editorial

HARD TIMES

IN A RECENT ENGLISH PLACEMENT EXAMINATION in B.C., one of the essay questions was the following: "If the view is taken that it is as important for man to provide for his soul as well as his body during difficult economic times, discuss the role that poets, musicians, or painters can play in today's world." Few students chose to write on this topic; a cynical explanation might be that most knew little, and cared less, about the arts. Some, however, might have been deterred by a more serious consideration: *do* the arts have a role in times of economic distress? Can poetry or music or painting really provide sustenance and consolation to people suffering from poverty or hunger? Such questions involve concepts dealing with the relationship of art to life that have challenged philosophers and aestheticians from the time of Plato onwards, and demand a depth of understanding and a sophistication hardly to be expected from an eighteen-year-old struggling under examination conditions. Yet the difficulty and complexity of the issues should not deter us from asking young people to think about them, or from attempting to formulate our own answers, even at the risk of running into platitudinous generalities. Yes, we might say to the invisible examiner, the arts *are* important, whatever the prevailing economic conditions; yes, they *do* provide sustenance for the human spirit, not merely by providing us with some relief from harsh realities but by showing us that suffering can be transcended, that others have endured terrible hardships and come through, that even amidst misery the clear vision of the artist can find meaning and beauty and hope.

This is certainly a difficult time for those of us who teach the humanities. On the one hand we are assailed by clichés about living in a technological age, and by demands that we prepare our students to cope with a new kind of world dominated by the sciences. On the other hand we are threatened by massive cutbacks in the public sector, lay-offs of teachers and support staff, even the

closure of schools and colleges. Education in the fine arts is the area most vulnerable to these pressures, primarily because it is "unproductive" in any sense understood by economics: it does not turn out trained hands for the work-force, it does not advance the interests of trade or industry, it does not contribute in any measurable way to the nation's economic recovery. This was undoubtedly the reasoning behind the recent decision by the British Columbia provincial government to close the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, B.C., at the same time as the government was agreeing to fund a new engineering department at the University of Victoria. D.T.U.C., a small college dedicated to the study of literature and the performing arts, was simply not cost-effective. The arts, after all, are a luxury that the individual can enjoy in moments of leisure, a source of entertainment like football or hockey, but without the financial spin-offs generated by professional sports. If people want to read novels or poems, runs the argument, let them use public libraries; why subsidize such activities from the public purse, when there are so many other, more pressing claims on government support?

Writers and artists have long been familiar with such arguments. There has always been a tension between the claims of utility or practicality and those of imagination or the ideal. Of late, however, there has been a noticeable increase in the intensity of that debate, accompanied by a tightening of official purse-strings and a growing insistence on greater rigour in the educational system. The "back-to-basics" movement of the mid-seventies has changed its direction; the cry is no longer for a return to the three R's, but for numeracy and computer literacy. In this context, the fine arts are seen as expendable, since they are not conventionally "academic"; English is still regarded as an important subject, but primarily because of its importance as a medium of factual communication, not because of the cultural history or aesthetic values embodied in its literature. No government, of course, would make the Wilde claim that all art is quite useless; but the trend in educational policy across North America is away from concepts of schooling as a means of personal fulfilment, in which the arts play a major role, and towards the acquisition of marketable skills.

In the face of such changes, what should our reaction be? Retreat into the ivory tower is no longer an option, since someone has been busily removing the bricks from its foundation. Nor can we hope to sway public opinion by shrill denunciations of the policy-makers; biting the hand that feeds us is hardly likely to arouse much sympathy or support. In some respects, indeed, we have been fortunate in this country in the degree of official recognition and financial aid that has been accorded to scholarship and the arts through such agencies as the SSHRCC and the Canada Council, and it would be folly now to insist that the arts be exempted from the painful cutbacks experienced in every sector of our society. But we can, and must, continue to work at every level — local, regional,

and national — towards a broader public understanding of the importance of the arts and the life of the mind as a means of strengthening our awareness of community and our sense of social purpose. The Science Council of Canada recently issued a report lamenting the quality of scientific training across the country, and recommending an increase in the time allotted to science teaching in the schools. Lobby-groups for the arts, such as the Canadian Conference on the Arts, or the Canadian Authors Association, should respond to that report by urging on educators the equal need to develop a sense of cultural values alongside greater scientific skills. Improvements in the training of our scientists should not be made at the expense of arts subjects (though there is evidence that this is already happening); the arts should not be sacrificed in the name of some imagined goal of economic recovery through technological development. We must show that art enriches our society by vitalizing the imagination — and that without imagination, a society will soon become hidebound by its search for material achievement.

Dickens recognized the dangers of elevating fact over feeling, of suppressing fancy in the name of "truth," and in *Hard Times* he paints a grim picture of a world dedicated to the principles of utility:

> Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.

If, as they constantly proclaim, the politicians of our own day seek to provide our children with a "better future," they should ask themselves what kind of a future it would be that denied those children the excitement and pleasure offered by works of imagination; that restricted the avenues of intellectual growth and the free interplay of new ideas; that measured the worth of every action in terms of its utility to the state and its contribution to the gross national product. We should not oppose efforts to improve the teaching of science or to match students' curricula to changing economic needs; but we must resist the temptation to return to a Gradgrindian system of education, to any approach that would compartmentalize experience and give priority to "factual" learning. Education itself is benefiting in many ways from research in informational technology, which promises to offer exciting and effective alternatives to traditional methods of teaching. But we must not be seduced by the revolution in communications and the electronic media into thinking that technology is the be-all and end-all, or else we shall rapidly become slaves of the machine, like the downtrodden workers of Dickens's Coketown. Machines may have become necessary to our material progress and physical well-being, but they can't tell us the differences between

good and evil, they can't express joy or pain, they can't convey what it means to be a sentient being: these are matters of the mind and spirit, for which we shall always need the writer, the artist, and the musician.

H.J.R.

SURVIVAL

Elizabeth Gourlay

There are no dinosaurs today
eons ago they ruled the earth
some had machete teeth
but most, like brontosaurus, merely chewed the lush green leaves
and lolled about the pleasant marsh
when cataclysm struck the earth's moist envelope
they perished

there is one dragon left
the tuatara wears
a wing about his back
a third eye in his head

what if we grew
a most discerning
understanding
eye?