VOLUME XX, NO. 28
JULY 12, 1967

USES AND MISUSES OF CONFORMITY

LIFE would be an uncomplicated, unburdensome affair if the tried and true were always indeed the true, and the familiar and reliable way of doing things a dependable means of being sure that one is right. Innovators, educators, and artists know well the fallacy in these assumptions, and often spend their lives contesting them; and yet, behind the misleading stability of habit, and beneath the onerous controls of convention, there lies a form of action which may become the basis for freedom, without which practically nothing at all would ever get done.

Consider the importance of technique, the mastery of means. It is when the skills in the performance of action have reached a certain excellence that another kind of excellence is able to appear. This must be noted, but in the next breath we must add that technique is known to become a confinement instead of a release, a pyrotechnic display of means instead of a revelation of ends, and there seems to be no way to predict or prescribe for an ideal balance, so far as the performance of individual is concerned. A mood in teaching doubtless has its effect, but there are mysteries behind puzzles in the susceptibility of human beings to this inspiration; although one thing is sure—in an authentic work of art, the technique involved is all but forgotten. Only analysis reveals its part, and such analysis is sometimes a blighting and dangerous thing.

Habits can be obsessive to human beings; they also set men free. We could not live on earth, we could not draw a breath, save for the "habits" of the organs of the body which perform life functions. An intentional breath is in most cases a pathology of respiration, and a deliberated heart-beat would be much worse. Health is a *Taoistic* reality; name it, reify it, call attention to it with learned definitions and it is no longer health but an object of cultist adoration. We do not easily celebrate the involuntary in song. If one breaks his arm, has it set and recovers its use, the value lies in being able to forget there was ever anything wrong with it. One may be grateful to the bonesetter, but no odes result.

In relation to the questions and problems of behavior, we might think of the human being as a complex arrangement of habit-levels, each one nesting in the one below, and serving as matrix for the one above, with the *kind* of habits appropriate to each level changing at each ascending step becoming subtler, less "automatic," more dependent upon habit-free evaluation. The question of freedom, which always lurks behind any discussion of behavior, might be dealt with abstractly by saying that perfect freedom is present when *no* habit, *no* technical skill or established tendency, plays a part. But then one must admit that this is an unimaginable situation. Freedom is intelligible only in historical contexts; *some* status quo, with alternatives and options, must be involved for the idea of freedom to have meaning. The problem of freedom, in short, is lost by abstraction, although pursuing it to the limit of abstraction is probably a necessary exercise.

What is a good habit, a useful convention? Well, a good habit would be one that frees human attention, *without prejudice,* for other things. The good habit, in the terms of Plato's *Phaedrus* myth, is a docile steed. Hypothetically, one can imagine an appropriate habit formation for each level of human behavior—providing an ideal function which needs a minimum of supervisory attention, yet is immediately responsive to whatever direction from a higher level is required. The endocrine glands in their regulatory and coordinating functions could be taken as physiological analogy for such an achievement, but when it comes to applying the analogy to the

full scheme and possibilities of human behavior, it is not much help. Physiological situations provide closed-system analogies, and man is not a closed system. That is the trouble with the doctrine of homeostasis, when applied to whole human beings. It loses sight of the fact that, for all the reliance of people on habit, something more than habit—the unknown potentialities of freedom—is involved.

Well, what are the potentialities of freedom? This is something of a trapping question. If a limiting answer could be given, it would take away the meaning of freedom. So the only useful answer is an open-ended answer which resorts to symbolism—presenting polarities which are essentially incommensurable in relation to the possibilities of freedom. And for such answers we must turn to the high religions. Speaking to this point, the Buddha is held to have said:

> Higher than Indra's ye may lift your lot,
> And sink it lower than the worm or gnat;
> The end of many myriad lives is this,
> The end of myriads that.

An identical conception is found in Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* that great manifesto of the Italian Renaissance, in which its youthful author (Pico was twenty-four when he wrote it) laid the foundations for Western Humanism. At the beginning, in his allegory of the Creation, Pico calls man a "creature of indeterminate image." Addressing Man, or Adam, the Great Artificer is made to say:

> The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.

