

"REALITY IS WHAT WE CREATE"

THE writer has two basic embarrassments. The first is essential to his health as a human being, and also to the quality of his work. Have I, he must ask himself, anything worth saying? If not, he should of course keep still, and this is quite an embarrassment for a writer. His predicament can be overcome only by the driving energy of the muse. The thing that needs to be said should assert itself with so much insistence that it *has* to be written about. The writer is not only himself, but himself plus this fire which cannot be put out. The fire is not personal. It is an endowment from one of the gods—the Promethean god. If its coming is not attended by a lively humility then the writer ought to continue to keep still until he feels it. The Jack Horner syndrome spoils good writing.

The second embarrassment lies in the difficulty of knowing *how* to say what needs to be said. If the thing needs to be put across, how do you do it? Should you imitate Homer or the *Encyclopedia Britannica*? There are various ways to focus this problem, but one that keeps coming to mind is a passage by Douglas Cater in a *Saturday Review* of about six or seven years ago. He said:

Our journalists, both on TV and in print, pledge fealty to the proposition that society thrives by communication of great gobs of unvarnished truth. Our law courts make us swear to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Yet we only dimly understand how, in an all-enveloping environment, man chisels his little statues of perceived reality. As we approach a time when communication threatens to fission like an atom, we need to delve more deeply into these mysteries.

If you think about it, you realize how right Mr. Cater is. Of course, we know something about such matters. There is the cultural environment we inherit, a vast collection of opinions and habits of mind. But we are

somehow still "individuals," and if a writer is out to "convert," then he is really trying to make his readers less individual by imposing on them *his* opinion. But what else can he do? Aren't minds made up of opinions, and good minds made of good opinions? Well, yes, but behind the man of good opinions is the man who is a good *chooser* of opinions, and do you want to convert him to something or provide proper exercise for his choosing capacity? Maybe you want to do both. Most appeals to reason try to do both.

But should they?

Writers, teachers, and educators who perform well-intentioned work in the world have this central question to answer. If they concentrate on the art of choosing wisely, and not on a select list of good choices, history may seem to pass their students by. Those bombs may go off any day. The air is now polluted almost to the point of asphyxiating us. Corruption in politics is already the rule of public life.

But where is the advance if people substitute one set of rubrics for another? Was Stalin an improvement on the Czar? And what, you ask yourself musingly, would have prevented the United States from dropping those atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? What would it take to alter the attitude of the American people to be something like that of the common folk of India, as described by Edmund Taylor in *Richer by Asia*? He wrote in 1947:

If India had been in a position to speak with authority—as I believe that she will be able to do before long—at the time of the American atomic-warfare tests at Bikini atoll, we would have heard, not only through the Indian press but from the official diplomatic sounding-boards of the world, a message of great importance to us. We would have learned that without quite committing a social crime, we were following the pattern of crime, and were guilty of

national blasphemy, not of a grave offense against Russia or even against peace, but against the dignity of man and the harmony of nature.

We did not feel—even those of us who strongly disapproved of the Bikini tests—that we were committing a really serious offense against peace, therefore the deep feeling of guilt we had seemed slightly superstitious to us, and we brushed it out of our minds, falling into an unnatural apathy. The Indians could have explained to us why our guilt was real and not superstitious, why Bikini, though it lacked the element of sadism, constituted the same basic blasphemy which is really what shocked us the most in the showerbaths, the gas-chambers and crematoriums of Belsen, in Goering's grotesque experiments with frozen prisoners and naked prisoners, in the researches of Nazi medicine aimed at discovering the ideal poisons for injecting through the eardrums of children. The Indians would have told us that our blasphemy, like the Nazi ones, arose from an idolatrous worship of the techniques of science divorced from any ethical goals, that the man-made cataclysm of Bikini was a black mass of physics as the German experiments were a black mass of medicine, that it was a mob-insurrection against the pantheist sense of citizenship in nature, which we share with the Hindus in our hearts, but consider a childish foible.

If, in the perspective of history, we see that Taylor overestimated the moral promise of official India, the point of his comment is hardly reduced. It seems just to say that ordinary people in the East, whatever their shortcomings, have a sense of fitness about relations with nature which is lacking in the West. How shall we develop similar feelings, to guard our children, and our children's children, against a long series of "black masses" held in the name of scientific advance and progress?

Obviously, a different sense of "reality" is involved, and, one asks oneself, how are alterations in the idea of reality accomplished? Well, we know and we don't know. The cultural anthropologists and the social historians have useful things to say, but their insights are not easy to apply in any here-and-now situation. Lao tse and some of the Buddhist writers may have said

things more basic, but we have not the habit of taking such sources seriously.

