

## WORDS WITHOUT END

FROM time to time—not often—a reader asks a question about writing, or how one learns to write. Such questions are an embarrassment. Little essays can be composed on the subject, but they give no answers. One thing to do is to gain admiration for passages by fine writers, becoming sensitive to and able to identify what is good. By osmosis you learn something. Too much analysis may be a blight. The best writing is spontaneous, and all you can do to help spontaneity is get out of its way.

The first law of writing is to have something to say. The second is to be sure it is worth saying. Then there is X—which must remain undefined. Finally, a sense of form is required. But writing about writing is vastly presumptuous. There are a lot of books on the subject, but when you read them you keep looking for a certain magnificence of expression, and it's never there. If the writer is able to make you forget about him and his "writing," he has done a probably useful book. An art—if writing is art—is always at war with self-consciousness. You must have it, but also be able to lose it in the intensity of what you have to say.

How do you identify good writing? If a passage, after you have read it once, keeps coming back to you, because of how it articulates some of your own vague feelings, compresses rich meaning in a brief, compact utterance, set down with color and style, it is probably very good. The writer has given you a seed for reflection. He has helped you to "conceive." In the world of the mind, nothing important happens without conception. There is fertilization, conception, gestation, and birth. That is why Socrates, who sowed seeds for reflection throughout his life, called himself a midwife. Real thinking is a kind of parthenogenic process, of which earthly reproduction may be only the material counterpart. The one may some day displace the

other, and then we shall use the expression "spiritual being" with some understanding of what it means.

But what is the world of the mind, of which writing is a currency? Well, if we start with big generalizations, we could say that first of all there is life, our life, and its endlessly diverse day-to-day reality. Call it the field. Then, by hypothesis, there is the meaning of life—the *real* meaning, not just a few happy guesses or sententious formulations. The sense of meaning is untransferable. You can talk about it, make poems of it, but you can't *give* it. Which is fortunate, since what you say might become a prison for someone else. If he thinks he can take meaning from you, he is already on the way to jail. For this reason writing is one of the priestly arts, entailing immeasurable responsibility.

The world of the mind—the human mind, that is, and not what Newton called the Divine Sensorium—is the constellation of ideas we hold about the meaning of existence. The senses deliver sensations, the items in the range of experience, not meanings. The body traffics in sensations, the mind in meanings. The mind, then, is a halfway house between reality and our experiences. It seeks the *reasons* behind experience. As we develop a structure of related reasons to illuminate experience and give direction to behavior, we see order in what happens. Thinking beings require some order in order to survive. Meaning is the life-blood of the mind. Loss of meaning is loss of life.

But, curiously, the ideas of meaning which enable us to keep going are not ultimate or final. They don't explain everything, but only something, and often not very much. Every idea—even a very good one—is doomed to be replaced by a better idea. Then, at some point in this

progression, ideas are no longer adequate. First they give way to paradoxes, and then the paradoxes disappear in an honest silence, but perhaps leaving echoes which blend to give the silence a kind of meaning. Plotinus tells about this at the end of the sixth *Ennead*. (Serious writers should know something about Plotinus, whose mind was a wonder and a rarity.)

So the mind is an annex of the world—between the world and what we hopefully call "reality"—peopled by ideas about ourselves and the world, in various stages of development. It is all too much, too confusing, unless you think about human life as a drama, with ourselves as the protagonists. We dive into the physical world and cope as best we can, finding a share of beauty and wonder in it, along with frustration and pain. The world of mind is occupied in much the same way. Being not the world we live in, but an annex—a passageway—leading, perhaps, to the understanding we long for, which we might name Transcendence, the world of mind is a place of trial, error, and high adventure. It is the place where we conduct our tussles between levels of thinking. There is a kind of dirigibility of the mind which is always rising to abstract levels of reasoning without any confusion from mere "facts." The mind is most comfortable there, and most in danger, too, as the Zen masters point out. Some of the poets try to bring us back to earth, saying, "No ideas but in things," as William Carlos Williams put it. It is a counsel of health, but also a kind of giving up. The poet is saying, "Don't bring me to any razor's edge. We'll get cut or lost." But perhaps getting lost is necessary—at the point where the mind breaks up and quits.

Well, it is time for us to come down to earth. If a young man or woman, somewhere between twenty and thirty, or thirty and forty, etc., asks us about "writing," we generally say: Read Lafcadio Hearn's *Talks to Writers*; there is no other good book on the subject. There are, of course. But people asking advice need to be told something simple, and something that will put them on their

own. Hearn accomplishes this. He is very practical, too. He tells you to count the adjectives in a piece of prose. Then he shows you why five hundred words with only eight adjectives in it is ten times as vivid as an elegant passage by Flaubert which is filled with adjectival delicacies. This is the nuts and bolts of writing. You learn from Hearn in various ways. You learn how to use commas, semi-colons, and colons, and what can be done with dashes. But most of all you realize that Hearn wrote because he *had* to. He was bursting with what he had to say. And that is what really counts. Failing to recognize this makes a fraud of everything else said about writing. But the "everything else" is important for the reason that no one is at concert pitch all the time, and you need technique for those dull days when ideas weigh a ton. You need it just as a dancer needs to be an athlete, even though a lot of athletes can't dance.

