

## IS "NATURE" DUAL?

THE question of why human beings behave as they do, where we should look for light on how they ought to behave, and to what end, has been aggressively argued for more than two hundred years. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Julien Offray de la Mettrie contended in his *Natural History of the Soul* (1745) that one who wishes to learn the nature of the human soul must study the behavior of the body. The teachings of religion are no help. Following the example of Galileo, he preferred the Book of Nature to the books of the theologians. It does not matter, he said, whether or not there is a God, since this belief will not improve our understanding. The wonders of nature are no proof of deity since we are not yet so well informed of the natural causes of things as to be sure that Nature does not produce everything out of herself.

Man [he wrote] is framed of materials not exceeding in value those of other animals; nature has made use of one and the same paste—she has diversified the ferment in working it up. . . . We may call the body an enlightened machine. It is a clock, and the fresh chyle from the food is the spring.

This was a statement of Cartesian doctrine, on which Lamettrie elaborated at length, especially in his *Man a Machine* published in 1748. In consequence of this view, which eventually became dominant, all investigations of human nature and purpose were directed to the study of bodies, animal and human, and what little attention was given to mind sought to explain mental phenomena in terms of physiology. Almost two hundred years were required for men of learning to question this outlook, so great was the enthusiasm and determination of scientists to study the natural world alone for instruction in the nature of both things and man. We might take as the turning-point a compact essay by Alfred North Whitehead, *Nature and Life* (1934), in which the distinguished philosopher challenged both

Newtonian and psychological mechanism as sources for understanding ourselves. He wrote:

Science can find no individual enjoyment in Nature; science can find no aim in Nature; science can find no creativity in Nature; it finds mere rules of succession. These negations are true of natural science. They are inherent in its methodology. The reason for this blindness of physical science lies in the fact that such science only deals with half the evidence provided by human experience. It divides the seamless coat—or, to change the metaphor into a happier form, it examines the coat, which is superficial, and neglects the body which is fundamental.

The disastrous separation of body and mind which has been fixed on European thought by Descartes is responsible for this blindness of science.

By the middle of the twentieth century great changes had taken place. Thoughtful individuals, many of them working in the sciences, began to consult their own experience instead of the books of the materialists—the scholastics of science. They began to study the book of human nature instead of the Pavlovians, the Behaviorists, and the Freudians. A. H. Maslow, a psychologist trained in the tradition of John B. Watson, looked at his newborn child and abandoned Watson's assumptions. "It is as if he never had any children," he said. The human presence of the baby, he said, "made the behaviorism I had been so enthusiastic about look so foolish that I could not stomach it any more." Other writers were giving a humanist focus of attention for the understanding of man. Lewis Mumford said to the archaeologists, "Study old bones if you must, but look also at the *ideas* held by the ancients, what they believed about life and death. You may learn more." The trauma of two world wars provided ample reason for new beginnings in thought about human behavior. "What," people began to ask, "have you left out?" Instead of looking for instruction from the memory of cells

and "organic molecules," serious inquirers began to study the cultural flow of ideas. Men like Ernst Cassirer and Carl Jung found the springs of human behavior in myths, and more recently Giorgio de Santillana, who teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, spoke (in *Hamlet's Mill*) of a "great world-wide archaic construction" already in existence when the Greeks came on the scene, something of which still survives in myths and fairy tales. The original themes of this construction, de Santillana suggests, were preserved in the thought of the Pythagoreans and Plato, as "tantalizing fragments of a lost whole." Plato, he declared, knew "the language of archaic myth" and built his philosophy on this foundation.

It is as though there were recognition that in the complex layers of human tradition may be found artifacts as informative of *human* reality as fossil remains are to the explorers of organic evolution and the biological past. The evidence may be non-material, but it is *substantial*. We have bodies, but we *are* minds. De Santillana addresses himself to the past in this spirit, saying:

Behind Plato there stands the imposing body of doctrine attributed to Pythagoras, some of its formulation uncouth, but rich with the prodigious content of early mathematics, pregnant with a science and a metaphysics that were to flower in Plato's time. From it come such words as "theorem," "theory," and "philosophy." This in turn rests on what might be called a proto-Pythagorean phase, spread all over the East but with a focus in Susa. And then there was something else again, the stark numerical computing of Babylon. From it all came that strange principle: "Things are numbers."

