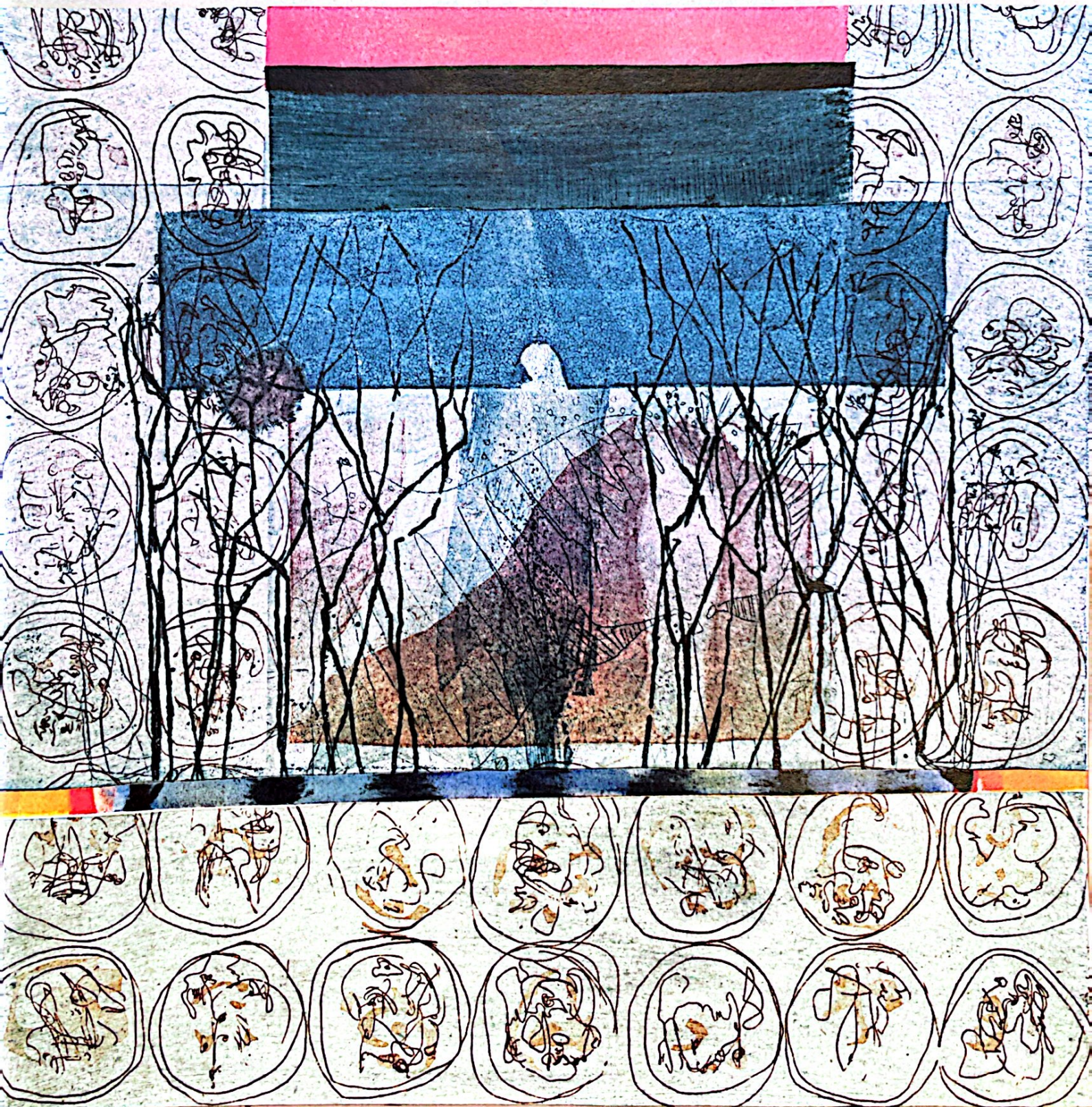


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Camp David Diplomacy by Steven L. Spiegel

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THE CRITICAL TEMPER

Sometimes it happens that an insight, thought, or idea is prompted by the combination of ingredients that a day, a circumstance, or the items assembled on a reading table bring together. In this instance an idea has been encouraged by a constellation of three components all of which pertain to the way in which intelligence can be directed in our time.

