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INTERVIEW WITH  
ERNESTO SÁBATO

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# Ernesto Sábato

## *A sense of wonder*

One of the greatest living writers in Spanish, the Argentine novelist and essayist Ernesto Sábato analyses what he sees as the spiritual crisis of our time

*You have written many essays, notably a collection entitled *Hombres y Engranajes* (1951; “Men and Gears”), on the dehumanizing effects of science and technology. How did a scientist like yourself come to see things in this light?*

— Although I studied physics and mathematics, disciplines which offered me a kind of abstract and ideal refuge in a “platonian paradise” far from the chaos of the world, I soon realized that the blind faith that some scientists have in “pure” thought, in reason and in Progress (usually with a capital “P”) made them overlook and even despise such essential aspects of human life as the unconscious and the myths which lie at the origin of artistic expression, in short, the “hidden” side of human nature. All that was missing in my purely scientific work—the Mr. Hyde that every Dr. Jekyll needs if he is to be a complete individual—I found in German romanticism and, above all, in existentialism and surrealism. Lifting my eyes from my logarithms and sinuoids, I looked on the human face, from which I have never since looked away.

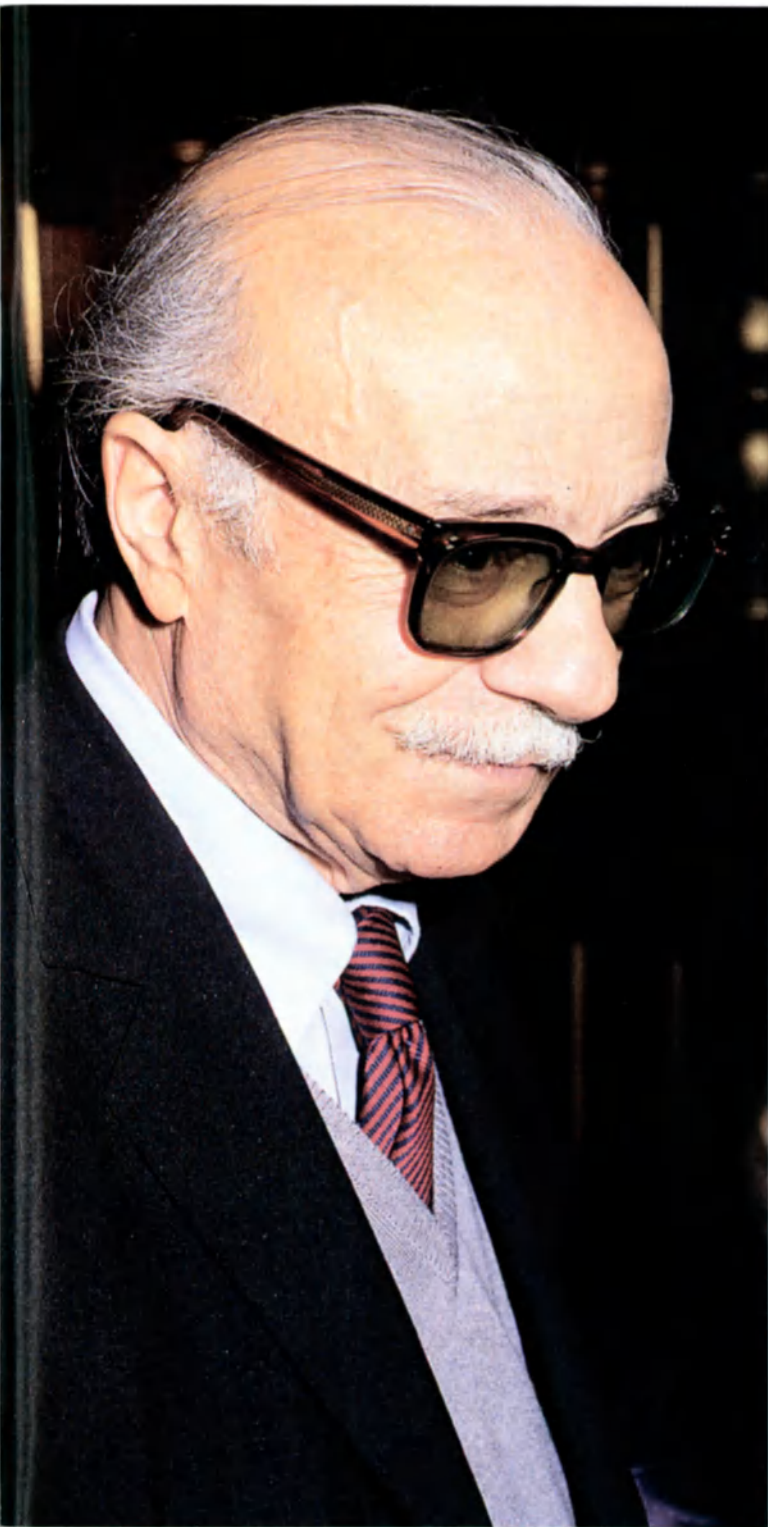
*Some great contemporary writers have managed to reconcile science and creativity...*

