wall, and develops by a precise series of stages into a fruit, specific in size, form and internal structure.
>
> Evidently something is happening in all this which escapes us. These bits of protoplasm proceed about their task in such a precise fashion as to leave no doubt that they are under a very specific compulsion of some sort.

The direction of cell division is controlled by some unknown mechanism which faithfully reproduces the master pattern of the species. Yet a plant has no "nervous system" by which these directions can be organized and transmitted:

> The fruit, and probably the whole plant structure, produces this axis of symmetry and polarity. This, in the hypothetical picture, takes on some dynamical properties of form that permeate the whole structure. Through what flux, effluvia or ether, this dynamic geometry of vital processes reaches out to influence all cells is beyond safe guessing.

Again, in *Science* for Jan. 20, 1939, Dr. Sinnott wrote:

> To watch a fertilized egg or a tiny primordium march unfalteringly onward until the ultimate form of complex organ or body has been attained is an experience common enough among biologists, but it cannot fail to impress the thoughtful observer with a sense of his ignorance. Until we shall discover what is really happening in this mass of developing protoplasm, what molding and morphogenetic processes are here so subtly at work, our knowledge of living things will still be merely superficial.

Earlier (*Science*, Jan. 15, 1937) he had spoken of the fundamental paradox of organic form:

> . . . that protoplasm, itself liquid, formless and flowing, inevitably builds those formed and coordinated structures of cell, organ and body in which it is housed. If dynamic morphology can come to the center of this problem, it will have brought us close to the ultimate secret of life itself.

It is in this mood that Dr. Sinnott comes to grips with the problems of philosophy. Not remarkably, he insists that the intelligence of life ought to be accepted as a reality in itself, and sought out and studied in the forms through which it is expressed. The point is that if we are really concerned with equating reality with meaning, it is patently absurd to take flight from the levels of experience where meaning is disclosed, in the name of seeking a more primary "reality." Why should we assume that we shall reach into the heart of things by reductive analysis? This may well be the way in which the very avenues to perception of reality are destroyed. "Perhaps," Dr. Sinnott writes, "as Bohr has suggested, life may be an elementary fact of the universe, like gravity, which must be accepted without our attempting to define it." Yet the definition provided by the author a little later is undeniably helpful:

> A living thing is not a collection of parts and traits but an *organized system*, well called an *organism*. . . . Life is more than a series of lifeless chemical processes. These are part of it, but it transcends them and pulls them all together. I can best define life as *the process by which matter is brought together in organized and integrated systems capable of self-perpetuation and change.*

He then adds:

> L. J. Henderson believes that organization is a major category in nature, standing beside matter and energy. J. S. Haldane goes further and suggests that science must ultimately interpret the world of matter and energy in terms of organism and not try, as it now usually does, to explain the organism in terms of the physical sciences. The organism, product of biological organization, has been emphasized much less than many other biological facts, probably because it is so difficult to understand. I shall try to show that in biological organization can be found the roots not only of the physical side of man but also of his psychical traits. The main argument of the present book is based upon this fact of organization, the phenomenon that makes possible the bridge of life.

It is the wonder of the invisible, organizing intelligence of living things that constitutes for Dr. Sinnott the "bridge" from matter to spirit. He keeps hammering away at the *sui generis* character of this intelligence, which, he says, we must study in all its manifestations and potentialities, and *not* try to explain it away in terms of the organism's ingredients or parts. Of science which would dispose of "life" by reducing vital phenomena to the categories of physics and chemistry, he says:

> We are like a scientist listening to an orchestra and trying to find the secret of the harmonies he hears by making an analysis of the physics of the instruments, of the sensory and motor mechanisms of the various players and of the electrical patterns in the brain of the conductor. His search will be in vain. The most complete analysis will be useless to him, for what binds together the performance of this group of men and produces great music is something underneath it all, the great orchestral *score.* Something remotely comparable to this score may be the basis of the harmonious control that produces the organism. This idea is not mysticism or scientific pessimism though it is sometimes called such. It is a recognition of the fact that form and pattern are qualities *inherent in the universe,* both lifeless and living. They must be studied by the techniques of synthesis, not by analysis alone, as science has usually done.

