VOLUME XXXVII, NO. 19
MAY 9, 1984

QUESTION FOR OUR TIME

A CENTURY divides the counsels of Thomas Huxley from Dwight Macdonald's blistering essay, "The Triumph of the Fact" (in *Against the American Grain,* 1962)—a long interval which slowly transformed a nineteenth-century vision into disillusionment and unguided wondering. Huxley wrote to Charles Kingsley in 1869:

> Sit down before fact as a little child, be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and whatever abysses nature leads, or you will learn nothing.

Somewhere else Huxley set down his famous prayer: "God give me strength to face a fact, though it slay me."

Warming to his subject, Macdonald said at the beginning of his diatribe:

> Our mass culture—and a good deal of our high, or serious culture—is dominated by an emphasis on data and a corresponding lack of interest in theory, by a frank admiration of the factual and an uneasy contempt for imagination, sensibility, and speculation. We are obsessed with technique hagridden by Facts, in love with information. Our popular novelists must tell us all about the historical and professional backgrounds of their puppets; our press lords make millions by giving us this day our daily Fact; our scholars—or, more accurately, our research administrators—erect pyramids of data to cover the corpse of a stillborn idea, our way of "following" a sport is to amass an extraordinary amount of data about batting averages, past performances, yards gained, etc., so that many Americans who can't read without moving their lips have a fund of sports scholarship that would stagger Lord Acton; our politicians are mostly former lawyers, a profession where the manipulation of Facts is of first importance; we are brought up according to Spock, Gessel and the other Aristotles of child care. . . .

The infection also spread to education. Macdonald relates:

> A friend of mine complained to her eight-year-old child's teacher that fairy tales, myths, and other kinds of imaginative literature had been almost eliminated from the curriculum in favor of handbooks of information. "But children want to know how things work," she was told. "They aren't really satisfied by escape books." Similarly when I asked why my fourteen-year-old son and his classmates were learning a great deal about the natural resources of Latin America but nothing about ancient history or Greek literature, I was told that Latin America is "closer to them" than Homer. I venture to doubt both these explanations. . . . Although, as I have already observed, any stock boy—or any vice-president-in-charge-of-production—knows the batting averages of dozens of ballplayers, half our high-school graduates and a quarter of our college graduates did not read a single book in 1955, And 39 per cent of the college graduates, asked to name the authors of twelve famous works—*Leaves of Grass, Gulliver's Travels, The Origin of Species,* etc,—could not name more than three.

In a final paragraph of summing up Macdonald says:

> We Americans are . . . a practical race, narrow in our perceptions, men of action rather than of thought or feeling. Our chief contribution to philosophy is pragmatism (*pragma* is Greek for *factum*); technique rather than theory distinguishes our science; our homes, our cities, our landscapes are designed for profit or practicality but not generally for beauty; we think it odd that a man should devote his life to writing poems but natural that he should devote it to inducing children to breakfast on Crunchies instead of Krispies; our scholars are strong on research, weak on interpreting the masses of data they collect. . . .
>
> This tropism toward the Fact deforms our thinking and impoverishes our humanity. "Theory" (Greek *theoria*) is literally a "looking at" and thence "contemplation, reflection, speculation." Children are told: "You may look but you mustn't touch," that is, "You mustn't change what you look at." This would be good discipline for Americans, just to look at things once in a while without touching them, using them, converting them into means to achieve power, profits or some other practical end.

The world of education—at its best—has lately come to a similar realization. In a publication of the Faculty Association of the Canadian University of Saskatchewan, *University Forum,* Stan Rowe, who teaches plant ecology, examines the impact on higher education of the devotion to fact. He begins

> Years ago the university shaped itself to an industrial ideal—the knowledge factory. Now it is overloaded and top-heavy with expertness and information. Its goal today should be deliverance from the manifest unwisdom of that earlier choice.
>
> Atomized knowledge both general and specific—what we call facts and information—undeniably occupies a useful place in today's scheme of things. In this statement the operative phrase is "in today's scheme of things," raising the question of context, and asking what is the contemporary framework that gives meaning to disciplinary expertness. Obviously there is a higher but less distinct mental level that gives point to mere knowledge. . . .
>
> Hannah Arendt defined *knowing* as knowing-how to do things, to make things, to reach desired ends, while *thinking* prepares one for judging what is to be done, what ought to be done. Thinking, though unsettling and dangerous to the established order, is constructive; it challenges old conventions by suggesting new directions that ought to be followed. Knowledge without thought seems safe and secure, but in the long run it is dangerously unconstructive because it has nothing to say about directions. . . . An important qualitative distinction can therefore be drawn between two kinds of knowledge: that which reciprocates with ethical action (Arendt's *thinking;* reason on its way to wisdom) and that which does not. The latter—bare bones cognition—is ignorant knowledge. It is knowing in fragments; knowing without direction; knowing without commitment. Unfortunately, it is not inconsequential knowledge because although unintegrated and blind to its own potential, it falls in neatly with and supports those activities that flow from convention and the status quo. . . . The distinctive role of the university in a volatile society set in an unstable world environment ought to be the quest for *Know-Why* ahead of *Know-How.*

