

A. J. Muste

1885—1967

By NAT HENTOFF

I FIRST SAW A. J. Muste one evening in the spring of 1960. He was speaking at Community Church in New York. I knew, of course, that he was a pacifist and I had some vague knowledge of his activity decades before in the labor movement and, for a brief period, as a Trotskyite. But I didn't know the man. He was the last to speak that night, as he often was. Tall, lean, he spoke softly, though firmly. He distilled what had gone before and went on to analyze with uncommon clarity the nature and interrelationships of the forces and the myths that kept preventing peace.

There was no immediate charisma. He did hold my attention, but by the thrust of his logic rather than by the resonance of his presence. A few days later he led a thousand people in refusing to take shelter at City Hall Park during the civil defense drill. (Five years before there had only been A. J. and twenty-five others in the first act of civil disobedience in New York against the drills.) He stood there, surrounded by young people, waiting to be arrested, as he had been in the past. That year the police passed him by, but soon there were no more civil defense drills involving orders to the populace to take shelter. The number of protesters was now too high.

Curious about the man, I spent much of the next two years with him. It was immediately clear that he was the center of the otherwise contentiously heterogeneous peace movement in the United States as well as a unifying force in international peace activity. There was no one else so thoroughly trusted and respected by all the doughty factions. There was no one else so open and expert in keeping open bridges of communication, in encouraging and advising on all manner of ideas and projects. There was no one else who, on the one hand, was so incisively analytical about what he used to term "the objective situation," and yet on the other hand so resiliently committed to possibility.

During that time, and in the years after, he changed my life. I can't tell you how he did it. It wasn't by force of awe. I knew he was an extraordinary man, but I was always easy in his presence. He had *that* quality—putting you

at ease—to a greater degree than anyone I've known. Aging Quakers, young students in the New Left, fiercely skeptical black militants, academicians, middle-aged women looking for relevance beyond their families—all had no problem getting through to A. J.

Perhaps I do know how he changed my life. Roy Finch, a professor of philosophy at Sarah Lawrence, explained the process better than anyone else: "This is an awfully smooth world and contains very few men of absolute principle. A. J. has stood so far on that absolute end of the spectrum of principle that he's influenced thousands of people to at least move in his direction, and they have influenced others."

That's what it is. Every time I saw him, read an article by him—or now think of him—he was a man against whom I could measure myself. Not that he was a man of saintly purity. He made mistakes, he could be stubborn, he had a deft (though not at all malicious) wit, he "wasted" his time at baseball double-headers and at Marx Brothers movies. But he was all of a piece. What he did he did totally. As a young minister during the First World War, he had declared his pacifism and as a result he had to leave his church in Newtonville, Massachusetts. In 1919, as an early preacher of the social gospel, he had become one of the leaders of the long, bloody textile strike in Lawrence. In the 1920s and early 1930s, he was a radical in the labor movement, a prescient advocate of industrial unionism.

For a few years in the 1930s, A. J. turned Marxist-Leninist, and so long as he traveled that route, he made no pretense at still being a Christian pacifist. When he returned to the Church and to pacifism in 1936, he was again fully committed and consistent. During his long years with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which he served as executive secretary, his example moved and shaped young men who later became movers and shapers in civil rights (James Farmer, Martin Luther King, Bayard Rustin) and in other directions toward nonviolent, basic change in the society.

He was an organizational man and yet he was so much the individual man. In 1952, he wrote: "Precisely on that day when the individual appears to be utterly hopeless, to 'have no choice,' when the aim of the 'system' is to convince him that he is helpless as an individual and that the only way to meet



—Wide World.

A. J. Muste—"so utterly free."

regimentation is by regimentation, there is absolutely no hope save in going back to the beginning. The human being, the child of God, must assert his humanity and his sonship again. He must exercise the choice which is no longer accorded him by society. [It is a choice] which, 'naked, weaponless, armorless, without shield or spear, but only with naked hands and open eyes,' he must create again. He must understand that this naked human being is the one *real* thing in the face of the machines and the mechanized institutions of our age."

And so the naked human being that was A. J. Muste climbed over the fence at a missile base in Nebraska, protested against nuclear testing on the White House lawn and in Moscow's Red Square, wrote, organized, went to Hanoi, and in his last days was chairman of the April 15 Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam.

Throughout all these years and all these activities, A. J. changed the very nature of pacifism in the United States, and he involved many, like myself, who are not absolute pacifists and who have no God. He did this by being himself and by insistently reminding us that "we cannot have peace if we are concerned only with peace. War is not an accident. It is the logical outcome of a certain way of life. If we want to attack war, we have to attack that way of life."

I remember A. J. in motion—to a meeting, to a conference in another city, or late at night on the way home with reading to do and newspapers to clip. And I remember the amusement so often in his eyes. Living it so fully, he enjoyed life enormously. He was so utterly free a man. And that perhaps is why many young people continued to listen to him in these years of the widening generational chasm. He showed them it was possible to remain free, to remain *real*.