A question worth asking is why this common-sense view should be presented almost with diffidence. Dr. Sinnott anticipates irritation and objection from his colleagues in biology, as though his conception of intelligence and form-making potentiality as things-in-themselves were somehow a dreadful heresy. Why.? Why should conventional biological science feel constrained to exclude the manifest reality of intelligence in order to "understand" the processes of life? Why must the omnipresent facts of life and being be ignored in the name of objective certainty?

Why, in short, this war against "teleology"? It is as though the entire scientific fraternity had been almost frightened to death in its infancy by the apparition of *life,* and has ever since been devising defenses against a repetition of the horror.

Man is the crown of evolution. All his knowledge is a fulfillment of purposive striving. All his activities have an end. All his explanations relate means to ends. He is a natural being—conceivably, he is nature itself in a state of self-consciousness. The intelligence he expresses is stuff of his being, the primary *given* of his awareness. Yet it is this natural intelligence which science has been attempting to read out of the universe. Why? Dr. Sinnott has his own way of asking this question. Regarding man, he says:

> Science shuts its eyes and pretends that there is *nothing* there but protoplasmic mechanisms. Nevertheless, the man inside feels vividly that in some fashion, strange but very real, he permeates his body, and that its behavior is under his direction and control. His feelings of selfhood and freedom are so strong that, in his psychological innocence, he finds it hard to believe that he is no more at last than a collection of molecules and a succession of reflex acts. Here is our problem posed in simple terms: what is the relation between the material body, on the one hand, and, on the other, a hypothetical something else—dearly immaterial, perhaps nonexistent, but possibly quite real and more significant than anything else on earth?

Obviously, the mechanistic obsession is losing its hypnotic control. The immediacy of man's sense of self and the pervasive strength of his intuitions of purpose and meaning are regaining their natural authority. *The Bridge of Life* is a book consciously devoted to this restoration.

COMMENTARY
SOCRATIC FRIENDSHIP

WE are rightly wary of easy definitions of the self. An account of man's inner being which can be rubricized or made into a formula is a barrier to self-discovery. But an attempt to understand self-*activities* is somewhat different. The meaning behind an act of self-reference remains a flat abstraction when described in words, but gains rich content from being acted out.

In this week's "Children," for example, Prof. Bowers speaks of the need of the individual to "withdraw into himself in order to think through his own values. . . ." The man who begins to *do* this becomes a man who feels the dimensions of his identity. He begins to originate causes. His freedom becomes a subjectively tangible reality.

"Definitions" could never have conveyed to him the substantial reality of his own being. Verbalization hides the self, but acts of the self make it subjectively manifest. For this reason, perhaps, dialogue is better than written communication, as Plato contended. The self is not known logically, but through the active play of its being. When a man openly refers questions and ambiguities to the core-intelligence of his values—the values which have given his life its unique configuration—he supplies evidence of the reality of his inner being. A field of *morale* gains some objective presence through such activity in dialogue. You can almost "see" a man thinking in this way.

We might call this second-degree objectivity. Unlike the objectivity we have without effort with respect to the external world, this second-degree objectivity exists only in a created field. It develops out of exercised recognition of the realities of self-understanding.

There can be, for example, no grasp of the psychology of self-actualization without at least the beginnings of such a field. Subjective science requires use of both imagination and will—which may be the meaning of Plato's claim that self-knowledge is *volitional.* And the idea of "dynamic unification," explored by Raymond Rogers in *Coming into Existence,* must be understood from the content of lived experience. Such realities, if they are communicated at all by words, require poetic incantation, and the reader must cast his own responding spell. Before anything of this sort can be accomplished by the educational process, the schools will have to become places of Socratic friendship.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL FOR THE SCHOOLS

II

HAVING identified one of the major problems that must be resolved before the educational process can lead to something more than social adjustment, I would now like to sketch in broad strokes an alternative system of educational values to that of the social reconstructionists. Where they began with educating for social responsibility—and never got beyond it—I would suggest that the school make its primary objective the development of the individual's inner self. Learning the customs, goal-expectations and roles assigned by society goes on all the time outside the school. What should take place in the school is a form of education that equips the individual in a way that enables him to withdraw into himself in order to think through his own values, formulate a plan of action consistent with these values, and return to participate in society more on his own terms.