— That may be so, but it does not lessen my belief that our era is strongly marked by the opposition between science and the humanities, which today has become irreconcilable. Since the Enlightenment and the days of the Encyclopaedists,

and above all since the advent of positivism, science has withdrawn to a kind of Olympian retreat, cut off from humanity. The absolute sovereignty of Science and Progress over the greater part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has reduced the individual to the status of a cog in a gigantic machine. Capitalist and Marxist theorists alike have contributed to the propagation of this sadly distorted vision in which the individual is melted into the mass and the mystery of the soul is reduced to physically quantifiable emissions of radiation.

*Yet, even in the nineteenth century, there was a strong philosophical current that questioned the monumental rational edifice constructed by Hegel, the weight of which crushed the individual. We are thinking of Kierkegaard, about whom you have written extensively.*

— Kierkegaard was the first thinker to question whether science should take precedence over life and to answer firmly that life comes first. Since then, the *object* deified by science has been dislodged as the centre of the universe and been replaced by the *subject*, the man of flesh and blood. This led on to Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, to twentieth-century existentialist philosophy in which man is no longer an “impartial” scientific observer but a “self” clothed in flesh, the “being destined to die” of whom I have written and who is the source of tragedy and metaphysics, the highest forms of literary expression.



*But not the only ones...*

— Of course not, but to my mind they are the most important because of their tragic, transcendental dimension. One has only to think of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, that bloody diatribe in which, with almost demented hatred, he denounced the modern age and its cult of progress.

*We are right into literature now...*

— Yes, because the novel can express things that are beyond the scope of philosophy or the essay—such as our darkest uncertainties about God, destiny, the meaning of life, hope.

The novel answers all these questions, not simply by expressing ideas, but through myth and symbol, by drawing on the magical properties of thought. All the same, many of the characters in novels are just as real as reality itself. Is Don Quixote “unreal”? If reality bears any relationship to durability, then this character born of Cervantes' imagination is much more real than the objects that surround us, for he is immortal.

*So literature interprets reality?*

— Fortunately, art and poetry have never claimed to dissociate the rational from the irrational, the sensibility from the intellect, dream from reality. Dream, mythology and art have a common source in the unconscious—they

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reveal a world which could have no other form of expression. It is absurd to ask artists to explain their work. Can you imagine Beethoven analysing his symphonies or Kafka explaining what he really meant in *The Trial*? The notion that everything can be “rationally” explained is the hallmark of the Western positivist mentality typical of the modern age, an age which overestimates the value of science, reason and logic. Yet this form of culture represents only a brief moment in human history.

