

Jeremy Larner

To Speak of Black Violence

"I'll be glad when you're dead, you rascal you!"
—*Louis Armstrong* to the King of England

The Voice of Malcolm

When the time came, Malcolm X was going to "unveil" his program—that specific cause-and-effect linking of actions to goals which would bring about equality for black people in the United States. Since his was the most dramatic rejection of the civil rights movement, it was only natural to ask Malcolm for his alternative: how, exactly, could violence create the social and economic parity that nonviolence had failed to bring?

Malcolm's answers were strategically ambiguous.¹ He argued most of his career for separation—for a parcel of land either here or in Africa—then changed his mind a few months before his death. At that time he hoped the new governments of Africa—ruled by the "strong men" he admired—would bring the American issue before the United Nations. Now and again Malcolm called for an "American Mau Mau." But at the same time he stressed voter registration—though he rejected the concept of building power within either major party. "The ballot or the bullet," he said; but it was unclear how either was to be used. And since Malcolm's assassination on February 21, 1965, no one else has succeeded in outlining a systematic use of violence as the means to black equality in this country, unless one counts the parade of ringmasters for a revolution which perpetually fails to materialize.

But it is not for his politics that Malcolm

has been mythicized and deified among young black people, "our manhood, our own shining black prince," as Ossie Davis called him in his eulogy. The legend of Malcolm is essentially religious and derives from his incarnation and reincarnation in a variety of strong, "bad" roles which culminate in a supreme ability to stand eyeball to eyeball with "the devils." The figure of Malcolm is the symbol par excellence of the new black man, whose spiritual credo is "take no shit." Malcolm "told" it, and he made it righteous:

Not a single white person in America would sit idly by and let someone do to him what we black men have been letting others do to us. The white person would not remain passive, peaceful and non-violent. The day the black man in this country shows others that we are just as human as they in reaction to injustice, that we are just as willing to die to protect our lives and property . . . only then will our people be recognized as human beings. . . . The government has not protected us. It is time to do whatever is necessary by any means necessary to protect ourselves.²

That is Malcolm X at his most lucid and compelling. If a black man is fired upon, why in the world should he not fire back? Even the saying of it denotes a step in the direction of freedom. Or call it manhood. And yet . . . and yet, there was a time when it

¹ Cf. my report, "McComb vs. Harlem," *DISSENT*, Spring 1965.

² Harvard Law School, December 16, 1964.

could not be said, much less acted upon. The fact that it can now be maintained—as part of a daily, ongoing attitude toward the world—is a sign of change and progress, political work done and social gain achieved. There could be no Malcolm X without a Martin Luther King.

The fact is that nonviolent pressure tactics have produced a tremendous amount of integration in American life since 1945. In that period, every public aspect of life has become integrated: and if you don't think that's significant, imagine how our society would feel if we returned to segregated armed forces, sports and entertainment, to say nothing of transportation and other public facilities. What remains is the urban ghetto, the physical separation of the bulk of the black population, which as long as it continues will perpetuate economic inferiority. But integration, and the possibility of integration, remains the great moving force in race relations since the end of World War II. Integration has significantly changed the outlook of black people, created new conditions, new anxieties and new forms of expression, one of which is the open call for violence.

The Idea of Integration

TRADITIONALLY, the black community in America has been a frontier area, where law and law enforcement were instruments of the white ruling class, used almost exclusively to maintain black caste inferiority. The law shielded whites from blacks but not blacks from whites. The sorriest aspect of black existence in America was that the black man could not protect his woman, his children, or his home. This is the first fact that must be confronted by those who would deal with the weakness of the black family, and it is the fact which gave symbolic impact to the Black Panthers' attempts to patrol the Oakland cops.

The ghetto was also a lawless area when it came to relations between blacks and blacks. Conflicts between individuals were

settled by personal, physical force, or by verbal show of force. In this kind of situation it paid off to have a reputation as a "bad nigger"—a man who will without hesitation retaliate upon anyone who gets in his way. Ordinarily such a man would be restrained by legal force and moral disapproval. Certainly to love him took an amount of masochism and self-hate, qualities which could hardly be lacking under the circumstances. If not love there was bound to be an admiration for the "bad nigger," who, as his title implies, was everything the white man didn't want him to be—and who, when he fired back on whites, as he sometimes did, was risking his life for the sake of his personal style.

In a community where law is absent or minimal, where life itself cannot be guaranteed, the *style* of life takes on a supreme importance. Style signifies self-esteem, not through substance, career, or position, but through personal power in relation to the give and take of the immediate scene.

When it came to the dynamics of life on the frontier, the style required was a readiness for display, for passion, for toughness and even brutality. But in contact with whites, the only style consistent with survival was the style of accommodation—even if accommodation masked anger, theft and sabotage. For the white man was in a position to exploit the black man—and woman—for his own economic, social and sexual gain. Black people were crippled and inferior in their relations with whites—and compensation could be found only in pursuit of their "real" lives within the black community, where their prestige could hardly depend on their positions in the world at large.