We spoke earlier of passages by fine writers that are unforgettable. Ortega y Gasset, certainly a fine writer, in an early book (1914), *Meditations on Quixote*, writes about the mind. Right from the start, Ortega *engages* the reader. He will not let you look away from the page. He is *talking* to you. He takes you seriously. Near the beginning of this book he gives you his idea of the work of the mind, how to use it.

When shall we open our minds to the conviction that the ultimate reality of the world is neither matter nor spirit, is no definite thing, but a perspective? God is perspective and hierarchy; Satan's sin was an error of perspective. Now a perspective is perfected by the multiplication of its viewpoints and the precision with which we react to each one of its planes. The intuition of higher values fertilizes our contact with the lesser ones, and love for what is near and small makes the sublime real and effective within our hearts. For the person for whom small things do not exist, the great is not great.

We must try to find for our circumstance, such as it is, and precisely in its very limitation and peculiarity, its appropriate place in the immense perspective of the world. We must not stop in perpetual ecstasy before the hieratic values but conquer the right place among them for our

individual life. In short, the reabsorption of circumstance is the concrete destiny of man.

Here was a man whose self-consciousness heightens instead of blurring what he has to say. He is exquisitely deliberate; his Spanish pride is no doubt there, but under control. He holds dialogue with the reader. He doesn't use the dialogue form; he doesn't need to. You answer him, question him, on every page. You are engaged. His art is great because his thinking is both clear-cut and profound. We all of us have our particular places where we start; wherever we go, we should remember our point of origin, and respect and honor it. It supplied the raw material of our lives. Ortega says this, or rather he sings it:

My natural exit toward the universe is through the mountain passes of the Guadarrama or the plain of Ontigola. This sector of circumstantial reality forms the other half of my person; only through it can I integrate myself and be fully myself. . . . I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself. *Benefac loco illi quo natus es*, as we read in the Bible. And in the Platonic school the task of all culture is given as "to save the appearances," the phenomena; that is to say, to look for the meaning of what surrounds us.

The youth who wants to "write" will say to a friend, with a glistening eye, "What shall I write about?" He has already gone down in defeat. The question is posturing, and posturing has no place at all in the life of the mind, but is native to another, lower world entirely. Henry Miller once told one of his wives, mother of some of his children—when she asked him where to begin in teaching them—"Start anywhere—start with that knot on the wall," and he went on with an impromptu lecture on knots and trees and very nearly everything else. Well, it wasn't fair. *She* had to do the teaching, and he ought to have jumped in and helped, but he was painting pictures and writing books. Yet say what you like, he was *right*. Happily, quite imperfect humans can utter whole and balanced truths. They make them in the mind, and then as writers get them on paper, if they can. The writer's mind is a living network of association, with a sense of hierarchy added, and

also a sense of form. Everyone has this network, of course, but the writer uses it as a workshop library.

Ortega continues:

Having exercised our eyes in gazing at the world map, let us now concentrate on the Guadarrama. Perhaps we shall find nothing profound, but we may be sure that the defect and the sterility derive from our glance. There is also a *logos* of the Manzanares River: this very humble stream, this liquid irony which laps the foundations of our capital, undoubtedly bears a drop of spirituality among its few drops of water. For there is nothing on earth through which some divine nerve does not pass: the difficulty lies in reaching this nerve and making it react. To the friends who are hesitating to enter his kitchen, Heraclitus cries: "Come in, come in! The gods are here too." Goethe writes to Jacobi: "Here I am going up and down hills and searching for the divine in *herbis et lapidibus*." It is told of Rousseau that he used to grow herbs in his canary's cage, and Fabre, who tells about it, writes a book about the tiny creatures which lived on the legs of his desk.

Nothing prevents heroism—which is the activity of the spirit—as much as considering it bound to certain specific contents of life. The possibility of heroism must subsist beneath the surface everywhere, and every man should be able to hope that a spring may come forth when he strikes vigorously the earth he treads.