*You seem to consider our age to be the final phase in a line of modern thought beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century and ending in our own times.*

— Literary fashions should not be confused with the major trends of thought. In the vast and tragic movement of ideas there are advances and retreats, sideways excursions and counter-currents. It is clear, however, that we are witnessing the end of an era. We are living through a crisis of civilization in which there is a kind of confrontation between the eternal forces of passion and order, of pathos and ethos, of the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

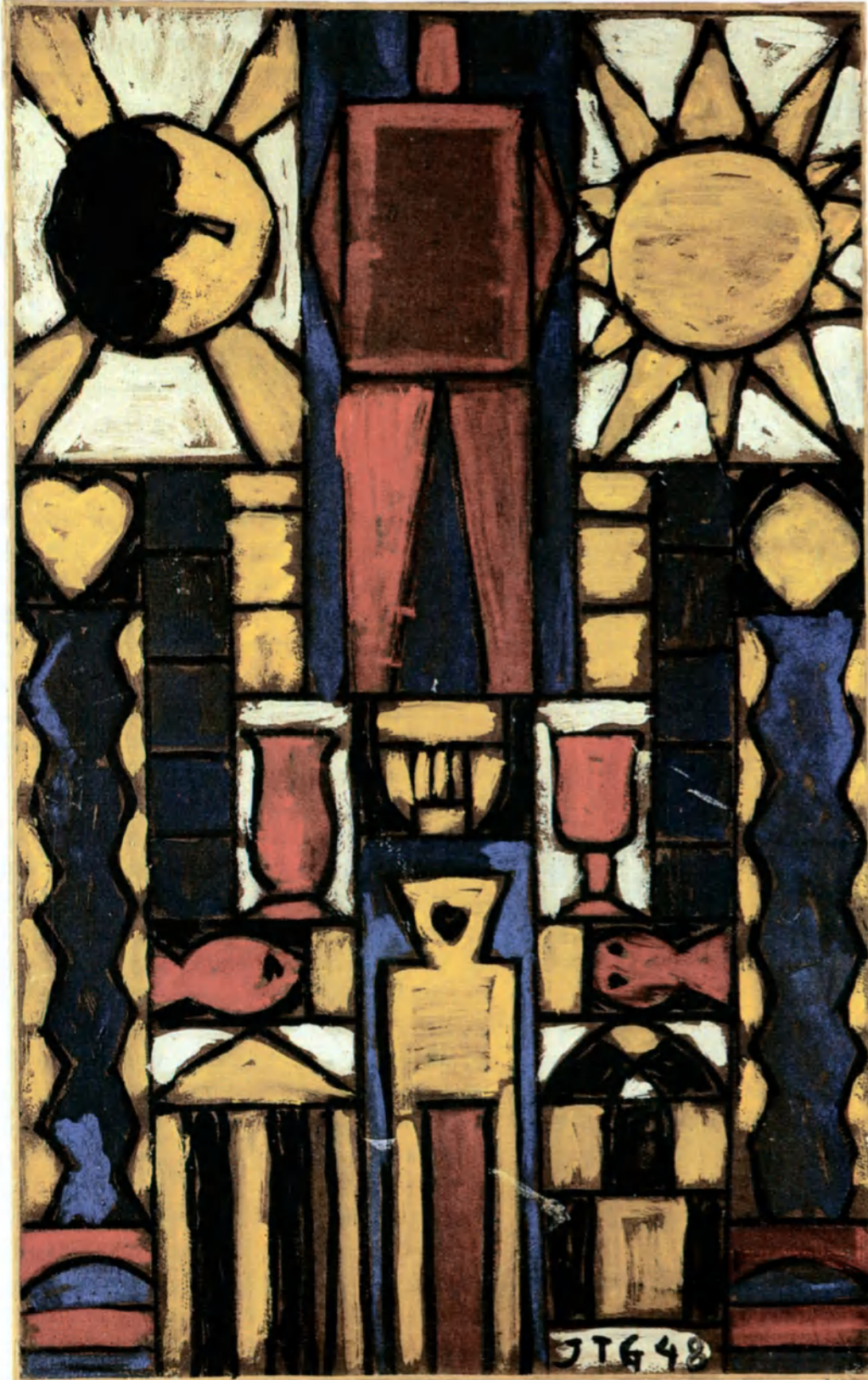
*Can this crisis be resolved?*

— The only way we can escape from this harrowing crisis is by snatching living, suffering man from the gigantic machine in which he is enmeshed and which is crushing him. But it must not be forgotten, at the dawn of a new millennium, that an age does not end at the same moment for

everyone. In the nineteenth century, when Progress was triumphant, writers and thinkers such as Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were not “of their time”, for already, despite the optimism of scientists, they had a presentiment of the catastrophe that was in store for us and which Kafka, Sartre and Camus were to portray.

