Note

From: Burke, K. Language As Symbolic Action
Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1966.
Pp. 2-24.

The first five of these chapters have been set apart from the rest because I think that, taken as a group, they best convey the gist of the collection as a whole. The remainder could be viewed as developing one or another aspect of the same position, with more arguments or evidence, and wider application.

Since a definition of man is at least *implicit* in any writer's comments on cultural matters, the book begins with an essay on that subject. But the definition's concern with "symbolic action" involves a distinction between the limiting of this concept to the specifically artistic and a broader application to symbol systems in general; so the second essay deals with that problem. Since all definitions involve the use of terminology, and many kinds of terminology are available, the third essay attempts to argue for a "Dramatistic" solution. But, dialectic being what it is, any formal concern with the realm of the symbolic also prods us to inquire about the relation between the symbolic and its nonsymbolic or extrasymbolic context; and in dealing with the relation between these two realms of the symbolic and nonsymbolic, the fourth chapter considers ambiguities inherent in the range of meanings that complicate the concept of the "Unconscious." The fifth piece ties things down by focusing on a single work.

Further, since the third essay had closed on an admittedly ideal (Platonistic) view of a Dramatistic terminology, the fifth essay, in studying one Shakespearean tragedy, emphasizes the drastic nature of a troublesome motive that had been considered, but not fully developed, in the opening definition. For a Dramatistic definition of man requires an admonitory stress upon *victimage* as the major temptation in the symbol systems by which men build up their ideas, concepts, and images of identity and community (with correspondingly troublesome attitudes that prod to correspondingly turbulent acts).

Definition of Man

I

First, a few words on definition in general. Let's admit it: I see in a definition the critic's equivalent of a lyric, or of an aria in opera. Also, we might note that, when used in an essay, as with Aristotle's definition of tragedy in his *Poetics*, a definition so sums things up that all the properties attributed to the thing defined can be as though "derived" from the definition. In actual development, the definition may be the last thing a writer hits upon. Or it may be formulated somewhere along the line. But logically it is prior to the observations that it summarizes. Thus, insofar as all the attributes of the thing defined fit the definition, the definition should be viewed as "prior" in this purely nontemporal sense of priority.

Definitions are also the critic's equivalent of the lyric (though a poet might not think so!) in that the writer usually "hits on them." They are "breakthroughs," and thus are somewhat hard to come by. We should always keep trying for them—but they don't always seem to "click."

A definition should have just enough clauses, and no more. However, each clause should be like a chapter head, under which appropriate observations might be assembled, as though derived from it.

I am offering my Definition of Man in the hope of either persuading the reader that it fills the bill, or of prompting him to decide what should be added, or subtracted, or in some way modified.

II

Man is the symbol-using animal.

Granted, it doesn't come as much of a surprise. But our definition is being offered not for any possible paradoxical value. The aim is to get as essential a set of clauses as possible, and to meditate on each of them.

I remember one day at college when, on entering my philosophy class, I found all blinds up and the windows open from the top, while a bird kept flying nervously about the ceiling. The windows were high, they extended almost to the ceiling; yet the bird kept trying to escape by batting against

the ceiling rather than dipping down and flying out one of the open windows. While it kept circling thus helplessly over our heads, the instructor explained that this was an example of a "tropism." This particular bird's instinct was to escape by flying *up*, he said; hence it ignored the easy exit through the windows.

But how different things would be if the bird could speak and we could speak his language. What a simple statement would have served to solve his problem. "Fly down just a foot or so, and out one of those windows."

Later, I ran across another example that I cite because it has further implications, with regard to a later clause in our definition. I witnessed the behavior of a wren that was unquestionably a genius within the terms of its species. The parents had succeeded in getting all of a brood off the nest except one particularly stubborn or backward fellow who still remained for a couple of days after the others had flown. Despite all kinds of threats and cajolery, he still lingered, demanding and getting the rations which all concerned seem to consider his rightful lot. Then came the moment of genius. One of the parent wrens came to the nest with a morsel of food. But instead of simply giving it to the noisy youngster, the parent bird held it at a distance. The fledgling in the nest kept stretching its neck out farther and farther with its beak gaping until, of a sudden, instead of merely putting the morsel of food into the bird's mouth, the parent wren clamped its beak shut on the young one's lower mandible, and with a slight jerk caused the youngster, with his outstretched neck, to lose balance and tumble out of the nest.

Surely this was an "act" of genius. This wren had discovered how to use the principle of leverage as a way of getting a young bird off the nest. Had that exceptionally brilliant wren been able to conceptualize this discovery in such terms as come easy to symbol systems, we can imagine him giving a dissertation on "The Use of the Principle of Leverage as an Improved Method for Unnesting Birds or Debirding a Nest." And within a few years the invention would spread throughout all birddom, with an incalculable saving in bird-hours as compared with the traditional turbulent and inefficient method still in general practice.

There are three things to note about this incident:

1) The ability to describe this method in words would have readily made it possible for all other birds to take over this same "act" of genius, though they themselves might never have hit upon it.

2) The likelihood is that even this one wren never used the method again. For the ability to conceptualize implies a kind of *attention* without which this innovation could probably not advance beyond the condition of a mere accident to the condition of an invention.

3) On the happier side, there is the thought that at least, through lack of such ability, birds are spared our many susceptibilities to the ways

of demagogic spellbinders. They cannot be filled with fantastic hatreds for alien populations they know about mainly by mere hearsay, or with all sorts of unsettling new expectations, most of which could not possibly turn out as promised.

The "symbol-using animal," yes, obviously. But can we bring ourselves to realize just what that formula implies, just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by "reality" has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems? Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so "down to earth" as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our "reality" for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present? In school, as they go from class to class, students turn from one idiom to another. The various courses in the curriculum are in effect but so many different terminologies. And however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall "picture" is but a construct of our symbol systems. To meditate on this fact until one sees its full implications is much like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss. And doubtless that's one reason why, though man is typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naïve verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his notions of reality.

In responding to words, with their overt and covert modes of persuasion ("progress" is a typical one that usually sets expectations to vibrating), we like to forget the kind of relation that really prevails between the verbal and the nonverbal. In being a link between us and the nonverbal, words are by the same token a screen separating us from the nonverbal—though the statement gets tangled in its own traces, since so much of the "we" that is separated from the nonverbal by the verbal would not even exist were it not for the verbal (or for our symbolicity in general, since the same applies to the symbol systems of dance, music, painting, and the like).

