

Feasting on Life

My Works and Days: A Personal Chronicle, by Lewis Mumford, *New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979. 545 pp. \$13.95.*

AT ONE POINT in this collection of extracts from his speeches, autobiographic notes, letters, earlier books, and sundry other items, Lewis Mumford compares Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* with Tolstoy's *War and Peace* by noting: "I have begun to re-read *War and Peace* with the sensation one gets on going to Switzerland, when one passes out of the tunnel and suddenly sees the great ice peaks hanging over one in the distance. Glad to get the smoke out of my lungs and leave the tunnel behind!" I felt the same way while reading this latest of his twenty-seven published books—delighted to leave behind the smog and tunnels of some of today's so-called critics of society. Born in 1895, Mumford has been an eloquent and noble voice since his first book, *The Story of Utopias*, was published in 1922. Age has not dimmed his vision nor muted his voice; it has but given him a more profound perspective both on himself and his times.

This double focus on himself and his times also provides the subject of *My*

Works and Days (the title's indebtedness to Hesiod's work suggests Mumford's awareness and use of the past), just as it has provided the framework of Mumford's previous publications. (Incidentally, he himself believes that his *The City in History* and the two books comprising *The Myth of the Machine—Technics and Human Development* and *The Pentagon of Power*—will be “the three books on which my reputation will probably ultimately rest.”) Whether he is writing a work on Melville (with whom he strongly identifies) or *The Culture of Cities* (1938) or *In the Name of Sanity* (1954) or *The Pentagon of Power* (1970), Mumford recognizes that he is neither an “isolato” (an archetypically Melvillean word), unaffected by what happens to the rest of the world, nor a transcendent deity who can observe the antics of the world with Puckish amusement or Jovian detachment. He thus avoids the constrictions of narcissism and the delusions of those who fancy themselves “objective” reporters.

As mentioned earlier, the book is a collection of material from various sources. The subjects are as diversified as are the sources—Mumford's growing up in New York at the end of the previous century and the beginning of this one; his schooling in New York City's Stuyvesant High School and City College (Evening Division)—considering his vast and varied erudition, it's soberly shocking to learn that he never was graduated from a college, but, on the other hand, perceiving the un-intellectual if not anti-intellectual tides which have inundated some of our schools, perhaps it's not surprising at all; his pre-marital, marital, and extra-marital affairs; his travels to Europe; his friends, children (the loss of his son Geddes in World War II is perhaps the most poignant reminiscence in the book); his speeches to several organizations on different occasions; excerpts from his poems, published books, random notes, etc. dealing with both personal recollections and judgments on such subjects as the arts, urbanization, education, World War II and its aftermath, the danger of nuclear warfare, the evils of totalitarianism, etc. In

many ways, Mumford in these observations is the mirror of both his individual soul and the collective conscience of twentieth-century society.

Although, much to his annoyance, he has been classified in many ways—sociologist, architect, urbanologist, poet, belletrist, journalist, a modern-day Jeremiah, etc.—perhaps the term *humanistic philosopher* would best describe him—philosopher in the etymological sense of being a lover of wisdom and humanistic in the sense of believing that salvation can come from human beings relying on their own decency rather than on divine intervention or technological manipulation and expansion. Mumford is certainly not oblivious of the importance of science and technology as a means to achieving happiness (a word which, interestingly enough, he defines as becoming “more intensely alive”), but he accurately perceives that science and technology should be the servants of humanity and not its masters, as they have become. It is always the soul that needs reinforcement, not the Gross National Product. He is quite properly frightened by the increased dehumanization of our society, whether this dehumanization takes the shape of Adolph Eichmann (“On the bureaucratic side...the veritable Hero of Our Time”) or the inanities of our “pop” culture or the puerilities of our “higher” (“higher” than what?) education; he is very displeased with “our so-called educational system,” calling it “the most vicious institution of present-day civilization.”

One of the gratifying aspects of this book is that, despite its chronological range of over sixty years, his comments are both graphic and prophetic. He foresaw the ecological crisis long before it became a crisis; he denounced the dangers of Stalinism long before Krushchev did; and perhaps most frightening of all, he intuited that the real malaise of our times is not ecological but spiritual, not an increase in prices, but a decrease in values, resulting in an existential vacuum vainly filled with distractions. How timely for our times is this observation written in 1939: “Not to be

in trouble or pain at the present moment, not to feel baffled and empty, is to be outside the experience of our generation and therefore inhuman." And yet, Mumford's clear and transcendent vision justifiably enables him to call himself "neither a pessimist, nor an optimist, still less a utopian or a futurologist." Like the Sophocles of Matthew Arnold, he can see life "steadily" and "whole."

Besides the balanced vision and the compassionate humanism of his substance, there is the style which couches his content in classical elegance and cosmic inclusiveness. Unlike the arid fragmentation of many of today's academic specialists, his inclusiveness and diversity are bracing to behold. Like Aristotle (to whom, with perhaps excessive Emersonian self-reliance, he compares himself) and Francis Bacon before him, he takes the entire world to be his province—architecture, painting, literature, politics, psychology, sociology, education, science, philosophy, religion, ethics, etc. It is this wondrous catholicity which enables him to connect seemingly disparate entities; for example, he attacks the dangers of today's affluent society by comparing it to Odysseus' "scouts among the Lotus Eaters [who] were so beguiled by their honeyed fare and dreamy ease that they had to be rescued by force."

There is always the evidence that in Mumford we have that rare person who sees the present by the glow of the past and the luminescence of the future; who can make an aesthetic judgment without prissiness because he is aware of the forces of science; who can preach like the Biblical Jonah (to whom he confesses a

resemblance) because he too has succumbed to weakness and like Ahab, has wrestled with the whale. But he can lighten his homiletics with humor and epigrammatic wit: "There is a time to laugh and a time to weep, as The Preacher reminds us; but the pessimists forget the first clause and the optimists the second"; "The occasion brought together those who knew him [Jung] too well to worship him and those who worshipped him too well to know him...."

There are some minor flaws in the work—a preoccupation with individuals who come across as silhouettes—his wife, his great mentor Patrick Geddes, etc.—because the letters to them are not correlated with *their* letters to *him*; an occasional reminder that he is after all a child of others (even as the Olympians were the progeny of the Titans), especially of Emerson; a frustratingly continual reminder that the real Mumford will emerge in the as yet unpublished autobiography. But these are irritating crumbs in an otherwise delectable feast. Fairly early in the book, Mumford quotes "a simple farmhand" who, at the end of his life, despite many tribulations and hardships, said, "My time has come. The feast of life will soon be over." To Mumford, too, despite many personal griefs and disappointments, life has been a feast, and on the very last page of the book, he again quotes John Ruskin, who taught him that "there is no wealth but life." The reader who partakes of this book will vicariously share in this festive but pensive exuberance.

Reviewed by MILTON BIRNBAUM