How, then, in the first place, do we obtain our idea of "reality"? The psychologists may help, but humanist literateurs have probably put the matter more simply, and in ways consistent with Eastern psychology. In *The Stubborn Structure* (Cornell University Press, 1970), the Canadian scholar, Northrop Frye, provides a conception that he finds generated by Blake, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and D. H. Lawrence:

Reality is primarily what we create, not what we contemplate. It is more important to know how to construct a human world than to know how to study a non-human one. Science and philosophy are significant as two of the creative things that man does, not as keys to the reality of the world out there. There is a world out there, but science sees it as a world under law, and no vision under law can ever give us the whole truth about anything. Science moves with greatest confidence, and makes its most startling discoveries, in a mechanical and unconscious world. If we remove science from its context and make it not a mental construct but an oracle of reality, the logical conclusion is that man ought to adjust himself to that reality on its terms. Thus moral law imitates natural law, and human life takes on the predictable characteristics of nature as science reveals it. What begins as reason ends in the conditioned reflexes of an insect state, where human beings have become cerebral automata. The real world, that is, the human world, has constantly to be created, and the one model on which we must not create it is that of the world out there. The world out there has no human values, hence we should think of it primarily not as real but as absurd. The existential paradoxes help us to do this, and they thereby reduce the world to the . . . waste and void chaos of a world which man has once again to create.

The serious writer wants to contribute to the new, fresh, or modified "reality" that people are now having to create. He wants to say something about its desirable or necessary ingredients. He has, as men of good will put it, a "concern." This means, as Northrop Frye says, "something which includes the sense of the importance of preserving the integrity of the total human community."

Concern, then, is what people feel, and by which they are moved to act. How can we generalize the idea of concern? Again Frye is helpful:

The language of concern is the language of myth, the total vision of the human situation, human destiny, human inspirations and fears. The mythology of concern reaches us on different levels. On the lowest level is the social mythology acquired from elementary education and from one's surroundings, the steady rain of assumptions and values and popular proverbs and cliches and suggested stock responses that soaks into our early life and is constantly reinforced, in our day, by the mass media. . . . In our society, the structure of initiatory education is a loose mixture of ideas, beliefs and assumptions, different in composition for each person, but not so different as to preclude communication on its own primarily social level. It forms a body of opinion which I call the mythology of concern. By a myth, in this context, I mean a body of knowledge assimilated to or informed by a general view of the human situation. . . . The mythology of concern, taken as a whole, is not a unified body of knowledge, nor is the knowledge it contains always logically deduced from its beliefs and assumptions, nor does one necessarily believe in everything one accepts from it. But it does possess a unity none the less, and those who have most effectively changed the modern world—Rousseau Marx, and Freud. . . . are those who have changed the general pattern of our mythology.

The question then becomes: *How* is the general pattern of our mythology changed? And we should add: Do we know enough to try to change it? Did Rousseau, Marx, and Freud? Or should we try to do it anyhow, as best we can?

What can be said about our past experience in relation to such processes? Frye considers the effects of science on our ways of thinking, noting that, at the outset, the scientist tries to separate himself from familiar "concerns" in order to be impartial and "objective." This is why we find it difficult to be at home in the scientist's conception of "reality," which has in it no place for participating, choosing, and event-causing human beings. Frye says:

Naturally the main outlines of the scientific picture of the world are a part of our general cultural picture, and naturally, too, any broad and important scientific hypothesis, such as evolution or relativity, soon filters down into the myth of concern. But scientific hypotheses enter the myth of concern, not as themselves, but as parallel or translated forms of themselves. An immense number of conceptions in modern thought owe their existence to the biological theory of evolution. But social Darwinism, the conception of progress, the philosophies of Bergson and Shaw, and the like, are not applications of the *same* hypothesis in other fields: they are mythical analogies to that hypothesis. By the time they have worked their way down to stock response, as when slums are built over park land because "you can't stop progress," even the sense of analogy gets hazy.

Whatever these distortions or abuses, it is none the less evident that no human can live without the felt complexes of meaning on which his life's decisions are based. Frye goes on:

It is becoming clearer that the impulse which creates the mythology of concern and makes it socially effective is a central part of the religious impulse. Religion in this sense may be without a God; certainly it may be without a first cause or controller of the order of nature, but it can never be without the primitive function of *religio*, of binding together a society with the acts and beliefs of a common concern. Such an impulse starts with one's own society, but if it stops there it sets up a cult of state-worship and becomes perverted. . . . The force that creates the myth of concern drives it onward from the specific society one is in to larger and larger groups, and finally toward assimilating the whole of humanity to the ideal of its dialectic, its concerned feeling that freedom and happiness are better for everyone without exception than their opposites. All national or class loyalties, however instinctive or necessary are thus in the long run interim or temporary loyalties, the only abiding loyalty is to mankind as a whole.