A road map that helps us easily find our way from one side of the continent to the other owes its great utility to its exceptional existential poverty. It tells us absurdly little about the trip that is to be experienced in a welter of detail. Indeed, its value for us is in the very fact that it is so essentially inane.

Language referring to the realm of the nonverbal is necessarily talk about things in terms of what they are not—and in this sense we start out beset by a paradox. Such language is but a set of labels, signs for helping us find our way about. Indeed, they can even be so useful that they help us to invent ingenious ways of threatening to destroy ourselves. But even accuracy of this powerful sort does not get around the fact that such terms are

sheer emptiness, as compared with the substance of the things they name. Nor is such abstractness confined to the language of scientific prose. Despite the concrete richness of the imagery in Keats's poems, his letters repeatedly refer to his art as "abstract." And the same kind of considerations would apply to the symbol systems of all other arts. Even so bodily a form of expression as the dance is abstract in this sense. (Indeed, in this regard it is so abstract that, when asking students to sum up the gist of a plot, I usually got the best results from dance majors, with music students a close second. Students specializing in literature or the social sciences tended to get bogged down in details. They were less apt at "abstracting.")

When a bit of talking takes place, just what is doing the talking? Just where are the words coming from? Some of the motivation must derive from our animality, and some from our symbolicity. We hear of "brainwashing," of schemes whereby an "ideology" is imposed upon people. But should we stop at that? Should we not also see the situation the other way around? For was not the "brainwasher" also similarly motivated? Do we simply use words, or do they not also use us? An "ideology" is like a god coming down to earth, where it will inhabit a place pervaded by its presence. An "ideology" is like a spirit taking up its abode in a body: it makes that body hop around in certain ways; and that same body would have hopped around in different ways had a different ideology happened to inhabit it.

I am saying in one way what Paul said in another when he told his listeners that "Faith comes from hearing." He had a doctrine which, if his hearers were persuaded to accept it, would direct a body somewhat differently from the way it would have moved and been moved in its daily rounds under the earlier pagan dispensation. Consider the kind of German boys and girls, for instance, who became burghers in the old days, who during the period of inflation and U.S.-financed reparation payments after World War I wanted but to be Wandering Birds, and who with the rise of the Third Reich were got to functioning as Hitlerite fiends.

With regard to this first clause in our definition (man as the "symbol-using" animal) it has often been suggested that "symbol-making" would be a better term. I can go along with that emendation. But I'd want to add one further step. Then, for the whole formula we'd have: the "symbol-using, symbol-making, and symbol-misusing animal."

In referring to the misuse of symbols, I have in mind not only such demagogic tricks as I have already mentioned. I also think of "psychogenic illnesses," violent dislocations of bodily motion due to the improperly criticized action of symbolicity. A certain kind of food may be perfectly wholesome, so far as its sheer material nature is concerned. And people in some areas may particularly prize it. But our habits may be such that it seems to us loathsome; and under those conditions, the very thought of eating it may be nauseating to us. (The most drastic instance is, of course,

provided by the ideal diets of cannibals.) When the body rebels at such thoughts, we have a clear instance of the ways whereby the realm of symbolicity may affect the sheerly biologic motions of animality. Instances of "hexing" are of the same sort (as when a tribesman, on entering his tent, finds there the sign that for some reason those in authority have decreed his death by magic, and he promptly begins to waste away and die under the burden of this sheer thought).

A merely funny example concerns an anecdote told by the anthropologist, Franz Boas. He had gone to a feast being given by Esquimaux. As a good anthropologist, he would establish rapport by eating what they ate. But there was a pot full of what he took to be blubber. He dutifully took some, and felt sick. He went outside the igloo to recover. There he met an Esquimau woman, who was scandalized when she heard that they were serving blubber. For they hadn't told her! She rushed in—but came out soon after in great disgust. It wasn't blubber at all, it was simply dumplings. Had the good savant only known, he could have taken dumplings in his stride. But it was a battle indeed for him to hold them down when he thought of them as blubber!

So, in defining man as the symbol-using animal, we thereby set the conditions for asking: Which motives derive from man's animality, which from his symbolicity, and which from the combination of the two? Physicality is, of course, subsumed in animality. And though the *principles* of symbolism are not reducible to sheerly physical terms (quite as the rules of football are not so reducible despite the physicality of the players' hulks and motions as such), the meanings cannot be conceived by empirical organisms except by the aid of a sheerly physical dimension.

One further point, and we shall have finished with our first clause. In his analysis of dream symbolism, Freud laid great stress upon the two processes of "condensation" and "displacement." His observations are well taken. But, since we are here using the term "symbolism" in a much wider sense, we might remind ourselves that the processes of "condensation" and "displacement" are not confined merely to the symbolism of dreams and neuroses, but are also an aspect of normal symbol systems. A fundamental resource "natural" to symbolism is *substitution*. For instance, we can paraphrase a statement; if you don't get it one way, we can try another way. We translate English into French, Fahrenheit into Centigrade, or use the Greek letter *pi* to designate the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter, otherwise stated as 3.14159. . . . In this sense, substitution is a quite rational resource of symbolism. Yet it is but a more general aspect of what Freud meant by "displacement" (which is a confused kind of substitution).

Or, as Horne Tooke pointed out a century and a half ago, a typical resource of language is abbreviation. And obviously, abbreviation is also a

kind of substitution, hence a kind of "displacement," while it is also necessarily a kind of "condensation." And language is an abbreviation radically. If I refer to Mr. Jones by name, I have cut countless corners, as regards the particularities of that particular person. Or if I say, "Let's make a fire," think of what all I have left out, as regards the specific doing. Or if I give a book a title, I thereby refer to, while leaving unsaid, all that is subsumed under that title. Thus, condensation also can be viewed as a species of substitution. And a quite "rational" kind of "condensation" has taken place if, instead of referring to "tables," "chairs," and "rugs," I refer to "furniture," or if we put "parents" for "mother and father," and "siblings" for "brothers or sisters."

To say as much is to realize how many muddles such as Freud is concerned with may also be implicit in the symbols of "condensation" in his particular sense of the term. For my remarks are not intended as a "refutation" of Freud's terminology. By all means, my haggling about "condensation" and "displacement" as aspects of *all* symbolizing is not meant to question his line of investigation. All I am saying is that there still are some dividing lines to be drawn between the two realms (of symbolism in his sense and symbolism in general).