*Is that why you reject the concept of “progress” in art?*  
— Art can no more progress than a dream can, and for the

same reasons. Are the nightmares of our contemporaries any more advanced than those of the prophets of the Bible? We can say that Einstein’s mathematics are superior to those of Archimedes, but not that Joyce’s *Ulysses* is superior to Homer’s *Odyssey*. One of Proust’s characters is convinced that Debussy is a better composer than Beethoven for the simple reason that he was born after him. There’s no need to be a musicologist to appreciate Proust’s satirical irony in this passage. Every artist aspires towards what may be



Design for stained-glass window, oil on cardboard, by the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García.

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called an absolute, or towards a fragment of the Absolute, with a capital "A", whether he be an Egyptian sculptor in the time of Ramses II, a Greek artist of the classical age, or Donatello. This is why there is no progress in art, only change and new departures that are due not only to the sensibilities of each artist but also to the tacit or explicit vision of an epoch or a culture. One thing at least is certain; no artist is better placed than another to attain these absolute values simply because he was born later.

*So you do not believe that there can be a universal aesthetic?*

— The relativity of history is reflected in aesthetics. Each period has a dominant value—religious, economic or metaphysical—which colours all the others. In the eyes of the people of a religious culture preoccupied with the eternal, Ramses II's hieratic and geometric colossus would encapsulate more "truth" than a totally realistic statue. History shows us that beauty and truth change from one period to the next, that black culture and white culture are based on different criteria. The reputations of writers, artists and musicians are subject to swings of the pendulum.

*There is no justification, therefore, for speaking of the superiority of one culture over another?*

— Today we have come a long way from conceited positivist certainties and from "enlightened thought" in general. Following the work of Levy-Bruhl, who after forty years of research admitted in all honesty that he could see no "progression" in the move from magical to logical thought and that the two had inevitably to coexist in man, all cultures must be seen as deserving equal respect. We have finally come round to rendering justice to what were once condescendingly called "primitive cultures".

*You are, nevertheless, dissatisfied with the education currently available in schools and universities. What do you think it lacks?*

— When I was young, I was made to swallow a mountain of facts that I forgot as quickly as I could. In geography, for example, I barely remember the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn, and perhaps that's only because they are often mentioned in the newspapers. Someone once said that culture is what is left when you have forgotten everything else. For a human being, learning means taking part, discovering and inventing. If people are to advance, they must

form their own opinions, even if, at times, this means making mistakes and having to go back to the beginning again. They need to explore new paths and experiment with new methods. Otherwise we shall, at best, merely produce a race of scholars or, at worst, of bookworms or of parrots regurgitating ready-made phrases from books. The book is a wonderful tool, provided that it does not become an obstacle that prevents us from pursuing our own research.

*How do you see the educator's role?*

— Etymologically speaking, to educate means to develop, to bring out what exists in embryonic form, to realize potential. This "labour", this delivery by the teacher is rarely fully accomplished, and this perhaps is the origin of all the faults of our education systems. Students must be made to ask themselves questions, and be convinced of their own ignorance and of ours, so that they are prepared not only to ask questions but to think for themselves, even if they disagree with us. It is also very important for them to be able to make mistakes and for us to accept questions and approaches that may seem odd. Given this state of mind, students will understand that reality is infinitely more complex and mysterious than the small area encompassed by our knowledge. Everything else will follow automatically. This is what gives rise to questionings and to certainties, the mixture of tradition and innovation that constitutes the cultural dynamic. As Kant said, people should not be taught philosophy, they should be taught to philosophize. This is the method of Plato's "Dialogues", based on direct, spontaneous exchange, in the course of which questions emerge from our awareness of our fundamental ignorance.

