

## THE QUAVERING QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

IN *The Culture of Narcissism* Christopher Lasch remarks: "A society that fears that it has no future is not likely to give much attention to the needs of the next generation, and the ever-present sense of historical discontinuity—the blight of our society—falls with particularly devastating effect on the family." What he says, with a number of outstanding exceptions, seems true enough. Families have trouble holding together. The young sense in their parents that sense of "historical discontinuity," and they overhear the pessimism of the generation they will soon have to replace. It is likely that they think the pessimism well founded, in view of the events of the past fifty years. But if the society Mr. Lasch speaks of is really as bad as he suggests, then some sort of "blight" may be required, for not only decline and collapse grow out of the disasters he seems to predict, but also various rebirths and the generation of new ways of thinking.

Yet not only disintegrating events such as three wearing wars and the attacks of a ruthless technology on the planet are responsible for the loss of historical continuity. The familiar authorities to whom people turn when they try to think seriously have grown unstable and uncertain. No one needs to be told that the national state is now regarded with increasing distrust. The churches—those still able to hold together—seem mainly places where new fashions in belief are turned out, with bizarre brave-new-world innovations getting the most attention. The whole idea of political authority and legitimacy is in radical flux, as John Schaar made clear a few years ago. But most noticeable of all are the changes taking place in the conception of scientific knowledge and certainty. Here we now walk on mushy ground. The humanist critics have had their day, from, say, Macneile Dixon to Theodore Roszak, and now the scientists

themselves are shaking the columns of the temple their forebears and teachers erected. In a recent article (*Harper's* for last August) Annie Dillard gave a sprightly summary:

First Einstein, then Heisenberg, then Godel made a shambles of our hope (a hope that Kant shared) for a purely natural science that actually and certainly connects at base with things as they are. What can we know for certain when our position in space is limited, our velocity may vary, our instruments contract as they accelerate, our own observations of particles on the micro-level botch any chance of precise data, and not only are our senses severely limited, but many of the impulses they transmit are edited out before they ever reach the brain? . . .

Physicists have been saying for sixty years that (according to the Principle of Indeterminacy) they cannot study nature, but only their own perception of nature: "Method and object can no longer be separated" (Heisenberg). Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington, British Astronomer Royal, said in 1927, "The physical world is entirely abstract and without 'actuality' apart from its linkage to consciousness."

A little later Sir James Jeans, reviewing the recent progress in physics, wrote that "The world begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine." The world, Eddington proposed, is made of "mind-stuff," which makes us humans in some sense participants in cosmic events—a role for which we are by no means prepared. But Annie Dillard leaps into the breach, carrying the banner of the poet and artist:

Is not the Linnaean system of classification a poem among poems, a provisional coherence selected out of chaos? It has always been possible for artists of every kind to sniff at science and claim for art special, transcendent, and priestly powers. Now it is possible for artists to have and eat that particular cake by adding that, after all, science is in one (rather attenuated) sense mere art; art is all there is. I am not saying that writers or painters have made such a claim outright; but in theory it is there to be made.

This is of course going too fast. The machines work, don't they? No poet ever created a washing machine. But that is not the point. The poet gives us reason to think about what things *are*—which is the same as what they mean—while the engineer is mainly concerned with how they *work*. The artist, or designer, who thinks in terms of wholes, is concerned with the ends of his work, and is likely to set sensible limits to restrain the imperialism of the machine. Leopold Kohr is as much a poet and designer as he is an economist or sociologist, and reading him lends force to what Annie Dillard says. The real point is the present reduction of the philosophical authority of science, which is leaving a vacuum in our lives.

We are far from ready, today, to make decisions about a workable and reliable replacement. We don't know how to array the elements of the situation, and the options offered seem mainly guesswork. Even if some of them are carefully thought out and tested by the proposers, we hardly know as much about how to confirm such tests as we know how to measure the quality or strength of a piece of steel. This is a time, in short, when we are invited—nay, constrained—to become our own authorities. It is a formidable prospect.

The question must be explored, and not answered easily or too soon. Interestingly, more than fifty years ago, a scholarly philosopher who was also a teacher of mathematics (the discipline at the heart of the most impressive and influential of the sciences), began thinking about such questions. His situation was right for locating the beginnings of a useful answer. This man, Scott Buchanan, was then (from 1925 to 1929) Assistant Director of the People's Institute in New York City, housed in Cooper Union. The Institute, as Buchanan explains (in the introduction to the 1962 edition of his *Poetry and Mathematics*), was intended to provide serious popular education for working people—the people of the "melting pot"—in the city. At that time Everett Dean Martin was the Director. He

gave regular lectures three times a week, and invited other speakers as well. Buchanan says of Martin:

The pervading theme of his lectures was liberty, the internal freedom from passion and dogma as the aim of liberal education, individual freedom from mass pressures, and political freedom against tyrannical governments and institutions. Certain lectures each year celebrated the same heroes, Socrates, Rousseau, Tom Paine, and Jefferson. This repeated series of lectures had become a curriculum or, perhaps better, the syllabus for an as yet nonexistent curriculum which was being demanded by the students.

