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THE RING OF RETURN

MEN and women of mind who write books are both emancipators and imprisoners of our intelligence. They look at the world, and at themselves, trying to understand both and the relation between, and then set down scrolls of meaning which they have imagined. Is there any other way to reach to meaning? One may doubt it. Meaning is never objective. It is a construction of intelligence; it tells us why one thing, a cause, is followed by another thing, a result, which then in turn becomes another cause. This effect may be painful or pleasurable, which is the principal reason why we try to think about how cause and effect work, and about the various factors which enter in.

There are, however, other reasons for this kind of thinking. The Greeks named one of them wonder—wonder at the splendor of the world. How did all this come about? This Greek reason for thinking about how the world comes into being and what may be our part in the process is probably the best way to pursue answers, since it is without self-interest. Those who think in this way are called philosophers, lovers of truth. They set down their conclusions in books, just as the hedonists or pleasure-seekers do, but there seems less bias in what they say. Bias after all, is of two kinds. There is first the bias which results from leaving out of consideration factors which have not been experienced and are therefore unknown—a matter of simple ignorance—and, second, the bias which grows out of goals in self-interest, which has a blinding effect. Distinguishing between these biases is a way of establishing the quality of a book. Our own biases, of course, will enter into making this distinction, but that can hardly be helped.

Writers who want to be understood will often at the beginning describe their point of view in a preface or foreword. In a book we have been reading lately, *The Human Condition* by Hannah Arendt, the author gives her view in a Prologue:

The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice. The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms. For some time now, a great many scientific endeavors have been directed toward making life also "artificial," toward cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature. It is the same desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth that is manifest in the attempt to create life in the test tube, in the desire to mix "frozen germ plasm from people of demonstrated ability under the microscope to produce superior human beings" and "to alter (their) size, shape, and function"; and the wish to escape the human condition, I suspect, also underlies the hope to extend man's life-span far beyond the hundred-year limit.

This future man, whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years seems to be possessed by rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians. . . .

We do not yet know whether this situation is final. But it could be that we, who are earth-bound creatures and have begun to act as though we were dwellers in the universe, will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do. In this case, it would be as though our brain, which constitutes the physical, material condition of our thoughts, were unable to follow what we do, so that from now on we would need artificial machines to do our thinking and speaking. If it should turn out to be

> true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is.

In this situation, Hannah Arendt says, we can hardly turn to the scientists for help, since they no longer speak our language but only the language of mathematical symbols. "The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judgment of scientists *qua* scientists is not primarily their lack of 'character'—that they did not refuse to develop atomic weapons—or their naïveté—that they did not understand that once these weapons were developed they would be the last to be consulted about their use—but precisely the fact that they move in a world where speech has lost its power."

It would be the mildest of comments to say that Hannah Arendt entered upon the writing of her book in a depressed state of mind. Yet on what count could anyone seriously disagree with what she says? She has indeed defined the human condition, as it was in 1958 when her book was published, and as it is today. Yet what she saw then, that brought depression, in no way reduced her insight or her intelligence active in behalf of understanding if not improving our condition.

Before turning to other considerations, we quote from her last chapter, where she points out that the mechanizing of the work of making a living has had the effect of requiring the individual "to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed 'tranquilized,' functional type of behavior." She goes on:

> The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they are actually the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society. It is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.

There are books with a not unpleasant fatality in them, such that when you have read a page or two you are constrained to go on—and on. The author, whoever he is, combines a depth of thought with a skill of language that demands continued attention. He invites but does not command. One such book, *The Human Situation* by W. Macneile Dixon, which appeared in England in 1937, the Gifford Lectures, delivered in the University of Glasgow (1935-1937), is still the most urbanely civilized work we know that has been published in modern times. His subject is the same Hannah Arendt's, his title almost the same. His book may be no more penetrating than Miss Arendt's, which is why we have paired them, but he produces no depression, although he seems as aware as she of the reason for the dark picture she paints and would hardly contradict her.