Whatever we may think of Pico's Renaissance rhetoric, the principle he declares is indispensable in understanding the springs of human behavior. Whether we choose the rubric of *Proverbs*—as a man "thinketh in his heart, so is he"—or find more inclusive insight in the *Rig Veda,* where *Brahma,* as the archetype of human beings, incessantly creates by thinking of himself as this, that, or the other thing or being—the rule seems to have absolute authority. The important thing is that wherever human decision can have sway, the idea of the self is the primary law of all *becoming*. The ultimate instruction in regard to the religious life, in the *Institutes of Vishnu,* is based on the power of thought. Addressing the Spirit of Earth (Adam?), Vishnu says:

> This human frame, O Earth, is called "field." He who knows (how to enter and how to leave) it is denominated, by those conversant with the subject, "the knower of the field" (i.e., Self or Soul) . . . . Those striving after final emancipation must constantly seek to understand the "field" and to obtain a knowledge of the knower of the field. . . .
>
> Let him meditate. . . . Whatever he meditates upon, that is obtained by a man (in a future existence): such is the mysterious power of meditation.
>
> Therefore must he dismiss everything perishable from his thoughts and meditate upon that which is imperishable only.
>
> There is nothing imperishable except Purusha. . . . It exists without and within created beings (as being enjoyed and as enjoyer), and in the shape both of immovable things (such as trees and stones) and of movable things (such as water and fire); it is undistinguishable on account of its subtlety; it is out of reach (imperceptible), and yet is found in the heart.
>
> It is not distinct from creation, and yet distinct from it in outward appearance; it annihilates and produces by turns (the world), which consists of everything that has been, that will be, and that is. (*Sacred Books of the East* [Clarendon Press, 1880], VII, 288-91.)

Thus thought, in the psychological analysis of philosophic religion, is seen as both the binding

and liberating element in human life. For the ancients it was also the form-evolving force in cosmogenesis, personified in the various creative gods (Brahma, and Plato's Artificer in the *Timaeus*), but for modern thinkers—for those, at any rate, who regard subjective evidence as bearing significant testimony—thought is pre-eminently the determinant of human ends and of the nature of the "field" in which those ends are sought. This latter view is clear, for example, in the conclusions of Adelbert Ames from his lifelong study of the physiology of visual perception:

> . . . our perceptual awarenesses are not disclosures to us of the nature of what we are looking at but only provide us with a prognosis as to its significance. . . . Significance to the individual means importance to him. It seems apparent that what a person is perceptually aware of is of importance to him in that it provides him with awareness of how to act and behave effectively, in the particular environment in which he finds himself, i.e., to carry out his purposes or, more specifically, to attain to goals natural to him as a human being. . . .

So it is that "one man's meat is another man's poison," depending upon the turns of the kaleidoscope of ideas of the self and its ends. In the very moment when one man is declaring that the world has become a vast concentration camp, another is heralding the technological millennium. The foundations of Utopia, in one conception, are seen in another as the road to serfdom. Even among philosophers these differences persist. Against those who experience in the wilderness and high places the natural temple of life, Socrates may be quoted as saying in the *Phaedrus* that "the country places and the trees won't teach me anything and the people in the city do."

Whether or not the *ding an sich,* the thing-in-itself, as Kant maintained, must be forever unknown to us, there can be no doubt of the fact that our descriptions of "the world out there" are dependent upon two factors: (1) our conceptions of self and of human ends, and (2) the related modes of perception which are relied upon for looking at the world. And we can hardly evade the fact that these approaches are subject to flux. Concerning the external world, Ames speaks of the fundamental relativity of its presentations: "it would seem that nothing that can be pointed at exists as a reality in its own right but only in transactional relationship to everything else that can be pointed at." This suggests that the fundamental instability of all definitions of what is "out there" has no remedy except in the stability of the observing intelligence—which is a way of saying that all knowledge depends upon self-knowledge. Yet the highest aspect of self-knowledge seems hidden by its curious abstracting requirements, leading Ames to speak of "the dilemma by which we are all faced when we try to follow the precept that one must become unaware of, lose one's Self, to experience God and Reality." "It is confusing," he says, "to try to understand how, by becoming unaware of an aspect of reality, we could be more aware of total reality."

One might regard these reflections of Adelbert Ames as constituting a self-validating psychological metaphysic. There is, in short, some certainty here. It supplies no finality concerning either the self or the world, but it describes the processes on which all approaching conceptions are based. It makes a man ask himself, every step of the way, "Now what sort of a relativity is *this?"*

Such a man, it will be argued, will *never* make up his mind. This is not so. He will make up his mind from the same necessity that will make Dr. Pangloss cultivate his garden. And he will stop converting other men to the view that *his* garden is the Garden of Allah. There is after all, a resolution of the paradox of relativity—a resolution which "is out of reach, and yet is found in the heart."

Every culture which has enough such resolutions in it to deserve the name of culture finds a way of speaking of this paradox with both warning and encouragement. Today people call it the subject/object dichotomy, which is resolved by

the Peak Experience. And fortunately, because of the intensely *psychological* character of modern thought, simplistic versions of this resolution are being avoided. Each of our "nesting" habit-levels has its own kind of limited resolution, producing its natural balance and limited sunburst of corresponding delights. A. H. Maslow speaks of both a high and a low "nirvana." One could say, therefore, that there are many relative perfections.