Mr. Rowe proceeds, giving ample evidence to show that present-day universities are still focused on the Know-How track A strong suspicion arises, he says, "that this institution of higher learning is *intentionally* geared to a fragmented world view in order to keep it safe, serving business-as-usual, rather than business-as-it-might-be." To drive his point home, he recalls the motto of the University of Chicago—"Let knowledge grow from more to more, that human life may be enriched." That university was a center for nuclear research for military ends, drawing the comment by Milton Mayer "that by August 6, 1945, its knowledge had grown to the point where it was able to enrich practically all the life of Hiroshima." Rowe adds:

> It bears repeating that fragmented knowledge, assiduously pursued and disseminated, is not neutral. It fits smoothly into and greases the gears of a mechanistic world view that has brought undoubted material benefits to society. . . . But now that same mechanistic world view, and the science-technology that it has spawned, has taken on a Frankenstein life of its own. Unrestrained and out of control it devours the biosphere and threatens to dispose of humanity in one last big bang. . . . The New University might well adopt a questioning motto from T. S. Eliot:
>
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
>
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Another aspect of the "fragmented world view" is subjected to analysis by Thomas Merton in some reflections on Adolf Eichmann of infamous memory. In *IFOR Report* for last December an extract from Merton's writings begins:

> One of the most disturbing facts that came out of the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him *perfectly sane.* I do not doubt it at all. . . . He was thoughtful, orderly, unimaginative. He had a profound respect for system, for law and order. He was obedient, loyal, a faithful officer of a great state. . . .
>
> The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the *sane* ones who are the most dangerous.

> It is the sane ones, the well-adapted ones who can without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, the *sane ones,* have prepared. What makes us so sure, after all, that the danger comes from a psychotic getting into a position to fire the first shot in a nuclear war? Psychotics will be suspect. The sane ones will keep them from the button. No one suspects the sane, and the sane ones will have *perfectly good reasons,* logical, well-adjusted reasons, for firing the shot. They will be obeying sane orders that have come sanely down the chain of command. And because of their sanity they will have no qualms at all. When the missiles take off, *it will be no mistake.*

How, one must ask, does a conscientious bureaucrat tell when the "system" to which all his loyalties adhere is itself mad? Where will he find ground for judgment? What are the human qualities, if any, that will enable him to seek that ground, and stand on it?

Merton's conclusion dramatizes the present state of disillusionment:

> We can no longer assume that because a man is "sane" he is therefore in his "right mind." The whole concept of sanity in a society where spiritual values have lost their meaning is itself meaningless. A man can be "sane" in the limited sense that he is not impeded by his disordered emotions from acting in a cool, orderly manner, according to the needs and dictates of the social situation in which he finds himself. He can be perfectly "adjusted." God knows perhaps such people can be perfectly adjusted even in hell itself

There is certainly truth in this judgment, how much is left to the reader. It is difficult to think in these terms for very long, but no doubt worse never to think that way at all.

We have quoted one ecologist and now turn to another, Donald Worster, author of *Nature's Economy* (Sierra Club Books, 1977), who considers the socio-political effects of man's domination and exploitation of nature.

He raises, first, questions like, Can nature be *oppressed?* The answer, of course, depends upon whether you think nature is some kind of "being" that can be misused and hurt. Or is it, instead, simply a vast inventory of resources, there for us to mine or enslave as we think best? Worster believes that study of history in relation to a particular form of the domination of nature may throw light on such questions. The light comes in the fact that extreme domination of nature requires a despotic control of human beings, too. Worster's seven large pages in a late 1983 (Vol. 13, No. 5) issue of the *Ecologist* are concerned with showing that when an industrialized society resolves to turn a desert into fertile land, the rigors of maintaining the necessary flow of water require an authoritarian regime. Setting the problem, he says:

> A common assumption is that a genuinely democratic society can flourish in a world where every desert has been conquered, where the earth is intensely managed on every hand, and where total dominion is the goal of humans in their dealings with nature. But is it really possible? Can democracy in fact thrive under such circumstances, or does it, along with nature, become a victim? Obviously what one means by democracy is important to such an inquiry. I do not take democracy to be merely a matter of elections and parliaments; I have in mind a deeper condition of widely distributed freedom and autonomy, in which communities, along with the individuals in them, retain considerable power to exercise cultural as well as economic and political self-management. Can it be assumed that democracy in this latter sense automatically follows in the wake of technological progress, or that democracy can exist apart from and in spite of the impact technology has on the natural order?