To be sure of getting it in, we interrupt quotation from Ortega—we'll come back to him—to repeat a passage by Thoreau. This has to do with rules and the need to break them appropriately. Don't overstate, people say. Well, it depends on how you do it. Thoreau wrote for *Graham's Magazine* of March, 1847, a long essay on the works of Thomas Carlyle, in one place saying that all Carlyle's writing is covered by one title, *On Heroes*. Discussing how Carlyle wrote, he said:

No doubt Carlyle has a propensity to *exaggerate* the heroic in history, that is, he creates you an ideal hero rather than another thing: he has most of that material. This we allow in all its senses, and in one narrower sense it is not so convenient. Yet what were history if he did not exaggerate it? How comes it that history never has to wait for facts, but for a man to

write it? The ages may go on forgetting the facts never so long, he can remember two for every one forgotten. The musty records of history, like the catacombs contain the perishable remains, but only in the breast of genius are embalmed the souls of heroes. There is very little of what is called criticism here; it is love and reverence rather, which deal with qualities not relatively, but absolutely great; for whatever is admirable in a man is something infinite, to which we cannot set bounds. These sentiments allow the mortal to die, the immortal and divine to survive.

Now comes the heart of the matter for Thoreau:

Exaggeration! was ever any virtue attributed to a man without exaggeration? was ever any vice, without infinite exaggeration? Do we not exaggerate ourselves to ourselves, or do we recognize ourselves for the actual men we are? Are we not all great men? Yet what are we actually to speak of? We live by exaggeration. What else is it to anticipate more than we enjoy? The lightning is an exaggeration of the light. Exaggerated history is poetry, and truth referred to a new standard. To a small man every man greater is an exaggeration. He who cannot exaggerate is not qualified to utter truth. No truth, we think, was ever expressed but with this sort of emphasis, so that for the time there seemed to be no other. Moreover, you must speak loud to those who are hard of hearing, and so you acquire a habit of shouting to those who are not. By an immense exaggeration we appreciate our Greek poetry and philosophy, and Egyptian ruins; our Shakespeares and Miltons, our Liberty and Christianity. We give importance to this hour over all other hours. We do not live by justice, but by grace. As the sort of justice which concerns us in our daily intercourse is not that administered by the judge, so the historical justice which we prize is not arrived at by nicely balancing the evidence.

Thoreau's writing bubbles along like a brook ambling down a gentle hill, with boulders driving up sprays of meaning. You remember it. This may be the best lecture on rhetoric ever given, because it isn't of course on rhetoric at all, but about the drama of our lives, and the absolute priority of the subjective over the mythical objective. Science, as another poet recently declared, is but art. No one can say that Thoreau didn't know what science was about. His quality as a naturalist caused the Commissioners of the

Zoological and Botanical Survey in his state to choose him to write a "Natural History of Massachusetts" (1842). Yet in his little editorial at the end, he showed what sort of "science" he respected and practiced:

Wisdom does not inspect, but behold. We must look a long time before we can see. Slow are the beginnings of philosophy. He has something demoniacal in him who can discern a law or couple two facts. We can imagine a time when,—“Water runs down hill.”—may have been taught in the schools. The true man of science will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men. His will be a deeper and finer experience. We do not learn by inference and deduction, and the application of mathematics to philosophy, but by direct intercourse and sympathy. It is with science as with ethics,—we cannot know the truth by contrivance and method; the Baconian is as false as any other, and with all the helps of machinery and the arts, the most scientific will still be the healthiest and friendliest man, and possess a more perfect Indian wisdom.

The writer, in short, is an oracular epistemologist, one who knows and knows how he knows, or is on the way to knowing. Well, then, how shall we recognize a great writer so that we can follow him? But if he is a great writer, you *can't* follow him! His whole instruction is that we must do what must be done for ourselves. Nor will he lord it over anyone in saying things like that. He doesn't really know, except what is bound to be false and fraudulent, and by avoiding that he becomes wise indeed. His uncertainty is his genius, his tentativeness his grace. Truly, his modesty is Socratic, which means that it's hard to believe in. Plato handled this question in another way. In the *Meno*, as Michael Polanyi briefly relates, Plato "says that to search for the solution of a problem is an absurdity; for either you know what you are looking for, and then there is no problem; or you do not know what you are looking for, and then you cannot expect to find anything."

So, back to Ortega and his theme of the hero—his and Carlyle's. In a later essay (on "Comedy") he says:

The hero anticipates the future and appeals to it. His gestures have a utopian significance. He does not say that he is but that he wants to be. Thus the feminist woman hopes for the day when women will not need to be feminists. But the comic writer substitutes for the feminists' ideal the modern woman who actually tries to carry out that ideal. As something made to live in a future world, the ideal, when it is drawn back and frozen in the present, does not succeed in satisfying the most trivial functions of existence; and so people laugh. People watch the fall of the ideal bird as it flies over the vapor of stagnant water and they laugh. It is a useful laughter: for each hero whom it hits, it crushes a hundred frauds.

We can break off anywhere in such a discussion. There is no end.

