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THE RECONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

CONFIDENT in his knowledge of mechanics, Archimedes declared to his contemporaries: "Give me a place to stand and I will move the world." With a similar resolve, Karl Marx wrote in his *Theses on Feuerbach:* "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it." It is of some interest that, today, after the world has suffered some noticeable changes at the hands of Marx's followers, and is in danger of being badly shaken, if not moved, by the skills of the nuclear physicists, the chief interest of many men is neither to move the world nor to change it, but simply to be able to *see* it.

There are many evidences of this uncertainty concerning the kind of world we have, and the nature of the human environment. George P. Elliott, a contemporary novelist, gave it expression two years ago *(Nation,* Nov. 14, 1959):

> Nothing is harder than to have a clear, steady and sound idea of what society is and what it should be. I must speak for myself: I realize that I could not define the word to anyone's satisfaction; like many, I sometimes in desperation identify society with the state—whence horrors ensue. The word "democratic" has ceased to have any more independent meaning than the word "united" in United States. We have no good analogy by which to comprehend our society. . . .
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> Perhaps this very difficulty in conceiving American society coherently helps account for the importance in contemporary fiction of the theme of alienation. In any case, while some of the fictional characters you come across nowadays are pretty well outside any social scheme, on the bum with the beats, a lot more of them are in various sorts of social organizations and yet do not *feel* in them. They don't necessarily hate their family, whether the family they were born into or the one they created by marriage, but they do want to be shed of it or are so already. They don't much like their work and do not feel a sense of community with their fellow workers. They are without church. Solitude means nothing to them, loneliness all. They collect in coffee houses, in the Army, at games, wherever, and feel all the more alienated for the falseness of the community they are in. Sooner or later these characters, or their authors for them, get around to asking "Who am I?"—that question which can hardly be answered unless you are in a strong social, moral order, and which is not likely to be asked if you are in one. But the reasons for the characters' alienation are seldom made very clear. . . .

Contributing a similar sort of analysis to the *Nation* for April 21, (1962), Frederick R. Karl suggests that the distinguished novelists of the first part of this century—Conrad, Mann, Lawrence, Proust, Kafka, Faulkner, and Joyce—

> have greatly extended novelistic reality and directed us to recognize the multiplicity of experience and the protean nature of life. We have come to view the world not as a stable place but as a web of overlapping illusions, as an ever-expanding function of memory, as a manifestation of irrational responses and perverse desires, and as an obstacle course in which man is forever trapped. This powerful demonstration of uncertainty and mystery has been the substance of the major writers; while the reputable minor ones—both in England and the United States—continue in the Victorian main stream and reflect a relatively stable world.

Mr. Karl takes Clancy Sigal as a type of the modern writer who continues to write about the world as Kafka saw it years ago. In *Going Away,* Sigal's narrator says:

> I see no salvation in personal relationships, in political action, or in any job I might take in society. Everything in me cries out that we are meaningless pieces of paste. . . . That man is alone and can only relieve but not redeem his loneliness. That, to the extent that we try to deny this—and most things in America aim at denying this—to that extent we participate in a living lie which must corrupt if not destroy us.

Karl adds:

> These novelists—American as well as English and continental—reflect a reality that balks resolution. The pressures are too great, man's separation from others and from himself too immense, the important issues too distant. The power of the human will to overcome problems, even to create happiness—what every nineteenth-century novelist took for granted—is now in serious doubt, and only popular minor novelists like Wouk, Sloan Wilson and Ruark seriously believe in it.

The popular, minor novelists, however, have most of the readers. Of all these people, Mr. Karl says:

> Paradoxically, however, most people live as though stability were not only possible but already present. Their public lives, as well as their private (despite the high divorce rate), are based on ambitions, goals, continuity. They strive and seek; they hope to find; they build, and then settle in; they raise large families—in itself a sign of optimism and a mark of relative security. They struggle for better positions, for more money, for higher status. No matter what their private fears, their lives are founded on more than mere survival, in fact, on attainable self-gratification.

This is the big movie and television audience, the people "out there" who vote or think they vote public men in and out of office, who are courted by propagandists and sales managers, and alternately seduced by hope and fear. They are the people who, to borrow from Mr. Elliott, still think they live in a "strong social, moral order," and have not yet reached a state which makes them ask, "Who am I?"

The Spring, 1962 *Activist*, a student publication of Oberlin College, has a number of articles which reveal what is happening to the youth of the country. One writer, Tom Hayden, quotes from Dr. Hermann H. Remmers' report of a survey, which says of present-day students: "They play it so safe that they've lost their feelings for the basic tenets of democracy." Hayden continues:

