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SOME INCONCLUSIONS

EVER since Karl Marx wrote (in 1845, in his *Theses on Feuerbach,* published in 1888) that "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it," radicals have exhibited a proud disdain for the "yes buts" of people who try to see both sides. Marx was an angry, impatient man—much like an Old Testament prophet, it has been said—and his rage for action against social injustice, which first gained expression in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, has been seeping into the world for more than a hundred years, and the end is not yet. Schooled in Hegelian thinking, he resolved that the thing to do was to stand Hegel on his head—make matter, not spirit, the determinant of action. We know something about matter and can be sure. This resulted in the materialist interpretation of history, embodied in *Das Kapital* and other works. Marx composed his doctrines fully convinced that they expounded *scientific* socialism, which in those days was a way of declaring that "if what I say is scientific, then it *must* be true." He was supremely contemptuous of those who disagreed with him, and for the most part doctrinaire communists have followed his example. After all, if you really know not only what is right, but what the laws of nature are as well, why should you waste time in useless argument about things already settled by scientific *fact?*

Marx was not of course the only self-righteous prophet and law-giver, but he makes one of the best examples of this attitude—which has had such great and grave consequences throughout history—since his influence is so obvious. Take for example the name of one of the influential journals of this century—influential among intellectuals—the *Partisan Review.* To be a partisan is to have chosen a side—the "right" side. By implication its writers say, "We are not merely thinkers, we are *actors."* In this case the revisions of editorial opinion concerning what is right become irrelevant. The paper did not need to change its name when the editors became anti-Stalinist. Believing in one's own righteousness becomes a habit, after a while.

One classic analysis of the righteous habit of mind is provided by Michael Polanyi in *The Tacit Dimension:*

> Scientific skepticism and moral perfectionism join forces . . . in a movement denouncing any appeal to moral ideals as futile and dishonest. Its perfectionism demands a total transformation of society; but this utopian project is not allowed to declare itself. It conceals its moral motives by embodying them in a struggle for power, believed to bring about automatically the aims of utopia. It blindly accepts for this the scientific testimony of Marxism. Marxism embodies the boundless moral aspirations of modern man in a theory which protects his ideals from skeptical doubt by denying the reality of moral motives in public life. The power of Marxism lies in uniting the two contradictory forces of the modern mind into a single political doctrine. Thus originated a world-embracing idea, in which moral doubt is frenzied by moral fury and moral fury is armed by scientific nihilism.

John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, born about forty years after Marx, was also a student of philosophy and like Marx reacted against Hegel's preoccupation with speculation. Dewey advocated humanism guided by science, urging that democratic action take the place of the ineffectual dreams of the intellectual system-builders. Paralleling Marx's demand that the world be changed, not just "interpreted," Dewey said in *The Quest for Certainty:*

> After a polite and pious deference has been paid to "ideals," men feel free to devote themselves to matters which are more immediate and pressing. . . . Men hoist the banner of the ideal, and then march in the direction that concrete conditions suggest and reward. . . . To many persons, the idea that the ends

> professed by morals are impotent save as they are connected with the working machinery of economic life seems like deflowering the purity of moral values and obligations.

What then should we do? Dewey's answer was given in *Freedom and Culture:*

> The present need is recognition by scientific men of social responsibility for contagious diffusion of the scientific attitude: a task not to be accomplished without abandoning once and for all the belief that science is set apart from all other social interests as if possessed of a peculiar holiness. . . . A culture which permits science to destroy traditional values but which distrusts its power to create new ones is a culture which is destroying itself.

Dewey made science his guide throughout his life, and in retrospect we may say that he did pretty well. His books on culture and education—especially *Human Nature and Conduct*—may still inspire their readers. Moreover, Dewey would never let science become dogmatic, nor would he approve a social system claiming scientific authority as justification of tyranny. When Trotsky was murdered in Mexico City by one of Stalin's emissaries, Dewey served on the investigating committee which attempted to establish the facts of the assassination.

A question, however, must be asked. Does science as understood and practiced in the twentieth century provide the vision that is needed to carry its followers through to realization of a social ideal? Various scientists have expressed themselves on this question, most notably Edwin Grant Conklin who, as retiring president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said in 1937 (speaking on "Science and Ethics"):

> In spite of a few notable exceptions it must be confessed that scientists did not win the freedom they have generally enjoyed, and they have not been conspicuous in defending this freedom when it has been threatened. Perhaps they have lacked that confidence in absolute truth and that emotional exaltation that have led martyrs and heroes to welcome persecution and death in defense of their faith. Today as in former times it is the religious leaders who are most courageous in resisting tyranny. It was not science but religion and ethics that led Socrates to say to his accusers, "I will obey the god, rather than you." It was not science but religious conviction that led Milton to utter his noble defense of intellectual liberty, "Whoever knew truth put to the worst in a free and open encounter . . .?" The spirit of science does not cultivate such heroism in the maintenance of freedom.

