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TWO TRANSFORMATIONS

THERE are various transitions in the history of thought which are like the developmental changes in individuals. Such parallels are useful in giving form to what is going on around us. Analogy, after all, is the tool most fruitful for making discoveries. For example, there is a sense in which we all start out in life as "philosophers"—that is, as individuals with purposes and intent on realizing them in life. But then we find ourselves ignorant, not ready to "cope." So we repair this deficiency. That is, we become scientists. We *need* science to deal with a world that is by no means clear in its processes and rules.

This leads to a far-reaching change in attitude, well described in a late paper by A. H. Maslow, in which he distinguishes between "intrinsic" learning, involving personal growth and philosophic understanding, and "extrinsic" learning, which means finding out about things which are not part of ourselves—the entire region of scientific investigation. When a student has made up his mind—decided what he wants to do with his life—he begins to be a scientist. To illustrate this change Maslow uses medical education:

> The general point is that once a person has decided to commit himself to becoming a physician, his taste in teachers, in classes, in education, all change very radically. He now seeks to become skilled, to become knowledgeable, to become master of his trade. In general he ceases to care about the interpersonal relationship between him and his instructor, or at least it becomes less crucial and less primary. It makes far less difference whether he likes or dislikes his teacher, whether his teacher is a nice man, or a bad man, or whether the teacher likes the student, or doesn't like the student. The real question is: Can the instructor help the student toward *his*, the student's, goal of becoming a good physician? (*Journal of Hamanistic Psychology*, Summer, 1979.)

The "why" of life is a philosophic question, and for the medical student, it has been answered. He will achieve meaning by becoming a doctor. So he turns to science to find out the "what" and "how" of being a doctor.

Ortega gave this decision a more general characterization. "The essence of man," he said, "lies in the fact that he has no choice but to force himself to know, to build a science, good or bad, in order to resolve the problem of his own being and toward this end the problem of what are the things among which he must inexorably have that being." And this, Ortega adds—"that he needs to know, that whether he likes it or not, he needs to work to the best of his intellectual means—is undoubtedly what constitutes the human condition." We apparently have no choice in the matter. If we start out as philosophers, people who want to know, we must become scientists to fulfill the philosophic purpose.

This distinction, however, often seems to dissolve in practice for the reason that philosophers inhabit scientists and scientists inhabit philosophers, and the "why" and the "how" questions can never be completely separated, although sometimes we imagine we can do so. On the other hand, there are scientists who stopped asking "why" questions a long time ago, claiming, in effect, that philosophy does not exist or is at any rate fruitless. The distinction, therefore, is necessary.

The historical parallel is evident enough. The passage from philosophy to science is to be found, Ernst Cassirer shows in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, in a comparison of seventeenth-century with eighteenth-century thinking. In the seventeenth century, he says—

> Truly "philosophical" knowledge had seemed attainable only when thought, starting from a highest being and from a highest, intuitively grasped certainty, succeeded in spreading the light of this certainty over all derived being and all derived

> knowledge. This was done by the method of proof and rigorous inference, which added other propositions to the first original certainty and in this way pieced out and linked together the whole chain of possible knowledge. No link of this chain could be removed from the whole, none was explicable by itself. The only real explanation possible consisted in its "derivation," in the strict, systematic deduction by which any link might be traced back to the source of being and certainty, by which its distance from this source might be determined, and by which the number of intermediate links separating a given link from this source might be specified. The eighteenth century abandons this kind of deduction and proof. It no longer vies with Descartes and Malebranche, with Leibniz and Spinoza for the prize of systematic rigor and completeness. It seeks another concept of truth and philosophy whose function is to extend the boundaries of both and make them more elastic, concrete, and vital. The Enlightenment does not take the ideal of this mode of thinking from the philosophical doctrines of the past; on the contrary, it constructs its ideal according to the model and pattern of contemporary natural science.

Philosophy, in short, was sacrificed on the altar of Measurement, and reduced to grammatical studies in practice. It had performed its function and could retire from the scene, having delegated the pursuit of truth to the various sciences. The incompetence of science, given its methodological assumptions, to deal with the crucial human matters (which never present themselves in sense experience) was not recognized for many long years. This was the first great transformation, to which we owe a great deal of what is called "modern thought." It is the transformation which led to the policy of "reductionism," now so widely condemned. Human beings were redefined in terms that empirical science could handle, and what could not be so handled was either ignored as irrelevant or converted into some sort of material shadow of the original.

The resulting dehumanization of thought—and of culture, as so many are pointing out—made the tortured matrix for the next great transformation, now already begun. This transformation is the restoration of philosophy as the designer of the sciences, in terms of the *meanings* they are intended to add to or reveal.