This is a large philosophical and metaphysical question, but it is also, now, a practical, even a scientific, question, with answers in historical experience. Wanting to be practically persuasive, Worster presents historical evidence and discusses various interpretations of its meaning. One key quotation is from Max Horkheimer in *The Eclipse of Reason:* "The human being, in the process of his emancipation, shares the fate of the rest of the world. Domination of nature involves domination of man."

What we have here is an expansion of the meaning of "facts." The modern world took the

advice of Francis Bacon seriously. Get power over nature, he said, through science, and enrich yourself and your nation. We've been doing this for some two or three hundred years. One result has been, in our time, the increasing impoverishment of more and more people in the world. Apparently, the real "facts" have not been wholly understood. Mr. Worster enlarges on their meaning; his article deserves a careful reading in full. We skip to his conclusion—a philosophical conclusion based on scientific evidence. He says:

> The new point of view is that discipline and restraint are not necessarily undesirable, nor are they to be automatically associated with the project of environmental domination. On the contrary, self-discipline may be regarded as the only true antithesis of domination. Liberating nature from the threat of endless conquest, endless intensification of use, the argument for simplicity goes, is not likely to be achieved under any social philosophy based on hedonism. Instead, it will require a cultural dedication to the mastery of self. That does not have to be only a private strategy; conceivably, it could have a public, political dimension too, including the decentralization of production into local and regional modes, the development of new forms of technology that interfere less with natural processes, and the setting of personal income ceilings and the redistribution of the surplus.

Worster adds, as he must, that a wholesale move toward self-restraint does not seem immediately likely, despite a few promising signs. How, one wonders, is attractive strength given to a moral ideal?

> It may well turn out that the human appetite will not be cannot be, moderated. On a planet teeming with four or eight or twelve billion people, examples of restraint may remain what they are now: a series of minor, isolated gestures, unthinkable to the starving, unacceptable to the aspiring, unappealing to the affluent. If that is to be the case, then the fate of the Colorado River will inevitably become the fate of every river on earth. Their waters will be turned out of their channels onto every remaining scrap of wasteland, changing the last deserts into food, fibre, and energy factories. Whether that future arrives by choice or by necessity is immaterial; in either case, I'm afraid, democracy—in the sense of freedom from centralized authorities and oppressive hierarchies, in the sense of escape from the managed life, in the sense of ordinary people exercising a high degree of autonomy, cultural and political, in their lives—will not remain a realistic social ideal. Where wants and needs are out of self-control, where they cannot be defined or filled by the person and the immediate community, power must gravitate farther and farther away.

So much for where we are now, in the terms of the most thoughtful spokesmen of our time. We have come a long way from the splendid devotion to "facts," advocated by Thomas Huxley, but we haven't come full circle. What shall we say to Huxley's nineteenth-century man of science who "learned to believe in justification, not by faith but by verification"?

This question has been put in another way by another contributor to the Saskatchewan *University Forum* D. R. Cherry, who teaches English. In a review of literature and science in Huxley's century and our own, Mr. Cherry says:

> While Huxley gave us a powerful description of the morality which guides scientific research, he said nothing about a morality which may guide the scientist in his *choice* of research. In our time the one third of scientists working on military problems may, and one assumes will, argue that academic or intellectual freedom allows them to do research on biological, chemical, or thermonuclear weapons. But what about academic or intellectual *responsibility?* It is entirely possible that a nuclear holocaust will make academic freedom a very academic question indeed.
>
> Huxley did not, also, offer us any help in answering the question. What moral or political or nationalistic imperatives explain the fact that scientists can examine the same data and come to diametrically opposed conclusions about them, as, for example, with acid rain?
>
> Admirable as is Huxley's agnoticism in the laboratory, can this austere, arid, emotionless skepticism, this determination to withhold belief until all the evidence is in, serve to provide moral sanctions for wise and good behavior in the generality of mankind, who must make choices and decisions today, and tomorrow, and tomorrow?

It seems plain enough that neither Huxley's "emotionless skepticism"—which wasn't entirely emotionless. he was *proud* of it—nor his famous

"agnosticism," of which he seemed even more proud, will provide sanctions for wise and good behavior among those who must make decisions now, and from day to day; which, of course, leads to the question: *What will?*

This is the most insistent question before the thoughtful humans of the present—the question to which a hundred years of rather devastating experience has led us. How shall we deal with it?

