

CORRESPONDENCE

Not Crowded, Not Lonely

"GOOD JOB," I THOUGHT, smoothing the cover and contents of the latest MODERN AGE (Summer, 1958). "Kirk is finding the writers, free men all. They use words for fuel too long deficient in this shivering world from which decent and civilized drapery has been torn."

Now I do not believe that Dr. Kirk would do deliberately what seems to be the neatest trick of any year: to make of this issue a symbol of an ancient dilemma. It took some time for me to identify the question which is only a suggestion. Rather puzzled, and yet certain that somewhere in the issue there was a curious conflict, I went back over the ground once more, itself a pleasant search. I riffled the pages again, this time from back to front. Finally, or so I believe, I found the key. It was in the last line, on the last page, where a letter was signed "A Reader". It was a fine letter, — literate, orderly, informed, and also angry. "A Reader" had recognized and assembled a good many fractions, parts of a complicated puzzle. In part his fragments resembled garbage, in part shavings from timber once unafraid of any storm. Finally, however, apparently shocked by his reckless honesty, he retreated into anonymity. "Let's you and him fight,"

he seemed to say. Well, all of us have thrown spitballs at authority on occasion and then quickly turned accusing eyes elsewhere.

So I left "A Reader", and returned once more to the front. In the MODERN AGE editorial's first sentence, — and I find this neither tragic nor comic, but simply interesting — there is a quotation from Roy Campbell. Roy Campbell had said, and loudly: "A body that cannot react is a corpse." Now one of these lines, the first line or the last line, is in error. There is an alpha, and also omega. Between one head and one tail lies the body, soul enclosed, of this generation and of the race. Toward some remotest Thule travel we all, some erect, some crouching and some supine. But only one stance is suited to sounding trumpets when nations drowse. The tattered flag of conservatism is not retrieved by command, but by volunteers. It is no man's privilege to examine or order the honor of another. Where the secret police have been seen approaching, or what passes for team-spirit is chiefly product of fear, the flesh can reflect only attitudes which arise within each of us. Choice, peculiar to man, includes swimming against the stream of unthinking water, as well as

joining the water. And if there are tail-guns ahead and others are riding our tails, choice here is also personal. No one can say with confidence what he could do if men with flannel mouths, wearing the grey of defeat, were observing him with speculative eyes. God may hate cowards and love fools, but men lack both That power and That understanding. We must, therefore, leave "A Reader" his choice, and thank him for the good letter.

And, if thus far he is not degraded, for I do not mean to do so, he would know there is more than physical well being at stake. We must accept his estimate of the barbarism which supports him, though this may not be his greatest agony. An agony it must be to move daily in forced civility, forced acquiescence, his grateful head bowed while his eyes burn with rejection and his pen writes to us, though shielded. He has acquired loneliness, without accepting it. Nor should his participation, while not yet encouraged to the point of membership be labeled otherwise than admirable. There are many things, in this life, which are difficult. Nonetheless there are other and quite ancient breastplates to lessen his solitary discomfort. He might discover, by the simple act of signing his name, the soaring spirit so released. He is, in fact, already one of us. His letter proves that. Public defense of an honorable cause which is neither understood nor admired by the company one keeps is an elixir of new life. Lonely sentinels need not be solitary, nor alone. For, as I have pointed out, in this single issue of MODERN AGE there is much hope and much explanation. Indeed, in the list of editorial advisers, as well as the splendid essays which are alike only in their excellence, and even in the thousands as yet too few who read these pages are many friends. And for hardly any, one believes, need "A Reader" feel apologetic. And finally, ranged in the background of MODERN AGE and those who admire it, are some of the mightiest intellects of all the world's history. Quite a few of them, then and now, have given thanks for

blessed peace which is the reward of those who have escaped to freedom. And one knows freedom, for freedom satisfies that most severe of our critics, ourselves alone. One may never be President, or president. The famous five of the United States Senate stand as proof that ours is an honorable category. Indeed, their lives remind us chiefly of shame in other generations as well as our own, remembering who actually *was* elected. And because none of them became President, and because others of a lesser stature and in other fields did not achieve a financial presidency, we may conclude only that success of this type may be actual proof of failure.

Nor is it enough to strike always the iconoclastic posture. So narrow a mind is quite properly regarded poorly in any organization. In large clinics, no less than large corporations, the eccentric, whether genius or not, is too much trouble to get along with, too much trouble to be worth accepting his gifts so self-admired. The conservative mind is not addicted to mere tiresome disagreement, for the sake only of disagreement. It is a sorry thing to acquire only the title of disagreeable. This is nihilism, and quite properly perceived to be destructive. Short of so miserable an existence, which may be easily the sorry reward of one reluctant ever to disagree in matters of principle and ethical verity, there are less violent and more rewarding areas. To dwellers in these places will be granted respect, perhaps only grudging, but genuine. And even latent respect is better than unblinking self-criticism to those few whose beliefs are older than yesterday and whose confidence is stronger than tomorrow. There is a wonderful glow available, to warm the flinching body of those as yet not ready to differ, in public. Conservatism needs, and will reward in grace unbought, recruits who are able to choose between frozen, unhappy silence and that unsanctified halter of total, hostile rejection. There is much ground between these two extremes. Much of it is honorable ground.