When Vishnu, in the last chapter of the *Institutes,* describes his various embodiments, he seems to be saying that there is an appropriate perfection in all of them—a relative being-fulfillment belonging to each finite form:

> I reside in the sun, in the moon, and in the cloudless atmosphere in which the flock of stars is spread out. I reside in that cloud, from which the waters of the rain pour down, in that cloud which is adorned with Indra's bow, and in that cloud from which the rays of lightning flash forth. . . .
>
> I reside in fresh cow-dung, in a noble elephant in rut, in a horse exulting in his vigour, in a proud bull, and in a Brahmana who studies the Veda. . . .
>
> I reside in milk, butter, fresh grass, honey, and sour milk in the body of a married woman, in the frame of an unmarried damsel, and in the frame of gods, ascetics, and of officiating priests. . . .
>
> I reside in a man who observes approved usages, in one who constantly acts up to the sacred law, in one modestly, and in one splendidly attired, in one who keeps his organs of sense and his mind under control, in one free from sin, in one whose food is pure, and in one who honours his guests. . . .
>
> I do not remain separated from *Purushottama* [the most excellent of men, and/or the soul of the universe] for a single moment.

From one point of view, this is a beyond-good-and-evil conception of the self of the world—*in* all things, but not confined by them; but it is also an idea of the highest good as the element of *fitness* in the quality of right action in all things—in the balance of form with function which presses toward transcendence, to become something higher. The good is the fulfillment of form, but the *divine* is its transfiguration; and so Vishnu, essentially formless, is nonetheless present in all forms, through this omnipresent potentiality.

There is a sense in which it is quite possible that the major psychological pathologies of human life grow out of misconceptions or inversions of divine possibility. The neurotic longing for nailed-down security and certainty in some kind of closed-system existence may be a tragic misreading of the intuition of transcendent being. It is the spontaneous, but upside-down self-therapy of the psyche which idolizes a conditioned symbol of the unconditioned ideal. Dostoevsky understood phases of this tendency well, as he shows in *Notes from Underground.* Mental illness is a passionate misunderstanding of mental health. As Trigant Burrow remarks in *Preconscious Foundations of Human Experience:*

> Certain writers have pointed to the common tendency among schizophrenics, mystics, and primitive people to perceive in wholes and to feel themselves identified with objects and other persons in a way that is sharply differentiated from the mental attitude that customarily characterizes the use of verbal images or words. Storch has cited cases of schizophrenia that abound in instances of a return, although in a distorted form, to this earlier, more confluent level of adjustment.

Well, why not *stay* with the modern psychologists in an investigation of this sort? Why branch out with quotation from old psychological religions? The answer might be, Why not? Have we any real reason to suppose, any more, that truth is not increased by lyrical expression? From what rule concerning "reliable knowledge" must we ignore, say, the Buddha's wondrous declaration in the *Diamond Sutra* of the same truth, and at much greater length, as that reached by Adelbert Ames concerning the transactional relativity of all knowledge of the "out there"? Just possibly, ancient religious thought includes awareness of symmetries and side-effects not yet discerned by modern investigators, and if those old teachers declared that nothing would be gained merely by *believing* them, we are sufficiently warned in advance. It is

not they who encouraged the "will to believe," but much later "authorities" in religion.

What then, finally, are the uses of convention? Good conventions, like good habits, are something to fall back on after one makes a flight into the unknown. A man can't practice "originality" all the time. In fact, a great deal of the time, he finds it useful and freeing to let the lesser, mechanical intelligence of his habits keep things going. Conformity means agreeing on what decisions we can afford to delegate to computer-memory for common convenience and greater freedom. We couldn't possibly live without this conformity, and when we feel we can no longer live *with* it, then something has gone terribly wrong.

We have trouble with the idea of conformity only because it threatens to invade areas where it has no agreed-upon role. It is supposed to represent the consensus on matters we don't need to think about any more—which may be safely delegated to habit—but the area governed by conformity often turns out to be a region of crucial growth, and therefore of necessary change, and people disagree on which habits ought to be broken and which should be maintained. Habit-breaking is painful, and the terrible question of *norms* is forced to the front. And then the bedrock idea of the self which has created the habit-patterns, and made convenient use of them perhaps for centuries, is put into jeopardy. The result may be desperate and agonized religious wars.

This could not happen among a people who deliberated such matters and managed to agree with Adelbert Ames:

> . . . the essential "I" is not an isolated aspect of self, but is a reality in dimensions where "isolation" as we understand it in time and space does not exist.
>
> The essential "I" isn't anything of our own that we can lose.

