

recovering the new world dream
organic evolution
in the work of lewis mumford

raymond h. geselbracht

To turn away from the processes of life, growth, reproduction, to prefer the disintegrated, the accidental, the random to organic form and order is to commit collective suicide; and by the same token, to create a counter-movement to the irrationalities and threatened exterminations of our day, we must draw close once more to the healing order of nature, modified by human design.

Lewis Mumford
"Landscape and Townscape"
in *The Urban Prospect* (New York, 1968)

The American Adam has been forced, in the twentieth century, to change in time, to recognize the inexorable movement of history which, in his original conception, he was intended to deny. The national mythology which posited his existence has also threatened in recent decades to become absurd. This mythology, variously called the "myth of the garden" or the "Edenic myth," accepts Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's judgment, formed in the 1780's, that man in the New World of America is as a reborn Adam, innocent, virtuous, who will forever remain free of the evils of European history and civilization. "Nature"—never clearly defined, but understood as the polar opposite of what was perceived as the evil corruption and decadence of civilization in the Old World—was the great New World lap in which this mythic self-conception sat, the simplicity of absences which assured the American of his eternal newness. The authors who have examined this mythic complex in recent years have usually resigned themselves to its gradual senescence and demise in the twentieth century. One often finds in the books which examine the New World myth concluding chapters such as "East of Eden," or "The Garden of Ashes."¹ David Noble, who does follow the

myth into the twentieth century and who does find its influence still present, has only angry impatience for what he considers such a terribly silly, obfuscating anachronism, such a “bondage to romanticism.”²

Of course, Noble is correct in assuming that nothing in history dies in a day, or in a decade for that matter—and this is especially true of something so difficult to hit with a hammer as a myth. One need not share, however, his apparent assumption that the New World myth crystallized in the nineteenth century and came as a rigid form into the twentieth. It would seem, on the contrary, that a myth, like a religious belief, is always inchoate, always in metamorphosis, never quite fading away, but rather becoming transformed to meet the nuances of difference in the needs and desires of every new day. It is both unlikely that the New World myth would vanish in the twentieth century and that it would appear, unchanged, in its nineteenth-century form.

As one moves into the twentieth century, the danger to man from history seems not so much to be the terror of its mere existence—and this despite the profound and disillusioning cruelty with which history has treated twentieth-century man—but the possibility that the forces moving history in the modern world might actually, ironically, act to end its movement, to encapsulate man finally and for eternity into the ascetic, absolute and totalitarian bonds of what Jacques Ellul calls “technique,” that is, as he writes, “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency . . . in every field of human activity.”³ If, from the point of view of the twentieth century, one could not share with the early formulators of the New World mythology a naive faith that simply by invoking the name of nature and living what were understood to be its principles one could bring justice, goodness and primal innocence to the world, then neither could one quickly discard what had been taken to be nature’s opposite—civilization as it has existed in history. If the mythic complex which saw America as a New World garden were to retain meaning for the twentieth century, it would have to take into account the new meanings and relative positions of nature and civilization effected by the movement of history.

The apparent purpose of Lewis Mumford’s twenty-five or thirty books and thousand or more articles—not to mention his many public appearances and teaching assignments—has been to recover for the twentieth century the dream of a New World by rethinking the consequences of civilization and nature for each other, and by reevaluating the meaning of the former and the potential inspiration of the latter for a twentieth-century man. Mumford’s first book was about utopias;⁴ his life’s work may be seen as an attempt to bring to seed the utopia which has never emerged from history. The very word “utopia,” coined apparently by Thomas More, indicates the ambivalence of those who would envision an ideal future for man: the word is a pun, meaning either

“the good place” or “no place.” The latter meaning, of course, has prevailed.

Never has “the good place” been so distant as in the lifetime of Lewis Mumford. Its absence was particularly poignant for the generation born at the end of the nineteenth century, a time of relative peace and hope. “You and I grew up in an innocent world,” Mumford wrote to his friend Van Wyck Brooks in 1936. “Soldiers then were all of the tin variety: they liked drums and music and . . . innocent displays of brass buttons . . . : they still thought of war in terms of manly encounters on galloping horses, indeed, only as a more spectacular exhibition than a hunt or horseshow.” World War I broke this illusion. War became a deadly reality and an ugly companion to man’s civilization. “For the mass of mankind,” Mumford remembers of the period following the war, “war had become an unthinkable obscenity, like eating the human body.”⁵