What were the "students" like?

It would be quite misleading to think of this center of teaching and learning as a mission to the slums. Certain members of the audience were noticeable as underprivileged slum dwellers who found a free lecture a physically and socially warm place to take a nap. But the great body of the audience was first- or second-generation immigrants whose migration to this country had uprooted them from intellectual traditions which they had come to fear they would lose in America. These were sharply critical, often scolding the lecturer for sentimental or sloppy reasoning. There were also the internal migrants, remnants of native American intellectual movements who spent their summers in harvesting on the Great Plains or in lumber camps, and who rode the rods back to New York for the winter. Some of these were continuing the reading and discussion which had started when they knew Jack London. One could always find them during the day conversing and smoking, in the lobby of the reading room of the New York Public Library, at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street. These two groups, the East Siders and the Wobblies, as we used to call them, were with the graduate students from the local universities at that time probably the best read audience in America. They were not reading and studying for degrees or advancement in life, but to know and to understand. The People's Institute and the Public Library provided them with the opportunity of higher education without requiring credits and degrees or the promise of jobs. The Institute was not initiating, coercing, cajoling, or finishing education, as schools and colleges were wont to do

Buchanan, a young Ph.D., was delighted to leave "the low state of the intellectual arts in the

conventional college" and to work in a center which was determined "to precipitate insights and understanding." The fruits became evident:

Some of the students formed a club to continue discussions after the lectures in an abandoned artist's studio on Twenty-second Street. . . . It turned into long sessions around the samovar with tea glasses and copies of Marx's *Capital*, Spinoza's *Ethics*, and St. Thomas's *Summa*, then in its first English translation, lying at hand. And these heated disputations were only the foci of discussions of Greek tragedy, Stoic ethics, Aristotelian, atomic, and energetic physics, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Newtonian and Einsteinian space, Humean and Kantian epistemology, Hegelian and Spenglerian theories of history, Russian novels, and Oriental epics. These in turn were only the deeper background of the Russian Revolution, the anarchist co-operative theories, the spectrum of socialisms, and the cults of Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, theosophy, the single tax, Herbert Spencer, Walt Whitman and Emerson. The liveliest foreground consisted of the reporters or popularizers of the new physics, Eddington, Russell, Whitehead, and Bridgman. These discussions were never formalized with assignments of topics to leaders; the man with the latest book under his arm usually took over for the evening after the lecture had had its going over.

Scott Buchanan had the job of planning lectures, and he decided to have a series on mathematics, "ignorance of which was proving a real barrier to communication and understanding." Anticipating in a way Annie Dillard's remarks quoted earlier, he decided to pair mathematics with poetry or poetics. The book we are quoting from, *Poetry and Mathematics* (Lippincott, 1962), was the result. Its detailed comparison of mathematics with poetry seems a practical answer—or the start of one to C. P. Snow's *The Two Cultures* and it is now an introductory plank to grasping the sudden changes Annie Dillard reports in her *Harper's* article. One could say that the gap between the Humanists and the Scientists is at least partly explained by the way in which mathematics has been taught. Buchanan says:

Mathematics suffers much, but most of all from its teachers. As a result of bad pedagogy—and I mean the kind often judged best by administrative

pedagogues—the appearance of an algebraic formula, a geometrical figure, or an innocent set of symbols reduces the reader to an unbecoming attitude of hypocritical humility. A great many sometime students of mathematics try to persuade themselves that they haven't mathematical minds, when as a matter of fact they have only had nonmathematical teachers. Mathematics is not what most teachers of mathematics teach. They, with the good intention of conveying what they themselves have only as a skill of manipulation, have unconsciously worked hocus-pocus on their pupils. They have repeated and illustrated opaque formulae, sometimes to the admiration, but almost always to the bewilderment, of their students.

The study of what mathematics is must be distinguished from what mathematics *does*. It is the science of relationships. It enables us to manipulate specific relationships. Its tools are abstract ideas, and as Buchanan says, "Abstract ideas are of the very tissue of the human mind." In evidence of this he adds that "illustration of mathematics by concrete event, fact, or object is never as effective as illustration by equally abstract analogous ideas." This seems a way of saying that our thought takes off with analogy, but remains on the ground with literal statement.