In any case, Freud (like Frazer) gives us ample grounds for trying never to forget that, once emotional involvement is added to symbolism's resources of substitution (which included the invitations to both condensation and displacement) the conditions are set for the symbol-using animal, with its ailments both physically and symbolically engendered, to tinker with such varying kinds of substitution as we encounter in men's modes of penance, expiation, compensation, paying of fines in lieu of bodily punishment, and cult of the scapegoat.

Obviously, to illustrate this point, there is an embarrassment of riches everywhere we choose to look, in the history of mankind. But, almost by accident, let us pick one, from a book, *Realm of the Incas*, by Victor W. Von Hagen. I refer to the picture of a

> propitiatory cairn, called *apacheta*, found in all of the high places of Peru on the ancient road. As heavily laden travelers passed along the road, they placed a stone on the *apacheta* as a symbol of the burden, "and so left their tiredness behind."

We are further told that "The Persians, the Chinese, and the Greeks adopted more or less the same custom."

Substitution sets the condition for "transcendence," since there is a technical sense in which the name for a thing can be said to "transcend" the thing named (by making for a kind of "ascent" from the realm of motion and matter to the realm of essence and spirit). The subterfuges of

euphemism can carry this process still further, culminating in the resources of idealization that Plato perfected through his dialectic of the Upward Way and Downward Way.

The designation of man as the symbol-using animal parallels the traditional formulas, "rational animal" and *Homo sapiens*—but with one notable difference. These earlier versions are honorific, whereas the idea of symbolicity implies no such temptation to self-flattery, and to this extent is more admonitory. Such definitions as "two-footed land-animal" (referred to in Aristotle's *Topics*) or "featherless biped" (referred to in Spinoza's *Ethics*) would be inadequate because they would confine the horizon to the realm of motion.

So much for our first clause.

III

The second clause is: *Inventor of the negative.* I am not wholly happy with the word, "inventor." For we could not properly say that man "invented" the negative unless we can also say that man is the "inventor" of language itself. So far as sheerly empirical development is concerned, it might be more accurate to say that language and the negative "invented" man. In any case, we are here concerned with the fact that there are no negatives in nature, and that this ingenious addition to the universe is solely a product of human symbol systems. In an age when we are told, even in song, to "accentuate the positive," and when some experts in verbalization make big money writing inspirational works that praise "the power of positive thinking," the second clause of my definition must take on the difficult and thankless task of celebrating that peculiarly human marvel, the negative.

I have discussed elsewhere what an eye-opener the chapter, "The Idea of Nothing," was to me, in Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. It jolted me into realizing that there are no negatives in nature, where everything simply is what it is and as it is. To look for negatives in nature would be as absurd as though you were to go out hunting for the square root of minus-one. The negative is a function peculiar to symbol systems, quite as the square root of minus-one is an implication of a certain mathematical symbol system.

The quickest way to demonstrate the sheer symbolicity of the negative is to look at any object, say, a table, and to remind yourself that, though it is exactly what it is, you could go on for the rest of your life saying all the things that it is not. "It is not a book, it is not a house, it is not Times Square," etc., etc.

One of the negative's prime uses, as Bergson points out, involves its role with regard to unfulfilled expectations. If I am expecting a certain

situation, and a different situation occurs, I can say that the expected situation did *not* occur. But so far as the actual state of affairs is concerned, some situation positively prevails, and that's that. If you are here but someone is expecting to meet you elsewhere, he will *not* meet you elsewhere because you positively *are* here. I can ask, "Does the thermometer read 54?" And if it registers anything in the world but 54, your proper answer can be "It is not 54." Yet there's no such thing as it's simply *not* being 54; it *is* 53, or 55, or whatever.

However, I would make one change of emphasis with regard to Bergson's fertile chapter. His stress is a bit too "Scientistic" for specifically "Dramatistic" purposes. Thus, in keeping with the stress upon matters of knowledge, he stresses the propositional negative, "It *is* not." Dramatistically, the stress should be upon the hortatory negative, "Thou *shalt* not." The negative begins not as a resource of definition or information, but as a command, as "Don't." Its more "Scientistic" potentialities develop later. And whereas Bergson is right in observing that we can't have an "idea of nothing" (that we must imagine a black spot, or something being annihilated, or an abyss, or some such), I submit that we *can* have an "idea of No," an "idea of don't." The Existentialists may amuse themselves and bewilder us with paradoxes about *le Néant*, by the sheer linguistic trick of treating no-thing as an abstruse kind of something. It's good showmanship. But there's no paradox about the idea of "don't," and a child can learn its meaning early.

No, I must revise that statement somewhat. In one sense, there is a paradox about "don't." For the negative is but a *principle*, an *idea*, not a name for a *thing*. And thus, whereas an injunction such as "thou shalt not kill" is understandable enough as a negative *idea*, it also has about its edges the positive *image* of killing. But the main point is: Though a child may not always obey the "thou shalt not," and though there may inevitably be, in the offing, an image positively inviting disobedience, the child "gets the idea."

In this sense, though we can't have an "idea of nothing," we can have an "idea of no." When first working on the negative, I thought of looking through the documents on the training of Helen Keller and Laura Bridgeman, whose physical privations made it so difficult to teach them language. And in both cases the records showed that the hortatory negative was taught first, and it was later applied for use as propositional negative, without explicit recognition of the change in application.

There is a superbly relevant passage in Emerson's early long essay, *Nature*, in the chapter "Discipline," a paragraph ending thus: All things "shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the ten commandments." In our scheme, this could be presented thus: "Reverse the statement, start with the principle of negation as in the Mosaic Decalogue, and everything encountered along your way will be negatively infused."

In other words, if our character is built of our responses (positive or negative) to the thou-shalt-not's of morality, and if we necessarily approach life from the standpoint of our personalities, will not all experience reflect the genius of this negativity? Laws are essentially negative; "mine" equals "not thine"; insofar as property is not protected by the thou-shalt-not's of either moral or civil law, it is not protected at all.

