

EQUILIBRIUM REGAINED

OF the making of books on the future there seems no end, but one that has come into our hands recently combines qualities which provide the leverage a great many people are looking for. The present, as everyone is saying, is a time of "transition." This produces both social and personal turmoil. We are being pushed into a variety of painful decisions by circumstances, which is always upsetting. It is difficult to think clearly under multitude of diverse pressures. The problem is something like that of an addict who has not merely one habit to kick, but five or six. "Can't I keep one or two of them?" he wonders to himself.

Objectivity toward the addictions of present society is one of the qualities of this book. It shows in terms of acceptable generality how the habits enslave us and where they lead. Another quality is its sense of direction and a way-station version of goals which makes the foundation for practical criticism—exactly the criticism we need, which contrasts what is with what ought to be.

The book is *The Sane Alternative*, written and published by James Robertson, a man with experience in management, government, and banking. For some, self-publishing is a weakness. For this author it is a strength. At the close of his introduction he gives three reasons for issuing his own book:

I see self-publication as a modest but useful and interesting practical experiment in self-reliance—a venture in action learning—in keeping with the general message of the book. Second, I hope self-publication will enable me to encourage use of the book as discussion material, to assess its practical usefulness for that purpose, to revise it in response to suggestions, and to be in touch personally with people who find it useful. Third, self-publication will make the book an integral part of the project named in Chapter 5 [the last—which describes "transformation"

activities that involve a clearing-house "of information and ideas".]

What accounts for the excellence of this book? First, the author is able to put the results of years of observation and study in terms that people are able to comprehend and judge. This we understand to be the distinctive virtue of a scientific education. It supplies clarity concerning what is. Second, Mr. Robertson has a unifying purpose: He looks at facts in relation to a direction chosen, and this gives the book its animating principle. The author is a man-in-motion, not a value-free observer. He is well aware that facts isolated from human meaning are not facts at all—not "data" for any intelligible conclusion. He makes his purpose clear, justifying it with vision and supporting it with evidence. So far as we can see, this book is the record of the thinking of a man who is "on top of" what is now going on in the world, who has touched all the fundamental bases in the field of common experience, and whose vision articulates (gives objective substance to) the hopes of countless people who have in some way felt something of what the writer has felt, seen what he has seen, and who want, as he does, to make their efforts more effective.

The focus of *The Sane Alternative* is determined by the proposition: "Thinking about the future is only useful and interesting if it affects what we do and how we live today." There are, Mr. Robertson suggests, five possible ways to move toward the future. First is *Business-As-Usual*. This has obvious attraction:

It appeals to placid and pragmatic people, good operators, successful trouble-shooters, moderate reformers people who are content with their present position or their future prospects in the existing system. It also appeals to defeatists, cynics, and worldly wisemen, critical of the present state of

affairs but convinced they cannot change it and not prepared to try.

We called Mr. Robertson an "observer," suggesting that he has wide experience of what has been going on, and this is obviously the case, but the most valuable part of his observation concerns how people think and how this relates to what they decide to do. The persuasive understanding his book displays is owed to this perception.

The second attitude toward the future grows out of anticipation of coming *Disaster*, for which there is much heavy evidence—no doubt too much:

There is no realistic alternative to nuclear war, and increasing unrest, famine, pollution, poverty, misery, disease and crime, on a national and international scale. This view, too, can be presented as the only realistic view of the future. It is held by calm and thoughtful people, who have worked out the possibilities carefully, and who see no point in kidding themselves and others. It also attracts pessimists; hellfire merchants, preachers and doomsters, who enjoy making other people uncomfortable and like the limelight themselves; and people whose personal experience of failure has left its mark on their thinking about the world.

The third attitude accepts and extends the second to include a strong-man or ruling-clique program, standing for what the author calls the *Totalitarian Conservationist* solution. Its advocates point to history—Caesar pulled the Roman Empire together at a time of social dissolution; Napoleon "saved" France; Hitler took over from the Weimar Republic, and Stalin filled the power vacuum left by the Russian Revolution. This is taken as evidence that—

people turn towards authority in times of chaos. They say that world-wide shortages and population pressures are creating a situation in which too many people are competing for too few resources. The only solution to this "tragedy of the commons," in which uncontrolled individual greed destroys the common good, is a TC (*Totalitarian Conservationist*) solution on the lines proposed by Hobbes in his *Leviathan*: we must give up our freedom to a sovereign power, which will enforce law and order and distribute the

limited resources fairly to us all; otherwise our lives will be poor, nasty, brutish and short.

