

## Neglected Classics

"The great drawback in new books," remarked the French essayist Joseph Joubert, "is that they prevent our reading the old ones." And yet, as the critic John Morley noted, "There are some books which cannot be adequately reviewed for 20 or 30 years after they come out."

In referring to such books as "neglected classics" I hope I am not committing a redundancy, for Mark Twain defined a classic as "a book which people praise and don't read." The six little-known works listed below are worth reading—and, in most cases, re-reading—by those who would be free people, uncowed citizens, and constructive agents of social change.

Mark Van Doren's *Liberal Education* (Henry Holt, 1943; new edition, Beacon Press, 1959; now, regrettably, out of print) is still, to my knowledge, the definitive exposition of what it means to be educated. Van Doren proceeds on the assumption, which is common to all these books, that "bad thinking brings bad consequences, now or at any time," and offers a useful corrective to the credential-exalting pronouncements of various "experts" on the subject. For Aristotle, Van Doren reminds us, "the educated man was one who had learned how to judge the competence of any teacher in any science." And for Alexander Meiklejohn (himself an educator and author of *The Liberal College* and *Education Between Two Worlds*), the educated person "is not discouraged by the legend that there is too much to know, because he has kept faith with the principles of organization and analogy."

Jacob Bronowski shares with Van Doren a belief that a knowledge of science is indispensable to the civilized man or woman. His special gift is to convey, with freshness and considerable insight, the creative excitement experienced by the scientist—"his sense of pleasure and adventure," as

he writes in *Science and Human Values* (Harper and Row, 1956; revised edition, 1972).

Science, in Bronowski's impassioned conception, is an imaginative (what we might call "artistic") activity, ignited by wild leaps and outrageous guesses. He posits a similarity—indeed, an identity—between the creative act in art and science, and his book is an extended essay on such commonalities, for "all science is the search for unity in hidden likenesses."

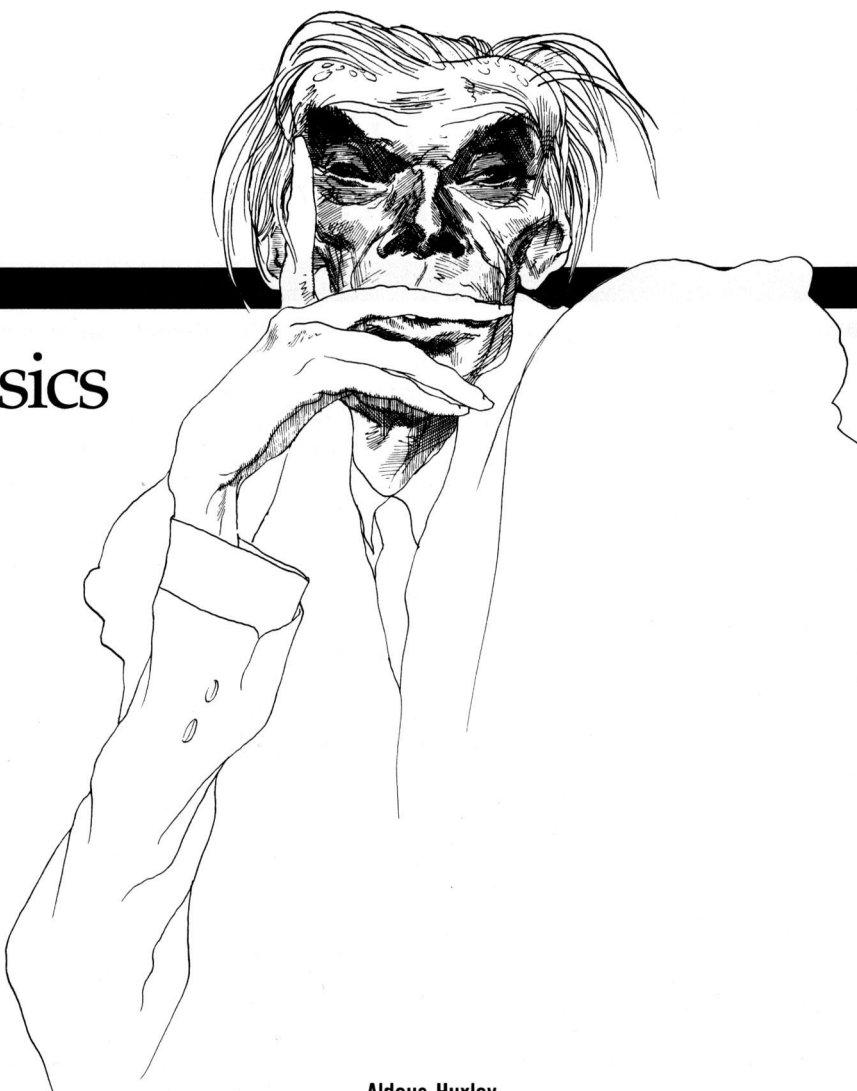
Bronowski is also eloquent on the virtues nurtured by science (freedom of thought and speech, respect for originality and dissent), though these are (as with everything else) also its drawbacks. The value that science accorded "the new and the bold," for example, eventually developed into an overvaluation of the new and the bold. But Bronowski's inattentiveness to these problems does not diminish the grandness of his vision and the nobility of his statement of the scientific ethic: "The end for which we work ex-

ists and is judged only by the means which we use to reach it."