The idea that souls come from the stars is a part of that old system, and this, curiously, is reflected even in the New World in the tribal traditions of the American Indians. After providing such illustrations, de Santillana says:

These examples will do. What they demonstrate is this: the *Timaeus* and, in fact, most Platonic myths, act like a floodlight that throws bright beams upon the whole of "high mythology." Plato did not *invent* his myths, he used them in the *right* context—now and then mockingly—without divulging their precise

meaning: whoever is entitled to the knowledge of the proper terminology would understand them.

A great possibility begins to loom in such expressions. What if the immeasurable deposit of thought that constitutes all human tradition is as representative of the reality of the cosmos as the geologic and organic record? Thought is the stuff of our lives, the blood of our intellectual organism, and our ideas are the structural units of our deliberated and intentional existence. Are there patterns of thought which correspond to the organic memories we call instinct? If so, they might be similar to the structures which scientists study in visible nature, yet also different, by reason of the human endowment of reflective consciousness, freedom of choice, and an irrepressible sense of purpose. Already the feeling of such a reality seems present in the work of active thinkers now reaching full maturity. In a new book embodying the visionary yet practical conceptions of a number of pioneers who met to consider the requirements of a sustainable society, Nancy Jack Todd, of the New Alchemy Institute on Cape Cod, describes the spirit of the gathering:

As a group New Alchemists brought agricultural, aquacultural and conceptual skills for ecological design. With this assemblage we felt that we had some of the pieces of the puzzle in hand, but that as many more were missing. We knew that well beyond our reach, in accumulated wealth of human experience lay great repositories of wisdom that we could only intuit and try to recover. To be haunted by a dream of union, of Oneness, is not uncommon. One friend of mine once told me that she often had a feeling of almost remembering a time, as though it were just beyond memory, when we understood better our destiny, our place in the cosmos. More recently I heard a woman of the Wampanoag tribe say to a group of women, talking to us as representatives of our culture, "We don't understand you. We don't understand what your instructions are: how you have been taught to live. A seed, a flower unfolds according to the instructions it has been given. We don't understand yours."

I guess we have forgotten.

A larger purpose of this book, titled *The Village as Solar Ecology*, is, then, to try "to

reinvent and recreate a sense of the human place in the cosmos." This conception—of re-invention and re-creation—may be the key to the difference between man and what we think of as external nature. Continuity is a principle of organic life, but human culture loses its continuity when we forget our place in the cosmos, requiring us to reinvent it. Nothing we are simply *told* works for very long in the lives of humans. The vitality of our being lies in our *rediscoveries*, in giving the new life of currency to ideas which may be as old as the stars, yet need continual reanimation by thinkers who embody them in fresh terms, increasing their relevance and their subtlety.

It is certainly the case that human history is made of the emergence, rise, climax, and then decline and death of one civilization after another. Sometimes—probably more often than not—the rebirth is initiated by rediscovery and exploration of the spirit of the past. This quite plainly happened with European civilization. The Renaissance began with the rediscovery of the Greeks, and this was as true of the beginnings of science as it was of the revival of literature and philosophy. And today, when the truths of the Enlightenment, which was the practical fruit of the Renaissance, are going sour, and science, in its manifold expansion, has become self-destructive through the technology of war and ruthless acquisition, the intense longing for the restoration of community is everywhere in evidence. This, in its way, is again a rebirth of the Greek spirit, so well characterized by Werner Jaeger (in *Paideia*):

It is a mark of the close connection between the productive artistic and intellectual life and the community that the greatest Greeks always felt they were its servants. This attitude is well known in the East also: it seems to be the most natural in a state where life is organized by quasi-religious rules. Yet the great men of Greece came forward not to utter the word of God, but to teach the people what they themselves knew, and to give shape to their ideals. Even when they spoke in the form of religious inspiration, they translated their inspiration into personal knowledge and personal form. But personal as it might be in shape and purpose, they themselves felt it fully and compellingly social. The Greek

trinity of poet, statesman, and sage embodied the nation's highest ideal of leadership. In that atmosphere of spiritual liberty, bound by deep knowledge (as if by a divine law) to the service of the community, the Greek creative genius conceived and attained that lofty educational ideal which sets it far above the more superficial artistic and intellectual brilliance of our individualistic civilization. That is what lifts classical Greek literature out of the category of pure aesthetics, in which many have tried to understand it, and gives it the immeasurable influence on human nature which it has exercised for thousands of years.