*Can you give us a specific example?*

— A long time ago, I travelled through Patagonia in a jeep with a forester who told me how much the forest was receding with each successive forest fire. He told me of the defensive role played by cypress trees, which he compared to the stoical heroes of an army rearguard since they sacrifice themselves to delay the spread of a fire and to protect the other trees. This made me wonder what the teaching of geography could be like if it were linked to the struggle between species, the conquest of the oceans and of the continents, and to the history of mankind, which is pathetically dependent upon the terrestrial environment. In this way the pupil would get the idea of a true adventure, of a thrilling battle against the hostile forces of Nature and of history. Far from the dead weight of encyclopaedic knowledge, from dusty volumes and ready-made ideas, knowledge thus perpetually renewed would give each pupil the feeling of discovering and participating in an age-old story. For example, to engrave indelibly on students' minds the complicated geography of the American continent, as a lived-through rather than a book-learned experience, would not the best way be to teach it through the adventures of great

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explorers such as Magellan or conquistadores such as Cortés? We should be formed, not informed. As Montaigne said, "Learning by heart is not learning". What an exciting manual of geography and ethnology for teenagers Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* would make! We have to kindle astonishment at the profound mysteries of the universe. Everything in the universe is astonishing if you think about it. But familiarity has made us blasé and nothing astonishes us any more. We have to rediscover a sense of wonder.

*You even recommend "back to front" teaching, starting with the present and reaching back into the past.*

— I believe that the best way to interest young people in

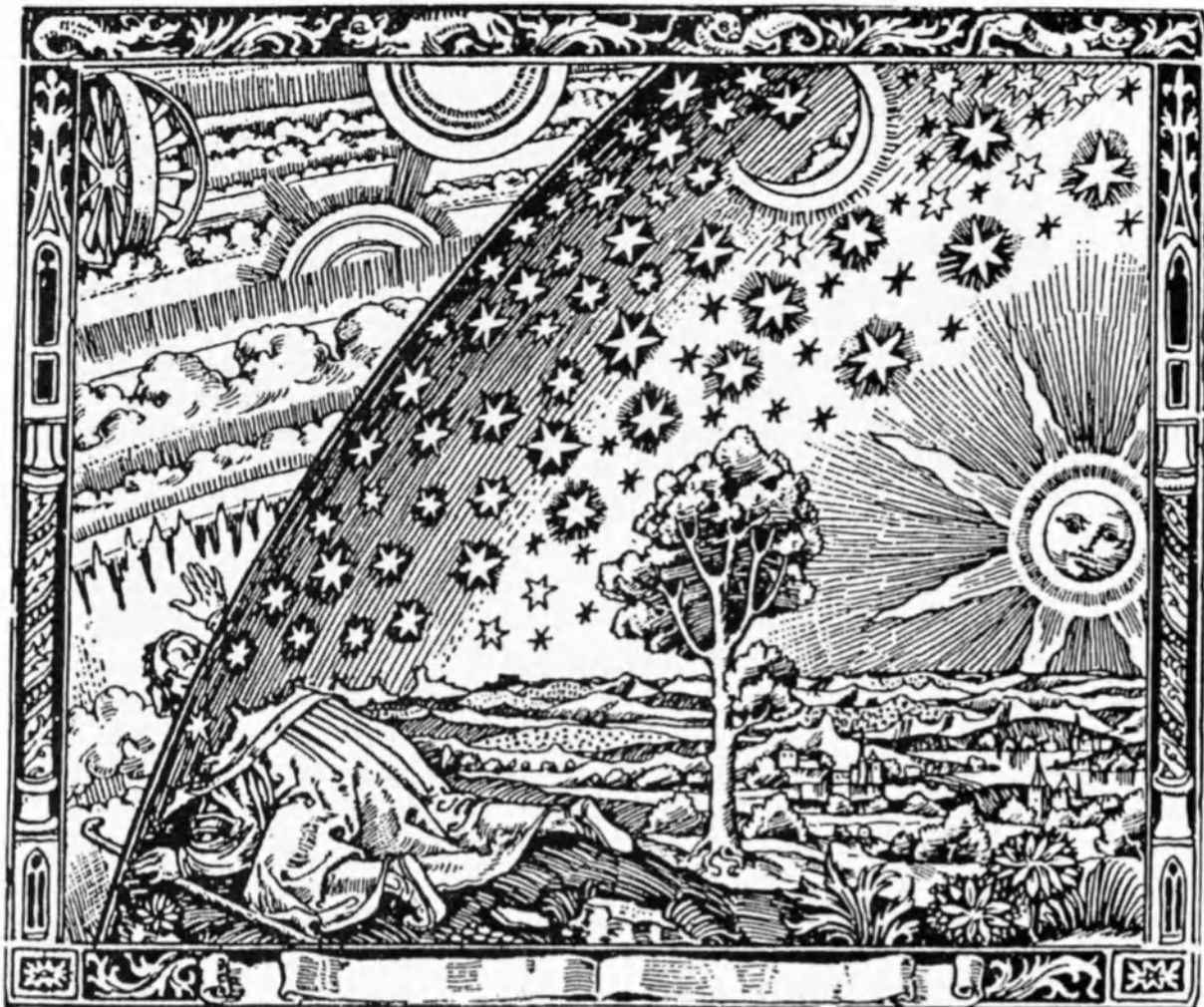
literature is to start with contemporary authors, whose language and concerns are closer to the students' own hopes and fears. Only later can they really become interested in what Homer or Cervantes wrote about love and death, hope and despair, solitude and heroism. The same could be done with history by tracing back to the roots of current problems.

