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THE AMBIGUOUS GODS

SOME things about human life are obvious, believable, inescapable. Yet knowing these things does not help us very much. The known (by itself) is not of great value in solving problems or answering unanswered questions. It is possible, of course, that we do not really *know* the known, but only a limited portion of it, and that our difficulty lies here; but this is just another way of stating the problem.

Every day and all the time we have to act; we have to make decisions *as if* we know what we are doing—according, that is, to some theory, guess, or belief concerning the areas of life—of ourselves—of which we are still ignorant. The foreground of our existence, then, is filled with the *x-y-z* suppositions we put in place of knowledge, hoping that they will work and that we are not making serious mistakes.

One doesn't act, of course, without giving *x* or *y* or *z* a value (meaning). In the not so distant past, we substituted the Gods to make our ignorance seem less formidable. Periodically, it seems, men feel a need to have gods, and then, after a time, they feel the need to dispense with them. With each of these changes of view, men claim to be making "progress." The most often quoted phrase of Robert Ingersoll is that "An honest God is man's noblest creation." True or false, it is certainly an idea we can work over.

Well, as we said at the beginning, we know some things as inescapably true, and one of these things is that Deity can have no definition—not unless, that is, we change our idea of God and allow the possibility of finite gods. What is involved in the idea of a finite god? It has to contain *something* beyond the finite, or there would be no sense in using the word "god." Well, then, a finite god is a creative being who works within limits.

But that is a definition of man! The application of reason in this sublime area makes for perplexities. What sort of limits, then, do these man-gods work within, and what justifies calling them gods? To have existence in time and space—as we do—is to work under limits. Yet there is no finality in anything humans do or make—what they do can always be altered, improved, or worsened. So the quality of being human—what we *are*—can not be defined by time; the limitations of time and place are continually being transcended by human beings; not absolutely, but measurably, and, indeed, unpredictably.

This is pretty impressive language for people who feel as depressed as we do about our lives. So, in development of a theory of the gods, we might say that to enable ourselves to use this language—since we *want* to use it—we invent the gods as projections of human potentiality or possibility.

Are they then "false" gods? The answer, it seems clear, must be yes and no. If thinking about them illuminates and strengthens our lives, they are true gods; if not, they are false. How can we tell? If there were a short answer to this question, the universe would undoubtedly collapse for lack of evolutionary meaning. However, we do learn something about all this by looking at a given period of history. In retrospect, from the way people behave, it becomes reasonable to make judgments about their gods.

To help out in such matters let us make some assumptions. Let us assume, for example, that since the world and our lives are partially intelligible, there is the possibility that they will eventually become completely intelligible. This may be hard to imagine—mainly for the reason that, if we knew all about the universe we live in,

there would be nothing left for us to do—but if we think evolution is a universal law, inscribed in the grain of all life, it becomes entirely reasonable to suppose the existence of some sort of intelligence—conscious intelligence, like ourselves—which has gone far beyond us yet can't help but feel sympathy for those still struggling in ignorance. Such intelligence (again, on occasion, like ourselves) would try to do what is possible to help us learn more about the world and how to make the best of our lives here.

How would this intelligence start out?

It would first of all suffer frustration. This seems quite obvious. All those who know more than others and want to help them suffer frustration. The learning process pursued by human beings is mysterious. The wisest humans of history have found themselves impotent in the presence of the determined ignorance of mankind. The Christs are crucified, the Buddhas misunderstood, the Socrateses poisoned. This is frustration, to say the least.

Being wise, they must have known they would be treated this way. Being determined, they kept on trying; as educators, they do not accept discouragement. What is their method? Since the answer to this is bound to be arguable, we choose one example of what such beings do. They speak ambiguously. They pronounce obscure oracles. They devise myths. They repeat parables, allegories, symbolic stories.

Such stories are as necessary as breathing to human beings. Deprived of them, children invent their own. What is a human being? A human being is a form of intelligence which requires a sense of meaning that reaches beyond itself simply to go on living. There are dozens of ways in which this necessity is confirmed by experience. The expression, "the religious instinct," is one confirmation. When Northrop Frye says that knowledge (science) cannot enter into everyday human life except as it is transformed into myth, he is confirming this idea. The pseudo-myths of ideology may be another kind of confirmation.

What, in psychological terms, is a myth? It is the natural food of minds possessed of memory and imagination. Memory contains the field of what has been, imagination is the power of creating what will or may be. We can imagine (create) well or poorly, of course. We can make great works or messes. Memory displays both.