This attitude, as the essence of civilization, was, as Jaeger says, well known in the East, and how that "imposing body of doctrine" spoken of by de Santillana pervaded the lives of Easterners is made clear by Ananda Coomaraswami and Sister Nivedita in their *Myths and Legends of Hindus and Buddhists*. The ideas of meaning and purpose in the mythic lore of Indian literature became an all-pervasive cultural reality. As one of the writers says, "in India mythology is not a mere subject of antiquarian research and disquisition," but rather a "living mythology which, passing through the stages of representation of successive cosmic process and assuming definite shape thereafter, has become a powerful factor in the everyday life of the people." Both language and tradition in India are filled with the imagery of an ancestral tradition providing "a sense of the human place in the cosmos," both spiritual and earthly; in fact, you could say of Indian philosophy and literature that in the arts of poetry and song, as well as in the visual and plastic arts, instructions on "how to live" are implicit throughout. It is true enough that India, like other parts of the world which came under Western influence through either imperial or commercial conquest, has very largely lost the value of its archaic inspiration, but the record of its past and the evidence of a majestic transmission of great ideas remain intact and open to investigation, and perhaps to authentic renewal. A passage in the book quoted above conveys the importance of this transmission:

. . . it should be understood that not merely the lawgivers like Manu, but also the poets of ancient India, conceived of their own literary art, not as an end in itself, but entirely as a means to an end—and that end, the nearest possible realization of an ideal society. The poets were practical sociologists, using the great power of their art deliberately to mould the development of human institutions and to lay down ideals for all classes of men. The poet is, in fact, a philosopher, in the Nietzschean sense of one who stands behind and directs the evolution of a desired type. Results have proved the wisdom of the chosen means for if Hindu society has ever as a whole approached the ideal or ideals which have been the guiding force in its development, it is through hero-worship. The *Vedas*, indeed, belonged essentially to the learned; but the epics have been translated into every vernacular by poets such as Tulsi Das and Kamban ranking in power with Valmiki himself. The material of the epics, moreover, as also many of the *Puranas*, has been made familiar not only to the literate, but also to all the unlettered not excepting women, by constant recitation, and also by means of the drama, in folksong, and in painting. Until quite modern times no Hindu boy or girl grew up unfamiliar with the story of the Ramayana; and their highest aspiration was to be like Rama or Sita.

The question to be raised here is whether these "instructions," given not didactically, but in epic poetry and drama, in storied tradition, may not be a natural expression of the *human* evolutionary surge, a means of transmitting instruction of the sort free minds are able to take, assimilate, and then convert into a base of self-knowledge, while, in some cases, the exposure to great tradition may provoke into action the latent creative capacities of the young. If, as the Indian woman said to Nancy Todd, "a flower unfolds according to the instructions it has been given," and if humans, too, are natural beings, why should there not be another sort of instruction, psycho-spiritual in content, given by the flowing principle of intellectual and moral continuity for the world? Indeed, why should we not affirm that Nature itself is dual? Emerson put it well:

There are two laws discrete,  
Not reconciled,—  
Law for man, and law for thing;  
The last builds town and fleet,

But it runs wild,  
And doth the man unking.

If there are hierarchies throughout visible nature, then why not hierarchies to structure transcendent nature, giving "instruction" to each level of inner life appropriate to its evolutionary degree? In the case of man, the instruction, through the media of authentic communication such as literature and the arts, provides seeds for us to use as we will, since *human* growth must be through freedom and self-reliant development.

Meanwhile, we know what happens when the seeds alleged to have a "higher" origin are turned into hothouse plants and forced to grow into dogmas. Didactic religion, in contrast, say, with the questioning of Socrates and the dialectic of Plato, is almost always distorted and exploited by its priestly teachers, and in time angrily rejected by the people. Then, during such epochs of revolt, truth is made to appear as an upside-down affair, for, no matter how basic the doctrine or verity, freedom of mind is the primary foundation of human life. By the eighteenth century in Western history, then, the unbelievers were very nearly the only champions of freedom, and we find Lamettrie declaring that "If Atheism were universally disseminated, all the branches of religion would be torn up by the roots." He added: "Then there would be no more theological wars: there would no longer be soldiers of religion, that terrible kind of soldier."

In consequence of this surrounding moral atmosphere for the rise of Western civilization, our "instructions" were obtained empirically, beginning with deductions from physics and biology, with Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Darwin, and Freud for our authorities and guides. So, in recent centuries, we have gone bumping from one partial empirical synthesis to another, while allowing our social life to be governed by principles declared by Adam Smith and our concept of destiny shaped by Herbert Spencer's notion of Survival of the Fittest. But we are beginning to see, today, that these "instructions"

take us in the wrong direction, leading to confusion and disaster. Our critics speak repeatedly of the need for "a change of heart," yet have little to say concerning how real civilizations are actually constructed. But even in modern times we have had wise men—secular prophets, we might call them, since the conventional religions are barren of inspiration—who know something of how the fabric of a new society must be woven. Arthur Morgan was one of these, Lewis Mumford another.

