

REVIEWS

The Cult of Mediocrity

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In the Country of the Young, by John W. Aldridge, *New York: Harper and Row, 1970. 128 pp. \$5.00.*

Revolution As Theatre: Notes on the New Radical Style, by Robert Brustein, *New York: Liveright, 1971. 170 pp. \$5.95.*

I

"STANDARDS" AND "DISCIPLINE" are not popular words nowadays. To judge by the present cultural climate, they are very much in neglect, as much absent as chaos and barbarism are present. Even sadder than that they are absent is that among intellectuals themselves and in institutions traditionally the upholders of culture, "standards" and "discipline" are often treated as "irrelevant" words as useless and dead as, say, "metaphysics." When, therefore, one thinks of these two words, one must immediately think of the intellectuals' betrayal of them; one must think, that is, of all the grim connotations of Julien Benda's phrase, *la trahison des clercs*. Hence, more than ever one needs to recall the special meanings of these words in their cultural contexts. They require the courage of our attention now, even at this midnight hour of a "dissolving society," the dissolution being made evident in everything around us: in tastelessness, in insensibility,

in ugliness, in what the British poet Roy Fuller has (too politely) called the "new nihilism."

There are those, we know only too well, who would dismiss the validity of this indictment of the cultural state. Any glance at the (monolithic) liberal press should be evidence enough. Such a glance, of course, returns us to the need for definitions of the words "standards" and "discipline," our liberal spokesmen being their most flagrant violators. And it is perhaps best to start with standards, always the arch-enemy of the meretricious. Standards are what are resistant to the transient and the merely experimental. They *stand* for what is immutable, the proved and the transcendent; for what is of ultimate and permanent worth; for what gives form and order to value and to vision, to judgment, to principle, faithful in promise yet cognizant of limits. Standards are the discriminating formulation of truths that measure man against the greater truths of eternity. They are a bulwark against formlessness and falseness; inevitably they are rooted in hierarchy—a hierarchy of merit. Discipline, on the other hand, embodies the informing presence and application of standards. It is their next of kin, so to speak, the active transmitter of achieved forms, the supreme refiner and refinement of the order of life and thought, of the conditions of man and his civilization. It is a consubstantiating rigor operating between the defined and the un-

defined. Thus it is the power of exertion that refines what it defines. Discipline in its best and absolute sense is an antidote against extremes, for it must work in terms of limits.

These definitions are called for here not because there is need for some exercise in words but rather because a small but important spirit of protest needs to be heard. Not all intellectuals, after all, are dupes of the liberal line. Not all intellectuals have betrayed either their cultural charge or their understanding of what values make for organic cultural continuity. There is yet a remnant that survives and that warns of dire cultural consequences which are emerging from the erosion of standards and of discipline. The situation, as they try to make us aware, is rotting. Their warnings, like the two words they revere, are equally unpopular. But they are both diagnostic and necessary, and it is one of the infrequent good fortunes of this bleak phase of culture, and specifically American culture (though the whole of Western culture fits the diagnosis), that voices of a remnant can still be heard, in spite of the oracles of the liberal press and in spite of the liberal coterie-world dictating American taste and style.

John W. Aldridge in his *In the Country of the Young* and Robert Brustein in his *Revolution As Theatre* are representative of those few intellectuals (others are Jacques Barzun, Daniel Boorstin, Oscar Handlin, and Sidney Hook) willing to question the way things have been going in the United States, especially during the decade just passed. Aldridge and Brustein are distinguished educators and writers, the former a professor of English at the University of Michigan, the latter Dean of the Yale Drama School. Both are in touch with the young and are eminently aware of what is happening in higher education, and both are profoundly disturbed by it. In advancing what Aldridge calls "the case of critical skepticism" and in speaking up for standards and for discipline, they are certainly not going to receive accolades from "the

current armies of self-righteous puberty and dissident studentism," to quote Aldridge's description. Likewise, the response of intellectuals themselves to those who, in Brustein's words, believe that "it is not just the cult of amateurism that is beginning to breach the walls of professionalism, but that the professionals are throwing over ladders and helping their assailants over the top," will not be enthusiastic, to say the least. For the concept of professionalism, as Brustein iterates, is under assault today not only by the young but also by professionals who have succumbed to the "radical style." This bastard alliance of the clenched fist and the clenched mind can lead only to disintegration in the cultural sense that Aldridge discloses in the first quotation below as well as in the attendant educational problems that Brustein points to in the second quotation:

. . . Their [youth's] actions derive not from a coherent ideology or even a coherent emotional attitude but more nearly resemble a series of random gestures enacted in a climate of metaphysical confusion. One notices, for example, that although they are passionate about causes and issues—especially as these relate to the quantitative, material problems of society—they are strangely indifferent to questions of quality, as well as to the process of intellectual discrimination and analysis by which qualitative judgments are made.

Education is used not for the acquisition of knowledge or for the development of the critical temperament, but rather for experiments in life styles, political manipulation and social engineering, while men of reason founder in a miasma of doubts, uncertainties, and petty surrenders.

To some these observations will sound strange, even heretical, accustomed as they are to equate the "thoughts" of a Jerry Rubin or a Herbert Marcuse (or some other "infantile leftist" who may come along)¹

with wisdom. And we are reminded once more that demands for standards and discipline can hardly have the priority of "revolution for the hell of it" or the excitement of the "guerilla theater" in Chicago and elsewhere. But, then, exponents of standards and discipline in a century that has increasingly enshrined mediocrity have not fared well. One thinks, for instance, of the derisive smiles on the faces of some professionals (and of the young—when and if they can recognize the names) when, for example, T. E. Hulme, Irving Babbitt, and T. S. Eliot are mentioned. (Interestingly, students are initially responsive to Eliot until their professors "tell it like it is" regarding Eliot's elitist "sociological" views!) For the professionals, then, it would be particularly worthwhile to be persuaded to read these books by Aldridge and by Brustein. Odd that they should need any persuasion at all, but dispassionate habits of scholarship do not seem to go with "the new radical style" (not even at Harvard), and ours is a time when intellectual work in higher education is surrendering to what Brustein calls a "monochromatic amateurism in which everybody has opinions, few have facts, nobody has an idea."

II

BRUSTEIN'S BOOK, since it centers on particular conditions in contemporary education, must be read in the light of Aldridge's, which examines some of the cultural conditions that give rise to cultural and intellectual breakdown. Aldridge's book has the added benefit of going to the roots of our cultural *malaise*, insofar as it is concerned with the ultimate question of values, cultural and personal. His preoccupation is with standards of culture and with their problematic role in contemporary American culture and, consequently, with their impingement on the manners, the morals, the social concerns of the young. The essentially metaphysical artifacts of contemporary American culture are the object of his attention. Undoubtedly this is an

old-fashioned approach, yet it is one that takes courage these days. With an honesty and a courage that few professionals dare assert and fewer dare practice, Aldridge expresses a minority view of culture; but it is the view of the minority that alone speaks for and transmits the cultural values that a collectivized society abhors and invariably submits to the processes of democratization and standardization. Although he is primarily concerned with "the country of the young" of today, he treats the whole American cultural scene since World War II. The power that the young wield today, Aldridge believes, is pervasive—"programming our minds to work within alternatives which *they* have invented, and forcing us to conform to *their* authoritarianism and bureaucratic plans for the renovation of the modern world." Throughout his book Aldridge is hardhitting; his tone is uncompromising but refreshing at a time when the "radical style" remains largely unchallenged.

For some of the major causes of the sad condition of the American cultural scene today Aldridge fixes his attention on the war years and the postwar years: "We had brought no resources with us out of the past, no norms or precedents of conduct, no tradition of amenities or graces, luxuries or even comforts." As a result what has prevailed is a lack of qualitative attitudes; "life in America became frozen—apparently for good—at the level of utilitarian existence." This reliance on the utilitarian, on "social engineering," he stresses, has led to a life style antagonistic to aesthetic and civilizing standards. Growing affluence and permissiveness, moreover, have overwhelmed any sense of standards or discipline, without which American society, in both its inner and its outer semblances, has steadily given way to the ugly, the amorphous, the expedient. The emerging American cultural ethos in the years after 1945 was based essentially on a materialistic dream-world. Such an ethos could hardly be anything less than specious, as parents and children saw their problems in terms

of mechanical and technical solutions, "through legislative and programmatic action and the acquisition of higher incomes, bigger houses, better cars, and more goods and services."