Why is a myth better than a true-fact description? A myth gives clues to the imagination; a true-fact description inhibits the imagination, condemning the true-fact to be forever hearsay, not our own, not experienced (created) truth. This is a way of saying that what is not self-created remains unknown. Educators from Socrates to Piaget have told us this about human learning, but we still ask the bright people of the world to solve our problems for us—and often the bright people, being in some ways not so bright, try to do it, and thus confuse both us and themselves. What they attempt doesn't, can't, work with human beings.

What is science? Science is the elimination of ambiguity. It is the statement of fact without exception. A statement of fact with explained exceptions is still a statement without exception. This being the nature of science, it naturally seeks levels of description appropriate to what it does. When randomness (or freedom) seems inevitable, science operates at a level where prediction becomes possible through a statistical approach. One might say that science is history—it tells what has been and what is. Its grammar—its method—does not encompass creative acts. The creative acts precede the application of method. For this reason there is no science of man; there is science applying to parts of man—his equipment, that is, his various kinds of embodiment—but none that applies to the reality that makes him human: his power to choose, to create and recreate.

Could there be a science which takes creativity into account? Accounts for the unaccountable?

A question like this is bound to be resisted. For historical reasons a scientist is likely to

consider the idea of free will or creativity with as much suspicion as he has of an interfering extra-cosmic Creator. How can there be science—which *is* prediction—if it has to stipulate unpredictable causes in nature and life? Long ago, in *Psychology: Briefer Course,* William James stated the position:

> A psychologist wants to build a *Science*; and a science is a system of fixed relations. Wherever there are independent variables, there science stops. So far, then, as our volitions may be independent variables, a scientific psychology must ignore that fact, and treat of them only so far as they are fixed functions. In other words, she must deal with the *general laws* of volition exclusively; with the impulsive and inhibitory character of ideas; with the nature of their appeals to the attention; with the conditions under which effort may arise, etc.; but not with the precise amounts of effort, for these, if our wills be free, are impossible to compute. She thus abstracts from free-will, without necessarily denying its existence. Practically, however, such abstraction is not distinguished from rejection; and most actual psychologists have no hesitation in denying that free-will exists. . . .
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> When, then, we talk of "psychology as a natural science," we must not assume that that means a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground. It means just the reverse. . . .

Yet James declared that he was going to practice a no-free-will, physiological psychology, explaining that "the only way to make sure of its unsatisfactoriness is to apply it seriously to every possible case that can turn up." Unfortunately, few of those in the psychological fraternity were as acute as Prof. James. They didn't find such a psychology unsatisfactory at all. As he said, they simply *ignored* the independent variables—the qualities of originality, moral strength (or weakness), altruism, compassion—proceeding in their reductive measurements and calculations as though they did not exist. The result, over the years, has been a view of man which neglects all these qualities, which regards them as some sort of nuisance and beside the point in a science of man. And this view, as we can see from contemporary art, politics, and social arrangements, has made what Stanislaus Joyce calls "the oppression of a monstrous vision of life itself." The kind of science we are used to popularizes a view of man in which he is nothing more than the accidental product of circumstances, creature of forces with which he had nothing to do.

If we were now presented with a science of man that has room for the creative, the godlike, and the transcendent, we should probably have difficulty in recognizing it as science. As W. H. Auden said, discussing the outlook of the ancient Greeks: "Nothing is more bewildering to us about Plato, for instance, than the way in which, in the middle of a piece of dialectic, he will introduce what he himself admits to be a myth but without any feeling on his part that it is a peculiar thing to do."

The introduction of myth seems to us peculiar because myth deals with the essential qualities of man, and our science does not. It is exactly as Mumford, Camus, and Roszak have shown. We are compelled to say, echoing Camus: "Forever shall I be a stranger to myself. . . . I shall never know."

Meanwhile the massive dimensions of our science—its endless penetration and catalogue of the physical environment, its increasingly impressive history of natural phenomena, its extraordinary manipulative power—which seem to require nothing of us save wonder and submission—leave us naked and shriveled. Science permits no veil of ambiguity. For science, anything unpredictable is the *enemy.* This makes science—conventional science—*our* enemy. Eric Havelock, in an essay on the meaning of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound,* points out that this science's effect on the idea of man amounts to a reduction which is unbearable, "and therefore almost unthinkable."

> For it seems to destroy those truisms which the nature of our consciousness demands shall stay true. Who dare say that justice is any more eternal in the heavens? It is a name, a sound of approval, voiced by an ephemeral species to indicate some crawling

> pattern of preference, on a speck of dust, in the vast halls of space and time. Who dare say that man any more keeps company with angels, in those trackless wastes beyond the sun and moon? Who dare say his intelligence, so long mastered by illusion, so long convinced that it stood at the point of judgment in a measurable and estimable environment, a cosmos organized by a permanent and stable providence—who dare say that intelligence has any health in it, any metaphysic, any revelation above the energy of the blind groping of a worm?