What and how does he think? For a short answer we may say that he is an English Leibnizian, with all that this implies. He says in his introduction:

> Let us, to begin with, agree upon something. And we can at least agree, borrowing the words of Cromwell, on the eve of Dunbar, that "We are upon an engagement very difficult." For the first and last of all life's complicated circumstances, the presiding fact, utterly astonishing, even stupefying, is that we are wholly in the dark about everything. Blank ignorance is our portion. In reasoning from our experience of nature and ourselves we have all the evidence there is. We can add none. There remains, then, the reasoning itself, which is philosophy. People often complain that philosophy is useless. This, however, is merely to vilify our own minds. Philosophy is nothing but men's thinking. The evidence fails us, and "Nature nothing careth," as said Galileo, "whether her abstruse reasons and methods of operating be, or be not, exposed to the capacity of men." In a measure, no doubt, nature responds to examination and study. We learn, and have learnt something of her history and habits. Yet upon the matters that most deeply concern us we have in reality no more information than our ancestors of the Stone Age. Without exception all the thoughts men have entertained upon this very singular experience we call "life" are speculations, and no more than the purest speculations, hazardous guesses at the authorship and significance of the mystery play in which we are actors. " 'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer." And what, indeed, is truth? For so strange is our plight that

even were you and I in possession of the truth we could not know with certainty whether it was the truth or not.

Toward the end of this chapter Dixon sets out the way men of education were in the habit of thinking in the 1930s.

> Physics, upon which all the other sciences must necessarily build, introduces modern man to new and bewildering, if not contradictory concepts. He hears of a finite but unlimited universe, of wrinkled and twisted space-time. He is told of electrons and protons constituting the atom, whirling in unimaginable orbits at inconceivable speeds, and before he has accommodated his mind to their fantastic dances they are joined by neutrons and positrons in a system of which the mathematical framework is still more complicated. If he supposes himself to understand the character of energy—a very foolish supposition on the part of any man—he must add to it the conception of negative energy. He must enlarge his mind to embrace the possibility of half a dozen geometries, which would have made Euclid stare and gasp, he must attempt to visualize cosmic rays, and "waves of probability," and be aware, while he is attending to his income tax forms, that he is a dweller in an exploding or a stampeding universe.
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> Time was when man was the chief object of his own attention, interest and study. We have changed all that. Nature has usurped the pride of place, and we are told to think of ourselves as mere incidents in a process. The modern view fuses man and things. Men are merely things of one kind among innumerable things of other kinds. . . .
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> Time was when man's presence on earth gave it dignity amid the heavenly host, when the intellectual systems magnified mankind, exalted the mind and assigned it great place in the hierarchy of creation. "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in families! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!" Hamlet was, of course, mad, and only a madman could say such things. One must admit that it is hard for the plain man to accept what the philosophers and men of science tell him is the truth.

Yet Dixon himself is willing to stretch his mind to such possibilities. He ends his introduction by saying:

> Our modern teachers appear, I sometimes feel, apprehensive lest man should prove a greater enigma than they can deal with, or indeed, perhaps than they desire him to be. They have, in my judgment, good reason for their misgivings. The truth about him may be very remote from their notions, may lie elsewhere than they would have us believe. Man may be more interesting and important than they suppose, possibly even a star of some magnitude in the celestial universe.

What has happened to modern man, that he has been willing to let himself be reduced a "a mere incident" in a vast natural process? One way of explaining his plight is that he has stopped feeling the need to struggle. He is no longer inspired by the drama of revolution. We have no Thomas Paines to arouse us to action, no Brunos to fire our hearts and stir to resistance and affirmation the dignity lost by becoming a mere incident. Our crises are all plated by still remaining comforts of life, the unearned benefits of a remotely clever technology whose conveniences have not yet broken down. No heroes have arisen in modern times to inspire the young and shock their parents into a renewed human consciousness. We have been too involved in the pleasures and petty goals which becoming "mere incidents" made possible. The "enemy," moreover, is obscure. Paine had no problem of this sort. The Redcoats were already on our shores. The enemy was obvious, our everyday freedom was threatened. But who would you single out today as the cause of our multiplying disasters? We can only say, sheepishly, ourselves, and then find comfort in the soporifics so abundantly provided by the countless "specialists" turned out by the professional schools. We long for a vigorous life on a new frontier but no such area remains accessible on earth that we know of. We are warned of coming collapse but see no way of implementing the measures that are needed.

