

Self-Renewal: The Individual And The Innovative Society

GARDNER, J. W.

New York: Harper & Row, 1963. Pp. xvi + 141. \$3.50.

The mood of *Self-Renewal* is Emersonian; the energies and strivings it celebrates are reminiscent of William James. Not surprisingly, John Gardner also evokes some of the qualities we associate with the Kennedy years—a kind of virile, adventurous pragmatism: courage, detachment, and impatience with complacency. Although he was not officially connected with the administration of the late President, he was involved in many consultations on "national goals," and he edited *To Turn the Tide*, a collection of John F. Kennedy's statements of purpose for 1961. And those who recall Mr. Gardner's *Excellence* will have in mind his preoccupation with process and with "style."

The concern of the new book is with education in its widest sense, with the culture's total effort to remain viable and alive. The focus is on "innovativeness," which may be an attitude, a body of skills, or a condition; in any case, it is recommended as a norm for both the functioning individual and society. The problem of attaining it is approached by means of a discussion of individual talents and resources. These, Gardner writes, must somehow be released if the society is to provide for "its own continuous renewal." The fundamental responsibility, however, is the individual's; and, in a sense, the book constitutes a moral appeal to each person to liberate himself, to involve himself in the effort to renew. The individual must choose, the author suggests, to innovate, to strive. In more Jamesian terms, Mr. Gardner is demanding that we "will ourselves to be versatile, creative, vital—free."

Society has certain obligations, he admits: mainly, to cultivate pluralism and diversity, to protect dissenters and innovators by maintaining freedom and keeping the channels of change unclogged. The schools have the very specific obligation to nurture continuities in human experience and to enable young people to reappraise shared purposes and heritage. Whether they begin

by rebelling or affirming, they must, says Gardner, build "on the heritage of earlier work." In the manner of John Dewey and certain contemporary curriculum reformers, he believes that the school must stress "not things that readily become outmoded," but "methods of analysis and modes of attack on problems." The properly educated man is to be equipped to deal creatively with novelty, to seek out and define significant problems, and to develop mastery of some medium to the end of continuing growth.

Doing so, he may become Gardner's innovative, self-renewing man, willing to take risks, choosing to manufacture his own challenges when the alternative is mere gratification, mere complacency. He may become the kind of person given to creating his own order in the confusion of things, avoiding "outer-direction," breaking through "the false fronts of life." Also, he is the healthy man in Abraham Maslow's sense and Erik Erikson's.

This use of the artist-as-model evokes the Emerson who liked to say that "disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, vanish," if only one is able to "conform (one's) life to the pure idea in (one's) mind." In Gardner's context, it leads to the notion that the threat perceived in the corporate structures of our society is due, in William Blake's words, to the "mind-forged manacles" we wear. It is due to the "habits, attitudes and belief systems" which make us passive, non-participant, irresponsible. Some may see an irony in the use of Blake; others may be irritated by the comment that some people "will become cogs in the machine because they feel like cogs in the machine."

It must be granted that there is something tonic in the conviction that modern man (so long a Willy Loman, a Mr. Zero, a "little man") has the potential for saving himself. There is something occasionally contagious in the confidence that the individual can summon up the energies required for

renewal. John Gardner, of course, is president of the Carnegie corporation and may have had too much experience with what Jacques Barzun has pejoratively called "philanthropy." In any event, his demand for self-reliance may well make some of his readers feel like underprivileged children miraculously confronted by a teacher whose expectations are consistently high. At the very least, they will feel the touch of a late 19th century wind, a Browningsque optimism which may yet give rise to a Jamesian "second wind."

Mr. Gardner esteems the "capacity to function as a generalist," because so many specialists seem to him to lack adaptive ability. Clearly, this book has been written by a generalist whose capacity for adaptability may sometimes give a reader pause. He has sought a middle path (if one exists)

between individuality and membership in modern society, between "a man's potentialities and the claims of life." As in his previous work, he has argued against "the vegetative state" that so often accompanies affluence; he has defined happiness as striving, not fulfillment—"striving toward meaningful goals, not necessarily the attainment of those goals."

Perhaps *Self-Renewal* should be taken as an expression of its author's present striving, rather than a set of answers or clues. Perhaps he wishes to initiate a conversation in the culture, to involve us in the effort to conserve, to innovate,—and somehow to survive as autonomous selves. Who can say him nay?

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