The negative principle in morals is often hidden behind a realm of quasi-positives. One can appreciate this situation most readily by thinking of monastic discipline. The day may be filled with a constant succession of positive acts. Yet they are ultimately guided or regulated by proscriptive principles, involving acquiesence to vows consciously and conscientiously taken, while such vows come to fulfillment formally in such admonitions as are embodied in the Decalogue. Next, bearing in mind such clear evidence of the moralistic negativity that underlies the "quasi-positives" of the monastic rituals and routines, look at sheerly secular ambitions, with their countless ways of "justifying" oneself—and all such efforts too will be seen for what they are, not simply positives, but "quasi-positives," countless improvised ways of responding to the negativity so basic to man as moral agent.

Thus, all definitions stressing man as moral agent would tie in with this clause (if I may quote a relevant passage from a recent book of mine, *The Rhetoric of Religion*):

> *Action* involves *character*, which involves *choice*—and the *form* of choice attains its perfection in the distinction between Yes and No (shall and shall-not, will and will-not). Though the concept of sheer *motion* is non-ethical, *action* implies the ethical, the human personality. Hence the obvious close connection between the ethical and negativity, as indicated in the Decalogue.[1]

Is more needed on this point? We might say a few words about the role of antithesis in what are often called "polar" terms, not just Yes-No, but such similarly constructed pairs as: true-false, order-disorder, cosmos-chaos, success-failure, peace-war, pleasure-pain, clean-unclean, life-death, love-hate. These are to be distinguished from sheerly positive terms. The word "table," for instance, involves no thought of counter-table, anti-table, non-table, or un-table (except perhaps in the inventions of our quite positively negative-minded poet, E. E. Cummings).

We need not now decide whether, in such paired opposites, the posi-

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[1] It suggests the thought that our second clause might be rephrased: "Moralized by the negative."

tive or the negative member of the pair is to be considered as essentially prior. We can settle for the indubitable fact that all *moral* terms are of this polar sort. And we can settle merely for the fact that such positives and negatives imply each other. However, in a hit-and-run sort of way, before hurrying on, I might avow that I personally would treat the negative as in principle prior, for this reason: (1) Yes and No imply each other; (2) in their role as opposites, they *limit* each other; (3) but limitation itself is the "negation of part of a divisible quantum." (I am quoting from the article on Fichte in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition.)

There is an implied sense of negativity in the ability to use words at all. For to use them properly, we must know that they are *not* the things they stand for. Next, since language is extended by metaphor which gradually becomes the kind of dead metaphor we call abstraction, we must know that metaphor is *not* literal. Further, we cannot use language maturely until we are spontaneously at home in irony. (That is, if the weather is bad, and someone says, "What a beautiful day!" we spontaneously know that he does *not* mean what the words say on their face. Children, before reaching "the age of reason," usually find this twist quite disturbing, and are likely to object that it is *not* a good day. Dramatic irony, of course, carries such a principle of negativity to its most complicated perfection.)

Our tendency to write works on such topics as "The Spirit of Christianity," or "The Soul of Islam," or "The Meaning of Judaism," or "Buddha and Eternity," or "Hinduism and Metempsychosis," leads us to overlook a strongly negativistic aspect of religions. I refer here not just to the principle of moral negativity already discussed, but also to the fact that religions are so often built *antithetically* to other persuasions. Negative motivation of this sort is attested by such steps as the formation of Christianity in opposition to paganism, the formation of Protestant offshoots in opposition to Catholicism, and the current reinvigoration of churchgoing, if not exactly of religion, in opposition to communism. So goes the dialectic!

Only one more consideration, and we are through with thoughts on this clause in our definition:

In an advertising world that is so strong on the glorification of the positive (as a way of selling either goods or bads), how make the negative enticing? At times the job has been done negatively, yet effectively, by the threat of hell. But what sanctions can we best build on now?

What a notable irony we here confront! For some of man's greatest acts of genius are in danger of transforming millions and millions of human agents into positive particles of sheer motion that go on somehow, but that are negative indeed as regards even the minimum expectations to which we might feel entitled.

And what is this new astounding irony? Precisely the fact that all these new positive powers developed by the new technology have intro-

duced a vast new era of negativity. For they are deadly indeed, unless we make haste to develop the controls (the negatives, the thou-shalt-not's) that become necessary, if these great powers are to be kept from getting out of hand.

Somewhat ironically, even as the possibilities of ultimate man-made suicide beset us, we also face an opposite kind of positive technologic threat to the resources of our moral negativity. I refer to the current "population explosion." In earlier days, the problem was solved automatically by plagues, famines, high rate of infant mortality, and such. But now the positive resources of technology have undone much of those natural "adjustments," so that new burdens are placed upon the Muscles of Negativity as the need arises for greater deliberate limitation of offspring.

However, ironically again, we should not end our discussion of this clause until we have reminded ourselves: There is a kind of aesthetic negativity whereby any moralistic thou-shalt-not provides material for our entertainment, as we pay to follow imaginary accounts of "deviants" who, in all sorts of ingenious ways, are represented as violating these very Don'ts.

IV

Third clause: *Separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making.* It concerns the fact that even the most primitive of tribes are led by inventions to depart somewhat from the needs of food, shelter, sex as defined by the survival standards of sheer animality. The implements of hunting and husbandry, with corresponding implements of war, make for a set of habits that become a kind of "second nature," as a special set of expectations, shaped by custom, comes to seem "natural." (I recall once when there was a breakdown of the lighting equipment in New York City. As the newspapers the next day told of the event, one got almost a sense of mystical terror from the description of the darkened streets. Yet but fifty miles away, that same evening, we had been walking on an unlit road by our house in the country, in a darkness wholly "natural." In the "second nature" of the city, something so natural as dark roadways at night was weirdly "unnatural.")

This clause is designed to take care of those who would define man as the "tool-using animal" (*homo faber, homo economicus*, and such). In adding this clause, we are immediately reminded of the close tie-up between tools and language. Imagine trying to run a modern factory, for instance, without the vast and often ungainly nomenclatures of the various technological specialties, without instructions, education, specifications, filing systems, accountancy (including mathematics and money or some similar counters). And I already referred to the likelihood that the develop-

ment of tools requires a kind of attention not possible without symbolic means of conceptualization. The connection between tools and language is also observable in what we might call the "second level" aspect of both. I refer to the fact that, whereas one might think of other animals as using certain rudiments of symbolism and rudimentary tools (for instance, when an ape learns to use a stick as a means of raking in a banana that the experimenter has purposely put beyond arm's length), in both cases the "reflexive" dimension is missing. Animals do not use words about words (as with the definitions of a dictionary)—and though an ape may even learn to put two sticks together as a way of extending his reach in case the sticks are so made that one can be fitted into the other, he would not take a knife and deliberately hollow out the end of one stick to make possible the insertion of the other stick. This is what we mean by the reflexive or second-level aspect of human symbolism. And it would presumably apply also to such complex sign systems as bees apparently have, to spread information about the distance and direction of a newly discovered food supply. Apparently investigators really have "cracked" such a code in certain dancelike motions of bees—but we should hardly expect ever to find that student bees are taught the language by teacher bees, or that there are apiaries where bees formulate the grammar and syntax of such signaling. "Information" in the sense of sheer motion is not thus "reflexive," but rather is like that of an electric circuit where, if a car is on a certain stretch of track, it automatically turns off the current on the adjoining piece of track, so that any car on that other piece of track would stop through lack of power. The car could be said to behave in accordance with this "information."