We must, it seems, in a time like the present, generate our identity and its armament for ourselves. History, having been so much abused, is on strike. For any such undertaking, Dixon prescribes a foundation:

> Whatever it be, this entity, this I, this being that cares for truth and beauty, the haughty, exclusive, conscious soul, its sense of personal identity survives all assaults. You may analyze it, with Hume, into a series of disconnected thoughts and feelings, but its

unity reasserts itself in reviewing the series into which you have attempted to dissect it. In Hegel's words, "I have many ideas, a wealth of thoughts in me, and yet I remain, in spite of this variety, one." There is then something in us which nature has not given for she had it not to give. Selfhood is not a contingent entity, but the representative of a metaphysical and necessary principle of the universe, a part of its essential nature, a constituent of reality, nor without it could the Cosmos attain to recognition, to full consummation or true being. Experiencing souls were a necessity of a universe in any legitimate sense there was to be. Such is the soul's superlative standing in reality. . . .

It is Plato's doctrine, and none more defensible than the soul before it entered the realm of Becoming existed in the universe of Being. Released from the region of time and space, it returns to its former abode, "the Sabbath, or rest of souls," into communion with itself. After a season of quiet "alone with the Alone," of assimilation of its earthly experiences and memories, refreshed and invigorated, it is seized again by the desire for further trials of its strength, further knowledge of the universe, the companionship of former friends, by the desire to keep in step and on the march with the moving world. There it seeks out and once more animates a body, the medium of communication with its fellow travellers, and sails forth in that vessel upon a new venture in the ocean of Becoming.

Many, no doubt, will be its ventures, many its voyages. For not until all the possibilities of Being have been manifested in Becoming, not until all the good, beauty and happiness of which existence allows have, by the wayfaring soul, been experienced, not until it has become all that it is capable of becoming—and who can tell to what heights of power and vision it may climb?—is it fitted to choose for itself the state and society which best meets its many requirements, as its natural or enduring habitation.

To us in our present gloomy mood, the promise of immortality may sound like a dream of wished-for compensation, a release from bonds that have the sanction of most modern minds. And yet, only the history of science for the past hundred years should be enough to make clear to us that the mood of common denial is easily shattered, and has been again and again, by the discoveries of humans. Nor is there warrant for assuming that if immortality and rebirth are possibilities, we shall find them without the burdens of responsibility, some sort of supernatural cutting off from the requirements of our unfinished business. Rather rebirth means simply that we shall have another chance.

This is no new idea, but one that was set aside when we allowed the physicists to make up our minds concerning what is real and what unreal. Dixon consults the testimony of distinguished thinkers:

How many modes of existence are there? I cannot tell you, but I should imagine them to be very numerous. And what kind of immortality is at all conceivable? Of all doctrines of a future life palingenesis or rebirth, which carries with it the idea of pre-existence, is by far the most ancient and most widely held, "the only system to which," as said Hume, "philosophy can hearken." "The soul is eternal and migratory, say the Egyptians," reports Laertius. In its existence birth and death are events. And though this doctrine has for European thought a strangeness, it is in fact the most natural and easily imagined, since what has been can be again. This belief, taught by Pythagoras, to which Plato and Plotinus were attached, has been held by Christian fathers as well as by many philosophers since the dawn of civilization. It "has made the tour of the world," and seems, indeed, to be in accordance with nature's own favorite way of thought, of which she so insistently reminds us, in her rhythms and recurrences, her cycles and revolving seasons. "It presents itself," wrote Schopenhauer, "as the natural conviction of man whenever he reflects at all in an unprejudiced manner."

"If there be a sceptical star," Dixon wrote, "I was born under it," and one who reads him finds this confession confirmed. But he also said:

To believe life an irremediable disaster, the heavens and earth an imbecility, is to my way of thinking hard indeed. Since I am not prepared to believe the world a misery-go-round, a torture-chamber, a furnace of senseless affliction; since I am not prepared to believe the fiery, invincible soul a by-blow, a lamentable accident; I prefer to put my trust in the larger vision of the poets. To fortify our minds it is to them we have to return, and yet again return.

The reasons for such a return grow in number with every passing year.

REVIEW
A GENIUS OF THIS CENTURY

OUR first acquaintance with the work of Simone Weil came in February, 1945, when her article, "Reflections on War," written in 1933 and published in *La Critique Sociale,* appeared in Dwight Macdonald's *Politics* and came to two men who would in three years be the founding editors of MANAS. This was forty-two years ago, toward the end of World War II, when the future editors were in a conscientious objector camp in California and subscribers to Macdonald's paper. The impact of Simone Weil's thinking about war remains to this day, so it was with pleasure that we received for review a volume of selected material from her work, *Formative Writing 1929-1941,* edited and translated by Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness, and published by the University of Massachusetts Press ($30 in cloth). Other parts of her works have appeared in English through the years, including her major book, *The Need for Roots* (Putnam's, 1952), and various collections of letters and essays, and the present volume provides material that only now becomes available in English, throwing additional light on her thought processes. We offer a quotation from "Reflections on War" to exhibit the quality and power of this extraordinary woman's work, a writer who died in 1943 at the age of thirty-four. She said:

> Ultimately, war in our time appears to be a war conducted by the aggregate of the state apparatuses and their general staffs against the aggregate of men old enough to bear arms. But, whereas machines take away from the workers only their labor power, and owners have no other means of constraint except dismissal (which is blunted by the fact that the worker can choose among different employers), every soldier is constrained to sacrifice his very life to the demands of the military machine, and he is forced to do so by the threat of execution without trial that the power of the state constantly holds over his head. Consequently it matters very little whether a war is defensive or offensive, imperialist, or nationalist; every state at war is forced to use this method, since the enemy uses it. The great error of almost every study on war—an error into which all the socialists, especially, have fallen—is to consider war an episode in foreign policy, when above all it constitutes a fact of domestic policy, and the most atrocious one of all. . . .
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> Present-day society is like an immense machine that continually snatches up and devours men and that no one knows how to control. Those who sacrifice themselves for social progress are like people who would hang on to the wheels and the transmission belts in an attempt to stop the machine and who will be ground to bits in their turn. But the helplessness one feels at a given moment—a helplessness that must never be regarded as final—cannot exempt one from remaining faithful to oneself, nor excuse capitulation to the enemy, whatever mask he might assume. And, no matter what name it bears—fascism, democracy, or dictatorship of the proletariat—the principal enemy remains the administrative, police, and military apparatus, not the apparatus across the border from us, which is our enemy only to the degree that it is the enemy of our brothers, but the one that calls itself our defender and makes us its slaves. Whatever the circumstances, the worst possible treason is always to consent to subordinate oneself to this apparatus and trample underfoot, in order to serve it, all human values in oneself and others.

Who was Simone Weil? She was a Jewish girl born of middle-class parents in France in 1909. In a note in *Politics,* probably by Macdonald, it is said:

> As a pupil of that Ecole Normale Superieure which produced, under the Third Republic, an intellectual elite that included Jaures, Peguy, Bergson (to name only three of the most recent examples), Simone Weil was already distinguished among her classmates by a personality in which the moral and the intellectual were inextricably united. She assimilated as her everyday mental fare the highest products of art and science. When she was graduated and began to teach philosophy, mathematics and Greek language and literature, she continued to broaden her culture, going always to the great primary sources, whether it was Homeric poetry, Euclidian geometry, Vitruvius' rules of architecture, Vieta's algebra, or the laws of the pendulum discovered by Huygens. But even more than her encyclopedic knowledge, tirelessly striving to capture the inmost essence of things, it was her personal honesty and her delicate sense of human relations that won the admiration and love of her pupils. Outside the academic world, also, this girl of insignificant appearance and unassuming manner, with a frail body and a fiery spirit, made a deep impression on all who came to know her.

For those whose interest is aroused by this sketch, the biography of Simone Weil, written years later by her friend and fellow student, Simone

Petrement, *The Life of Simone Weil* (Pantheon, 1976), would be pleasurable reading.

In her preface to the present book, one of the editors, Wilhelmina Van Ness, describes the contents:

> *Formative Writings, 1929-1941* is a collection of texts from this remnant. The equivalent of approximately one more volume of short texts remains to be translated. The texts selected for this volume were written between 1929 and 1941, a crucial and transitional period, one of an anguishing rite of passage for Weil, Europe of the world. In chronological order, the texts are "Science and Perception in Descartes" (1929-30), a formidable dissertation Weil wrote as a twenty-one-year-old philosophy student at the Ecole Normale Superieure; "The Situation in Germany" (1932-33), a ten-article extravaganza of dissident Left journalism on the subject of Hitler's rise to power and Comintern politics; "Factory Journal" (1934-35), Weil's unedited almost daily record of the "year" she spent as an unskilled factory worker; "War and Peace" (1933-40), a selection of essays and fragments reflecting aspects of her pacifist thought culled from the "War and Peace" and "Spain" sections of *Ecrits historiques et politiques;* and "Philosophy" (1941), a light essay that accurately reflects some of the breadth of her mature thought on Eastern and Western art, mysticism, science, and philosophy.