War of course was quickly followed by the rise of fascism and the preparation for another war. At the same time, civilization came to be seemingly no more than an endless belt of production and insatiable consumption. So at least it appeared to Mumford. In 1946 he referred to his lifetime as “a period dominated by mechanism, militarism, and mammonism.” It was a period marked by what Mumford called the “plutonic fallacy,” which sought to turn all living things it touched into metal. “The great heresy of the modern world,” as Mumford described this fallacy, “is that it ceased to worship the Lords of Life, who made the rivers flow, causes the animals to mate, and brought forth the yearly miracle of vegetation. . . .” Instead, the modern world paid reverence to other mythical beings, dwarfs and giants, representatives of mechanical ingenuity and imbecile power.⁶

The id was loose in the world, leading the forces of modern barbarism. Minds were empty and jaded by sensation; society was streamlined and chromium-plated, but potentially self-destructive. Mumford felt the morals of the rattlesnake, who would give his enemy warning before striking, to be better than those of the modern general or financier. The world, in short, had become inhuman, perhaps inimical to life itself. “Why,” Mumford cried, “have we become technological gods and moral devils, scientific supermen and esthetic idiots. . . ?”⁷

This intense indictment took on biblical overtones as it spread to the forms of modern civilization. Mumford described the megalopolis in his 1938 book, *The Culture of Cities*, in a chapter entitled “A Brief Outline of Hell.” Megalopolis, he said, was quickly becoming Nekropolis—the city of the dead. By 1961, Mumford could refer to the formless spread of megalopolis as “cancerous.” Industrial “Coketowns” with their industrial slums altogether divorced the town from human needs. “They should be destroyed,” Mumford insisted in a passionate moment, “by trumpets and God’s wrath—like Jericho!”⁸

“I regard this as one of the worst periods in human history,” Mum-

ford wrote to a friend in 1969.⁹ His greatest fears, however, were for the future, for his reading of history warned him of the possible emergence of what he called “post-historic man,” the ultimate demon, the totally inhuman, Faustian man. The chaos and creativity of nature would be forced, by this post-historic man, into identical units more easily assimilated by the mechanistic world view. Useless grasslands, fenlands, woodlands, deserts and lakes would be eradicated to make way for more “useful,” uniform environments. Mountains would be leveled for their useful ores, or simply for the pleasure of bulldozing and grinding them down. The climate would be stripped of its seasons and variations and made uniform from pole to pole. Into this environment, post-historic man would insert himself, a no longer human being, no longer wayward and unpredictable, made uniformly bland by hypnotics, sedatives, surgical operations, and genetic tampering. This post-historic man, as Mumford puts it, is “a creature under constant mechanical pressure from incubator to incinerator.”¹⁰ With nature totally dominated and man completely dehumanized, history comes to a necessary end, and man thus becomes “post-historic.”

Such a dark reading of modern history might seem a strange, unlikely point of view from which to draw an optimistic utopianism, but Mumford was saved from despair and turned to utopian prophecies by a wonder and awe before life. He is precisely the infidel of Whitman’s remark: “I believe a leaf of grass is no less/ than the journeywork of the stars . . . / and a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.” Every living thought, Mumford wrote in an autobiographical novella, “is a divine orgasm. The last entrail of a dissected grasshopper increases the wonder of life.” The story’s young hero, presumably Mumford, is described as a worshipper of trees.¹¹

This wonder before life and love of nature and the “organic”—this latter is an almost mystical word throughout Mumford’s writings—was brought to full maturity in the young Mumford by the Scots thinker Patrick Geddes, whose ideas he first encountered in 1914. “Geddes,” the disciple later wrote, “is primarily the philosopher of life in its fullness and unity: his doctrine rests on the perpetual capacity of life to renew itself and transcend itself.”¹² Mumford never met Geddes, who was in Palestine when he made his first trip to Europe in 1920, but he did, during his stay in England, become closely acquainted with Victor Branford, Geddes’ friend and colleague. Geddes’ ideas ran deeply into the young man, and Mumford frankly acknowledged their formative influence on all his work.

Geddes was not the only source of Mumford’s overwhelming faith in life, however. No less important were the writers of what Mumford came to call the Golden Day: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Melville. He had become intimate with the writings of Emerson and Whitman while still in his teens, but it was not until the period 1921-1931 that he felt

the full impact of these men. This was the period of his life when he joined with Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank and others in what he called "this instauration of the American Past."¹³ In seeking to bring America to cultural maturity, Mumford exhumed the Golden Day writers. "In their imaginations," he wrote of these men in his 1926 book, *The Golden Day*, "a new world began to form out of the distracting chaos: wealth was in its place, and science was in its place, and the deeper life of man began again to emerge, no longer stunted or frustrated by the instrumentalities it had conceived and set to work." There emerged from this new world a philosophy oriented as completely toward life as modern thought has been directed toward the machine. The Golden Day writers truly sought to conceive a new world. "Allons!" the exuberant author of *The Golden Day* cried, using a Whitmanesque word at the book's end. "The road is before us!"¹⁴

Mumford wrote to Van Wyck Brooks that while he was reading for and writing *The Golden Day* he experienced a time of active introspection. "If I am not quite daffy," he wrote to his friend, "I have discovered what the religion of a modern man may be."¹⁵ He found a special inspiration in the essays and journals of Emerson. "For me," Mumford wrote to a British friend, "he is the central American writer: our whole literature, apart from the novel, flows downward from that mountain spring."¹⁶ He discovered in Emerson's writings a past "prophetically meshed in a future that had not yet dawned. . . ."¹⁷ Therein was both the destroyed remains of a world view based on life and its organic needs, and the promise that this world view might yet prevail.