Some may have a private answer—we certainly have ours—but such answers are difficult if not impossible to put into generally acceptable terms. Such answers are almost always subjectively grounded and have been carefully nurtured to maturity, sometimes over many years. But there are various ways of looking for them; one would be to go back over the century and pick out the individuals who had sense enough to say *No!* to Huxley and his growing band of followers, in their own time. These independent minds did not join the cavalcade of the worshippers of fact, of the discoverers of the narrow truth of dissection and analysis, of those who formulated the materialistic dogma. They were not the men who, while disliking dogma, nonetheless felt as Bertrand Russell put it, "that nothing less definite would enable them to fight the dogmas they disliked." Who, then, were these individuals that resisted the seductive persuasions of materialism? Carlyle is one, Thoreau another. Pick them out, then, in the pages of literature and history, and try to find out where they found their "sanctions for wise and good behavior." What inner voices did they hear?

REVIEW
A LITTLE LIST

IN his introduction to *What Will it Take To Prevent Nuclear War.;* (Schenkman, 331 Broadway, Cambridge, Mass. 02138, $6.95), the historian, Howard Zinn, calls the book "the literary equivalent of a mass meeting," which seems accurate enough. The editor, Pat Farren, who edits a monthly newsletter, *Peacework* (issued by the New England Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee), sent out questionnaires with the question of the book's title, then put together for its contents about 235 replies The result is not a distillation of wisdom, but a mosaic of widely varying opinions, some simplistic, some candidly hopeless, some hard-headed, some worthy of further thinking. Yet the book is also a reflection of deep concern, and perhaps, in Zinn's words, evidence of "the capacity of ordinary people around the world to give new vitality to the age of democracy, to summon up the organization, the imagination, the ideas, the courage, the acts of disobedience and solidarity, to dispel that threat and create a world of brotherhood and sisterhood, of equality and respect for human rights."

If we had to select one "prescription" based on realities that need general recognition, we would choose the reply offered by Karl Hess. What will it take?

> A sharp diminution of the power of those who have the power to divert resources to weapons and to order a nuclear strike.
>
> This is an unfortunate, sad, rather gloomy but nonetheless practical answer, it seems to me.
>
> Nuclear weapons are the result of state power. They are the very affirmation of such power in this century. Even the most impoverished state drives relentlessly toward possessing them. It is to the state what a big car is to the status-seeking person. No modern state claims power on any other basis than the possession of such great weapons. None to be respected. None boast of the happiness of the people. All boast of their weapons or complain of their lack of them. Exceptions might be Costa Rica the Maldive Islands and Tanzania. But, beyond even medium size, weapons are the thing.
>
> Thus, I believe, nuclear war is simply another function of state power. The two are intimately related.
>
> To use state power to curb such weapons would be to ask the state to step down its own power. What state would do that? Norway, maybe. Switzerland, assuredly. Again, a few. But not the great ones. Nor would the new pretenders to state power, the major terrorist groups, want to step down their power by renouncing the Big Bang. Hardly. They probably lust after it.
>
> Nuclear war will be avoided if, and only if, state power itself diminishes. And, who knows, given the very low level of respect commanded by nation states, it just might happen.

Equally useful in its way is the first sentence of Carl Oglesby's reply: "The question is, of course, unanswerable." Thinking about why Oglesby is right, or in what sense he is right, should be applicable in deciding where to put one's energies. The value of Oglesby's answer is in no way reduced by the verbally cogent replies given by others. For example, Willis Harman, of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, says:

> The answer: a total change of mind-set around the globe. Nothing less.
>
> Nuclear arms control and non-proliferation efforts won't do it. Peace research and teaching non-violence won't do it. Surely more annihilative weapons on both (or all) sides won't do it.
>
> Essential: a total change of the mind-set.

And *how,* pray, is that to be accomplished? The question, after all, is "essentially": How do you reverse the everyday habits of *millions* of people who go on with what they are doing with almost no perception of the accumulating consequences of all their little decisions—like polluting the atmosphere with the "negligible" emissions from their quite necessary automobiles? Needed is a formula for altering patterns of human behavior that have been securely established for centuries. The only formula that will *work* requires cataclysmic persuasion, so no wonder that a Los Angeles psychologist begins his dead-

pan answer by saying: "I propose an end to suspense, arguing and waste: I propose the U.S. launch a nuclear attack on Russia."

What would that achieve?