## *REVIEW*

### RELIGION OF TOMORROW

THERE are certain themes now entering the thought of the world, accomplishing a gradual change in outlook which may, by the early years of the twenty-first century, have virtually turned thinking upside down—or, as we may say of it then, rightside up. Can such a change be simply described? Well, it can be suggested, but "descriptions" don't mean much until they are lit up by a web of spontaneous conviction. One account of the attitude we have in mind was given last year by Owen Barfield as Visiting Scholar at a conference held at the California State University at Fullerton. Barfield is author of *Poetic Diction* and *What Coleridge Thought*. Asked where his chief interest lies, Mr. Barfield said:

I suppose what I have always been trying to get across—what I think is most important—is that if civilization is to be saved, people must come more and more to realize that our consciousness is not something spatially enclosed in the skin or in the skull or in the brain; that it is not only our inside, but the inside of the world as a whole. That people should not merely be able to propound that as a theory, as some philosophers and others have done, but that it should become more and more their actual experience. I think that is a very important thing, and if anything I've written contributes to that, I would be pleased. I would think I hadn't wasted my life. That, and also the overcoming of the total obsession there is today, half conscious and half subconscious, with the Darwinian theory of evolution—of consciousness or mind having emerged from a material, but entirely unconscious universe. Putting it very shortly, to realize, not simply as a theory but as a conviction of common sense, that in the history of the world, matter has emerged from mind and not mind from matter. (*Toward*, Summer, 1980.)

This seems a way of suggesting that people need to listen to themselves instead of academic or scientific authorities. Actually, a change in this direction has already begun. It isn't that impressive arguments against materialism have called the turn, although these arguments exist, but rather that people are drawn to ideas which

"speak to their condition." We haven't given up "rationalism," but are beginning to use our rational faculties differently. Rationalism no longer means accepting scientific mechanism as a philosophy, or a substitute for philosophy. We have gradually become skeptical of our skepticism.

There is, as everyone knows, a widespread turning to the East. While exotic beliefs are imported wholesale from the sectarian East by the sectarian West, there is also the diffusion of authentic philosophical religion, with the teachings of the Buddha—the most rational as well as the least sectarian of the Oriental religions—leading the way. No religion, as such, has similar intellectual and moral appeal. Buddhism, then, may stand for religious inspiration from the East. In a book issued last year in Malaysia, *Who Is This Coomaraswamy*; edited and published by S. Durai Raja Singam, there is a quotation from this scholarly specialist in oriental art on the underlying unity of the religions of India: "The more superficially one studies Buddhism, the more it seems to differ from Brahmanism in which it originated; the more profound our study, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish Buddhism from Brahmanism."

Coomaraswamy's fame as a scholar became so great that in 1917 he was appointed Keeper of Indian Art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. During his life—he died in Boston in 1947 at the age of seventy—he published many books and papers, a total of 894 titles, earning universal respect. One of his more influential works, *The Bugbear of Literacy* (1949), is perhaps the best introduction one could have to the living ideas of the Far East. A few days before he died Coomaraswamy gave a talk in Boston in which he said:

I have not remained untouched by the religious philosophies I have studied and to which I was led by way of the history of art. *Intellige ut credas!* In my case, at least, understanding has involved belief; and for me the time has come to exchange the active for a more contemplative way of life in which it would be my hope to experience more immediately, more fully,

at least a part of the truth of which my understanding has been so far predominantly logical. And so, though I may be here for another year [in Boston], I ask you also to say "Goodbye"—equally in the etymological sense of the word and in that of the Sanskrit *Svaga*, a salutation that expresses the wish, "May you come into your own," that is, may I know and become what I am, no longer this man So-and-so, but the Self that is also the Being of all beings, my Self and your Self.

While he wrote perceptively about the inner meanings of religion, Coomaraswamy, like the great artists to whose work he devoted his life, knew that no literal expression could convey religious truth. Attempts to express the idea of radical unity in language evolved to deal with differences inevitably break down. How do you talk about unity in terms that gain their meaning from duality and plurality? The best that human language can do is to celebrate the quest, leaving the goal to paradox and even contradiction. So it is that the literature of religious philosophy is a vast and changing metaphor, expressive of alterations in human understanding, not in the truth beyond words. Speaking of the heritage of Indian thought, Coomaraswamy said:

If we regard the world as a family of nations then we shall best understand the position of India which has passed through many experiences and solved many problems which younger races have hardly yet recognized. The heart and essence of the Indian experience is to be found in a constant intuition of the unity of all life, and the instinctive and ineradicable conviction that the recognition of this unity is the highest good and the uttermost freedom. All that India can offer to the world proceeds from her philosophy. This philosophy is not indeed unknown to others—it is equally the gospel of Jesus and of Blake, Lao Tze and Rumi—but nowhere else has it been made the essential basis of sociology and education.