Have we, Havelock asks, eaten "too greedily of the tree of knowledge"? His book, *Prometheus* (University of Washington Press), presenting this classicist's essay and his translation of *Prometheus Bound,* was published years ago, in 1950, which may account for his saying that the effects of our greediness have been kept secret. No one familiar with modern art and literature could call these effects "secret," today. Except for this, the following has gained much in accuracy during the past twenty-five years:

> Modern man has learned the disproportion between himself and his universe and is secretly depressed and defeated by his own insignificance. He retreats and relapses into a half-formulated cynicism, which confines his practical hopes and ambitions to an immediate minute. He loses some inner faith and interest in his descendants, and even in himself as he will be in old age. But the loss is secret. Even to visualize his life as a whole, from birth to death, and to plan today's living and loving with an eye on the emotional needs of tomorrow, requires an act of faith which the new science of his own utter insignificance has undermined.

What is the meaning of the myth of Prometheus—or of Aeschylus' reading of it in his great drama? Stripped of all false optimism, it remains a declaration of the significance of man:

> The antique framework was not only mythical but understandable; it established a proportion between man and his environment, which, while it kept man small, was still a proportion. He remained an *x* in the equation, not a zero.

Who, then, is Prometheus? He is a god and he is a man—or Man. His gift to humans was fire, including the fire of mind—the strength of the imagination, the power of forethought. So, in our terms, Prometheus was the father of know-how, of science and technology. But he is also the archetypal altruist—the self-sacrificing god who refuses to submit to Zeus, to the mighty authoritarian who wants man to continue in a reduced, submissive state. Prometheus opposes the naked power of Zeus, and endures his punishment, with courage if not with complete patience, because he knows that power always comes to term, always destroys itself.

Havelock believes that the way out for modern man is to restore Prometheus to the cosmos—which is to restore man. The Promethean is an altruist, and science without altruism becomes Epimethean—"the agent of transmission of miseries to man." Altruism and self-sacrifice; both linked with the powers of the mind—these are the qualities which have been left out of the scientific account of man, and therefore left out of the universe, since universe is a human conception.

Havelock discusses the idea of foreknowledge at some length, showing that it is naturally united with the doing of good. Without foreknowledge, science pursues only immediate, self-centered goals:

> Short-range effort fastens on the thing nearest to one's nose; this thing becomes one's own utility of the immediate moment, something private to oneself. As the time range extends, so does the orbit of persons and interests. . . . The conclusion would seem to be that if man cares to pre-think far enough, his forethought becomes increasingly moral and philanthropic in its direction. Man cannot pre-think evil, but only good.

Goodness is not only private and personal, as religion tends to maintain:

> If modern man clings at the same time to the illusion that the precious healing balm of altruism is by definition confined to intimate relationships, he is forced to dismiss it as an emotional luxury, not adapted to the needs of policy. That religious prejudice, which separates the source of moral purpose from the intellect, cripples the range of moral purpose beyond remedy. The formula symbolized in the person of Prometheus restores hope of effective

public action, by making moral purpose depend not on religious intuition, but on a certain directive training of the mind.

But why should Prometheus be punished by Zeus, if he is such a force for good? The explanation of religion is that he "sinned," that he challenged the authority of the Ruler of Olympus and the world. Prometheus does not avoid the charge; he glories in it. Zeus, in his eyes, is no more than the lust for power, the insistence on might:

> The tyrannical will of Zeus, and the various executive forms which it takes in the play, form a single parable of the will to power and the will to obey among men. They are a critique and a condemnation of what might be called the chain of command, or the structure of discipline which translates the willfulness of the strong into a system, and makes the end product seem inevitable and almost natural. The masque puts on parade not the purely personal relationships of man to man, but the structure of society itself. Intelligence and power are influences that compete for the direction of human affairs. If their contest grows grim, if it can end in the crucifixion of the wise by the strong, it is because of the frightening immorality of the executive mind and mood.
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> Some measure of discipline as a means to other ends is obviously necessary in any society. But if present-day societies tend to collide head-on, to their own destruction, it is not because they have too little discipline, but because they have too much. There has been a steady tendency in the west to estimate this quality as a moral virtue, to be pursued in and for itself: social discipline has been confused with self-discipline. A religious ethic, which bases itself on obedience to divine will, is partly responsible for this falsification. The chain of command and obedience, once it becomes an end in itself, conflicts with all forms of science and all processes of the imaginative intellect. The *Prometheus Bound* is a tremendous dramatization of this clash of history.
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> It symbolizes also the reasons for it, when Zeus is represented as ignorant of his own future and his own interest. His ignorance threatens his security, and the threat arises directly out of the nature of his power drive.