People who think this way are likely to have only a practical, utilitarian view of conventions. Dr. Maslow says in *Toward a Psychology of Being* (170):

> . . . my healthy subjects [were] superficially accepting of conventions, but privately . . . casual, perfunctory and detached about them. That is, they could take them or leave them. In practically all of them, I found a rather calm, good-humored rejection of the stupidities and imperfections of the culture with greater or lesser effort at improving it. They definitely showed an ability to fight it vigorously when they thought it necessary.

But conventions, when identity is involved, can become compulsions. "Most men and women," John F. Wharton observed in the *Saturday Review* (May 27), "are more sensitive to the voice of the herd than to any other influence." He continues:

> They fear to go against it and they revel in its approval. Because of this fear, there is great hesitation in putting forth new ideas; moreover, an attack on proposed change usually meets with approval. Hence, change usually comes slowly. However, when a man (such as Hitler) emerges who can really manipulate the voice of the herd, he can speedily lead people wheresoever he wishes.

So, for us, there is only a limited and very dangerous security in habit. Or, we might say, the hierarchy of human habits needs close attention indeed, to make sure that no one of them acquires authority in regions where lack of higher direction means simply self-destruction.

The idea of the self, at the apex of the ascending order, obviously should never be entrusted to habit at all. A man, when he considers the self, has indeed to "dismiss everything perishable from his thoughts." The heart of both philosophy and religion, then, consists in freeing the idea of the self from all *habitual* constructions. From the ancient religions, at least, we gather that this is a work of ages.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (Criterion, 1955), has two untendentious and perceptive discussions of American life which could be taken as

documentary evidence for what has been briefly suggested here. Sartre is perhaps at his best as dispassionate observer, and these essays, "Individualism and Conformism in the United States" and "American Cities," are masterpieces of descriptive prose at the relevant level of subjectivity. He ends the second essay with a comparison:

> Our beautiful closed [European] cities, full as eggs, are a bit stifling. Our slanting, winding streets run head on against walls and houses; once you are inside the city, you can no longer see beyond it. In America, these long, straight unobstructed streets carry one's glance, like canals, outside the city. You always see mountains or fields or seas at the end of them, no matter where you may be. . . . these slight cities ... reveal the other side of the United States: their freedom. Here everyone is free—not to criticize or to reform their customs—but to flee them, to leave for the desert or another city. The cities are open, open to the world, and to the future. This is what gives them their adventurous look and, even in their ugliness and disorder, a touching beauty.

Of course, to agree with Sartre you have to *feel* the way he did when he was here. There are so many ways to "feel"—about oneself, one's environment, and about the confining and liberating factors in life. Actually, the enormous differences in what one man may feel from day to day, in addition to his differences with others, are about all that can account for the extraordinary disagreements which exist among men of manifest intelligence. What, one may ask, are the valid symmetries in the thinking of intelligent men who disagree? What *kind* of agreement is both possible and desirable among such men, and what would its consequence be for the idea of the self? Pico della Mirandola, we suspect, along with some others, had the only workable answer to this question.

REVIEW

DOLCI'S WORK IN PROGRESS

A NEW WORLD IN THE MAKING, by Danilo Dolci (Monthly Review Press, 333 Sixth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10014, $7.50) is not a block-buster of a book, yet its simplicity may be deceiving. During 1961 and in 1963 and 1964 Dolci visited other countries—Russia, Jugoslavia, Senegal and Ghana—in an effort to get at the essential meaning of *planning*. At his Study Center in Partinico, Sicily, a continuous effort is made to understand the obligations and necessities of planning. There are peculiar difficulties—human difficulties—in planning for Sicily. These are clear from Dolci's other books, and from James McNeish's biography of Dolci (Beacon, 1966). His present work-in-progress is the quest for an answer to a basic question:

> Today, when one can no longer accept blindly as absolute and eternal moral laws which have been handed down from the past, what means have we of discovering the true criteria for a new life? What machinery have we for building a new united world?

The book seems largely concerned with "economic planning" in the countries visited. Yet this too is misleading. The survival and subsistence needs of human beings are different from what we call "economic" problems. For men concerned with survival, these problems involve the foundations of existence. Beneath Dolci's questions and inquiry, therefore, are profound deeps. In fact, after reading the first few pages, one realizes all over again how *serious* he is. He moves from simplicity to simplicity, but his words and sentences seem chiselled from his life and thought, as for example in the following:

> The further a man tries to cast his vision, the deeper his reflections, the greater the store he sets by his experiences in his work and life and the clearer the meaning he reads into them; so the principles he adopts will be the truer, the truer the aim he sets himself, the truer the plans he lays.
>
> Certain moral principles the "new" man cannot but adopt. He must admit, for example, that life belongs to everyone; and that everyone has the right to live it in the fullest possible sense; that you cannot cure evils if you do not understand them, that each man has a point of view; that mankind will only be healthy when it realizes the essential need for unity.
>
> I do not believe it will be long before mankind has taken these principles for granted; and not only in the general terms in which I have set them down. I think that the same intuitive process, backed by reasoning and practice which is used in many sciences from architecture, and constructional engineering to theoretical physics, will have been at work here, too.

