For The Record: The Higher Dignity

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The artist's sense of truth. Regarding truths, the artist has a weaker morality than the thinker. He definitely does not want to be deprived of the splendid and profound interpretations of life, and he resists sober, simple methods and results. Apparently he fights for the higher dignity and significance of man; in truth, he does not want to give up the most effective presuppositions of his art: the fantastic, mythical, uncertain, extreme, the sense for the symbolic, the overestimation of the person, the faith in some miraculous element in the genius. Thus he considers the continued existence of his kind of creation more important than scientific devotion to the truth in every form, however plain.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All-Too-Human

At the close of the last century, when Nietzsche wrote those words, many people felt appalled by the descriptions of humankind being presented by biologists and psychologists; and there was considerable talk about the possibility of creating a new "image of man." It was recognized, however, that the observations of the Darwinians and the empirical psychologists could not easily be discredited. Scientists could hardly be expected to restore the human person to his traditional place "below the angels." They could not be expected to retract what they had said about man's animal ancestry, his brutishness and unlovely instincts, and make him "paragon" again, with all the dignity and significance he had once possessed. Understandably, many of them turned to the artist for the vision of dignity they so deeply desired; and occasionally (although not very often, when the new century began) the artist met the wishful demand for a meaningful "image," a sustaining one. Nietzsche knew what few would dare admit: that the rendering of man as significant in the cosmos was nothing but illusion, a necessary illusion. He knew that "sober, simple methods" could only result in neutral description, not in judgments about human dignity, nor in assurances with respect to human worth.

In our own time, there is a pervasive concern about the significance of man. On all sides, we hear talk of the experience of powerlessness, of "meaninglessness." Frequently it is evoked by the Vietnamese war: intellectuals, like dissident young people, feel frustrated by their apparent helplessness in the face of a commitment that horrifies them, bombings that sicken them, claims that they do not believe. Or else, particularly in the slums, it is evoked by unrelenting poverty and unemployment, which (so it appears) no one has the power to assuage. In more general terms, feelings of impotence are expressed in relation to the "system": the bureaucracies, the corporate institutions, the hierarchies of technicians seem to cancel out the person in his uniqueness and fallibility. On occasion, the expansion of technologies afflicts people: they make the computer a fearful symbol; they see themselves as mere ciphers in a "Brave New World." And the response, just as in Nietzsche's time, is increasingly one of aestheticism. People begin to reject both the empirical and the moral in their yearning for renewed significance. They set up "images" against what they perceive as the void.

It may seem paradoxical, given the current "cognitive" stress in educational discussion, but the "weaker morality" has made considerable inroads within education in recent months. By this we mean—not that educators are becoming less moral—but that there is a growing attraction to what Lionel Trilling (in Beyond Culture) calls the "criterion of style, the examination of life by aesthetic categories----" Trilling writes that this criterion and these categories are replacing traditional moral and ethical criteria and categories—that, in fact, young people today support their impulses to define the kinds of persons they will be with a "moralizing attitude" about taste and style. He says, moreover, that there now exist two "cultural environments": one, the traditional, often moralistic environment; the other, defined by "its commitment to the 'sources of life,' by its adherence to the imagination of

fullness, freedom, and potency of life, and to what goes with this imagination. . . ."

How does this affect education? Some teachers (and educational theorists) find considerable value in the existence of this "adversary culture" and choose to encourage it, even though this may mean taking issue (at least implicitly) with the "system" into which they are expected to initiate the young. And this is understandable. Everything they hear about the "now generation," the "plugged-in generation," and the "total environment" in which they presumably live, moves certain kinds of teachers to motivate by affirmation and sympathy. Motivate to what? Frequently to increased imaginative awareness, to the "expansion of consciousness" made possible by creative work. This may be why we presently hear so much about the poetry of the supposedly "unteachable," why we are being convinced that the free expression of what has been suffered and seen is itself a kind of forming, a preparation for the more complex orders identified with the disciplines.

We are beginning to see more and more respect for the "adversary culture" among those who write about education and the schools. Exemplary in these days is a paper recently reprinted in The Research Reporter, the newsletter of the Center for Research and Development in Higher Education at Berkeley. The author is Warren Bryan Martin, whose "An Answer for Anomie" we published in October, 1966. Constructing what strikes us as a fairly questionable dichotomy of "essentialist" and "existentialism" as the two positions confronting each other in education, Dr. Martin goes on to associate "existentialism" (or the concern for the unique individual) with a challenge to the "system." For him, "system" now refers—not to the great rational structures Kierkegaard, for one, had in mind—but to "technique unerringly achieving programmed results. . . ." Although we are not sure precisely why, this "means" to Dr. Martin that, in education, the individual is no longer being educated for himself but "in and for the system." Using this notion as a premise, he says that the younger generation has been "turned-on," not by mass media but "by a panexistential ethos that challenges youth to look within

themselves, to feel things deeply, and to insist on meanings in life that are personal and vital."