To avoid leaving the matter at this broad level of generality, Frye adds:

One's neighbor is the person with whom one has been linked by some kind of creative human act, whether of mercy or charity, . . . or by the intellect or the imagination, as with the teacher, scholar, or artist; or by love, whether spiritual or sexual. The society of neighbors, in this sense is our real society;

the society of all men for whom we feel tolerance and goodwill rather than love, is in its background. . . . But the sense of a society of neighbors takes us beyond ethics and values into the question of identity. It would perhaps be a reasonable characterization to say that a man's religion is revealed by that with which he is trying to identify himself. . . . We belong to something before we are anything nor does growing in being diminish the link of belonging.

This, then, may be the ultimate content of primordial myth: To what do we belong, from which we become, and in growing out of, our belonging is increased?

Such are the first principles of the writer—one who, if he knows what he is about, also knows that his effective influence will be in the form of myth: idea joined with feeling and a sense of identity through which people become able to act. Northrop Frye's valuable contribution in this book of essays is in pointing out that however the man of learning, of science, scholarship, poetry, drama, or art, affects the thinking and acting or the character of other people, this influence, to take hold, must be of a sort that can be turned into myth. It must become the motivation to act; that is the meaning, here, of myth.

The virtually priestly responsibility of the writer grows out of this psychological reality. What he writes may be turned into myth and acted upon by his readers. Hence the guarded expression of some writers in relation to delicate matters that may be inverted or corrupted by mythic simplification. The tradition of the "mysteries" is not without sanction from the laws of learning. The writer who has not mastered something of educational psychology is a practitioner without a moral discipline—a serious offense.

Simone Weil, who believed that the true life of humans is defined by their obligations rather than their "rights," said in *The Need for Roots*:

Writers have an outrageous habit of playing a double game. Never so much as in our age have they claimed the role of directors of conscience and exercised it. Actually during the years immediately

preceding the war, no one challenged their right to it except the savants. The position formerly occupied by priests in the moral life of the country was held by physicists and novelists, which is sufficient to gauge the value of our progress. But if somebody called upon writers to render an account of the orientation set by their influence, they barricaded themselves indignantly behind the sacred privilege of art for art's sake.

There is not the least doubt, for example, that André Gide has always known that books like *Nourritares Terrestres* and the *Caves du Vatican* have exercised an influence on the practical conduct of life of hundreds of young people, and he has been proud of the fact. There is, then, no reason for placing such books behind the inviolable barrier of art for art's sake, and sending to prison a young fellow who pushes somebody off a train in motion. [Translator's note: A reference to a gratuitous act performed by Lafcadio, hero of André Gide's *Caves du Vatican*, who pushes somebody off a train in Italy to prove to himself that he is capable of committing any act whatever, however motiveless, unrelated to preceding events.] One might just as well claim the privileges of art for art's sake in support of crime. At one time the Surrealists came pretty close to doing so.

Another example of modern myth-making—which will please some readers and upset others—is given in one paragraph of an article by Charles Weingartner (co-author with Neil Postman of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*) in *et cetera* (Summer 1981):

Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, a printed book, while now regarded as the basic scripture of women's lib (just for the hell of it, look up the word "lib" in an unabridged dictionary), precipitated no vast "consciousness raising" among women. It took Gloria Steinem on TV to do that some time after Friedan's book was published. The "liberating" vision presented in print by Friedan, the point is, produced no "movement" *because* it was print. Draw your own conclusions about the relative potency of Friedan's physiognomy as compared with Steinem's. Imitation is still the most apparent form, not of flattery but of bankruptcy, at least intellectually. From the earliest appearances of Steinem on TV, replicas of her, clones of her, both cosmetically and rhetorically, appeared in every direction. The myth of the dragon's teeth was reaffirmed. We should all be grateful, I suppose, that Friedan herself did not serve as a model, at least cosmetically. But, the response to Steinem was

similar to a much later response to Farrah Fawcett, females by the million, lacking any ability to invent their persona, copied Fawcett's, she being like an idea-free Steinem, but the problem with Steinem was more substantive because the women who copied her were not only lacking in the ability to invent their own persona cosmetically; they lacked the ability to invent an idea of their own too. This is not a new condition by any means, but the magnitude of the consequences of this kind of demagoguery was amplified by television with consequences that have yet to be adequately assessed.

This is freewheeling and cavalier criticism, yet not without point. And it in no way suggests that beneath the frothy mass phenomena of the women's movement there is not a profound awakening to the meaning of both manhood and womanhood, and to the fact that, as Theodore Roszak has pointed out, the virtues have no sex.