But no real prophet tells another human being what to do, or what to believe, since he understands the human spirit and respects its independent authority, however uncertain and frail it may be during the difficult process of developing autonomy. Learning to think, and gaining the courage of the convictions reached—this is the process of mind to which the true instructions are addressed. Involved in this, for humans, is learning to combine a higher sort of "empiricism"—even the empiricism of the mystic—with respect for the wisdom of the past, using those of its seeds which can be found and nurtured.

Nancy Todd puts the spirit of such undertakings in appropriate words:

Perhaps through the slow integration of knowledge that is engendered and with subsequent further synthesis from fields as disparate as ecology, quantum physics, astronomy, religion, holography, anthropology, the contemplation of sacred art, architecture, and geometry, and the study of Gaia that certain harmonies are being heard and that our sense of the world, rather than being cacophonous and diffuse with the claims of economists and environmentalists, communists and capitalists, begins, at least intuitively, to make more sense, to ring true. Perhaps a cosmology that is at once beyond memory and still just out of reach of present knowledge, yet still somehow alive within us is unfolding.

## REVIEW

### "IF THE REPUBLIC HAD ANY SENSE"

THIS is a week for attention to old books that have survived, or ought to have survived. At hand is a Vintage paperback combining Paul Goodman's *People or Personnel* and *Like a Conquered Province*, plus some additional essays. "Sprightly" is an adjective that practically always applies to Goodman's writing, and here it means that he thinks of parallels that are suddenly illuminating. Lively prose is filled with effective analogies, and Goodman's analogies have a memorable bite. These essays first came out about fifteen years ago, but since Goodman wrote them it is not surprising to find most of what he says quite applicable to the present. Toward the end of *Like a Conquered Province*, he says:

Of all politically advanced peoples, the Americans are the only ones who started in an historical golden age of anarchy. Having gotten rid of the king—and he was always far away, as well as being only an English king—they were in no hurry to find another sovereign, or even reconstruct a concept of sovereignty. For more than thirty years after the outbreak of the Revolution, almost nobody bothered to vote in formal elections (often less than 2 per cent), and the national Constitution was the concern of a few merchants and lawyers. Yet the Americans were not a primitive or unpolitical people; on the contrary they had many kinds of civilized democratic and hierarchical structures: town meetings, congregational parishes, masters with apprentices and indentured servants, gentry with slaves, professionals and clients, provincial assemblies. The pluralism goes way back. But where was the sovereignty?

What, for Goodman, was the meaning of the fact that few people bothered to go to the polls in the early days of the Republic? It meant that the political life of that society was vital in community terms and that the national state was important only to a comparatively small group of leaders. For Goodman, this did not represent apathy but an intelligent focus of social energies. The people were "political" only when they needed to be. He answers his own question about sovereignty:

Theoretically, the sovereignty resided in the People. But except for sporadic waves of protest, like the riots, Tea Parties, and the Revolution itself—the populism goes way back—who were the People? One does not at all

have the impression, in this congeries of families, face-to-face communities, and pluralist social relations, that there was anything like a General Will, except maybe to be left alone.

Nevertheless, there *is*—it is clear from American behavior—a characteristic kind of sovereignty. It is what is made up by political people as they go along, a continuous series of existential constitutional acts, just as they invented the Declaration, the Articles, and the Constitution, and obviously expected to keep rewriting the Constitution.

Goodman saw this as the temper of the decentralist society he argued for and worked for throughout his life. *A New York Times* reviewer said of *Like a Conquered Province*:

If the republic had any sense, it would put Paul Goodman on its payroll. Not because he agrees with it, but because he doesn't. For Mr. Goodman is the ombudsman of our morality. . . . To say that Mr. Goodman is one of the most penetrating critics of our society is to give no idea of the quality of his thinking. It is not merely that he differs with the status quo on matters of education, city planning, ecology, decentralization and much else, but that the nature of that difference derives from his manner of tunneling underneath the problem and, if necessary, blowing it sky high. . . . He is humane in the deepest sense of the word.

Goodman acquired a large audience because he did not write as a partisan. Understanding was more important for him than winning arguments. If, for example, he considers the idea of the market as the ruling principle of our lives, he begins by showing what a decent man of the eighteenth century, Adam Smith, meant by the "morality" of the market system—the controls it was expected to exercise over human behavior—and then shows how and why it fails in our time.