How can he be wrong about this? One thinks immediately of Buckminster Fuller and E. F. Schumacher for independent confirmation.

Dolci is not a sentimental man. All his energies are devoted to "underdogs," yet he says:

> The under-dog must come to realize that the causes of his backwardness and the obstacles to his development do not lie primarily in the wickedness of others, but in his own confused ideas, in his lack of organization, of unity of purpose, of creative power. He must be all the more determined to see as a result that neither he nor others remain thus incomplete and deformed.

Many sagacious men have made this observation and then turned away to their chosen activity of increasing the efficiency of the efficient. Dolci says it and turns toward the confused and inefficient to help them learn what they must learn in order to change their lives.

In Russia Dolci encountered many kinds of planners, some of them sagely effective, others mechanically bureaucratic. On the whole, in consideration of the history of the Soviet Union, one gets a favorable impression, despite the reluctance of officials to tell Dolci about their "problems." Dolci is himself completely unideological and eventually his purely human approach made headway with the people he talked to. One of his most interesting encounters was with "an artless Georgian poet" who discussed the question of regional culture. Dolci asked what was being done to preserve it. The old poet spoke at length of Russia's various ethnic groups and

their past, and how local customs were continuing. Then he said:

> If we insist on the need for unity now, it is because these peoples have been divided for centuries. Frequently they hated each other and the weak were oppressed by the strong. The national conscience of hundreds of peoples suffered under the old Russian Empires and so it was that they looked to the October Revolution to give them national as well as social and economic freedom. The more they were divided, the more we have sought to bring them together. And this is why we insist so much on unity.
>
> We believe that the whole of humanity is moving towards a single international culture to which each country will contribute the best it has to offer.

Dolci's concluding comment on his Russian experience is this:

> The planning of life, and not of economic life alone, as a means to the over-all evolution of the individual is the new science which man must develop here no less than elsewhere. It is true that each locality here has its own customs and culture and that not only are they often of a very high quality but also of a much greater diversity than most people in the West imagine. Nevertheless, this is due, I should say, more to existing conditions than to any active encouragement from above, and there is no doubt that not enough thought has been given to the theory of cultural development. And I might say further that it is this failure which has led in part to the false myth that life is standardized in the USSR.

A passing comment in Jugoslavia:

> The more I look around me, as I make my way among the slow-moving stream of young people, the more I am aware of the beauty of these tall, well-made people. There is something so clean in their regard, in their features, in their dress, their movements and their behavior, that one cannot but feel that truth and beauty still mingle here as in few other parts of the world.

A Jugoslavian sociologist, justifying his profession, remarked that it used to be said that dialectical materialism had made the revolution, while sociology brought no change, but that now the need to examine the social life was recognized. "It is essential," he said, "for us to know just how far we have managed to free the individual, which obstacles still stand in our way, and on what lines to base future action." Dolci's conversation with Edward Kardelj, "the leading political thinker in the Jugoslavia of today," ended with Kardelj's comment on the idea of world government:

> I do not agree that the world is moving in that direction. Men and peoples do not unite to form a single world state but, in general, to break away gradually from traditional, well-worn systems. In other words, the initial moves towards integration in the world of today show that we must come together in a freer society. The centralization, on the international level, of certain functions which are of vital interest to all peoples must not indeed interfere in any way with the independent development of each single people within the democratic concert of all the peoples in general.

Danilo Dolci represents a current of thought and action which may well hold the keys to the social future of mankind. In any larger vision on which the hopes of the best men among us are based, Dolci's conceptions of human good fit perfectly. It is interesting to reflect that for his tour of Senegal, Leopold Sedar Sengor, the poet-president of that Republic, selected for Dolci the most skillful driver in the land to conduct him from town to town, and also put a car at his disposal. One wonders what corresponding courtesies would be afforded him in the United States! True, there is in America a private, Friends of Danilo Dolci organization (102 East 2nd St., New York), and nothing of the sort in Senegal, but the comparison is worth thinking about, just the same. Who is better able to recognize authentic forces for progress?

