

Correspondence

Martin Luther King

To the Editors: The moving address by Dr. King, "A New Sense of Direction" (*Workview*, April), . . . leads one to assess anew the view which Dr. King had of where he was heading at the time of his death.

Clearly, his commitment to non-violence was undiminished. He recognized the emergence of new forces and new ideas within the black community which might question the appropriateness of the non-violent tool chest, but while predicting an escalation in scale—to mass civil disobedience—he makes no retreat whatsoever from the nonviolent posture.

Regarding the racial aspect of his program he is less categoric. Although he unhesitatingly embraces the black power consciousness which was already sweeping the black community well before his death, he takes care to cast his program in humanistic rather than in racial terms. Sympathetic elements in the white community are afforded a role in the movement, and the ultimate vision is a "colorless" society of "the creative majority."

Are such positions still viable within the black community? Can they be effective?

Curiously, such questions, so vigorously debated in the months following King's death, seem to have lost much of their urgency today. In part this may be due to the failure to appear of any genuine successor to Dr. King. His movement appears to have largely died with him, and the struggle which continues today, although building upon the solid accomplishments of Dr. King and possible only because Dr. King had prepared the way, is hardly the same struggle. The vanguard of black activism in the seventies centers around such disparate groups as the Congressional Black Caucus, the National Welfare Rights Organization, programs of black capitalism and black economic development, and localized manifestations of black

nationalism and community control. There is no national black leader, nor is there a national black program, although Gary represented an incipient effort to formulate one.

To be sure, violence is not a stated element of the programs of the black activist organizations, but Dr. King's program can hardly be adequately characterized merely by the absence of violence. An active, consciously chosen *nonviolence* is the essential element of the King philosophy and, generally speaking, this attitude is conspicuously absent from the black movement today. In this sense, the King philosophy has not so much been rejected as ignored. The tactics of confrontation have largely been abandoned, and with this shift the choice of violence or nonviolence has largely become irrelevant.

The ultimate vision which Dr. King articulated, however, of a colorless society of right-thinking people, has probably been more consciously rejected by a significant percentage of the black community in recent years. To be sure, differences in goals, after careful scrutiny, often prove to be merely differences in time horizons. Dr. King's vision may have been of an America (or a world) many centuries in the future. If this were his time horizon, then it may not be in contradiction to the more separatist, less idealistic objectives being articulated by an ever growing number of blacks today. Apples should not be compared with bananas. Today's blacks, by keeping white allies at arms' length, by focusing on what blacks can and must do for themselves, by talking in terms of a separate black nation or of other forms of black separatism, are searching for ways to address their own problems in the most effective and expeditious way. This is not to say that they are unconcerned about a good society for all mankind. Far from it. But it says that they have decided that their priority must be to seek the security and well-being of the black community first. It says further that this security must be found in a black setting, with white participation kept to a minimum.

Their time horizon is next year; Dr. King's dream is for the next century.

Robert S. Browne

*Director, Black Economic
Research Center, N.Y.*

To the Editors: Your publication of the hitherto unavailable evaluation of the civil rights movement by Dr. King shortly before his death is an important contribution—not merely to those of us with an abiding interest in the history and continuing fate of the movement, but to all of America. For even more than in the dark days of that speech, America needs now to comprehend the vision of such an analysis and to feel anew the unkillable spirit of such a leader.

Many people of both races and all ages were touched by his and the movement's highest spiritual qualities. There is no knowing how many such people there are, but I am convinced there are far more than anyone has ever acknowledged, including many white Southerners who are probably not even aware of how much their attitudes were affected by the movement. I know from having interviewed a number of the men and women who worked under Dr. King that there is a large cadre of experienced movement people who are still dedicated to integration and nonviolence, and to the corresponding insight, most important of all of Dr. King's, I believe, that the social changes this country needs cannot be achieved through violence because violence is what, in essence, is wrong with the country. . . .

Repeatedly in Dr. King's 1968 analysis of the movement, he spoke of the need to change the country's values, and, most beautifully, he invoked the hope for a broadened movement to achieve this. This is what his movement and the early SNCC's movement were all about—putting people in motion for fundamental change of the culture.