Again, why is Prometheus punished?

The answer seems to be that *we* punish him; we are Prometheus *and* Zeus:

> The Controllers and Executives of this world [the agents of Zeus in *Prometheus Bound*] by their very presence enjoy honor in this world, for that honor represents what they want and must have, in order to be what they are. The intellectual [which here means the Promethean] must by definition be pushed to the wall, because his science cannot be competitive. To compete for power would destroy his premises and his mental processes. So far as he does compete, he puts his own premises away from him.
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> So, by that virtue which is his, he is called upon to bear an emotional burden which his rival does not have to shoulder. Every time he attempts a fresh effort at foresight he risks offense to the established chain of command in society. . . . This brings on intellectual man a certain loneliness. He is not necessarily a type or a class. He can be a part of many men; but one which, if they lack Promethean nerve or if they are placed in circumstances where they cannot use intelligence, they conceal in order to be successful. The play at times seems to rise to the level of a moral philosophy of the estate of man. Its actors, with varying degrees of irony and protest, all give witness that philanthropy is not requited, that the benefactor is evilly treated, that pity given wins no pity in return, almost as though this were a historical law. It is not suggested by the victim that his benevolence was mistaken. He nowhere expresses regret for his policies. Rather, the drama seems designed to reconcile the Promethean to carry this burden of non-requital, as if it were a functional element in his task. And this is true. Working in actual history, the Promethean intellect can never be repaid in kind for its services, for if it were, the services would be recognized in the category of the familiar; and its objectives, to be familiar, would have to be short range. They would therefore lose that touch of imaginative science which makes them Promethean.

Here, surely, is the foundation on which to erect a science of Man—a view of human beings which assimilates the godlike and declares the law of their becoming.

REVIEW
RANDOM READING

THERE is no simple and single appreciation of a good writer, and the better the writer the more unpredictable the reader's response. Loafing, recently, through the pages of the Viking collection of William Faulkner's short novels—*Spotted Horses, The Old Man,* and *The Bear*—which hold the attention no matter how cryptic the meaning or how long the sentences (some make a full page)—we kept wondering: Why is this man so *good?* The question may be foolish but the longing for an answer is not.

Spotted Horses is uproariously funny. After getting a few pages into it you are likely to pursue anyone who happens along, with a finger on your place, and insist on reading out loud a page or two. The sardonic bitterness of the women commenting on the customary idiocies of their men has just enough condescending tolerance; the decencies hidden in the most brazen of rascals come out exactly when they ought to. These stories are human encounters much more than books. The author has a feeling for certain qualities in human nature that is awesome in its effect. He is not looking down or up at his characters, but at them, from the inside.

Comment on books of this sort should be deliberately short, briefly inviting. There is no substitute for reading them, no way to skim their cream. The ironies of *The Old Man*—Old Man River, in this case—are exquisite; and they are not "developed" by the writer but grow, little by little, until, at the end, they burst on the reader like a thunderclap.

The Bear is the story of a hunt—a bear hunt that lasts for years. Again you come in at the middle of things, gradually getting familiar with the characters and what they are about. They are white men, and men partly Indian and partly black. These people have their weaknesses, their narrow bands of awareness, but the *story* is about what they make of what they are. You know, as you read along, that there can't be an end to this story. Maybe it's easy—or was easy for Faulkner—to have this timeless quality in one's writing. But getting the translucent tissue of human life on a printed page is not easy at all. There are such terrible contradictions. Faulkner's use of them makes you wonder if he just erased himself and repeated the figures, movements, and speeches which his precipitating imagination displayed to him—as though he were somebody else, as though he had nothing to do with it. But then you realize that there has never been a more *individual* writer than Faulkner. All the way it is a Faulkner creation, with the play of his associations, his memories, his dreams, his darting fancy, and his sudden fits of classical allusion producing the flow and the mood.

In *The Bear* a boy learns from an old Indian—or part Indian—the lore of woodcraft and hunting. After the encounter with the bear, in which he is at last killed, the Indian is found lying close by, unconscious, apparently from exhaustion and old age. The hunters think he will be all right but the boy knows he will die. The boy wants to stay with old Sam, but it is time for him to go back to school.