In chapter after chapter, Mr. Buchanan draws analogy between literature and mathematics. He quotes at length from *Alice in Wonderland* (by a distinguished mathematician), showing that the conversation between the caterpillar and Alice is "a highly generalized form of geometry. . . . often called positional or projective geometry." Elsewhere he selects a number of propositions from Isaac Newton's *Principia* (from Books I and III), suggesting that they be read as poetry, as a litany. The study of proportions, basic in mathematics as ratio, becomes in literature analogy. The metaphor is a loose-jointed kin of ratio, and "metaphor" is more and more used, these days, by contemporary writers to show the direction in which scientific thought is going. Of Newton, Buchanan suggests:

It is often said that Newton saw the force of gravity in an apple. Byron assigns the origin of this insight to the piety of Newton and his preoccupation

with the Biblical account of the fall of man. I shall not be so Byronic. Newton's poetic and mathematical heritage came from his more immediate past. His preoccupation with ratios is more relevant, although it may be admitted that Biblical literature and numbers have often been fine intellectual companions and emotional auxiliaries to each other. It is certainly true that he connected falling apples, cannonballs, and space in general with celestial bodies, both astronomical and divine.

Nevertheless, it was his extraordinary ability to disentangle the chain of abstract relations from the more exotic and wayward speculations of his predecessors in the school of natural analogy that led to his summary and perfection of their work. He made the analogical jump that astrophysicists are now making daily, from Galileo's art of physical experiment to Kepler's astronomical inferences. He did it by careful consideration of their ratios and a judicious sorting of their literary allusions. He finally kept all their mathematics, Galileo's forces, and Kepler's conic sections. Consequently the law of gravitation is an extraordinarily condensed version of the allegory of nature. We are still searching for the lost symbol that goes with Newtonian mechanics.

Then Buchanan says: "It is not the aim of this book to show that mathematics is identical with poetry, but it will do the reader no harm to read mathematics as if it were poetry." He gives a table of definitions of scientific operations in the language of literature, showing how much of science can be assimilated by the poetic art, using terms like "analogy" and "metaphor" to demonstrate the parallels. Measurement, for example, is "an analogy that asserts the similarity of two relations, one between things and the other between numbers," and "Science is an allegory that asserts that the relations between parts of reality are similar to the relations between terms of discourse." Finally, "The natural universe is the things and their relations that enter into the allegories of science."

It is difficult, he shows, to make a scientific statement devoid of metaphor or allegory. "Facts" just lie there, dead and undeveloped, but metaphors make amplification possible. Buchanan says:

The proposition, "man is a machine," if it is taken as a statement of fact, is obscure and ambiguous. It is an allegory condensed and badly crushed. Properly expanded it is the explicit detailed analysis of a man's body, an allegory stating that the temporal and spatial parts of the human body are related and articulated according to the laws of motion. . . . Pure poetry and pure mathematics, like pure music are never expressed. The extreme case would be symbols expressing themselves, but even there the distinction would have to be made between symbols as things and symbols as ideas. Discourse is allegorical or nonsensical.

Much attention is given in this book to the discoveries and inventions of mathematicians, enabling them to do things that couldn't be done before. They become able to construct mathematical analogies of some aspect of nature that had not been abstractly represented. Buchanan points to the parallel inventions of the poet:

The problem of style, as it actually faces the writer, is the difficulty in finding words to fit a subject matter. There is a rightness and a wrongness about words that is inescapable, yet in the end ineffable. . . . The problem of style is the fitful faithfulness of symbols to an ideal subject matter. The mathematician and the poet have had long experience with it, and their products are the facts to be considered. . . . Style is an unconscious witness to the presence of a system of abstract relations among adjectives. Perhaps it is better not to tell the poet this, but it might be whispered to a critic.

The parallels found between the work of poets or writers and the processes of trigonometry and calculus will be of particular interest to the reader with background in mathematics. After a discussion of the uses of symbols as "metaphors or condensed analogies," Mr. Buchanan says:

The extraordinary position and power of proportions in mathematics and the essential metaphorical character of poetry are thus not mere accidents of history, but the key to an inward dialectic of thought. It is by expansion of metaphor that fact becomes intelligible, the world measured, and the complexities of experience described in language. Any history of thought might begin and end with the statement that man is an analogical animal.

An essential and vastly clarifying statement comes at the end of the chapter on Functions:

What is the difference between mathematics and poetry? I have been at pains to describe the meeting points, but have in no way intended to assert their identity. Briefly, the difference is this. The mathematician sees and deals with relations the poet sees and deals with qualities. Functions and adjectives are the symbols through which they see and with which they operate. Mathematics is analytic, seeing wholes as systems of relations; poetry is synthetic, seeing wholes as simple qualities. The qualities that the poet sees are due to relations, says the mathematician. They need purgation. The relations that the mathematician sees are concrete and factual, says the poet. They need appreciation and love.