Meanings are always at the outset philosophic questions. When something happens, and we want to know what it means, the task of the philosopher is to give direction on how to study it. Writing on this requirement in the British journal, *Philosophy* (for October, 1940), Prof. H. H. Price used psychic research as an example, saying that it is the philosopher's business to tell the scientist how to go about its study and to supply an initial terminology. He went on:

> . . . those who say that the study of supernormal phenomena may be safely left to the experts, and is none of the philosopher's business, seem to be deceived by a false analogy. For in this field there *are* as yet no experts in the sense intended, the sense in which we speak of experts in Physics or Chemistry or Physiology. All we can say is that some people are more familiar with the facts and others less.
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> When once a science has established itself, by devising some comprehensive hypothesis which will unify all the phenomena within its field, even though in a provisional manner; and when, consequently, it has been able to formulate with tolerable clearness the questions it wishes to ask and has devised a reliable experimental technique which can be trusted to provide the answers—once all this has been accomplished, we *can* draw a distinction between the people who are experts in that science, who understand and practice the technique of it, and the philosophers who are not. But Psychical Research is not yet in this happy position. What is more, it never will be in it, unless philosophers lend a hand, or what comes to the same thing unless Psychical Researchers do some philosophizing for themselves. If we want a parallel, let us consider the position of Physics in the early seventeenth century. An entirely new way of looking at the material world had first to be devised before Physics could establish itself as a science. And the people who devised that new outlook were the philosophers of that century, from Bacon to Leibniz, and chiefly Descartes. They succeeded so well that we almost forget how indispensable and how revolutionary their work was. For despite of much clever sniping both from the Right and from the Left, that way of looking at Nature has been taken for granted by scientists from that day to this. The whole of modern European civilization—its defects no less than its virtues—is based on nothing else.

This was written in 1940. During the almost forty years since, there has been growing dissatisfaction with "modern civilization" and an increasing demand that philosophers take a hand in redefining and redesigning the sciences. We may paraphrase Plato and say that either philosophers must become scientists, or scientists (and technologists) must become philosophers, because we cannot go on the way we are. Fortunately, we are getting some help from distinguished individuals. There are thinkers—not technically classified as philosophers, but more effective, perhaps, for this reason—who are looking at the grain of our lives and undertakings and proposing far-reaching changes. Among older writers we are thinking of Lewis Mumford and Erich Fromm; younger ones would be Theodore Roszak and Wendell Berry. And in the sciences *per se,* there have been Michael Polanyi and Abraham Maslow, who, seeing the need for reform and redirection in scientific thinking, transformed themselves into philosophers. Such men are Socratic midwives who preside over the birth-pains of the science of tomorrow. Polanyi was led by personal experience to revolt against the moral indifference, or the amorality, of the social sciences as now practiced, and to write several epoch-making books proposing fundamental reforms—at root one great epistemological reform. He formulated a clarifying and ethically renewing conception of science. His *Personal Knowledge* (1958) and *The Tacit Dimension* (1966) are classics of the second great transformation—the return of philosophy to the helm of the sciences.

The role of A. H. Maslow as reformer of Psychology is now fairly well known. He makes plain his position and program in all his works, but the books that probably serve best as an introduction are *Toward a Psychology of Being, Eupsychian Management, The Psychology of Science,* and *Farther Reaches of Human Nature.* His work may be summed up as a psychology of *health,* in which the climax of human or personal development, psychologically speaking, is the peak experience, and the means of reaching it, self-actualization. The peak experience is not, however, some final consummation, but an experience which establishes the stance of the philosopher, of the sage who knows what he is about in his work in the world.

Maslow became increasingly philosophical as he grew older. Psychology was for him the practical wisdom that needed to be behind all efforts at education, and education meant for him the education of the human race. As will be seen from his *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (1964), he was as much concerned with the cleansing and revivification of religion as he was with the redesign of psychology. But he would have only natural and scientific religion, even if the scientific outlook had to be altered and enlarged in order to make such religion possible.

His dialogue with Mildred Hardeman of the New School for Social Research (published in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology,* Winter, 1979, Vol. 19, No. I) will illustrate the temper of his thinking. Asked about the part played by pain in human growth, he said:

> . . . what comes to me is the superficiality of our whole culture—the young people, the affluent, and spoiled people. That includes most of us at most ages. Even the more intellectual of us, the more earnest, even the nicest people, tend too much to be superficial.
>
> The traditional religions have pretty well died, and they were the ones that used to take care of the serious problems of life. A new religion that can attract intelligent people has not yet been made. There is no official way in our culture of really being serious. The priests of the present society are really the psychoanalysts who deal with pain, anguish, dread of death, how to make life serious for oneself, how to handle one's own evil.
>
> We psychologists are now becoming dimly aware for the first time of what human beings can be like, and we realize that friendship and intimacy are practically absent in our society. It is often said that Americans are very friendly; but people don't ordinarily dare to look seriously at their relationships, because if they did, there would be the profoundly

hurtful feeling of being utterly alone in the world as you realize you don't have a real friend.