Well aware that each age and civilization must find its way to truth, he continued:

Every race must solve its own problems and those of its own day. I do not suggest that the ancient Indian solutions of the special Indian problems, though the lessons may be many and valuable, can be directly applied to modern conditions. What I do

suggest is that the Hindus grasped more firmly than others the fundamental meaning and purpose of life and more deliberately than others organized society with a view to the attainment of the fruit of life; and this organization was designed not for the advantage of a single class but, to use a modern formula, to take from each according to his capacity and to give to each according to his needs. How far the rishis succeeded in this aim may be a matter of opinion. We must not judge of Indian society, especially Indian society in its present moment of decay, as if it actually realized the Brahmanical social idea; yet even with all its imperfections Hindu society as it survives will appear to many to be superior to any form of social organization attained on a large scale anywhere else, and infinitely superior to the social order which we know as modern civilization. The book we have been quoting from—*Who Is This Coomaraswamy?*—is available from the editor, S. Durai Raja Singam, at House Seven, Section eleven-three, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. It is filled with photographs and drawings of and by Coomaraswamy, with accounts of his various works and what leading critics have said about them. Heinrich Zimmer, for example, called Coomaraswamy "That noble scholar upon whose shoulders we are all still standing."

Since we began by speaking of the Buddha's teaching, we turn for a conclusion to a small book, *Gautama the Buddha* (Hind Kitabs, Ltd., Bombay, 1949), by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, famous scholar and Indian patriot, who served as President of his country after it gained independence. Here is one key statement of the Buddha's teaching:

The Upanishads from which the Buddha's teaching is derived hold that the world we know, whether outward or inward, does not possess intrinsic reality. Intrinsic reality belongs to the knower, the Atman, the self of all selves. Brahman and Atman are one. Knowledge of this supreme truth, realization of the identity of the self of man and the spirit of the universe, is salvation. . . .

## COMMENTARY

### THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

IT seems well to point out that the teachings of the Buddha (spoken of in Review), and also the teachings of the Upanishads, ought to be recognized as prior to, and independent of, the various Buddhist sects and the organized religion of Hinduism. While these religions may be more faithful to their origins than the Christian churches are to the Sermon on the Mount, time has its way with all widely taught doctrines, and human nature is much the same all over the world. If one's interest is in philosophical religion itself, and not the sociology of religion, the great scriptures are the place to begin.

In his two-volume study, *Indian Philosophy*, Radhakrishnan remarks that "the message of the Gita is the ancient wisdom taught by Visvamitra, the seer of Gayatri, the rishi of the third cycle of the Rig-Veda and Rama Krishna, Gautama Buddha, and other teachers of the Solar line." He qualifies the parallel between the Upanishads and Buddha's teaching in the book named in Review:

When the Upanishads make out that the center and core of the human being is the universal self, or *atman*, and the aim of man is to discover it, the Buddha insists on the remaking of character, the evolving of a new personality. But the discovery of the latent self is not possible without a transformation of the whole being. The aim of man is to become what he is. One has to grow into the self. The Buddha warns us against the danger of assuming that, because we are divine in essence, we are not divided in actuality. To become actually divine is our goal. . . . The Buddha's emphasis is more on the pathway (*marga*) than on the goal, but he implies the reality of a universal spirit which is not to be confused with the changing empirical aggregate.

In *Indian Philosophy* Radhakrishnan says:

The Upanishads form the concluding portions of the Veda, and are therefore called Veda-anta, or the end of the Veda, a denomination which suggests that they contain the essence of Vedic teaching. They are the foundation on which most of the later philosophies and religions rest. . . . The seers of the Upanishads try to lead us to [the] central reality

which is infinite existence (*sat*), absolute truth (*chit*), and pure delight (*ananda*). The prayer of every human heart is "Lead me from the unreal to the real, lead me from darkness to light, lead me from death to immortality."

## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

#### EATING GRAPES DOWNWARDS

[A reader recently wrote wonderingly, "Should a writer be a mirror or a mover?" This short essay by Harold Goddard, set down many years ago, seems an answer. Goddard whose *The Meaning of Shakespeare* is treasured by many, was a master in the use of analogy. His knowledge of literature is reflected in practically everything he wrote, but always to some striking effect. He was a teacher who moved his students. Even small matters became vehicles of instruction in his hands.]

AS odd and fascinating an entry as is to be found in that mine of wisdom and humor, *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*, is the one entitled, "Eating Grapes Downwards." This note, I know from experience, can be counted on to arouse lively or even acrimonious debate. I venture to think that the question of how best to consume a bunch of grapes is as important as any before the world at the present time, especially for Americans. This naturally will sound like nonsense to any who are unacquainted with Butler's note. So let us have it before us:

Always eat grapes downward—that is, always eat the best grape first; in this way there will be none left better on the bunch, and each grape will seem good down to the last. If you eat the other way, you will not have a good grape in the lot. Besides, you will be tempting Providence to kill you before you come to the best. This is why autumn seems better than spring: in autumn we are eating our days downwards, in the spring each day still seems "very bad." People should live on this principle more than they do, but they live on it a good deal; from the age of, say, fifty we eat our days downwards.