We take from the editors' introductory essay to the section on War and Peace the following passage, showing how the author thought things through to her final conclusion:

> Contrary to the Socialists' belief that revolutionary war was "one of the most glorious forms of the struggle of the working masses against their oppressors," Weil's analysis in "Reflections on War" showed that both the French and Revolutionary wars had actually taken political power from the people and entrenched it in the state and military apparatus, that exigencies of war had in fact made democracy impossible, had led to the Terror and then to the military dictatorship of Napoleon in France and had given Russia "the heaviest bureaucratic, military, and police machine that has ever burdened an unfortunate people." Revolutionary war, she concluded, "is the tomb of the revolution and will remain so as long as the soldiers themselves, or rather the armed citizenry, are not given the means to making war without a controlling apparatus, without police pressure without a special court, without punishment for desertion."

A careful student of history, especially of revolutionary war, Simone Weil showed that Robespierre, who was a brilliant man, recognized all too late that war took power away from the people and gave it to the government or the military apparatus. In 1793 he said that "liberty is not brought at the point of bayonets," She goes on:

> From that time onward he foresaw the coming military despotism and continued to predict it despite the apparent success of the revolution; he was still predicting it two days before his death, in his last speech, and left this prediction behind as a testament, but those who have since claimed him as their own have unfortunately not attached much importance to it.
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> The history of the Russian Revolution provides exactly the same lessons, along with a striking analogy. The Soviet Constitution suffered exactly the same fate as the Constitution of 1793; Lenin forsook its democratic doctrines in order to establish the despotism of a centralized state apparatus, just as Robespierre did, and Lenin was the precursor of Stalin, as Robespierre was the precursor of Bonaparte. The difference is that Lenin—who had, moreover, long ago paved the way for the domination of the state apparatus by forging a highly centralized party—later distorted his own doctrines in order to adapt them to the necessities of the hour; thus he was not guillotined, but has become the idol of a new state religion. . . .
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> Furthermore, to recognize the kinship between war and fascism, all one has to do is turn to the fascist texts that conjure up "the martial spirit" and "socialism of the front." Both war and fascism essentially involve a kind of aggravated fanaticism that leads to the total effacement of the individual before the state bureaucracy. If the capitalist system is more or less damaged in process, it can only be at the expense of human values and the proletariat, and not to their benefit, no matter what the demagogues may sometimes say.

Simone Weil was the uncompromising enemy of coercion, force, and violence. She was also a tender and compassionate human being. This feeling comes out in many of her essays, especially in *The Iliad,* or *The Poem of Force,* which was written late in 1940, published in *Cahiers du Sud,* and appeared in the November 1945 *Politics* in a translation by Mary McCarthy revised by Dwight Macdonald. It **is** now available as a Pendle Hill Pamphlet (No. 9I) from Pendle Hill, Wallingford, Pennsylvania 19806.

COMMENTARY
CHANGING PEOPLE'S MINDS

AMONG the sources of ideas on which we draw, the richest of all is almost certainly the paper founded by John Holt, *Growing Without Schooling*. He started it ten years ago, and while he is no longer with us, the paper continues in the spirit of its beginning, guided by a small handful who had experience working with him and who gained some understanding of his genius. They seem to be succeeding in continuing in the original spirit of *Growing Without Schooling*. A year's subscription (six issues, 32 pages each) is $20. The address is 729 Boylston Street, Boston, Mass. 02116.

"Changing People's Minds" is a heading in the current *GWS*, for a quotation from what John Holt said in an interview in England in 1982. He began by noting that our ability to change people's minds is indeed very limited, then said:

What I do, practically speaking, is I talk, I give lectures, I speak on radio, TV, I write books. From this I think three things may happen.

> There's a kind of spectrum of possibilities and I think at one end, for many people, I just put a pebble in their shoe which they can't get out. I mean, the vast majority of people who hear me speak or read some of my stuff, whether they are parents or teachers, think, "Well, that's utter rubbish," but they can't quite get back to where they were before they first heard it. There it is, it's in their shoe, they cannot altogether escape it. The world looks a little bit different from the way it looked before.
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> Then there are many people who I think have intuited, as teachers or parents, that there was something not quite right about what they were doing, that it wasn't working out the way they had hoped. Here they get a sense, perhaps, of "This is why." I like to think I'm shining a light on my own experience which makes them able to see their own experience in a rather different light, perhaps learn something new from it.