One conclusion that Mr. Weingartner does not suggest is that the popular profile of women's lib as a movement might be recognized as a peculiarly American development: When we make a reform, we do it *right now*, and in a big way. The people can grow up to its actual demands later on. We have *fast* reforms just as we have fast foods and other hurry-up satisfactions and solutions. Back in the 1930s a justly famous Japanese writer, Tanizaki, virtually unknown in this country, mused briefly about the frenzied haste of Western civilization, wondering what might have happened in Japan if the West (in particular the United States) had not obliged the Japanese to "catch up" so rapidly with the rest of the industrialized world. Writers, who are often both observant and philosophically detached, are able to see the advantages in doing things quietly and naturally:

If we had been left alone we might not be much further along now in a material way than we were five hundred years ago. Even now [1934] in the Indian and Chinese countryside life no doubt goes on much as it did when Buddha and Confucius were alive. But we would have gone in a direction that suited us. We would have gone ahead very slowly, and yet it is not impossible that we would one day have discovered our own substitute for the trolley, the

radio, the airplane of today. They would have been no borrowed gadgets, they would have been the tools of our culture, suited to us.

Speaking mythically, an American Sisyphus (we have more of them all the time) might sigh in agreement with this Japanese writer, and smile his little Sisyphusian smile.

REVIEW

HAIL AND FAREWELL

RECEIVING in the mail the last issue of *Tract*, a journal published in England (three times a year) which we have quoted with relish, we take this occasion to pay our respects. *Tract* was the creation of Peter Abbs, an English teacher who became its editor and publisher. The enterprise had a somewhat heroic character and should be remembered as such—and mined as such. The first issue came out in October, 1971, and Mr. Abbs now quotes from it in the last:

"Whether we are directly involved in education or not, the pressures of contemporary life are so relentless that we are all liable to overlook the need for fundamental values and aims. As a result we find everywhere a tendency to place means before ends, methods before purposes, techniques before content. *Tract* is opposed to this tendency."

Ten years of carrying out this policy makes a notable survival record. That *Tract* was able to last so long bespeaks the courage and determination of the publisher and the loyalty of the readers and supporters. During that time it spread the seed of like enterprises—however untraceable—and it gave help and encouragement to others doing similar work around the world. (Since the last ten back issues are available at a pound each, we give the address: The Gryphon Press, 38 Prince Edwards Road, Lewes, Sussex, U.K.)

In his valedictory Mr. Abbs says:

Looking back we can say that our purposes have remained fairly constant. We have attempted to establish a comprehensive criticism of our civilization and to have hinted at an emerging more generous epistemology in which the knower and the known are in intimate relation, an epistemology in which feeling and imagination are included as much as reason and experimentation. In developing our critique of industrial culture and in elaborating the pattern of a deeper and broader philosophy, we have ranged widely. We have considered architecture, art, science, ecology, mass-culture, anthropology, mythology, psychotherapy, literature, philosophy, education. Through the fragments of our age,

through the bewildering specialization of subject matter, through the divisions of our own painful experience, we have looked for a common thread in order to weave a unified fabric. At times we have had to attack rather than create. Yet our trenchant criticism of current orthodoxies—the visionless orthodoxies of the modish art world, the mechanical gobbledygook of the educational establishment, the centralized tyranny of mass-culture—has never been merely iconoclastic. The criticism has always come from a perspective, always been informed by a notion of remedy and possible renewal.

Then the editor says:

It is significant that not one of our challenges was taken up. This preserved the journal from becoming temporary fodder for the metropolitan fashion-machine, but, at the same time, it made us feel we were grappling with fog rather than tangible actualities—and it also effectively prevented us from finding an audience. Intellectual life has become unreal in England. There seems to be a general dissociation which undermines the life of the engaged imagination and of the committed intellect. Writing in England is like having a relationship with a person who when challenged, constantly disappears. The mediocrity of our culture has much to do with the existential unreality of our institutions and our split-off private lives. The problems are there, but there seems to be no context in which they can be productively encountered, challenged, questioned, thought through, resolved and transcended. We have monolithic controlling institutions and opaque private lives.

On any realist criteria *Tract* has failed. We have not entered a public world of discourse. Given our civilization, given our premises, given our resources, it could not have been otherwise. There could not have been another narrative.

Well, if Mr. Abbs will forgive the allusion, this is his version of *Prometheus Bound*. Zeus never gives in. His hirelings have no ears. He owns the ball park and his minions call the shots. It is the human situation as known to Sisyphus as read by Albert Camus.