The difference is possible because of the way experience comes, qualities in relation, substances with attributes, wholes and parts. Both poet and mathematician select and abstract what they see and in that they are free minds. Sometimes they, and almost always we, get confused, taking relations for qualities and qualities for relations. The result is belief.

Belief is the natural attitude of a thwarted mind.

...

But why does mathematics work so well in practical affairs? And poetry, as we might say, hardly at all (although it may work far more than we suppose)? The answer may be that mathematics is concerned with form—the external appearance of relations—and, while abstract, has the glory of objectivity. But poetry is concerned with the substance of life, its quality and movement, its "appreciation and love." Poetry makes only inward demonstrations, and its objectivity is recognized only by the heart.

## *REVIEW*

### JUVENILE MYSTERIES

BACK in the early 1920s, five Russian boys were brought before the juvenile court in Los Angeles. The oldest was eleven. They were truants who had broken into a warehouse and destroyed property to the value of a thousand dollars. The apparent leader of the group was called Fred, but his name was Dimitri. He was eight years old. In *Youth in Conflict*, published in 1925, Miriam Van Waters, then the Referee in Juvenile Court, describes him:

He has roving, intelligent gray eyes, set in a wrinkled, aged face. The physician has declared him normal, his body is found bruised with marks from a beating. He is about eight pounds underweight. Fred is an habitual truant from school. He is of more than average intelligence. Both his parents work in factories. So do his older brothers and sisters. In his house the only thing Fred has the slightest right to is one-third of the mattress he shares with two brothers. There is not poverty at home, but sugar, milk and fruit are absent. Every night after work father and mother and eldest son go to church. As long as the children are in arms they too go to church.

These boys were the children of Russians in the Los Angeles colony of Molokans, a pacifist sect which had migrated from Russia to be free of the universal military service adopted by the Czarist government in 1880. Thousands of them settled in southwestern America. "Apart from beating their wives and children," Dr. Van Waters says, "they were the gentlest of men." Labor and prayer fully occupied their lives. She continues her tale of what happened in court:

"Why don't you keep Fred at home?" the court asks.

"Oh, Fred!" cries the father, gnashing his teeth angrily. "He is wicked. I beat him to death,—then they say it is against the law. The teacher comes and says: 'Let Fred come to the playground.' I let him go—he never comes home."

"Fred, where do you sleep?"

"On the roof," replies Fred.

The details of the damage done to the warehouse are described to the court by one of the boys—a timid child who is a camp-follower of Fred. He gives personal details which offend the leader.

Fred becomes still. His eyes flash hostility. He is eight years old, alert, defiant, he has already built his defense against the encroachment of the adult world. Eager to possess all that adults know, his eyes and ears are strained for chance colors, perceptions, sounds. He is the most alive spirit in the court room. The detention home superintendent reports that he has read tales of Twain, Stevenson and Swift. He is thirsty for mental nourishment. Answers and questions, ponderous attitudes of adults occupy him only an instant; it is with difficulty that he restrains his impatience.

There is an interruption. The owner of the warehouse complains of the damage, describes its extent, says that this is the third burglary (the boys had taken only a length of copper wire which they sold to a junk man for thirty cents, to buy pop and cigarettes, but they vandalized the place), and then adds: "I don't want 'em shut up; they ain't none of them vicious, but I do want my things left alone." He is, Miriam Van Waters says, "obviously kindly, annoyed and perplexed."

The author muses:

This was no ordinary malicious mischief. There was in it a primitive outburst of energy, a volcanic jet of elemental forces long buried under crust of intolerable dullness, barrenness and meanness of their daily lives. They were not wanton young criminals, seeking to destroy. Rather, in this crude and unfortunate way there had been some fundamental dealing with primitive matter, with bricks and boards, flying colors and liquids and crashing sounds which, in spite of waste, had satisfied some savage spirit of creation.

Who indeed were these five children? Their forebears had lived in the immense spaces on Russian steppes, without physical restraint. They had intimate contact with the soil with frost, snow, sun, sweat. They handled reality direct. They wrestled stubbornly with land, for mere existence. They were used to listening to the voice of prophets, one of whom had called upon the very fathers and mothers of these boys to arise and follow him from war-

threatened Russia to America where, in a holy vision, he had seen the exact spot where God wished them to settle.

They obeyed. They had squeezed their great bodies into crowded houses along the arid, treeless strip of land near the railway tracks which evidently had fulfilled the requirements of the vision.