The speciousness of such an ethos is characterized by a romanticism and a naturalism that lead to loss of control and that Babbitt equates with "a merely temperamental insurrection against convention." This is another way of saying that the tragic vision was gradually replaced by the absurd on the one hand and the progressivist on the other. (The disappearance of the religious element in life has its relevance here. "We introduce into human things," as T. E. Hulme observed, "the *Perfection* that properly belongs only to the divine, and thus confuse both human and divine things by not clearly separating them.") It is precisely the speciousness of the contemporary American cultural ethos that Aldridge focuses on in this observation:

They [parents] would scarcely be in a position to instruct their children in the unpopular but necessary wisdom that man is innately weak and imperfect, that human progress is slow and may even be illusory, that political systems cannot always be depended upon to cure the world's ills, that measures cannot always be taken, and that sometimes the most serious problems a man may face are those that exist between himself and his courage or conscience. . . . And because they did not, their children have grown up with apparently no awareness of, or tolerance for, human limitation, and no understanding of the obstacles that may stand in the way of the changes they are so anxious to bring about in our society. They think today in morally purist and naïve terms perhaps because they have never experienced the impurities of the human condition, as those impurities might have been represented to them by their parents.

Aldridge's small book could have been sub-titled "Notes on the Shaping of the American Character." His conclusions are nothing less than sobering in conveying what is currently very much a *malaise* in this country, particularly among young people. Since the end of World War II it has been downhill all the way, it would appear, as far as "the human life . . . the life of feeling and the life of thought" are concerned. Not only a debased aesthetic sensibility but also a corrosive anti-intellectualism—a detestation of cultural standards and discipline—have characterized American attitudes, formed as they have been by quantitative concerns. Young people today, Aldridge shows, as the inheritors of such an ethos, may be "passionate about causes and issues—especially as these relate to the quantitative, material problems of society—[but] they are strangely indifferent to questions of quality, as well as to the processes of intellectual discrimination and analysis by which qualitative judgments are made." Hence, too, one can understand the reasons for all the fuss over legislative and administrative actions, cultural surrogates that do not require a discriminating, critical faculty, and the reasons for the absence, in short, of the standards and the discipline that give any permanent value to existence beyond mere animality. D. H. Lawrence summarized this problem nearly a half-century ago:

The tortures of psychic starvation which civilized people proceed to suffer, once they have solved the bread-and-butter problem of alimentation, will not bear thought.

That Aldridge is right to observe that the young, lacking the discriminating quality, "have very little sense of personal life and an overwhelming sense of collective life," is not to be denied when one thinks of their public actions in the last few years. A boring sameness of looks, of dress, of speech, of movement, of taste is pervasive, defying, with sanctimonious arrogance (and a delu-

sive piety, which the young seem to have assumed as their special moral province), finely civilized conduct and, even more, all sense of *pudeur*. Indeed, what Aldridge makes us see is that the young often lack a sense of moderation, that it is extremism that dictates their attitudes and gestures. If not ignorance, then it is surely irreverence that, as Aldridge suggests, dominates them. At the root of their irreverence, he points out, is the long-recognized fact (hardly ever admitted by parents or teachers or leaders, except in *sotto voce*) that the "children of affluence and permissiveness" have never had to contend at any point of their lives with "the irritant of necessity" in their physical environment or with "the irritant of guilt" in their emotional environment.