But what if the bread a paper like *Tract* casts upon the waters does indeed come back a hundredfold, even though the influence of a *Tract* cannot be tracked? The flow of ideas from mind to mind leaves no marks for statisticians to

compile. Who knows the dynamics of the gases and molten solids that one day erupt in a lava flow? And who can explain what multiple influences caused a Gandhi to begin his beneficent eruption in South Africa toward the end of the nineteenth century? He was a very great man, but he didn't do it all alone. All good men, all serious thinkers, all thoughtful critics, add their deposit of ideas to the axial currents that will someday turn into axes of crystallization. Tom Paine was an Englishman—later a citizen of the world—and he became an axis of crystallization in America. Blake, another Englishman, performed in the same way at another level. The fruit of doing what you think—practically *know*—is right is in most cases invisible, but it is not ephemeral, and men like Peter Abbs are able to declare to themselves that, even if they can't see its results, the work must be done.

There are lots of aphoristic ways of saying this—fortunately, since it needs to be repeated again and again. He concludes his editorial:

Yet with all the limitations of our own thinking and writing, we believe that we have not been far wrong in our common emphasis; that we were right to foster a more expansive epistemology, right to question the provincialism of metropolitan "intellectual" life, right to attack the manipulating symbolism of mass-culture, right to emphasize wholeness of human life and to celebrate the inward dimension of being. Perhaps the simplest way of stating our case is to say that we have attempted to represent a certain kind of intelligence which is in danger of dying out. How could it best be described? As an intelligence which is, at once, passionate and discerning; an intelligence which gravitates always toward coherent principles and which is historically awake, an intelligence which is radical in that it seeks to penetrate the modish and fashionable cults which surround it, radical also in the sense that it is ready to go back to tested sources so that its energies can be replenished and its insights honed. Above all, such intelligence is the very reverse of cleverness, of knowing about, it is not scholarship, it is not a body of skills or a body of knowledge; it is not measured by a list of qualifications or a list of publications. It is only where it exists as an energy in individual life, desiring circumference, the psyche attending in order to increase its own domain, being becoming. Of

course, we have failed to always embody such acts of passionate intelligence. Yet it has been our aim to represent such radical intelligence.

We have a note on literary criticism to add. The closing article in the final issue of *Tract* is "The Case Against George Orwell" by D. S. Savage, a skillful redresser of balances. The discussion is searching and valuable, even if the criticism seems merciless. The reader is likely to understand better why reading *1984* made him so uncomfortable. Actually, no human is *admirable* in that book. Orwell seems to celebrate the total disgrace of mankind. This is not "realism" but defeat, as Mr. Savage makes clear. He concludes his review:

The case of Orwell is complicated both by his wearing of the mask of the no-nonsense common man, and by the convergence of his own fears and fantasies with the general mood of the times. As a one-eyed man in the country of the blind he was elevated to a position of shaky eminence from which, with a change of circumstance and mood, he is bound to be dislodged.

But there was another side to Orwell, perhaps the earlier Orwell, which should not be forgotten. While planning his introduction to an edition of Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, Lionel Trilling exchanged bibliographical information with a student, who then said to his teacher, "suddenly in a very simple and matter of fact way, 'He was a virtuous man'." The two talked about this feeling about Orwell, which they shared. In his introduction, Trilling related:

We were glad to say it about anybody. One doesn't have the opportunity very often. Not that there are not many men who are good, but there are few men who, in addition to being good, have the simplicity and sturdiness and activity which allow us to say of them that they are virtuous men, for somehow to say that a man "is good," or even to speak of a man who "is virtuous" is not the same thing as saying, "He is a virtuous man." By some quirk of the spirit of the language, the form of that sentence brings out the primitive meaning of the word virtuous, which is not merely moral goodness, but also fortitude and strength in goodness.

Orwell, by reason of the quality that permits us to say of him that he was a virtuous man, is a figure in our lives. He was not a genius, and this is one of the remarkable things about him.

Orwell, Trilling concluded, "told the truth, and told it in an exemplary way, quietly, simply, with due warning to the reader that it was only one man's truth."

In contrast, Savage says:

In evaluating Orwell one must take into account that he belonged to that peculiarly damaged generation of writers (Greene, Waugh, Isherwood, etc.) who in their tender adolescence were shocked to the core by the terrors and horrors of the Great War, and who in maimed youth and early manhood had somehow come to terms with the collapse of values of post-War Europe, for which their upbringing had in no way prepared them. The inhibition of their growth into normal, responsible maturity left them open in the first place to intellectual victimization by undigested, schematic pseudo-religious or pseudo-political creeds, eventually discarded. . . . As novelists they are able to identify sympathetically with only one type of character, the rootless, disoriented male drifting miserably or jocosely through a wretchedly loveless and meaningless world: that is to say, with endless versions of their undeveloped selves projected in fictional form.

Savage seems presumptuous, but he obliges serious consideration. His case against Orwell is perceptively argued. Who, then, is "right"? Trilling or Savage? Reading both of them helps to the conclusion that this is not a very useful question.

A major contribution of *Tract* has been its stimulus to such reflections.