The check of the market has been weakened by subsidies, cost-plus contracts, monopolies, price-fixing, advertising, and consumer ignorance. And the various technologies increasingly interlock and depend on one another in a vast and recondite system, so that it has become fantastically difficult even for experts to decide what is by and large useful, cheap, or even safe. No one at all can trace the remote effects. And the control of systems of technology, and of the systems of systems, is lodged in managers who finally are not interested in efficiency, not to speak of prudence. They are not in business for technical or citizenry reasons.

There ceases to be a morality of technique at all. A technician is hired to execute a detail of a program handed down to him. Apart from honestly trying to make his detail work he is not entitled to criticize the program itself, in terms of its efficiency, common sense, beauty, effect on the community, or human scale. If management is not concerned with these either, a technician must often lend his wits to ludicrous contradictions. Cars are designed to go faster than it is safe to drive; food is processed to take out the nourishment and sometimes put it back; housing is expertly engineered to destroy neighborhoods; weapons are stockpiled that only a maniac would use. The ultimate in irresponsibility is that the engineer is not allowed to know what he is making.

Goodman is an expert in pointing out how people victimize themselves. Because he is impersonal—he doesn't condemn persons—people are able to listen to what he says:

The interlocking system of technology without the direct check of personal acquaintance and use and political prudence creates a series of booby traps. Human scale may be quite disregarded, the time and energy that people actually have, the space they need to move in, and the rhythm or randomness with which they best operate. As the engineers design, we move, or sometimes can't move. Facilities are improved, but during the transition everybody is inconvenienced, and by the time the facility is completed it may be obsolescent. Fast trips are made possible by jet, but they prove to chop up our lives, to involve longer trips to airports and more waiting in terminals, so we have less free time. Business machines are installed and there is no longer any person from whom to get information or service for one's particular case. Cities spread so far that one can't get out of them; the country is deserted, so it is inefficient to provide means to get to it. Immense printing presses and other means of communication are devised, but to warrant such an investment of capital requires a mass audience, and it becomes hard to publish a serious book or transmit a serious message.

This sounds like chaos, and modern life pretty nearly is. . . .

Goodman is good at producing shocks of self-recognition. All the contradictions he mentions are now much more in evidence than they were when he wrote, fifteen or sixteen years ago. Reading him compels a kind of reflection that has never been much practiced by Americans. We have believed that we've been doing everything just right for a couple of hundred years, but now find our lives invaded by confusion and malfunction. The very

idea of "progress" is called into question, which is the same as questioning the established ends and means of American life. At the same time we find ourselves locked in position by vast institutions which seem practically unchangeable and are staffed by people whose personal wellbeing requires resistance to change. What to do in a situation of this sort calls for vivid powers of imagination. Goodman combines his sharp critical sense with down-to-earth colorful examples. For example, in *People or Personnel*, which begins with arguments for decentralization, he does the "tunneling" spoken of by the *Times* writer:

A student hotly objects that decentralism is humanly unrealistic, it "puts too much faith in human nature" by relying on intrinsic motives, like interest in the job and voluntary association. Another student mentions Rousseau, who is still academically out of fashion since his debunking by Professor Babbitt a generation ago. (Jefferson, too, is getting his lumps.)

This objection is remarkably off-base. My experience is that most decentralists are crotchety and skeptical and tend rather to follow Aristotle than Rousseau. We must avoid concentration of power precisely because we *are* fallible; *quis custodiet custodes?* Democracy, Aristotle says, is to be preferred because it is the "least evil" form of government, since it divides power among many. I think the student states the moral issue upside down. The moral question is not whether men are "good enough" for a type of social organization, but whether the type of organization is useful to develop the potentialities of intelligence, grace, and freedom in men.

To some, this will seem like a new idea. Most discussion of social order assumes a righteous competence on the part of those who discuss—a proprietary view of all problems. We know how inadequate most other people are. Yet there are arrangements which help people to develop intelligence, grace, and freedom and other arrangements which prevent it. Because most of our present arrangements are of the second kind, it often seems that anything else will be dangerous even to attempt. Goodman, however, wanted us to improvise the first kind of institutions, and to see for ourselves how well they can be made to work, even within the confinements of the status quo.