Three years later, Archibald MacLeish wrote a searing indictment of both scientist and scholar, charging them with indifference toward the agonizing issues of the war which had already broken out in Europe. He said (in the *Nation* for May 18, 1940):

> The irresponsibility of the scholar is the irresponsibility of the scientist upon whose laboratory insulation he has patterned all his work. The scholar in letters has made himself as indifferent to values, as careless of significance, as bored with meanings, as the chemist. He is a refugee from consequences, an exile from the responsibility of moral choice. . . . It is not for nothing that the modern scholar invented the Ph.D. thesis as his principal contribution to literary form. The Ph.D. thesis is the perfect image of his world. It is work done for sake of doing work—perfectly conscientious, perfectly laborious, perfectly irresponsible.

The poet chooses heroes of the sort named by Prof. Conklin:

> Milton defending freedom of mind in sentences which outlive every name of those who struck at freedom. Voltaire displaying naked to the grin of history the tyrants who were great until he made them small, Bartholomew de las Casas gentling cruel priests and brutal captains with the dreadful strokes of truth—las Casas, Milton, and Voltaire were men of letters, men who confessed an obligation to defend the disciplines of thought not in their own but in the general interest.
>
> Had men like these been living in our time, had the intellectuals of our time been whole and loyal, it would, I think, have been impossible for the revolution of gangs to have succeeded where success has been most dangerous—in the perversion of judgments of the mind.

Of what, one wonders, are the people whom Dewey called to the colors of scientific humanism made? Have any of them, at least in theory, the

ingredients of a Milton or a de las Casas? This was Dewey's doctrine of the self:

> There is no one ready-made self behind activities. There are complex, unstable, opposing attitudes, habits, impulses which gradually come to terms with one another, and assume a certain consistency of configuration, even though only by means of a distribution of inconsistencies which keeps them in water-tight compartments, giving them separate turns or tricks in action. (*Human Nature and Conduct.*)

Did a fortunate configuration of inconsistencies somehow write *Areopagitica?* What *else* is there in human beings?

Of course, through a selective use of quotations from distinguished thinkers one can win—or seem to win—practically any argument, but our purpose here is not to reach same firm conclusion but to lay out certain contradictions that lie at the root of both human behavior and the accounts we give of it. The dispassion of the scientist needs no defense, but the indifference of an intellectual or scientific elite to the pain of the world can have none. But then, as we know, where passion enters—most of all righteous passion—the worst crimes on the calendar are committed, sometimes on an enormous scale.

The balance of feeling and idea is what we want, but have no idea how to get. The matter is not programmatic at all, yet history seems to be written in terms of ideological programs to get rid of either one or the other, so that we may either triumph by becoming "all heart," or attain to the exacting rule of "pure reason."

The latest version of "all heart" is the "I feel it in my guts" theory of truth. In the Fall 1974 *Dædalus,* Alexander Gerschenkron, who teaches economics at Harvard, recalled the days of disaster precipitated there (in April, 1969) by the Harvard Corporation's ill-advised plans for construction that would dispossess some poor people of their homes. The students who attacked the institution had no interest in high-minded dispassion. The allegedly high-minded people showed no interest in the injustice that was all about:

> What mattered were questions of morals. The brain became much less important than other organs. "I know it must be so," a student used to say, "I feel it in my guts." Those attitudes were deplorable, but perhaps not surprising. As Karl Marx, the scholar, used to say, "It is peculiar to petty bourgeoisie to see every problem as a moral problem." And there was of course, G. B. Shaw's Stephen Undershaft, the unsmart son of the smart Andrew Undershaft, the youngster who knew nothing of, and was not interested in, any field of study, but being an English gentleman knew one thing extremely well: the difference between right and wrong.

Well, the youngsters were cocky. Where did they learn to be cocky? No doubt from their parents and teachers, like all the other youngsters down the ages. They were merely cocky about different things. We know how cocky the men of the Enlightenment were, and the parents of that generation of students at Harvard had not yet been humbled by the onslaught of events.

