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Editor's Note: A Past Gnawing at a Future

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Editor's Note:

A Past Gnawing at a Future

An amiable but somber historian once told me he thought the greatest danger facing America was loss of cultural memory. He subscribed to Foucault's notion of cultural discontinuity and suggested that the chasm separating America from its cultural past would some day be insuperable. I remember saying that I did not accept the idea of total cultural discontinuity; that there has to be some connection with the past; that I had become a humanist because I believed in cultural continuity; and that I thought continuity was what universities were all about. The rescue operations in culture, I suggested, are often contemporaneous with the acts of destruction. When Italian cities lay in ashes and ruin, the Benedictines at Monte Cassino were creating the first European schools.

This is not a special issue about culture and barbarism, or about the dangers of cultural amnesia; but in a sense cultural memory is what each paper in this number is about. I can't help remembering Bergson's simple and gentle image of time as a past gnawing away at a future. In some ways the past is the only dimension of time that we've really got. If cultural memory didn't exist, to paraphrase Voltaire, it would have to be invented. But maybe I have a predilection for French authors and speak out of a tradition that has sometimes consecrated its past to the point of constricting its present. How about America? Isn't it founded on the unalienable right of discontinuity with the past?

Not on your life, argues William Wasserstrom. All our pieties to the contrary, America's cultural past shows through, sometimes negatively, in the very way we treat and mistreat our children. Beneath the reality of child abuse in contemporary America are stacked layers of ideological cruelty ranging from a seventeenth-century theology of the sinful newborn to an architectural tradition of the dysfunctional and unreceptive house.

Other papers in this issue deal broadly with similar ideas. Abraham Veinus's article is about two basic ways of reading our collective visual memory—one considering the perception of a work as a progressive explicitation of the artist's nonverbal mind states, the other grafting foreign critical methods onto the work across a chasm of cultural discontinuity. Huston Smith reminds his reader that our cultural perceptions are shaped by a store of concepts derived from Athens, Jerusalem, and Gnostic systems. William Gass suggests that to be civilized means implicitly to acknowledge sets of residual conventions that lie fragile but unquestioned in the cultural memory. Hugh Kenner describes a historical moment when the attempt was made to create an English language based on science and the designation of things, with an accompanying loss of deeper layers of memory, ambiguity, and poetic resonance. Such layers, Kenner suggests, are implicit in a civilization's "decision" not to remain savage.

That the word culture should occur in two of the titles in this

number, and should recur especially often in three articles—those of William Gass, Huston Smith, and Hugh Kenner—is not a coincidence. These are slightly modified versions of papers delivered at a symposium called “The Study of Culture,” held at Syracuse University in October 1979; the university was then celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of its humanities doctoral program. Other speakers on that occasion were Professors Howard Becker of Northwestern University, Peter Gay of Yale, and George Elliott and Jane Fulcher of Syracuse. Professor Fulcher’s paper (“Current Perspectives on Culture and the Meaning of Cultural History Today”) and Professor Gay’s (“Aggression and Culture: A Psychoanalytic Perspective”) will appear in slightly revised form in a later issue of this journal.

I want to thank the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Gershon Vincow, for his generous sponsorship of the culture symposium. Syracuse Scholar is also grateful to the coordinators of that symposium, Dr. J.H. Matthews and Dr. Donald Morton, director of the humanities doctoral program, for their tactful assistance in gathering the papers together.

—Paul Archambault

In Coming Issues . . .

- Peter Gay, “Aggression and Culture: A Psychoanalytic Perspective”
James H. Billington, “Revolution and Its Discontents: The Revolutionary Faith in the Modern World”
Myron I. Lichtblau, “Recent Spanish-American Fiction: Trial and Success”
Robert E. Stacy, “Russia and Spain”
Burton Blatt and Andrejs Ozolins, “The University of Scholarly Deeds”
Manfred Stanley, “The Educator’s Conscience”
Amanda Porterfield, “The Great Awakening”
Robert Schwarz, “Nazism in Austria”
Jane Fulcher, “Current Perspectives on Culture and the Meaning of Cultural History Today”

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