> "You're damn right you're going back to school," Boon said. "Or I'll burn the tail off you myself if Cass don't, whether you are sixteen or sixty. Where in hell do you expect to get without education? Where would Cass be? Where in hell would I be if I hadn't never went to school?"
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> He looked at McCaslin again. He could feel his breath coming shorter and shorter and shallower and shallower, as if there were not enough air in the kitchen for that many to breathe. "This is just Thursday. I'll come home Sunday night on one of the horses. I'll come home Sunday, then. I'll make up the time I lost studying Sunday night, McCaslin," he said, without even despair.
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> "No, I tell you," McCaslin said. "Sit down here and eat your supper. We're going out to—"
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> "Hold up, Cass," General Compson said. The boy did not know General Compson had moved until he put his hand on his shoulder. "What is it, bud?" he said.

"I've got to stay," he said. "I've got to."

"All right," General Compson said. "You can stay. If missing an extra week of school is going to throw you so far behind you'll have to sweat to find out what some hired pedagogue put between the covers of a book, you better quit altogether.—And you shut up, Cass," he said, though McCaslin had not spoken. "You've got one foot straddled into a farm and the other foot straddled into a bank, you ain't even got a good hand-hold where this boy was already an old man long before you damned Sartorises and Edmondses invented farms and banks to keep yourselves from having to find out what this boy was born knowing and fearing too maybe but without being afraid, that could go ten miles on a compass because he wanted to look at a bear none of us had ever got near enough to put a bullet in and looked at the bear and came the ten miles back on the compass in the dark; maybe by God that's the why and the wherefore of farms and banks.—I reckon you still ain't going to tell what it is?"

But still he could not. "I've got to stay," he said.

"All right," General Compson said. "There's plenty of grub left. And you'll come home Sunday, like you promised McCaslin? Not Sunday night: Sunday."

"Yes, sir," he said.

In passages like this one, everything local falls away. The old General has the capacity to spot what is real in a human being. In some relationships, that is, he can see it. The way people ordinarily do things—depending on protective devices, conventions, custom, prudence—works best most of the time, but there are moments when you have to forget all that. A man who can recognize those moments when they come—nobody knows how—has the right to command. And a writer who can make his readers see this performs a minor miracle.

We've never noticed any moralizing in William Faulkner. Maybe there is some somewhere; there are books of his we don't want to read again—*Sanctuary,* for one; but he was a man who had dose touch with the nerves of life, who knew how to make homely things serve as altars for his thanksgiving, and how to reveal heroism in act instead of by adjective. While this is going on, Faulkner is like a bystander: *he* isn't creating these people, they are just there, and you're no longer reading a "story."

Some kinds of writing need commentary and "introduction." But there ought to be a law prohibiting all such pseudo-assistance when it comes to a work which was born from the artist whole and complete. A fine song, poem, or story ought to be heard without intermediaries. When the sun comes up bright in the morning you don't need a manual on astronomy; the more you study and try to remember, the more you'll miss. When the violinist begins to move his bow, the thing to do is to *listen.*

A work of art does not speak to the symbols of time and place but to the keys of meaning in ourselves. It may use the symbols, like stepping-stones, but the best stepping-stones need the least notice while you use them.

By indirection Faulkner makes the reader brood about all the things he knows better than to talk about. When a boy of seventeen reads a lot of dime novels, then practices up to rob a train, because robbing trains is like going after the Golden Fleece, or like counting coup on a tribal enemy or stealing his horses, and then gets caught—because he had the purity of an unspoiled believer and didn't know such stories are written to make money—and goes to prison for godknows how many years; and while in prison goes on being a true believer in his own still unspoiled way, until, finally, they let him out to go rescue people who are drowning in a Mississippi flood; and when he makes hell and highwater pale and empty words by what he survives to do the job they set him, and then days later comes back to prison on his own, and the warden adds ten years to his sentence just to keep his records looking good—well you read this and know that such things are really likely to happen in our mixed-up world. And then you want the heavens to open and a great light shine to show people—*make* them see—what ought to be done.

One pedestrian point you could make after reading *The Old Man* is that we don't need any research on the failures of penology. But if you say this people will ask you if you think we should just close the prisons or open them up and let everybody go.

Nobody can tell people what to do, not even Faulkner. But if a lot more people could experience an increase in their humanity, they would see that rule by rule is errant, and often bitterly cruel—that it's mostly a confession of ignorance and helplessness on our part—and then people who get in trouble wouldn't be made to *feel* as though they're not worth anything and that nobody cares about them at all. With a real change in the way people think about crime and jails and criminals, there would be at least a chance that our institutions would be staffed by the best instead of the worst, and all the laws we pass would begin by making an apology to the world, explaining that while law enforcement goes against nature again and again, we don't know what else to do.

A writer like Faulkner gets people to thinking along lines like these.