> He [Remmers] found that three out of every four students believe "that what the nation needs is a strong, fearless leader in whom we can have faith," fifty per cent were willing to compromise freedom of the press, eighty-three per cent saw nothing wrong with wire-tapping, and fifty-eight per cent thought it all right for the police to use third degree tactics.
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> There is a deep alienation of the student from the decisionmaking institutions of society. C. Wright Mills suggests a widening separation between "social structure" and personal "milieu." As our major institutions expand, and science and technology generate an increased need for division of labor, expertise and specialization, and the life of nations becomes more interconnected, fewer and fewer individuals are able to perceive truly beyond their immediate and limited circles, their milieu. . . . As the perimeter of personal vision becomes closer, a sense of powerlessness evolves with regard to changing the state of affairs, evoking the ideology of "complexity" often hidden behind joviality and complacency. To the students, things seem to happen because of a mixture of drift and manipulation by an unseen "them," the modern equivalent of "fate." . . .
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> A recent Gallup poll of youth concluded that, among other things, youth will "settle for low success (and) won't risk high failure." There is no willingness to take risks, to set dangerous goals, no real conception of personal identity, no real urge for personal fulfillment except to be almost as successful as the very successful people. Much attention is to be paid to the social status (meeting people, getting a wife or a husband, making solid business contacts); increasingly more attention is paid to academic status (grades, honors, admittance to med school). Still neglected is the *intellectual* status, the personal cultivation of excellence of the mind. . . .
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> The university and society are not just impersonal to the student. Where members of an institution are linked by a *functional bond* of being students, not the fraternal bond of being people, there develops a terrible isolation of man from man, dimly disguised in the intensity of twist parties, or the frightening riots of Fort Lauderdale. Albert Camus' novel, *The Stranger*, creates a paradigm of the man lacking relatedness to anything at all. In one part of the novel the stranger's mother has died, and he, himself, goes swimming and to the movies with his girl friend. That evening she asks him to marry her, to which he nonchalantly consents. Next she asks if he loves her, and with the same detachment he replies that he does not think so. In this perhaps extreme case, don't we see the contours of a generation consciously drifting, *but not even prepared to commit itself to drifting?*

A teacher in Austin, Texas, made this point clear to me when he joked: "Students don't even give a damn about apathy." Can we call this attitude human? Doesn't it involve a perception of life that is unreal, as articulated by the co-ed who stated: "For most of us war is a great big fairy tale told by our parents. We don't believe it can happen to us."

If war is a fairy tale, what meaning have life and death?

So far, our quotations may seem to be a somewhat mixed bag, but they do serve in the direction of this inquiry. That, as Mr. Karl notes, "most people live as though stability were not only possible but already present," is not a fact against the idea that the crisis of the present is one of uncertainty about the nature of the world. These people do not feel the crisis directly, but it is reflected in their lives in the form of isolation, loneliness, neuroticism, and ambiguity in their behavior. They are still unaware of what Tom Driver, *Christian Century* drama critic, calls the "crisis in action." Camus' "stranger" is the victim of this crisis.

In the same issue of the *Nation* (April 21), Driver discusses the contemporary theatre, finding little virtue in modern plays except those of the *avant-garde* dramatists "The bulk of twentieth-century drama," he says, "has tried to get into the swim by taking over various ideas current in the market place. Eager to be thought relevant, the playwrights have gone with the stream instead of against it." He continues:

Forgetting the wisdom of pioneers like Ibsen and Shaw they have curried favor with the audience by affirming what the audience already thinks. They could hardly have made a more serious mistake. What do we learn from *A Raisin in the Sun* or *Sunrise at Campobello* except that the "liberal" notions we hold are indeed correct and look very good as dressed-up soap opera? . . .

The work of the so-called *avant-garde* playwrights must be seen in relation to that crisis in action. Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Michel de Ghelderode, Harold Pinter and the others have observed the crisis and have, in their several ways, written directly about it. That is why their work is superior to the plays of many writers who merely reflect the crisis without realizing they are doing so.

Beckett says that if you look about you today you see that nothing corresponds to action. Contemporary experience affords no basis for an action that would be, in Aristotle's words "serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude." There is only "the mess," for the representation of which drama must find new forms. . . . All the *avant-garde* are dissatisfied with what Ionesco calls "the non-metaphysical world of today." They try to reveal it for what it is and to communicate, by indirect means, an awareness of the dimension that has been lost to contemporary experience.

The *avant-garde* is the healthiest movement to have emerged in the theatre since the Second World War. The popular notions that it is nihilistic and that it describes the impossibility of communication are completely mistaken. On the contrary it is a highly sophisticated strategy for the achievement of communication. . . . it has understood that the theatre declines when it is used to reinforce current ideas and to advocate known doctrines of politics, psychology, religion, and so forth. The power of the *avant-garde*, over and above whatever is due to the technical skill of its best writers, is the power to attack, or at least to put in jeopardy, even those residual assurances that are left to modern man. . . . the *avant-garde* has seen that the theatre cannot speak relevantly to a modern audience without acknowledging the mistrust of action that the audience actually has. They have been bold in attempting to create a kind of theatre that could exist without action—or at least without the rational progress of ideas and events, which is what action has traditionally meant in the theatre. Lionel Abel has given to what they have achieved the name anti-play. That is, a play whose very point is the absence of action. Those who invented the anti-play showed that they understood the contemporary mind profoundly. . . . If the theatre is to have a future, the metaphysical imagination, which has been spurred by the *avant-garde*, will play a great part in it. But also a kind of humanism will have to return, so that we feel once more that we are dealing with men as well as with forces and essences.