Well, the juvenile court let the boys go, in the custody of their parents and the Molokan priest or elder. The court told the school teachers of the boys to give them reading-matter which would challenge their intelligence, instead of placing them with "dull" children. The Court asked the boys to come in and talk things over at intervals during the next two years. It told the warehouse owner to equip his building with better locks and warned the junk dealer who paid 30 cents for the stolen wire not to try to profit from juvenile offenses.

All this comes at the beginning of Miriam Van Waters' book, which is filled with extraordinary understanding of children, especially the spunky, rebellious children who get into trouble. This spirit pervaded the Los Angeles Juvenile Court in the 1920s. One wonders what it is like today.

One also wonders at that special breed of humans that develops a special sense for helping "wayward" youngsters. There are a few very good books by and about these people. They have a calling to do this work. We are thinking of people like Homer Lane and A. S. Neill, of books like George Dennison's *The Lives of Children*, like *Children and Their Caretakers* (edited by Norman K. Denzin) and *Weeping in the Playtime of Others* by Kenneth Wooden. These teachers and friends of the rebellious young develop a special capacity to get inside the psyches of youngsters who have problems or get into trouble. Their happiness comes from understanding what is wrong and putting enough things right for a change to take place. A book by one such writer, John Embling, a young Australian teacher, is *Tom*, published by Penguin in 1978.

Tom, when John Embling met him in a Melbourne trade school in 1975, was "a thirteen-year-old on the verge of a complete breakdown." The book is about what happened in the next two years—how, with these two working together, Tom pulled himself together. It tells as much about John, the teacher, as about Tom, the pupil. At the end of two years, the teacher was able to say:

Our relationship now has real significance. My caring has come alive to him in concrete ways. He can better understand the healing process in his own family. My love, care and anger are felt to be a natural, life-sustaining right. He now knows how to give honesty in return. A hurt child finding his own feet in the world. Life is taking on new meanings and possibilities. He now feels safe enough to grow in a more spontaneous way.

Tom's troubles seemed to begin a few years before, when his father, who drank and was often brutal to his two children (the other a girl), left home. John asks himself:

Would Tom Goodwood have been better off without his father, or were the traumas worth their limited relationship? Are his problems the result of deprivation or of his father's treatment of him? Are "bad" parents worse than no parents? Is one caring parent, in Tom's case, his mother, better than two warring, troubled ones? And what about the nature of the hurt inflicted on the child? These questions trouble me.

Early in his work with Tom the relationship was casual. Tom would cut school and John would find him, ask about the work scheduled for the next day and leave.

The regular contact must be kept going. He disturbs me in a rather elusive way. I am determined to keep cool. I receive another blast from the senior master on how hopeless he is.

"You're just wasting your bloody time. I tried for a while and he just turned bad any time he couldn't get his own way. I've had enough of him."

I try not to over-blame these people. They spend time and effort on cultivating "I'm your big mate" or "You're my little buddy" techniques. They have to give up. When Tom fights off their phoney approaches, they hang on to his rejection to avoid

looking into the causes of it. To show Tom you are really for him means patience and a stubborn refusal to be put off by anyone.

Teachers like John Embling have almost as much (or more) trouble with the institutions they work for as they do with the youngsters they try to help.

Tom certainly has strength in his character, regardless of what the police and staff at school say. As usual they see only the superficial things. And their failure to perceive anything deeper applies to many professionals as well—teachers, psychologists, social workers. Their only "insight" comes from the results of I.Q. tests, behaviour assessments and consensus opinions. The clinical approach too often ignores that only a caring relationship can help children like Tom Goodwood. I want to understand the child's feelings and reactions and view of things.

That's what he wants to do, but it proves very difficult. He makes lots of mistakes, tries things that don't work at all. What seems to have happened, finally, is that the boy eventually realized John's *intention*, whatever he actually did, and he put his faith in that, which helped him, in time, to have faith in himself. The important lesson of this book is that every human being, as John Kiley shows in *Equilibrium*, is seeking for some fundamental balance in his life. People with bad environments often look in the wrong places for balance, and only a friendly, stable human who is willing to try, keep on trying, and is willing to wait, sometimes for years, to see a little of what is happening inside the other, and then show some alternative choices, but without doing any pushing, can help. Persistence, imagination, and faith are the basic requirements. *Tom* is a book for all who work with the young.



## *COMMENTARY*

### A JAMESIAN ASSOCIATION

IT is difficult, these days, not to become just one more voice adding to the chorus of complaints. The complaints are at all levels, since our troubles affect everyone. What can be hoped for during another year?