However, in saying that the human powers of symbolicity are interwoven with the capacity for making tools (and particularly for making tools that make tools), we still haven't answered one objection. If the two powers involve each other, if the same reflexive trait is characteristic of both, why start with symbol-using rather than with toolmaking? I'd propose an answer of this sort:

Formally, is not the choice implicit in the very act of definition itself? If we defined man first of all as the tool-using animal (or, old style, as *homo faber* rather than as *homo sapiens*), our definition would not be taking into account the "priority" of its very own nature as a definition. Inasmuch as definition is a symbolic act, it must begin by explicitly recognizing its formal grounding in the *principle* of definition as an act. In choosing *any definition at all*, one implicitly represents man as the kind of animal that is capable of definition (that is to say, capable of symbolic action). Thus, even if one views the powers of speech and mechanical invention as mutually involving each other, in a technical or formal sense one should make the implications explicit by treating the gifts of symbolicity as the "prior" member of the pair.

Also, we should note that one especially good result follows from this choice. Those who begin with the stress upon *tools* proceed to define language itself as a species of tool. But though instrumentality is an important aspect of language, we could not properly treat it as the *essence* of language. To define language simply as a species of tool would be like defining metals merely as species of tools. Or like defining sticks and stones simply as primitive weapons. Edward Sapir's view of language as "a collective means of expression" points in a more appropriate direction. The instrumental value of language certainly accounts for much of its development, and this instrumental value of language may even have been responsible for the survival of language itself (by helping the language-using animal to survive), quite as the instrumental value of language in developing atomic power now threatens the survival of the language-using animal; but to say as much is not by any means to say that language is in its essence a tool. Language is a species of action, symbolic action—and its nature is such that it can be used as a tool.

In any case, the toolmaking propensities envisioned in our third clause result in the complex network of material operations and properties, public or private, that arise through men's ways of livelihood, with the different *classes* of society that arise through the division of labor and the varying relationships to the property structure. And that brings us to our fourth clause.

V

Fourth clause: *Goaded by the spirit of hierarchy.* But if that sounds too weighted, we could settle for, "Moved by a sense of order." Under this clause, of course, would fall the incentives of organization and status. In my *Rhetoric of Motives*, I tried to trace the relation between social hierarchy and mystery, or guilt. And I carried such speculations further in my *Rhetoric of Religion*. Here we encounter secular analogues of "original sin." For, despite any cult of good manners and humility, to the extent that a social structure becomes differentiated, with privileges to some that are denied to others, there are the conditions for a kind of "built in" pride. King and peasant are "mysteries" to each other. Those "Up" are guilty of not being "Down," those "Down" are certainly guilty of not being "Up."

Here man's skill with symbols combines with his negativity and with the tendencies towards different modes of livelihood implicit in the inventions that make for division of labor, the result being definitions and differentiations and allocations of property protected by the negativities of the law. I particularly like E. M. Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*, for its ingenious ways of showing how social mystery can become interwoven with

ideas of cosmic mystery. The grotesque fictions of Franz Kafka are marvelous in this regard. The use of the word "Lord," to designate sometimes the Deity and sometimes an aristocrat, in itself indicates the shift between the two kinds of "worship." In *Book of the Courtier* Castiglione brings out the relationship nicely when he writes of kneeling on one knee to the sovereign, on both knees to God. Or, in ancient Rome, the application of the term *pontifex maximus* to the Emperor specifically recognized his "bridging" relationship as both a god and the head of the social hierarchy. Milton's use of terms such as Cherubim, Seraphim, Thrones, Dominations, Powers, reflects the conceiving of supernatural relations after the analogy of a social ladder. The religious vision of the city on a hill is similarly infused—making in all a ziggurat-like structure without skyscrapers. (Recall a related image, El Greco's painting of Toledo.) And, of course, the principles of such hierarchal order are worked out with imaginative and intellectual fullness in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The medieval pageant probably represents the perfection of this design. All the various "mysteries" were represented, each distinct from all the others, yet all parts of the same overarching order.

VI

By now we should also have taken care of such definitions as man the "political animal" or the "culture-bearing animal." And for a while, I felt that these clauses sufficiently covered the ground. However, for reasons yet to be explained, I decided that a final codicil was still needed, thus making in all:

> *Man is*
> *the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal*
> *inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)*
> *separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making*
> *goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)*
> *and rotten with perfection.*

I must hurry to explain and justify this wry codicil.

The principle of perfection is central to the nature of language as motive. The mere desire to name something by its "proper" name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways is intrinsically "perfectionist." What is more "perfectionist" in essence than the impulse, when one is in dire need of something, to so state this need that one in effect "defines" the situation? And even a poet who works out cunning ways of distorting language does so with perfectionist principles in mind, though his ideas of improvement involve recondite stylistic twists that may not disclose their true nature as judged by less perverse tests.

Thoughts on this subject induce us to attempt adapting, for sheerly logological purposes, the Aristotelian concept of the "entelechy," the notion that each being aims at the perfection natural to its kind (or, etymologically, is marked by a "possession of telos within"). The stone would be all that is needed to make it a stone; the tree would be all that is needed to make it a tree; and man would (or should!) be all that is needed to make him the perfectly "rational" being (presumably a harder entelechial job to accomplish than lower kinds of entities confront). Our point is: Whereas Aristotle seems to have thought of all beings in terms of the entelechy (in keeping with the ambiguities of his term, *kinesis*, which includes something of both "action" and "motion"), we are confining our use of the principle to the realm of symbolic action. And in keeping with this view, we would state merely: There is a principle of perfection implicit in the nature of symbol systems; and in keeping with his nature as symbol-using animal, man is moved by this principle.