In the *New Republic* for April 23, Irving Howe examines the books of the anti-utopian novelists—Aldous Huxley *(Brave New World)*, George Orwell (*Nineteen-Eighty-four*) and Eugene Zamiatin (*We)*—in a way which amounts to repeating the fears of Roderick Seidenberg in

Post-Historic Man. Howe bases analysis on Karl Mannheim's differentiation between two kinds of rationalization—(1) that which, in thought, relates the meanings of various events of a given situation, and (2) the application of "rational" methods in industry and technology. The first kind Mannheim called substantial rationality, the second, functional rationality. Mr. Howe cites from Mannheim the following observation

> "The violent shocks of crises and revolutions have uncovered a tendency which has hitherto been working under the surface, namely the paralyzing effect of functional rationalization on the capacity for rational judgment."

Spelled out by the art of the anti-utopian novelist, this perception becomes "the nightmare-vision" of *Brave New World* and *Nineteen-Eighty-four:* "that what men do and what they are become unrelated; that a world is appearing in which technique and value have been split apart, so that technique spins forward with a mad fecundity while value becomes debased to a mere slogan of the state." The anti-utopian novelists, Mr. Howe suggests, return us to the choices presented by Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor—will we have material security and contentment with obedience, or the freedom which defies statistics and "sound management"? Howe recalls de Tocqueville's ominous fear that "a kind of virtuous materialism may ultimately be established in the world which would not corrupt but enervate the soul, and noiselessly unbend its springs of action."

Behind the outspoken uncertainty of the serious forms of the arts is a rapidly growing development of modern technology—cybernetics. If you read the recent pamphlet of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, *Cybernetics: The Silent Conquest,* you may begin to feel that the anti-utopians have ample documentation for their nightmares in technical literature, and that Mr. Seidenberg had better get ready to put together several more frightening books. The writer of this pamphlet is Donald N. Michaels, director of planning and programs of the Peace Research Institute in Washington, D.C. Toward the end, he says:

> In twenty years, other things being equal, most of the routine blue-collar tasks that can be done by cybernation will be. Our schools will probably be turning out a larger proportion of the population better educated than they are today but most of our citizens will be unable to understand the cybernated world in which they live. Perhaps they will understand the rudiments of calculus, biology, nuclear physics, and the humanities. But the research of scientists, the problems of government, and the interplay between them will be beyond the ken even of our college graduates. Besides, most people will have had to recognize that, when it comes to logic, the machines by and large can think better than they, for in that time reasonably good thinking computers should be operating on a large scale.
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> There will be a small, almost separate, society of people in rapport with the advanced computers. These cyberneticians will have established a relationship with their machines that cannot be shared by the average man any more than the average man today can understand the problems of molecular biology, nuclear physics, or neuropsychiatry. Indeed, many scholars will not have the capacity to share their krowledge or feeling about this new man-machine relationship. Those with the talent for the work probably will have to develop it from childhood and will be trained as intensively as the classical ballerina.

We don't believe it, of course. Even should we be compared with stubborn souls who once insisted the world is flat, we won't believe that the future will work out as Mr. Michaels predicts, but we are willing to accept as a fact that cybernetics and automation will surely alter the relationships of men and their thinking about politics and social organization. If machines and their priests are to do our thinking for us, what difference will it make whether our government is paternal in the form of a Senate or a Soviet? Here is full justification of Max Eastman's fearful apprehension set down in 1922: "I feel sometimes as though the whole modern world of capitalism and Communism and all were rushing toward some enormous efficient machine-made doom of the true values of life."

Well, as the Abstract Expressionist painters are insisting with so much determination, the realist image, the objective reality with which we were once so familiar, is gone, shot down, shattered, and not Mr. Khrushchev and not Mr. Kennedy, with all their men and all their Polaris submarines, can put it back together again. The world we knew is as tattered and torn as the self we knew.

It is a strange thing indeed that the two or three centuries of progress of the scientific epoch should find its final climax in the absolute destruction of public verity, and the sending of man, running cringing, frightened—back into himself to consult with himself about "reality." For this is what has happened. Our recent history reads like an acted-out translation of the *Upanishads:* Not this, not that, is the Real, we have been instructed by the disenchanting impact of events. Our firm definitions, our upward-and-onward intentions, our educational optimism, and our constitutional dignity—where are they? How many faiths have we worn out and had to cast away? The faith in property? Who owns it, nowadays? The faith in self-government? Try to relate dreams of the good society to the welfare-warfare state. The machine? We are already a race of machine-tenders in bondage to the unceasing obligation of *selling* everything the machines produce, and they keep on producing more and more.

So it is time to declare for the reconstruction of reality. What is wanted is a sense of the meaning of human life which is independent of all these broken illusions. We are still here, and we are no less human than we were when we believed in the illusions—more human, perhaps, because we are beginning to accept our pain, instead of imagining that it is something we can do away with by a succession of changes called "progress." Some pain, no doubt, can be eliminated, but not the existential pain of *being* and *half-knowing*

We have made history, we built it up, decorated it with slogans and flags, and even boasted of a new creation in the form of a method and a plan; and then, history began to strip us naked and hold us up to the light. We are just now beginning to see ourselves, the world, and the history we made in that light. About the only encouraging thing that can be said, at this juncture, is that we are now making the light.