By starting with the human condition, rather than social need, a number of problems come into view which can properly be regarded as more the responsibility of the school than any other institution. The first of these is the freedom which accompanies the existence of all men. Because we can only live subjectively we are confronted each moment with the necessity of decision-making. We have to choose between alternative courses of action, the meaning we are going to attach to an event, and even what will occupy the center of consciousness. To use Jean-Paul Sartre's terminology: "choice and consciousness are thus finally one and the same thing." Viewed in this way freedom is not something that is granted to the individual by the state, rather it is something we exercise in the very process of living. While we can never escape our own freedom, we often allow ourselves to be dominated by other individuals, laws, and institutions like the church and state. We may even look to these outside authorities to tell us what to think and how to act. Yet even the act of submission to the dictates of an outside force is essentially a free act; what the act of acceptance does, in effect, is confirm the limiting conditions that are imposed from without. If, however, the conditions are regarded as too burdensome or too degrading, then the individual is free to rebel against them; and in the act of rebellion he is affirming the existence of another value as being more worthwhile. We are also free to determine the level at which we are going to live out our lives; to accept a life preoccupied with triviality or one that is characterized by a stubborn search for a deeper truth and purpose is a choice that confronts each of us. It is impossible to avoid making a choice and, therefore, exercising our freedom.

While the individual's freedom is potentially unlimited, ignorance and self-deception can, and do, impose limitations on its scope. To expand the area in which the individual can act freely by making him knowledgeable both about the choices that are available and the consequences of each choice, should be, it seems, one of the primary objectives of the school. For without knowledge freedom becomes a disruptive and chaotic force. Learning about one's physical and cultural environment can contribute to a more intelligent exercise of freedom, but it is not enough. The school must also make the student aware that his decision represents an act of freedom and that he alone is responsible for it. Making the student aware that he is free and responsible for how he exercises his freedom is presently not a goal of the school. This is primarily because it is much easier to run a school when the students are led to believe that they must follow the rules laid down by the institution. If the students were told that they are free to pursue the studies that interest them most or to use their time any way they considered desirable, the efficiency that comes from our present lockstep approach to education

would be lost. Perhaps another reason that no real attempt has been made to make the student aware of the meaning of his own freedom is that most administrators and teachers are little concerned with it. Before they can lead the student to a correct understanding of freedom they must become aware of it in their own lives; self-deception on the part of the teacher can only thwart the student's powers of self-understanding and direction.

That we have not yet understood the significance of freedom and its relationship to education can be seen in how little opportunity we provide at both the public school and university level for the student to come to terms with his freedom, much less to recognize its existence. His time is often completely scheduled with classes and other demands which he must meet and, in the public schools, he is constantly under surveillance. Seldom is he left with a block of free time where he must determine for himself how it is to be used. It may be necessary to exert more control over the activities of students in the lower grades to insure that they acquire the basic intellectual skills which they must rely upon later when they begin to organize their own ideas. But as the student masters the basic skills it seems that he should be gradually introduced to an environment where he has to come to terms with the problem of decision-making. The schools should strive to transfer the function of decision-making from themselves to the student, and the process should be complete by the time the student graduates from high school if he is going to avoid becoming intellectually dependent upon some other institution. That the schools have generally not been concerned with enlarging the student's power of self-direction can be also seen in the way he is forced to memorize facts and the ideas of others, but seldom encouraged to formulate his own questions. Yet, the ability to raise important questions, both about himself and society, may be more important than acquiring a body of factual knowledge that is always in danger of being outdated. It contributes to the intellectual self-sufficiency of the individual, whereas an inability to distinguish between a trivial and a profound question leads to a state of blind dependence on those who are only too willing to share their answers. In creating an atmosphere that encourages a student to ask his own questions, he is, in effect, being given a chance to see meanings and relationships for himself, and thus to organize his own body of knowledge.