> At last we will know whether or not the human race can survive a nuclear war. No more worry, no more academic arguments by pinko professors, no more patriotic harangues by bloodthirsty hawks, no more fund-raising appeals from peaceniks, no more Jane Fonda movies.
>
> Frank Lloyd Wright once said that what San Francisco needs is another earthquake. What's good for the architecture of San Francisco is good for civilization. But we don't have to wait for nature. We can SAVE OURSELVES! Launch the nuclear missiles and free humanity from this ceaseless dread. . . .

A parallel to this "shock-producing" thinking—if we can call it thinking—is in the old joke about the man who, tired of life and its discouragements, decided to end it all by jumping off the top of a hundred-story building in New York. Sailing down, he looked into happenings on the twenty-third floor, and the people there seemed so happy that he asked himself, "Did I make a mistake?" There is a sense in which asking what it will take to prevent nuclear war is a similar case.

Or is it? If not, why not?

Many of the respondents had recourse to a source customarily resorted to in impossible dilemmas. As Farren reports:

> Significantly, the largest single group of responses was in the category of religion and faith. In length, the submissions ranged from the single word "God" to a 47-page single-spaced treatise. The most cryptic was a postcard unsigned, with only the words "A virus that eats metal." While many responses reflected degrees of desperation, far more stressed the need to keep hoping and acting with courage in the face of danger.

A review of the moral consequences of the Black Plague in the Middle Ages might be in order; and, possibly, a reading of Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger.* One might also ask: What if I had lived in Hiroshima in 1945?

A passage by Pat Farren is relevant:

> It was recently reported by the director of the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) that more than 40,000 children per day die from the effects of hunger and malnutrition, and that half of those lives could be saved if the children were administered packets of a simple glucose/salt rehydration mixture costing five cents each per day. The worldwide military budget is said to amount to $1.5 billion per day, and a mere quarter of a million dollars would be able to halt the suffering of those children and their families. The failure of the human community to recognize and deal compassionately with this daily carnage, amounting to a new Hiroshima-without-headlines each week, is a severe indictment of civilization. If we are unable to address this comparatively simple problem, can we be counted upon to resolve the complexities and ambiguities of the arms race?

Here, one thinks of the middle-aged father who has just lost his job—the factory has closed down or moved to some place in South America—and what his reaction will be to the UN figures. Or of the study made years ago by a perceptive psychiatrist, which showed that unbearably disturbing facts are spontaneously rejected by people who find they cannot function as they must, from day to day, with horrors looming up continually in the form of a threat they feel helpless to reduce. Or the report in *Food First* to the effect that while ships were bringing emergency food supply to the drought-stricken starving peasants in the African Sahel, Sahelian exporters were shipping to Paris and other centers of luxurious consumption millions of dollars' worth of gastronomic delicacies grown on the land that once fed the peasants what they needed. Pat Farren adds:

> I believe that if we can let the facts sink in and our feelings come forth in time, we can develop a consensus for life that will enable us to do what it takes to prevent nuclear war. We are members of the same human family, stewards of the world, and we can become reconciled and live on neighborliness if we so choose.

Which "facts" are the most important to let sink in? There are wide differences of opinion, as

the book discloses. Returning to our choice—Karl Hess's reply—we assume that a stateless world would be a warless world. How then can we get rid of states? The answer is, by refusing to depend on them—day by day, week by week, year by year, taking back our independence a little at a time, rejecting the services of the state as *sovereign,* while cooperating with our fellows through forms of association that make sense.

What then is the best influence that can be hoped for from a book such as this one? If it makes us wonder what is the right thing to do, today and tomorrow, whether or not there will be nuclear war, a genuine educational purpose will have been fulfilled. Such wondering depends upon the realization that "survival" is not the most important thing there is—a conclusion that changes the entire formulation. Another kind of thinking results from the elimination of fear as a motive.

The people who cannot be manipulated through fear are the only people who can be relied upon not to make any kind of war. Preventing nuclear war, then, depends upon getting more such people, relying only on such people for our "leaders," so long as we need leaders. What are such people like? They are like Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Gandhi, to start a little list.

COMMENTARY
THE MISSING FACTOR

THIS week's lead and the material in Frontiers deal with the same subject—the thinking nature of man and its contradictions. The polarity evident in how we think generates two worlds—the world of fact and the world of meaning. The two are very different, yet inseparable.

They are inseparable for the reason that without the world of facts we would not be driven to pursue meanings; and without the world of meanings we could hardly distinguish one fact from another.