COMMENTARY
ABOUT STORIES

WHILE we were musing about Faulkner's rare abilities (see Review), a small book came in from Schocken—*Stories of Sicily,* translated by Alfred Alexander ($10.95—ridiculous, isn't it?)—which precipitated the question: What is the special virtue of the short story? These tales by Italian writers who lived within the past hundred years—from Pirandello to Danilo Dolci—help to suggest an answer. The following is from a story called "Antimony" by Leonardo Sciascia, related by a Sicilian character who, by blind fate, found himself fighting on Franco's side in the Spanish war:

> For me, for Ventura and for many of us, there were no flags in a war we had gone into without understanding it and that gradually pushed us towards the arguments and opinions of the enemy. But every one of us felt the need for a pledge of honour toward himself; not to be frightened, not to give way and not to abandon his post. Perhaps all wars are waged like this, with men who are just men, without flags; perhaps for men who fight against one another there's no Italy or Spain or Russia, no Communism, Fascism or Church, only dignity in staking your life honestly and accepting the gamble of death. I say perhaps, because as far as I'm concerned I would have liked to see a true and human flag under which to fight. When the voices inviting us to desert stopped, we heard the tune of the Workers' Hymn over the loudspeaker. The invitations and declarations of fraternity worried me a lot: even true things appear false when shouted over loudspeakers—but the Workers' Hymn made me feel differently. . . .
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> But what was Socialism really about? It certainly had a good banner, as my father said, with justice and equality. . . . But what was Socialism really about? . . . For me it was simply the memory of my father, his beliefs and the way he had died, and the thought that I had risked my life in the same way; and donna Maria Grazia's remark about me "He has his father's twisted ideas"—whereas I had neither straight or twisted ideas but only a sweet memory of my father and great sorrow at how he had died, a terror of antimony, and a little hope of justice.

A good short story gets you back into the grain of life. It helps you to realize that there is no good way to hurry these people along, convert them to anything. They have their own pace, their own alchemical necessities. A good short story makes this clear.

It can't make a great revelation about Meaning. Its wisdom—usually a melancholy wisdom—is of the essence of "folk."

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
CLASS IN DEMOCRACY

IN the tail-end of Ross Terrill's article on Peking in the September *Atlantic* we found this:

> The changes I see in Peking are mostly not economic, and the steady development of the economy that has taken place owes nothing to international forces.
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> The change is social: role of women, spread of education, firmer local community. It is psychological: students lose their awe for teachers, a feeling of pride in China's new world stature arises, a controlled theater constrains people to embrace the political myths of the CCP [Chinese Communist Party]. And it is political: Mao makes a fresh analysis of America: the PLA [People's Liberation Army] is called in and then called off; the high are brought low and the low ushered into their places.
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> All this is change with a purpose, not change as a result of the onward march of economic mechanism. Some moves have been ill-advised—assigning Red Guard impulse to do the job of Party organization—and have had to be canceled. But the purposive change the CCP brings about speaks strength, independence from fashions and pressures in the world, leadership that uses political power in the service of values, minds that believe society can progress far beyond today's levels.
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> And it is change that produces not just new *things* but new ways of living in society. Maybe this makes change in Peking more basic—because more self-moving—than change in most of Asia. Some call it the making of a "new man." I do not think the CCP has made a new man. But it has called into being new social circumstances which make men and women able to behave in new ways. This is true social development, beside which all the gadgets of "growth" are dross.
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> And who cares if communism obviates itself by the self-moving nature of the change it sets in motion? Isms cannot matter as much as the minds and bodies that invent them for a purpose.

Reading Mr. Terrill, we began to think about a class in democracy, with what he does in this article for illustration of how it works—not in China, but here. What is Democracy? You could say it is the ideology of refusing to be seduced by ideologies. A man who thinks democratically is able to look past the slogans at the people who produced them—and who will change them—to see what is really going on. And he is able, also, to publish what he thinks and get a wide hearing for his ideas, in a Democracy. Watergate and all, this is something to recognize, honor, and respect. It happens much of the time in America. It is something to keep going, as vigorously as we can.

Also in this issue of the *Atlantic* is *a* report on Cuba by a journalist who went there recently with Sen. George McGovern. At the moment, things are not going well in Cuba. The people have to wait in line to get what they need at the store. But in today's Cuba, while nobody wears silks, nobody wears rags, either. All are decently dressed; education is going strong; pretty soon Cuba will have 10,000 doctors, instead of only the 6,000 they had in 1959, many of whom fled along with the general middleclass exodus. This writer, Stanley Meisler, says:

> The most telling sign of Castro's popularity is the absence of much overt glorification of himself. Unlike the late Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, or Jomo Kenyatta's Kenya, Fidel Castro's Cuba does not overflow with monuments to him, with photographs of him, with coins bearing his likeness.
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> Schools do have placards with quotations by Fidel.