Nowadays we are beginning to see the point of the sobering observations of thoughtful scholars and students who are at least wise critics, even if programless. For example, Henry Zimmer, the distinguished orientalist, wrote in *Hindu Medicine* (1948):

> . . . that which pleases human reason may be worlds apart from the course that nature takes in weaving its strangely intricate web of devices by which it produces a living organism or brings about the collaboration of the various organs necessary for the continuation of living process or for its defense against harmful influences. The human mind due to its very faculty of reasoning is apt to fall short of its goal: to grasp what might be called the reality of things, an objective that seems forever to be receding from its grip, even despite the fact that reason at the same time has acquired an ever-increasing hold over nature. The persistent advance into the region of the unknown, into the no-man's land of scientific research, finds its own limitation in the power of reason that is apt to overreach itself by trying to systematize and to simplify the intricate ways of nature.

This is very general, very abstract, but also very precise. An enlightening history of science could be written in documentation of what Dr. Zimmer says. But how do you apply it to *present* issues or arguments concerned with science and society? What practical use can you make of the wisdom of a man who seems mainly to say, We don't know, or, We can't be sure?

How do you decide what to do? Where do you draw the line? Sanitation, all agree, is a good thing. It has helped to wipe out infectious disease. Is, then, fluoridization of all drinking water a good thing? Some scientists say there will be no more cavities in our teeth if we let them do it. And shouldn't we limit the offspring of parents known to have hereditary diseases? Why not sterilize the unfit? And put away people who threaten society with subversive doctrines? They might corrupt our young, just as Socrates did centuries ago. Whom should we retain to decide about these difficult matters? How about the experts who want a chance to switch our genes around so that we won't have any more of those terrible diseases?

What, after all, happens to the uncertainties of science—those which are admitted and those which aren't—when they are allowed to become or are made into political issues? Are they any longer "scientific" where the weight of "interest" is so heavily involved? How can we protect ourselves from such confusions?

Under what circumstances does feeling either shut out or enslave the mind?

Science, in order to affect our lives, has to be reinterpreted in *human* terms. It is not human at all, to begin with, having to do with the objects of external nature. Humans are subjects, and what science knows about subjects is either uncertain inference or speculation. So, to become part of the cherished opinions that we *feel* about, we have to "naturalize" science in our own terms. Northrop Frye has written instructively about this in *The Stubborn Structure:*

> One reason why our myth of concern [made up of the things we feel to be humanly important and precious] is not as well unified as that of the Middle Ages is that all myths of concern are anthropocentric in perspective, and physical science, at least, refuses to have anything to do with such a perspective. The physical scientist finds his subject less rooted in the myth of concern than the philosopher, the historian, or the theologian. The latter find it more difficult to separate their subjects from their social commitments: they may even find it something of a struggle to preserve intellectual honesty in their arguments, to let facts speak for themselves and avoid twisting them into the directions called for by their commitments. . . . 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. If a closed myth like official Marxism does not interfere with physical science, we have still to remember that physical science is not an integral part of the myth of concern.

Mr. Frye makes his meaning more evident:

> 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. We know in our own experience how our mythology of concern works against exclusiveness: all genuine concern recognizes the claims of Negroes to full citizenship, for example. Yet the kind of problem represented by the disabilities of Negroes is much broader in scope,

> as many suffer from similar disabilities who are not Negroes and if we make the symbol of coloured skin an end in itself, like some of the proponents of "black power," we merely set up a new kind of anxiety. 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 one to mankind as a whole.

Curiously, Plato warns in particular against the use of myth and tradition in politics. The virtues of myth—its indefinite power of suggestion, its ambiguity, and its effect on the feelings—while valuable and indispensable in individual life, turn into folly and deception when made the basis of collective action. Myths are for reflection, wondering, and provocation, not for application to matters where precision and some certainty are required. Politics may be a measure or test of human growth, but it is not the area where the delicate and uncertain processes of growth take place. To pretend that it is creates the stock in trade of the demagogue and, in another way, of the sophist. Practical politics involves coercion and manipulation.

There are these two departments of our being—the howto department and ought-to department—one having to do with present practical decisions, the other with direction and meaning. They are not the same. They serve different purposes. Humans make endless messes when the two departments are confused. Yet in some sense every human act—every chosen or deliberated act—puts them together. History is a record of the poverty of human law (as *laws*), when it comes to the realization of vision, for the reason that vision is neither produced nor affected by law. Vision is unique to the voluntary and uncoerced movements of the human spirit, which afterward may be usefully ratified by law to disclose a consensus already achieved. But the ratification may also turn into a tyranny, in the passage of time. There is no end to these puzzling considerations.