For anyone concerned about recent shifts in intellectual consensus in the United States there are some arresting thoughts in a new book by Gerald Grant and David Riesman, *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College*. The book provides a provocative analysis of selected recent experiments in American higher education. Of special interest is the chapter, "The Neoclassical Revival," directed toward recovering the network of ideas (the ideological perspective) that inspired the founding of St. John's College. The authors pay tribute to the vision of Robert M. Hutchins, Scott Buchanan, and Stringfellow Barr as it was (and is) reflected in a variety of related educational and intellectual achievements. One thinks of the University of Chicago (especially during Hutchins' presidency), the Encyclopædia Britannica, the Great Books enterprise, and the myriad examples of creative thought, outstanding scholarship, and disciplined cultural sensitivity that have been evoked by this strong and living heritage.

This distinctiveness of vision — and it is the vision of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, which Hutchins founded — is compelling and abiding. It is a refined form of Ernest Gellner's

more comprehensive, but fundamental concern, as he put it in *Crisis in the Humanities* (edited by J. H. Plumb):

"The real and deeper problem concerns just what, if anything, it is that the humanities have to communicate. The language of the humanities is incomparably closer to what we are, to the life we live, than is the language of science; but on the other hand, it is not obvious that the humanities contain, in any serious sense, genuine *knowledge*. It is the chasm, perhaps intolerable, between real knowledge and identity which is the fundamental issue."

It is important to know the answer to this query. Admittedly, some doubts and questions have arisen. For, as I read through the chapters in Grant's and Riesman's book, I am aware of some disturbing analogies to the history of the Warburg Institute (an institution in which I logged some postdoctoral research time) at the University of London. Like the Center, the Warburg Institute was founded to serve a specific set of convictions or a compelling network of ideas. The Warburg's occasion, like the Center's, was based on anticipations of some perilous tendencies within the society. And the Warburg Institute, like the Center, found eloquent reasons (particularly in a time, also following a war of world proportions and an extensive cultural shift) to perpetuate the classical traditions of knowledge, insight, and virtue. It also attempted to capture and portray, in an inte-

tures or modes of address and association. To state it oversimplily, only as something other than critic can the critic function as creator or designer. Criticism is not the primary source through which the power of construction is carried out. When the creative or the constructive impulse lags, criticism becomes its own reward, but its products lack connectedness. Aaron's analysis can also be read this way.

Steven Marcus' conclusions in the Mooney and Stuber book may be stated too dramatically, but they are cogent and consistent:

"When a phase of culture comes to an end or to a kind of end, it does not simply disappear and leave not a wrack behind. What it usually does is go into a state of decomposition. It is that state that we are passing through now."

Adding specification (and a not very covert Marxist allusion) to his judgment, Marcus continues:

"We are, I believe, in the midst of the beginning of the decomposition of bourgeois culture, or high culture, or whatever it is that we want to call that phase of culture that accompanied the development of capitalism — industrial and then advanced capitalism — in the West until 1950 or thereabouts. Since then, as the modernist phase of culture began to decompose, what we have been witness to is the increasingly rapid diffusion of the decomposed elements of modernism through the larger culture and society."

The contention is that most recent intelligence has been formed so extensively by the critical temper that it has not been able to be anything else. It has become adept at criticizing, sounding warnings, bringing alarms, expressing indignation, and calling things into question. But it has also become woefully inadequate in taking responsibility for the fundamental design of things.

The viewpoint expressed in the foregoing paragraphs can also be used to gain insight into the meaning of the Vietnam experience. I suggest that that experience is linked to the ineluctable workings of the critical temper.

It is generally acknowledged that criticism — particularly in the form of protest, and this principally by young people — brought the Vietnam war to a close, or, at least, accelerated the stopping of it. What may not be as evident, but may be powerfully true, is that the war came into being through criticism.

That is a difficult thought to reach. Yet, if one views an external event as a manifestation of a corporate mental or spiritual state, one can come close. For Vietnam was not solely the military combat; it was the total agonizing experience. The conflict itself is a visible symbol of a society at odds with itself, and corresponds with the situation that exists when the community is in such a state of anguish that it becomes totally turned in upon itself. Under such conditions, the critical temper has nothing but itself to work upon.

It would be oversimplifying the causal nexus to contend that the critical temper caused the war. Yet, without that sustaining temper, the war would not have had the character it did, nor would it have been the occasion for such intensive corporate soul-searching. It is in keeping with that same temper that there were no heroes, except, perhaps, those who were persistent in exercising the "calling into question."

This would suggest that the way beyond Vietnam requires a profound intellectual and spiritual modal shift. One can perceive early signs of this recognition in the recent pleas of persons like John Gardner.