And we are reminded once again of the absence of the tragic sense of life—and why simplistic formulas for changing the world are so abundant; why the body and not the soul is the solitary standard of measure today (even, alas, in that great conservatrix of tradition, the Roman Catholic Church, to judge by some of the demands and the actions—indeed, the spectacle and the shame, as Pope Paul VI lamented recently—of some of the clergy). Relativism, subjectivism, inordinate self-righteousness, naïve idealism, pragmatism, and perhaps worst of all sentimentalism have been steadily removing the tragic principle to the extreme that, as Aldridge reminds us, the modern inheritors of such an ethos illustrate in their lives and actions. In this respect, Dostoevsky's prophetic passage in his Epilogue to *Crime and Punishment* has much truth for our time, such are the frightening parallels of Raskolnikov's vision of evil in this novel of 1860 and the enactment of that vision in its peculiarly American contexts as seen by Aldridge in *In the Country of the Young*:

But never [Dostoevsky writes] had people considered themselves as wise and as strong in their pursuit of truth as these plague-ridden people. Never had

they thought their decisions, their scientific conclusions, and their moral convictions so unshakeable or so incontrovertibly right. Whole villages, whole towns and peoples became infected and went mad. They were in a state of constant alarm. They did not understand each other. Each of them believed that the truth only resided in him, and was miserable looking at the others, and smote his breast, wept, and wrung his hands. . . . In the cities the tocsin was sounded all day long: they called everyone together, but no one knew who had summoned them or why they had been summoned, and all were in a state of great alarm.

III

WHAT, IN THE present cultural drift and portent, becomes especially distressing to consider is the future of humanity. Where are we going? This is a question that Aldridge asks. And the question becomes desperate when one finds that the traditional upholders of cultural standards and discipline—e.g., the Church and our educational institutions—are no longer either respected or respectable, the latter trait being of their own making, as these institutions have consistently surrendered to and placated the young in the guise of an "orthodoxy of enlightenment" (to apply here a phrase of the British critic F. R. Leavis). Professionals by training, experience, skill, and achievement, who should know the values of standards and of discipline, have, in other words, willingly allowed these values to crumble. This is the major point made by Brustein, and in it he validates the warnings voiced by Aldridge. By abrogating their responsibilities professionals capitulate to amateurs and to "the cult of amateurism" that prevails in the educational field:

. . . the system of hierarchy—so infuriating to a democratic society, yet so essential to its survival—begins to break

down, and men cannot hold firmly to their judgments, values, and standards.

A society succumbing to the attitudes—the *malaise*—that Aldridge analyzes must inevitably come to the precarious conditions that Brusteine describes as an educational crisis. Educators themselves must share the shame (along, to be sure, with parents and administrators—with the deans and their deaneries that constitute such a top-heavy and expensive segment of education); they must share the blame for this crisis by continually sacrificing standards and discipline, which comprise the foundation of any culture and which Irving Babbitt, writing on “President Eliot and American Education” in *Forum* (January 1929), scrutinized in the way that brought him so much animosity, particularly from his teaching colleagues:

At the bottom of the whole educational debate, as I have been trying to show, is the debate between a religious-humanistic and a utilitarian-sentimental philosophy. This opposition, involving as it does first principles, is not subject to compromise or mediation. Those who attempt such mediation are not humanists but Laodiceans. Many persons who deem themselves moderate are in fact only muddled.

(Since the time of President Eliot, educators have become even more muddled, more vacillating, more timid, flabby, cowardly, and deserving of the fate of trimmers: *Sed quia tepidus es, et nec frigidus, nec calidus, incipiam te evomere ex ore meo* [Rev. III: 16].)

The problems besetting American education today are neither new nor immediate; they have been developing in scope and gravity during the last fifty years. Of course, the main problem on the American cultural scene has always been that of mediocrity, and it is an enforced, one could say regulated and plotted, mediocrity that has been gradually allowed to strangle American education in its qualitative sense.