The views of the Golden Day writers did not immediately and have not yet prevailed, however, and this suggests a flaw in the very context which gave them life. They were, above all, "New World" men, enamored of the idea of the fresh start for men freed from the encumbrances of an ancient past. This was not to reject the past, but merely to assert that any single historic tradition—that of Europe in this case—held no power to determine America's future. Instead, the Golden Day writers would assert, the past is a repository of possibilities from which man selects when building his future.¹⁸

The flaw in the New World context, which the Golden Day writers were not sufficiently aware of and which almost completely banished their memory and influence, was that there was a second New World dream, besides the desire to be free of history's determining influence. This was the dream of dominating nature. These two dreams lived, according to Mumford, uneasily and ironically together until the various wars and imperialistic ventures of the nineteenth century—most notably the American Civil War—symbolically and actually destroyed the romantic dream of the integration of man, nature and society, and elevated to unchallenged dominance the mechanistic and materialistic dream of dominating nature.¹⁹ Emerson's joy at being an "endless seeker, with no

Past at my back," was ironically used to extirpate any humanistic litter from the past which might hinder the growth and development of the new deity, the machine. "Why should we import rags and relics into the new hour," the new servers of the mechanical world view asked with Emerson. The New World dream of the Golden Day writers was ironically turned against its authors by the Faustian servers of the machine and used to destroy the past so completely that the romantic dream of release, which always drew its most cherished ideals from the past it sought to escape, lost the inspiration from which it drew substance, and so became impossible.²⁰

A new form of barbarism took possession of man in the New World. Though the oppressed European may have envisioned, in his desire to escape his oppressors, a return to nature, the return itself led, eventually, to a denatured environment. The machine, which had in fact helped bring the European to the New World—think of the compass and the astrolabe—became a "counterfeit of nature, nature analyzed, regulated, narrowed, controlled by the mind of man." The pioneer surrendered to the "mine and move" animus, and once the wilderness had been conquered, "he surrendered abjectly to the instruments that had made his conquest so swift. . . ." Freedom and vitality slowly gave way to power, regimentation, conformity, absolutism; man himself became only an abstraction, and life too became a matter of abstract units: weight, measure, time, space, energy, money.²¹

Thus the New World culture which had given the Golden Day writers their breath had immolated them in the fire of their own ideals. When Mumford and his fellow literary radicals commenced their "instauration of the American past" in the 1920's, they had to rescue some of the Golden Day writers, notably Melville and Thoreau, from almost total obscurity. But once the rediscovery had been made, the ideas seemed, to Mumford at least, to be as vital and compelling as ever. He decided to change the direction of his career in the early 1930's, leaving any further exploration of the American past to such friends as Van Wyck Brooks; he took on himself the task of being a new Bacon to the modern world, one who would rewrite the *Advancement of Learning* and give man a second *New Organon*, with the human elements put in their rightful position of dominance.²² A long list of books followed, most notably the four volumes of *The Renewal of Life* series.

To lay the groundwork for a renewal of the organic philosophy of the Golden Day writers, Mumford sought to correct two errors associated with the romantic half of the New World dream, both of which left it weak and unable to endure the assault of those who wished to dominate nature through the machine. The two errors are related, both having to do with the New World man's attempt to escape the Old World's past. The first error is the naive expectation of New World man that he might escape evil. Mumford finds such a view essentially false. Instead,

he would say, the twentieth-century man must see that evil, which he defines as disintegration, de-building, unbalance, is very real and always active. God and devil, building and de-building forces, are working simultaneously. If man is to confront creatively the truculent, brute energies of the universe, he must be aware of their evil component. Evil, too, can actually provide the basis for good. "The very forces which, if triumphant," Mumford wrote, "would destroy life are needful to season experience and deepen understanding."²³

The second error, really a more fundamental expression of the first, is the belief that one can escape time and the cumulative effects of time—tradition and history. "The more effective the liberation from the past," Mumford insists, "the more complete the enslavement to a narrow and compulsive present. . . ." Not the dead past, but rather the hyperactive present is the greatest threat to twentieth-century man.²⁴