There are many ways to explain why the critical temper in general has failed in any kind of constructive achievement. Marcus sees a fundamental "decomposition" in that temper. Morris Dickstein blames the collapse on reactions to previous "foolhardy acts of overreaching." Aaron cites the corrosion of the intellectual consensus. These assorted analyses form a consensus of their own.

At the same time, one cannot help but ask if the time has not come for a transformation of the human intelligence's dominant way. Perhaps it is time for intelligence to shift — if it can — to constructive and reconstitutive tasks. Perhaps it can find ways to attach itself to the process of rebuilding, to the search for a new coherence, to the discovery and/or creation of some unified portrayal of the human situation, and to bring the new forms of consciousness into rapport with long-established ways of doing, conceiving, and intuiting things. Such needs seem to be fundamental, and are beginning to find expression within the society.

John Gardner, founder of Common Cause a decade or so ago, has written a new book, *Morale*, in which he deplores the loss of a compelling corporate vision. "When a society disintegrates," writes Gardner, "you may be sure that its animating ideas and

ideals died first in the minds of men and women." He finds it essential that there be a new vision, a sense of shared values, a "dream of greatness to come." Acknowledging the shift in the direction of his enthusiasms, Gardner writes autobiographically:

"My life for the past dozen years has been wholly devoted to action and conflict in the political and social arena, and to practical work on concrete issues — from the improvement of education to the reform of election campaign financing. I have been wholly preoccupied with specific solutions to specific problems.

"Now I want to step back and look at the motives that underlie social and political action. . . . From an active life in the public arena, I know all too well the case for cynicism and surrender. But there are things to be said. . . . It is especially important now for us to realize that just as shared beliefs and values are susceptible to decay, so are they capable of regeneration. The processes of decay are always at work, but so are the regenerative processes."

William de Bary, discovering the same aspiration in today's students, observes that "young people . . . feel a powerful urge to affirm and not just to criticize."



Thus, I return to the first prompter of these remarks and observations, namely, to the analysis by Grant and Riesman of the neoclassical model. While a rigid retention of neoclassical revivalism would frustrate intellectual vitality, there is much to be said for keeping those convictions.

S. N. Eisenstadt anticipated, in the Spring, 1972, issue of *Daedalus*, that the crucial issue is that there be comprehension of the necessary interdependence "between the various forms of criticism, protest, and general cultural and social innovation" of which intelligence is capable. Edward Shils, in that same periodical, has emphasized that intellectual innovation and cultural creativity can occur dependably only within the framework of tradition (defined as "the most enduring element in the collective social and cultural construction of reality").

The Center's founders believed in the power of tradition. Their devotion to the classics, the great books, the great teachers — Robert Hutchins said, "the greatest teachers through the greatest books" — and the necessity of an intellectual community are evidence of this. But they also recognized that a so-

ciety must be open to innovation. They were deeply committed to the principle that it is necessary to call things — all things — into question. Indeed, their attachment to the classical vision lay, in large part, in being responsible for a scheme of things within which the simultaneous expression of all of these intellectual temperaments was possible. Socrates' dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living" was a call to the contemplative life. But it also served as an indispensable formative ingredient in what we recognize today as the beginnings of Western civilization. It is an ideal that can be read in both critical and constructive terms.

The trouble recently is that the critical temper has had to function in a context of its own creation. It has not reached out for more compelling, sustaining, and nurturing environments. It has become isolated, as George Steiner has said, from other necessary "grammars of perception." J. H. Plumb's analysis that "the humanities are at the crossroads, at a crisis in their existence" is accurate. But his recommendation that "they must either change the image that they present, adapt themselves to the needs of a society dominated by science and technology, or retreat into social triviality" is oversimple and confused.

The problem is not that there is science and there are the humanities, and that these two have formed two distinct, discontinuous, or competing worlds. The problem is that the Enlightenment's great strength is also its great weakness. Its strength is to have discovered critical reflexivity (the turning of thought back upon itself so that it becomes aware of its powers). "The dialogue of the mind with itself," to use Matthew Arnold's phrase, has become the fundamental fact of consciousness. Its weakness is to have assumed that a viable life-world can be formed this way. As a consequence, to the extent intellectuals become adept at doing what they know best, they become, in Leo Tolstoy's words, "visitors in their own lives." And the discrepancies, incongruities, and utter loneliness show up in the very need to put humanities and public policy back together again.

With William de Bary, I believe that intelligence must come to terms with "those traditional values and institutions which have provided the basis for the self-critical attitude itself."

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