REVIEW
WORLDWIDE ARCHAIC CONSTRUCTION

WE have for attention three books—one by a historian, one by a philosopher, the third by an architect—all of which have at least some inspiration from the idea that a great philosophic tradition underlies all modern thinking and progress, yet a tradition more or less lost or forgotten. For a general account of this idea we quote from Giorgio de Santillana's *Hamlet's Mill*, a book of formidable erudition and scholarship, yet clear enough on the theme in question. In this work de Santillana, who teaches the history of science at M.I.T., speaks of a "great worldwide archaic construction" already in existence when the Greeks came on the scene, something of which survives in myths and fairy tales no longer understood. What we have of this construction was preserved, he says, by the Pythagoreans and Plato as "tantalizing fragments of a lost whole." Plato knew, he says, "the language of archaic myth" and built the first Western or modern philosophy on this foundation—to which, we may recall, all subsequent philosophies are but footnotes, according to Alfred North Whitehead.

It seems of particular interest that a man of Prof. de Santillana's credentials goes on to say:

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

After some discussion of what indefatigable research has been able to recover of this ancient system of thought—of which the idea that human souls come from the stars is a part—de Santillana says:

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

Our second book, the one by a philosopher, is *Reason and Nature,* first published in 1951 by Morris Raphael Cohen, who was one of the most distinguished thinkers and teachers of his time. (Some indication of his stature may be gained from a tribute by Sidney Hook, once his student, in the *American Scholar* for the Summer of 1976.) In these days of suspicion and careless as well as reasoned criticism of science, Morris Cohen's books, *Logic and the Scientific Method* (written with Ernest Nagel) and *Reason and Nature*, subtitled, "An Essay on the Meaning of Scientific Method," are particularly worth looking into, as a means of being sure that we do not neglect the human value and inspiration of the true spirit of science. In *Reason and Nature*, which Dover has restored to print as a paperback ($6.00), in a chapter on the relation between reason and "the facts" of science, he says:

> Now, the relevant facts of nature do not of their own accord separate themselves from all the others, nor do they come with all their significant characteristics duly labelled for us. Which of the infinite variety of nature's circumstances we should turn to as relevant to or bearing upon any specific problem depends upon our general ideas as to how that which is sought for can possibly be related to what we already know. Without such guiding ideas or hypotheses as to possible connection we have nothing to look for. For countless ages men saw things balance each other and sink or float in liquids, but not before Archimedes did men see in these phenomena the principle of the lever and the law or fact that a body replaces exactly its own weight of water. It was the ideas and reasoning of Archimedes that made it possible to see the specific gravity of substances and to use it as a test for determining the amount of gold in an alloy. Surely Newton was not the first to see that the moon revolves about the earth, and that apples and other objects fall to the earth. But no one before Newton saw embodied in all these

> phenomena the common mathematical relation which we call the law of gravitation. To look for and see the latter, one had to have the following in mind: (1) Galileo's law of falling bodies and Kepler's laws of planetary motion, (2) the analysis of circular motion into centrifugal and centripetal components—according to the principle of the parallelogram, and (3) the daring and unorthodox speculative idea (which Newton derived from Boehme and Kepler) of a parallelism between the celestial and the terrestrial realm. Similarly we know that it was the Pythagorean conception of the book of nature written in simple mathematical terms that led Galileo to look for and ultimately to see the simple law connecting the increased velocity of a falling body with the time of the fall. Tycho Brahe's astronomical tables did not in themselves show Kepler's laws; indeed, they suggested quite different laws to Brahe himself. Kepler could see these laws only after he brought to his vision certain speculative ideas of Apollonius (on conic sections) and of Plotinus.

Without this wealth of ideas, some of them coming from "mystics," as in the case of Plotinus and Boehme, and without the matrix of number, which Galileo learned from the ancient Pythagoreans, there would have been no "modern science." (Pythagoras also taught another kind of "arithmetic," of which Plato spoke in guarded language. We know little of that today.)

Our third book is *Islamic Patterns* (Schocken, 1976, $24.95) by Keith Critchlow, who teaches architecture at the Royal College of Art in London. This work is evidently a part of the current revival of Sufi philosophy and culture. In his introduction, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the leaders in this revival, says:

> The writings of Keith Critchlow are among the first in the West to analyze the geometry of Islamic patterns from the point of view of the metaphysical and cosmological principles involved. His research has already had a profound influence upon a group of young Western architects and historians of art. Now in the present work, the first of his extensive studies on the subject to appear in print, he presents for the first time to the world at large the blinding evidence of the metaphysical significance of geometric patterns in Islamic art.

