

marvelous occupational freedom that America affords the young. However, the implicit assumption that career choice determines what a child will *be*, not merely *do*, suggests that in modern America one's job has a problematic and troubling ontological dimension.

Judeo-Christian thought has usually legitimated various social hierarchies as divinely authorized (or at least divinely permitted) as a means of maintaining order and continuity. But it has also insisted that the standing (or better, the *kneeling*) of the soul before God has no particular relationship to social class or employment. Sainthood was open to mayors, bakers, artists, and blacksmiths alike, and everyone understood that the scriptural admonition to "hold fast our profession" was a warning to all against apostasy and had nothing to do with distinctive career orientation. But in a modern world where no shared religious "profession" unites men, different secular professions, "held fast to" with quasi-religious zeal, sharply divide them. No longer looking at one another as essentially similar cobelievers in a shared creed, men who make their living in different ways have come to regard one another as more fundamentally different than alike.

In particular, those few who make careers as creative writers now often see themselves as a breed wholly apart from and usually much above the rest of the human race. Such an attitude informs Theodore Dreiser's *An Amateur Laborer*, an unfinished account—here published for the first time—of a period in the author's life when depression and illness rendered him unable to write. Seeking to earn a meager living and to recover his health, Dreiser temporarily accepted employment with the New York Central Railroad as a

laborer, first in a carpentry shop, then with a masonry crew. Largely because the typical railroad worker felt no professional aspirations in literature, Dreiser regarded him, as he in turn regarded Dreiser, as a "curiosity," virtually another species, a different type of creature. Dreiser perceived a great "gulf" between himself as a writer and the "barren lot" of other laborers "well fitted to bother with the infinitely common things with which they were laboring."



A rather different authorial attitude is evident in *The Devil's Stocking* by Nelson Algren, another talented writer commonly grouped with Dreiser under the misleading rubric "realist." (The notion, shared by Algren and Dreiser, that reality can be adequately represented without serious regard for the suprasensory and transcendent

is actually the wildest of fantasies.) In his uncritical prepossession with "professionals" of the most unliterary sort imaginable—boxers (Hemingway was an exception, not the rule) and prostitutes—Algren updates and refurbishes the badly tattered myth of the noble savage. But this refurbishing provides no more satisfactory sense of commonality between writer and non-writer than does Dreiser's aloofness. Most readers and writers can feel little real kinship with



those who turn their fists or genitals to profit. Indeed, until authors again learn to use their uncommon gifts to celebrate the dignity and moral stature attainable in every honest walk of life, they must either archly look down upon most of mankind, like Dreiser, or, like Algren, must view the race from the underside. (BC) □

Word Processors

William Bronk: *Vectors and Smoothable Curves*; North Point Press; Berkeley, CA.

Wendell Berry: *Standing by Words*; North Point Press; Berkeley, CA.

Elizabeth Bishop: *The Collected Prose*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

John McPhee: *La Place de la Concorde Suisse*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

If quantity had a positive effect on quality, then it could be stated

without hesitation that this is the golden age of the essay. After all, only souls lost on desert isles can escape being pelted—by newspapers, newsletters, magazines, journals, TV magazines, and radio broadcasts—with the products of itchy pens; moreover, it's likely that if a modern Crusoe were to discover a corked Perrier bottle washed ashore some languid dawn, it would include something like "Notes Toward an Understanding of the Intersection Between Shipwrecks and Intellectual Currents or Seeing an Uncharted Island on 50 a Day." People tend to imag-

ine that the most vexing form of communication aborning today is the commercial, but that's only because (A) commercials tend to be obnoxious and therefore obvious and (B) commercials are made by a few for the many. Modern essays are often obnoxious but they tend not to be obvious: they are sort of like the atmosphere in, say, Gary, Indiana, which is unpleasantly apparent at first, but which one quickly adapts to since it *is* the environment. This leads to point B: essays are made by many for many—or at least one supposes that they are scribbled with a large audience in mind; the products themselves are regularly so pitiful that it's hard to imagine that they are written with *anyone* in mind. Whereas amateurs once addressed their particular—or peculiar—muse through the medium of poetry, they now go for prose; an essay, being more limited in physical size, is thought to be more readily produced than a novel. Novelists and other professional writers recognize that the proliferating number of magazines constitute a prime income possibility between books, so they, too, add their musings and observations to an already Everest-sized pile of prose.

This is not to state that all the heirs of Montaigne are illegitimate. William Bronk, for example, in addition to being a bona



fide poet, is a fine prose stylist (and his competent sentences have, one suspects, influenced other interesting but similarly little-known writers like Ken-

teth Gangemi). Bronk's talent as an essayist is rooted in his appreciation of the truth that while an essay may deal with the physical—Mayan ruins or the works of Whitman—it must speak, explicitly or implicitly, of the metaphysical if it is to aspire to something beyond merely a medium



for information or data. Consider, for example, the following:

One feels that the buildings at Machu Picchu, which must have been old at the time of the Spanish conquest, are nevertheless more of our own time than buildings which must have been erected afterwards—the churches of Cuzco, for example, in the crumbled and rubble remains of their baroque splendor. These Spanish colonial buildings are now so obviously antique: they are, as we say, "dated." The buildings at Machu Picchu, on the other hand, are not shabby and out of fashion.