The fourth approach verges on science fiction, yet is widely held. Robertson names it the *Hyper-expansionist* doctrine, the view that claims—

we can break out of our present problems by accelerating the super-industrialist drives in Western society, and in particular by making more effective use of science and technology. Space colonisation, nuclear power, computing, and genetic engineering can enable us to overcome the limits of geography, energy, intelligence and biology. This view appeals to optimistic, energetic, ambitious, competitive people for whom economic and technical achievement is more significant than personal and social growth.

Interestingly, when Mr. Robertson gets to the fifth attitude—the one he has adopted for himself—he describes it almost entirely in psychological terms. Naming it the *Sane, Humane, Ecological Future*, he says:

This view holds that, instead of accelerating, we should change direction: . . . the key to the future is not continuing expansion but balance—balance within ourselves, balance between ourselves and other people, balance between people and nature. Future expansion will be psychological and social; the important limits and the important frontiers now are social and psychological, not technical and economic. The only realistic course is to give top priority to learning to live supportively with one another on a small and crowded planet. This will involve decentralization, not further centralization. That is the only way of organising that will enable most people to fulfill themselves. We should aim to create a learning and planning society, a "trans-industrial society" as Willis Harman calls it. This view appeals to optimistic, participative, reflective people, who reject each of the first four views as unrealistic or unacceptable and believe that a better future is feasible. It is only fair to say that it also appeals to quite a large number of cranks.

We should note that two of the three adjectives (sane, humane, ecological) used to identify this position are adamantly subjective, defying objective definition. All their synonyms are distinctively human in content. How can you explain what you mean by "sane" except by saying

that a sane individual combines maturity with purpose informed by knowledge of constructive ways and means? "Humane" means having an underlying ethical intention in all that one does. It means rejecting behavior that is merely self-serving and inevitably indifferent to the general good—a stance that is intuitively chosen, admired, and agreed upon by those who may differ widely on programs and theories of progress. The humane person, in other words, has the capacity to hold practical contradictions in solution in his mind, while looking, as patiently as he can, for resolutions that bring synthesis instead of overt conflict. We know what "sane" means only from consulting our own feelings, ideals, hopes, and aspirations, and the expression of these qualities in the work of balanced and reflective minds. "Ecological," on the other hand, connects the subject with the object—mankind with the world of nature. The science of ecology is filled with examples of the subtleties of balance, the splendors of harmonious action, the mysteries of synergistic prosperity. Good ecological relations are relations founded on naturalistic ethics—a discipline consciously concerned with the welfare of the whole of the living earth. Ecology is a discipline having to ask incessantly, What is the Good? and What is the Whole? to guide its practice. Its exercise is subjectively regenerating.

In short, Ecology as a science—ecology in the broadest sense—comes very close to being what philosophers have talked about for centuries, but found it difficult to define: namely, Moral Science. The underlying spirit of ecology is to be on *the side of life*. Ecology studies nature in order to know more about vital processes, how they are served, what they require, and this includes beneficent self-limitation as well as the laws of growth. For humans, ecology endeavors to transform intervention into collaboration within the fellowship of life. This has to do with human relations with the objective world. For relations among themselves, ecologically oriented humans spontaneously seek to know the natural law of community—the modes, that is, of the

brotherhood of man. This means obtaining a better understanding of one another and promulgating a conception of human life which fosters instead of defeating human development. It also means learning from nature—seeing the natural world as a vast system of analogues, rich in meaning for us, however limited in application.

An example from nature chosen by Mr. Robertson is the idea of growth. The economic production-and-acquisition version of growth needs to give way to the goal of growth toward balance through control. He says:

As the prevailing paradigm of growth continues to shift, we shall no doubt seek insights from patterns of growth in plant and animal life. For example, as the new shoots and twigs of a tree take over the process of growth from the old wood, growth ceases in the trunk and main branches. Are the overdeveloped industrial countries like trees in which the old wood of economic activity is hardening and reaching the limits of its growth, while the buds of psychological and social development are forming the new shoots of growth? If the tree were a rose tree or a fruit tree, we would prune it—to get new growth in the right places. Is there an equivalent way of pruning old growth in the social and human sphere? All plants and creatures have a natural life cycle—birth, growth, maturity, decline and death. Do we forget this in our attempts to prolong life, not only for individual people but also for organisations and institutions? Finally, the existence of each plant or creature to some extent enables and to some extent prevents the growth of others; and by its eventual death, it may create conditions in which others may grow. Do we tend to forget that, as individuals and as part of the institutions to which we belong, we can create conditions for others to grow in, not only by growing ourselves but also by declining? Is this what Christians mean when they say that Christ died that we may live?