In New Zealand for a long time I had to do the washing-up after each meal. I used to do the knives first, for it might please God to take me before I came to the forks, and then what a sell it would have been to have done the forks rather than the knives!

"What an absurd, not to say immoral, doctrine!" you very likely will exclaim. "Why, this is preaching the rankest self-indulgence. It is putting pleasure first. It is advising people to play

all day and then come home to do their work at night. It is telling them to eat their ice cream before their soup, to lead out their trumps and aces at the very beginning of the game, to throw in all their best troops at the very beginning of the battle. As if there wasn't enough of that sort of thing in the world already without deliberately inculcating it! And it is as bad sense and tactics as it is bad morality. Even taking Butler literally—who would not prefer to get the smaller, sourer grapes out of the way to begin with—not to mention any that are overripe—and *then* settle down to enjoy the remaining bunch of big delicious ones?"

All of which would be very cogent and unanswerable if the Grapes of Life—which of course are the only ones Butler is talking about—came on the same sort of bunch that Concord grapes do. But they come on an immeasurably bigger bunch, on an *infinite* bunch it would hardly be too much to say. And that makes all the difference. It is because the possibilities always so outnumber the possible actualities that this principle is so important. If you have free run of a small strawberry patch with a whole day before you, there is much to be said for picking the berries clean down each row as you come to them. But if you have just ten minutes in a big strawberry patch it would be foolish to pick any but the largest and most luscious berries. And so of roses in a rose garden. If you are sure the game will go on to the end, it would be rash indeed to be too prodigal of trumps and aces at the outset. But if the game may be called off at any moment, why not take what tricks you can while there is a chance to take any? And similarly with reserves in a battle. What irony to be defeated in what turns out to be the final encounter with the enemy without ever having thrown in your best fighting men! It would be like denying yourself everything all through life and dying with a big bank account and nobody to leave it to. "And *then* settle down to enjoy the remaining big grapes," you said. But suppose that *then* never comes?

And the fact is that it never does come. The fact is that life is like all these things I have mentioned. The essence of it is selection. It is a garden or an orchard too large for us to pick all the flowers or fruit. It is a game never played through to its conclusion. It is a battle which, because it is once and for all our only chance, is in a very real sense, even from the beginning, our last battle. "Life is given but once," says Chekhov. That this is just what Butler meant is shown when he says, "I used to do the knives first, for *it might please God to take me before I came to the forks*, and then what a sell it would have been to have done the forks rather than the knives." . . .

What would we think of a man who, suddenly told that he had only half an hour more to live, spent it reading the evening paper, listening to the radio, playing a game of cards, or eating a big dinner like a gangster about to be electrocuted? How different we would feel about him if he spent it walking up a hill to watch a sunset, playing with his children, writing a last letter to a friend, or having a talk with his wife.

Well, on any sound consideration of time, we all of us have just a half hour to live, the young as well as the old; so why should not our daily activities come under the same judgment? We have things sadly out of perspective. We need to remember that passage from the old Anglo-Saxon chronicle about the sparrow that flies in through an open window from the stormy night, passes across a brightly lighted hall and out through another window into the night again. Our life, says the poet, is like those few intervening seconds of light between two darkneses.

The animals and even the insects are nearer the truth in this matter than is civilized man. The very bees agree with Samuel Butler. "Experiments at the—station," says a scientific report headed "Bees Pick Richest Blossoms," "show that working bees choose apple blossoms before pear blossoms. The nectar from the apples runs 55% sugar and from pears only 15%." Time

enough to turn to the pear blossoms, the bees' instinct tells them, after the apple blossoms have given out. But "apple blossoms" never do give out, even when it isn't May, for those who are on the watch for them.

Poets, like the bees, are the storers-up of sweetness and light, and the poets have been in agreement about this matter from the beginning. Few of them have put it more effectively than that old Persian, Hafiz. He is forever ringing the changes on the thought:

O be thy attar from each rose distilled  
Before it closes.

Hafiz' themes are flowers, song, love and wine. And a prosaic world has rewarded one of the great lyric poets of all time by setting him down as a sensualist. But the admiration of the austere Emerson for him is enough to tell us that Hafiz was writing about something more than the literal grape as certainly as Butler was.

Robert Herrick utters the same thought: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." And though this could be debased into a very low doctrine, when did a rosebud ever symbolize anything but good unless in the mind of a very bad or very unimaginative man?