The error, however, was not in the desire to escape the past, but in a misreading of the nature of time and consequently a misunderstanding of how to control the influence which the past has on man. "All history," Mumford writes with seeming irony, "is contemporary; only by recapturing the past can one escape its influence."²⁵ "The past never leaves us," to put this ironic relationship of past to present another way, "and the future is already here."²⁶ It is the condition of man, Mumford contends, to live in a simultaneously present, three-dimensional time world: past, present, possible. What saves man from becoming trapped in what Mumford would call the black present—such a particularly black present as that of the twentieth century—is "the continuity of human experience in history, which brings into the present moment, however desperate, the salvage of the past and the possibility of salvation in the future." Should man ever succeed in escaping history, then he would be damned to the inhuman, machine-ridden existence of what Mumford describes as "the cold asteroid of post-historic culture: indisputably new, mechanically efficient, slickly uniform, but incapable of sustaining human life." On the other hand, should man confront and become fully conscious of his past, and attain a full understanding of the meaning of his history, then he can reject the old form which his past took and rearrange the parts, while adding new ones, to form a better future—what Mumford likes to call "One World Culture."²⁷ Mumford's hope, in his last great magnum opus—the two volumes of *The Myth of the Machine* (1967-1970)—was precisely to effect such a confrontation with man's past, including all of his irrationalities, frustrations and perversions. "For the first time," Mumford wrote to a friend while in the middle of this work, "we have the means of becoming fully conscious of our hidden past, and thus we may ultimately overcome the forces and institutions that have so far bedeviled human development."²⁸

Once he had corrected these two errors, Mumford could recover the one great virtue of the New World dream—the reading of nature to find

fundamental principles and values. In his own desire to revive the New World ideology, Mumford began with just such a search for meaning in nature as Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau and Melville had undertaken.

His first task in arriving at a reading of nature was to correct the error of Plato, and of practically every scientist since Galileo, which would posit nature as an absolute, an ideal which exists apart from and independently of man. To Mumford, as with Thoreau and Emerson, any "forms" must derive from the sensible world of nature.²⁹ And nature, in turn, is partly a projection of the human personality. Nature and human culture, this is to say, define one another. Nature is no absolute in this view; rather man is an active participant in its very existence.³⁰ "Man is never found in a state of nature," as Mumford expresses this interdependence, "because . . . nature is always . . . in a state of man."³¹

Mumford discovered, again from his reading of nature, that the companion to the idea of nature as absolute, the idea that time is absolute—an idea which was the fundamental basis of all science before Einstein—was likewise an error. While absolute time, that is, mechanical or clock time, is strung out in a succession of mathematically isolated instants, organic time—the time which Mumford observed in nature—is cumulative in its effects. "Organic time moves in only one direction," he writes, "—through the cycle of birth, growth, development, decay, and death—and the past that is already dead remains present in the future that has still to be born." The future of an organism, then, is partly pre-determined by all that has happened to its species, and its antecedent species, since the very beginning of life.³²

The most important quality of time according to this organic interpretation is that it is evolutionary. Since all three dimensions of time—past, present and future—are simultaneous, both memory of the past and anticipation of the future inform the organism's present action. Thus, according to Mumford's reading of nature, "in this organic world purpose superimposes itself on process and partly transforms it." Life, then, is goal-seeking, purposive, end-achieving. Mumford went so far as to describe the universe as "a structure in mutual aid." Life, he insists, is internally teleological.³³

Mumford found justification for his reading of nature in the much-maligned evolutionary theory of Lamarck. Rejecting the favored theory of Darwin on the grounds that "natural selection" was a better description of the cut-throat economic life of nineteenth-century Anglo-American society than of the organic world, Mumford preferred Lamarck's functional theory of evolution. In this view, to use a phrase later made famous by the architect Louis Sullivan, form follows function. Forms change when functions change, and new functions cannot be expressed by old forms.³⁴

Thus purpose, not chance, determines evolutionary direction. Mumford turns to the "doctrine of finalism" of the French philosopher Paul

Janet to give support to this Lamarckian belief that in organic change the present may be as much determined by the future as by the past—"that causal mechanisms operate in organisms precisely by being attached to goals." To justify his belief that such small purposive functional changes contribute to an overall "teleology of all life," Mumford cites James Clerk Maxwell's theory of "singular points," which posits special, singular points in history, times when a small, purposive act may produce a great result. "This doctrine," Mumford concludes, introducing man into the evolutionary decision-making process, "allows for the direct impact of the human personality in history, not only by mass movements, but by individuals and small groups who are sufficiently alert to intervene at the right time and the right place for the right purpose. . . ." All of nature, this is to say, risen to self-consciousness in man, might direct its future to its own purpose, its own end.³⁵