In small and local civic affairs may be

found truth which can be duplicated in the unspoiled minds of children. I witnessed, over many years, timid business men and their equally timorous brethren in the various professions. Almost all who have participated in municipal functions on a voluntary basis have met these apprehensive gentlemen, who fear to lose customers or clients. Now even if this bogey man were real, it would seem to me that such desertions would in fact be reinforcement. Actually, in spite of the atmosphere of timidity described, I have yet to see one business man fail, or one professional man leave town because he had firmly and definitely identified himself with an honorable opinion. I am aware of terrible events which take place where docile men are driven by leaders heedless of the greater world about them. Not every man, said Goethe, can be a hero, but every man can be a man. Nonetheless, allowances must be made for the helpless but perceptive union members who seem actually to have no escape of the moment. The small merchant who faces arson or worse must be understood and encouraged, and not scorned. More trouble arises, however, with one as erudite as "A Reader". Here is no earnest mechanic, laboring with hands alone. This one *sees* the trouble. He *writes*, and writes well about it. He may also, it must be hoped, arrive before long at that one final step forward, which I sense and believe he will make. Those who know should say so, but only if they so desire. This is their choice. We can only assure him that there is peace, and warmth and resurgence of humane reality, available only to those who *do say*, and who alone decide.

Among the unbalanced contradictions which make life on earth more frequently bewildering than satisfying, says Sperry, is the simultaneous development of narrow skills and decline of communities (Willard Sperry, *The Ethical Basis of Medical Practice*, p. 19). An unhappy by-product of one's rise to eminence in any special field is his increasing isolation ex-

cept for those who share his central interest. The very fact of an increasing number of these skillful and lonely individuals is that they have a disintegrating effect upon society rather than its opposite. One who goes far in a special field is eventually unable to share his major concerns with all sorts and conditions of men. In this specialization, and in the dedication of modern men to a galloping compartmentation of knowledge, great scientific advances are possible. The real promise of tragedy seems not to come from science or mathematics, or those concepts which have served us well in these areas. Trouble begins when those immersed in the discipline of nuclear physics or mathematics fail to learn that other, and to them foreign devotions, are to others as sacred as their own. Loneliness, then, in a general way, is a product of activity developed in ignorance of other branches of learning. Nonetheless, the most deadly product which might be distilled from otherwise human beings would be a race or a generation of mathematicians divorced, for they would be ignorant, of any spiritual responsibilities or allegiances. Siphoned from their earliest years into tunnels where only material science is allowed or respected, they might well be inhuman. The ultimate in such a civilization, savage in its ignorance, would be a sort of ape, learned in algebra, skilled in mathematics, and being godless, concerned only with products of the electronic brain and the slide rule.

Acceptance of a solitary life, in which flames of spirit and imagination and anticipation burn invisibly but not without passion, is seen in many parts of the world. Edith Hamilton, for example, has suggested that in the far east there has for years been practiced a retreat to inner spiritual life in anticipation of release from the misery of earthly existence (Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way*, pp. 28-29). In this way members of the human race have alienated themselves in the middle of that race and found a way to endure the intolerable. Outside all may be delusion, while

truth alone comes from within. The same idea is seen in the writings of Milosz (Czslaw Milosz. *The Captive Mind*, pp. 51-57). He describes Ketman, an ancient and oriental retreat within themselves by tortured people, which teaches that those possessing the truth must not expose their persons, their relatives, or their reputations to the blankness, folly, and perversity of some whom it has pleased God to place and maintain in charge, and also in error. When the mere fact of retreating within no longer suffices to protect, where even silence might pass for approval, there must be no hesitation. Not only must true opinions be denied, but there must even be resort to all manner of ruses in order to deceive adversaries. Those who practice Ketman make all protestations of faith which please them, their oppressors, perform all of the rites recognized to be the most vain, falsify their own books, and exhaust all possible means of deceit. Thus they acquire multiple satisfactions and merits, for they have placed themselves and their relatives under cover, and they have not exposed their venerable faith to horrible contact with the infidel. Finally, they cheat the infidel, and have confirmed the infidel in his error, and imposed upon this bestial person the shame and misery that he deserves.