What enables us to deal with facts in terms of their meaning? Only the Promethean faculty, foresight, makes this possible. Do we have continuous foresight, or does it come only in brief interludes? The account given by Thomas Powers of the "civilian analyst" answers this question. He was suddenly overtaken by a realization of where his work was leading. The meaning of this work horrified him—but only for a time. He went on doing it. The immediacies of a well-paying and "imporant" job blocked out his foresight. Grosser expressions of appetite have the same effect on others.

Such behavioral realities give pith and marrow to the Buddha's diagnosis of human ills. *Craving*, he said, is the source of all human suffering. But we have been taught, and believe, that craving makes the world go round.

How can craving be displaced by the impact of foresight? Only by valuing meaning above any *thing* else. What will make meaning seem more desirable than pleasure or sensation? Only the consequent experience of pain which results from the neglect of meaning.

Yet the lot of the Prometheans is hardly painless. Ingratitude is the normal response to those who call our attention to the meaning of the things we do. Socrates is an example, and there have been many others. They did no more than declare that human life is a quest for meaning, but the world could not bear the cutting edge of what they said.

We have, it seems, to choose between the pain of thinking and the pain of not thinking. However, another factor enters into this decision. It may be called nobility, by which an individual responds to a higher calling in himself, and does not count the cost.

Nobility is a given, yet it must also be evolved—something difficult to understand.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

TRANSCENDENTALIST TEACHER

THE writings of Bronson Alcott, one of our great educators, are both an inspiration and an embarrassment. His work is not well known, save by a kind of hearsay. The intensity of his philosophical reflections gives the inspiration; the embarrassment comes from his open discussion of his own inner life, which a pervasive if mild and hardly conscious egoism does not improve. The blessed innocence and candor of the early years of the nineteenth century! How far away they are, how admirable, how inimitable.

Why is Alcott worth looking into? Emerson said he had never seen Alcott's equal "as pure intellect." Frederick Hedge, an acute judge of men, called Alcott "the best representative I have known of the spiritual hero." In the introduction to his *Journal of Bronson Alcott* (Little, Brown, 1938), Odell Shephard gives an account of the reading that helped to shape Alcott's thinking:

> In Jakob Boehme, the uneducated mystical shoemaker, he found a faraway brother of his own mind. Plato, Plotinus, Proclus—always read in the highly stimulating though inaccurate paraphrases by Thomas Taylor which meant far more even to Emerson and, in his youth, to Shelley, than the originals themselves—filled his thoughts with majestic and cloudy conjectures. The little he knew of Hindu literature, and particularly of the *Bhagavad-Gita,* was easily domesticated in his hospitable mind. Apparently he was the only member of the Concord group who ever read the *Tao Te Ching,* that profoundly Transcendental treatise which would have been so congenial to them all. . . . A closer companion of his mind than any he ever found in the flesh was the strange ecstatic genius Henry More.

Odell Shepherd gives a reason for attention to Alcott:

> First of all, then, and always, Bronson Alcott was a teacher. His teaching bound his life together as firmly as his thought was unified by a single article of faith. He held that true teaching—by which he never meant mere instruction—involves an ascent to a common spiritual level. Far more socially-minded than Emerson, who said that "we descend to meet," he believed that for all true meeting of minds we must rise above dispute and fact peddling to the heights of Spirit on which we realize that we are one. Good teaching was therefore a sharing of mind with mind. It was a process in which all those concerned were engaged in recollecting what, in some sense, they already knew.
>
> Hence arose Alcott's emphasis upon conversation as a pedagogical method. He taught children by it while he could, and when they were shut away he tried to approach them through their parents in the same manner. Jesus, Socrates, and Pythagoras had given him his models, he said. He used this method in the Fruitlands experiment, which was partly an educational effort, and on all of his tours of the West. His superintendency of the Concord Schools showed no abatement in the enthusiasm of his teaching, no change in his theory or method, and the Concord School of Philosophy revealed once more the guiding thread of purpose which had led him through the labyrinth of his eighty years.

We can't report on what the nuts and bolts of Alcott's teaching were like. This is doubtless given in Elizabeth Peabody's *Record of Mr. Alcott's School* (I835), which we don't have at hand. She was taught Greek by Emerson at the age of eighteen and at about thirty she became Alcott's assistant at the Temple School, writing her book about his work. We have a quotation from it, in "Children" for June 22, 1949:

> A common conscience was the first object toward which he aimed. And this he defended on the ground that the general conscience of the school would be the highest; for which, also, he had some very excellent arguments. . . . the general conscience . . . might be called the treasury of the school.