COMMENTARY A LESSON IN POLICY

THE murder of Anwar Sadat, President of Egypt, by one of his soldiers can hardly be regarded casually as one more in a series of assassinations or killings which keep on occurring—and which, however reluctantly, we have come to expect. Sadat was a man on whom a great many people in the world pinned vague hopes. He seemed to have made an honest attempt to bring peace—or the beginnings of peace—to the Middle-Eastern region which has been torn by almost continuous violence for generations. He risked much—even his life, we now must say—in making this attempt, and his political enemies chose to eliminate him.

The "civilized world" is shocked and saddened. Where does this barbarous logic—if you disagree with a leader's policies, kill him—come from? And what sort of humans would claim "credit" for such a crime?

The Western nations—the shapers of what we call our civilization—have never rejected violence or war, but they have maintained that the use of violence as a tool of statecraft must be *controlled*. War, as von Clausewitz put it, is the continuation of policy by other means. This seems a way of saying that violence is a tool that must not be exercised except by *responsible* policy-makers. And this, at any rate, is how we explain our own military enterprises to the young men we draft into the armed forces: Killing is all right if the nation declares it necessary.

But now the doctrine is spreading, and being applied by "irresponsible" individuals and groups. These people are saying, "My principles are better than yours, and if you don't adopt my principles I'll kill you." They also argue that this is a way of teaching the world the importance of their principles.

You could even say that an assassin is a free lance "hawk" who feels free to do what various governments are doing on a larger, more "controlled" scale. After all assassins are not

identified as assassins when they have behind them the formal decision of a legislature.

For fifty years or so, we have explained to the world that the offenses of less civilized people require us to use our form of controlled, technological violence to bring order and decency to international affairs. Well, the lesson has been learned. Violence has become the order of the day, and now it is out of control.

CHILDREN

. . . and Ourselves

ON SELF EXAMINED RIGHTEOUSNESS

WE have for attention a lovely book by Malcolm Margolin, *The Ohlone Way* (Heyday Books, Box 9145, Berkeley, Calif. 94709, paper, \$5.95), that we want to tell about for three reasons. First, it is a book which reminds us of the work of Carl O. Sauer, distinguished human geographer, whose *Man in Nature* (put back in print by Turtle Island Press, Berkeley) tells about the grain of life as it once was lived on the North American continent. When Sauer tells you about the discovery of America by the explorers, he gives quotation from those explorers themselves, including Columbus.

Margolin's *The Ohlone Way* is another book of this sort. It is about the Indians who lived in California—in the San Francisco Bay area, down to the Monterey Peninsula—before the whites came. Children who live in that area—or anywhere in California—ought to know this book. Who among us Californians realizes, for example, that two hundred years ago Central California was more densely populated by Indians than anywhere else north of Mexico—that these people, 10,000 of them, were in about forty different tribal groups and used eight to twelve different languages, each of which had about a thousand speakers? What were they like? More is known of them than one might expect, but there are lots of gaps—"There is an Ohlone song, for example, from which only one evocative line survives: *Dancing on the brink of the world.*"

Malcolm Margolin has found out about all that can be known of these Indians and has written about them engagingly for readers of all ages. That is one of the reasons for telling about his work. Another is the fact that this book is an example of successful regional publishing. Apparently, if you live in a fairly populous area, such as California, and want to write mainly for the people there, you can do it and at least break even on the venture. Any news about increasing

possibilities in decentralizing the practical arts is good news, and here is a man who has proved that local publishing is not doomed to failure. You don't have to have a national market. And the book can be as well produced as any other in the stores. The new technology of typesetting means you can do much of it yourself.

And that is the third reason. Malcolm Margolin is his own publisher. He tells why in a sprightly magazine article. We have given part of his explanation, but this is the best:

. . . I have ended up with the kind of a book I wanted. I'm embarrassed to admit that I used to think a book was finished when the typewritten manuscript was done, the rest I considered mere execution. I've changed. I've come to feel that what I'm doing as a writer is not just battling with the typewriter, but rather forming ideas and images in my own mind and getting them into the minds (and hearts) of others. The typography, layout, illustrations, cover design—even the pricing and merchandising—all affect the ways in which the ideas and images get transmitted. So forcibly do I feel this that I would be as reluctant now to turn a book manuscript over to another publisher as I would be to hand in a rough draft of the manuscript and allow other writers to complete it.

There's no way to discover these home truths except by doing what this writer did. On a less extensive scale, this principle can be demonstrated easily enough. Suppose you have a subject to look up and then write up. Don't let other people do your research, isolating for you the choice quotations. You may miss the heart of the matter. The drudgery of research is the ground for the figure of synthesis and inspiration. While you are copying out something that seems just right, the mind may jump to parallels, illustrations, and subtleties that make what you say worth reading. It's like building the house you're going to live in. One of the good things about some of modern technology is the way it cuts down on the division of labor. With a little effort you can do more and more yourself. Not everything, of course, but enough to start a trend going in your own life. You affect others this way, too. They like the result.