The troubles, obviously, are not going to go away. Nor are the critics, who, almost of necessity, as they explain, live on the largesse of what is wrong with contemporary society, likely to go deeper into the past and the present to find worthy affirmative themes. The chief virtue of today's criticism is its sophistication, its incisive penetration. For example, one of the contributing editors of *Harper's*, John Lahr, in a musing review of Studs Terkel's latest book, *American Dreams*, remarks in passing:

Industrial capitalism seems to require a belief in personal acquisitiveness as a dream. An agglomeration of self-interests is presented as common interests. Individual goals have been promoted to prevent an identification of class interests. Vertical solidarity serves capitalism better than horizontal solidarity. The pursuit of happiness, that unique notion written into the Declaration of Independence, originally meant the pursuit of *public* happiness, not private pleasure.

In another place he says:

America has become a society of exciting distractions. The media reinforce the glamour and drama of this pageant of abundance and mobility, charting the personalities, the payoffs, and their positions on the wheel of fortune. Easily charmed, Americans are the gourmands of the new. The latest objects have a kind of magical status in a society that confuses the democracy of objects with equality and forgetfulness with hope. It is not simply the driven, obsessive army of businessmen pursuing profit at the expense of conscience, or their spendthrift wives, who are spellbound. Enchantment is promoted as a desirable state of mind. And much of the average day is spent tuned into the network of persuasion.

That, essentially, is why 1981 will not be noticeably different from 1980, although the course of events may offer novelty. Yet there will

be changes, if not especially visible ones. There will be changes because William James is finding more and more followers. He wrote in a letter in 1899:

. . . As for me, my bed is made: I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootless, or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man's pride, if you give them time.

In the first issue of the year, MANAS often makes some kind of report to readers about the state of the paper. This year we may say that its state is good, although our growth is still very slow, which seems natural enough. Our correspondence is encouraging and our readers, a great many of them, help with suggestions and contributions. MANAS and its readers form a sort of Jamesian community which is not without public happiness, whose members seem on occasion to take some private pleasure in the association.

## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

#### INGREDIENTS OF EUPSYCHIA

THERE is a great deal of writing, these days, about ideal societies and what would be the best socio-economic arrangements. This is all to the good, since each one of us, you could say, should compose his own "Republic" and work to bring it into existence, in some relation or degree. But there is another sort of utopian realization which is within the reach of all. What thoughts and feelings attend birth, and how do we meet death? Could the answer to these questions tell more than learned volumes about the quality of a good society?

It seems fair to say that Grantly Dick Read was a utopian. He wrote *Childbirth without Fear* and began a movement that has given a utopian dimension to motherhood. His initial inspiration was a woman in the Whitechapel district of London, to whom he was called to perform an emergency delivery. While only the poor live in Whitechapel, it would be a mistake to call this woman poor. She rejected the chloroform mask and had her baby without anesthetic. Later, as Dr. Read was leaving, he asked her why she had not wanted the mask. In his book he gives her reply: "Shyly she turned to me and said, 'It didn't hurt. It wasn't meant to, was it, doctor?'"

This simple utterance was the seed of great changes in the lives of many women—men, too. The idea she proposed became the energy of what might be called a crusade, yet she was no crusader. She had no office, no secretary, no staff to answer letters and send out persuasive literature. It is something to think about—this. She simply did what one woman was able to do.

Is there a parallel in the way people die? Much literary attention—and supposedly scientific attention—is now being given to such questions. But the best parallel we could think of came to us in the mail from a reader—a copy of an article by Setsuko Koizumi, the wife of Lafcadio Hearn—for the last days of the writer, taken from the *Atlantic* for

March, 1917. What she set down was an idyll, not an article.

Hearn died on September 26, 1904. A few days before, he had felt ill, and told his wife it seemed like a "sickness of the heart." He said to her:

Perhaps if this pain of mine increases, I may die. If I die, do not weep. Buy a little urn; you can find one for three or four *sen*. Put my bones in it, and bury it near a quiet temple in the country. I shall not like it if you cry. Amuse the children and play cards with them—how much better I shall enjoy that! There will be no need of announcing my death. If anyone asks, reply, 'Oh, he died some time ago!' That will be quite proper."

Hearn was not old, only fifty-four. But he was old from hard work, frustration, and misfortune. Perhaps you could say that his life was done because his work was done. He might as well go on to something else. A week later, the pain returned. But a little before, Mrs. Hearn relates, three things happened. A cherry tree bloomed out of season; Hearn heard the "dying song" of a *matsu-mushi* (pine-insect) he liked to listen to; and he had a dream. These, Setsuko Koizumi thought, were portents of death.

On the day he died she found him up early in the morning, sitting in his room smoking one of his hundred pipes. He told her he had had a dream.

I inquired what kind of a dream it was.

He replied, "I traveled for a very long distance. Now that I am smoking here, it hardly seems to have been a real journey. It was like a dream," he continued; "not a journey in Europe, nor in Japan—it was a strange place." He seemed to be enjoying himself.

