

THE PEJORIST

BY FREDERICK F. BARKER

THE trend of all human affairs is for the worse." This is the peyorist's creed. He is a root-and-branch radical, an iconoclast, a philosophical nihilist, an agnostic if not an atheist, and an egoist. His favorite pastime is debunking and the only publication he indorses unreservedly is *The American Mercury*. His characteristic is an irresistible urge to destructive criticism. No peyorist is ever guilty of constructive thinking. He leaves that field to the meliorist.

Our purpose here is not to make converts to peyorism, but to place the creed and to show its usefulness to society.

Perhaps the best services rendered by the peyorist are in the realm of ethics. He insists, and with good reason, that to characterize any act as virtuous or as vicious is always to beg the question at issue—its acceptability. Truth itself is no sane ideal if pursued to the exclusion of all other ends; nor is veracity in high esteem among those who achieve their purposes through diplomacy and finesse. In the past, no doubt, the conscious cultivation of the social or herd instincts in man made for the growth of stable communities; but nowadays the danger of social disintegration, in any of the more civilized countries, has passed, and with it has passed also the need for any emphasis upon the social qualities as against those that are primarily egoistic. The human sport or variation from type is nature's supreme effort. Today, to crush any biologic sport out of existence for fear of social dissolution is an anachronism.

In the training of children, obviously, some cultivation of the social qualities is still expedient. Every parent aims to keep his offspring out of the penitentiary, the poorhouse, and the psychopathic ward. To this end the child needs to recapitulate in his de-

velopment the faith cultures of past civilizations: the belief in fairies, in dogmatic theism, in the social creed; but at full maturity he should have graduated from reliance upon ethical and religious symbols. A too-prolonged insistence by parents upon an outlived moral code is largely responsible for the present breach between youth and age. The situation, however, is evolving its own remedy: many Victorian parents are undergoing forcible re-education at the hands of their children.

Confidence in the authoritativeness and efficacy of the ancient catalogue of virtues and vices dies hard, even among the intellectual. For instance, a professed unbeliever, writing recently under the title "Agnosticism and the New Tendencies in Science and Philosophy," condenses all good behavior into a single trilogy of principles: "justice, beneficence, altruism." He assures his readers that "the more we carry these principles into our conduct, the more happiness we attain and the more abundant and worthy is the life we lead." Another moralist, in a recent article entitled "The Faith of an Atheist," is more discriminating but perhaps not more convincing. He holds that in the practice of the red-blooded virtues lies the salvation of the race. He urges that while the priestly virtues of meekness and asceticism should be disdained, kindness toward the lower animals is to be encouraged; that since vice itself purifies a race by killing off the vicious, we should not be too anxious to shield a fool from his folly; always bearing in mind, however, that chivalry should be displayed toward the weak. He is confident that in the community of the future the virtues of integrity, sincerity, courage, industry, initiative, self-reliance, and in a single phrase, "love of the good and hatred of the evil" will be honored by every organ of public opinion. But the three virtues held to be basic by the first writer quoted, namely, justice, beneficence and altruism, are here entirely overlooked. The explanation is, perhaps, that one of the writers is constitutionally an altruist and the other an individualist. The ardent seeker after authoritative ultimates is left free, therefore, to make his own selection from among the virtues listed, or to continue his search elsewhere.

We are, it would seem, still steeped in the same old superstition—the sense of sin: fearful of ourselves, clinging to authority, demanding a sign, timid of the herd's criticism. But modern youth is combining with the behaviorists, the psychoanalysts and others whose

mental approach is scientific, to free us from religious and ethical dogmas. New points of reference and a new technology of behavior, stripped of moral implications, will evolve; and so our threadbare ethics, with its inventory of virtues and vices, will pass.

To return to our pejorist, the inveterate bubble-pricker, who is doing good work in clearing the way for a more rational view of human conduct. As a pronounced individualist, he is irked by the restraints and prohibitions of society. He is distinctly asocial. We will endeavor to show that even as an anti-social element he is rendering invaluable service to society.

The writer holds no brief for any formula of human progress. He admits regretfully that he has never yet learnt of a race goal or *summum bonum* that will stand up under rational criticism. The stream of life is too broad, perhaps, to be encompassed by a single watchword or principle. In the last analysis all ideals are matters of faith—faith in one's self. For the purpose here in view, however, we may be permitted to set up as a race ideal the one now most in vogue in this country: "the miracle of the fully shared life," a life devoted to social service, to the promotion of an abounding sympathetic accord within the human brotherhood. Now, if this is indeed the end to be desired, then the quickest way to attain it is through democracy, through the standardization of the individual, and the sacrifice of all personal idiosyncracies in the interests of society at large. In the past, however, the race has advanced largely through the pursuit of quite personal desires and ambitions. If such individuality of expression is to be eliminated in favor of the achievement of a smooth-working, homogeneous social entity, then we must needs sacrifice variety and diversity. We shall stabilize sooner, it may be, but at a lower level. The mission of the pejorist is, seemingly, to oppose all stabilization, and by so doing to provoke in the end a higher and more complex civilization. He is the brake on the social coach. If man is destined to follow in the wake of the bee-hive and the ant-hill, surely nothing will be lost by striving for the utmost heterogeneity attainable.

Really the pejorist is the meliorist's best friend. The Spaniards have a saying: "*Nadie sabe para quien trabaja*" (No one knows for whom he works.) Who would have predicted ten years ago that the prohibitionist would share with the boot-legger a common objective—retention of the Eighteenth Amendment? Or that a war

waged by us "to make the world safe for democracy" would have fructified new autocracies?

As the writer sees what is termed human progress, this comes about quite as much through clash and conflict as it does through love and sympathetic understanding. An active antagonism between the altruist and the egoist, the social and the asocial, the pacific and the belligerent, will, it seems, always remain a necessary factor in the civilizing process. Only in the grave is there peace. The pe-jorist performs a cosmic task, as does every other person who pur-sues a purpose or expresses a bent. One's individual reaction to pe-jorism, whether friendly or hostile, is of course self-justified; or better, needs no justification. But surely the reflective observer, one who is catholic in his sympathies and has an abiding faith in mankind, will view the destructive propensities of the pe-jorist with equanimity.