Would he, Mildred Hardeman asked, clarify the idea of a possible new religion in the future? He said:

> In three sentences, no. We don't have a vocabulary. Our words have become meaningless. I was once in a group of three professional theologians and three avowed atheists, and everybody got confused. It turned out that these very intelligent theologians had renounced the definition of God as a man with a beard and were laughing at me for fighting the 1890 picture of God. Tillich defines religion as concern with ultimate concern, and I became puzzled because that's the way I define psychology!
>
> People like Carl Rogers and Erich Fromm are now making a picture of human nature and life which is being seized upon by the advanced theologians. What will be coming along in a decade or so, I'm not quite sure. But certainly it will have a real respect for human nature, not regarding it as totally evil. Truth and goodness and beauty are inherent in human nature. They don't have to be given to us from outside.

Here Maslow's psychology is defined as Being-Psychology. Of it, he said:

> The psychology of being . . . is defined . . . as the study of ends rather than means, and the study of the human being insofar as he is an end, not insofar as he is useful. It is the study of those situations which produce in us "end" experiences, which are valid in themselves—just good because they're good. Nobody has ever studied them in a scientific way. For the first time in human history, if we can manage it, we would begin to have an *empirical* science of ultimate value.
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> Our values are what give us direction in life. And so this is really the study of directions in which we *must* go, if we are to have such and such experiences which we would all like to have.

This, quite plainly, is psychology turned into philosophy, or a fusion of the two. Yet Maslow was at the same time a hard-headed scientist, insistent on discipline, rigor, and consciously responsible action. In the paper quoted at the beginning, he said:

> My own belief is very strong that the salvation of mankind lies essentially in the advancement of knowledge. Also my feeling is very strong that we do not yet know enough to be good humanistic psychologists or good humanistic teachers or practitioners. I continually urge those psychologists who call themselves humanistic to regard their main task as research, that is, the advancement of knowledge of human nature. I am certainly in favor of "personal growth centers" and personal growth education and have been much involved with them from their beginning (and still am). But I should make it very clear that I did then and still regard these primarily as experiments in the old-fashioned sense, *i.e.*, attempts to find out more about human nature alone and in groups. I am very disturbed by those who proceed blithely to assume that we already know what we are doing and then simply apply in an unquestioning way the techniques, which have been offered as simply experimental techniques, as "trying something out to see what happens." I consider much of the Esalen-type education to be the application of a science which does not yet exist. Many of these kinds of education are used not so much to seek for answers which we do not have, but rather as if they were simply applying answers which had already been attained.
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> I share with many other scholars and scientists a great uneasiness over some trends (or rather misuses) in Esalen-type education. For instance, in some of its less respectworthy adherents, I see trends toward anti-intellectualism, anti-science, and anti-rationality, anti-discipline, anti-hard work, etc. I worry when competence and training are by some considered to be irrelevant or unnecessary. I worry when I see impulsivity confused with spontaneity. I worry when people, especially young people, overlook the fact that the proponents of spontaneity, for example, people like Aldous Huxley or Alan Watts or Carl Rogers, are themselves highly disciplined, hard-working people who think of true spontaneity as the consequence of much hard work, as the reward for high personal development. I worry when youngsters think that this is something that you *begin* with, something that is easy to achieve. I do not think that spontaneity by fiat is possible.

This is a text at once scientific and philosophical. The pursuit of meaning is the high philosophic purpose, while the concern about wishy-washy assumption and romantic carelessness illustrates the scientist's insistence on

discipline and hard work. In this sort of science, however, the subjective regions of human nature are involved, illustrating the problems of a science which includes man's inner life. Maslow did not avoid the tough-minded criticism which such science requires.

Out of cultural anthropology comes further impressive evidence that the second great transformation is launched and will continue. In his Pulitzer prize-winning volume, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker boldly sets forth the idea that the true role of the human being is as *hero*, and that immortality is his goal. He gathers supporting material for this view from all the human sciences, arguing for "a merger of psychology and mythico-religious perspective." Becker sees the human present as virtually a Prodigal Son situation:

> When we appreciate how natural it is for man to strive to be a hero, how deeply it goes into his evolutionary and organismic constitution, how openly he shows it as a child then it is all the more curious how ignorant we are, consciously, of what we really want and need. In our culture anyway, especially in modern times, the heroic seems too big for us, or we too small for it. Tell a young man that he is entitled to be a hero and he will blush. We disguise our struggle by piling up figures in a bank book to reflect privately our sense of heroic worth. Or by having only a little better home in the neighborhood, a bigger car, brighter children. But underneath throbs the ache of cosmic specialness, no matter how we mask it in concerns of smaller scope. . . . The urge to heroism is natural, and to admit it honest. For everyone to admit it would probably release such pent-up force as to be devastating to societies as they are now. . . .
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> The urge to cosmic heroism, then, is sacred and mysterious and not to be neatly ordered and rationalized by science and secularism. Science, after all, is a credo that has attempted to absorb into itself and to deny the fear of life and death. . . . We can conclude that a project as grand as the scientific-mythical construction of victory over human limitation is not something that can be programmed by science. . . . Who knows what form the forward momentum of life will take in the time ahead or what use it will make of our anguished searching? The most any of us can do is to fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force.

This seems wholly in key with a reply by Maslow to a query on how to help others toward self-actualization. He said:

> In general, it looks as if the best way to help other people grow toward self-actualization is to become a good person yourself. Trying to help other people can be a way of avoiding our own troubles. I can deny that I am hostile, for example, by going and helping everybody else not to be hostile. A more humble approach is better. Clean your own doorstep first. That would guard you against hurting other people and being phony and dishonest. Also, it would automatically produce all sorts of good results because "to move toward self-actualization" means to move toward realism of perception, spontaneity, a particular kind of humor, and so on.

REVIEW
A SCIENTIST TO LEARN FROM

MYTH AND MEANING by Claude Lévi-Strauss(Schocken paperback, $2.95) has several notable virtues. First, it is short—only 54 pages. Scientific works are usually far too long for the general reader, and probably for many scientists. It often seems that complicated books on scientific subjects grow long because of the writer's need to involve the reader in the current technical vocabulary, which may be forgotten or radically changed in a generation or so. A story is told of an English Bishop whom Queen Anne complimented on a sermon she had heard, remarking however, "It was very short." The Bishop replied, "Madam, it would have been shorter had I the time to make it so." In this book Lévi-Strauss has found time to distill what he has to say, probably because the book is made from lectures given over CBC (Canadian radio); in any event, the resulting simplicity is welcome. You have to think, but you can understand it.

The book has a second virtue. It appeals to the reader's intelligence for its authority, not to the institutional grandeur of scientific research. This is of course the very essence of true scientific thinking, so that the book helps to restore the reader's respect for science—at least in the area of cultural anthropology.

It also shows great respect for the intelligence of preliterate peoples which has the effect of uniting us with our past and showing that we and they are not so different, after all. Finally, by exposing how he reaches his own conclusions, Lévi-Strauss helps to give us confidence in our own thinking, at the same time showing his careful attention to widely diverse material, so that the reader is able to distinguish between scientific impartiality and bright impressionism.

Myth and Meaning also demonstrates that the scientific approach, because of its systematic procedure, may become locked in position. The best scientists, today, are unshackling scientific thinking from its servitude to past assumption and doctrine. And by more than coincidence, these are the scientists who are able to write well for the general reader. Lévi-Strauss is one of them, and so was Loren Eiseley. The latter, because he was another kind of anthropologist, is appropriate to quote here. In *The Immense Journey*, Eiseley has a chapter on Alfred Russel Wallace's challenge to Darwin, who maintained that past evolution took place solely through adaptations resulting from the struggle for survival. If that is the case, asked Wallace, how did man get his brain? The brain, he said, is an organ developed far beyond the survival needs of its possessor. "Natural selection could only have endowed the savage with a brain a little superior to that of an ape, whereas he actually possesses one but little inferior to that of the average member of our learned societies." In time, because of the prestige of Darwin's theory, Wallace's question was forgotten, so that, as Eiseley says, "a great complacency settled down upon the scientific world." Eiseley renewed the challenge, declaring: "Those who would revile us by pointing to an ape at the foot of our family tree grasp little of the awe with which the modern scientist now puzzles over man's lonely and supreme ascent."

Clearly, if less rhetorically, Lévi-Strauss is intent upon a similar challenge or correction. In a chapter on "primitive thinking," he recalls to the reader that Malinowski, a famous anthropologist, believed that the thought of all populations without writing is "determined by the basic needs of life"—a view with a Darwinian foundation. Lévi-Strauss then says:

> What I tried to show in *Totemism* and in *The Savage Mind* . . . is that these people whom we usually consider as completely subservient to the need of not starving, of continuing able just to subsist in very harsh material conditions, are perfectly capable of disinterested thinking; that is, they are moved by a need or desire to understand the world around them, its nature and their society. On the other hand, to achieve that end, they proceed by intellectual means, exactly as a philosopher, or even to some extent a scientist, can and would do.

