social and cultural forces came into play, only to succumb so quickly to cold war reaction, and why? A discussion of such questions would provide the context that would make Boyer’s fascinating data even more significant. Boyer’s claims are modest, and he becomingly expresses at the beginning his “hope that what I have written will be viewed not as the last word, but as a point of departure for further work.” And it does offer just such a point.

Whatever its shortcomings, Boyer’s book is extremely valuable. In addition to breaking new historical ground, Boyer is alive to the contemporary lessons his data suggest. He sees the history of our reaction to the bomb as one of “continuing cycles of activism and apathy,” with another period of heightened atomic concern from the mid-1950s to early 1960s, followed by “the big sleep” of 1963-80. The activism of recent years brings with it a “powerful sense of déjà vu.... Except for a post-holocaust ‘Nuclear Winter,’ every theme and image by which we express our nuclear fear today has its counterpart in the immediate post-Hiroshima period.” Tactics too: “We debate the wisdom of the scare tactics of a Helen Caldicott with little apparent awareness that this very issue was the subject of massive discussion—and some bitter lessons—a generation ago.” A large part of Boyer’s purpose in digging up this particular past, it seems, is to rescue today’s antinuclear movement from repetition of that history. I’d add only that the movement against nuclear war needs not just an awareness of past cycles, attitudes and tactics but an analysis of the social and political forces at work, both then and now.

Modern Superstitions

BRIAN MORTON


In one of Sol Yurick’s novels, a young innocent stumbles on a plot against the President. A complicated sequence of events leaves him unhinged; he ends up in Bellevue. “They’re trying to kill the President,” he says. The admitting psychiatrist nods sympathetically and opens her notebook. “Oedipus complex accompanied by delusional psychosis,” she writes.

Yurick has always been fascinated by the myths that mask relations of power and prevent a dominated population from understanding its condition. His novels are filled with deluded true believers, passionate adherents of ideologies that leave them incapable of seeing what’s in front of their eyes. The same preoccupation is at work in Metatron, Yurick’s first nonfiction book, in which he explores the emerging ideology of the information age.

Up to now, Freudianism has been the myth he has attacked most vigorously. No Yurick novel would be complete without a psychoanalyst or two tirelessly explaining away social problems by reference to individual neuroses. But with all his hostility to Freud, one has always sensed a wary respect: the respect of one fiction writer for another. He objects to the influence of Freud’s fictions, but he respects their imaginative range. The ideology of the information age exasperates him precisely because the fiction it proposes is so reductive: the idea that all knowledge, indeed all reality, can be represented in a binary language, plus and minus, one and zero, yes and no.

But what enrages him even more than the crudity of this fiction is that our lives are being made crude. The information expert’s view of human beings may be reductive; but it becomes less and less so as we begin to recognize ourselves in it—to live by it. The world view of the information age seeps into every field. In sociobiology, human beings are seen as mere envelopes for the transmission of genetic messages. In the world of business, information becomes a commodity more important—more real—than any other. In everyday language we speak of how we’ve been “programmed.”

The ideology and technology of the information age, far from representing a break with some obsolete industrial past, are marked by the features of the economic system that brought them into being. The ethos of simplification is amusingly contradicted by the way in
which computer technology has been developed:

Different manufacturers... while proclaiming one world, one language, one global village... fight each other tooth and nail. They erect a maze of priced mediations and product differentiation, countering speed and directness of transmission with profitable labyrinths, in different time zones, each turn and gate tolled and tariffed... Out of this uniform un-language has come Babel.

Beyond this, the guiding metaphors of the information age have been the guiding metaphors of capitalism all along. The plus and minus of the binary code correspond to profit and loss on an accountant's ledger; the conceit that all reality can be represented in this code corresponds to the central axiom of capitalist economics: that all labor and all commodities—the most varied kinds of human activity and the most varied products of that activity—can be represented by a single, simple, abstract standard.

Yurick is a Marxist, but a maverick Marxist. Most writers on the left would be satisfied to show that behind the rhetoric of newness, the old forms of domination are at work; once they'd demonstrated this, they'd consider the job done. The most novel strand within Metatron, and the most problematic, is Yurick's effort to show that though the technology and ideology of the information age answer to the needs of capitalism, still deeper forces are at work behind this.

Max Weber is never mentioned in Metatron, but this part of Yurick's argument can be seen as a debate with Weber's idea that capitalism has fostered the ceaseless rationalization of material and intellectual life. In Yurick's view modern rationalization [has] taken a secret rider, an incubus along in its institutional and intellectual baggage... Invisible religions, acts of abject faith, superstition, lurk beneath the most rational mathematical and scientific works.

The relentless quest to simplify, Yurick argues, is peculiar to our culture. He draws on Lévi-Strauss's accounts of the astonishingly complex schemes of classification developed by “primitive” societies; he sets the Hindus, with their “geological strata of explanations,” and the Mayans, who “choked their cosmos with Gods,” against the Judeo-Christian tradition with its “hunt for

The One.” Yurick believes that this urge to unify, to simplify, which began as a religious impulse, remains a religious impulse, in that it is obsessive, self-verifying and almost unquestioned. So that Weber's rationalization is itself the expression of an irrational impulse.

In Yurick's vision, modern capitalism is as deeply imbued with mysticism as any cargo cult. Even the idea of immortality was never wholly abandoned but transformed into the myth of a "great ascent, a goal-oriented progression of history." (He notes that this myth was accepted even by Marx, who merely assigned it a new hero.) "Perhaps, after all," he writes, "modern capitalism is a great factory for the production of angels."

I've written about Metatron as if it were composed of a series of separate arguments; in fact its arguments are intertwined, overlapping, winding through discussions of gene theory, Faust, the cabala, particle physics, Oedipus, black holes and the nature of time. Yurick's desire, as he puts it, is to create a "disunified field theory"; his contempt for rationalization is inscribed in the book's very form.

At times all this makes for forbidding reading. At times, too, Yurick ascends into regions of abstraction where I can't follow... I lose him in the mists. Yurick is primarily a novelist; his genius lies in his ability to show what these abstractions mean in people's lives, and I look forward to his next novel, in which many of these themes will undoubtedly be taken up again.

But while we're waiting for his next novel, it's good to have Metatron. Yurick's effort to reinterpret the history of just about everything makes for a challenging book. He has the arrogance of the accomplished novelist: the confidence that every area of life and thought is his proper domain. In an era of specialization and subspecialization, this is bracing. Every page of Metatron is a provocation.

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GROUNDHOG SEES ITS SHADOW

1

From the window, dead-winter dawn. Slowly a red without warmth seeps through cold-flesh blues and grays. Dull shadows form, throw themselves full length across the snow, begging recognition from distorting distance. Smoke drifts like breath from sleeping chimneys. What can be revived? Garden weedstalk spills its seed over the week-old glaze of snow, and our most careful words still wander like floating scars, like the indifferent, shadowless crow.

2

Unweight. Unweight. Half-formed thoughts stretch thinly, break glib and brittle with anaemic freight. Words, hours, faces, all pale, crowd into sameness, and this tedium braces only panic. Words, especially words, seem nothing but their letters, scattered, unfocused, like a hundred schoolgirls giggling in uniform idiocy, running from the shadows of two dark strangers: articulate rage, speakable grief.

Karen Chamberlain

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February 1, 1986

The Nation. 123