By increasing the student's awareness of his own freedom and supplying the intellectual tools necessary to use it in a personally constructive way the school is, at the same time, giving the student greater contro1 over the process of self-identification. When the student emerges from the school believing that authorities—social, political and religious—exist only for the purpose of being obeyed, or that one must always refer one's actions to the group for confirmation, there is a danger that he will accept passively, a concept of self that reflects more the values of others than his own. George Herbert Mead has shown how our concept of self is formed through the responses that other individuals and groups make to our actions. If we lack the power of discrimination which comes from a knowledge of the individual or group that responds to our actions, then we are really at their mercy. Their disapproval of an act or idea will often lead us to disown it too, unless we realize that we are free to accept or reject their judgment. In seeking to bring our thoughts in line with what we know will be approved by society, we are abandoning the responsibility and, indeed, the right to develop our sense of identity. An awareness that we are free to accept or reject the evaluative responses of others is the first step in the direction of individual autonomy. Knowledge of society enables one to select the group or value system that will supply the criteria for evaluating his own acts. The reference group may thus be highly abstracted and generalized—like accepting the Thoreau-Gandhian idea of passive resistance as a guide to conduct. In moving from a state of dependency where one accepts the judgments of others as a guide to conduct, to the state of

independence which is characterized by a greater ability to live inwardly—and therefore more independently of social norms—the individual is gaining control over the process of self-identification. This process involves the selection of goals, which are highly subjective, toward which the individual moves. In a sense the individual moves. In a sense the individual chooses what he wants to become rather than merely playing out the role that is designated by society.

Unless the individual asserts his own values and sense of identity he will be, in all likelihood, swept along by events. Conformity then replaces self-integrity as the individual becomes lost in the group. It is only as the individual can separate his own values from those of the group that he is able to dissent. And it should be added, that when the individual finds his own values in agreement with those of the group his conformity will carry with it a higher degree of commitment to the goal of the group. Social pluralism, and in a very direct way democracy itself, are dependent upon individuals who are engaged in the quest for self-identity. When this quest is ignored by the people the monolithic state becomes a reality that, in turn, oppresses those who do take it up.

C. A. BOWERS

Eugene, Oregon

(*To be concluded*)

FRONTIERS

"Living and Breathing Fiction"

WE are far too much the creatures of our myths to attempt to give them classifying definition. "Myth," said Friedrich von Schelling, "resembles nature in its permanence, profundity, and universality." Bronislaw Malinowski, the anthropologist, called myth "the re-arising of primordial reality in narrative form." Myths are the improvised garb of the thing-in-itself behind being human.

Periodically, men suppose they have settled the origin of all those old stories. People made them up, they say, to fill the gaps in their understanding of the world. Now we know better. Now that we have real knowledge of natural forces, the myths can do us no service. Of interest to antiquarians, illustrative of primitive foible, myths cannot grip our emotions nor guide our lives. We have learned to live by facts.

Yet myths keep asserting their claim on human beings. It is as though the flattened-out "reality" of a universe devoid of psychological forces, in which nothing moves except from the morally indifferent dynamics of a gravitational field, has no breath of life in it for human beings. So men must find ways to smuggle back into their world clandestine schemes which restore the reference-points of psychological reality. They have to make for themselves a continuum which has in it the stuff of human dreams.

We live by our myths, and it is well to know it, although to describe them in some bright, objectifying fashion would be precocious and stultifying. We do not know enough to limit the realities by which we are moved, since no man can so easily tell what and who he is.

Years ago, working with a group of children that had been denied access to fairy tales, the psychologist, Samuel Slavson, found that the children invariably made up their own. There was no such thing as "doing without." Myths were as necessary as breathing to the children. And so it is with grown-ups, too, although very few of them are able to admit the secret role of fantasy in their lives. Willy Loman's brother Ben was the Arabian Nights wonder-worker that kept Willy going, but also, being a myth filled with betrayal, did him in. How much better the flights of imaginative world-making which Ralph Ellison recalls from his childhood in Kansas City. Who or what, one may ask, could have supplied a better or more "accurate" reality for these children? Jazz, Ellison says, was brought to perfection in Oklahoma. As he tells it, in *Shadow and Act* (Signet 1966):

> . . . my friends and I were exploring an idea of human versatility and possibility which went against the barbs or over the palings of almost every fence which those who controlled social and political power had erected to restrict our roles in the life of the country. Looking back, one might say that the jazzmen, some of whom we idolized, were in their own way better examples for youth to follow than were most judges and ministers, legislators and governors (we were stuck with the notorious Alfalfa Bill Murray). For as we viewed these pillars of society from the confines of our segregated community we almost always saw the crooks, clowns or hypocrites. Even the best were revealed by their attitudes toward us as lacking the respectable qualities to which they pretended and for which they were accepted by others, while despite the outlaw nature of their art, the jazzmen were less torn and damaged by the moral compromises and insincerities which have so sickened the life of our country.