There is then this amplification and qualification:

> To say that a way of thinking is disinterested and that it is an intellectual way of thinking does not mean at all that it is equal to scientific thinking. Of course, it remains different in a way, and inferior in another way. It remains different because its aim is to reach by the shortest possible means a general understanding of the universe—and not only a general but a total understanding. That is, it is a way of thinking which must imply that if you don't understand everything, you don't explain anything. This is entirely in contradiction to what scientific thinking does, which is to proceed step by step, trying to give explanations for very limited phenomena, and so on. As Descartes has already said, scientific thinking aimed to divide the difficulty into as many parts as were necessary in order to solve it.

The author makes the interesting comment that while "primitive" (this word should always be quoted, he says) thinking fails to give man power over his environment (as science does), "it gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he *does* understand the universe."

Is this, one wonders, an "illusion" people can do without? Lévi-Strauss does not discuss the possibility that certain scientific conceptions may be illusions of another sort, but he gives a wonderful illustration of what may have been lost by relying on exact modern methods:

> Today we use less and we use more of our mental capacity than we did in the past; and it is not exactly the same kind of mental capacity as it was either. For example, we use considerably less of our sensory perceptions. When I was writing the first version of *Mythologiques* (*Introduction to a Science of Mythology*), I was confronted with a problem which to me was extremely mysterious. It seems that there was a particular tribe which was able to see the planet Venus in full daylight, something which to me would be utterly impossible and incredible. I put the question to professional astronomers; they told me, of course, that we don't but, nevertheless, when we know the amount of light emitted by Venus in full daylight it was not absolutely inconceivable that some people could. Later on I looked up old treatises on navigation belonging to our own civilization and it seems that sailors of old were perfectly able to see the planet in full daylight. Probably we could still do so if we had a trained eye.

We should give some attention to the words of the title of this book—Myth and Meaning. Meaning, the author says, exhibits order. He also says:

> There is something very curious in semantics, that the word "meaning" is probably, in the whole language, the word the meaning of which is the most difficult to find. What does "to mean" mean? It seems to me that the only answer we can give is that "to mean" means the ability of any kind of data to be translated into a different language. . . . Now what would a translation be without rules? . . . To speak of rules and to speak of meaning is to speak of the same thing; and if we look at all the intellectual undertakings of mankind, as far as they have been recorded all over the world, the common denominator is always to introduce some kind of order. If this represents a basic need for order in the human mind and since, after all, the human mind is only part of the universe, the need probably exists because there is some order in the universe and the universe is not chaos.

What then is a myth? According to Lévi-Strauss, it is a language of explanation. Myth tells where we came from, how we get on, and deals with the adventures of life, its successes and failures. Myth chooses for its elements things in nature which by their qualities help to explain other things. And this, he says, is something like "the elements in modern computers which can be used to solve very difficult problems by adding a series of 'yes' or 'no' answers." Speaking of one explanatory myth (known to the Indians of Western Canada) for illustration, Lévi-Strauss says:

> The story is not true from a scientific point of view, but we could only understand this property [how the mythic elements are chosen and used] of the myth at a time when cybernetics and computers have come to exist in the scientific world and have provided us with an understanding of binary operations which had already been put to use in a very different way with concrete objects or beings by mythical thought. So there is really not a kind of divorce between mythology and science. It is only the present state of scientific thought that gives us the

ability to understand what is in this myth, to which we remained completely blind before the idea of binary operations became familiar to us.

Now, I would not like you to think I am putting scientific explanation and mythical explanation on an equal footing. What I would say is that the greatness and superiority of scientific explanation lies not only in the practical and intellectual achievement of science, but in the fact, which we are witnessing more and more, that science is becoming able to explain not only its own validity but also what was to some extent valid in mythological thinking. What is important is that we are becoming more and more interested in this qualitative aspect, and that science, which had a purely quantitative outlook in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, is beginning to integrate the qualitative aspects of reality as well. This undoubtedly will enable us to understand a great many things present in mythological thinking which we were in the past prone to dismiss as meaningless and absurd. And the trend will lead us to believe that, between life and thought, there is not the absolute gap which was accepted as a matter of fact by the seventeenth-century philosophical dualism. If we are led to believe that what takes place in our mind is something not substantially different from the basic phenomenon of life itself, and if we are led then to the feeling that there is not this kind of gap which is impossible to overcome between mankind on the one hand and all other living beings—not only animals, but also plants—on the other, then perhaps we will reach more wisdom, let us say, than we think we are capable of.

Lévi-Strauss seems a kind of scientist we can learn from.

COMMENTARY
IT SHOULD BE THE OPPOSITE

ON the surface, Leon Botstein's *Harper's* article (see "Children") may seem depressing. He begins by saying that the "new curriculum initiatives, whether at Amherst, Harvard, Stanford, Illinois Central, or Gustavus Adolphus College, are directed only at so-called educational abuses and bypass fundamental issues." He thinks that these efforts will be fruitless. Recalling what Ortega said years ago in *Mission of the University*, he maintains that the reforms must "reach beyond the confines of educational institutions and respond to the problems and needs of a culture and nation."