It is also a mistake to try to teach everything. Only a few key episodes and problems, enough to provide a structure, should be taught. Few books should be used, but they should be read with passion. This is the only way to avoid making reading seem like a walk through a cemetery of dead words. Reading is only valid if it strikes a chord in the reader's mind. There is a kind of pseudo-encyclopaedic teaching, invariably associated with book-learning, which is a form of death. As if there were no culture before Gutenberg!

*For years you have been pointing out the risks inherent in nuclear weapons, in the arms race and in ideological confrontation throughout the world. Aren't the upheavals of recent years, and in particular of recent months, taking some of the force out of this message?*

— I'm not so sure about that. First of all, the proliferation

Wood engraving, anonymous, 16th century.





*The Temple*, 1949, oil on canvas by the Belgian artist Paul Delvaux.

of nuclear weapons is a fact. Many countries already have their own atomic “mini-bombs” and a chain reaction starting with some irresponsible terrorist action cannot be discounted. But this is only the purely “physical” aspect of the question, monstrous though it is. What really worries me is the spiritual catastrophe facing our era, which is the sad outcome of the repression of the forces of the unconscious in contemporary society. I see evidence of this in the proliferation of all kinds of protesting minorities, as well as in our collective history. We live in an anguished, neurotic, unstable age, hence the frequency of psychosomatic disorders, the upsurge in violence and in the use of drugs. This is a philosophical rather than a police matter. Until quite recently the “peripheral” regions of the world were unaffected by this phenomenon. In the East for example, as well as in Africa and in Oceania, mythological and philosophical traditions maintained a certain harmony between man and the world. The abrupt, unchecked irruption of Western values and technology has wreaked havoc, just as, during the Industrial Revolution, the mill-owners

of Manchester swamped with their cheap cotton goods peoples who knew how to produce exquisite textiles. This mental catastrophe is leading us towards a terrifying psychological and spiritual explosion which will give rise to a wave of suicides and scenes of hysteria and collective madness. Ancient traditions cannot be replaced by the transistor industry.

*Do you see nothing positive in the balance-sheet?*

— Yes, perhaps, but frankly I suspect that I belong to a race that is on the road to extinction. I believe in art, dialogue, liberty and the dignity of the individual human being. But who is interested in such nonsense today? Dialogue has given way to insult and liberty to political prisons. What difference is there between a left-wing and a right-wing police state? As if there could be good or bad torturers! I must be a reactionary because I still believe in dull, mediocre democracy, the only regime which, after all, allows one to think freely and to prepare the way for a better reality. ■