

The Great Division

Cultures in Conflict, by Otto A. Bird,
South Bend, Indiana, 1976. Notre Dame
University Press, 1976. 220 pp. \$19.95.

PROFESSOR BIRD'S BOOK is diagnostic: it probes the disharmony in our Western intellectual community and suggests a remedy. The two cultures in conflict are those noted by C. P. Snow in 1959, namely, the scientific and the literary, or humanistic. The main reason the two are not one, that there is an every widening gap between the two cultures, is that there has occurred an increasing "imperialism" of specialization within Western, chiefly the American, universities. While the first two parts of the book trace the ideological and historical grounds for this opposition between science and the humanities, the third part describes similarities between the two areas and notes points of contact. The suggestion is made that reconciliation is possible.

The most obvious characteristic of science as contrasted with the humanities is its abstractness—"it immediately departs from the *Lebenswelt* and not only leaves it behind, but also ceases to take it into account." Indeed it is this very abstractness, together with the fixity to purpose of the scientist *cum* technologist that has "altered the shape of our world, but has also generated a host of new problems that in many cases derive directly from the method of isolating and solving piecemeal . . ."

In saying this, however, Bird insists that we not ignore the fact that the scientist at work resembles the artist in certain important respects (as Arthur Koestler and Jacob Bronowski have noted). Science "as inquiry" or as "creative achievement" is not totally unlike "any of the other creative works of the humanities and the arts." In addition, "science employs all the ways of knowing that we possess: experience, ideas, imagination, memory, reasoning, insight, as well as all the arts of signs and of learn-

ing." In a word, science, like the humanities, is a "linguistic" and a "liberal" art.

Whether or not these creative and linguistic dimensions of the activity of the artist and the scientist are sufficient to allow for an alliance remains a question after Bird has made his case. This is especially true when one reflects on the way the scientist employs his language as contrasted with the way the artist or poet employs his—a point which Bird himself makes quite forcefully. Further, we must recall the many considerations noted by the author in the first two parts of his book—the fundamental differences in temperament, preoccupation and expectation between the artist and the scientist, together with the tendency of the sciences to claim "exclusive right to reason, knowledge and truth." Bird wants to adjudicate differences and if not marry the two protagonists at least invite them to lie down together like lion and lamb. His plan calls for "a center or agency charged with the responsibility for the intellectual community as such . . . a *summa dialectica* to make manifest and illuminate the pattern of agreement and disagreement in the philosophical controversies over basic ideas." In the end, Bird calls for communication between the sciences and the humanities and, ideally, a sense of community in the university as envisioned in the classical model of the academy. One must agree with Bird that the modern version of the academy falls far short of the model, and Bird is assuredly correct in hoping for a reconciliation among warring parties. Whether or not he is correct in *expecting* such a reconciliation, however, is a question that is suggested most particularly by the tone of caution at the end of this book. But there is another, deeper problem which the book suggests by implication.

Bird's book is markedly elementary: it lacks the profundity one expects from a writer who draws from the deep well of Western classical literature. The reader waits in vain for the writer to describe the distant horizon from his vantage point atop these giants—but he seems to delight in

simply being there. The author is widely read, to be sure, but he seems to be instructing his readers whom he suspects of having no first-hand knowledge of such writers as Augustine, Bacon, Galileo, Newton, and Descartes. Despite the fact that it is decidedly a flaw in the book, one cannot resist the thought that the very basic level on which Bird operates is somehow appropriate, which is to say that Bird's book exemplifies another aspect of the intellectual crisis which it ignores. Ignorance of our cultural heritage is widespread and prevalent even among the so-called educated Americans who (especially of late) take little away with them from the university except the academic degree which they have expended a modicum of time and energy to "earn." As Bird takes pains to show, the two cultures have been in conflict since Socrates (at least) and it is difficult to see why it has suddenly become a "problem." The author makes the case that the "imperialism of specialization; has brought this about, but surely specialization is not all bad: it has brought exciting new discoveries, raised fundamental questions, and provided important answers as well. But such intellectual narrowness when combined with a diminished spiritual outlook does seem peculiarly modern and decidedly problematic.

In a word, the intellectual crisis that is generated by the cultures in conflict which Bird has recounted in his book is merely symptomatic of a deeper, spiritual crisis that is marked by Western man's increasing inability to see beyond the narrow limits of his own dwarfed feelings. Doubtless this is brought about in part, at least, by his increasing conviction that there is nothing "out there" worthy of his attention; but in his preoccupation with himself—his own material and hedonic well being—Western man has cut himself off from the other, and communication has become impossible be-

cause the status of his fellow man had been reduced from person to thing. To be sure, self-preoccupation is a human failing that has always been with us, but since the Reformation powerful forces have conspired to lock Western man's consciousness within itself and he has lost touch with his world and his fellow man. In this regard, specialization within the academy is nothing more than a sign of our increasing self-preoccupation: we have compartmentalized inquiry just as we have reduced life itself to a set of calculations designed to guarantee security and "progress." Life has become what Jacques Ellul called *technique*.

Clearly, the only thing that can shake Western man out of his spiritual stupor, and bring about community within the academy and in society at large, is a sense of urgency about the task at hand and mutual dependence among all human beings, together with a rebirth of the conviction that life is tragic but nonetheless worth living and loving for its own sake. One suspects, however, that such a change can be brought about only by a profound shock: discovery follows, or accompanies, *peripeteia*.

Bird's book insists upon the fact that man's intellectual life requires both *mythos* and *logos*, and it reminds us, when we reflect on it, that man's spirit has diminished along with his intellect to the point where he is little more than a poor, bare, forked animal. But while it is lucid, Bird's diagnosis is rudimentary and the remedy suggested is therefore implausible. The resolution of the intellectual conflict between science and the humanities will not occur until man is forced by circumstances outside himself to attend to the still small voice of the human spirit within that demands a holistic approach to learning and wisdom in the place of knowledge.

Reviewed by HUGH MERCER CURTLER