I hope . . . more people who believe as Dr. King did will find new confidence to express themselves, and that more and more people who missed his message the first time or

[Continued on p. 61]

From Jacob Bronowski, Director of the Council for Biology in Human Affairs at the Salk Institute, some thoughts on "Technology and Culture in Evolution" (*American Scholar*, Spring):

"The fact, the dreadful fact, is that the assertion by those who speak for a counterculture that technology distorts human nature is not only false, as biology and as history. It is a deliberate act of mischief, for it is a recapitulation in modern dress of the anti-intellectual, irrational and illiberal prejudices that have always been endemic in America. In the past this homespun obscurantism has been a defensive faith for the old; now it is being sold to the young as a respectable brand of snake oil that

will dull the itch of ignorance. . . .

"What we have done, and should be proud to own, is to make the benefits of technology (in the sense of a high standard of health, convenience, privacy and information) as much a human right as life and liberty. . . . Of course, the proliferation of the apparatus to do these things, the water mains and the sewers, the apartment houses, the roads and the telephone wires, the tin cans and the gift wrappings, for a time has turned the landscape cockeyed. But that distortion is not the price of technology—it is the price of revolution anywhere, at any time, like the guillotine springing up in the Place de la Concorde. . . ."

PAMPHILUS

Correspondence

[from p. 2]

were too young to hear it will come to understand the truly radical and revolutionary meanings of it.

Otherwise, change will be sought by "radicals" who are creatures of the culture's overemphasis of violence, and their "revolution" will produce no real change at all.

Pat Watters

*Southern Regional Council,
Atlanta, Ga.*

The End of Progress?

To the Editors: Noel Perrin's "The End of Progress" (*Worldview*, April) brings to mind the story about the private tutor who tried to teach her wealthy charge about the life of the poor. The little rich girl sat down to write a story, which began: "Once upon a time there was a very poor family. Everybody was poor. The Papa was poor, the Mama was poor, the children were poor, the cook was poor, the maid was poor, the butler was poor, the gardener was poor—Everybody was poor." Members of one class cannot help judging members of other classes in terms of their own class expectations and values. Of all forms of ethnocentrism, class ethnocentrism is one of the most difficult to restrain.

The only two qualitative changes in social living that man has ever known are the agricultural and the industrial-scientific revolutions. Neither has attracted much or very favorable attention from literary intel-

lectuals or pure scientists. . . .

Although Perrin cautions that he doesn't feel confident of his abilities as prophet, he assures his readers that he thinks he can see correctly "the assumptions that Americans, and people of the developed world in general, have lumped together under the name of progress." He maintains that we are at a transitional state in our history that will be noted as the "end of the age of linear movement known as progress, and the beginning of a new age of that universal recycling known as process." This new period will be a time when people recognize their animal instincts and enjoy the process of living from day to day rather than pursue material goals that have proven to be hollow victories, once attained. . . . A bucolic utopia like that enjoyed by the British poet of nature William Cowper and his American counterpart Henry David Thoreau awaits those willing to drop out of the race for material success. Cowper and Thoreau, however, made the choice voluntarily. . . . The world's underprivileged would also appreciate a choice.

If Perrin, as a matter of personal choice, goes into the White Mountains and exists the way much of the world's lower class does—half-starved, frequently sick and diseased, illiterate and prone to die prematurely—then he can use the editorial "we" and claim to be speaking for mankind. What he does, however, is to propose that the choice be imposed upon others who are not free to choose. . . . Almost

unanimously, in any country where they have had the chance, the poor have chosen to move from farm to factory.

Instead of losing freedom to industrialization, the common man has gained it through this process, as witness Western Europe, the United States and Japan. The case of the rural-Southern Negro can hardly be a better illustration. Although the Bostonian and the New Yorker may lament overcrowding and wish for a return to nature, he could hardly be forced to live in rural areas in the South and Midwest that have consistently lost population to urban-industrial areas.

The historian Carl Becker once derided the proclivity of some of the younger members of his profession to predict "without fear—and without research." . . . I, too, lack confidence in my ability as a prophet. My suggestion, nonetheless, is to look at the situation of the entire world population at present in terms of health, education, wealth and general well-being and compare it with any other period in our history. One cannot escape the indisputable truth that the situation as a whole, rather than being catastrophic, is better than ever and that there still exists a great deal of room to expand. My estimation is that people looking back will see our day as one of a rapid increase in the well-being of the world's dispossessed in spite of admonitions from the established classes that man has already acquired so much power, knowledge, freedom, life expectancy and refine-

ment that these benefits are beginning to turn into a burden.

Rolland Dewing
*Chairman, Division of
 Social Sciences,
 Chadron State College, Neb.*

Noel Perrin Responds:

Mr. Dewing has a good point, that one should not renounce things on behalf of other people. An American who owns a car, as I do (a truck, anyway), looks rather odd telling Malays they will be happiest if they keep their water buffalo.