How could children grow up at all without this engrossing imagery of the daring and the wonderful? What, indeed, shall we say about these indispensable elements of man's psychic life, when it comes to comparing them with the abstractions of technical certainty? Pragmatically or experimentally, the myths we make, even if only half-consciously, have the greater claim to reality since we do *live* by them. They actually mediate all the relations we have with the world outside. We can hardly deny that the quality of our myths determines the quality of our lives.

Ellison thinks of himself and his boyhood companions as a company of Huck Finns:

> Like Huck we observed, we judged, we imitated and evaded as we could the dullness, corruption and blindness of "civilization." We were undoubtedly comic because, as the saying goes, we weren't supposed to know what it was all about. But to ourselves we were "boys," members of a wild, free outlaw tribe which transcended the category of race. . . . We were seeking examples, patterns to live by, out of a freedom which for all its being ignored by the sociologists and subtle thinkers was implicit in the Negro situation. Father and mother substitutes also have a role to play in aiding the child to help create himself. Thus we fabricated our own heroes and ideals catch-as-catch-can, and with an outrageous and irreverent sense of freedom. Yes, and in complete disregard for ideas of respectability or the surreal incongruity of some of our projections. Gamblers and scholars, jazz musicians and scientists, Negro cowboys and soldiers from the Spanish-American and First World Wars, movie stars and stunt men, figures from the Italian Renaissance and literature, both classical and popular, were combined with the special virtues of some local bootlegger, the eloquence of some Negro preacher, the strength and grace of some local athlete, the ruthlessness of some businessman-physician, the elegance in dress and manners of some headwaiter or hotel doorman.

These boys were myth-makers:

> Looking back through the shadows upon this absurd activity I realize now that we were projecting archetypes, recreating folk figures, legendary heroes, monsters even, most of which violated all ideas of social hierarchy and order and all accepted conceptions of the hero handed down by cultural, religious and racist tradition. . . . being boys, yet in the play-stage of our development, we were dream-serious in our efforts. But serious, nevertheless, for *culturally* play is a preparation, and we felt that somehow the human ideal lay in the vague and constantly shifting figures—sometimes comic but always versatile, picaresque and self-effacingly heroic—which evolved from our wildly improvisionary projections—figures neither white nor black, Christian nor Jewish, but representative of certain desirable essences, of skills and powers physical, æsthetic and moral.

But what about civilizations—cultures whose collective faiths are dying out? Should they attempt to recover some vitality for their myths?

Questions of this sort are considered by Alexander Eliot in a paper in the *Texas Quarterly* for the Summer of 1967. Toward the end, he says:

> Is there any way to heal ourselves? Should we attempt resurgence as "Christians"? Or should we seek a path more consonant with "scientific advance"? Or what?
>
> These are fairly hot points of debate right now. Some people wonder, shuddering a little, whether Nietzsche was right when he said "God is dead." Others reply that it's ourselves who are dying from the roots up, as charity dries out of us. Dr. Timothy Leary sits down by our bed and begs that we swallow drugs to stretch our sense of myth. Bishop James Albert Pike, in his purple, plumps our pillows while proposing that we "demythologize" religion instead. The myth concerning Jesus' virgin birth, Pike smiles, no longer "speaks" to him.
>
> Myths which no longer "speak" are like dreams we have banished on awakening. They happened, in the same sense that our dreams happened. To deny the existence, as experience, of myths or dreams would be absurd. But of course to call them "true" in the literal or waking meaning of the word would also be absurd. So far, so good. These distinctions may be subtle but at least they don't conflict with common experience or common sense. The Santa Claus on the corner is a fraud, perhaps; yet Santa lives. Myth is ambivalent: a lying truth or, if you will, a living and breathing fiction. Our honest differences do not concern the ambivalence of myth so much as they do its continuing significance—or lack of same.

The thing to do first, it seems clear, is to recognize that the substance of our psychological being, reflected by our myths, is as inaccessible to direct observation as the hidden entities behind subatomic phenomena are for the physicist. The physicist makes his "representative fictions," and works with them, knowing quite well that these definitions are temporary—that they will eventually dissolve into closer approximations. So with our myths, which are representative fictions, too, and basic materials we have to work with in self-discovery.