REVIEW
ENIGMAS IN RUSSIAN CULTURE

A SERIES of articles prepared for the New York *Times by* Harrison Salisbury, the paper's former Moscow correspondent—appearing early this year—suggests that at least a slight "ferment of mysticism" is bubbling beneath the surface of Soviet materialism. In the third article of the series, Mr. Salisbury says:

> Within the most advanced echelon of Soviet science there is emerging a tendency to seek a non-materialist, spiritual concept of the universe. This startling development within the elite corps of Soviet society is closely related to two collateral tendencies—a new and vigorous Communist party drive against religious beliefs and a reform move within the Russian Orthodox Church to adapt itself to the modern technological society.
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> The fact that some of the most brilliant Soviet scientists suggest that there must exist in the universe a force or power that is superior to any possessed by man is said to have shocked conventionally minded Communist party functionaries.
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> How widespread this tendency is cannot be established. Names are not being given. But there is reason to believe that some of the most eminent figures in the galaxy of Soviet physicists, astronomers and mathematicians are involved.

Turning to recent issues of the *Soviet Review*—containing translations of Soviet analysis, criticism, literature, etc., published monthly by the International Arts and Sciences Press of New York—one can find some substantiation for Mr. Salisbury's view. "Aspirations and Ideals of Soviet Youth," in the *Review* for June, 1961, collects essays from students at various Russian institutes. In one of these, first published in Russia, of course, by Vladimir Solovyev, a Repin Institute student, are ideas which a Russian editor said, "started arguments which continued for a long time." Among Mr. Solovyev's expressions are these:

> Being true to yourself means being true to others. We must be true to our real selves, not to masks.
>
> We all say that we must learn from our fathers and grandfathers, from the Komsomols of the 1930's and of the Civil War. True enough. But we must not mechanically adopt the traits of thirty years ago for our own day.
>
> I don't know who has more to offer me: Pavel Korchagin or Saint-Just. History did not begin today or yesterday. By making a painstaking study of the achievements and mistakes of past generations each of us can and should develop his own character and his own ideas.
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> Paradoxical as this may sound, there are people who have no ideas that are truly their own, who never think independently but merely mechanically mouth the thoughts of others. And this is bad regardless of whether the thoughts come from Schopenhauer, from Hemingway or from the novels of our own Soviet writers. Of course we do assimilate other people's ideas, but first we must explore and verify them. Needless to say I do not believe that truth is actually born of disputation but it is axiomatic that it is checked and strengthened by doubt, pseudo-truths are discarded in the process.
>
> The fact is that the world we are building will not mark time and in order to move ahead we must do a lot of thinking and questioning. We often speak of the wheel of history. But it is people who move the wheel—not God or fate or time. When a person doesn't think, he no longer resembles a worker at the wheel but a squirrel in a cage.
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> When I speak of criticism I do not mean professional carping. Criticism to me is not the whispering of banal anecdotes into your neighbor's ear, but the scorching fire of human reason in the service of an idea which has been checked and rechecked, not adopted mechanically, and which is worth fighting for if need be.

The same issue of *Soviet Review* contains a lengthy discussion of telepathy by various Russian professors, showing that the dedicated materialism of the Marxist tradition makes open-mindedness on such subjects difficult. Most of the psychologists, biologists and Academy of Sciences members are not in the least interested in the type of ESP research which gains so much attention in the United States, Great Britain, Holland and France. But, on the other hand, the subject is not easily dismissed, and so twenty-one pages of commentary appear in the Soviet publication

Znaniye-Sila. The editor of this journal comments:

> As the reader may see for himself, scientists are not only debating the nature of telepathy but are arguing whether it exists at all. We must admit that there are not sufficient grounds to write it off altogether. For it does seem quite likely that this amazing phenomenon does exist in some form.
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> The consensus of opinion among Soviet scientists is that telepathic abilities are encountered seldom if ever, and that it is the mentally ill who are most likely to claim such abilities. In the light of this view, Professor Vasilyev's theory is most interesting. He considers the seldom-observed telepathic properties of the human brain not as an advance but as a form of retrogression. Biologically this seems fully justified.
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> The question then suggests itself, is it worth while to continue such a line of investigation, disputation and refutation of outmoded explanations and search for new ones? Obviously it is. But such must be done along strictly scientific lines, starting from materialistic positions and discarding everything that is false or sensational. Any light shed on physiological and psychical processes taking place in the human organism—processes which we do not yet fully understand—helps give us a deeper understanding of living matter and of its supreme creation, which is man.