With this introduction of man into the evolutionary process, Mumford has prepared for the final phase in his teleological theory of organic evolution. Man, he maintains, is the unfinished animal, the self-transforming animal, always involved in a becoming, never quite sure of what he is, animal or god. Man is the mind-making, self-mastering, and self-designing animal. He holds in his capacity for self-transformation the possibility of continuous creation. He is the only animal not content to remain in a state of nature; in order to achieve a sense of his own destiny and purpose, man detached himself from nature and created a second self, which we now call "culture." Through this second self, man freed himself from the slow process of organic change and became the primary agent in organic evolution.³⁶

Man, then, in transcending his own creatureliness, projects new destinies not given in nature. His mind becomes in fact the First Cause. "The acceptance of a pervasive teleology of finalism," Mumford writes, "uniting the cosmic and the human, now becomes our operational postulate and living faith." Organic change now becomes not merely increased motion, but the increase of sentience and self-directed activity. God becomes, in this scheme, not the foundation of human existence, but the faint glimmer of design, rationality, justice, love still to emerge in history. God is not at the beginning of history; rather he will issue out of it. The Kingdom of God, this is to say, is latent in nature and is the ideal culmination of organic evolution. It is man's destiny, through his culture, to aid in the emergence of "this unfinished, still-evolving deity." This he can do by transforming himself into a new species in nature, what Mumford refers to as the "universal personality."³⁷

Presumably this end of organic evolution is the "biotechnic economy," to use a phrase which Mumford borrowed from his mentor Patrick Geddes. Here technology serves life, and all activity follows the basic organic principle of functionalism. Form and function, matter and manner, form and purpose—all are a single unity in the biotechnic

economy.³⁸ The fundamental shift is from “the metaphysics of the machine . . . to the metaphysics of the organism. . . .” Technics is assimilated to the purposes of life in this “new organic model of ecological association and self-organization. . . .”³⁹ Man now rises to the “expectation of the land,”⁴⁰ and organic life becomes a cult object. “All thinking worthy of the name,” Mumford concluded in 1970, “now must be ecological, in the sense of appreciating and utilizing organic complexity, and in adapting every kind of change to the requirements not of man alone, or of any single generation, but of all his organic partners and every part of his habitat.”⁴¹

One may cull from Mumford’s voluminous writings on the city the social form which this ideal biotechnic utopia would take. Most importantly, the life-impulse will replace the power-impulse in the spiritual center of society, which means that where now man’s civilization presides over the conquest and expropriation of nature, there will be substituted nature’s restoration and renewal. Value itself will no longer be measured by money, or even by labor units, but rather by the ability to sustain life.⁴²

The biotechnic utopia must break man’s overgrown, cancerously spreading society into “organic regions” which are carefully planned so that man’s life is fit into nature’s pattern, not into the artificial patterns of the mind which inform too much of twentieth-century civilization. The organic region must be balanced, a middle landscape, so to speak, located between the wild and the civilized, where man is naturalized and therefore at home, and nature is civilized and therefore enriched. No single metropolitan center will be allowed to dominate an organic region. Instead, the ideal city will be “poly-nucleated,” spread in small, humanly assimilable units throughout the organic region. This “functional spotting” results in an equilibrium between man and nature such as existed once in the medieval English village, and in Jerusalem, Athens, Florence, and Concord, as they were in their brief biotechnic periods.⁴³

To suggest an image of the new man who will evolve to inhabit the biotechnic utopia, Mumford draws a contrast between Rousseau’s man of nature and Shakespeare’s Prospero, the hero of *The Tempest*. Rousseau’s man of nature, the noble primitive who stands solitarily above and superior to human conventions and restrictions, is, according to Mumford’s analysis, essentially a false conception. Even the most primitive man, this point of view holds, is enmeshed in social obligations and is far removed from an idealized primitive simplicity. Instead of this flaccid conception, Mumford would posit for the biotechnic utopia a Prospero—one who realizes that man’s natural state is that of society, and that it is his natural condition and most imperative destiny to dream of transcending the limits of his own nature. “The theme of natural life,” Mumford insists, “cannot be divorced from man’s dream

of transcending the limitations of his own nature: the impulse toward the divine.”⁴⁴

This ideal man, then, will be one in whom the instinctual, social and intellectual parts are fully integrated.⁴⁵ He will be the founder of a new race of pioneers who realize that Orpheus the dreamer, not Prometheus the bringer of fire, was man’s first great teacher and benefactor—that, this is to say, man was first not a toolmaker, but an image maker, language maker, dreamer and artist.⁴⁶ He will realize too that man can no longer think of himself as the abstracted atomic particle, motivated only by self-interest, formulated by John Locke and called Economic Man by Adam Smith and almost all economists since his day. Instead, the biotechnic man will see himself as the guardian of life, “responsible for maintaining an ecological balance that replaces the automatic controls of nature.”⁴⁷