Similar thinking is pursued at length and with great finesse by Leopold Kohr in *The Overdeveloped Nations*, who says in one place:

In a superb study on the interrelationship of growth and form, the great English biologist W. D'Arcy Thompson has shown why nature puts a stop to the growth of things once they have become large enough to fulfil their function. A tooth stops growing when it can effectively bite and chew. If it grew

larger, it would violate its function. It would impede the organism it is meant to strengthen, and would have to be pulled out. Similarly a snail after having added a number of widening rings to the delicate structure of its shell, suddenly brings its building activities, to which it has now become accustomed, to a stop. For, as D'Arcy Thompson points out, a single additional ring would increase the size of the shell sixteen times. Instead of adding to the welfare of the snail, it would burden it with such an excess of weight that any increase in its productivity would henceforth be absorbed by the task of coping with the added difficulties created by enlarging the shell beyond the limits set by its purpose. Moreover, since from that point on the problems of overgrowth begin to multiply at a geometric ratio while the snail's productive capacity can at best be extended at an arithmetic ratio, it follows that, once overgrowth sets in, the snail will never be able to catch up with the added problems created by it.

This is the fundamental philosophic reason why there is a limit to all growth. Though highly beneficial up to a certain point, beyond it, it not only becomes life's chief complexity; it becomes nature's principal tool by which it leads its organism to obsolescence and destruction.

One reason why we think so highly of *The Sane Alternative* is that it combines effective thinking with the clear intention of doing. This means that the contents are meant to be *understood*, since no one can act on what he does not grasp. Books like this are quite rare. The last chapter, "A Piece of the Action," lists six levels and thirty "activity areas" where people can get to work for beneficent change, either as individuals or in groups. There is of course the chicken-or-the-egg problem in all such undertakings. In order to move from what "is" to what "ought" to be, you have to know something about the status quo, and possess a shrewd sense of where changes can and ought now to be introduced for growth in the right direction. One seldom is able to see such openings in all the confusion of the present without first taking some experimental steps of personal action. The motive gives the general direction but the experience is required for actual skill and pragmatic effectiveness.

We have had a few examples of people who act on what they think. One is E. F. Schumacher. Until the day of his death this man trained in economics showed how to act in the economic area with ethical purpose—as if people mattered. It is fair to say he moved the world—measurably moved the entire world—in the right direction. Because of his action Schumacher was *understood*. A second example is John Todd, a marine biologist who with some associates founded The New Alchemy Institute "To Restore the Lands, Protect the Seas, and Inform Earth's Stewards." Here, again, is science put to use by the light of ethical or moral intent. The work and the writings of the New Alchemists are *understood*. The common denominator of all such work and contributions is its rendering of high human purpose into the terms of concrete activity through a practical knowledge of natural processes. A third example is the work of Wendell Berry, the professor-farmer, the poet-reformer who recently published *The Unsettling of America* (Sierra Club), an extraordinary book devoted to the roots, branches, and flowering of the sort of society Mr. Robertson would like to see come into being. These three men—others could of course be added—have overtly declared for the practice of moral science, and all have given clear illustration of what they mean by this.

The importance of acting on what you think is driven home by something said recently (*American Review*, January, 1974) by John Schaar. He is writing about people such as Joan of Arc, Lincoln and Gandhi:

More of their lives are contained in, or centered upon, their views. In that fascinating way, great actors have a mode of experience or selfhood and identity that is different from ours. That difference makes us uneasy, for we know at bottom the great actor is demanding of us that we change our lives.

They do indeed. But this demand seems mostly implicit, not moralistically oppressive. What they say ought to be done appeals to us by reason of the *sense* it makes. The moralist who relies on Socratic demonstrations instead of

righteous exhortations offends us the least and has therefore the widest influence. The move from indifference or self-interest to effort for the common good is obscure and unpredictable; it needs all the help it can get; and acceptable help is given by leaders who are able to see all sides, measure all contentions, then pick a side to work for without losing any of this broad understanding. Early in his book Mr. Robertson stresses the importance of knowing all the fundamental facts and appreciating the variety of human interpretations in reading them. Speaking of the five ways of regarding the future (given above) he says:

We need to understand all these different views, because the actual future will almost certainly contain elements of all five: to some extent things will continue as before; to some extent there will be disasters; to some extent the enforcement of new regulations will be needed; to some extent new technologies will help us to break out of existing limits; and to some extent the evolution of new psychological and social capacities—at least in the form of better education—will be important. Although I prefer the fifth view, I certainly don't deny that government and technology both have a positive contribution to make to a sane, humane, ecological society.