He ends by recalling what James Herndon (who wrote *How To Survive in Your Native Land*) said to him.

> He suddenly stopped in the middle of a sentence and looked at me for a second and said, "John, do you know what your first book did for me?" I said, "No, Jim, what did it do for you?" He said, "It convinced me that I wasn't crazy."

John didn't go about changing other people's minds—which would be virtually immoral—but he made it a little difficult for them not to change their minds themselves.

John was in this sense a Platonist—a teacher who believed that unless there was room for dissent in the mind of the student, the lesson being taught couldn't amount to much. This was Aristotle's great mistake, since he believed in what was called by the Greeks *apodictic* teaching, the teaching which *compels* acceptance. Arithmetic is an illustration. Two and two are four, three and three are six, and if you don't accept these sums you are out of your mind. Reflection is unnecessary. You *must* agree.

There are obviously areas where we need the apodictive method, but no inner, human growth is accomplished by it. Much of the science of engineering is based upon apodictic, yet even here, where the use of imagination is required, the Platonic method is essential. What is the Platonic method? It involves the "why" of an undertaking, not merely the "how." The inquirer himself makes a real decision, and he learns from its consequences. So it was with John Holt and the pebbles he put in shoes. One had to think about how to apply the pebble's meaning and learn from it for oneself.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
NEIL POSTMAN ON EVERYTHING

ON the last page of its Fall (1986) issue, the *Antaeus Report* presents a discussion of "Future Schlock" by Neil Postman, author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death.* Here, as might be expected, Mr. Postman continues his devastating critique of television, finding it guilty of overcoming normal human intelligence with the weapons of "ignorance, superstition, cruelty, cowardice, neglect, moral fervor." In television programs, he says, serious language has been replaced by the art of show business.

> What I'm talking about is television's preemption of our culture's most serious business. It is one thing to say that TV presents us with entertaining subject matter. It is quite another to say that on TV all subject matter is presented as entertaining and it is in that sense that TV can bring ruin to any intelligent understanding of public affairs. . . .
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> You have also seen "Sesame Street" and other educational shows in which the demands of entertainment take precedence over the rigors of learning and you well know how American businessmen working under the assumption that potential customers require amusement rather than facts use music, dance, comedy, cartoons, and celebrities to sell their products. I should say that Karl Marx did far less in undermining the rational basis of capitalist ideology than does the American television commercial. Now even our daily news, which for most Americans means television news, is packaged as a kind of show, featuring exciting music and dynamic film footage, especially film footage. When there is no film footage or can be no film footage, there's no story because it appears that in America what is not televisable does not, for all practical purposes, exist.

Everything, in short, that comes over the tube is trivialized, and even the serious matters which may be broadcast are trivialized by what comes before and after them. As Postman says:

> Stranger still is the fact that commercials may appear anywhere in a news story, before, after or in the middle, so that all events are rendered essentially trivial, that is to say, all events are treated as a source of public entertainment. How serious can an earthquake in Mexico be or a highjacking in Beirut, if it is shown to us prefaced by a happy United Airlines commercial and summarized by a Calvin Klein jeans commercial. . . .
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> But I don't mean to say that the trivialization of American public discourse is all accomplished on television. Rather, television is the paradigm for all of our attempts at public communication. It conditions our minds to apprehend the world through fragmented pictures and forces other media to orient themselves in that direction. We would do well to keep in mind that there are two ways in which the spirit of a culture may be degraded. In the first, the Orwellian, culture becomes a prison. This was the way of the Nazis. . . . In the second, the Huxleyian, culture becomes a burlesque and this appears to be the way of the Americans. . . . Now when a culture becomes distracted by trivia, when political and social life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when public conversation becomes a form of baby talk, when in short a people become an audience and their public business a Vaudeville act then Huxley argued, a nation finds itself at risk.

That is the end of Mr. Postman's article, which is condensed from an address he gave before the National Colloquium at Ohio Wesleyan University.

Neil Postman is not the only effective writer against television. There have been a half dozen or so much books published within the past ten years, all well argued and good. Have they actually reduced the number of TV screens in operation in the country? The issue is one of taste, and tastes are shaped mostly by one's environment, so that children brought up in homes where there are TV sets are likely to go on watching in their adult years.