In Africa, Dolci met scores of utterly devoted, perceptive men who work and plan against great obstacles for the welfare and future of their countrymen. Many of them seem to understand clearly what must be accomplished. Dolci makes no value judgments about what he learns—he simply reports—but we can say that in the Africa of today are elements of a leadership that will almost certainly find the way to a better future. A portion of President Sengor's radio

address concerning Senegal's second four-year plan will illustrate:

> What happened in our villages in the past when, seated under the baobab, the heads of the various families discussed how to bring in the harvest, how to build the houses they needed, how to help Samba or Demba? They drew up plans together. Oh, they weren't very complicated plans. There weren't many people to consider and the resources at their disposal were only enough to ensure the future life of their own little community. But all this called nevertheless for a choice of things to be done. . . .
>
> People of Senegal, the plan of which I speak is nothing more than a like assumption of mutual responsibility, but no longer limited this time to the men and women of one village but extended to the men and women of all the villages in the same region and of all the regions in the same country: Senegal.

COMMENTARY
MORE JOURNALISTIC WISTFULNESS

IN these days of angry and violent solutions, it produces a curious wrench of feeling to put down Irving Stone's *Those Who Love,* which is the story of John and Abigail Adams, place a mark at the page where the battle of Bunker Hill is being described, and turn to current events. Bunker Hill was pretty violent, too, but if you look for integrity in war, it is not hard to find in Mr. Stone's book. There seemed to be a lot more of it around in those days. Could, one wonders, John Adams have been persuaded to write about the Vietnam campaign the way he defended the American Revolution? War seems atavistic, now. But if we can't have peace, can we have integrity? Or is the state of human affairs and development such that if we *did* have integrity, there'd be no war?

A feature writer in the *Christian Science Monitor* (June 16) doesn't discuss these questions, but he gives some evidence that might apply. After pointing out that the Arabs were let down by the Soviets, and that Israel was let down by the Americans—the United States, he says "managed to wriggle out of a large collection of highly specific commitments"—the writer, Joseph C. Harsch, observes:

> In other words, the Middle East war has exposed the fact that great powers do manage to evade such commitments as they wish to evade.
>
> The effect is to downgrade all the talk about the sanctity of commitments which has been such a feature of the American role in the Vietnam war.

Surely a point worth noting. Mr. Harsch hopes it will make Washington "less doctrinaire." Wistfully, he goes on with some shy common sense:

> Does the fate of mankind rest on whether North Vietnam can be bombed to the peace table? Is the United States forever discredited as a great power if it fails to win a decisive victory over the Viet Cong? Moscow has taken a fearsome setback in the Middle East. But does anyone seriously think that Russia is finished as a great power just because she has suffered a humiliating defeat on one front of history?
>
> The influence and prestige of great powers is tough and resilient. Moscow has not yet recovered from its loss in the Cuban missile crisis. It has suffered another serious reverse. But it is still one of the only two superpowers on earth. Everyone is respectful of Russian power.
>
> Such thoughts can, though not necessarily will, stir up the cauldron of Washington thinking. It is conceivable, though not at all certain, that the net result will be a new search for peace in Vietnam, with a. little more imagination put into the effort than has been the case in previous moves.

Wouldn't *that* make a nice self-fulfilling prophecy? Such prophecies depend, of course, on the word getting around.

Newsnote on Premier Kosygin: People old enough and with memories too good for peace of mind will remember that during World War II an official of the D.A.R. reverentially remarked that Stalin was "a strong silent man with a college education." Now we learn *(Monitor,* June 21) that Premier Alexei Nikolayvich Kosygin, who was "shaped in the hard school of Stalinist planning," is a leader of whom an American businessman who got to know him said: "He could be the chairman of the board of Ford or General Motors." We ought to be able to get things settled with a man like that in charge.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
EVENT IN MONROVIA

IT was not the usual graduation. Not all blank-faced, pretty young girls walking with assurance, or "most-likely-to-succeed" young men looking eager or "playing it cool." This graduation class, some 195 of them, walked, strode, shuffled into the auditorium after the preliminaries of a nervous technician practicing spotlighting the flag, an introductory organ recital, the quieting of children and babies in arms, and the settling down of families and friends. They filed in solemnly, occupying the first six rows of the central section of the hall.

This was the graduating class, '67, of the Monrovia Adult Evening School. Ages 18 to 59, mean 25. Housewives, mechanics, salesmen, beauty operators—all dropouts in some form or other of past educational starts—come to receive a high school diploma.

