Book Reviews

Essays for the Left Hand

On Knowing. Essays for the left hand. Jerome S. Bruner. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1962. 165 pp. $3.75.

Jerome Bruner has collected into a little book ten essays on knowing, to which he gives the subtitle "Essays for the left hand," on the strength of the dictum that symbolizes the doer by the right hand and the dreamer by the left. But these essays do not record Bruner's dreams, in any sense of that word. They are the organized though occasional remarks of a noted psychologist who has studied as well as thought about the act and the concomitants of knowing. He has also read and reflected about many aspects of life other than the cognitive, and these little excursions outside his science are evidently meant to be taken as expressions of wisdom and philosophy, in addition to whatever knowledge of knowledge they impart.

Strongly favoring such deliberate digressions from the severely "eyes front" march of science, I took up Bruner's book with a lively anticipation of modern essays akin to William James's *Talks to Teachers*, a book (by the way) which still contains nearly all that anyone need know of educational "method." Bruner justifies by his choice of topics the comparison I am making. "The conditions of creativity," "The art of discovery," "On learning mathematics," "After John Dewey, what?," "The control of human behavior," "Fate and the possible" are very Jamesian concerns. James himself, despite his loyalty to friends, might have asked, "After John Dewey, what?" I was therefore primed for a rare satisfaction, and it grieves me to say that I was disappointed.

I must hope that my eagerness did not distort my judgment; but from the outset the tone and diction no less than the assumptions and conclusions of the obviously gifted and cultivated author made me aware of the chasm yawning between us. Bruner seems to me obsessed with the idea and the uses of metaphor. In two pages of his introduction, he uses the word six times, and (as I think) without serving precision. Indeed, lack of precision is his chief defect, and I am led to wonder whether the love of metaphor is not its instinctive cloak. Bruner tells us, for example, that in himself and his colleagues "the forging of metaphorical hunch into testable hypothesis goes on all the time." This is itself a metaphor; "all the time" is an exaggeration; but what is "metaphoric hunch"? Earlier we are told that since childhood, Bruner has been "enchanted by the fact and the symbolism of the right hand and the left." What happens to the "fact" when we see people who do things with their left hand? And in what sense is it a "fact" that dreaming goes on exclusively *sinistra*? I use the Latin to throw in an additional connotation and to suggest the kind of perpetual slipping from notion to notion which distresses and repels me in Bruner's philosophizing.

Since the discussion of terms can be mistaken for quibbling, I must give an example where misusage and metaphor clearly entail the confusion of high matters. In the essay "The conditions of creativity" we find a good deal of common sense inflated by jargon and mixed with references to works of literature, classic and modern. Thus: "I would propose that all of the forms of effective surprise grow out of combinatorial activity—a placing of things in new perspectives." This "surprise" is later defined as "metaphorical effectiveness." It remains a question throughout the essay what Bruner actually means by creativity. At times he follows the current cant of believing that everybody has his share of this virtue and displays it daily in small ways. He assures us, "I have been speaking of creativity, not of genius." But at other times, as when he adduces examples from the works of Sophocles and Goethe, or from the mathematical insights of the psychologist Weber, it is certainly genius that he has in mind. One paragraph asserts that the talk is not of genius but of creativity, the next says that the subject under discussion is "the production of novelty." It is evident that for all his enjoyment and knowledge of art and science Bruner has a very hazy idea of what novelty is and how rare. Genius is in fact the only producer of it—and that is how we know genius when we see it.

Bruner—and this is for me the fundamental cause of his difficulties and his failure to resolve them—writes as a naive scientist who has glimpses of the moon and would revisit them. With a candor that disarms ridicule, he says of what he calls "the production of novelty": "It is reasonable to suppose that we will someday devise a proper scientific theory capable of understanding and predicting such acts." The prediction of novelty is a program worthy of Swift's Laputans or Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet. But the endearing thing about Bruner is that he catches himself up, and four sentences later he confesses: "Perhaps it is our conceit that there is only one way of understanding a phenomenon." A little more awareness of the stifling effects of scientific or any other professionalism, a little more consecutiveness in drawing implications, a little less love of metaphor and artistic reference, and Bruner would become the philosophical writer he has the ability and ambition to be. At the moment his chief trouble is that the left hand does not sufficiently know what the right is doing.

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Free Speculation Invited

Continental Drift. S. K. Runcorn, Ed. Academic Press, New York, 1962. xii + 338 pp. Illus. $12.

In this assemblage of essays, published 50 years after Wegener first presented his concept of drifting continents, workers in several fields of earth science consider the hypothesis in the light of current evidence and concepts. Rapid advances in the study of paleomagnetism receive particular emphasis. The general principles and methods involved in this study are outlined, and a sequence of maps shows changing loca-