Now near the end of a long career, Lewis Mumford has succeeded in remaining from dawn to dusk a utopian. A *Washington Post* critic recently put Mumford in “the major American line of Emerson, Whitman and William James.”⁴⁸ One feels that Mumford would receive the judgment favorably. The Golden Day writers have, along with Patrick Geddes, always been the main inspiration for his criticisms of the past and prophecies for the future. He would apparently insist that their reading of nature should still be man’s primary guide to the good life. He would only add to this insistence a warning that the reality of evil and tragedy must never be denied, as those readers who encounter only the early writings of Emerson and Whitman, and ignore Melville and Thoreau altogether, are wont to do. Despite the many bestialities which have made the twentieth century a prolonged tragedy, Mumford has been able to find in the “Nature” of the Golden Day writers a promise of an organic evolution which would lift man, to reverse Henry Adams’ prophecy, from twentieth-century multiplicity to a post-twentieth century unity.⁴⁹

There is, finally, something unbearably odd in Mumford’s whole life’s work. Organic evolution seems too fine a dream, childish really, and irritating if one cannot feel the mystic magic in “Nature.” Of course, this is precisely what Mumford refuses to give up. It is Mumford’s position, because he is, as he considers himself, in the line of thought which runs from Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, and through Charles Ives and Frank Lloyd Wright, that if man is to achieve a vision which can endure the cynicism inherent in the twentieth century, he will have to found that vision on a profound empathy with the mystically conceived organic principle of nature. But it is just this tenacious hold on “Nature” which gives Mumford’s work an odd glare. There is something profoundly non-rigorous in his work. One must laugh the same laugh at Mumford’s “organic evolution” that he would give to St. Francis’ “Hymn to Brother Sun.” Both these things must be nonsense to

a rational, bureaucratic civilization, which is of course exactly what America has become. But one feels that Mumford expresses a different America, that the continent itself predisposed him to a reverence of nature's organic principle, that the experience of once European men on North America has been long and deep enough to have created at least one myth which can still take possession of a thinking man's soul.

There can be no doubt—and Mumford's work is proof of this—that the myth which grew out of the New World experience envisions a civilization fundamentally different from the European variety. For Jose Ortega y Gasset, for example, nature and civilization are contradictory. Civilization, in Ortega's view, is artificial, unnatural precisely because it is man's creation, one which may well be destroyed by what he calls the new primitives, the mass men who will very possibly destroy civilization through their ignorance of its being, not a plum to be picked, but a work of art to be cared for. This point of view is very different from Mumford's vision in which nature and civilization live together symbiotically. Although Mumford too sees man as the maker of the vision which is his civilization, he would insist that the man is behaving truly only when he bases his creative vision on nature's organic principle. Any other vision, in Mumford's view, perishes.

The distinction between these two points of view is suggested both by the disgust with which Frank Lloyd Wright stood before the Parthenon, and the bewilderment with which most Europeans must greet Wright's reaction. For Wright, as one who found inspiration in the same concepts as does Mumford, the Parthenon was an act of pride which stood out offensively above nature. The distinction between the Old World and New World concepts of civilization becomes very clear if one compares any of Wright's prairie houses to the Swiss architect Le Corbusier's Villa Savoie at Poissy (1930). Whereas the prairie house appears to exist within the landscape, the Villa Savoie apparently believes, like the Greek temple, in standing out above the landscape—it is essentially a cube set upon pillars.⁵⁰ Whereas the windows of the prairie house join inner and outer worlds, acting in fact to break down the distinction between the two, the windows of the Villa Savoie act to frame nature into scenes carefully composed by the architect. The two buildings suggest a very different relationship between nature and civilization. In the Villa Savoie, man accepts his position as artificer, as molder of nature; in the prairie house, man lives more humbly as a creature within nature—a partner, really, with nature in the act of creating something worthwhile and inherently valuable on the earth.

One senses too in Mumford's work a New World naivete in his faith that the vision of a civilization which is organically joined with nature will be realized in history. A different point of view is presented by Jacques Ellul, who insists that civilization must inevitably draw further away from nature. Ellul stresses the overpowering momentum of the

modern mover and carrier of history, "technique." The last few pages of his *The Technological Society*, entitled "A Look at the Year 2000," draw a dark picture of human society at the end of the twentieth century. Basing his predictions on a 1960 interview with the leading Soviet and American scientists, Ellul sees a future society in which population is controlled, education is fed electronically into the brain, reproduction is controlled by scientists who decide which genes are desirable. Such a society, Ellul concludes, is necessarily dictatorial. He believes that "technique" realizes itself inexorably, driving history in the directions outlined by the scientists. Man then is to entirely lose contact with nature and is to become, as C. S. Lewis describes in *The Abolition of Man*, his own fatal force, one through which the strong manipulate and control the weak.