At this point we must pause to answer an objection. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (near the end of Chapter V) Freud explicitly calls upon us "to abandon our belief that in man there dwells an impulse towards perfection, which has brought him to his present heights of intellectual prowess and sublimation." Yet a few sentences later in that same closing paragraph, we find him saying, "The repressive instinct never ceases to strive after its complete satisfaction." But are not these two sentences mutually contradictory? For what could more clearly represent an "impulse to perfection" than a "striving" after "complete satisfaction"?

The alternative that Freud proposes to the striving after perfection is what he calls a "repetition compulsion." And near the end of Chapter III he has described it thus:

> One knows people with whom every human relationship ends in the same way: benefactors whose protégés, however different they may otherwise have been, invariably after a time desert them in ill-will, so that they are apparently condemned to drain to the dregs all the bitterness of ingratitude; men with whom every friendship ends in the friend's treachery; others who indefinitely often in their lives invest some other person with authority either in their own eyes or generally, and themselves overthrow such authority after a given time, only to replace it by a new one; lovers whose tender relationships with women each and all run through the same phases and come to the same end, and so on. We are less astonished at this "endless repetition of the same" if there is involved a question of active behaviour on the part of the person concerned, and if we detect in his character an unalterable trait which must always manifest itself in the repetition of identical experiences. Far more striking are those cases where the person seems to be experiencing something passively, without exerting any influence of his own, and yet always meets with the same fate over and over again.

Freud next mentions in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* the story of the hero Tancred who, having unwittingly slain his beloved Clorinda, later in an enchanted wood hews down a tall tree with his sword, and when blood streams from the gash in the tree, he hears the voice of Clorinda whose soul was imprisoned in the tree, and who reproaches him for having again "wrought" the same "baleful deed."

Freud sees in all such instances the workings of what he calls the neurotic attempt to so shape one's later life that some earlier unresolved problem is lived over and over again. Freud also calls it a "destiny compulsion," to bring out the thought that the sufferer unconsciously strives to form his destiny in accordance with this earlier pattern.

My point is: Why should such a "destiny compulsion" or "repetition compulsion" be viewed as antithetical to the "principle of perfection"? Is not the sufferer exerting almost superhuman efforts in the attempt to give his life a certain *form*, so shaping his relations to people in later years that they will conform perfectly to an emotional or psychological pattern already established in some earlier formative situation? What more thorough illustrations could one want, of a drive to make one's life "perfect," despite the fact that such efforts at perfection might cause the unconscious striver great suffering?

To get the point, we need simply widen the concept of perfection to the point where we can also use the term *ironically*, as when we speak of a "perfect fool" or a "perfect villain." And, of course, I had precisely such possibilities in mind when in my codicil I refer to man as being "rotten" with perfection.

The ironic aspect of the principle is itself revealed most perfectly in our tendency to conceive of a "perfect" enemy. (See on " 'Perfection' as a Motive," in *Permanence and Change*, Hermes edition, pp. 292-294.) The Nazi version of the Jew, as developed in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, is the most thoroughgoing instance of such ironic "perfection" in recent times, though strongly similar trends keep manifesting themselves in current controversies between "East" and "West." I suppose the most "perfect" definition of man along these lines is the formula derived from Plautus: *homo homini lupus*, or one to suit the sort of imaginary herding animal that would fit Hobbes's notion of the *bellum omnium contra omnes*.

The principle of perfection in this dangerous sense derives sustenance from other primary aspects of symbolicity. Thus, the principle of drama is implicit in the idea of action, and the principle of victimage is implicit in the nature of drama. The negative helps radically to define the elements to be victimized. And inasmuch as substitution is a prime resource of symbol systems, the conditions are set for catharsis by scapegoat (including the "natural" invitation to "project" upon the enemy any troublesome traits of our own that we would negate). And the unresolved problems of "pride" that

are intrinsic to privilege also bring the motive of hierarchy to bear here; for many kinds of guilt, resentment, and fear tend to cluster about the hierarchal psychosis, with its corresponding search for a sacrificial principle such as can become embodied in a political scapegoat.

Similar ominous invitations along these lines derive from the terministic fact that, as Aristotle observes in his *Rhetoric*, antithesis is an exceptionally effective rhetorical device. There is its sheerly *formal* lure, in giving dramatic saliency and at least apparent clarity to any issue. One may find himself hard put to define a policy purely in its own terms, but one can advocate it persuasively by an urgent assurance that it is decidedly *against* such-and-such other policy with which people may be disgruntled. For this reason also, the use of antithesis helps deflect embarrassing criticism (as when rulers silence domestic controversy by turning public attention to animosity against some foreign country's policies). And in this way, of course, antithesis helps reinforce unification by scapegoat.

The principle of perfection (the "entelechial" principle) figures in other notable ways as regards the genius of symbolism. A given terminology contains various *implications*, and there is a corresponding "perfectionist" tendency for men to attempt carrying out those implications. Thus, each of our scientific nomenclatures suggests its own special range of possible developments, with specialists vowed to carry out these terministic possibilities to the extent of their personal ability and technical resources. Each such specialty is like the situation of an author who has an idea for a novel, and who will never rest until he has completely embodied it in a book. Insofar as any of these terminologies happen also to contain the risks of destroying the world, that's just too bad; but the fact remains that, so far as the sheer principles of the investigation are concerned, they are no different from those of the writer who strives to complete his novel. There is a kind of "terministic compulsion" to carry out the implications of one's terminology, quite as, if an astronomer discovered by his observations and computations that a certain wandering body was likely to hit the earth and destroy us, he would nonetheless feel compelled to *argue for the correctness of his computations*, despite the ominousness of the outcome. Similarly, of course, men will so draw out the implications of their terminologies that new expectations are aroused (promises that are now largely interwoven with the state of Big Technology, and that may prove to be true or false, but that can have revolutionary effects upon persons who agree with such terministic "extrapolations").

Whereas there seems to be no principle of control intrinsic to the ideal of carrying out any such set of possibilities to its "perfect" conclusion, and whereas all sorts of people are variously goaded to track down their particular sets of terministically directed insights, there is at least the fact that the schemes get in one another's way, thus being to some extent checked by

rivalry with one another. And such is especially the case where *allocation of funds* is concerned.