In the same issue of MANAS an Alcott enthusiast was quoted as saying:

> Think of a school-master with complete faith in the notion that children from four to twelve could manage the ideas and intimations he himself had most respect for. Think of carrying on a school as if the real world is in the mind, and all outside things were reflections only. Suppose you heard of a school where the main business seemed to be the learning and defining of words—and where even this "lesson"

> was almost pure Conversation! What of a teacher who moved, in all his pedagogy (that would have been his term for "educational psychology"), toward philosophy? How about a school preoccupied with the *soul's* view of life, things, people, and events?

It must be admitted that all this does for us is to set problems: How would you translate Alcott into present-day modes of thinking and speaking? Do we have the necessary language? How would you keep it from being moralistic and stuffy, yet not lose the fire it had for him?

The year 1835 was the time of Alcott's greatest professional triumph, but it didn't last. The Temple School began by being popular, but Alcott was a man who had to work in his own way and say what he thought. In October, Shepherd says, he began to converse with the children about the Gospels, and what he said to them was the worst possible public relations for conservative New Englanders. So, in the following year, attendance waned and finally the school had to close.

Alcott, while a deeply religious man, was not a churchgoer. He wrote in his Journal:

> It is not my duty, I cannot so regard it, to attend the churches. My own spirit preaches sounder doctrine than I there hear, and I must listen to its divine teachings. Not in contumelious distrust of the good results of the preached Word on society will I refrain from the temples, but in the deep conviction that the Lord appeareth to me more visibly in other courts, and that there am I to seek and find Him, worshipping in the holy temple of Self.

Again:

> I am a meek and simple follower of the Divine Word within, which I must and shall speak as I feel. I shall preach the Gospel as it is revealed to my own soul. By so doing I but exert the right of my nature. If this Gospel be at variance with popular views, mine be the glory of braving the all-dominating force, and of showing other and worthier doctrines to the sense of my kind.

And again:

> I call that man no wise Christian who belies the divinity of his nature by denying the identity of his soul with God. I deem his creed false to the spirit of his master's teachings. He ever declared the union of his own soul with God, and, as constantly, denied all superiority of nature above others. I pronounce the man that sees not his intimate and divine union yet destitute of the spirit of his master, and a vilifier of his holy religion. For this debases the eternity of the soul and the dignity of man's nature. I say that the Christian world is anti-Christ.

Another side of Alcott's character comes out in an entry in the same year, 1837. Here he speaks of what are for us very nearly lost generations—simple rural people:

> These people put themselves into their speech. They do not hide their souls. Words are things with them. . . . in this simple, free state of being their language is more true to nature. They speak it in greater purity than the artificial citizen or closeted bookworm. . . . I never hear a countryman speak without being reminded of the dignity of our common nature and the richness of our common tongue. He reminds me of Shakespeare. He has retained his epithets. Language appears in its simpler, worthier forms. . . . The needs of the soul shine in his speech. His vocabulary is not shorn of woods, winds, waters, sky, toil, humanity. It hath a soul in it. . . . I would rather study simple countryman amidst the scenes of nature, as dictionary of my native tongue, than commune with citizen amidst his conventions, or read with professor in college or hall, the tomes of a library. There is life and meaning in it. It is devoid of pretense. It is mother-tongue.

Is it possible to translate Alcott's vision, insight, and integrity into the conceptual modes of our time? How would one go about it? What are resources to draw upon? Only one or two come to mind: Wendell Berry's poetry and prose (see his new book, *Standing by Words*); and some of William Coperthwaite's expressions in his MANAS article, "Society by Design."

FRONTIERS

Moments of Silence

CHANGES are coming. They might be seen to be already on the way, if we could recognize their initial form. Meanwhile, for humans, there are preludes to change. Change is letting go and taking on; the preludes indicate readiness for this. One kind of readiness seems apparent in what David Bradley, a novelist, contributed to the *Nation* in a final issue of 1983 (Dec. 24), repeating his reflections after attending a Christmas service to please his mother. He says toward the end: "I feel tears behind my eyes, in a place that no one sees, and I sense that I am not alone in that. And we stand there silent, listening to the bells." But the readiness for change is shown by the following:

> I am looking for a leader. . . . The thought frightens me. Never before have I felt in need of a leader. I have always believed that I knew what needed to be done, and had a pretty good idea of how to go about it. Oh, when it came to matters of public policy I was among the masses that the politicians assume are treading along in the rear. But I wasn't, really. I complained. I cursed them for being fools. My idea of a good leader was someone who did what I would have done if I had the time or the opportunity or the interest. But now, I realize, that is no longer so. It has all gotten beyond my understanding. I no longer know what we should do. I no longer know what I would do. And I feel fear, not only because of my helplessness but because I know what helpless people often do; they mistake a charlatan for a savior. They follow the man with the shiny boots and the simple solutions. If we do not know, and know we do not know, we tend to follow those who say they do know.