In the afternoon he wrote a letter and at supper he laughed and joked with the children. Hearn ordinarily had good health. He disliked medical examinations and was pleased when she did not call the doctor. Even when sick he could not lie in bed and would walk around, "thinking things." That day, after dinner, he walked around in the library, and—

In a little less than an hour he came back to me with a drawn face, and said quietly, "Mama-san, the sickness of the other day has come back again."

I went with him. For a little while he walked around the room with his hands on his breast. I advised him to lie quietly on the bed, and he did so. Very soon after that he was no longer of this world.

He died without any pain, having a little smile around his mouth. It could not be helped, if it was the order of Heaven. I wish that I could have taken care of him, and given all my strength in nursing him. This was too easy a death to me.

It is as though death came to Hearn as a friend. He might have regarded it so. Seven years earlier, in 1897, he had published *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields*, subtitled "Studies of Hand and Soul in the Far East," in which he told the story of "The Rebirth of Katsugoro," which, as he explained, was not one of his own stories, but the translation of a series of Japanese documents which, taken together, confirmed the memory of his past life by a Japanese boy. The recollections of the child were so vivid and detailed that the local officials decided to verify them, which they were able to do. Hearn gives translations of the various documents, which dated from 1823 to 1835, and says at the end:

Perhaps somebody will now be unreasonable enough to ask whether I believe this story,—as if my belief or disbelief had anything to do with the matter! The question of the possibility of remembering former births seems to me to depend upon the question what it is that remembers. If it is the Infinite All-Self in each one of us, then I can believe the whole of the *Jatakas* [Pall accounts of the 550 "incarnations" of Buddha] without any trouble. As to the False Self, the mere woof and warp of sensation and desire, then I can best express my idea by relating a dream which I once dreamed. Whether it was a dream of the night or a dream of the day need not concern anyone,—since it was only a dream.

Hearn turns this dream into a reflective essay which becomes a challenge to all those who speculate—and today they are many—about what happens at the time of death. It is said that a panoramic review of the past life is involved. But Hearn writes of a review of several past lives!

He begins:

Neither personal pain nor personal pleasure can be really expressed in words. It is never possible to communicate them in their original form. It is only possible, by vivid portrayal of the circumstances or

conditions causing them, to awaken in sympathetic minds some kindred qualities of feeling. But if the circumstances causing the pain or the pleasure be totally foreign to common human experience, then no representation of them can make fully known the sensations which they evoked. Hopeless, therefore, any attempt to tell the real pain of seeing my former births.

But not hopeless for Hearn! What follows needs to be read whole, not mutilated in partial quotation. At the end of a magnificent passage, he says:

Then in the moment when sentiency itself seemed bursting into dissolution, one divine touch ended the frightful vision, and brought again to me the simple consciousness of the single present. Oh! how unspeakably delicious that sudden shrinking back out of multiplicity into unity!—that immense, immeasurable collapse of Self into the blind oblivious numbness of individuality!

Then a voice spoke to him—the voice of a "presence" which recalls that of the near-death experience described in Moody's *Life after Life* and Ring's *Life at Death*.

"To others also," said the voice of the divine one who had thus saved me,— "to others in the like state it has been permitted to see something of their pre-existence. But no one of them ever could endure to look far. Power to see all former births belongs only to those eternally released from the bonds of Self. Such exist outside of illusion,—outside of form and name; and pain cannot come nigh them.

"But to you, remaining in illusion, not even the Buddha could give power to look back more than a little way.

"Still you are bewitched by the follies of art and of poetry and music,—the delusions of sensuous speech, the delusions of sensuous sound.

Hearn, the consummate artist, makes a fabric of self-discovery out of his dream, explaining that his pain came from his fondness for beautiful forms. He was not ready, yet, to embrace his egoic past, to suffer divorce from all his cherished illusions. The beginning of such vision was therefore unbearable, or so he explains. But Hearn the artist smiled at death.

## *FRONTIERS*

### **An Accumulating Incentive . . .**

JOHN SWOMLEY, veteran pacifist thinker and policy analyst, who lives in Kansas City, publishes a monthly newsletter, *Facts for Action*, which throws a clear light on commonly unexamined aspects of American life. (The newsletter is sponsored by the Kansas City Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Methodist Peace Fellowship, 5123 Truman Road, Kansas City, Mo. 64127.) The September 1980 number was devoted to the contrast between the rich and the poor in the United States. It begins:

The number of millionaires in America recently passed 500,000, whereas less than ten years ago there were fewer than 100,000. In the same period the average pay of the American factory worker, wrote economist Richard Parker "actually declined in real inflation-adjusted dollars." One in four Americans lives below what the government calls a 'minimum budget' level."