How to protect educational quality has been a battle of standards and of discipline fought by the remnant during this long period. But the battle has been a losing one. Mediocrities in the profession have made for more mediocrity—a compulsive mediocrity. For a long time public school education was the battleground of the quantitative vs. the qualitative. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, when the problem of education—what kind of education—had reached its climactic point, a few brave minds managed to focus on the problems and in some ways to encourage debate. Mortimer Smith's *And Madly Teach* (1949), Bernard Iddings Bell's *Crisis in Education* (1949), Albert Lynd's *Quackery in the Public Schools* (1953), Arthur E. Bestor's *Educational Wasteland* (1953), and Russell Kirk's *Academic Freedom* (1955) did much to underline a minority view. The results of their efforts were another matter. For, to judge by today's young people, who are the products of the subsequent educational process in the public schools, something went wrong. Educational standards and discipline have steadily given way to nominalism and “progressivism.” Indeed, what is happening at the present time in the American university is the culmination of a destructive process that, initially occurring in public school education, weakens the entire educational process until it may become inoperative.

It is the “pernicious utilitarianism,” the egalitarian ethos (in essence, a *malaise*) that Brusteine sees destroying the very concept of university education—

The idea [he writes]—so central to scholarship—that there is an inherited body of knowledge to be transmitted from one generation to another—loses favor because it puts the student in an unacceptably subordinate position, with the result that the learning process gives way to a general free-for-all in which one man's opinion is as good as another's.—

Such is the epitomizing adulterative philosophy of a theoretical and applied mediocrity. The Hellenic concept of excellence, always central to the humanities, has been replaced by the specious programmatic measurement of the social sciences—an ultimate result of what in earlier years was termed the “democracy of the subjects.” It is precisely this inherited “democracy” that is now being felt in the breaking down, or the proletarianization, of a hierarchy of merit and a hierarchy of values. Neither standards nor discipline, as the foundation of any hierarchy in its richest cultural sense (spiritual, intellectual, humane), can be tolerated by the proletarian attitude.

To capture and devastate American university education is the final stage of the attack on American cultural life itself. (Indeed, the bureaucratization of the university structure, in terms of an endless creation of student-faculty committees, as Aldridge and Brustein indicate, is symptomatic of what the educational ideologues have been conspiring to do all along, with the schools of education being perhaps the most notorious breeding-ground for the disdainers of standards and of discipline and for the canon of collectivized attitudes.) In this respect it is not hard to trace the collectivist (mob!) tendencies of the young and their failure “to develop the perspective of otherness,” in Aldridge’s phrase. How, surely, can the young be otherwise than they are, as Aldridge shows in the following passage, when their formative setting has all along been a dehumanized group consciousness:

In fact, they must be the first generation in history to see itself from the outset as a herd rather than as an aggregate of private persons who happen to be the same age. Consequently instead of feeling separate and aloof from the masses and contemptuous of the concerns of the masses, they identify psychologically with the masses, and so quite naturally conceive of the world’s salvation in collective terms.

IV

AND HOW, it will be asked, has all this been allowed to happen? A utilitarian-sentimental society no doubt hates to admit to failure and thus makes for the “irresponsibles.” Indeed, modern American society, far from being a “great society,” is thoroughly irresponsible. It is a society that, as both Aldridge and Brustein depict, has consistently allowed the ideologues of mediocrity to shake foundations and to destroy ancient edifices. In the end the origin of this cultural destructiveness remains as it was thirty years ago, when Lewis Mumford exposed it in *The New Republic* (April 29, 1940): “the corruption of liberalism.” The ideologues, then and today, are precisely those “pragmatic liberals” whose doctrines, rooted in Voltaire and Rousseau, “grew up in the eighteenth century out of a rather adolescent pride in the scientific conquest of nature and the invention of power machinery.” Unlike “ideal liberalism,” the principles of which belong to Western and Christian humanist tradition and have as their strength universality and historical continuity, “pragmatic Liberalism,” Mumford maintains, is preoccupied with the machinery of life. And he continues in terms that help to crystallize the kind of unstable thinking that has led to the cultural collapse that, in its most immediate offshoots, *In the Country of the Young* and *Revolution As Theatre* dramatically render:

It was characteristic of this creed to overemphasize the part played by political and mechanical invention, by abstract thought and political contrivance. And accordingly it minimized the role of instinct, tradition, history; it was unaware of the dark forces of the unconscious; it was suspicious of either the capricious or the incalculable, for the only universe it could rule was a measured one, and the only type of human character it could understand was the utilitarian one. That there are modes of insight into

man and into the cosmos which science does not possess, the liberal did not suspect; he took for granted that the emotional and spiritual life of man needs no other foundation than the rational, utilitarian activities associated with the getting of a living. Hence, finally, liberalism's progressive neglect of the fields of aesthetics, ethics and religion.