But now the signals have been changed. The big city is right at hand, with all the sweets of white power, and the most respected blacks are those who go and get them some. The white world is open as never before, and nonexploitative contacts are not only available, they are—for black males, at least—nearly unavoidable. The contact

comes increasingly in schools, and through community centers and youth programs. There is contact in the army, and likely to be more contact on the job. If a young black person becomes part of the "street culture" around urban universities and some high schools, there will be chances for social and sexual contact as well. Perhaps most significantly, the efforts of integrationist recruiting and preparation programs have ensured a dramatic increase in black college enrollment—up from 287,000 in 1960 to 680,000 in 1971, including a proportionately higher number of students from the lowest social levels.³

So integration on the personal level is a real possibility. The trouble is that in a larger social sense, Americans seem to reject integration: they move away from Negroes, they are not willing to undertake the basic economic programs that would be necessary to eliminate the ghetto. So that young blacks emerging into white society are still coming from the frontier: they are simultaneously taking it along with them and leaving it behind. For them the price of admission to the world of white expertise and power is still something that feels like accommodation: that is, they must approach as inferior beings who are starting from a disadvantaged position. The crux of every integrated job or training or educational opportunity is that the young black person is being given a chance to catch up. Often enough, he knows full well that he has been admitted through a special lowering of the usual standards.

Giving opportunities to catch up is not in itself unrealistic; but the situation can be unbearable for the individual, who in applying for improvement to the white world must in some sense repudiate what he is and where he comes from. When he does, the reward for his renunciation is not full equal-

ity—merely the right to continue to struggle at a disadvantage.

Integration then is a terrible threat to the well-being and self-esteem of young black people, and the more successful they are in the larger world the more of a threat it may be. Logically, their fulfillment as educated, skilled people should be part of a process that will wipe out the ghetto; but in fact the ghetto remains, it is worse off than ever, plagued triply by heroin, while American society is committed to do nothing more than skim some talent off the top and maintain the rest as is. If the ghetto must remain, and the masses of black people must remain within it, the individual who leaves it behind might well feel like a traitor.

To sum up: young blacks begin from an inferior position, they are aware of an ultimate rejection, and can look forward at best to an impasse. Under such conditions mere opportunity is maddening.

Young black people are torn in two by America. On page one of the *New York Times* of April 4, 1972, there is a story about increasing racial conflict on college campuses: separatism, culture clashes, rowdiness, sometimes theft and assault. This partly explains why white students are no longer interested in being tongue-whipped by revolutionary lecturers. The young blacks, for their part, do not want to be "friends" with the whites; they make contact through forms of hostility. But in another story that same day, same paper, buried on page 58, we learn that a survey has been taken of 54,000 college-bound black students: and two-thirds of them believe that integration is "not only good but necessary."

Clearly something happens to these kids when they begin to live in the integrated situation. Accommodation to the routine of student life is required, but departures in verbal style or personal attitude no longer imperil one's life. Personal aggression is acceptable: at best, from the aggressor's point of view, he will meet with sympathy; at worst, it can be gotten away with. And as

³ *New York Times*, April 4, 1972. The 1971 figure for white college enrollment is 8,087,000. "About 56 per cent of the black college students attend predominantly white institutions where very few blacks attended a decade before."

long as the national situation contains the built-in assumption of inferiority, expressions of vengeance and violence are inevitable.

The Social Uses of Hostility

WITH WHAT ATTITUDES do young or "new" blacks engage the equivocal welcome of the white world? The following list is admittedly incomplete; its focus is on attitudes involving forms of aggression.

a) *Super Materialism*. The determination to get for oneself everything that can be gotten. Personal goods belonging to white people viewed as spoils of exploitation. Old-fashioned conspicuous consumption, involving both standard American TV commodities and that showier line of merchandise for black people only.

b) *A Hermetic Ideology of Blackness*. Black is not only beautiful, it can't be judged by standards other than its own. Exaggeration of the glory of African civilization (kings and riches), and the cultural and political cohesiveness of "the black community."

c) *Tough Talking*. The desire for respect, the need for compensatory privileges expressed in the language of demand and threat. Possible embarrassments of direct competition or cooperation avoided through styles of aloofness or "pride."

d) *Vigilant Assertion of Manhood*. A threat projected into every conceivable situation, as if to make certain that none will be overlooked. The best defense is a good offense, or vice versa. The concealed point is a sensation of full-time vulnerability.

e) *Bringing the Frontier to Whitey*. Whitey can't protect his family either. Why should he alone be safe on the street or in his apartment? Whitey can be hit, his son can be hit, his daughter can be had. With no apologies. This is the latest bill for racism in America, Malcolm's "chickens coming home to roost," the newest fact of life between the races. It is intensified by the replacement of the knife

with the hand gun among delinquents and lower-class gangs of both races.

f) *The Will to Unity*. The assertion that all black aggression is part of the good and against the bad. The identification, for example, for the sake of which black college students may band together to bully whites to release a black intruder whom they have caught in a dormitory in the act of theft or assault.