Another reason for trying to understand all five views (and the differences between them) is that the actual future will be shaped by each interacting with the others. The dynamics of this kind of interaction are important. Other people approach the future differently from ourselves; only if we understand how and why, shall we know how to try to bring them over to our point of view; and, only by succeeding in that, shall we ensure that the actual future resembles the one we prefer.

Quotations taken almost at random will show why this book is likely to be understood: the key passages have to do with the nature of intelligent human response to experience. The author notes, for example, that in an "equilibrium" ("steady state") economy, the durability of goods would lead to more emphasis on repair and maintenance, and a psychological effect would be more capacity to distinguish between advertising seductions and the qualities we seek or need. As we learn and

practice self-sufficiency, people will "come to see it both as a way to reduce their sense of economic insecurity and dependence, and as a way of getting closer to nature and reality." Without going back to pre-industrial conditions, the equilibrium economy "will blur the split between work and leisure." This economy will enable people to "*liberate* themselves—to a greater or lesser extent—from dependence on the institutionalized economy; they will develop their own forms of economic activity in the informal economy." Finally:

The post-industrial revolution will amplify our psychological and social capabilities; our ability to develop ourselves, to understand one another, to support one another, to share in the life of the cosmos—that is what will grow.

REVIEW

UPSURGE AND DECLINE

TELLING the good guys from the bad guys may always be a problem, if the career of William Cobbett (1763-1835) is any indication. He began life as the son of a small English farmer, ran away from home at fourteen, served in the British Army, and got his first taste of the Establishment when he charged the officers of his regiment with fraud and peculation. Knowing how a court-martial would deal with him, he fled to France and then took ship for America. He was apparently a man of passionate loyalties—British to the core—and he became "the most vehement and violent writer on the British side in the United States, producing a series of tirades against the French Revolution and all its works, and against all Americans who ventured to give it, or any sort of Radicalism, even the mildest support." (*Britannica*.) Especially irritating to Americans devoted to their Founding Fathers was his "scurrilous" *Life of Tom Paine*, of which the less said the better.

Yet his aim was good in some directions. Before he went home he was fined \$5,000 for asserting in print that one of our revolutionary heroes, Benjamin Rush, the first Surgeon General of the United States, was killing his patients by too much bleeding. He was, unfortunately, right, as present-day physicians agree, but libel actions drove him back to England where, at thirty-seven, he began publishing his famous *Political Register*, adopting aggressive policies which kept him poor and in and out of jail. As Richard Ingrams says in his introduction to *Cobbett's Country Book* (an anthology published here by Schocken in 1975):

Gradually Cobbett came to see that the whole of public life was riddled with corruption. His attacks became more general as he himself became more radical. Cobbett now formulated the concept of "THE THING," by which he meant the network of MPs, stockbrokers, money-lenders, placemen and hacks bound together by mutual interests, who were running the country.

His outspoken charges of corruption earned him a two-year prison sentence for criminal libel (he claimed a duke's mistress was selling commissions in the Army), and while he was able to edit his paper from prison, he found it best, after he was released, to return to America. But now his outlook was considerably changed. As Ingrams says:

Cobbett returned to England in 1820, bringing with him the remains of Tom Paine, who had died in poverty and squalor in America. Determined to make amends for his previous attacks on the great Radical, Cobbett personally dug up his coffin and took the bones with him to Liverpool. His enemies were delighted by this rather ludicrous incident and he was subjected to much ridicule in the press.

He continued his career as critic of political affairs in England, finally winning the respect of all his countrymen. The *Britannica* article concludes:

He was that rarest of literary portents—an articulate peasant. His prose is astonishingly quick in its movement, yet solid as a lump of earth. . . . Cobbett has often been called an egoist, and he was; but his egoism—his capacity to make himself express the aspirations of a whole suffering class—is at the root of his appeal. [The writer here is G.D.H. Cole.]

Today Cobbett is emerging as a hero of positive achievement—a peasant's achievement. He stands as a model of the kind of radical that is rapidly gaining stature in our time. Mr. Ingrams ends his sketch of Cobbett's life:

Cobbett lived in the Romantic Age and was himself a romantic. But he was perhaps a healthier kind of romantic than Shelley or Coleridge. He looked back to the Middle Ages and to Merry England. Before Tawney he saw clearly the connection between Religion and the Rise of Capitalism and traced the troubles of England to the Reformation. His ideal was to restore a rural property-owning democracy. His books on gardening and farming were written partly with this aim in view, to help a man as far as possible to be economically self-sufficient.

During the heyday of the Industrial Revolution, Cobbett was forgotten. As G. K. Chesterton put it, "After him radicalism is urban—and Toryism suburban." But today radicalism is

becoming rural, and William Cobbett is deservedly restored to fame.