He speaks of the Islamic "philosophy of mathematics akin to the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition of antiquity," and in the body of the book, in a section on the Tetraktys, Critchlow gives some detail on this line of influence:

> This deceptively simple description of the philosophical model apparently used by the school of Pythagoras, whose tradition was recorded for posterity by Plato in the Timaeus, belies the depth of its possible interpretation while at the same time reflecting the extreme simplicity of the model. The most decisive evidence for the influence and transmission of Pythagorean philosophy—in its correct meaning of "love of wisdom or knowledge"—is particularly seen in the works of the Brotherhood of Purity (Ikhwan al-Safe) and of the philosopher Suhrawardi. The latter describes his view of the transmission of universal wisdom through the ancient sages, of whom there were two lines—one Persian the other Greek. The Greek line proceeds from Asclepius, the god of healing, through Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato (and the Neoplatonists), Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri, Abu Sahl alTustari and thence to Suhrawardi himself; the Persian line descends through the priest-kings. . . . Suhrawardi . . . says: "Since the Sages of the past, because of the ignorance of the masses, expressed their sayings in secret symbols, the refutations which have been made against them have concerned the exterior of these sayings, not their real intentions." Suhrawardi criticizes Aristotle with severity for not understanding the world of archetypes, or "Platonic ideas" of his master and thereby through his works cutting things off and separating them from any reality of a higher order of being.

The Persian thinkers honored Pythagoras:

> The Brotherhood of Purity, however, speak of their indebtedness to and respect for the Samian Master: "Pythagoras was the first who spoke of the nature of numbers. He taught that the nature of numbers is in relation with that of Nature. Whoever knows the nature of numbers, their species and genus and their properties, can know the quantity of species of beings and their genius."

There is more on Pythagorean arithmetic, after which Critchlow speaks of the meaning of the Tetraktys:

> Tradition has it that Pythagoras taught his philosophy on the pattern known as the tetraktis—a

triangle of ten dots or points arranged in symmetrical relationship. This set of points reads as an equilateral triangle with four points per side—an aggregate of four digits adding up to and representing the perfect number, ten.

The supreme oath of the Pythagorean philosophical community was "By him who gave the fourness to our soul," and the aim of the community was a purification based on the same law and measure that governed the cosmos, and which in the terrestrial sphere take the form of rhythmic relations in the form of music, song, dance, and ritual. Rhythm partakes of and is governed by measure and can be stated in mathematical proportions; hence there was in the community a great enthusiasm for and devotion to the study of mathematics as a source of Divine Wisdom. Four was the number symbolic of justice as it represented or contained the perfect harmonious proportion.

How all this relates to Islamic design and architecture can hardly be put into words, but the visually delighting illustrations of this book, throughout its 192 pages, provide a rich demonstration.

COMMENTARY
"LAST OF THE PROPHETS"

THE decline of the heroic spirit in science may account for the blase flabbiness found by Lionel Trilling and Gregory Bateson in the students of the present (see "Children"). Einstein was probably the last of the scientists who worked in the great tradition of a spiritual as well as a practical quest.

Isaac Newton, for example, was the generator of cultural attitudes as well as the discoverer of Gravitation. He was a believer in the Lost Word, and all his life searched for its meaning in his own time. As Frank Manuel says in *A Portrait of Isaac Newton:*

> Newton was an almost fanatical traditionalist about the ancient word transmitted in the Bible, in the writings of acceptable Church Fathers and rabbis, in Greek myth, in the fragments of pre-Socratic philosophers, or in the treatises of medieval and Renaissance alchemists. And at the same time he was a most searching and rigorous experimenter, questioning until convinced. . . .
>
> There was in Newton simultaneously a longing for the abstract, for the ineffable, for what he never cast his eyes upon, and an astonishing sense of the real, experimentally wrested from nature by physical actions and controlled by mathematical notations. His greatest creation has been characterized, perhaps simplistically, as a synthesis of the abstract and the concrete.