Mumford strongly resists such conclusions as these. In the bibliography to *The Pentagon of Power*, he emphasized the difference of opinion between Ellul and himself, and this despite the evidence—almost overwhelming, as Mumford must realize—that history is moving as Ellul projected. Mumford's own American people seem to call most loudly for nature's betrayal, particularly as they confront the question of how to fuel the more thoroughly technical society of the future. The same continent, it seems, which taught many Americans to revere nature has taught other Americans to seek the power which lies latent within nature. The right of man to escape technique, and the rights of animal and earth forms who cannot endure contact with technique, seem at this early stage in energy crisis to be deemed by most Americans distinctly secondary to the right of the technological society to exist unblemished, without weakness or constraint.

One suspects that this betrayal is another melancholy gethsemane in the life of a man who wishes to recover for his people the essentially religious devotion for nature which was the strongest dream which men brought to the New World, and which, in Mumford's view, has never lost its ability to inspire. For the present, however, one would guess that Lewis Mumford must harbor at least one suppressed tear, or be holding back a fist never quite shaken at the cosmos, asking why it is necessary that it be his fate to live his long life in a transitional, "mesotechnic" period, seemingly a resident of Matthew Arnold's Dover Beach, "between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born." There he awaits man's future transformations, projecting goals to guide man's evolution and repeating to himself that "the sum of all man's days is just a beginning."⁵¹

Alexandria, Virginia

footnotes

1. See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York, 1950); Charles Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise* (Urbana, Ill., 1961); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York, 1964).

2. *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden* (New York, 1968), 225.
3. See the Note to the Reader, in the Vintage edition of *The Technological Society* (New York, 1964), xxv.
4. *The Story of Utopias* (New York, 1922).
5. Mumford to Van Wyck Brooks, July 24, 1936, in Robert E. Spiller, ed., *The Van Wyck Brooks-Lewis Mumford Letters: Record of a Literary Friendship, 1921-1963* (New York, 1970), 137-138; *Faith for Living* (New York, 1940), 4-5.
6. *Values for Survival* (New York, 1946), 189; *Sticks and Stones* (New York, 1924, 1955), 180, 237.
7. *In the Name of Sanity* (New York, 1954), 167-188; *Values for Survival*, 230-231, and "The Role of the Creative Arts in Contemporary Society" (University of New Hampshire, January 1958), 19; Mumford to Brooks, July 24, 1936, in *Brooks-Mumford Letters*, 137-138; "Renewal in the Arts," in *In the Name of Sanity*, 128-129; *Art and Technics* (New York, 1952), 137-138.
8. *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1938), 289-290; *The City in History* (New York, 1961), 543; *The Story of Utopias*, 241-242.
9. Mumford to Frederick J. Osborn, April 21, 1969, in Michael R. Hughes, ed., *The Letters of Lewis Mumford and Frederick J. Osborn* (Bath, 1971), 456.
10. Lewis Mumford, *The Transformations of Man* (New York, 1956), 123-124; see also 117-122.
11. "The Little Testament of Bernard Martin, Act. 30," in Alfred Kreyenborg et al., ed., *The Second American Caravan* (New York, 1928), 131, 148.
12. "Patrick Geddes," in Harry T. Moore and Karl W. Deutsch, ed., *The Human Prospect* (Boston, 1955), 101-102. The most thorough examination of Mumford's development is Park Dixon Goist, "Seeing Things Whole: A Consideration of Lewis Mumford," *Journal of the American Institute of Planning*, November 1972, 379-391.
13. *The Golden Day* (Boston, 1926; a new preface was added to the 1957 paperback edition), x, xi; see too Mumford's introduction to *Brooks-Mumford Letters*, "The Beginning of a Friendship," 2.
14. *Golden Day*, 142-144.
15. Mumford to Brooks, December 23, 1925, in *Brooks-Mumford Letters*, 37.
16. Mumford to Osborn, November 18, 1967, in *The Letters of Lewis Mumford and Frederick J. Osborn*, 431.
17. *Golden Day*, xiii, xiv.
18. See "The America in Europe," in *The Human Prospect*, 191-201.
19. See *Herman Melville* (New York, 1929), 264; and *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York, 1970), 24.
20. See *Golden Day*, xix-xxi, 51-52; *Transformations of Man*, 96-99, 107-110; and *Myth of the Machine: Pentagon of Power*, 24.
21. *Technics and Civilization* (New York, 1934), 52; *Sticks and Stones*, 225; *Golden Day*, xxi; *Transformations of Man*, 100, 108-109; *Technics and Civilization*, 31.
22. See *Values for Survival*, 123; and Mumford to Osborn, August 10, 1967, in *The Letters of Lewis Mumford and Frederick J. Osborn*, 421.
23. "Credo," in Albert Einstein et al., *Living Philosophies* (New York, 1931), 205-219; see too, for discussions of the problems of evil, Mumford, *The Conduct of Life* (London and New York, 1952), 73, 80, 151, 157, 168-172; *Faith for Living*, 75, 81; Mumford to Brooks, July 25, 1944, in *Brooks-Mumford Letters*, 254; see too *Golden Day*, 74-75, for Mumford's discussion of Melville's confrontation with evil in *Moby Dick*.
24. "The America in Europe," 198; *In the Name of Sanity*, 134.
25. *The Condition of Man* (New York, 1944), 11-13.
26. This quotation appeared, identically, in two places: *The Myth of Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York, 1967), 13; and *The Condition of Man*, 14.
27. *Values for Survival*, 206-208; "The Role of the Creative Arts in Contemporary Society," 20-22; *The Transformations of Man*, 144-145; see too *Faith for Living*, 68, and *In the Name of Sanity*, 126-127; *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, 13-14, and *Transformations of Man*, 139.
28. Mumford to Osborn, August 10, 1967, in *The Letters of Lewis Mumford and Frederick J. Osborn*, 421.
29. See *Herman Melville*, 362.
30. See *The Conduct of Life*, 26, 38-39, 229; *Technics and Civilization*, 329; and *The Brown Decades*, 59. See too *Herman Melville*, 210: "Man's roots are in the earth; and the effort to concentrate upon an ideal experience, that seeks no nourishment through these roots, may be quite as disastrous to spiritual growth as the failure to push upwards and to rise above the physical bed in which these roots are laid."
31. "Toward an Organic Humanism," in C. Hartley Grattan, ed., *The Critique of Humanism, A Symposium* (New York, 1930), 352-353.
32. *Technics and Civilization*, 15-16; see too for this contrasting of mechanical and organic time, *The Conduct of Life*, 261; *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, 87-88.

