

## Progress Be Damned: A Cantanker

What we call progress often turns out to be no more than motion, and the motion retrograde.

When our boys were small enough to want toys (as distinct from autos, hi-fi equipment, girls, and other elaborate gear), I spent years of blood and hope on expensive battery-driven toys that went out of commission the first time they were slammed. Of all my ventures into Toyland, my only success was an elaborate set of modular-unit, hardwood building blocks with which the boys built thousands of castles that rose above their heads. When at last they left the set to gather dust, I packed it in a stout cardboard box and stored it in the cold cellar. The box is still there. If time produces grandchildren to add to present disaster, I shall haul those blocks upstairs again, as good as new. All the other toys—a fat poke's worth—have gone from disappointment to junk, but that set is good for generations yet.

And to each new generation it will be everything it was to the first. A child is not a mechanism of technical "progress" but a bundle of primitive emotions in need of primitive satisfactions. Being a child, of course, he is a sucker for the toymakers' TV come-ons. But having hooked him with glitter, those con men know they have nothing to sell him but disappointment. Damn toymakers—most of them anyhow.

Damn all technology that serves only to give a plastic gloss to imitation-everything. Let Danny what's-his-name come on TV to tell me his freeze-dried sawdust tastes better than "fresh-brewed"—either the man is a liar for pay or he lacks taste buds. There may be lost souls who really think instant coffee is fit to drink. If so, they have been taste-washed as well as brainwashed. I stopped flying Delta Airlines years ago because they not only insisted on serving instant coffee but then also insisted on telling me I couldn't taste the difference. Damn Danny what's-his-name. Damn Delta Airlines.

Even milk is no longer milk. Where

are the old glass (non-polluting) bottles with the bulb tops full of the real cream that used to rise to the top of real cow's milk? The only good accomplished by the milk technologists was in giving Robert Frost occasion to remark: "We have homogenized society—that keeps the cream from coming to the top." Damn homogenization.

Where, for that matter, is cream to be found these days? Does no one remember what cream used to taste like off the top of the milk pail (especially if the cow was a Jersey), or whipped up with a dash of vanilla extract or liqueur or bourbon? Have cows stopped producing in deference to pressure cans of Kool-Glop—or whatever that tasteless ersatz topping is called? Damn Kool-Glop.

We are sheep, alas, and we deserve what we have let ourselves be led to. We have let the technologists talk us into depravity, and we have then let ourselves accept depravity as a norm. Damn technological norms.

THEY HAVEN'T even left us a decent instrument to write with. For years I have spoiled paper and my own disposition trying to write with ball-point pens. I found that, as such things go, some are better than others, but that none is a fit instrument for anything but jotting. Damn ball points.

For some technological reason I do not understand, red and green ink seems to flow from ball points more readily than black. Am I to be driven to decorators' colors? Theodore Roethke, I recall, used to write his letters in green ink. Let that rest as his own soul's choice. I like my ink to go onto the page black—to flow onto it at the lightest touch, preferably with a pen that will spread just a bit for making slightly heavier downstrokes. Why fill a page unless it testifies to the writer's respect for what he is setting down? Damn smudge-scratch.

I myself wasn't aware how many times I had cursed ball-point pens for skipping and smudging or for compelling me to gouge the words onto the page. I have a callus on the side of my middle finger from gripping the miserable things. It was my wife who took note of my annoyance and who gave me a fountain pen for my birthday. As it happened, the one

she chose turned out to be fine-point, scratchy, and stingy with ink. Nevertheless, it served to remind me.

I dug through odd corners and came up with several old, clogged fountain pens, the ink dried in them. I had to soak them in warm water overnight before they would unclog. But they did unclog, and I want this world's technology hucksters to know that my ancient Parker is a pleasure to my hand and to the page. I found myself writing for the pleasure of writing. I discovered after covering page after page that I could actually read what I had written. The pages themselves looked kept and tended. Bless something—whatever is left to bless.

I began to wonder why I had ever put aside fountain pens for those worthless ball points. It was my wife who remembered. "You went flying," she said, "and ruined a tee shirt, a shirt, and your good light-gray suit when the altitude squeezed the ink out of your pen."

I did recall then how that pen had leaked at altitude. That isn't quite the same thing as having the ink squeezed out by the altitude, but why look for trouble in marriage? Wives exist to correct, not to be corrected. Bless wives.

I also recalled that it had been a charter flight, the plane unpressurized. Would the same thing happen in today's jets? Are they still pressurized to 8000 feet? If so, the difference in ink-barrel pressure between sea-level New Jersey and 8000 feet would probably be enough to suck the ink out. I could, I suppose, move to Denver. My original ink-barrel pressure would then start at about 6000 feet. A 2000-foot difference seems safe enough.

Or I could empty the fountain pen and buy ink when I arrive.

But have you tried to buy ink recently? There was a time when any corner store stocked it. No more. I tried six and finally had to go to the stationer. He seemed to recall having some in stock and did finally dig up a bottle. I almost thought he was going to demand a prescription for it—or at least an identity card. "We don't sell much of it these days," he said.

"It's the technology," I told him.

"Yes," he said. "I guess that's what it is."

Damn the technology. □

Answer to *Wit Twister* (see page 20):  
devein, veined, envied, endive.

# Poisoning the Seas

Chance oil spills and the "deep sixing" of sludge, sewage, and atomic waste may well convert our life-abundant seas into trackless graveyards of civilization.