Lesser authors would be satisfied with making demi-Baedeker style observations. Wendell Berry is another writer who isn't

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satisfied with essaying the trivial (which leads us to wonder about North Point Press: How can it manage to publish such solid prose in books that are carefully and durably constructed in this age of disposable products?). One of Berry's key arguments in *Standing by Words* is that language is in a state of degeneration and that "this increasing unreliability of language parallels the increasing disintegration . . . of persons and communities." As people become opposed to simple norms like prescriptive grammar because they are taught that doing one's own thing is as good as any others' doings (Flaubert = Vidal = John Doe), social structures become less organized since there are no defining rules and limiting orders. Each person becomes his or her own essayist of reality: anarchy abounding.

The Collected Prose of Elizabeth Bishop, which contains both nonfiction and fiction, is a pleasant volume that has provoked numerous gushing essays in the various book reviews. The situation brings to mind the elementary school classroom demonstration of a chain reaction, the one in which



a ping-pong ball on a mousetrap is set off and which, in turn, causes other like setups to be activated in almost an exponential progression. Soon, of course, the arrangement is exhausted. Last year Bishop's *The Complete*

Poems were published; now we have the prose. That should be it: the arrangement exhausted. But essayists are an anxious breed. Elizabeth Hardwick wrote in her piece on Bishop's prose in *The New Republic*: "Many look forward to the publication of Elizabeth Bishop's letters, look forward to knowing in full the incomparable glow, the luster of thoughts and sights written in her small, curling, rather crooked script." All of which will be compared in essays set in small, straight, rather cold type.

John McPhee is well known to one portion of the reading public as a staff writer, or essayist, for *The New Yorker*; and to another segment as the author of numerous books. His most recent book, *La Place de la Concorde Suisse*, is like some of his others in that, as the little type including copyright information states, "The text of this book originally appeared in *The New Yorker*." While his entrepreneurial drive, like his prose style, can't be faulted on purely technical grounds, it does bring up the question of whether it's really necessary that the world of letters be inhabited by the essays of McPhee in magazine, hard-



bound, and paperback forms. True, the essays of Brock, Berry, and Bishop have appeared before, but some of the Bronk was featured in *Origin* and other hard-to-locate places; Berry's pieces are accessible but not

commonly at hand (e.g., *Hudson Review*): Bishop, being dead, has no say in the matter. McPhee doesn't have any of these excuses. (GSV) □

Perceptibles

George W. S. Trow: *The City in the Mist*; Little, Brown; Boston.

What's in a name? Fair Juliet's answer notwithstanding, we insist that there is something to it. Take the case of a relatively young author who places two initials between his given title and surname. There's something to that in the closing years of this century, though it would be barely monocle-raising in the 19th century in one of the better London clubs. George W. S. Trow seems to be a man out of his proper place and time, which would be 100 years ago across the Atlantic. Stylistically, *The City in the Mist* vents the aspirations of a junior Henry James. Whereas James crafted labyrinths that have, finally, goals, Trow has put together a series of cul-de-sacs. Trow's triumph of form over content results only in a trophy that rings hollow, a bibelot for the over-mannered.

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Ken Auletta: *The Art of Corporate Success: The Story of Schlumberger*; G. P. Putnam's Sons; New York.

In his last outing between hard covers, Mr. Auletta examined that huge, amorphous, ubiquitous mass known as "the underclass." That, of course, is not a particularly tony subject. What's more, members of the underclass don't buy books. Mean-

while, *The One-Minute Manager*, *In Search of Excellence*, and various and sundry books about Japanese management techniques, quality circles, and the like are hot numbers at the B. Daltons and Waldenbooks and the rest. Showing a grasp of entrepreneurial techniques and a touch of managerial savvy, Mr. Auletta has parlayed his *New Yorker* profile of oil-patch megagiant Schlumberger and its CEO, Jean Riboud, into what will undoubtedly become this season's *Megatrends*—though one that is less, as the insiders put it, "blue-sky" and more "real-



world." One thing puzzles us: with all of the up-and-coming leaders of industry busy reading, who's *doing* anything? □

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Gerard K. O'Neill: *The Technology Edge: Opportunities for America in World Competition*; Simon & Schuster; New York.

Gerard K. O'Neill makes an observation that virtually all Americans have heard, understand, and do little about: other countries, notably Japan, are making giant steps in the development of new (e.g., computer-related) and existing (e.g., auto and steel) technologies; if American managers, workers, academics, students, government officials, etc. don't come up to world speed, the eminence of