Jesus perpetually preached the eating of grapes downwards: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God. . . ." The Mary and Martha story, for instance, is a perfect embodiment of Samuel Butler's teaching. Martha ate her grapes upward. Mary ate hers downward. And Jesus said that Mary chose the better part. For the Mary and Martha theme in modern form, read Chekhov's "An Artist's Story," one of his loveliest tales. It is also about two sisters, and if ever two tales illuminated each other, it is these.

Indeed, one of the best ways to perceive the truth of Butler's idea is to apply it to books. "Read the best books first," says Thoreau, "or you may not have a chance to read them at all." Imagine going to your grave, whether early or late, having read all the best-sellers of your time,

but being unacquainted with *The Book of Tao* or *The Book of Job*, *The Divine Comedy* or *King Lear*, *Wuthering Heights* or *The Brothers Karamazov*, or, if the supreme masterpieces are beyond your taste, at least with some of the hundreds of great books that time has tested. And the same is true of any of the other arts. Think, for instance, of keeping abreast of all the popular airs without ever learning to love Mozart or Beethoven or Brahms.

What this doctrine comes down to, you see, is simply knowing the relative value of things and putting first ones first. It is a doctrine of excellence. "I would fain lay the most stress forever on that which is most important," says Thoreau. It is the art of knowing what to postpone or omit entirely, the art, as Michael Angelo called it, of getting rid of the superfluous. This is the art of arts. For when you have gotten rid of the superfluous, what is left is Life itself, as the statue is left when the superfluous stone has been chipped away. "I have only one life, and it's short enough," said the late Justice Brandeis. "Why waste it on things I don't want most? And I don't want money or property most. I want to be free."

"But no one can be always functioning at top level," you protest. Agreed! (And no one, by the way, was fonder of stressing that fact than this same Samuel Butler.) Nature and The State, through their grim agents, the grocer and the landlord, the tax-gatherer and the recruiting officer, can be counted on to see to it that we do not spend our lives exclusively on the spiritual mountain peaks. And apart from them, it is true that our minds need to lie fallow part of the time. But this is no reason for our not being up to our best level as much and as often as we can. Still less is it a reason for fooling ourselves into thinking that something very inferior is the best.

Insistence on superiority in material things and contentedness with inferiority in mental and spiritual things are all too often characteristic of Americans. The reason is obvious. America is an

attempt at a democracy, and the cardinal temptation and sin of democracy is vulgarity (using the word in its derivative sense), or, at the best, mediocrity, with the correlative danger of scorning what is excellent or rare. Eating Grapes Downwards is an aristocratic doctrine, a doctrine of *aristos*, which is just Greek for *the best*. We hear it argued that democracy and aristocracy are incompatible—as if democracy did not need the best. It is significant that all our major American prophets agree with Butler, two of the very greatest of them particularly: Emerson and Thoreau. Here, for example, in one of Thoreau's letters, is the gospel of eating grapes downward translated from hedonic into puritan language, yet indubitably the same idea:

All the world complain nowadays of a press of trivial duties and engagements, which prevents their employing themselves on some higher ground they know of; but, undoubtedly, if they were made of the right stuff to work on that higher ground, provided they were released from all those engagements, they would now at once fulfill the superior engagement, and neglect all the rest, as naturally as they breathe. They would never be caught saying that they had no time for this, when the dullest man knows that this is all he has time for. No man who acts from a sense of duty ever puts the lesser duty above the greater. No man has the desire and the ability to work on high things, but he has also the ability to build himself a high staging.

And finally Emerson's superb "Days," a poem as severe and classic as Butler's note is homely and humorous. Yet see if it does not say precisely the same thing, with the days of a life taking the place of grapes on a bunch:

Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,  
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,  
And marching single in an endless file,  
Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.  
To each they offer gifts after his will,  
Bread, kingdoms, stars, and sky that holds them all.  
I, in my preached garden, watched the pomp,  
Forgot my morning wishes, hastily  
Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day  
Turned and departed silent. I, too late,  
Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn.

HAROLD C. GODDARD

## *FRONTIERS* East and West . . .

FROM *Asian Action* (No 21), publication of the Asian Cultural Forum on Development, we take some paragraphs on rural conditions in South Asia, (reprinted from an article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 13, 1979):

Modern technology was imposed on an outmoded agrarian structure with little regard for social and political imperatives, largely following a prescription from the outside. The result has been an increase in poverty and unemployment, despite impressive gains in production, indicating a "pauperization" of the lower social strata.

The increasing poverty in the Indian state of Punjab (showpiece of the Green Revolution) corroborates this. An International Labour Organization (ILO) study found that during the past decade, despite a rise in average consumption levels, there was an absolute decline in consumption levels of the poorest 30% of the population. It is an even bleaker picture in adjoining Uttar Pradesh (India's most populous state). Far from leading to an increase in employment opportunities, mechanization of agriculture had the effect of increasing landlessness and shrinking demand for labour as a result of the Green Revolution. The number of landless workers in India jumped from 32 million in 1961 to about 75 million last year [1978]. . . .