Another Soviet writer notes the results of a conference on cybernetics in Moscow between Prof. Norbert Wiener of MIT and the editors of a national Soviet philosophy journal. Prof. Wiener appears to be one of the few American scholars who can speak fluent Russian, and so we have (in the *Soviet Review*, November, 1960) the curious but vaguely encouraging text in English of the remarks of a respected American scientist delivered in Russian and then turned back into English after publication in the Russian language! It is also interesting to learn that many Soviets believe themselves to be the true defenders of democracy, with no doubt of the sincerity of their concern. For instance, another article in the November, 1960, *Review*, entitled, "When the State has Withered Away," explains how the system of the Soviets (local units of government) is supposed to lead to an ever-greater participation of the individual in all affairs of state. The author, Mr. Georgi Shakhnazarov, writes:

> The continuous consolidation of the social factor in the organization and work of the Soviets is an essential prerequisite for the gradual development from socialist statehood to communist self-government. Consequently all this becomes a matter not of weakening but of further developing the Soviets. Therein lies the whole essence of a truly Marxist, truly Leninist approach to the problem of the withering away of the state. This was the consideration which led the Twenty-first Congress of the CPSU to emphasize the following: "The main direction of the development of socialist statehood lies in the overall progress of democracy, in enlisting the widest sections of the population for the administration of all the affairs of the country, in attracting all citizens to participation in the management of economic and cultural development."

One example of optimism in respect to democratic functioning occurs in an article on "The Community's Role in the Prevention and Study of Crime." While this lengthy paragraph may be naive, its earnest idealism is plain:

> While state agencies combatting crime work mainly to check crime and maintain public order, to reveal crimes which have been committed and to prevent crimes in the making, to punish criminals and to reform and re-educate them, the public has no less effective measures for the prevention of crime. Within this pattern public organizations and broad sections of the Soviet public, collectives of working people, can do the following: (1) respond in good time to the amoral conduct of individual members of the collective; (2) bring to light the conditions and causes contributing to the commission of crimes eliminate them by their own efforts or alert the proper state agencies to the need for eliminating certain negative features; (3) maintain public order and halt its violation through the efforts of the voluntary people's militia; (4) participate in the investigation of crimes and in the trial of criminal cases appointing for this purpose voluntary public prosecutors or public defenders; (5) participate in the work of commissions on juvenile delinquency; (6) participate in the work of corrective-labor institutions, helping to find work for persons on their release from prison: (7) participate in the reform and re-education of people serving corrective-labor sentences at their place of work; (8) participate in the reform and reeducation of persons with suspended sentences (9) participate in comrades'

courts, organized at factories' collective farms, state farms, state institutions, housing management centers, and so on, to hear various cases of amoral acts, lawbreaking and minor offenses; (10) petition the court, the procurator, examining magistrate or militia to relieve of criminal liability a member of the collective who has committed an offense that does not constitute a great social danger and if this is granted, to apply measures for reforming and re-educating them through the efforts of the collective.

Such fragmentary perspectives may not tell us a great deal about Russia, but they do tell us something about areas of common interest to both the Russians and ourselves. Much of the articles in the *Soviet Review*, it must be admitted, seem exceedingly wooden and doctrinaire and their authors less capable than their counterparts in America or Europe of truly open discussion. We shall, however. continue to take note of such material from time to time, and report developments of possible interest to our readers.

COMMENTARY
WHEN PUBLISHERS GET TOGETHER

A NEW YORK TIMES story (April 25) reporting the convention of the American Newspaper Publishers Association started out with the exciting prediction that soon the daily newspaper will cost its readers ten cents. This, apparently, was the most important thing the shapers of American public opinion and the custodians of one of the most important of the four freedoms had to say to one another at their annual get-together. The next most important item had to do with the fact that more and more papers are turning to lithography for efficient production.

The second paragraph was devoted to a "human interest" bit. Some printers who lacked equipment to get some red ink on the press for a second color in an advertisement used a plastic catsup bottle to squirt it on the rollers. American ingenuity triumphed once again!

The body of the story explored in more detail the rising prices for papers and the trend to offset printing. Then, at the bottom of the column came an afterthought of "idealism." The president of the Association said:

> "Newspapers face a challenge and have an opportunity greater, I believe, than any time before." . . .
>
> He [the president] asserted people had "fulfilled their material desires to a greater extent than at any time." Thus, he said, they have "more interest in education, in self-betterment and the cultural pursuits."

We suspect that the speaker reads only the daily newspapers, and in them, probably, only the ads. No problems. Everything is great. The publishers have got the people overfed and festooned with merchandise. Now they have an opportunity to sell Culture.

Readers will probably share with us the impression that the material presented in this week's lead article has ominous implications—but what can you expect of a society whose leaders (publishers are leaders) are interested only in making money and in the production techniques which will make more of it?

They might, had they had a mind to, have taken up for serious discussion what Robert Fuoss, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, said before an audience of advertising men last January:

> A vast gulf is developing between the most intelligent readers and viewers, on the one hand, and our biggest media of communication on the other. The more knowledgeable the reader or viewer, the more critical, the more suspicious, of mass communication he is likely to be. This is a tragedy.