Having, at this point, about half our space left we began wondering what Neil Postman said in his first book, published in 1969, which he wrote with Charles Weingartner, another experienced and skillful teacher. Since we reviewed that book, which is *Teaching as a Subversive Activity,* we got it off the shelf and started reading it. We didn't get far because, right at the beginning it

became evident that Postman, as one of the authors, hasn't changed at all in viewpoint. They start out:

> This book is based on two assumptions of ours. One, it seems to us, is indisputable; the other, highly questionable. We refer to the belief that (*a*) in general, the survival of our society is threatened by an increasing number of unprecedented and, to date, insoluble problems; and (*b*) that something can be done to improve the situation. If you do not know which of these is indisputable and which questionable, you have just finished reading this book.
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> If you do, we do not need to document in great detail assumption (*a*). We do want, however, to remind you of some of the problems we currently face and then to explain briefly why we have not outgrown the hope that many of them can be minimized if not eliminated through a new approach to education.

They then point out that the first problem in the United States is mental illness, with more Americans suffering from this ill than from all the others combined. It doesn't seem likely, today, that this affliction has subsided in America. Second is the ill of crime, involving both delinquent affluent adolescents and large corporations. Then there is the suicide problem—the second most common cause of death among adolescents. They go on, listing other familiar problems, then say:

> You may have noticed that almost all of these problems are related to "progress," a somewhat paradoxical manifestation that has also resulted in the air-pollution problem, the water-pollution problem, the garbage disposal problem, the radioactivity problem, the megalopolis problem, the supersonic-jet-noise problem, the traffic problem, the who-am-I problem, and the what-does-it-all-mean problem.
>
> Stay one more paragraph, for we must not omit alluding to the international scene: the Bomb problem, the Vietnam problem, the Red China problem, the Cuban problem, the Middle East problem, the foreign aid problem, the national-defense problem, and a mountain of others mostly thought of as stemming from the communist-conspiracy problem.

They now reach—rhetorically, at any rate—what their effort will be.

> Now, there is one problem under which all of the foregoing may be subsumed. It is the "What, if anything, can we do about these problems?" problem, and *that* is exactly what this book tries to be about. This book was written because we are serious, dedicated, professional educators, which means that we are simple, romantic men who risk contributing to the mental-health problem by maintaining a belief in the improvability of the human condition through education. We are not so simple and romantic as to believe that all of the problems we have enumerated are susceptible to solution—through education or anything else. But some can be solved, and perhaps more directly through education than any other means.

So they set out to do what they can, using their loose-jointed but well articulated prose. They are mainly concerned with exposing the web of cultural lies we absorb on every hand, not quite but almost from our mother's milk on. In one place they speak of the difficulty of addressing the nation about such matters—a difficulty only parents can do anything about, if they want to and will learn how. They say:

> It was George Counts who observed that technology repealed the Bill of Rights. In the eighteenth Centuly, a pamphlet could influence an entire nation. Today all the ideas of the Noam Chomskys, Paul Goodmans, Edgar Friedenbergs, I.F. Stones, and even the William Buckleys, cannot command as much attention as a 30-minute broadcast by Walter Cronkite. Unless, of course, one of them were given a prime-time network program, in which case he would most likely come out more like Walter Cronkite than himself. Even Marshall McLuhan, who is leading the field in understanding media, is having his ideas transformed and truncated by the forms of the media to fit present media functions. (One requirement, for example, is that an idea or a man must be "sensational" in order to get a hearing; thus, McLuhan comes out not as a scholar studying media but as the "Apostle of the Electronic Age.")

These are all ideas worth thinking about by people who are contemplating the need for reforms—any kind of reforms.

FRONTIERS

The Path to Sanity?

IN *Reconciliation International* for February, the Journal of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, a nonsectarian paper committed to non-violence and issued five times a year, the editor, Jim Forest, tells in his editorial about his prison experience, both its advantages and its pain. The pain is mostly loss of privacy and contact with loved ones. The advantages came, in his case, while he was doing over a year in 1969-70, in the opportunity to read. He was able to read Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Gorki—writers who for him became bridges to the Russians he later met. He also spoke of the pain of others "who may be in prison unjustly, whom no one visits and to whom no one writes." Except for papers like *Reconciliation International* and a few others, many of us would never hear of the lives of those incarcerated for their principles, and of all those in prison for other reasons.

There is also news of the peace movement from around the world, as for example the following item:

> The Synod of the Protestant Churches in the German Democratic Republic, meeting last September, issued a statement that has received much less attention than it deserves. The Synod, stressing the need "for a new way of thinking," published a confession of faith which completely rejects both war and the practice of deterrence.