If you look around in America today, it is not difficult to find Cobbett types, and articulate ones, too. Perhaps the best known is the venerable Scott Nearing, who like Cobbett combined social criticism with agriculture, and who practiced the same outspoken candor, and who, again like Cobbett, suffered for it but went on doing it. Nearing's present-day English counterpart is no doubt John Seymour, of whose latest book, *Bring Me My Bow* (Turnstone, £1.95), a reviewer in the March-April *Resurgence* says:

John Seymour, our latter day Cobbett, taking up from where his great predecessor left off, points out that the law of diminishing returns is now bringing nemesis upon the developments that Cobbett trounced. . . . In the *Political Register* for March, 1806, Cobbett wrote: "The taxing . . . and funding system has drawn the real property of the nation into fewer hands; it has made land and agriculture objects of speculation. . . . We are daily advancing into the state in which there are but two classes of men, masters and abject dependents." . . . John Seymour, writing 150 years after Cobbett, can take up his themes again and show how relevant they still are, although some of the detail has changed—we are economically richer but more abject.

Seymour's remedy is a graduated land tax, making five acres tax free and applying sharp increases to more acreage—a basically Georgist solution. One section of the *Resurgence* review—by Robert Waller—seems to carry the meat of the book, making the point of a number of good books now being published:

Our crimes have made us so terrified of the consequences of reforming them, we are paralyzed, as Edmund Burke was in his day by the threat of Jacobinism. As a result of this powerful mental inhibition, we cannot undertake reforms that are in fact in harmony with traditions from which we have departed, the traditions that Cobbett kept alive. We have been led astray by the false foundations of the "science" of economics which left out of account, as Ruskin argued, the needs of human nature. Which is why Cobbett continually brings in the word "unnatural." This word rings again in Seymour. Our industrial society has imposed on us an unnatural way

of life and we are trying to throw it off before our psyches collapse. Men with a strong sense of the natural see this clearly—through Cobbett, Morris, Ruskin, Carlyle, Lawrence . . . Seymour—while Oxbridge dons quibble about what natural means, if anything, we know what it means. It is unnatural for men to be regimented for the best hours of the day in factories or ploughing one field on a tractor. It is unnatural for men to be unable to afford a few acres of their land while a fortunate few own so much the majority are excluded and made into landless laborers. . . .

Cobbett noticed that the governments of his time were baffled by why the Chartists had no leaders. They have no leaders, he said, because their movement is a spontaneous expression of the feelings of the people. This is the baffling element of what is happening now and why governments are bemused.

Resurgence—which had E. F. Schumacher as one of the editors until he died—is \$10 a year by seairmail. Address: Pentre Ifan, Felindre, Crymych, Dyfyd, Wales (0239) 820317. In case anyone needs further reason for carefully choosing such magazines to keep track of good things happening, we came across the following in the June *Progressive* (another good magazine):

Atlantic Richfield recently bought *The London Observer*. Mobil Oil says it is in the market for a daily newspaper. . . . Blue Chip stamps now owns the *Buffalo Evening News* and 10 per cent of the *Washington Post*. . . . Some conglomerates seem to be focused on domination of national news. The Washington Post Company . . . owns *Newsweek*. Time, Inc., another large publishing conglomerate, [has purchased] the only other Washington paper, *The Star*.

Finally, there is growing vertical control of information and cross-media ownership, not just between newspapers, but among magazine and book publishers. RCA, for example, owns NBC and therefore has a lively interest in promoting books or magazine pieces that might make good television programming. A magazine article that leads to a book that leads to a TV series is considered ideal. So RCA also owns Random House book publishers and such subsidiaries as Ballantine Books, Alfred Knopf, Pantheon, Vintage, and Modern Library. CBS owns Holt, Rinehart and Winston, *Field and Stream* magazine, *Road & Track*, *World Tennis*, and *Cycle World*, plus the former Fawcett magazines. ABC has

a big stake in the religious movement, since it owns Word, Inc., a major producer of religious literature. . . Music Corporation of America, in addition to large-scale control of entertainment, owns the G. P. Putnam book publishing firm, Paramount Pictures, and *New Times* magazine.

Not unrelated is the report in the *Nation* for May 20 of the Supreme Court decision (on April 26) that business corporations have as much right to free speech under the First Amendment as any private citizen. The *Nation* writer says:

The *First National Bank* decision, a decisive victory for corporate power, has ominous consequences for both politics and law. Now that corporations have the same First Amendment right as you and I to spend money to affect the political process, the huge assets of the corporations will be used increasingly to support pro-business interests.