He uses the present rhetorical demand for a return to the "liberal arts" in education as a means of pointing out why many of the young seem to feel that there is no point in what is conventionally taught in the universities:

> I believe that the liberal arts are now being used as a slogan to shield more serious social and cultural issues from being addressed by the university. Who can argue with a call for literacy and learning, for the resurgence of culture and the nurturing of the civilized individual? Unfortunately, liberal education . . . has come to be defined as a powerless adjunct to the real acts of living: eating, working, sleeping, sharing one's life with others. The opposite ought to be the case. A sanitized version of history, the humanities, art, and science has emerged, based on the notion that the liberal arts are essentially disinterested, free of ideology, merely a technique of thinking rather than the substance of thought or the carrier of values. This notion was developed in imitation of science, the idea that science and real knowledge must be objective and true, as true as 2-plus-2-equals-4. Consequently, the liberal arts become "neutral," like culture, a discrete experience that one merely adds on to one's daily life. . . .
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> The liberal arts curricula now being revived are like advertising images, safe, serious, inoffensive.

In other words, impotent. Shouldn't this verdict be depressing? Well, no work which makes clear that tinkering with existing institutions will accomplish nothing or less than nothing should be regarded as depressing. What more important discovery could there be in behalf of the future? New institutions must grow on clean places. How this may become possible nobody knows—not in familiar terms—but we suspect that some of them are already on the way. Have a look at what the New Alchemists are doing in New England, and what the Tree People are doing in California.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
CAUSE AND EFFECT

WRITING on childhood in the *Saturday Review* (July 21)—somewhat bitterly, for which, as his books show, he has had ample provocation—Jonathan Kozol characterizes what the public schools have been for the past twenty-five years:

> The school, as Alfred North Whitehead noted, is built upon ideas that lead neither to action, nor to passion, nor to transformation, but (at most) to good term papers and examinations. Childhood thereby becomes a moratorium on life, a time in which young people spend about one-quarter of their projected biological existence in rote drill and readiness for the three-quarters they may never live to know. Youth is thus defined as preparation *for* life, not a portion *of* it.

There are wonderful exceptions, of course. There are children strong enough to resist this pervasive influence—who insist on living their own lives, even if it gets them into trouble and causes a lot of people pain—and there are teachers who leaven the system with simple affection for lively youngsters and invent antidotes by instinct if not by plan. But the over-all effect of schooling remains much as Kozol sees it:

> "It doesn't seem real," one student said to me in Syracuse, New York, last spring. "Everything we do in school is like a simulation of some other thing that would be real if it wasn't taking place in school."
>
> This wholesale neglect of the world outside the window is best dramatized by that insidious vehicle of scholastic alienation, "the simulation game." We close the windows, pull down the blinds, ventilate the air, deflect the light, absorb the sound, etherize the heart, and neutralize the soul. Then we bring in simulation games to try to imitate the world that we have, with such great care and at such vast expense, excluded.

The schools, of course, are only doing what now comes naturally. The whole culture is pervaded by artificiality, isolation, and simulation. People are "consumers"—we use the word all the time, as though it had some kind of sanctity—and consumers are told how the world "works" by the shallow deceits of advertising. They are instructed in "values" by the same egocentralizing media. Years ago a MANAS reader contributed a wonderful paragraph about Florence in the time of the Medicis, telling how you could walk through the city in about a half an hour—seeing practically everything that went on. The shops were doorways to scenes of craftsmen at work. The whole city was a wonderful display of people using their skills, making things for other people to use and enjoy. It is very different now. The operative processes of technology are hidden in black boxes—what adolescent can fix his jalopy the way an earlier generation did in the 1930s?—and production generally is concealed behind large, faceless walls that you can't get behind without a conducted tour. A hundred years ago at least three quarters of the people in the country lived by tilling the soil. Now the majority live by processing pieces of paper. They have no real idea of what is going on. The schools cannot change all this, so they copy it.

Kozol continues: "The direct consequence of this perverse method is that children come to view school, university, moral struggle—indeed, all social transformation—as "not what we do, but what is done to us." The child, Kozol says, "thus comes to adopt a passive view of his relation to history."

This has been going on long enough to have a discernible effect on "higher education." In *Harper's* for September, Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, writes about the students who are arriving at the colleges and universities, these days. "There happens," he says, "to be a real crisis out there, one that threatens to cheat young people out of a chance to learn and develop as private citizens and individuals."