Another report relates that when, last July, the U.S. Court of Appeals in St. Louis, Missouri, affirmed convictions in two Plowshare cases, one of the judges, Myron Bright, wrote a dissenting opinion arguing that the sabotage convictions in these cases should be overturned. He said m part:

> I believe that the government over-reacted in charging Father Karl Kabat, Paul Kabat, Lawrence Cloud Morgan, Helen Woodson, and Martin Holladay with sabotage. . . . Their acts of civil disobedience did not amount to sabotage. The defendants . . . are peace activists seeking to end the threat of global annihilation brought on by a nuclear arms race which the two superpowers seem unable to control. . . . The existence of nuclear weapons and the potential for nuclear war creates political, moral, and religious dilemmas never before confronted by mankind. . . . The actions of the defendants . . . constitute part of the growing clamor against nuclear threat. . . .

We must recognize that civil disobedience in various forms, used without violent acts against others, is ingrained in our society, and the moral correctness of political protesters' views has on occasion served to change and better our society. Civil disobedience has been prevalent throughout this nation's history, extending from the Boston Tea Party and the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the freeing of the slaves by the operation of the underground railroad in the mid-1800s. . . .

> We need carefully to consider the nature of the protest. Along these lines, Father Henri J.M. Nouwen, a priest of the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Utrecht, in the Netherlands, recently wrote: "The small groups of 'disobedient' people who here and there jump the fences of nuclear weapons facilities, climb on board nuclear submarines, or put their bodies in front of nuclear transports are trying to wake us up to a reality we continue to ignore or deny. Their loud, clear and often dramatic 'no' has to make us wonder what kind of 'no' we are called to speak."

This is an American Federal Judge speaking. We go from his statement to an action by twelve West German judges reported in *Peacemaker* for Feb. 27:

> On Jan. 15, 12 West German judges in full judicial robes, blockaded the entrance to the Mutlangen Pershing base for two hours before they were arrested. TV and other media gave their action full coverage and it created an uproar in the press. Among the 12 judges was Ulf Panzer who has been outspoken on the responsibilities of Judges to respond conscientiously to unjust or misused laws. He wrote a letter to the American judge who gave the extraordinary sentence to the Silo Plowshares, reproaching his "colleague" and asking him to reconsider.

It happens that one of the Plowshare defendants who received an "extraordinary sentence" is Helen Woodson, now in a federal prison in Shakopee, Minnesota, doing twelve

years. She tells in a letter to the same issue of *Peace maker* that she has been transferred from a high security prison to the "low" one at "Shakopee." She has no idea why she was moved. Her first prison was regarded as high security because there was no place to go outside. Her comments are of interest:

> Shakopee has many more rules, and I was told by several prisoners that this is good for us, because we need to learn "accountability." Accountability, being a buzz-word even in resistance, is worth some evaluation, and I find the concept existing on two levels—vertical and horizontal. Vertical is for young children who must accept authority in order to avoid danger. Vertical accountability protects the child from the consequences of immature judgment.
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> Horizontal accountability is for adults, reaching out to sisters and brothers is an attempt to respond to their needs. It requires constant questioning of society's assumptions in order to perceive those needs correctly and to act accordingly. Most authority, including that of church and state, actually interferes with horizontal accountability and must therefore be resisted.
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> It would be a mistake to assume that prisoners have never experienced vertical accountability and need to be trained for it, for most grew up under the harsh demands of brutally abusive parents. Likewise, it would be an error to believe that the prison intends a progression from vertical to horizontal accountability, for what actually exists is simple transference—from the present staff to future employer, from present guards to future cops, from present regulation to future law. Good prisoners become good citizens, unquestioning and obedient, and the reward is "success."
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> Success is pushed here in all its American obscenity. Personal property allowances are liberal, and mail order is available to supply luxuries. The ultimate reward is a supervised shopping trip into the community. When I refused to take the psychological exams, I was told that this privilege would never be mine, so I assume there is some positive correlation between certifiable sanity and cash registers. My refusal to accept the entrance gift (a $30 outfit from Penneys) and money for work performed here raised many eyebrows, and so I assume there is a positive correlation between material simplicity and presumed insanity. May we all become mad as hatters!

The time may come when sanity will prove the path to prison. *Peacemaker's* address is Box 627, Garberville, Calif. 95440.