In this manner, he too arrives at the "adversary culture"; but, for him, it appears to be a necessary response to the incursions of technique upon the lives of men. And those incursions are, it would seem, as objectively real as the "pan-existential ethos" he perceives as he looks around. The ethos is described in language many would associate with aesthetic rather than with philosophic talk: the students who are existentialist are said to be tolerant of ambiguities, sceptical of "form," eager for a "new freedom," hungry for "vitality" and "affective" learning, engaged in a continual quest for meanings, "naked and alone." Dr. Martin does not become an all-out partisan of this position when he reaches his conclusion. His emphasis turns out to be "inclusiveness"; he wishes "both sides" to be considered when innovations are proposed. It is when he says "both sides" that he seems to us to be exemplifying a peculiar misconception respecting art, truth, and morality—a misconception we find penetrating a great deal of discourse in our field.

Nietzsche was not guilty of this misconception, although he is sometimes given credit for the viewpoints to which it gives rise. The source of it seems to us to be in a confusion of aesthetic judgments with, let us say, moral judgments, and with empirical statements as well. To talk of manner, medium, style, and tone is, as Trilling has made clear, to talk aesthetically. The judgments arising in the course of such talk, he points out, "are the stuff of the great classic literature of the modern world." They have had a "liberating" power in time past, because they helped shake conventional acceptances and outmoded moralisms. Today, when the young person rebels against "squares," philistines, or the "establishment," he is no longer alone. He does not need the liberating judgments to give him courage. There exists, after all, an entire world—a "second environment," says Trilling—in which such rebels can dwell. It is a world with its own rules and pieties, its own acceptable ("moralized") tastes and standards. Everyone who goes to see

contemporary films, or drops in to see "pop" pictures, "primary structures," and "magic realism" at the art galleries, or who reads The New York Review of Books, Evergreen Review, Partisan Review, yes, even Esquire, or who knows the names of Pinter and Albee, or who reads Pynchon, Vonnegut, Barth, Friedman, and the others, knows very well that there now exists an intellectual and artistic culture with its own complex requirements and norms.

We suspect that many teachers, when they venture into the outskirts of that world, often feel somehow inadequate. Not to be "with it" becomes a kind of disgrace; yet they are constantly reminded that few people "over thirty" can be inducted or be made to understand. Some educators wonder sadly whether it is all a great "put-on" or spoof. The "put-on," as Jacob Brackman has explained in The New Yorker (June 24, 1967), has become a mode of communication occupying "a fuzzy territory between simple leg-pulling and elaborate practical joke, between pointed lampoon and free-floating spoof." Experiencing it, one has to fight to keep one's detachment and one's "cool"; one can never be absolutely sure whether something is "true"—or a joke.

There are educators who feel this way about the hippies and even about drugs. Clearly there are those who feel this way with respect to conversation and sloganizing that sound "existential" or, perhaps, "panexistential." It seems safer to take it all seriously, to give it an objective status, than to be fooled.

This may, in any case, be one reason why so much of the contemporary talk about art is being absorbed in educational discourse. This may be one reason why such preoccupations as those expressed in talk of "non-linear," "subliminal," "surreal," as well as in talk of "style," are treated as judgments about the nature of things in the modern world rather than judgments about manner, mood, and tone. To talk of how one chooses to look and act, to talk of "sincerity" as the highest value, to avoid "interpretation," to oppose "medium" to "message," is quite different from talking about decency, humaneness, compassion, and goodness. To put an exclusive emphasis upon these

things is, in addition, to verge on anti-intellectualism—a strange posture for an educator to take.

The point is not that it is "wrong" for young people to feel afflicted by the great anonymous super-structures of the modern age, nor that feelings of helplessness and alienation are unwarranted. It seems to us entirely appropriate, in fact, that certain teachers try to sympathize with the feelings that drive so many young people into withdrawal and dissent. But this does not have to mean a confusion of those feelings—and the styles associated with them—with a moral or intellectual position. Sympathy, even empathy, do not require educators to teach the "adversary culture." (Would there be an adversary culture if it were deliberately cultivated in the schools?)

