

# Books

## The New Prometheans by Robert S. deRopp

(Delacorte; 288 pp.; \$7.95)

### Emilio Quincy Daddario

Dr. deRopp's book has a little bit in it for everyone, with a dash of Greek mythology—the Prometheans are the good guys, the Epimetheans the fellows in the black hats who are always letting the genie out of the bottle. The reader is bound to recognize enough people to make him feel good, for just about anyone who has done anything in science is mentioned. There's an adequate bibliography, and the diagrams and figures are understandable and interesting.

The thesis the author develops is perhaps a little too neat. It goes something like this. Man is wonderfully creative from a scientific and technical viewpoint. He has difficulty in using what is available to him because of his strange propensity to hang on to the past. If, however, there appears to be enough profit in a monetary sense, or if there is a crisis of sufficient magnitude, he can usually motivate himself to use everything he has without measuring future consequences of that action as against present gains. When negative side effects appear, and usually after the technology has become deeply engrained in the structure of the society, he insists on quick correction without considering the disruptive effect that may have on the existing social order. As a result, man is in constant conflict, being pulled by forces over which he appears to have no control and which cause him to do great damage to himself and to the environment in which he lives. Dr. deRopp therefore asks: "Can man in the mass ever learn not to use violence . . .

where Jesus and Buddha failed, can Gandhi and Schweitzer succeed?" His answer: "The limiting factors now preventing further progress are not material, but spiritual. On the clarity of this realization man's future will depend."

The trap Dr. deRopp sets for himself is that he leans almost completely on an élite society. He constantly refers to "man," but his decisions are always made by giants "standing on the shoulders of other giants," "members of a race apart," "pathfinders" or, when things go wrong, "militarists," and "lawyers and bureaucrats." Man himself never appears to be in charge. He is either the beneficiary or the victim. Dr. deRopp goes so far along that road as to propose that a handful of men could have prevented the building of the atom bomb. "All of them," he says, "were men of the highest intelligence, who might have been expected to see that man at his present stage of development can hardly be trusted with such a weapon." Yet that same knowledge was as equally applicable to good as it was to evil. Man was simply not sufficiently warned as to the alternatives available. He did not make the choice. It was made for him.

Dr. deRopp has in quite a marvelous way helped to improve man's decision-making capability. He prods man to think about his place in society, as have Toffler in *Future Shock* and Reich in *The Greening of America*. And because any improvement, at least in our democratic society,

must necessarily come through public education and choice, the slightest movement toward the general development of increased intellectual sophistication and interdisciplinary vision must be greeted with gratitude. That is understandably a slow process at best, given the enormous mass and pressures of society with which we must contend.

Whether the democratic process is capable of arriving at sound decisions when faced with the kinds of issues that arise in a technologically based society will ultimately depend on involving enough people so that their collective wisdom cannot be ignored. Dr. deRopp adds to that possibility in *The New Prometheans*. He has stirred our interest in the atom, he has reawakened our awe of medicine, he has built our understanding of the genetic code, he has forced a look into the mind itself, and he has managed to philosophize a bit.

The impression he makes is an important one. We must have men and women working in every field of scientific endeavor in order to have enough "prepared minds" to go around. They must be able to communicate with each other without regard to national boundaries. They must somehow receive continuous and predictable support, both public and private. And what they learn must be given the widest possible dissemination so that the people may understand the alternative courses of action available to them. The public can then develop an intellectual capability which will allow for greatly improved choices as better information is provided. Since we cannot assume that technology and the democratic process are necessarily compatible, and since we are a technological society, higher levels of public understanding must be attained if the one is to be kept in harmony with the other. Somehow that involvement must also raise the level of morality in decision-making, at least to the extent that rational judgment will allow, and that may even bring us a little closer to Dr. deRopp's "spiritual" goal.