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith said we are not merely suffering from inflation but are also experiencing "a revolt of the rich against the poor." Karl Marx would have said that the rich are waging a class war against the poor and the lower middle class.

Richard Parker, referring to the plight of the middle class, wrote: "In the first four months of 1979, inflation rose over all at 7.1 per cent. In four key sectors of the economy—housing, health, food, and energy—inflation increased at a staggering 17.2 per cent." He indicated that "Four out of five Americans spend between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of their income on those four items alone, and the suffering grows proportionately as one moves down the income ladder."

Swomley is able to make the charges specific, declaring that "It is not those on welfare who are cheating the people, but those who exploit federal programs for their own benefit." Many medical doctors profit greatly from Medicaid. A report to Congress by FBI officers said that "corruption has permeated virtually every area of the Medicare/Medicaid health care industry." In 1967, the first year of full Medicare/Medicaid services, the cost to the government was \$4.8

billion. The estimated cost for the 1980 fiscal year was \$47 billion.

A Department of Agriculture economist told a Congressional committee that in 1975 "at least 110 billion . . . was lost by consumers due to the monopoly in the U.S. food-manufacturing industries." At present the annual loss is estimated at about \$16 billion, with overcharges amounting to about 5.7 per cent of the food bill paid by Americans.

Another cause of inflation, Swomley says, is collusion between government and the oil companies. He quotes a Texas Congressman who reported to his constituents in Houston that domestic policy decisions were responsible for about two thirds of the increase (excluding added taxes) in the price of gasoline. We blame the Arabs and the Iranians, but only ten cents of the price increase of 32 cents during the first ten months of 1979 was the result of the higher cost of imported crude oil.

A further important factor has been high interest rates, which caused a lay-off of 300,000 construction workers between January and May of 1980. Lack of housing, because of lack of mortgage money, has forced up rents and the cost of homes.

Mr. Swomley concludes his report by saying that military spending is almost certainly the largest factor in causing inflation, then adds:

A fifth factor is the non-payment of taxes by major corporations. Rep. Charles Vanik (D. Ohio) said that 14 major corporations earning more than \$3.5 billion among them paid no federal income taxes in 1978 and 30 others earning \$14.4 billion paid less than 10 per cent to the U.S. government. The ten largest banks paid an average of only 6.3 per cent on \$19.9 billion in income. These figures, he said, demonstrate that corporate tax cuts are not necessary to stimulate the economy.

We are without resource for comment on this depressing picture. More power to the State to make the rich behave is surely not the answer. Only a general change in the ends of life will alter

the patterns of acquisitive enterprise. One practical factor in this change would be for all of us to "slow down." Leopold Kohr wrote about this in the *CoEvolution Quarterly* for last summer, declaring that not only small, but *slow*, too, is beautiful. He wants a society with social and living arrangements which no longer require us to move about with great speed, just to keep going. He says:

This does not mean that a return to smaller environments entails the destruction of existing cities and states. All it requires is a change in their structure. In the case of urban sprawls, it means the super-imposition of a federal pattern by urbanizing the suburbs—that is, by concentrating the bulk of a citizen's activities in their immediate neighborhoods. Live where you work, and work where you live. This makes motorized transport largely superfluous. When I lived in Paris as a student some 50 years ago, I went to see glamour spots such as the Grande Boulevards, the Champs Elysees or Montmartre perhaps twice a year—for sightseeing. The reason for this was that there was hardly anything in the rest of the vast metropolis which could not be found in rival splendour in the *Quartier Latin* where I had my room and which, like all other *arrondissements* of Paris, was not a suburb but a highly autonomous and self-sufficient little city in its own right with all the glamour, centres, offices, theatres, schools, needed for keeping its citizens content within the confines of their animated, unharassed, pedestrian neighborhoods. This reduced dependence on motorized means of transport to 10% of what it is today. . . .

On the national level he would have us "cantonize" the state. Getting rid of costly transport would mean getting rid of the "heaviest tax on land and labour." Prof. Kohr suggests "a dike-like system of small regions of high political autonomy and economic self-sufficiency." A decelerated way of life, he says, would not necessarily lower our standard of living since it would require far less mechanical energy. He adds:

In Schumacher's terms, this means not a more advanced but an intermediate form of technology. But since intermediate technology is adequate, efficient, and appropriate only in societies of limited size, it follows that it cannot work unless we are

willing to replace first the present system of large powers, common markets, united nations, and what have you, by the mobile balance of a system of small states envisioned by St. Augustine, who said to the ancient Romans, "What glory is there in the largeness of empire, bright and brittle like glass, and forever in fear of breaking?"