Nietzsche was attracted by the "weaker morality" of artists, because the ones he had in mind were at least able to sustain the illusion of human dignity and potency. Yeats, Lawrence, Joyce, Pound, and the other great moderns mentioned by Lionel Trilling could justify promulgation of that "weaker morality" because of the contribution it made to "liberating" young people from a sterile, restraining code of life, if not from trivialities. Neither of these justifications seem to work today. Contemporary art does not sustain the ancient illusion of dignity. And, as we have said, art is no longer needed as a liberating force, at least not in the 19th century sense.

We believe that educational discourse will be obfuscated if attention is not paid to clarifying the role of art and distinguishing between the aesthetic and the moral. We also believe that a disservice will be done to works of art, if they are conceived simply as products of the same search for "vitality" and "spontaneity" on which so many college students are embarked.

Given what we now understand about knowing and the known, a work of art can only be conceived as a particular artist's symbolic rendering of his own subjectively experienced world. "Art," we now realize, is not amenable to true definition; but we can generalize to the point of saying that art is almost always a mode of transmuting some

of the stuff of human experience into symbolic and expressive form. The painting or the poem that results is something deliberately created out of the raw materials of paint and canvas, of language. With one, we encounter colors, shapes, and lines in relationship with one another, or a free play of forms and colors for their own sake. With the other, we encounter a patterning of sounds, a play of images, a structure of meanings. Both painting and poem communicate by means of what have been called "cryptograms" (gradations of color, arrangements of planes, for example, metaphors and other figures), some sort of message to the senses, the feelings, the mind. It is a message that cannot be paraphrased, that does not exist apart from the work. It need not be "true" in any empirical sense; it need not be translatable in any way at all. But it is a message, nonetheless, about the human condition. It is an expressive rendering of what it is to be alive at a particular moment of time. It would not communicate, however; it would not express; it would not move, arouse, excite, illuminate, if it were not consciously and deliberately made, modelled, formed.

When modern readers encounter works like Thomas Pynchon's V., with its passive anti-hero named Benny Profane and his "Whole Sick Crew" of friends, they are not likely to discover images of pride and potency which restore a sense of "the higher dignity and significance of man. . . ." When they read books like Joseph Heller's Catch-22 or William Burroughs' Naked Lunch, they are not likely to feel liberated from the "system," whose consequences for individual consciousness both novels do so much to dramatize. So it is when modern people confront the looming, anonymous sculptures called "primary structures," the high intensity colors of "Op" paintings, the stark objectivity of the images connoted by "Pop." And when they see films like Antonioni's Blow-Up or Bergman's Persona or the Pinter-Losey Accident.

They will receive no "knowledge" from works of art like these; they will find no abstractions, no ideal forms revealed. They will, rather, find themselves engaged with the efforts of highly sensitive men to shape what Wallace Stevens once called a "supreme fiction," some mode of making sense in an inchoate world. Once engaged, they may find themselves subjectively involved; they may begin confronting themselves. Self-confrontation of this sort signifies more than a return to one's "true self," one's spontaneity. It signifies the kind of engagement with art that becomes a mode of ordering one's own, one's personal experience. The arts seem to us to have a unique capacity to move those who can respond to them to create their own patterns and forms. They have the capacity to enable people to gain perspective upon the discontinuous events, the simultaneous occurrences which today compose their experience—to transmute mere "noise" into message, if not into knowledge and information.

The arts, in other words, cannot be depended upon to redeem, to inspire, or to liberate. Certainly they cannot be depended upon to make young people more moral or humane. But they can move individuals to break through conventional mental sets (even the sets of the "second environment"); they can help them come to terms with the blinding surfaces and happenings of our electronic age, to shape new orders in the midst of flux—to see, in some sense, anew.

To subsume such possibilities under revolt against the "system" is to stifle them. To abstract certain characteristics from particular works of modern art or criticism and apply them to the behavior of youthful rebels is to deform what the young people are trying to say. We have the capacity to enable our students to become people somewhat like the hero of Walker Percy's The Last Gentleman—Will, who felt like "a man who had crawled out of a bombed building. Everything looked strange. He could see things afresh." Or perhaps like the narrator in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, waiting in his underground room to merge: "In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived." The crucial terms are "mind," "plan," and "pattern." These suggest to us the values with which educators are fundamentally concerned.

The "higher dignity" today is not to be found in the formlessness and despair and impotence being rendered by contemporary artists. It is to be found in the ordering, the patterning their renderings make possible for the ones who have learned to understand. To conceive "a plan of living" against a backdrop of meaninglessness is not to give in to the "system" that cancels out the person. It is to act throughout one's life to create a self, a self that is freely chosen and formed. This may be the only true "significance" to be achieved by human beings. Surely it is something teachers (especially empathetic teachers) need to keep in mind.

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