## COMMENTARY

### UNIT OF TOMORROW'S CIVILIZATION

ATTENTION is drawn to a book issued by the New Alchemy Institute in this week's lead article, but little is said of the contents and the various contributors. *The Village as Solar Ecology* could easily be regarded as an expression of the classicism of the future. Nancy Todd's Prologue conveys the broad philosophical temper of the undertaking, evident from our quotations, and other participants (in a "Generic Design Conference" held at the New Alchemy headquarters on Cape Cod, which the book reports) offer a range of considerations dealing with the practical needs of village life, covering energy sources, architecture, community structure, water use and reuse, and the importance of trees. Amory and Hunter Lovins are contributors, and architects such as Malcolm Wells and Sim Van der Ryn draw on their extensive experience to show how technology may be adapted to ecological ways of life on a village scale.

The village as the unit of civilization, instead of the city, is the theme of the book. As William Irwin Thompson says in "The Need for Villages":

Expressed in the move from an international post-industrial city to a planetary, meta-industrial village is a shift from one world-system to another. It is a shift from consumer to contemplative values, a shift from an industrial mentality of the domination of nature and the mass production of culture to an ecological mentality of symbiosis, integration of the intuitive with the intellectual, and unique regional approaches to global processes. It is a shift from the coal and oil supported capital-intensive economies of scale of the old factory-system of Detroit and Manchester to ecologically sound workshop-production for regional markets. . . .

America is being forced to change and think in new ways. . . . As the monolithic mentality disappears from nationalism the monocrop mentality will disappear from agriculture, and the monolithic Los Angeles will disappear from urbanization.

*The Village as Solar Ecology*, then, presents vistas of possibility, linking the spiritual themes of high cultures of the past with the grain of deliberated cultural change in the present. The closing section is devoted to actual projects, mostly in the planning stage. One is a bioshelter addition to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, another is the construction of a solar village on the coast of Maine. A third is an "agricultural/cultural village" in the American Southwest, sponsored by a land trust, conceived by John Todd, and finally there is the transformation by Sim Van der Ryn of an old air force base near San Francisco into a solar village. This book may be purchased at \$22.50 (including shipping) from The New Alchemy Institute, 237 Hatchville Road, East Falmouth, Mass. 02536.



# CHILDREN

## . . . and Ourselves

### SOCIALIZATION IN AMERICA

IN an article in the *New York Times Magazine* for Nov. 2 (1980), Barbara Tuchman succeeds in lifting the subject of "Quality" out of its context of commercial clichés. She is one of the few contemporary writers able to use a popular style without sacrificing subtleties of content. Her title is "The Decline in Quality" and she illustrates what she means by quality with this story:

When Michelangelo started work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, five friends who were painters came to assist him and advise him in the techniques of fresco, in which they were practiced and he was not. Finding their work not what he desired, he resolved to accomplish the whole task by himself, locked the doors of the chapel until his friends gave up and went home, and through four painful years on a scaffold carried the work to completion, as Vasari tells us "with the utmost solicitude, labor and study." That is what makes for quality—and its cost—and what helped to make Michelangelo one of the greatest artists, if not, as some think, the greatest, of all time. Creating quality is self-nourishing. Michelangelo, Vasari goes on to say, "became more and more kindled every day by his fervor in the work and encouraged by his growing proficiency and improvement." Genius and effort go together, or if they do not, the genius will be wasted.

What happens, today, to the few—but to more, perhaps, than we realize—who are animated by the resolve to do only the very best work? One thing is sure: They either submit to compromises or they lose their jobs. (There are rare exceptions, of course.) Today, even more than in Michelangelo's time, if you embody something of his spirit you have to work alone, or the small group you work with has to be willing to undergo the privations that result from isolation from the economics of mass marketing. Years ago a professional therapist for ailing businesses told the story of a large pottery here on the coast that was threatened with failure. The expert found that the "trouble" lay in the high standards of the production manager, who classified as

"seconds" so many of the products that came out of the firing that the company was losing money. He was confronted by the expert's question: "How much perfection do you think the public will pay for?" The production man was, you could say, a conscientious craftsman who was out of place. Industry has no use for such people. The point, of course, is that for purposes of profit and survival, marketability is more important than quality. We live in a society in which the market has been made the only arbiter of value. You manufacture what will sell, not what is excellent. In a mass society this rule seems inevitable. To get the price down, (in order to be competitive), you need to make a lot of things to take advantage of the techniques of mass production, and excellence in business becomes the art of making them barely "good enough." The perfectionists can't find customers, or they work only for the very rich.