The disintegration of standards and discipline in contemporary American culture reflects the irrevocable influences of the ideology of a disintegrated liberalism. Cultural disintegration and educational mediocrity go hand-in-hand, they are the result of the pragmatic liberal's unclear and often confused, as well as sentimental, awareness of ethical ideas, borrowing, as Mumford notes, "here a scrap of Kant or Bentham or again a dash of Machiavelli, pacifist Quakers one moment and quaking Nietzscheans the next." The worst characteristic of pragmatic liberalism is its lack of firm ethical judgments, hence its sentimentality and its immaturity of vision. Hence, too, aesthetic concerns, moral discipline, the habits of contemplation and of diligent evaluation are to the pragmatic liberal "mere spiritual gymnastics." Their panaceas as a result are based on simplistic external solutions: the machine, measurement, legislative actions, "methods of production"—"the mere surface of living." Pragmatic liberals have failed, in a word, "to deal with the first and last things," as Mumford asserts: to deal with internal human experience in its corruption, its evil, its irrationalism, or even its fact of death. Yet the ideology of this pragmatic liberalism has been able, year by year and decade by decade, to displace cultural standards and discipline to the point of chaos and of anarchy that Aldridge and Brustein bemoan. Its Marxizing illusions, its dialectic, are precisely what have led to the failure found everywhere in American cultural life and particularly in its most vulnerable area—education. Mumford thus notes the central weakness of pragmatic liberalism: "Its

color-blindness to moral values is its most serious weakness today; hence it cannot distinguish between barbarism and civilization."

V

NOW THE EXTENT and the gravity of this barbarism are what the books by Aldridge and Brustein are all about. In a deep sense the ascendant barbarism is tantamount to the subordination of humane culture in a proletarian victory. Undoubtedly Aldridge and Brustein will be dubbed Luddites by pragmatic liberals. Nevertheless the need for resisting barbarism, technological or sexual or institutional, for resisting a leveling process, is an acute one. "A general impoverishment of life—that is the threat," observes Dr. Leavis, "that, ironically, accompanies the technological advance and the rising standard of living; and we are all involved." This same impoverishment today poses for American, for Western, civilization, and for education, the university especially, the great dilemma. Can the university, to paraphrase Brustein's words, continue to rest on the rock on which it is founded—the search for truth—and not the implementation of ideology? Is it possible to preserve the private side of university professionalism that, like the private side of man, is not so easily adapted to social and political purposes? Are the universities, to cite Aldridge's words here, to be "primarily rebel encampments, forums of political debate, or media for the distribution of pamphlets . . . [or] institutions whose first function is to train intelligence and preserve cultural standards"?

These are paramount questions in an age of the diminution of cultural standards and of a hostility to discipline. And the responses to these questions so far are not encouraging. The ideologues of pragmatic liberalism, for all their naïveté and delusion, have been doing their job with a vengeance. In marshalling support for their so-called reforms these ideologues have even insisted that the young today, reflect-

ing the "positive" cultural transformations evolving during the last fifty years, are more sensitive, more committed, more aware, more involved, more intelligent than preceding generations. Aldridge's and Brustein's books, needless to say, puncture this myth. They also call to mind the need for what Mumford speaks of as "a recrystallization of the positive values of life, and an understanding of the basic issues of good and evil, of power and form, of force and grace, in the actual world." They remind one, that is to say, of the need for the reaffirmation of standards and the reassertion of discipline, without which American culture will continue to drift from barbarism to nightmare.