The national anthem was sung, the flag saluted, "The Lord's Prayer" sung throatily by an earnest and nervous young woman . . . then the real interest of the evening: Talks by three members of the graduating class. The talks were brief but poignant. Why had these people returned to school? A charming woman of Spanish-American heritage had known only Spanish when, years before, she went to school. It was all that was spoken in her family. She couldn't keep up with classes taught in English. But when she worked in a beauty shop she discovered that one must talk to the customers, preferably in English. So, abetted by husband and children, she returned to school, found new confidence in herself, as witness her only slightly accented, lilting rendition of her adventure, titled, "As the Twig Is Bent." Next a middle-aged, balding mechanic reported with slow dignity: "A Dropout Speaks Out." He'd always made a living for his family, but with more education he figured he could make an even better living, and the children would perhaps realize more strongly the importance of education. Last, a slight and competent housewife spoke of "Thirteen Years and Four Children Later." When the children came home with school-work questions she couldn't answer, she took a long second look at her previous conviction that it was enough to be able to cook a meal, wash a floor. So, with cooperation from her family—they undertook more household chores, helped with the baby-sitting—she went back to school. Her next goal is college; her desire is to become a certified public accountant.

The evening class of '67. Some foreign born (but all, it was said, now citizens), different national backgrounds, different skin colors, they walked across the stage individually to receive their diplomas with a new dignity. The trustee who distributed the diplomas and called out each name said that although he would be performing a similar duty a week later at the day school graduation, he felt a particular pride in handing out diplomas to this class. Personal discipline and sacrifice were involved. The man who worked eight hours a day would have preferred many a night to relax at home, but instead he made it to his 7:00 o'clock class. The mother graduate had moved the family dinner up on school nights so that *she* wouldn't be late. Long-neglected habits of studying for classes had to be revived—not an easy task, but these men and women were dogged. They found they *liked* school. They made new friends, friends with problems similar to their own. Their viewpoints and horizons widened. And now, one by one, they marched across a stage before friends, family, teachers—with dignity and, it seemed, a new vision.

It was not just another graduation, but an "event" in Monrovia.

* * *

A feature story in the English *Weekend Telegraph* for May 12 presents poems by children under eleven, pupils of two London teachers of creative writing, Sheila Lane and Marion Kemp.

(Their book on this work for the public schools has just been published by Blackie.) After a mathematics class, Dennis Button, ten, wrote "Shapes in the Sky":

In the dark blue sky,
Stands the straight cross
And the weathercock of the church,
As I stand in the street.

Into the sky,
The buildings push
In rectangles and squares,
Straight as poles,
As I stand in the street.

Factory chimneys,
Cylinders of brick
Puff out the smoke
Of Deptford.
A triangle of stone
Comes to my eyes.
The dart of the church spire
Points upward to the sky
As I stand in the street.

Another ten-year-old boy, Eddie Moore, wrote "The Prayer of the Snake":

Dear God,
What have I done to deserve this life?
My slimy body is feared.
I am killed when I cross a human's
path.

Dear God,
What have I done to deserve this life?
Every year I come out of my skin,
But it doesn't help.

Dear God,
I am not as horrible as everyone thinks,
What have I done to deserve it?

The writer of the article about the poems, Michael Barnes, says that if these youngsters "qualify as 'child poets' it is not because they all have high IQs or have been reared in particularly cultured middle-class families." Most of them, he says, come from the East End of London where their "playground has been that no man's land of allotments, narrow streets and railway arches which border the docks."

* * *

Children, it is said, enjoy "nature" and need the experience of an unspoiled environment. But more important than this is a human environment of people devoted to nature, and not just because it's "good for children." Children don't exactly want what is "good for them." Actually, there is vast presumption in too much talk about this. But a teacher who has her own life in the natural world is good for children and everybody else. Following is a "June" extract from the monthly diary of Grace Rotzel, long at the head of The School in Rose Valley in Pennsylvania (from a collection, published by friends, with the title, *Twelve Turnings*):

> A whole chain of living things that contribute to the welfare of the forest is functioning at its busiest and best this time of year. Birds are teaching their awkward young bunches of pinfeathers to fly, and feeding them caterpillars, wasps and ants. Bees are pollinating, squirrels are scattering seeds as they provide for their young, rodents are aerating soil as they dig for grubs, and, in turn, supplying food for hawks and owls. At school, the crested flycatcher and oriole are vying for the tiptop of the hemlock as the best place from which to squawk or warble, and in so doing, are making life a bit more sparkling for us, by their flashes of color and sound; they are also packing in hundreds of insects and worms every day. The yellow-billed cuckoo lighted briefly last week, possibly hunting its favorite food, tent caterpillars, but found none. We hunted, too, and found one nest, which showed dead, half-grown larvae—a glimpse we assume, of that disappearing utopia called "the balance of nature," that has been given such a hard time by "civilized" progress. None of this activity would go on without trees.