But then, the newspaper publishers probably think that Mr. Fuoss is one of those "eggheads" who ought to be ignored by true believers in our Way of Life.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
DIFFICULTIES OF AFFIRMATION

THE best "defenders" of the democratic ideal are always aware that their position is paradoxical—simply because democracy, conceived as a fruitful environment, should never be defensive but always creative. Obliged to recognize that, despite the manifest low-rating of the individual in Communist thought, the citizens of Communist lands are at least working *for* something, while we are "defending" or "preserving," we are brought face to face with something which is at root a cultural or philosophical crisis.

Good background for such considerations is provided by Joseph Wood Krutch in his books *The Modern Temper* and *The Measure of Man.* A recent issue of the *Saturday Review* (March 10) has an article by Mr. Krutch in which some of the themes of these books are illustrated, and while his subject is contemporary literature, the evaluations hold, we think, for the general cultural situation. This has been a century of "leveling down," rather than reaching upward or beyond, with the effects evident in every department of national life from politics to education. Mr. Krutch writes:

> "When half gods go the gods arrive." So at least said Emerson in words which summed up well the attitude of the Victorians. They were reeling under the impact of their century's multiple skepticisms but they were still able to believe that it must all be "somehow good."
>
> We who were young in the Twenties did not quote Emerson very often but we were very busy getting rid of half gods and we believed in our job because we assumed—without always bothering to say so—that the gods were waiting to take their place. First of all, we said, let us get rid of Puritanism and Provincialism, the two great enemies of the freedom to be ourselves. And we were sure that we had selves which deserved to be free. Almost every work of literature in any form was iconoclastic.
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> Freud we greeted with enthusiasm; and by selecting only the negative portions of his doctrine we assumed that he, too, was important chiefly because he exposed errors and seemed to encourage us to scrap the long-accepted patterns of behavior. Those critics and philosophers who dealt with concepts more abstruse than Puritanism and Provincialism were also largely concerned with clearing the ground.
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> Like Emerson, Matthew Arnold also had tried to believe that though one world was dead there was another waiting to be born, and we, who thought ourselves so new, were unconsciously echoing him also. But the new world has not been born and the true gods are slow in arriving. Sinclair Lewis could expose Provincialism but he failed to create "a cultured heroine" who convinced anyone. We were no longer Puritans and we hoped that we were no longer provincials. We were free. But we did not know what we were free for.

Turning to Edgar Friedenberg's probing volume, *The Vanishing Adolescent* (reviewed in MANAS for March 28), we are enabled to see what happens in the educational area to a culture which has lost its sense of affirmation and has settled for passive shibboleths. Mr. Friedenberg writes:

> The process of becoming an American, as it goes on in high school, tends to be a process of renunciation of differences. This conflicts directly, of course, with the adolescent need for self-definition, but the conflict is so masked in institutionalized gaiety that the adolescent himself usually does not become aware of it. He must still deal with the alienation it engenders. He may do this by marginal differentiation, like Riesman's glad-handing boy with the special greeting style. He may do it by erupting into bouts of occasionally violent silliness, which does not make him seem queer to other people because it is unconsciously recognized as a form of self-abnegation rather than self-assertion, and is not, therefore, threatening. He may, if he has sufficient ego-strength, become the adolescent equivalent of a genuine revolutionary—rather than a rebel—that is, he may actually succeed in rejecting the folkways of the school without identifying with them and become guilty and raucous; he can then replace them with constructive patterns of behavior based on his own homemade values. This is a position which may lead to the growth of a splendid human being, but one which imposes a considerable strain on the boy.

So much for the high school student. But the teacher exists in a similar vacuum. Mr.

Friedenberg exposes "the shallowness of the school's conception of dignity":

> Public-school teaching attracts a disproportionate number of persons to whom security is more important than real freedom in the conduct of their life or their professional activity. Teachers do not usually desire to rebel against the social attitudes of their community, though they may resent or fear their application to particular events in their lives; on the whole they share these attitudes and were themselves brought up to have little respect for privacy and to expect little deference to the demands of the inner life. They are more preoccupied with acquiring and maintaining small increments of status for a small investment and without much risk than with disciplined self-expression through the medium of professional competence.
>
> Public-school teaching in the United States is an indigenous petty civil service, characterized by the usual gradations of rank and bureaucratic modes of organization. A civil service has its traditions, derived from the duties for which it is responsible. They may be—in the public school they are—traditions of responsibility, benevolence, and devotion to duty, and they influence the actual conduct of the school system strongly. But the traditions of a civil service are not those of chivalry; they do not emphasize courage, feeling, imagination, breadth of vision, and independence of action.

It seems clear that the "affirmations" of the future will not come from institutions, political or educational. They must be wrought out by individuals and small groups of individuals, if not in agony, at least through travail. Mr. Krutch also touches on this thought when he says: "If society makes men and if most men would be happy in a world where they would find 'things' sufficient if only we have enough of them, then we seem to be headed for a civilization in which everybody will be content except the thinkers—who have grown desperate. Perhaps that is, indeed, the civilization we now have."