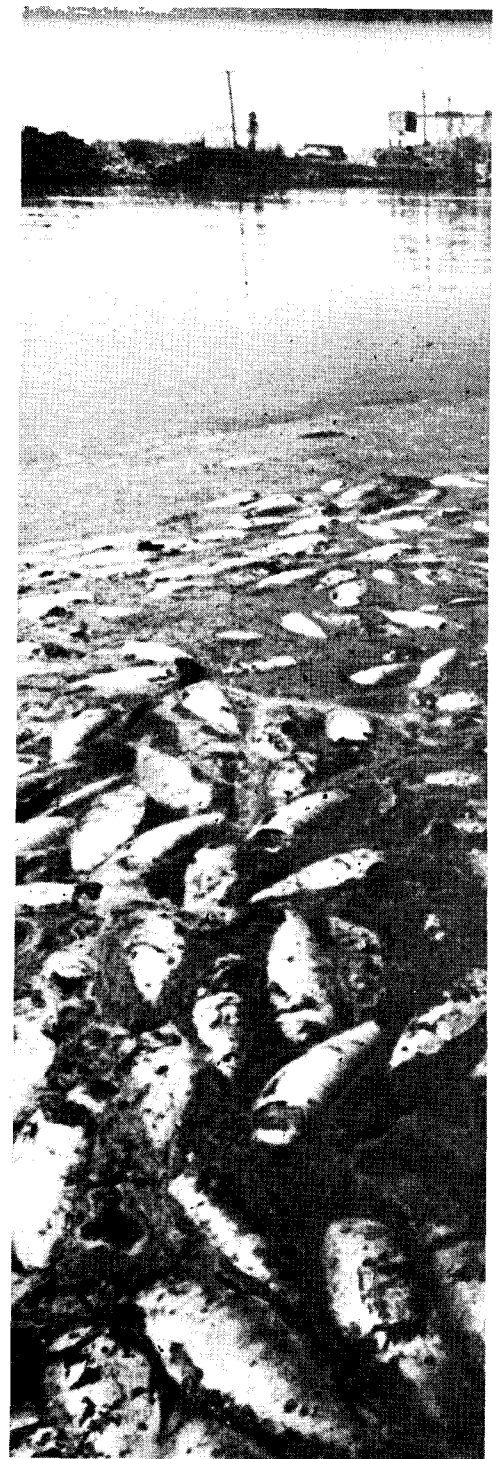
By Richard Bernstein

Two years ago yacht basins on Oyster Creek, along the New Jersey coast, were unaccountably attacked by wood-destroying organisms. Pilings that supported the docks were weakening; yacht hulls were developing spots of rot. After several months it was apparent that the wharves might well eventually collapse into the creek. For generations nothing had ever happened to these facilities; so the discovery of the source of the trouble came as something of a surprise to the marinas' membership: Embedded in the hull of a boat, like Blake's invisible worm, were specimens of Terebinthidae, otherwise known as shipworms or pileworms, a type of wood-boring clam. The area, it turned out, was infested with them.

Found often enough along the U.S. coast, the various species of the teredo are common harbor pests known to have demolished entire piers. But they do not survive in upstream fresh-water areas like Oyster Creek. How they got there illustrates how subtle a matter the pollution of the coastal waters is. The fault, explains Dr. Ruth Turner of the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, lies with the Oyster Creek Nuclear Power Plant. Built just the year before at the headwaters of Oyster Creek and Forked River, the plant had produced environmental changes that transformed the creek: Where it had been forbidding, it was now congenial to the wood-boring pests. The changes came about in this way: Needing vast amounts of water for its cooling system, the plant reversed

the flow of the Forked River, drawing in through the river channel salt water from the nearby sea. Later the used water was discharged, warm and still salty, into Oyster Creek at the rate of about 400,000 gallons each minute. In this way three environmental changes were brought about, all of which were favorable to the teredo. First, the creek became salty. Second, the addition of large amounts of water to the creek reduced the concentration of humus (i.e., decomposed plant and animal matter), which is an important inhibitor to the spread of one type of larva. Third, the warm wastes flowing into the creek raised the water temperature, thus enabling the marine borers to grow more rapidly and to breed more frequently, while at the same time protecting them from the winter kill-off that normally would have kept the population under control. "The whole life cycle was accelerated," says Dr. Turner. "Birth, growth, reproduction, and death were all speeded up by the warm water." Before the plant was built, only an occasional teredo was found near the mouth of the creek. Now, inadvertently, almost ideal circumstances for the proliferation of the pest had been brought about.

We can expect similar occurrences elsewhere. By 1986 the utility companies of New Jersey and Pennsylvania plan to install forty-two power plants along the Delaware River and its tributaries alone. At current rates of growth there will be in the year 2000 one nuclear power plant for every ten miles of coastline. And wherever these plants or other warm-water sources are built, variations on the Oyster Creek theme can be expected. Each nuclear reactor will affect



Gordon Alexander

*Thermal Pollution—An East Coast nucle*

only a few square miles of coastline; it will not create a global problem. Ecologically, some say, this is a small price to pay to satisfy our energy requirements. But considering that there is only so much coastline, we cannot afford to turn our oceans into a huge warm-water sink without at the same time having to pay a gigantic ecological price.

POLLUTION OF THE SEA is difficult to assess, precisely because of its frequently localized nature. A ruined dock here, a fish kill there—these are not pleasant

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