This rule of marketing has been applied to education, and Barbara Tuchman shows the result:

We have some superb schools in this country, but the dominant tendency, once again, is non-Q. Education for the majority has slipped to a level undemanding of effort, satisfied with the least, lacking respect for its own values, and actually teaching very little. We read in the press that, despite the anxious concern and experiments of educators, college-entrance scores are sinking and the national rate of schoolchildren reading at below-grade levels hovers at 50 per cent. The common tendency is to blame television, and while I suppose the two-minute attention span it fosters, and the passive involvement of the viewer, must negatively affect the learning process, I suspect something more basic is at fault.

That something, I believe, lies in new attitudes toward both teaching and learning. Schoolchildren are not taught to work. Homework is frivolous or absent. The idea has grown that learning must be fun; students must study what they like, therefore courses have become elective. Work is left to the highly motivated, and failure for the others does not matter because, owing to certain socially concerned but ill-conceived rules, students in many school systems cannot be flunked. Except by the few who learn because they cannot be stopped, the coping skills society needs are not acquired by the promoted

failures, and the gulf between the few and the mass will widen.

Further, one becomes aware through occasional glimpses into curriculums, that subject matter makes increasing concessions to junk. Where are the summer reading lists and book reports of former years? A high-school student of my acquaintance in affluent suburbia was recently assigned, by his English teacher, no less, to watch television for a week and keep a record on 3-by-5 cards of what he had seen. This in the literature of Shakespeare to Mark Twain, Jane Austen to J. D. Salinger! How will the young become acquainted with quality if they are not exposed to it?

The effect appears at the next level. A professor of classics at a major Eastern university told me recently that, in a discussion with his students of the heroes of Greek legend, he tried to elicit their concept of the hero. Only one student, a girl, raised her hand, and replied "Dustin Hoffman."

Who needs heroes? someone might ask. We are egalitarian people and our ideal is the common man, not the uncommon one. We are soaked in the standards of ordinariness. By this measure, excellence, or the goal of excellence, becomes virtually unAmerican! The marketing techniques thrive on mediocrity because it is predictable, and where the market defines value, mediocrity is inevitably praised. Mrs. Tuchman illustrates this with a story of what happened when former President Nixon nominated Judge G. Harold Carswell to the Supreme Court.

The general criticism of Carswell as mediocre prompted from Senator Roman L. Hruska of Nebraska, one of the historic remarks of the century. He did not think Carswell should be disqualified on the grounds of an undistinguished juridical career, because, he said, "Even if he were mediocre, there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers, and they are entitled to a little representation, aren't they?"

Not only politicians suffer from this ill. In *The Necessity for Ruins* J. B. Jackson recalls an occasion when American sculptors and architects were invited to submit designs for monuments honoring Thomas Jefferson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, the result being that after a time the artists admitted that they didn't really know how

to design monuments, or even what a monument was supposed to mean. Moreover, they implied that their ignorance was in fact a virtue, since they were practical men living in the present, not concerned with outmoded tradition.

But such virtues, along with our "progress," have led us to identify "quality of life" with what we possess, not with what we are. And as Barbara Tuchman says:

Advertising augments the condition. From infancy to adulthood, advertising is the air Americans breathe, the information we absorb, almost without knowing it. It floods our minds with pictures of perfection and goals of happiness easy to attain. Face cream will banish age, decaffeinated coffee will banish nerves, floor wax will bring in the neighbors for a cheery bridge game or gossip, grandchildren will love you if your disposition improves with the right laxative, storekeepers and pharmacists overflow with sound avuncular advice, the right beer endows you with hearty masculine identity, and almost anything from deodorants to cigarettes, toothpaste, hair shampoo and lately even antacids will bring on love affairs, usually on horseback or on a beach. Moreover, all the people engaged in these delights are beautiful. Dare I suggest that this is not the true world? We are feeding on foolery, of which a steady diet, for those who feed on little else, cannot help but leave a certain fuzziness.

Fuzziness, aimlessness, and in time actual helplessness is the result, if the need of enormous corporate enterprises to be bailed out by the government is any indication. All this, of course, cannot be blamed on the schools, which are shaped by the same forces that are affecting the rest of American life.

## FRONTIERS

### A Wild and Dusky Knowledge

IN the *North Country Anvil* (November-December, 1980)—a magazine published every two months in Winona, Minnesota—one that almost died but is now happily reanimated—Jim Eggert announces his discovery that Henry David Thoreau was "an economic prophet of our times." This seems entirely reasonable. Thoreau was a man of uncommon sense, so that when his thoughts turned to matters we think "economic," he said (in passing) things that we, over a hundred years later, recognize as altogether true. Schumacher, who was an economist turned philosopher, made a similar discovery about Gandhi, whose remarks bearing on the economic aspect of life are increasingly seen as prophetic.