Newton took himself and his work very seriously—egoism possessed him throughout his life—yet there was elevation in his assumptions and a sense of high responsibility seldom encountered today:

> The more Newton's theological and alchemical and mythological work is studied, the more apparent it becomes that in his moments of grandeur he saw himself as the last of the prophets, living on the eve of the fulfillment of the times. In his generation he was the vehicle of God's eternal truth, the greatest of all time perhaps, for by using new notations and an experimental method he combined the knowledge of Israel's prophets and the Greek mathematicians and the medieval alchemists. . . . In manuscript scholia to the Principia that date from the end of the seventeenth century he expanded his belief that a whole line of ancient philosophers had held to the atomic theory of matter, a conception of the void, the universality of gravitational force, and even the inverse square law. . . . many of the Greek gods and demigods were really scientists; in historical terms this is a survival of a major topos of the Renaissance tradition of knowledge and its veneration for the wisdom of antiquity.

Rationalist biographers have done much to hide the visionary aspect of Isaac Newton.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
A SPLENDID IMPOSSIBILITY

IN the Summer *Hudson Review* David Kubal gives this account of Lionel Trilling's musings on the teaching of modern literature (in *Beyond Culture*):

> What disconcerted him was that among his better students, he found neither dismay nor surprise, much less serious question, after he had confronted them with Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Conrad, Kafka, and Mann; that the judgment leveled against the citizen and his world, with all its implications of meaninglessness and disaster, had become so common that they simply, without blinking, accepted and accommodated it. As he said, "I asked them to look into the Abyss, and, both dutifully and gladly, they have looked into the Abyss, and the Abyss had greeted them with the grave courtesy of all objects of serious study, saying: 'Interesting, am I not? And *exciting*, if you consider how deep I am at my bottom. Have it well in mind that a knowledge of me contributes materially to your being whole, or well-rounded men'." It was only in his less gifted students that he read any kind of discomfort or protest. And if their reasons for rejecting the Abyss were not quite spiritually respectable, they nonetheless moved Trilling to a "queer respect." For, he observed, they honored the "gods of the copybook maxims . . . who make ready the way for 'the good and the beautiful' about which low-minded doubts have been raised in this course. . . . " And it was their wisdom that they sensed that the "good and the beautiful" was the justification of their lives.

A much briefer comment by Gregory Bateson, which says almost the same thing, loses little of the foregoing except, perhaps, some subtlety:

> My complaint with the kids I teach nowadays—graduate students and such—is that they don't really believe anything enough to get the tension between the data and the hypothesis. What they may find out doesn't impact on theory, because they don't have any theory they're willing to hold tight enough to get an impact. It *slides* all the time.

Trilling found that the less gifted students had the convictions which led to the tensions Bateson is talking about. Is then literary study, or "culture" in general, a bad thing? Do the young go to college to be demoralized? What sort of "giftedness" brings this result?

> Mr. Kubal implies that the *fashion* of Modernism is at fault. Trilling, he says, explained Modernism's decline as a result of its uncritical adoption by the literary intelligentsia. In the process its complex truths were domesticated and reduced to cant as a part of the general diatribe against the possibilities of ordinary existence. . . . Referring to the contemporary literary situation in 1958, for example, he said: "It is 80 years since Dostoevsky died, and in that time his appalling perceptions have been made into the common coin of modern literature. Any number of writers of the *avant garde*, from Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett down, have appropriated some part of his vision and have been understood and approved by *Mademoiselle, Harper's Bazaar*, and *Esquire."*

Well, who or what is to blame? Gregory Bateson seems to blame the students, but this is probably because in that brief remark he did not take the time to inquire into the causes of their indifference. Trilling's point seems to be that the springs and powers of literature have been conventionalized and taught as though they were Linnean classifications in botany. There is neither intellectual nor moral energy in an orthodoxy. Ortega made similar essential criticism concerning the teaching of philosophy:

> Life is concrete and so are circumstances. Only after having reconstructed the concrete situation and the function of the idea in it can we hope for a true understanding of the idea. But when we take the idea in its abstract sense, which in principle it always holds out to us, the idea will be a dead idea, a mummy, and its content that vague suggestion of human form peculiar to a mummy. . . . A "history of ideas"—philosophical, mathematical, political, religious, economic—in the traditional sense is impossible. Those ideas, I repeat, which are but abstractions of ideas, have no history. . . .
>
> Nor will it do to believe that we have written history when we have shown the influence of an idea upon subsequent ideas. Yesterday's idea does not influence that of today. It influences a man who reacts with a new idea. . . .

> To sum up: History must abolish the dehumanized form in which it has offered us philosophical doctrines. It must incorporate them again in the dynamic interplay of a man's life and let us witness the teleological functioning in it. What if all the mummified ideas which the customary history of philosophy has presented to us arose and functioned again, resuming the part they played in the existence of those who wrestled with them? Would not all those patterns of thought light up with a universal evidence to *gratify* us, their historians who revived them, as they gratified the original thinkers and students around them?