FRONTIERS

On Living Arithmetic

IN his Foreword to the first edition of *Space, Time and Architecture,* Sigfried Giedion said: *"History is not a compilation of facts, but an insight into a moving process of life."* He added: "Moreover, such insight is obtained not by the exclusive use of the panoramic survey, the bird's-eye view, but by isolating and examining certain specific events intensively, penetrating and exploring them in the manner of the close-up." *Module, Proportion, Symmetry, Rhythm,* edited by Gyorgy Kepes, sixth and last (to be reviewed here) of the volumes in the Vision + Value series (George Braziller, 1966, $12.50), is an extraordinary demonstration of the truth in what Giedion says, and much more. Modules are not only "units," but constructive events in the shaping of form. In living things, the units of form have a contradictory kind of "finiteness" or limitation—their definition flows with the laws of change, as though they were all pregnant with an incommensurable factor of becoming, so that while measurement of them may have its uses, these uses become prisons of meaning unless qualified by an intuition prophetic of growth.

For physics, the ultimate module is the atom. For minerals, it is the crystal. For biology, it is the cell. For man, it is the human body—or it may be a part of the human body; or it may be some unit he chooses as the basis of design or construction. It would be better to say that for man the module is no particular unit, but modularity itself—the notion of limit in endless relation to the notion of extension—not merely additive extension, but organic growth to create new wholes which quiver with the promise of even more stately mansions. There is no end to this process—yet, nonetheless, the initial modules exist and demand inspection. All these considerations run through this book.

A kind of "secular" ethic also pervades its pages. In common with the universalizing tendency of modern thought, discussions of the module are continually pressing for connection with general values, and for linkage with the ideas of ancient philosophers. Pythagoras and Vitrovius are more frequently mentioned than Le Corbusier, although the French genius is a close third. Rudolph Arnheim begins his essay, "A Review of Proportion," with these words:

> One of the basic visual experiences is that of right and wrong. In particular, the subdivisions of lines or other linear distances and the shape of rectangular surfaces or bodies impress us not only as what they are but also tell us whether or not they are what they ought to be. The shape of a house, a shelf, or a picture frame may repose contentedly or show a need to improve by stretching or shrinking. The sense of proportion is inherent in the experience of perception, and—like all other perceptual properties—it is dynamic rightness presents itself not as dead immobility but as the active equipoise of concerted forces while wrongness is seen as a struggle to get away from an unsatisfactory state. Well-balanced shape is a main source of the harmony found in many products of nature and man and of the pleasure given by that harmony.

The words in this book are good, but the pictures are better. By readers for whom the word "module" is something overheard in the talk of modern architects, the book will need to be read at least a couple of times, and the middle section will often require a knowledge of mathematics beyond the general reader's preparedness. Yet *Module,* etc., deserves some effort by such readers. Its meanings are fertile and they multiply. For this reviewer, the most exciting picture is a super-microscopic view of individual platinum atoms, making an indescribable pattern of tiny concentric spheres in square-starish, over-all relation. The illustration is seven inches wide, but the object photographed has the actual width of "one five-hundredth of a human hair." The writer, Philip Morrison, waxes poetic:

> One impression cannot escape us; whatever else we may see, the modular construction of the metal crystal is plain. No continuity, no smooth ground stuff of malleable metal appears to our eyes; our most powerful, almost magical magnification has yielded the discrete muster of atomic parts, multiplied in a

> pattern austere and elegant. Hidden within the luster of metal worked by hammer and roll, there always lie the patterns of the snowflake or of the Alhambra's tiled walls, patterns conforming in most details to the severe mathematical canons for the uniform assembly of identical modules. Exactly this did the crystallographers long ago infer from the well-developed forms of crystals; it has remained for our time to display the arrays of atoms themselves.

And a star-spangled array it is.

The geneticist, C. H. Waddington, is guarded in his acceptance of the architectural term, *module.* Bricks retain their dimensions, but living units are in continuous flux. Waddington introduces his galaxy of living modular forms by commenting:

> The only reason why it is not completely beside the point to discuss modular theory in connection with biological forms is that in many organisms, including the one the artists are most interested in, man himself, there is an extensive period in life—adulthood—during which developmental changes are relatively slight. They can therefore be neglected, if we are willing to remain at a level of discussion which is humanistically important even if it is biologically superficial. However, one must always be ready to find that, in a particular context, such neglect ceases to be justified if we wish to make comparisons which are really illuminating and not merely rhetorical.

The contributors to *Module, Proportion, Symmetry, Rhythm,* include scientists, mathematicians, psychologists, architects, musicologists, and artists. One is continuously impressed by the competence of these writers to take an over-view of their subjects and to reach out to one another's stances and conceptions. Responsible for all the brimming excellence and seminal quality in the books of the Vision + Value series is Gyorgy Kepes, editor, who- is a painter and designer and presently teaches visual design at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.