But neither Thoreau nor Gandhi thought of themselves as "economists." They were undivided humans who put first things first, with consequences that the new ecological and humanist economists are equipped to appreciate. There may be something to be learned from this—that the economic wisdom of these two (and some others) is little more than a side-effect of a kind of thinking not much done in the world, and that this thinking is what we really need to develop. It is doubtless a kind of thinking which, if widely adopted, would make learned "economists" unnecessary, since we would need no instruction from specialists in obvious common sense.

Once in a while—not often—MANAS receives a letter from a reader who says he would like to see less about "ecology" and environmental concerns. There is a sense in which the subject gets monotonous, especially for editors who are mere traffic managers of ideas rather than practitioners out on the land, where the application of sound ideas produces a valuable intensity in experience. Editors borrow some of that intensity for what it is worth, since applied ideas are more educational than abstractions. And a lot more interesting, most of the time.

But not all the time. Thoreau made it worth while to trace his applied ideas back to their roots. Take for example something that is now frequently quoted from him. Tom Eggert writes:

Picture this relatively young man (34) standing up before the Concord Lyceum in the spring of 1851 and opening his lecture with, "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wilderness," and then ending with the famous phrase, "in wildness is the preservation of the world."

Well, there was still plenty of wildness in America in 1851. Thoreau must have been a minority of one, or almost one, in making this declaration. After all, the achievement of Americans—they nearly all agreed on that—was in *taming* the wilderness. People are willing to listen to Thoreau so long as he makes sense—but didn't he care anything about *civilization*? You can't say that Thoreau was an uncivilized man, but his tastes are at issue here. In his book, *Excursions*, published in 1866, four years after his death, Emerson contributed a biographical sketch of his friend, in which he said:

He declined invitations to dinner-parties, because there each was in everyone's way, and he could not meet the individuals to any purpose. "They make their pride," he said, "in making their dinner cost much; I make my pride in making my dinner cost little." When asked at table what dish he preferred, he answered, "The nearest." . . .

His senses were acute, and he remarked that by night every dwelling-house gives out bad air, like a slaughter-house. He liked the pure fragrance of melilot [yellow clover]. He honored certain plants with special regard, and, over all, the pond-lily,—then, the gentian, and the *Mikania scandens*, and "life-everlasting," and a bass-tree which he visited every year when it bloomed, in the middle of July. He thought the scent a more oracular inquisition than the sight,—more oracular and truthworthy. The scent, of course, reveals what is concealed from the other senses. By it he detected earthiness. He delighted in echoes, and said they were almost the only kind of kindred voices he heard. He loved Nature so well, was so happy in her solitude, that he became very jealous of cities, and the sad work which their refinements and artifices made with man and his dwelling. The axe was always destroying his forest.

"Thank God," he said, "they cannot cut down the clouds!" "All kinds of figures are drawn on the blue ground with this fibrous white paint."

We begin to get an idea of what Thoreau meant by "wildness" and what, for him, it preserved. That quoted phrase about wildness occurs later in the book; apparently, he used it again, in the chapter on "Walking," where in 1862 he wrote:

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plough and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind.

Today he might add that the very air we breathe comes from the forest, but since a lot of people are now saying that, he would doubtless go on to other things—more obscure things. He developed, long before Abraham Maslow, a "psychology of being."

In short, all good things are wild and free. There is something in a strain of music, whether produced by an instrument or by the human voice,—take the sound of a bugle in a summer night, for instance,—which by its wildness, to speak without satire, reminds me of the cries emitted by wild beasts in their native forests. It is so much of their wildness as I can understand. Give me for my friends and neighbors wild men, not tame ones. The wildness of the savage is but a faint symbol of the awful ferocity with which good men and lovers meet.

I love even to see the domestic animals reassert their native rights,—any evidence that they have not wholly lost their original wild habits and vigor; as when my neighbor's cow breaks out of her pasture early in the morning and boldly swims the river, a cold, gray tide, twenty-five or thirty rods wide, swollen by the melted snow. It is the buffalo crossing the Mississippi. . . .

I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated: part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest, not only serving an immediate use, but preparing a mould against a distant future, by the annual decay of the vegetation it supports.

There are other letters for the child to learn than those which Cadmus invented. The Spaniards have a good term to express this wild and dusky knowledge,—*Gramática parda* tawny grammar,—a kind of mother-wit derived from that same leopard to which I have referred.

Thoreau grows on his readers, once they understand him. That would be one way to grow a society both civilized and sustainable.