One begins to see why Simone Weil argued for *no* free speech for anyone but private individuals.

COMMENTARY

THE END OF IDEOLOGY

ONE interesting thing about James Robertson's book is the complete absence in it of ideological partisanship. There is intellectual and moral strength, but no partisan spirit. There are differences in the way human beings look at the world and its affairs—the author generalizes five basic attitudes and he chooses one of them as his own—but he is not a righteous side-taker. He thinks it possible to work with the "opposition" in at least *some* ways. And it is necessary to understand the various outlooks since "the actual future will be shaped by each interacting with the others." This, you could say, is not compromise, but a way of cooperating with the inevitable. You still do the best you can according to your lights. And after all, the opposition is made up of human beings.

Paul Goodman was a man who displayed much of this attitude. He was an anarcho-pacifist, which means that he sought what solutions seemed possible through an attempt to increase common understanding. When you have an opposition, and you don't believe in liquidating them, and what they do shouldn't be ignored, you have to try to persuade them, and if you can't do that, then make your position clear.

When, in 1967, by an incomprehensible stroke of luck, Goodman was invited to Washington to speak to the members of the National Security Industrial Association, he told his audience:

You people are unfitted by your commitments, your experience, your customary methods, your recruitment, and your moral disposition. You are the military industrial of the United States, the most dangerous body of men at present in the world, for you not only implement our disastrous policies but are an overwhelming lobby for them, and you expand and rigidify the wrong use of brains, resources, and labor so that change becomes difficult.

They booed him, of course. But they sat there and listened, too. Probably many of them

had never heard this characterization of their activities so incisively put. Goodman took full part in the life of his community, giving his reasons in *The Society I Live in Is Mine*. a splendid book. The only steel in Goodman's makeup was his sense of truth, and you can't hit people over the head with that. Mr. Robertson seems to have a similar view.

CHILDREN

. . . and Ourselves

AN OLD EXPLORATION

SEEING, almost by accident, the word "art-lover" on the jacket flap of a large book devoted to collections of art in Czechoslovakia, we began wondering if the term has enough meaning to keep it in use. The expression probably originated sometime in the nineteenth century, when "art" became an interest of people with the time and money to give attention to the "aesthetic" side of life. To be an "art-lover" seems a passive virtue; one comes to be regarded by others as taking enjoyment in gazing at certain objects reputed to be "art." Owning them is best of all. The fact that "art news" doesn't make page one of the papers unless some painting or sculpture happens to be sold for several million dollars seems sufficient evidence of this.

There are of course more respectable meanings to be found for art and "art appreciation," but the question is whether or not we should go on using words which got their charge of value from the goals of a bourgeois society. (How much of our language belongs to this heritage?)

The ancient Greeks, as Eric Havelock shows in *Preface to Plato*, had no word for art. *Techne*, the nearest equivalent, meant simply skill. The Balinese declared to Covarrubias that they knew nothing about "art." We just, they said, "do everything as well as possible." And Lafcadio Hearn, lecturing in the University of Tokyo on the art of writing, told his students that "reading about writing will not teach you how to write." He went on:

Literature is exactly like a trade in this sense that it can only be acquired by practice. I know that such a statement will shock certain persons of much more learning than I could ever hope to acquire. But I believe this would be entirely due to what is called educational bias. The teachers who teach that literature as a practical art has anything to do with the mere study of books, seem to forget that much of

the world's greatest literature was made before there were any books, that the poems of Homer were composed before there were any schools or grammars, that the sacred books of nearly all the great civilizations were written without rules, either grammatical or other—and yet these works remain our admiration for all time.

This is from Hearn's book, *Talks to Writers*, in which he has much to say about literature as found in books, and Hearn, who lived only a few years into this century, can be called a true art-lover without fear of contradiction. The fact is, however, that Hearn meant by art something quite different from what many people understand from the word. He was the sort of art-lover that William Blake was, and John Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy. And in his lecture on Tolstoy's book, *What Is Art?*—a work which irritated or angered many of Tolstoy's literate contemporaries—Hearn made it plain that he was prevented by the conventions of his time from adopting Tolstoy's canon in his teaching of university students:

I think this is a very great and noble book, I also think that it is fundamentally true from beginning to end. There are mistakes in it—as, for instance, when Tolstoi speaks of Kipling as an essentially obscure writer, incomprehensible to the people. But Kipling happens to be just the man who speaks to the people. He uses their vernacular. Such little mistakes, due to an imperfect knowledge of a foreign people, do not in the least affect the moral in this teaching. But the reforms advised are at present, of course, impossible. Although I believe Tolstoi is perfectly right, I could not lecture to you—I could not fulfill my duties in this university by strictly observing his principles. Were I to do that, I should be obliged to tell you that hundreds of books famous in English literature are essentially bad books, and that you ought not to read them at all, whereas I am engaged for the purpose of pointing out to you the literary merits of those very books.