FRONTIERS

Faith's Surmise

AT a meeting for worship which I attended last Sunday, in the order of service was a hymn with the words:

> Fair are the verdant trees;
> Fair are the flashing seas;
> Fair is each wonder the seasons bring.
> Fairer is faith's surmise
> Shining in pilgrim eyes. . . .

"Surmise" is a modest term. A dictionary definition is "to imagine without sure knowledge; to infer from slight data." Because surmise is imagination without sure knowledge, it is not therefore necessarily useless. To infer *accurately* from slight data is the very essence of genius. Lest we think of surmise as chiefly concerned with speculative philosophy or religion, I shall illustrate from the world of science. Ability to surmise is one of the chief resources of science, as it is also in the realm of the spirit.

In the nineteen-forties, C. G. Suits, Chief of Research of the General Electric Company wrote:

> Most of us probably live all our lives surrounded by great discoveries which we fail to see. Intuition rings the bell, but we don't bother to answer. Therein lies the big difference between the ordinary mortal and the man of genius. The genius is at home to new ideas. His conscious mind is open to these subconscious promptings.

Prescott's book, *Modern Chemistry*, has a description of the process of discovery of the molecular structure of organic compounds. The discoverer, Frederick Kekulé, after much reflection on the structure of hydrocarbons, had a dream during which a surmise came to him. He saw atoms of organic compounds dancing before his eyes and forming themselves into chains and rings. On waking, he carefully recorded this dream, and from it came our pioneer knowledge of the molecular structure of organic compounds, known as the classical "benzine ring." This discovery has been called "the most remarkable generalization in the history of organic chemistry."

Kekulé himself, describing his methods of discovery wrote: "Let us learn to dream, then perhaps we shall find the truth. But let us beware of publishing our dreams before they have been put to the proof by the waking understanding."

I cannot fully agree with this advice not to publish our dreams until they have been put to the proof. Sometimes we feel that they may have great significance, and yet cannot prove them. Our surmises may serve as suggestions to other men who are better equipped to test their truth. It is when surmise is published as the very truth, and not as surmise, that a wrong course is taken. Democritus surmised about the structure of matter more than two thousand years before the facts were established. Lucretius published these surmises, and the publication stirred men's minds.

Through the centuries thoughtful men have had the surmise of faith without being able to demonstrate it. The passing on of that surmise from generation to generation, especially if it is transmitted as surmise and not as sure truth, may awaken, alert and encourage other men. Sometimes, in fear that the surmise would be lost, men have taught that it is certain truth, and is infallibly based on a doctrine or a sacred book or a religious hierarchy. If we forsake these, we are told, our faith will have lost its basis, and will disappear.

The surmise of faith has deeper roots than any of these. The basis of faith may be inherent in the very nature of life. I shall illustrate what I mean by an instance.

Several years ago in Canada, I was talking to a group of people which included a number of ministers. In the course of that talk I inferred that my faith did not rest on a book or a creed. After the talk a minister came to me in a troubled frame of mind. He said his faith rested on the Bible, and that if he should lose confidence in that as a basis, his faith would have no foundation. When I asked if he were sure that this was true, he responded, "What other basis is there for one's faith?"

Just outside the window where we stood there was a young, nearly perfect pine tree. I pointed to it and asked him where that pine tree got its faith. It seemed to have faith in the possibility of the fulfillment of a pattern for its life, and it certainly had a pattern to live by. Every leaf, every twig, every branch grew according to that pattern, and in the tree as a whole there was a strong impulse toward fulfillment and action as though that impulse was justified.

The minister looked at the tree for a time, and then asked, "Do you mean that faith is an inherent characteristic of life itself?" That was what I was inferring, and I believe that the inference may be justified. However, even such a broad inference calls for critical inquiry. Might it be true that the seeming expectation of fulfillment which is characteristic of all living things during their period of growth is not evidence of some universal truth, but only a practical help to survival. An organism which has that expectation of fulfillment will have better prospect for survival than one which does not. Some imaginative physicists are going beyond biological life to surmise that an impulse or tendency toward design and order is inherent in all energy and matter.

In the plant world through probably several thousand years, the Ohio region was a vast unbroken forest. During all that time almost never did a tree in the forest have opportunity to fulfill its inherent impulse to completely realize its type. It was always crowded by neighbors and prevented from complete fulfillment of its type. Almost never, for example, did a sycamore have space and freedom to grow unimpeded according to its nature. Yet sycamore trees never lost the impulse to do so. And sometimes now, in an open meadow or pasture, we see a sycamore which did have that opportunity. There it becomes a great dome of a tree, its branches giving it a spread of a hundred feet.

So it is with men. The surmise of faith among men is so deep-seated that it persists through long adversity and frustration. In Southeast Asia, for instance, men have been held in ruthless oppression for thousands of years. Yet as conditions change and the pressure of oppressors is relaxed, we see these and other similarly oppressed peoples rising with fresh spirit and with a passion for the dignity of mankind. Recently the *Scientific American* and the *American Sociological Review* reproduced a very thorough study of the Hutterites, a communal sect whose people for four centuries have lived under rigorous, patriarchal, arbitrary discipline. One of the elders commented to a friend of mine, "It is necessary to break a boy's spirit by the time he is twelve." Would not the spark of aspiration be put out by such a long time regime? The examiners found nothing of the sort. In the young people the surge of aspiration was strong, and craving for fulfillment of life had not died. Many of the young people among the Hutterites give up economic security in order to escape from their narrowly regimented life into a larger world. Those who reported this study generalized from their observations to express the opinion that all efforts of despotism to regiment life and to kill the craving for full development of personality will fail; that impulse of aspiration and of faith that is in the spirit of men is inherent and irrepressible.