It may well be that the present battle in and for the university is one that will decide whether what might be called the *meta*-barbaric world to which the liberal ideologues are leading us will be the final reality or not. Will America's educators have the guts to fight off the drift into this *meta*-barbaric world? This is the overarching question that Aldridge and Brustein are asking, "in fear and trembling," so to speak. Developments in the 1960's, unfortunately, have hastened the drift, even as the pusillanimity of the American professoriate

I owe this phrase to Oscar Handlin's "The Vulnerability of the American University," *Encounter* (July 1970), pp. 22-30. His description of the "turtle-necked worshippers" of the young must be quoted, such is its insight into the American professoriate of the recent decade: "They see

has led to a surrender of responsibility. Indeed, this pusillanimity is one of the great scandals of the age. It would be as foolhardy as it is unreal to paint an optimistic picture of American education today. The situation is certainly no less dismal than it was back in the early 1930's, when T. S. Eliot wrote in *The Criterion*:

We seem nowadays to be committed to the task of giving some sort of education to everybody. Education is a training of the mind and of the sensibility, an intellectual and an emotional discipline. In a society in which this discipline is neglected, a society which uses words instead of thoughts and feelings, one may expect any sort of religious, moral, social and political aberration, and eventual decomposition or petrification. And we seem to have little to hope from the official representatives of education.

The modern situation, in confirming Eliot's note of hopelessness, remains generally unchanged; it has even worsened. *Meta*-barbaric man now dances and fornicates in the streets, and the saving remnant, protesting but "very small and feeble," waits to be called.

love in the eyes of the Visigoths who storm through their offices. To act otherwise would jeopardize the gains so recently made, the pleasures so little enjoyed. Accommodate! Better to yield a little here, give away a little there. It can't be called rape so long as the victim yells loudly enough that he likes it."

The Nihilist Heresiarch

DONALD ATWELL ZOLL

Contra Marcuse, by Eliseo Vivas, *New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1971.* 236 pp. \$8.95.

I

PROFESSOR HERBERT MARCUSE has left no one in any doubt that it is his intention to throw down the gauntlet to American society. Whether it is his purpose to refute the foundational assumptions of Western culture or to hasten the advent of bloody revolution may be in question. Not contentious, however, is the fact that, merited or not, he has become an iconoclast of national dimensions and the much-quoted authority for a sizeable body of encomiasts who form a part of the contemporary political Left. Given the degree of provocation provided by Professor Marcuse, particularly in his more recent writings, it is somewhat surprising that few have bent down to retrieve his glove and fewer still—perhaps no one prior to Professor Vivas' book-length essay—have met him head-on, so to speak, framing a comprehensive rebuttal to his sweeping castigations of contemporary society. I am not sure why this is so, especially considering the fact that Professor Marcuse's position philosophically speaking does not seem all that formidable. This reviewer can recall being asked to participate in a public debate with Professor Marcuse (which did not materialize through no lack of enthusiasm on the part of the reviewer) and not being paralyzed with apprehension. I am inclined to think rather that a certain

philosophical fastidiousness inhibits many who might otherwise enter the lists against him. The refutation might I imagine introduce a certain primal intensity not always congenial to the philosophical temperament.

It is, therefore, distinctly worth a passing note that when Marcuse's challenge was finally accepted it was by a philosopher whose prior contributions bespeak a particularly delicate sense of the philosophically fastidious. Eliseo Vivas' reputation as a philosopher rests, in large part, upon reflections in the fields of ethics and aesthetics that reveal an extraordinary measure of refined sensitivity, a capacity for nuance, a humanistic tolerance and, indeed, an impeccable regard for the scholarly courtesies. Yet this was the man who was willing to enter the predictably disagreeable fray, the man who volunteered to invade the *Walpurgisnacht* of Marcusean nihilism. This situation is not as paradoxical as it might seem. Perhaps the answer to Professor Marcuse's often violently enunciated condemnation of the traditional conventions if not values of Western civilization could only be forthcoming from someone whose delicacy of attitude is intolerably affronted by the implications of Marcuse's neo-primitivism. Perhaps the counterstatement must be forged in passion; perhaps it must be an outcry of moral indignation. If I read *Contra Marcuse* accurately, this would appear to be the genesis of the work.

Thus, it must be said of Professor Vivas' book that it is a courageous one, a candid one, often an unconventional one, and, too,