33. *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, 235, 390-391; see too "Toward an Organic Humanism," in *The Critique of Humanism*, 355-356; *The Conduct of Life*, 31; *Technics and Civilization*, 370.
34. See *Art and Technics*, 117; "Monumentalism, Symbolism and Style," in *The Human Prospect*, 216; *The Conduct of Life*, 133; and *The Condition of Man*, 350-351.
35. *The Conduct of Life*, 131-132; *The Transformation of Man*, 136; *Art and Technics*, 159-160.
36. *The Conduct of Life*, 36-38, 251; *The Transformations of Man*, 21-24; *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development*, 9; *The Conduct of Life*, 118; see *In the Name of Sanity*, 214; *The Transformations of Man*, 13, 134.
37. *The Conduct of Life*, 240-241; *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, 419; *The Conduct of Life*, 137-138; *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development*, 31; *The Conduct of Life*, 70-72, 75, 90-91, 98.
38. See *Technics and Civilization*, 352, 356; *In the Name of Sanity*, 216; *Herman Melville*, 322; and *Sticks and Stones*, 178.
39. *Values for Survival*, 147; *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, 393.
40. For Mumford's long rhapsody on this subject, see *Golden Day*, 56-57; *The Culture of Cities*, 11-12; and *The Conduct of Life*, 180.
41. *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, 393.
42. "The Social Foundations of Post-War Building" (London, 1942), 16-23; *In the Name of Sanity*, 111-112; *Technics and Civilization*, 76-77; *Transformations of Man*, 158.
43. *The Culture of Cities*, 347, 236; "Report on Honolulu," in *City Development: Studies in Disintegration and Renewal* (New York, 1945), 87; *Technics and Civilization*, 147; *Sticks and Stones*, 95; *Transformations of Man*, 30; *The Culture of Cities*, 475, 489-491.
44. *The Condition of Man*, 274-277.
45. Lewis Mumford, "The Plan of London," in *City Development*, 224.
46. This is the thesis of *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development*. See too *Art and Technics*, 34-35.
47. *The Story of Utopias*, 239; *In the Name of Sanity*, 212-213.
48. Quoted from Frederick J. Osborn to Mumford, in *The Letters of Lewis Mumford and Frederick J. Osborn*, 477-478.
49. *In the Name of Sanity*, 140-141.
50. See Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* (Fifth Revised Edition, 1967), 525-528.
51. *Technics and Civilization*, 265; *Transformations of Man*, 184.