For Hearn, as for Tolstoy, art was much more than enviable skill. In *Lafcadio Hearn* (Houghton Mifflin, 1946) one of his biographers, Vera McWilliams, tells about the extraordinary reception of his two volumes of *The History of English Literature* (1930):

. . . when his lectures were posthumously published, they were hailed as one of the most fascinating estimates of English literature ever presented. In substance they were "criticism unmatched in English unless we turn to the best of Coleridge," one American authority declared. In England they were pronounced not only the best available English literature books for young people, but essays which would drive mature readers "straight to the authors of whom he speaks."

How did he do this? By choosing "the spiritual and imaginative interpretation as superior to analytical criticism." Hearn, a practicing artist as well as a critic, told his students:

As to original work, I have long wanted to say to you something about the real function of literature in relation not to the public, but to the author himself. That function should be moral. Literature ought to be especially a moral exercise. When I use the word moral, please do not understand me to mean anything religious, or anything in the sense of the exact opposite of immoral. I use it here only in the meaning of self-culture—the development within us of the best and strongest qualities of heart and mind.

In his introduction to *Talks to Writers*, John Erskine enlarges on this theme:

For example, he says that literature should be moral. We are at first surprised to hear this from him, who certainly had little sympathy with those preaching tendencies which often mar the aesthetic inspiration of English letters. We should rather expect from him defence of art for art's sake. But it is, as a matter of fact, when he talks of art for art's sake, that he tells us that literature should be moral. If when we read a book we come in the presence of beauty and respond emotionally to that presence, we are training our character and putting ourselves in an attitude in which it will be more difficult to feel or think or do an unworthy thing. The greater the beauty which the book brings to us, the more pronounced this moral effect will be. This doctrine is of the utmost simplicity, and artists accept it as an obvious statement of what men of their temperament observe daily. When you leave the theatre after a noble performance, or the concert hall after hearing a great symphony, for the moment at least you are lifted above mean considerations and are less likely than at normal times to act in an unworthy way. This is the effect of great art.

It is in this sense that Hearn was an art lover. For him the medium of art is the gamut of human feeling. Books which are a part of literature are books which have emotional power. This does not exclude history and philosophy. since the realm of ideas is for some writers filled with high feeling. Literature, John Erskine suggests, grows out of the practice of the poetic art, and he states Hearn's position:

Those books are poetical which render the quality of experience, which record not sensations, as he says, but our judgment on sensations, which is emotion. To live in consciousness of the experience we are having, with the mind thoroughly alert to our own pronouncements of good and evil on each moment, is to live poetically. Lafcadio Hearn taught, therefore, that the art of writing is first of all the art of observing one's relations to life, one's emotions, one's memories, one's mature judgments. In the second place the art of writing is the art of recording these memories, emotions and judgments. His attitude toward literature needs, perhaps, no further definition.

Art, then, it seems clear, contains such diversity and depth of meaning that we require this word for reference to the unsolved mysteries of human existence. The same is true of love. Erskine says:

To prove his point that the highest kind of writing, though pursued for esthetic reasons, will have a moral effect, Hearn cites the experience of love, which furnishes matter for most western poetry, fiction and drama. To love another is a moral experience, he says, even if the person loved be unworthy. Certainly it is a great misfortune and a great folly to love a bad person; but in spite of the misfortune and the folly a certain moral experience comes of it, which has immense value to a wholesome nature. The experience is one which very few poets and philosophers dwell upon; yet it is the important, the supremely important aspect of love. What is it? It is the sudden impulse to unselfishness.

To be able to write about such matters with both simplicity and appeal has become the rarest of arts in our time. Reading in Hearn—and in Erskine, too—might help to restore it.

FRONTIERS

Linked Awakenings

ASIAN ACTION for March-April gave voice to a segment of the population that is seldom heard from—the peasants or small farmers who have a profound knowledge of the land, yet hardly realize how much they know. In the 1960s these Asian agriculturists, regarded as backward and tradition-bound, resisted the Green Revolution, "warning against excessive use of inorganic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, etc." Their instinctive objections did no good, and the small farmer was often forced by economic pressures (from landlords and money-lenders) to "modernize" so that the land would yield greater profits.