Yet that spirit is not uniformly present. In some men it is weak and in some it is strong. In times when it is strong we have ages of greatness. When it is weak we have mediocrity. For the surmise of faith to be clear and strong, it is necessary for men to have conserved their powers. The cynic usually is a man who has wasted his physical and spiritual inheritance.

In plants and animals the surmise of faith seems to be largely limited to the fulfillment of the genetically inherited pattern. But men are relatively free. With the surmise of faith and the drive of aspiration they can survey the entire universe of what is and what might be to discover or to create values which will justify and fulfill that surmise. Even if expectation of fulfillment may have originated as a practical help to survival

rather than as a universal truth, yet it may have a real and enduring value. A man's surmise of faith and his life interact. Unless he greatly lives out his surmise of faith, that faith will in fact, though perhaps not in words or creed, shrink to the petty dimensions of his life. One cannot continue to live small and think great. Neither can one think small and live great. The surmise of faith and the actions of life will tend to grow or shrink together.

For the surmise of faith to be truest and strongest we must have a sense of the unity of life. My life could not be very effective or very rich if each day I remembered nothing of the days and years that have gone before; if I had to learn anew each day that fire will burn me, if I had to learn each day how to walk, how to speak, how to get on with other people. It is because I can bring the learning and experience of previous days to bear on the problems of today that I can have some degree of purposefulness and effectiveness.

So it is with human life as a whole. There is a tendency, especially among progressives and social rebels, to be provincials in time, rather than in geography. We may have a subconscious feeling that life began with us; that the past has little to contribute except perhaps technology. We think of our faith's surmise as coming direct to us without intervention of experience, as though the creative process within us were adequate for our lives.

That is not the case. The surmise of faith feeds on the past of humanity. If we deny it food, its growth will be poor and mean. We must appraise and judge the past, selecting the best and discarding the dross, but we must not ignore the past. I can illustrate a prevailing misconception among rebels about the surmise of faith by quoting Santayana:

> It is wisdom to believe the heart.
> Columbus found a world and had no chart
> Save one that faith deciphered in the skies
> To trust the soul's invincible surmise
> Was all his science and his only art.

This may be good poetry but it is untrue, both as to the particular case and in general. Not only did Columbus have a chart, but that chart probably was the origin of his interest in voyaging west. Columbus married the daughter of Bartholemew Perestrello, a daring navigator, governor of one of the Madeira Islands, for that day a far western outpost. The father-in-law had died, but according to Columbus' son and to his fellow mariner and biographer, Las Casas, Columbus inherited his father-in-law's charts and papers and from a study of them decided that there were lands further to the west and that it was possible to find them.

And so it runs in human affairs. We are not isolates, with our surmises independent of human culture and experience, but we are living in the endless chain of humanity. Unless we possess ourselves of the yesterdays of the human spirit, our todays will be commonplace indeed. It cannot be said of any great man that

> To trust the soul's invincible surmise
> Was *all* his science and his *only* art.

It is strange that many a person who would never think of becoming qualified in science without making himself familiar with the great works of the past, in the field of the spirit and of life purpose thinks it unnecessary to make any such acquaintance, but undertakes to live by the product of his own unaided thinking. In the world of life purpose, of attitudes and of ethics, as well as in the world of science and practical affairs, we are inheritors of the past. To know when to accept that inheritance and to grow by means of it, and when to reject the past and trust the "soul's invincible surmise," that is wisdom. It does not come solely from concern to possess the heritage of the past, nor solely from following the lead of the "soul's invincible surmise"; and it seldom comes from indifference to either or both.

We need to nurture and to strengthen faith's surmise and sometimes to follow it beyond the borders of tradition or experience; yet we need to inform and to discipline it by reason and

experience, and by the world's wisdom. For this nurture, the spiritual leaders of the world have much to give us.

And do not think that they teach us only conformity. For instance, there is the following, credited to the Buddha, who lived about 500 B.C.:

> Do not believe what you have heard. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. Do not believe anything because it is renowned or spoken of by many. Do not believe merely because the written statement of some old sage is produced. Do not believe in conjectures. Do not believe in that as truth to which you have become attached by habit. Do not believe merely on the authority of your teachers or elders. Often observation or analysis when the result agrees with reason is conducive to the good and gain of one and all. Accept and live up to it.*

This presents just one of the many facets of Buddha's thinking, but it indicates that spiritual daring is not of recent birth.

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* From "The Kalama, the sutta" quoted by H. Dharmapala, the great Ceylonese Buddhist, in an address at the World's Congress of Religions, Chicago, 1893.