It seems to me that the typical organization-man, if he holds but is silent about ideas different from those which are currently popular, is practicing Ketman. He makes all the protestations of faith that please the top man, performs all the rites one recognizes to be the most vain. He falsifies his books. He exhausts all possible means of deceit. Such an alienated individual may choose to remain anonymous, or worse, completely silent. "The Wayfarer", says Hamilton (p. 29) "sheltering for the night in an abandoned house and caring not to mend the roof to keep out rain, is no different from a people who live in such wretchedness that their one comfort is so to reject or deny the importance of the facts of earthly life that they will not

try to better them." Socrates, drinking hemlock in his prison, may have been the best example of one who saw that it no longer was possible for an Athenian to say what he wanted to say. Athens was in the throes of crushing defeat, and changes, and the government was scarcely respectable. There is a hemlock which will conceal one quite adequately in an unobserved area, inoffensive to the majority. This is a silence on all matters which might prove controversial. It is the silence which is observant and speculative, masked by seeming agreeableness. Many of us use a form of Ketman. Russell Kirk remarks, somewhere, that there are many areas on the earth today where it is not only unpopular to disagree, but positively dangerous. The growth and menace of loneliness, the increasing impossibility of finding common ground for discussion of anything except the weather, are penalties which result from an ever more limited specialization. Our narrow skills have robbed us of our contacts with others, and our need to conform only multiplies this agony. Indeed, this is the very definition of loneliness. For all of us, except those few who have been granted divine awareness, there must be a spiritual life which resides outside visible facts. Things, as apart from the invisible world, are inadequate to give real meaning to our lives. We are coming to realize that it is possible to recoil from that world of outside fact and of mass unhappiness, and yet still move about quite like others.

The immensity of forces bearing down on man must be placed into context in any discussion of a lonely life. In a simple world of smaller communities the anxieties of one are easily become the anxieties of all. Community gives to its members reinforcement by the commonness of their understanding. But we live in an age of atomized understanding. Ancient barriers of community behind which men could once retire in order to regroup their thoughts have either disappeared or been taken over by a distant and powerful bureaucracy. This bureaucracy may be that increasing

tyranny of the majority or usurpation by other forces or individuals not elected. Silence, enforced or suggested, may come from the welfare state no less than from corporate organizations. The problem of community has been nowhere better discussed than by Nisbet (Robert A. Nisbet, *Quest for Community*, 1953). Synthetic people in a prowling world are shaken into particles, or become dusty with the powder of others. If they do cling together or are thrown together, they are uncertain knowing that their affections may easily become unglued. This search for understanding, this loneliness, is more intense because they fear to speak, which is in a thousand ways the genesis of much of the anxiety of our times. Where there is no password, where no password is spoken, no one is free to proceed or to move about.

In such journals as *MODERN AGE*, they may find communication and community. Believing that not all the world is established and organized because of the anatomical gyrations of its inhabitants, the conservative is reassured when he finds others equally convinced that all not goodness is simply saccharine. This few, not all lonely, this minority which is happy, this conservative, understanding and patient faith may be, in spite of our discontents, the most rewarding and happy shelter available anywhere on earth today.

And if time is rushing past us, there is comfort, which is not arrogance, in knowledge and belief that this madness, too, will pass. And while the madness persists, we need not participate, not even if we have to employ Ketman. The conservative can be destroyed only by accepting, without shame, some portion of the shabby and dishonest rewards of the welfare state. If he is to maintain his integrity, if he is to find tranquillity in his innermost being, he may not participate in activities and condescensions of which he cannot approve. In this attitude will come his victory, which he seeks for himself. And it is this victory alone which makes him unique and will give him peace of mind which aspirants to

tyranny are denied. "A Reader" has begun that long journey home. May he show courage equal to his understanding. There are wells of strength, also, available to those who cherish man, the proven wisdom of man, and his Creator.

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THE ARTICLE BY George A. Lundberg, in the Summer issue of *MODERN AGE*, "Some Neglected Aspects of the 'Minorities' Problem," was a very interesting and informative one. He is quite correct in pointing out that we value the freedom to associate with anyone we like for whatever reasons and that this right may come into conflict with certain claims of minorities. I have no quarrel with Mr. Lundberg's sociological points. What I do find objectionable are the philosophical remarks he makes on the side, which seem to me to be extremely dangerous in their implications.

Mr. Lundberg writes "I have no illusions about the nature of these rights or about any others, including the most 'inalienable'. They come into existence by community consensus and continue to exist only as long as community consensus supports them." This is the kind of philosophical remark I referred to. When Mr. Lundberg tells us how many people believe that a right is inalienable, that is a scientific statement. But with what statistics can we determine whether a right is actually inalienable or not? When people speak of an inalienable right, they mean that not even communities such as existed in Nazi Germany or exist in Communist Russia which violate such a right can actually destroy its validity. The 'inalienable' right still stands in the same place in the moral order no matter