Here is a man, an artist, unafraid to reveal his ignorance, able to put into simple words the facts that apply to very nearly all of us. Perhaps you wouldn't want to send him to Washington, for after all, what good could so candid a man do there? That is the last place to go for an intelligent truth-teller. But he is a man whom you'd hope would speak up in a town meeting, and would come to all the meetings. And Government is not likely to have much meaning until, once again, the town meetings administer our public affairs.

Another sort of prelude is afforded by the January *Atlantic* article, "What Is It About?" by Thomas Powers. He means the stuff and reality of nuclear war. He starts out by noting that Americans seldom have any real idea of what being in a war is like.

> We live in a heavily militarized country, but we rarely see a military uniform on the street. We missed the worst of the two big wars of the century. We never had to live on turnips, pack our belongings in wheelbarrows and flee an army, huddle in the dark underground while the dust sifted down and the earth shook. . . .

He tells a story:

> A civilian analyst who spent four years on Carter's National Security Council once described to me a study he'd done on the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the opening hours of a big war on the Central Front, in Europe. Lots of such studies had been done in the past, but they all killed too many civilians—millions of them; there was no way to limit the war. But one day—it happened to be his daughter's fourth birthday—the analyst got to thinking about Soviet rail lines to the West. How many nukes, he wondered, would it take to isolate Soviet forces at the front? So he got out a lot of military maps and spread them all over the floor. "Whenever you see someone in the analysis business using maps, you can be sure he's a serious person," the analyst said, implying that the rest was just talk. He got out his bomb-effects computer, which looks like a round slide rule, and started drawing circles around rail junctures. Right away it began to look good. He was excited. He really had something. "It's so cheap," he said to himself. Instead of casualties in the millions there might be "only a hundred thousand dead"—far fewer than it would take, presumably, to touch off an all-out nuclear exchange.
>
> After a couple of hours of preliminary work, he left to take his daughter out for a birthday lunch, and it hit him, as they stood in line at McDonald's, what he'd been thinking about all morning: 100,000 dead, *like that.* Images warred in his mind—himself on his knees with his maps and templates, his daughter dead—and he felt ill with the enormity of what he did for a living. Later, of course, he went back to his maps and his plan and wrote a paper on it.

A brief event, in Minneapolis last year. at a meeting of Russians and Americans arranged by the Institute for Policy Studies—they were talking about arms control and how to get détente going again—illustrates the change in thinking that is required, but has hardly begun:

> In the midst of the discussion, one of the American delegates, W. H. Ferry, a consultant to foundations who has been writing about the dangers of the arms race for twenty years, took the floor to make a short statement. I believe I am reporting it whole: "I raise the question here of what this is all about. What issue could possibly warrant the use of nuclear weapons? Are they issues of territory, or human rights? What is it that justifies this confrontation?"
>
> This was followed by a long moment of silence. Perhaps no one could believe Ferry had concluded so soon. No one made any attempt to answer his question. It was never referred to again, by Russians or Americans. It elicited no interest whatever.

The article by Thomas Powers is an inquiry into *why.*

Here we should like to repeat Erich Kahler's generalized treatment of this question, in terms of two ways of thinking, one common enough, the other rare. The analysis illuminates the "meaning" of history, title of the book we quote:

> Reason is a human faculty inherent in the human being as such, rationality is a technical function, a technicalization and functionalization of the way reason proceeds. . . . It is only rather recently, in consequence of the general process of specialization, and of the ensuing transformation of consciousness, that rationality has become completely independent of, indeed radically opposed to human reason.

Kahler uses a man like Powers' acquaintance—the civilian specialist in the use of nuclear weapons—to dramatize his point:

> As far as human reason comes in at all, it is effective only in the narrowest, personal scope of concern for keeping his job and pursuing his career, and even the care for the destiny of his children is repressed and held back from any connection with the dire implications of his work. . . . in the field of war technology, rationality juggles the lives of millions of human beings as mere proportional figures. The most dainty comforts are produced alongside of colossal destructivity. The prevalence of reason in human affairs would presuppose a comprehensive evaluation of all factors, in a given situation. But in the anarchical condition of an incoherent collective consciousness, functional rationality has reached a point of autonomy where it simultaneously serves the most contradictory ends, among them purposes which human reason must regard as monstrous.

Ferry proposed a revival of *reason.* The conferees at Minneapolis could not understand what he meant—had no interest in his proposal. This defines the frontier of our time.