Mr. Dewing's *main* point, however, that industrialization and progress have always produced net benefits for the common man—and still do—will not bear scrutiny. The examples he offers are Western Europe, the United States, and Japan. Of course industrialization has produced benefits in all three places, or it would not have occurred. But if Mr. Dewing cares to examine the quality of life in England, say, in 1772 and then in 1972, what will he find? He will find that the 50 million Englishmen now living do indeed have better medical care, a higher literacy rate, faster means of getting from London to Brighton. But he will also find that the 7 million Englishmen living in 1772 had a better diet—or at least one more to their taste—since present luxuries such as lobsters, oysters and roast beef were then available to the common man. He will also find that they had somewhat more sunlight (yes, literally), a humane noise level, easy access to open countryside, etc. etc.

As for Japan, the great Japanese scholar at Columbia, Ivan Morris, has remarked that it took the Japanese about 2,000 years to create their landscape and one generation (1945-72) to destroy it. Certainly it is true that the Japanese are moving from farm to factory. How much choice is involved is another matter. I myself would explain a good deal of the move by the fact that because of industrialization it is no longer possible for most small farmers to make a comfortable living. Did American blacks *want* to leave the rural South and move to urban ghettos? Yes,

plainly they sometimes did. But I do not think Mr. Dewing can safely ignore the role played by cotton-picking machinery, by the battery chicken farm (which ended pin money for the black farmer's wife with thirty hens), by the effects tractors have had on mules.

The example I want to end with, though, is India. Mr. Dewing thinks that "people looking back will see our day as one of a rapid increase in the well-being of the world's dispossessed." I presume he would agree with me that the most dispossessed large population in the world is to be found in Calcutta and throughout India. Are people there enjoying a rapid increase in well-being? Not in their own estimation. I once heard the Indian ambassador to the U.S. make a speech to a large audience of American doctors in which he blamed most of the ills of India on Western science in general and English and American doctors in particular. He gave them credit for good and sometimes even noble intentions. But their intentions didn't alter the facts, he said. Which were (I quote from memory) that India in 1750 had a stable population of 150 million, enough food to go around, and sufficient surplus wealth to attract the avarice of both England and France. Then British government doctors and English and American medical missionaries began to introduce a rather lopsided "progress" in death control. So that now there are around 500 million Indians, a large proportion of them underfed, underhoused, undereverything. Some advance.

If Mr. Dewing can really look at India (or Puerto Rico or Tahiti or New Jersey) and say that the lower class in these places is better off than it was a century ago, then he and I have very different ideas indeed of what it is to be well off.

African Literature

To the Editors: One cannot help but feel distressed at how "black" a picture Kofi Awoonor draws of current African politics and ideology ("Africa's Literature Beyond Politics," March). . . . His account of

the genesis of *négritude* is accurate. But *négritude* has spawned a brood of interests in black cultural values, and some of these have proved both scientific and salutary. (I have in mind current interest in the nexus of cultural continuity between Africa and the "New World.")

More crucial is Awoonor's view of pessimism in the post-colonial African novel, and his dichotomy of (either?) political crusading and (or?) illuminating life for all people. There is much in current or past African life worthy of disillusionment, sadness and anger, and sometimes the culprits are identifiable. All these can be mentioned, even stressed, without despair. They are, for example, in Peter Palangyo's *Dying in the Sun* and Robert Serumaga's *Return to the Shadows*. Is description of the negative without proposing a program pessimism; is "fingering" the causes political crusading? Furthermore, there are novels of traditional (Legson Kayira's *Jingala*), colonial (Mongo Beti's *King Lazarus*) and independent life (Gabriel Ruhumbika's *Village in Uhuru*) full of criticism, love and joy.

Many of my examples may be taken as too "light" for comparison with works of Armah, Awoonor or Soyinka. Such dismissal will automatically distort our view of African literature. Furthermore it implies criteria of form and (individualistic) content derived from Euro-America's *haute cuisine* of *Kultur*. African novelists most attuned to this esthetic do indeed produce *Fragments* or *Voices in the Dark*—the Western fashion.

Most literature which has appealed to the world at large was written to, for, and of a parochial culture; most written to illuminate life for all people has been uninspired nonsense. Let us reject even veiled calls to universalism. It is the reader's job to be "universal," to find illumination in books not written with him in mind. How distressing it would be if Western readers accepted only familiar, psychodelic light from black Africa.

David F. Dorsey, Jr.
*Department of Classics,
 New York University*