To round out the subject of "perfection," in both honorific and ironic senses, we might end by observing that, without regard for the ontological truth or falsity of the case, there are sheerly technical reasons, intrinsic to the nature of language, for belief in God and the Devil. Insofar as language is intrinsically hortatory (a medium by which men can obtain the cooperation of one another), God perfectly embodies the petition. Similarly, insofar as vituperation is a "natural" resource of speech, the Devil provides a perfect butt for invective. Heaven and Hell together provide the ultimate, or perfect, grounding for sanctions. God is also the perfect audience for praise and lamentation (two primary modes of symbolic action, with lamentation perhaps the "first" of all, as regards tests of biological priority). Such considerations would provide a strictly logological treatment of Martin Buber's "I-Thou Relation."

VII

So much for the clauses of our Definition, a definition which most people would probably want to characterize as "descriptive" rather than "normative," yet which is surely normative in the sense that its implications are strongly admonitory, suggesting the kind of foibles and crotchets which a "comic" theory of education[2] would feature, in asking man to center his attention on the understanding of his "natural temptations" towards kinds of turbulence that, when reinforced with the powers of the new weapons, threaten to undo us.

I'm not too sure that, in the present state of Big Technology's confusions, any educational policy, even if it were itself perfect and were adopted throughout the world, would be able to help much, when the world is so ardently beset by so much distress and malice. The dreary likelihood is that, if we do avoid the holocaust, we shall do so mainly by bits of political patchwork here and there, with alliances falling sufficiently on the bias across one another, and thus getting sufficiently in one another's road, so that there's not enough "symmetrical perfection" among the contestants to set up the "right" alignment and touch it off.

[2] In his *Parts of Animals*, Chapter X, Aristotle mentions the definition of man as the "laughing animal," but he does not consider it adequate. Though I would hasten to agree, I obviously have a big investment in it, owing to my conviction that mankind's only hope is a cult of comedy. (The cult of tragedy is too eager to help out with the holocaust. And in the last analysis, it is too pretentious to allow for the proper recognition of our animality.) Also, I'd file "risibility" under "symbolicity." Insofar as man's laughter is to be distinguished from that of the Hyena, the difference derives from ideas of *incongruity* that are in turn derived from principles of *congruity* necessarily implicit in any given symbol system.

Perhaps because of my special liking for the sympathetically ironic point of view in E. M. Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*, I place a wan hope in the sheer muddle of current international relations. That is, there is the chance that the problem, in its very insolubility, also contains enough elements of self-cancellation to keep things from coming to a perfect fulfillment in a perfect Apocalyptic holocaust. Meanwhile, the most that one can do, when speculating on a definition, is to ask oneself whether it is turned somewhat in the right direction.

But what of an ending for this discussion? After so much talk about "perfection," I feel quite self-conscious. For obviously, my discussion should itself have a perfect ending.

A perfect ending should promise something. In this regard, I guess the most perfect ending is provided by a sermon in which, after a threat of total loss unless we mend our ways, we are promised the hope of total salvation if we do mend our ways. But even though, today, we stand as close as mankind ever has stood, in secular regards, to a choice precisely as radical as that, I can build up no such perfectly urgent pattern (partly because, as we generally recognize now, it is impossible for us truly to imagine that next day, no matter how earnestly some writers try to help us by inventing imaginary accounts of it, accounts which even they can't believe, despite the enterprise of their imaginings).

The best I can do is state my belief that things might be improved somewhat if enough people began thinking along the lines of this definition; my belief that, if such an approach could be perfected by many kinds of critics and educators and self-admonishers in general, things might be a little less ominous than otherwise.

However, at this point I hit upon a kind of *Ersatz* promise for an ending. As you will see, it is concerned with perfection on a grand scale. And it has in its favor the further fact that it involves the modernizing, or perfecting, of a traditional vision, one even so primal as to be expressed in a nursery jingle. I shall give the traditional jingle first, and then my proposed modernized perfecting of it. The older form ran thus:

If all the trees were one tree
What a great tree that would be

If all the axes were one axe
What a great axe that would be.

If all the men were one man
What a great man he would be.

And if all the seas were one sea
What a great sea that would be.

And if the great man
Took the great axe
And chopped down the great tree
And let it fall into the great sea

What a Splish-Splash that would be!

Modernized, perfected, the form runs thus:

If all the thermo-nuclear warheads
Were one thermo-nuclear warhead
What a great thermo-nuclear warhead that would be.

If all the intercontinental ballistic missiles
Were one intercontinental ballistic missile
What a great intercontinental ballistic missile that would be.

If all the military men
Were one military man
What a great military man he would be.

And if all the land masses
Were one land mass
What a great land mass that would be.

And if the great military man
Took the great thermo-nuclear warhead
And put it into the great intercontinental ballistic missile
And dropped it on the great land mass,

What great PROGRESS that would be!

Comments

One might ask the question: "What does it mean, to approach reality through one language rather than another?" Or one might ask: "What does it mean to be the kind of animal that uses *any* language (to view reality through *any* kind of highly developed symbol system)?" Benjamin Lee Whorf's ingenious speculations (many of them collected in his volume, *Language, Thought, and Reality*) suggest answers to the first question: The present "Definition" has been concerned rather with answers to the second.

Men can be studied as individuals, as members of groups (tribes, classes, organizations, and the like), or as generically "human." The present essay has been concerned with the most "universal" of such classifications. But elsewhere we deal with the fact that the analysis of particular idioms can be methodically narrowed even to the study of one particular writer's terminology (with its own unique set of "personal equations").

Given the range of meanings in the ancient Greeks' concept of "politics," the anthropologists' definition of man as the "culture-bearing animal" is not far from Aristotle's view of man as the "political animal." Both imply the ability to develop and transmit conventions and institutions. Just as Aristotle's definition serves most directly for his book on politics, so the anthropologists' definition serves most directly for their studies of tribal cultures. "Social animal" might most directly suit sociologists. Our point is simply that for our purposes a still more general starting point is necessary, analogous to *homo sapiens*, but minus the "built-in" honorific connotations of that formula (though perhaps it did perform a notable rhetorical function in prodding many of the perverse to cherish after the manner of Flaubert the lore of *la bêtise humaine*). For the psychologist, man is a "psychological" animal; for the psychoanalyst a mentally sick animal (a psychopathology being a natural part of even the average or "normal" Everyman's everyday life); for the chemist man should be a congeries of chemicals; and so on. But since man can't be called any of these various things except insofar as, encompassing the lot, he is the kind of animal that can haggle about the definition of himself, in this sense he is what Ernst Cassirer has called the *animal symbolicum*; yet I feel that the post-Kantian way of understanding such a formula tends to get epistemologically ("Scientistically") sidetracked from the more ontological ("Dramatistic") approach grounded in the older scholastic tradition.