The American reporters liked him. He was good-humored and intelligent. When they asked him about the CIA attempts to have him assassinated, Castro twitted them for taking so long to expose the CIA's ugly doings. "This is not news for us," he said. "Perhaps it is news for the United States. I know you have very good journalists in the United States, but they were not so good in this case."

On the shortage of goods in Cuba, Meisler says:

> Surprisingly, there is almost no overt grumbling. People wait a half-hour for a bus and then pack into a stifling mass of humanity without the slightest mutter or sigh. I noticed a hint of complaint only once. A man left the long line outside a movie theater on a Sunday afternoon, approached the ticket

seller, shrugged, and held the palms of his hands out, as if to ask, "When are you going to let us in?" But he did not say anything.

Like the Terrill piece, this whole report deserves attention (along with the August *Harper's* article on "the CIA's entanglement in the secret war against Cuba"), as an example of the strength, the impartiality, and the psychological security of democratic thinking. It is humanistic, not ideological. You never get the feeling that the writer is lying in wait for "evidence" of communist failure or weakness. He isn't trying to prove anything. He looks behind the façades, doesn't make fun of people for having them (we all have some facades), and tries to identify both good and bad in human terms. This is democratic journalism at work. There is probably no equal power in America for making friends with other people—people whose patience we have sorely tried. This is one voice of America; it seems to be getting stronger, these days.

It is a voice which refuses to reflect only the view which can be seen through ideological spectacles. When Angela Davis, after being freed, said she didn't have a fair trial—that a fair trial is impossible in America—she seemed to be talking in ideological terms. Actually, a "fair trial" in the ideal sense is probably impossible anywhere, under any system. After all, the subtleties of true justice can never be measured out in the finite segments allowed by statutes—justice isn't blind, but the laws devised by imperfect human beings are. So, the fairest of trials can never be more than the result of what is done by people who are trying very hard to be fair. Angela Davis probably had that kind of a trial. Not many radicals have had the same good luck in this country; a lot of the time the courts have been mechanisms of ideology. It is democratic to say so, to publish the fact. It is undemocratic not to recognize both the failures and successes, or to fail to muse about the uncertainties of a system which rejects the rule of any ideology.

Ideological thinking is bureaucratized thinking—thinking ruled by a time-and-place-bound system instead of by human beings. It is a close relative of the technological thinking which, as Erich Kahler pointed out in *The Meaning of History,* tends to displace authentic reason whenever more production, material luxury, and technical know-how become the total preoccupation. When technological or bureaucratic thinking takes over, the officials of a country can't get elected to office unless they think that way. And then you are bound to have the kind of government that is undermined by the deviously destructive and illegal exploits of a CIA.

Hardly anyone "believes" political and diplomatic utterances, these days. They reflect system purposes, not human purposes. They are examined carefully, of course, but as "signs," not as statements. You study what a politician says and try to translate it back into the code of self-interest and manipulative purpose that it represents. Some of our cleverest journalists give their lives to interpreting such obscurities and explaining to us what the politicians really mean. That is one reason why the newspapers have become so banal. And some of our best magazines give far too much space to such explorations of petty, ulterior purpose. Once a process is understood in principle, you don't need all those details, except once in a while. Hannah Arendt's study of lying in politics was enough to last another ten years.

So it is a great relief to read people like Ross Terrill and Stanley Meisler on China and Cuba. It might even be a relief for Mao and Castro to read them, too. Signs of fairness and decency help people to believe that other people mean what they say. Is there any other way for a country, which once promised to be great, to regain the respect of other people in the world? Is there a better way to re-establish faith in the competence, moral stability, and future of democracy? Well, yes; there is a better way, which would be to conform national behavior to the impartial mood and attitude these journalists express. But that will take some time.

FRONTIERS

Counterattack on Deserts

FOR a year or more we have been reading about the decimating toll of drought and crop failure in various parts of the world—especially in the Sahel, where famine has overtaken the people of several African countries bordering on the Sahara. Emergency aid has come to the Sahel from both America and European countries, but what about a long-term remedy for conditions which, according to both meteorologists and economists, are likely to grow worse? The expansion of the Sahara—turning agricultural lands into desert and depriving humans and animals of both food and water—now devours a Connecticut-sized area every two years, according to one report. What, if anything, can be done?

Apparently, there is an answer. Sixteen years ago, Wendy Campbell-Purdie, an Englishwoman then in her early thirties, was working for a timber firm in Corsica. Not unnaturally, she became fond of trees, and when she heard Richard St. Barbe Baker say that the spread of deserts could be stopped by a "green wall" of trees, she decided to act on the idea. Since Baker was then ill, she bought a one-way ticket to Morocco, where she rented 45 acres of desert and began to plant trees. She used her own savings to meet the costs.