> The crisis is demonstrated by the growing illiteracy and ignorance in English, in the humanities, in science, in general knowledge and ability to think and to express oneself. It reflects a profound alienation among young people, which lurks beneath their apparent conservatism and docility. . . .

> What is the character of the student alienation that the new efforts cannot reach? Consider the weak ability of entering students to read and write. It persists in the face of real intellectual gifts. Many even have superior high-school grades and test scores. Yet paper after paper is garbled. Documents from the French Revolution, from Luther, St. Augustine, or Goethe seem beyond their grasp. . . . What is wrong? We are seeing for one thing the lasting effect of twenty years of media distraction. . . . Despite good verbal facility, students are chronically unable to retain what they read, to absorb arguments or facts in their heads long enough to make them their own.

Mr. Botstein's next comment connects with what Jonathan Kozol has described:

> The reason behind all this is a profound and devastating absence of inner motivation. Fundamentally, students arrive in college with the attitude of civil servants or factory workers. They are alienated from the task of learning, which they think is an oppressive necessity, like wage labor. That learning is liberating (liberal arts?), a route to freedom, is wholly foreign. . . . Nothing seems to lead to the sense that learning is significant and essential. . . . In Hannah Arendt's terms, being a college student has become labor, where the result is alien to the individual and the process all-important—with the sole exception of the degree. It is less like creative work or the activity of the artisan, where any skill emerges from a desire to fashion an end product of continuing value. That critical thinking is a means of spiritual rescue to freedom and self-confidence is foreign; and it is a point of view as suspect as the testimony of men who witness miracles. All this the students have learned from us. They are not themselves to blame.

What comment or suggestion is called for? We think only of Simone Weil's prescription, applicable here:

> In such a situation, what can those do who still persist, against all eventualities, in honoring human dignity both in themselves and others? Nothing, except to introduce a little play into the cogs of the machine which is grinding us down; seize every opportunity of awakening a little thought wherever they are able; encourage whatever is capable, in the sphere of politics, economics or technique, of leaving the individual here and there a certain freedom of movement amid the trammels cast around him by social organization. That is certainly something, but it does not go very far.

Happily, Jonathan Kozol ends his *Saturday Review* article with a suggestion or two (examples of things being done) along these lines:

> In a school outside Havana, in the fall of 1976, I watched a class of third-grade children taking small amounts of a black powder-like substance from large wooden barrels in one corner of the room, pouring it carefully onto small square pieces of thin cloth or paper, then slowly stitching it together with a needle and thread. It was a few minutes before I recognized what they were doing. They were making tea bags!

For forty-five minutes a day, Kozol discovered, all the third-graders in Cuba make tea bags—all that their country would require during the year. It was for them harmless and they seemed, he says, to enjoy "helping to provide one of the basic needs of their society." Kozol has other examples:

> Here in Boston, a similar movement is under foot; not uniformly nor, for now, as official or state policy, but simply as the spontaneous reaction of good teachers to a new, less narrow, and less crippling vision of the role of children.
>
> Students of one secondary school in Boston study Early Childhood Development in the morning, then work, for pay, with troubled youngsters in a neighborhood day-care center in the afternoon. Another group of Boston high-school pupils tutors elementary-level students in basic math and reading skills improving their own competence while helping those 10 years their junior to make dramatic strides through one-to-one attention.
>
> A third group of ingenious high-school kids in Boston now operates a retail store out of an embellished pushcart at Boston's fashionable and historic Quincy Market.
>
> All of these efforts are for real; none is a "simulation." Whether it is tutoring in Boston or tea bags in Havana, the work of these young people is authentic and useful; in every instance, the student comes to see himself as a full-scale member and participant of the real political and economic life of his society.

FRONTIERS

Agents of Cultural Self-Consciousness

"HISTORY," Frederick Jackson Turner declared some seventy-five years ago, "is the self-consciousness of humanity." He meant, one supposes, that in history we have both framework and mirror of our own becoming. Through history we become aware of the consequences good and bad, of what we do. It is the social version of an examined life.

Two biographies, now available, prompted these reflections. We have seen only reviews of the books, but for the moment reviews—good ones—best serve our purpose here, which is mainly recognition and appreciation. First there is Lewis Mumford's *Works and Days*, called by Robert Kirsch in the *Los Angeles Times* "a cross between autobiography and an anthology of Mumford's writing and thought."

What do we owe to Lewis Mumford? The debt cannot be calculated. Mr. Kirsch says:

> He is best known, of course, as the most cogent and incisive critic of science and technology this century has produced. Yet Mumford has a far broader range, as we see in these pages: a master of writing forms, a reporter, essayist, biographer, philosopher, believer and teacher (in the least institutional sense of that vocation). Mumford said important things about the quality and flaws of our culture so early, it may surprise very young readers. . . .
>
> His has been the most eloquent voice, the one most difficult to ignore or shut away, on the evils and arrogance of science and technology, against the certainty of progress, the blind assurance which distorted the observation and "objectivity" it claimed. The faulty and inhuman creed of absolute faith in progress is like every other orthodoxy, a blinder and a barrier to the perception of reality. What blots out other ways of knowing, what takes us to fad and fashion, loses for us the wisdom of the past and the capacity to employ it.