Doing your own printing—or some part of it—of what you write has a similar value. You begin to understand more about typographic design. Book design, too. Or magazine design. Designers, the professionals at it, often get carried away, just as architects get carried away, and other determined specialists in some practical art. More "do-it-yourself" would correct countless awful mistakes without anyone even noticing the improvements, except in the perspective of history. (Rudolfsky's *Architecture without Architects* proves this up to the hilt.) There is a sense in which taste is the usufruct of hard work. But you must be sure to do it as well as the pros or the result will be something of a fraud. Margolin has plainly succeeded here.

So, to the book itself. There is a good chapter on the way Indians share with one another. Here one inevitably recalls Ruth Benedict's notes on synergistic societies and A.H. Maslow's study of the Blackfoot Indians. The rich among the Indians, he said, were not really respected. "They keep it," Maslow was told. The rich were frauds as Indians. (A chapter in *The Ohlone Way* makes you wonder if *all* American Indians felt this way about wealth.) Margolin says:

When a man killed a deer, for example, he did not bring the meat home, dry it, and store it for personal use. Acquisition was not an Ohlone's idea of wealth or security. Instead the hunter kept very little, perhaps even none of the meat, but rather distributed it along very formal lines to family and community. The people in turn gave him great honor. The women treated him with respect, the men listened to his advice in the sweat-house, and everyone praised him as a good hunter and a generous, proper man.

Others did the same, so all were in their way "wealthy" without being acquisitive. No "trickle down" theory for these people, but share and share alike.

Generosity was thus a prime virtue among the Ohlones, but it was even more than that. Generosity was a way of life. It was the only way a proper person could conceivably behave—toward a relative especially, but also toward the world at large. As an early missionary noted: "They give all they have.

Whoever reaches their dwelling is at once offered the food they possess."

The way of sharing gave the Ohlones a totally different outlook and character from ours. They were not "stimulated to obtain consequences among themselves," as Captain Vancouver put it. Competitiveness was not an Ohlone virtue. In fact, to stand out and place one's self above the society was considered a serious vice—the mark of a dangerous grossly unbalanced person. When praise and honor came, it came not to the egotists or the braggarts, but to those who showed the most moderation and restraint, to those who were able to share most generously.

Well, it's obvious why we have quoted these passages. Actually, it might have been better not to underline this material to avoid giving the impression that the book is mostly a comparison between the noble savages and our nastily acquisitive society. The contrast is there, all right, but quietly made, and intelligent readers won't need to have it pointed out.

More quotation:

To the early European visitors—for whom a strong government was the cornerstone of civilization—the Ohlones lived in a state of "anarchy." The Europeans never realized that rather than living in anarchy, the Ohlones lived in a society run by far more subtle and successful lines of control than anything the Europeans could understand—lines of control that bound the people to one another without the obvious, cumbersome, often oppressive mechanism of "strong government."

Finally:

"Brotherly love as a rule prevails among these nations," noted the missionary at Monterey. "It is their great delight to be of mutual help, now bringing each other seeds from the fields, now lending serviceable things." Father Arroyo de la Cuesta likewise remarked that "filial affection is stronger in these tribes than in any civilized nation on the globe." Other missionaries and early visitors presented the same picture of love and closeness among the Ohlones—qualities which were their strength, their passion, indeed the major assumption of their lives.

As we said, it's a lovely book.

FRONTIERS

On Self-Examined Righteousness

IN the *Friends Journal* for Aug. 1-15, Jack Powelson, who teaches economics at the University of Colorado, sets a problem—actually, more of a puzzle than a problem—that needs attention not only from Quakers, but from us all. It is the problem of Righteousness, and how, all too often, it turns into its opposite in practice. The desire to be *right* is a peculiarly human characteristic. That as its result humans do wrong over and over again is a fact of history. Jack Powelson calls his readers to consider how, at least among Quakers, this might be stopped. (It is to the great credit of the editors of the *Friends Journal* that they published his article. What could be more discomfiting to the readers of a magazine than the idea that they may have been doing wrong in the name of Right? How can you build effective group action with such demoralizing suggestions?)

We know that people with preponderantly evil intentions do a lot of wrong. We try to point out what is wrong with what they do. But what if the good people, too, do wrong? And if they do, and this is admitted, what hope remains for righteousness?