Baker's idea—now hers—was that trees would stop sandstorms and would cool the atmosphere upward to seven times their own height, increasing the surface humidity enough to make the land fertile again. It worked. She planted 2,000 trees at Tiznit, in Morocco, and four years later they were twelve feet high. She proved her point by growing wheat and barley in the shelter they provided.

As so often happens, a change in the Moroccan political regime interrupted these supremely intelligent labors, so Miss Campbell-Purdie went to Tunisia. There floods got in her way so she went on to Algeria, where she besieged officials until they made a proposal that would, they thought, put an end to her badgering. As she tells it (reported in the *San Diego Union* for May 18):

> "They gave me a rather nasty bit of sand covered with scrap metal. It had been a French military dump."
>
> She planted 1,000 seedlings. A year later 800 were still alive. An astonished Algerian government then offered unlimited seedlings for her 260-acre dump.

She went back to England to raise money. She formed the Bou Saada Trust (Bou Saada is the name of the place in Algeria where she planted the trees), and appealed to the public for help. There was good response, so she set a day for a get-together of the would-be reforesters:

> "As I got out of the car, I heard music from a three-piece band. Following them marched a great army of tree planters—thousands, literally thousands, of volunteers.
>
> "I nearly burst into tears. It was the most glorious, maddening and fabulous day of my life."

It was a great day for countries bordering on the Sahara, too.

> A few months ago, she revisited her Bou Saada plantation, now a going concern. Her 130,000 trees are flourishing. The fertile area they created grows vegetables, grain, and citrus fruits. It has given unemployed villagers work and wealth and inspired the government to use Miss Campbell-Purdie's full "green wall" blueprint.

"I'll go anywhere I'm invited and grow trees," she told the interviewer. "I don't think I'll run out of deserts in my lifetime." As a result of her demonstrations, Algeria is now planning an enormous wall of trees, in some places seven and a half miles wide, across the entire country. Senegal, where she visited recently, is about to establish a similar border-to-border protective belt of green. Botswana and Gambia have asked for counsel and Egypt is waiting for help.

The program is simple, and already proved:

> Of course it can be done," she said. "Trees will stop the desert in its tracks. Then you can plant

inward, shrinking the desert as you go. And you can plant pretty well all the way across the Sahara.

"There is still water everywhere, far down. Enough rain falls even now to keep an established tree alive," she said.

"Seedlings planted in the sand need irrigation for two or three years, she said. "But there's lots of water there. Most of it is just wasted now.

"An awful lot of people are starving, and its unnecessary, she said. "Once there's a green wall right around the Sahara, that's going to save a tremendous lot of lives. . . . Once the Sahara had rivers and vegetation and contented people."

Readers who would like to recall other dramatic tree-planting projects will find in MANAS for last Feb. 5 the account of the Frenchman who, working alone for forty years, restored a vast desert area of the Durance Valley (in Provence) by planting oaks and other trees; and the story of Andy Lipkis' ongoing program of planting smog-resistant conifers (thousands every year) on the mountains surrounding Los Angeles appeared in the Oct. 9, 1974 issue.

Reporting on the nutritive value of traditional foods of the Hopi and Papago Indians, as contrasted with commercial food products, *Organic Gardening* for August says: "The traditional Indian foods won—by a fantastic margin." Ironically, the comparison was between the mineral content in food grown and prepared by the Indians of Arizona and "supermarket variety food supplied by the government *under the supervision of a Nutrition and Dietetics Branch established to upgrade Indian health."*

The research was conducted by a team of University of California nutritionists headed by Dr. Doris Calloway. They found that—

Hopi cornmeal ground from Indian-grown corn contained 20 per cent more protein than the commercial product. Hopi cornmeal had twice the calcium, four times the magnesium and zinc, three times the manganese and potassium, and up to 50 per cent more iron! . . . Papago Indians have their nutritional supplement. *Cholla* cactus buds are gathered before they bloom, roasted for 12 hours, and dried in the sun for a week. Less than a handful of these dried buds (one ounce) supplies approximately 850 mg. of calcium, two mg. of iron, 400 mg. of potassium, 185 mg. of magnesium, and four grams of protein. Dr. Calloway concluded that the only commercially available products comparable to traditional Indian foods were whole-grain wheat and rice, neither of which were being given to the Indians! What the Hopi were getting from the government experts responsible for their nutritional welfare were barrels of white flour, white rice, degerminated corn meal, hydrogenated fat—only the pinto beans could be called honest-to-goodness food.

The Burmese have a proverb to the effect that of the five great enemies of mankind, officials are the worst. A Sahara tree-planting project for training them might possibly improve the breed.