The idealizing of man as a species of machine has again gained considerable popularity, owing to the great advances in automation and "sophisticated" computers. But such things are obviously inadequate as models since, not being biological organisms, machines lack the capacity for pleasure or pain (to say nothing of such subtler affective states as malice, envy, amusement, condescension, friendliness, sentimentality, embarrassment, etc., *ad nauseam*). One might so construct a computer that, if its signals got into a traffic jam, it would give forth a cry like a child in agony. And this "information" might make you impulsively, despite yourself, feel compassion for it. Yet, not being an organism, the ingenious artificial construct would all the while be as impassive as a Stoic's ideal of the perfect philosopher. For though the contraption might be so designed that it could *record* its own outcry, it could not "hear" that cry in the sense in which you, as an organism of pleasure and pain, would hear it. Until, like the robots in Capek's *R.U.R.*, men's contrivances can be made actually to ache, they cannot possibly serve as adequate models for the total human condition (that is, for a definition of "man in general").

When two machines get cruelly smashed in an accident, it's all the same to them, so far as pain goes. Hence a definition of man without reference to the animality of pain is, on its face, as inadequate as a definition would be that reduced man to the sheer kinetics of chemistry. Unquestionably, such a reduction could tell us much about the realm of motions that underlies our modes of action, and without which we could not act. But we *intuitively* recognize that such terms alone cannot deal with the qualities of experience as we necessarily suffer and enact it. (Awareness itself, by the way, is ambiguously on the dividing line between "action" and "knowledge"; or, otherwise put, intuitive knowledge is a spontaneous activity much like what we call an "act of faith," as per Santayana's ingenious concept of "animal faith.")

Insofar as the concept of "action" gets reduced to terms of "work," conditions are set for an antithetical stress upon play, as with Huizinga's formula, *homo*

ludens. While obviously not general enough to cover all cases, it serves well as an instrument to warn us against an overly instrumentalist view of man's ways with symbols. Here would belong also a related view of man, as the "laughing animal." While laughter, like tears, is grounded in the motions of animality, it also depends upon principles of congruity that are due to conventions or proprieties developed through the resources of symbolicity. It embodies these norms of congruity in reverse, by their violation within limits, a kind of "planned incongruity" (as discussed in my *Permanence and Change*.) Thus the incongruously perfect definition of man as a wolf (in keeping with man's traditional attitude towards that much maligned, but highly social-minded animal) comes down to us through comedy.

The reference to proprieties suggests the observation that the definition of man as a "moral being" centers in that mighty symbolic invention, the negative, involving the "thou-shalt-not's" (and corresponding "thou shalt's") of law and conscience, and the saying yes or no to such proscriptions and prescriptions. Here would belong Whitman's celebration of the "Answerer," and Nietzsche's paradoxical, negativity-saturated idea of the "Yea-sayer." I remember having heard that William Blackstone somewhere defines man as a being endowed with the capacity for all kinds of crime. Though I have not been able to verify the reference, such a definition would be the most direct fit for commentaries on the law; yet "crime" is but a reflex of human prowess in the making of laws, that is, man's "symbolicity." And Goethe has offered us an attenuated variant of the same notion when confessing an ability to *imagine* all kinds of crime.

The third essay will illustrate the basic symbolic devices under which one should class man as a being typically endowed with the powers of "transcendence." And many subsequent chapters will provide other instances of such resourcefulness (for instance, the piece on Emersonian transcendentalism) including its relation to the hierarchal motive, as embodied in the social order.

Man's "time-binding" propensities would be a subdivision of his traffic with symbols, though the fourth chapter will also consider a sense in which the past is preserved "unconsciously" in the animal tissues.

All told, we should by now have reviewed a sufficient range of cases to indicate why we feel that any possible definition of man will necessarily fall somewhere within the five clauses in our "Definition." Basically, these involve concepts of motion and action (or otherwise put, physicality, animality, and symbolicity). And above all, we would want to emphasize: Whereas many other animals seem sensitive in a rudimentary way to the motivating force of symbols, they seem to lack the "second-level" aspect of symbolicity that is characteristically human, the "reflexive" capacity to develop highly complex symbol systems about symbol systems, the pattern of which is indicated in Aristotle's definition of God as "thought of thought," or in Hegel's dialectics of "self-consciousness."

As we proceed, there will be other chances to consider these matters.

Chapter Two

Poetics in Particular; Language in General

I

The primary text for this talk will be from Poe's essay, "The Philosophy of Composition." This essay has not fared well with critics, or with readers generally. Though it purports to be an account of how Poe went about the writing of his poem, "The Raven," and though he might be expected to know more about his procedures than any one else, the general tendency has been to feel that he is making the genesis of the poem look much more deliberate than could possibly have been the case, and to assume that he did so either for purposes of showmanship or to compensate for his own personal shortcomings by representing himself as a paragon of rational control (a sheerly designing craftsman, who worked out the methods and contents of the poem by sheer theory, deducing every detail from poetic principles with the precision of a demonstation in Euclid).

He would try to show, he said, "that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequences of a mathematical problem."

The passage which I shall use as our text occurs just after Poe has "explained" how he decided on the figure of the Raven, after having discarded the much less appropriate notion of having the fatal refrain "Nevermore" repeated by a parrot, "in a poem of melancholy tone, and in length about one hundred lines." (He decides that this would be about the ideal length for such a lyric—and lo! his own poem turns out to have 108 lines, a pretty close hit as such things go.) He had already arrived at the "conclusion" that the ideal lyric should aim at *Beauty*, an "intense elevation of the *soul*," with an effect best got by a "tone" of "sadness," since Melancholy is "the most legitimate of the poetic tones." He continues (and this is the quotation which best suits our present purposes):

> Never losing sight of the object *supremeness*, or perfection, at all points, [and for later use in this chapter, I would also emphasize those words, *"supremeness*, or perfection"] I asked myself—"Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?" Death—was the obvious reply. "And when," I said, "is this most melancholy of topics most poeti-