The essential point of Powelson's article is that humans are prone to act with a feeling of righteousness without really knowing what they think they know about good and evil. The writer discusses contemporary issues, but doesn't settle them. He can't, and it begins to appear that nobody can. Does this make what he says unimportant? It will for some. Others, however, may be reminded of an adjuration in the Hippocratic Oath, said to have been formulated "under strong Pythagorean influence." I will, the would-be doctor pledges himself, do nothing for the hurt or wrong of my patients. Florence Nightingale echoed this rule in declaring that the one thing hospitals should not do is make people

sick. But they do, they do. (Read Illich's *Medical Nemesis*.)

These are great and magnificent generalizations. They come alive for us only through illustrations. This is the service performed by Jack Powelson in the *Friends Journal*. He begins:

Through the ages, Quaker credibility has depended on Quaker experience. But I see a change. More and more, it seems to me, Friends are spreading information that they have received second-hand from oppressed peoples in the belief that the oppressed have a clearer understanding of their own problems than do other sources, such as the media. This teaching is done with the highest of humanitarian emotion, and I admire and love the spirit from which it emerges. But I fear for its accuracy; I am also concerned for the credibility of Friends who may have become more a conduit for the information of others than they are themselves a source... .

U.S. citizens (it seems to me) possess a sense of historic mission. Our government believes itself responsible for the world and capable of restoring almost any ill. Most Friends would agree with me on that. But I perceive further that Friends, *like our government*, possess the same sense of mission.

This writer, who "has studied Latin American economics for over twenty years," is disturbed by the reports of a Quaker group which spent an average of three days in each of eight Central American countries. "They are showing films and telling stories of oppression, mostly things they have not seen themselves but have heard from guerrillas or from one branch of the Catholic Church." He distrusts some of these reports, giving his reasons:

I am as revolted by Salvadoran oppression as are these Friends, and I oppose much of our own government policy and that of the Salvadoran junta. But I see a far more complex picture and one with (I believe) greater potential for peace and compromise than I have gathered from my scant exposure to films and talks to Friends.

The guerrillas, and those elements of the Church who have supported them, have *chosen* war—at least in that they fired back when fired upon—and they *must* justify their decision by presenting an image in

which peace is impossible. Friends are inconsistent when they call for peace but transmit the guerrillas' image of war intact, declaring it to be the *truth* (and the media wrong).

Jack Powelson will win no popularity contests. He seems not to think much of righteousness—of a sort. Yet he deserves attention:

Citing our vast power, one sympathizer with Friends told me the United States always chooses the wrong side, always supports the dictator. Of course he had a host of examples: South Vietnam, Trujillo, Somoza, and the Shah. But he ignored the democratic governments we have also supported, such as all those in Venezuela since Betancourt (1958) or Moi Arap of Kenya and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia. He also omitted left-wing governments such as Tito of Yugoslavia, Nyerere of Tanzania, and now China itself.

The consistency I see in U.S. policy—and it is not one I am proud of—is that we support governments of convenience: those most likely to keep their regions quiescent and the Soviet Union at bay. Sometimes such governments are democratic, sometimes left-wing, sometimes right-wing, sometimes totalitarian. The same is so for policy. Sometimes we support policies that repress peoples economically and politically, but sometimes we favor agrarian reform, redistribution of income and wealth in favor of the poor, and helping the poor directly. When our government does the latter, as it did in the successful agrarian reforms in Japan, Taiwan, and Bolivia, we should cheer, not castigate it for not having the purest of reasons. How can our government hear our cues if in the face of a policy change we continue to scold it for sins of the past or to doubt its sincerity in the present?

Powelson thinks the agrarian reform in El Salvador had a chance, but that chance ended when the guerrilla warfare began.

The *New York Times* and others of the media have reported that the agrarian reform was well under way when the war stopped it. (You cannot carry out agrarian reform on a battlefield.) But—Friends tell me—the *New York Times* is biased; one Friend told me that the *Times* communicates only with government officials and carries only news approved by Washington."

This makes no sense to me. The *Times* is the newspaper whose editors risked criminal prosecution by releasing the Pentagon Papers. Its editorials consistently attack U.S. policy in El Salvador; it opposes military aid to that country. Its stories of agrarian reform are replete with names of places and of people interviewed.

This writer concludes:

As I see Friends becoming conduits for the views of others (and therefore relatively less the transmitters of our own experiences), as I see us merging indiscriminately with radical groups who do not share our tradition for veracity, as I see us losing our distinctive mark of spiritual foundation and as I see us making excuses for those who have chosen war (regardless of how "just" the cause), then I lose faith in Friends' credibility and Friends' pacifism. This is what saddens me most of all.

To keep the matter in balance, the editors of *Friends Journal* follow this article with a number of extracts from Quaker reports on current events in El Salvador. They sound fair-minded and good. But this does not affect the point and relevance of Jack Powelson's analysis.