Again and again it has been pointed out that bringing high technology to farmers in the developing countries, as we are accustomed to do, means dealing only with the rich farmers, which has the effect described in *Asian Action*. (G.P.O. Box 2930, Bangkok, Thailand.)

To go with this we have a clipping from the *Manchester Guardian*, sent by an English friend, which reports on a book published by the Stanford University Press, *The Innovator's Situation*, by a University of California professor, Frank Cancian. The review begins by saying that the organizations which try to help Third World Countries to adopt new agricultural methods are wrong in relying "on the wealthiest farmers to promote innovations in producing food." The *Guardian* writer goes on:

The professor, an anthropologist, based his findings on material collected from 16 research teams working from 1952 to 1973 in Brazil, Colombia, India, Kenya, Mexico, the Philippines, Taiwan and other countries including the U.S.

Dr. Cancian writes: "Contrary to the accepted theory, moderately poor farmers, those one could call lower middle class, are consistently more innovative than farmers of the upper middle class. Traditionally it has been thought that only the comparatively wealthy farmer will innovate—those whose resources allow them to gamble. While this theory still holds true, there is another group of people who are high innovators too: the moderately poor.

Wealthier and more conservative farmers resist changing their methods because they have too much capital committed to their land.

A report from a research center in India makes an interesting contrast with the foregoing. The writer tells about two and a half years' work done with "very disadvantaged" Indian villagers with access to only small, poor strips of land. The method followed is the one given by John Jeavons of Ecology Action, Palo Alto, Calif., in his book, *How To Grow More Vegetables*, using Biodynamic/French intensive gardening. Participants were mostly Harijan families with little or no education, working on soil clayey or sandy, within sight of the ocean. This work was carried on with the help of the Stockholm International Federation of Institutes of Advanced Study, which has a Self-Reliance Development Center in the town of Injambakkam.

The social workers looked for people who had a little unused land that was fenced in (goats eat everything they can get at). Despite the poor soil, good crops of greens, beans, and vegetables with Indian names were obtained from beds twelve feet long and five feet wide. Each family obtained a little income from selling greens that were not eaten. The report says:

As the people were witnessing the effect of these gardens, they were highly satisfied and more and more people started approaching the Center, for gardens. . . . According to a principle of community organization a simple programme should be taken up initially to prepare the people for more complex

programmes in the future. Therefore, biodynamic gardening as a simple programme is preparing the people for complex programmes such as use of windmills, biogas, fish culture, etc.

The Center extended its gardens from a few families to 22 families in four months. . . . these gardens have awakened people and today we see many of them doing biodynamic gardening by themselves without the help of the Center.

At the start seeds and instructions were given to the villagers. The method caught on because of the high yield from small patches of land, with less than usual water consumption, and application of locally available manure. The gardeners had fresh vegetables from their own gardens and their health improved. The reporter comments:

People are made confident to stand on their own legs. Biodynamic gardening also helps the people to avoid spending on conveyance to go to the market to purchase vegetables, and at the same time people are not affected by market price fluctuations as they get vegetables in their own houses. Another advantage of the biodynamic garden is clearly evident from the fact that it encourages social interaction when people locally market the vegetables at comparatively cheaper rate.

The thirty-eight pages of this monograph are mostly taken up with description of gardening procedures, tools used, and tables of crops obtained, family by family.

This is a good illustration of how experiments and achievements in the United States and European countries, however small the scale, are able to bring help to other parts of the world—the kind of help that is needed, not requiring radical changes in the patterns of life. Fortunately, pioneering similar to that going on at Ecology Action is springing up in other places. A long article in *The Townships Sun* for last August, published in Lennoxville, Province of Quebec, Canada, tells about the produce raised by Russell Pocock on twelve acres near Compton, which people gang up to buy when they see it in the markets. The reporter, Charles Bury, says

Twelve acres may not seem like much to North Americans used to thinking in terms of 500-acre

dairy farms and 40,000-acre cattle ranches, but it's a lot of vegetables. Those 30,000 heads of lettuce only take up half an acre, and that half acre will be replanted as soon as it's been harvested.

Pocock says:

"For years we've been told that the small farm is not profitable, that no one should bother trying to make a living from the land without machinery, chemistry, and hundreds of acres of land. . . . but some day a family with a couple of kids will be able to make a fine living on ten acres or so."

He plants his rows close together—no big aisles for tractors to go up and down—and gets three times the harvest of conventional methods. The people on his farm work in their bare feet. "Pocock," the writer says, is "staking his farm, his livelihood and his credit rating on twelve acres of market vegetables, grown the quiet way, without the 'Shout it Out' marketing methods of Green Giant, Kraft, Anita Bryant and Company." He risks going broke, but maybe he won't. Time, at any rate, is on his side.