The results were not to his liking:

The small farmer began, after a while, to notice hectares of paddy land yellow for the harvest, but with no substance in the paddy grain. He complained of massive incidence of pests after the application of pesticides. He lamented the fast degradation of hitherto-fertile top soil consequent to the vast inputs of agro-chemicals. He grieved for his livestock that were dying out from drinking at polluted streams. Of course, the small farmer did not have the scientific lingo to expose the grave disorders that he witnessed, nor did he have the political clout.

The *Asian Action* writer invites scientists concerned with agricultural planning to listen closely to the common sense of the Asian farmer "who refuses to break out of the cycle of life, adamantly resisting the conversion of nature's endless circles into man-made, linear events." He gives this account of the peasant's predicament:

The small farmers' approach to the problems that beset them are what one might call holistic: they tend to take in all factors simultaneously. And it is probably due to this peasant "simulsense" that they find it hard to explain what they mean whenever they are confronted by the expert who knows every little detail about his narrow field of specialization and further overwhelms the farmer with her/his superiority in social status and education.

Interestingly, Paulo Freire makes a related observation in his criticism of present attempts to

lead the peasants of Brazil out of their "ignorant ways." The relation of South American peasants to the land is not a matter of "techniques," but of their whole life. Their knowledge, although incomplete, is "experiential":

For example, their attitudes toward erosion, reforestation, seedtime or harvest (precisely because they are part of a structure and not isolated units) have a relation to peasant attitudes to religion, to cults of the dead, to the illness of animals, etc. All these aspects are contained within a cultural totality. As a structure, this cultural totality reacts as a whole. . . . This can be seen when there is an attempt to modify techniques governed by beliefs. . . . It is thus not possible for the agronomist-educator to attempt to change these attitudes (knowledge of these—and this cannot be ignored—occurs principally at the level of the senses) unless s/he is familiar with their view of the world, and unless s/he takes it as a whole. (*Education for Critical Consciousness*, Seabury, 1973.)

By combining the import of these quotations, we obtain a tempered view of the psycho-moral elements of a basic human situation. The *Asian Action* writer shows the validity of the holistic response of people to a natural life, in direct relation with the forces of nature. Paulo Freire shows that help given to such people must begin with their deep feelings about the nature of the world. It seems likely—almost certain—that similar considerations apply to all people, although, in the "advanced" societies, a smokescreen of elaborate external development hides their importance. Yet beneath the overlay of artificialities, conveniences and luxuries, which have the cultural coloring of requirements of the "good life," more fundamental yearnings persist, quietly awaiting the appointed hour. The time for their expression approaches as the excesses and failures of the acquisitive and technological society become more manifest.

A dramatic example of this humanizing rebirth is suddenly emerging in Italy. Now in lagging legislative process in that country is a law which, when adopted, will permit the assignment of abandoned or neglected land to "agricultural

cooperatives who demonstrate the ability to work it." The proposal of this measure was apparently a signal to begin action for a generation of young Italians. An article in the Italian magazine, *Abitare* (which means Habitation), for May, tells how a number of Italian youth, average age twenty-two, have taken over a large estate:

Castel di Decima is a 180 hectare [one hectare equals 2.47 acres] estate just outside Rome. The land is good for cultivation, but has been abandoned for years, awaiting construction of yet another spec building area in the Roman suburbs. Now it has been occupied by a group of laborers, students and unemployed youths, organized as a cooperative society. After months of preliminary studies of land and of work on the fields, Castel di Decima is now self-sufficient, and produces cereals and vegetables to be sold.

There is similar action throughout the country. Cooperative farming groups have sprung up everywhere in recent months, with plans to take over and farm uncultivated or abandoned land. There are now 197 of these co-op associations, with 43 in Emilia, 21 in Abruzzo, 20 in Sicily, 17 in Puglia, and 16 in Sardinia. The movement, Marco Fini (the *Abitare* writer) says, is expanding every day, especially in areas where there is much abandoned land. In the most backward areas, "advanced initiatives are put into operation, often by young women." Fini reports that these young people are among the "decentralized bodies which, despite delays, contradictions and bottlenecks, are now animating Italian society at its roots." The movement is made up of the young from all classes who have in common "unemployment and their search for something other in life than violent protest or evasion through drugs." They have assumed "the new role of land-workers, recuperating a primary asset and rediscovering a traditional value that of the land." It is, Fini adds, a spontaneous uprising which cannot be checked by conventional barriers or bureaucratic delays. The goal is to provide all Italy with a development model which replaces industrialization and short-term profit with

"economic and cultural recuperation of the countryside."

The need for such a change is urgent. There was a 50 per cent drop in agricultural employment in Italy between 1960 and 1976, with millions of hectares of land either abandoned or wastefully farmed. This return to the land goes to the heart of Italy's food and economic problems.