How can we fill in what Ortega means? We can do it by following Vico, who was the first great historiographer of the Western world. Vico, as Isaiah Berlin has said,

> was devout, intuitive, literary, imaginative, sensitive to nuances of style, outlook, expression—not to the structure of abstract systems or to the quantifiable properties of the external world. He belongs to the tradition of those who respond to the impalpable and unanalyzable characteristics of experience, rather than to that which alone is measurable. . . .

With engaging simplicity, Berlin gives in his own words Vico's prescription:

> If I can introspect and explain my own conduct in terms of purpose—in terms of hopes, fears, wishes, decisions, doubts, love, hatred, self-interest, principle and the like, then I can do this for others, for in the very process of communication I assume them to be creatures like myself; and if I can do this for the present, I can do it also for my own past, through memory and imaginative re-creation; and do it also for those with whom I am linked, my family, my tribe, my class, my profession, my nation, my church, my civilization, humanity at large.

What does this mean for the teacher? Jerry Richard provides one answer in the Summer 1978 issue of *New Directions in Teaching* (Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403):

> It is not possible to teach literature; it is only possible to teach about it. . . . We cannot teach literature because the essence of literature is precisely something which evades instruction. .
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> Literature is vicarious experience. We can deliberately expound on our own experience and elicit accounts of the experience of others; we can discuss its meaning for us, and we should, but we cannot teach the experience itself. . . .
>
> Material related to the lives of philosophers, the pleasure of learning history, or the history of the study of chemistry are teaching about those subjects. Similarly, the lives of authors, historical conditions at the time a certain work was written, or the properties of a given genre are teaching about literature rather than teaching literature itself. It is not wrong to do so; it is often interesting in its own right, and it may even help illuminate work to the point where a student or reader can better understand it. That, however, is not the same as teaching the work itself. . . . Of course, just having someone read a piece of literature is the beginning of teaching it, and requiring someone to memorize a poem is another step, though one likely to lead to knowledge without understanding. To appreciate what teaching literature would actually mean, we must understand why authors write it in the first place.

This seems the heart of the matter, in key with both Vico and Ortega. And in key with Joseph Wood Krutch, who matches almost epigrammatically what Jerry Richards suggests at greater length in his thoughtful and practical (for teachers) article. In a brief essay, "Novelists Know What Philosophers Don't," Krutch wrote:

> The best as well as the most effective works of art may sometimes be those in which the author is in pursuit of a truth, but the only reason for composing a novel or a play instead of a treatise is that the author is unwilling to reduce to a formula an insight which he can present without violation only through a concrete situation whose implications he can sense but only sense. Once the meaning of a work of art can be adequately stated in abstract terms, it ceases to have any *raison d'être*. . . . But art will continue to exist and to be truer than philosophy just so long as—and no longer than—there are truths which elude formulation into laws.

Cant was Trilling's word for themes turned into formulas without being understood. Ortega called them mummies. Fortunately, the great works always come back to life, but meanwhile students are the casualties. Who brings them back to life? Great teachers, mostly. Lafcadio Hearn and Harold Goddard are examples.

FRONTIERS

A Question of Scale

"THE FOX," the Greek poet Archilochus said, "knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." The fox, you could say, knows how to cope and deal, but the hedgehog is concerned with ultimate meanings and larger purposes. The fox and the hedgehog have a terrible time getting together, but it must be done.

Foxy sagacity attains popularity with ease. If you want to make headlines, be a fox. Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer* is an outstanding achievement in this direction, and there are other examples. Curiously, the "one big thing," the Truth we feel, keeps us going, but out in the world that truth is spread out (in time) and cut up into many. Being hard to recognize, these divided parts of the Big Truth have little appeal to an impatient man, who more and more listens to the fox in himself. But if he listens *only* to the fox, his heart may not tell him anything at all. Years ago, a leading exponent of the fox (empirical) outlook said something quite wise, perhaps revealing an under-cover wisdom of the heart. Karl Popper, a distinguished advocate of scientific thinking, wrote in *Etc*, the General Semantics magazine:

> . . . it must be one of the first principles of rational politics that we *cannot make heaven on earth.* The development of communism illustrates the terrible danger of the attempt. It has often been tried, but it has always led to the establishment of something more like hell.

Perhaps we could say that the hedgehog has charge of the *do's* in this world, while the fox declares the *don'ts.* The recent remark by Andrew Young that stirred up so much tumult is an illustration of the difficulty of getting the two together. A comparison of various comments on what he said illustrates the complexity of moral decision in an imperfect world.