Nat Hentoff is the author of *Peace Agitator: The Story of A. J. Muste*, and editor of the newly published *The Essays of A. J. Muste*.

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The Environment of Language

THE WORDS men use, Julian Huxley once said, not only express but shape their ideas. Language is an instrument; it is even more an environment. It has as much to do with the philosophical and political conditioning of a society as geography or climate. The role of language in contributing to men's problems and their prospects is the subject of an imaginative and valuable study now getting under way at Pro Deo University in Rome, which is winning recognition in world university circles for putting advanced scholarship to work for the concept of a world community.

One aspect of the Pro Deo study, as might be expected, has to do with the art of conveying precise meaning from one language to another. Stuart Chase, one of America's leading semanticists, has pointed out that when an English speaker at the United Nations uses the expression "I assume," the French interpreter may say "I deduce" and the Russian interpreter may say "I consider." When Pope Paul VI sent a cable to Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin and Party Chairman Leonid Brezhnev on their accession to office, he expressed the hope that the historic aspirations of the Russian people for a fuller life would be advanced under the new leadership. As translated into Russian by the Vatican's own interpreter, the Pope's expression of hope came out in a way that made it appear that the Pope was making known his endorsement of the new regime. The eventual clarification was inevitably awkward for all concerned.

The Pro Deo study, however, will not be confined to problems of precise trans-

lation. The major emphasis has to do with something even more fundamental: the dangerous misconceptions and prejudices that take root in language and that undermine human values. The color of a man's skin, for example, is tied to plus-or-minus words that inevitably condition human attitudes. The words "black" and "white," as defined in Western culture, are heavily loaded. "Black" has all sorts of unfavorable connotations; "white" is almost all favorable. One of the more interesting papers being studied by the Pro Deo scholars is by Ossie Davis, the author and actor. Mr. Davis, a Negro, concluded on the basis of a detailed study of dictionaries and *Roget's Thesaurus* that the English language was his enemy. In *Roget's*, he counted 120 synonyms for "blackness," most of them with unpleasant connotations: blot, blotch, blight, smut, smudge, sully, begrime, soot, becloud, obscure, dingy, murky, threatening, frowning, foreboding, forbidden, sinister, baneful, dismal, evil, wicked, malignant, deadly, secretive, unclean, unwashed, foul, blacklist, black book, black-hearted, etc. Incorporated in the same listing were words such as Negro, nigger, and darky.

In the same *Roget's*, Mr. Davis found 134 synonyms for the word "white," almost all of them with favorable connotations: purity, cleanness, bright, shining, fair, blonde, stainless, chaste, unblemished, unsullied, innocent, honorable, upright, just, straightforward, genuine, trustworthy, honesty, etc. "White" as a racial designation was, of course, included in this tally of desirable terms.

No less invidious than black are some

of the words associated with the color yellow: coward, conniver, baseness, fear, effeminacy, funk, soft, spiritless, poltroonery, pusillanimity, timidity, milk-sop, recreant, sneak, lilylivered, etc. Oriental peoples are included in the listing.

As a matter of factual accuracy, white, black, and yellow as colors are not descriptive of races. The coloration range of so-called white people may run from pale olive to mottled pink. So-called colored people run from light beige to mahogany. Absolute color designations—white, black, red, yellow—are not merely inaccurate; they have become symbolic rather than descriptive. It will be argued, of course, that definitions of color and the connotations that go with them are independent of sociological implications. There is no getting around the fact, it will be said, that whiteness means cleanliness and blackness means dirtiness. Are we to doctor the dictionary in order to achieve a social good? What this line of argument misses is that people in Western cultures do not realize the extent to which their racial attitudes have been conditioned since early childhood by the power of words to ennoble or condemn, augment or detract, glorify or demean. Negative language infects the subconscious of most Western people from the time they first learn to speak. Prejudice is not merely imparted or superimposed. It is metabolized in the bloodstream of society. What is needed is not so much a change in language as an awareness of the power of words to condition attitudes. If we can at least recognize the underpinnings of prejudice, we may be in a position to deal with the effects.

To be sure, Western languages have no monopoly on words with connotations that affect judgment. In Chinese, whiteness means cleanliness, but it can also mean bloodlessness, coldness, frigidity, absence of feeling, weakness, insensitivity. Also in Chinese, yellowness is associated with sunshine, openness, beauty, flowering, etc. Similarly, the word black in many African tongues has connotations of strength, certainty, recognizability, integrity, while white is associated with paleness, anemia, unnaturalness, deviousness, untrustworthiness.

The purpose of Pro Deo University in undertaking this study is not just to demonstrate that most cultures tend to be self-serving in their language. The purpose is to give educational substance to the belief that it will take all the adroitness and sensitivity of which the human species is capable if it is to be sustained. Earth-dwellers now have the choice of making their world into a neighborhood or a crematorium. Language is one of the factors in that option. The right words may not automatically produce the right actions but they are an essential part of the process. —N.C.