For two or more generations Mumford has inspired and kept alive the idealism and ardor of talented young men and women who took him as their guide to a life of meaningful work in a badly confused world. They found in him suggestions of what to work for and how to go about it. He gave both orientation and example. We shall look forward to reading this book and reporting on it. Mumford has been, as Kirsch shows, a pioneer and frontiersman of our time.

The other book is *The Education of Carey McWilliams* (by himself), reviewed in the *Nation* (June 30) by Studs Terkel. Educated in California as a lawyer, McWilliams became a tireless investigator of current history and then—during the days of Sen. Joseph McCarthy's oppressive reign in Washington—editor of the *Nation,* a job from which he retired a year or two ago, after generating and publishing some of the best magazine journalism of a quarter of a century. Terkel tells what he did before that, in California, during the 30s:

> Spontaneous strikes of Mexican and Filipino farm workers were busting out all over the state. McWilliams caught the movement's fever and significance. He traveled the Steinbeck country [described in *Grapes of Wrath* and In *Dubious Battle*] from Bakersfield to Salinas, eluded armed guards and interviewed organizers as well as growers. Out of this came his explosive book, *Factories in the Field.* In 1939 McWilliams was already in the middle of the struggle when Cesar Chavez was still a small boy witnessing his father's daily humiliations.

Much too intelligent, too American, too *Western* to be taken in by any stereotyped partisan politics, McWilliams made the *Nation* a champion of civil liberties at a time when few voices were raised against McCarthy's reputation-destroying power. He found new writers for the *Nation,* a number of them Western—such as Kenneth Rexroth—and the paper came alive with vital sociology, cultural analysis, and responsible social reporting. Studs Terkel says:

> Today, investigative journalism appears to be much in fashion. What distinguished the *Nation* under the ægis of Carey McWilliams is that it muckraked like crazy during all the years when doing so was out of fashion.

> Consider these examples: *The FBI Nobody Knows* by Fred Cook (1958); the Bay of Pigs stories by Carleton Beals (1960); *Cigarettes and Lung Cancer* by Dr. Alton Ochsner (1957); *The Safe Car You Can't Buy by* Ralph Nader (1959); *The Careful Young Men,* a teachers' symposium concerning campus apathy (1957); *Tensions Beneath the Apathy: The Myth of the Bland Generation* (1959). The list goes on. What most impresses the reader is the editorial prescience as well as the guts. Far from being checkbook journalism, the financial arrangements of McWilliams's assignments were almost comic. He worked out of a hat: a hunch, a phone call, a fee of two figures. He called upon writers who had never done their stuff for the *Nation* before, nor, in some notable cases, for any magazine.

A basic truth is involved here. In a recent *Ecologist Quarterly,* Edward Goldsmith said: "Obviously the most satisfying work must be *that which we are willing to do for nothing."* With all the sententious talk, these days, about the legitimacy and importance of *profits,* it becomes vital to point out that the *best* work is done by people who do it, *not* for money, but because it is right and good and necessary. They may get a little money, but barely enough to get by. The only sensible way to look at money is as an instrument of freedom to do what you care about and are determined to do anyway. The writers who are worth reading all belong to this tribe.

Well, we shall hope to read Carey McWilliams' autobiography. But meanwhile we have been looking at his very first book, written while he was a student at the University of Southern California, and working part-time for the *Los Angeles Times.* It is a life of Ambrose Bierce, published by Albert Boni in 1929 and reprinted in 1967 by Archon Books. In his introduction to the second edition, McWilliams says:

> By the time I graduated from the University in 1927, I had been working on the Bierce book for five or six years, devoting as much time to it as I could spare from a crowded school-and-work schedule. After graduation, I was able to devote a little more time to the project. At college one of my first published articles was about Bierce [in the college literary journal] and the first article I ever sold to a magazine—price, $10.00—was about Bierce, summarizing some of the research I had been doing, and Mencken accepted it for publication in the *American Mercury.*

Then Boni offered him an advance ($250—all he ever got) for a book on Bierce, and he set to work. The story of its writing is told in the Introduction. This introduction also shows, beyond the intention of the writer, what transforms young men with some talent into distinguished journalists, writers able to recognize the difference between the signals and the noise. (A notable bonus is what you learn about Bierce, giving a background light on the motives behind Carey McWilliams' long and fruitful career.)