Our first quotation is from Ken Tilsen, a lawyer who has for years defended American Indians in the courts, most recently at Wounded Knee in South Dakota. In an article headed, "There Are Thousands of Political Prisoners in the United States," in the Summer *Akwesasne Notes* (a paper devoted to the cause of the Indians), he said:

> Within the last several weeks now, the major subject in the headlines of the newspapers in this country and around the world has been our President's attacks on the Soviet Union for their treatment of dissidents, for their treatment of people who have been accused of political crimes against the Soviet Union. And in a remarkable breach of solidarity with the Carter Administration, as you all know, Andrew Young [a black man, who is U.S. Representative to the United Nations] made a statement that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of political prisoners in the United States. Well, the President has called Young, and I'm told he apologized.
>
> Far be it from me to be cast in the unusual role of defending anybody in any political administration in this country. But I'm here to tell you that there are in fact hundreds of political prisoners in the State of South Dakota, and tens of thousands of political prisoners throughout this country.

By reason of his legal activity in behalf of Indians struggling for justice under the law, Mr. Tilsen has intimate knowledge of numerous examples, and he gives a few in his article. He may be a special pleader, but special pleading (the adversary theory) is the foundation of the American system of justice and the facts he gives (or a lot of them) seem indisputable, his interpretations reasonable. He probably succeeds in filling many American readers with shame—more of the kind of shame Helen Hunt Jackson produced, ninety-seven years ago, with her *Century of Dishonor*.

And that, one could say, is good. People aroused in their feelings may give their time and energy to a just cause. They may help to make things better for the Indians—or the Blacks, or the Puerto Ricans, or the Filipinos, or the Mexican-Americans. And isn't it great that Andrew Young could speak from his heart, even though he has a big job in government, and good, too, that he only had to "apologize"—in Russia they might have

shot him; they would have certainly fired him and probably sent him off to prison with Shcharansky.

This is fox intelligence turned in a certain direction. It is very persuasive, its claims not demonstrably untrue.

But then you read a thoughtful letter in the *Nation* (Sept. 2) from a retired District Court judge, Marvin Frankel, who reproves the editors for repeating Young's remark with approval. He explains:

> The question put to Mr. Young was about Shcharansky. Standing, as he does, on a high pinnacle, addressing the whole world, lit by the brilliance of his own person and his record, Mr. Young is chargeable with knowing what the subject was and how his words would be heard. So what—especially as the audience heard and relayed it—did he say? He said in effect, "Now let's not get so almighty wrought up about old Shcharansky. We in Amerika got lots of political prisoners. I myself have been one."

This is plainly rhetorical exaggeration, and Judge Frankel admits it, adding that it makes his point. He goes on:

> Of course, the United States has a frightfully large prison population, with racial minorities grossly over-represented. All of us owe a primary duty to work fiercely against this and other evils close at hand. The point remains, that wasn't what Mr. Young was asked about.
>
> When he is asked to speak out on Rhodesia or Namibia, Mr. Young does not disdain those concerns by talking about Alabama or Georgia or New York or—forsooth—his own sojourns in jail. He dignifies and faces the questions that are relevant at the moment. Unless he is himself the victim of the racism he has fought so courageously for so long, he should do no less for Shcharansky and the other victims of Soviet lawlessness.

What begins to be evident is that in matters of this sort there can be critical comment on critical comment on critical comment. Someone else might say that, after all, why should we feel it our responsibility to tell the Russians how to behave? Making a big deal out of the Shcharansky trial only got him a severe sentence. Was that our objective? And then someone who has just come home from a visit to Moscow might remark that the only hope of the Russian dissidents—*they* say so—is that the rest of the world will object strenuously to such outrageous charges and trials. And all Shcharansky really did was try to get his country to live up to the agreements reached at the Helsinki conference, which the Russians had signed. His action was completely legal. Of course, he wasn't *charged* with that. (See the *New Yorker* for June 12.)

And so on. There is also the relevant question: How much does all this matter? What good can come out of such large-scale political confrontations, in the long run, or even the short run? Are these things so enormously important that we can afford to wear ourselves out arguing about them? Do we need suave diplomats more than anything else? What are we really arguing about when we dispute about the "morality" of political behavior? Politics, someone said recently, is "the ordering of values and priorities by authoritative means," and if this is the best we can do by political action, recognizing its limitations helps put all such controversies in scale.