Bronowski's statement is a perfect introduction to Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* (Greenwood Press, 1937), which begins with the assumption that "the ends cannot justify the means for the simple and obvious reason that the means employed determine the nature of the ends produced." His book is, however, no litany of verities, but rather a brilliant exploration of "the practical ways and means for modifying ourselves and the society in which we live."

Huxley treats social reform—and, for that matter, the attainment of individual virtue—as a serious vocation, with its own special knowledge, skills, and obligations. His approach to personal and social change reflects a refreshing realism, a disdain for absolutes, and a mature willingness to accept less than ideal conditions—say, less than perfect justice—for the sake of improvement.

The book contains a penetrating cri-



Aldous Huxley

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tique of the profound error of science (which is, by the way, Bronowski's) in identifying scientific knowledge and scientific reality with *all* knowledge and ultimate reality. He is wise about human nature: the child's need for security and a moral framework; the inequalities, natural as well as acquired, among human beings; the (nonobvious) relationship of income to happiness. I do not entirely subscribe to Huxley's beliefs; yet while reading *Ends and Means* I feel continually in the presence of an enlightened observer of rare insight, and his observations—often eerily prescient—are applicable to almost every political or social issue of consequence today.

**T**he journalist Milton Mayer went to Germany seven years after World War II in the hope of discovering how and why "average" Germans became Nazis. He got to know ten "decent, hard-working, ordinarily intelligent and honest men," and his report and reflections, in *They Thought They Were Free* (University of Chicago Press, 1955), are thoughtful—and disturbing.

In exploring Nazism's appeal, Mayer sensitizes us to the ordinary concerns of ordinary people—job, family, "summer camps for the children"—and their limited horizons, narrowed precisely by their desire (and, in time of crisis, their need) *not* to know, *not* to see, and *not* to think. National Socialism improved their lives—their job security, their medical care, their housing—and perhaps just as important, enlarged their sense of hope. "Nobody" (that is, nobody they knew) went hungry, and "nobody" in their circles was victimized, let alone exterminated; the horrors of Nazism never impinged on *their* lives.

Mayer valuably reminds us, in this connection, that "there were two Germanys, just as there are two countries in every country." The elements ascribed to the German national character—the ingrained anti-Semitism, the prevalent authoritarian style, the

acute class distinctions—seem, after reading Mayer, perhaps less important than the resemblances between the situation of the Germans in the 1930s and 1940s (including their need for father figures) and that of other societies at other times. "I came back home," he writes, "a little afraid for my country, afraid of what it might want, and get, and like.... I felt—and feel—that it was not German Man that I had met, but Man."

Proceeding on the same assumption, Eric Hoffer, in *The True Believer* (Harper and Row, 1951), examines the similarities in all mass movements—nationalist, fascist, religious, revolutionary—and the traits common (so he argues) to their adherents. His primary thesis is that such movements appeal to people not very comfortable with themselves, by offering them a refuge "from the anxieties, barrenness and meaninglessness of individual existence." Thus, widespread boredom is seen as a telltale sign of a society ripe for a "cause"—just as Huxley thought it heightened the probability of war.

The typical "true believer," writes Hoffer in an appealingly audacious style, is conscious of "an irremediably blemished self." Successful mass movements appeal to the needs and temperament of such personalities, who typically loathe the present order as entirely worthless (and hence welcome chaos), are utterly impervious to observed or experienced reality, and are, despite appearances, basically obedient and submissive. Unlike the educated person, the fanatic can live only with absolute certainty. And he yearns above all to be free from individual responsibility: "We Germans," Hoffer quotes a young Nazi, "are so happy. We are free from freedom."

Reinhold Niebuhr was exquisitely sensitive to our difficulties with political and personal boundaries in free societies—with striking a balance between our need for liberty and the requirements of social control. In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (Scribner's, 1944), Niebuhr criti-

cizes the foolish, naive illusions about human nature held by liberal and radical idealists: their blindness to the impurity of human motives and the power of individual and collective egoism, and their consequently "fatuous and superficial view of man."

His book reads like a remarkably accurate analysis of the romanticism that fueled the sixties and (on the left) survives it, and he speaks to our era on other matters as well. At a time when religious controversies were in remission, he could write that "religious diversity remains potentially the most basic source of conflict." Though Niebuhr believed strongly in the necessarily religious source of ultimate values, it was his genius to see religion as most properly a moderating force rather than an authoritarian one: he calls for a "religious solution to the problem of religious diversity," rooted in profound and mature religious commitment. "Religious humility," he notes, is both the natural outgrowth of authentic religious faith and a requirement of tolerant democratic life.

Such attention to character could not be more timely. "The most nearly free men," Aldous Huxley reminds us, "have always been those who combined virtue with insight." These books can, I think, make us stronger in virtue and clearer of insight—if we wish to be. "The finest works of art are precious," Huxley observes, "because they make it possible for us to know, if only imperfectly and for a little while, what it actually feels like to think subtly and feel nobly."

Robert L. Cohen