IN SOME RESPECTS this adaptation of hostility is class-bound and parallels the attitudes of ethnic immigrant groups as they prepared for entry into American society. Other groups—e.g., the Irish, the Jews, the Italians—have been regarded as innately uncouth, violent, and animalistic. There were members of all these groups who chose outright gangsterism as an avenue to the American dream. From a very long view, the current adaptation could be viewed as transitional: but it is "blacker" from the bitterness of a longer wait, an incomparably more hurtful wound, and a deeper doubt that the goal will ever be in reach.

For all the tension of contemporary American life, black violence against whites is by and large still sporadic rather than programmatic, in contrast to the history of white violence against blacks. It takes the form of eruptions in the everyday tension of continued and expanding black/white interrelations. Given the threat of partial integration and the insult of qualified equality, black attitudes of hostility and separatism are a means of differentiation without which engagement would apparently be impossible. Such attitudes must be respected, but they cannot be taken at face value, for it is *engagement* which is still the great problem and desire. The black man finds he cannot so simply engage on current terms. If, he says, we are not equal in every respect right from the beginning, we will damn well be *more* than equal.

Still: to have to be more than equal is crippling, for every assertion of supremacy

has as its underside an unspoken confession of inferiority.

The Revolutionary Religion

THE WATTS RIOTS in August of 1965 were supposed to have begun it: the rise of a self-conscious black proletariat which would transform America by revolutionary violence. After the riots of 1967, the white writer Andrew Kopkind—to cite one of many who wrote as if he were sending a message from inside the black consciousness—announced to the readership of *The New York Review of Books* (August 24, 1967) that “there was more method in the uprisings than the press and the public could see . . . an authenticity beyond chaotic mob actions . . . tough black street leaders have emerged . . . mass action has convulsed the society. . . . Poor blacks have stolen the center stage from the liberal elites, which is to say that the old order has been shattered.” Polarization was supposed to be in store, with “the establishment” swinging “wide to the right,” liberal “buffers . . . obliterated.” There would then ensue the confrontation the new radicals of the 1960s longed for, wherein American liberals would have to choose between violent repression and violent liberation.

Because America was “capitalist” it was “fascist,” ran the new line of the new times, and therefore only violence could end racism. The analysis itself was posed as a moral test: if the only answer is full-out revolution, only the corrupt and the complicitous will refrain. Verbal assent then gives elite satisfaction.

When Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, Eldridge Cleaver wrote a “Requiem for Nonviolence.” “The war has begun,” he said.

The violent phase of the black liberation struggle is here, and it will spread. From that shot, from that blood, America will be painted red. Dead bodies will litter the streets and the scenes will be reminiscent of the disgusting, terrifying nightmarish news reports coming out of Algeria during the

final breakdown of the French colonial regime.⁴

I wonder if it's necessary at this point to refute the colonial analogy: to remark that the U.S. government, for instance, is not a foreign imposition but for better or worse does represent a majority of the people living here, that avenues of politics by means other than violence are open. The analogy draws its strength from the long-term isolation and exploitation of black people. That oppression has engendered what seems to be the same kind of rage—though as I've tried to establish, the rage in this country has been intensified by a partial *lifting* of oppression. Is violence, as Cleaver and others argue via Fanon, the only necessary and inevitable therapy? Whether it's therapeutic or not, we are having some violence, and we are going to have more, in various forms, traceable to the fury of men who now have a chance to avenge the long history of emasculation.

It seems clear, however, that the revolution is not in the process of arriving—any more than those other magic charms of the 1960s, “black capitalism,” and “community control.” Even with Richard Nixon's indifference to any basic redistribution of wealth, even with unemployment maintained at a high level and the unaltered decay of urban ghettos, organized violent action has not caught on—and the riots, which on a practical level achieved only the deaths of black people and the further isolation and impoverishment of the ghetto, turn out to have been spontaneous and temporary.

Yes, there have been cops ambushed here and there, there have been guns bought and stored, proclamations, threats, speeches, classes, publications and sun-glassed bodyguards, but no sustained, organized revolutionary action, perhaps even less than among white children of the middle classes. Even the known assassins of Medgar Evers, Em-

⁴ “The Death of Martin Luther King: Requiem for Nonviolence,” written April 6, 1968; published later in *Ramparts* and in *Eldridge Cleaver: Post-Prison Writings and Speeches*, edited by Robert Scheer (New York: Random House, 1969).

mett Till, Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney, the four little girls in Birmingham, etc.—whose deaths Malcolm logically called for—walk around the South free from retribution. It is a teacher in a ghetto school, a small shop owner, a cabdriver, or a co-ed who is more likely to feel the hand of ideologically certified black violence.

It turns out that however many young ones “speak the language,” however many lash out at times in one way or another, very few black people are ready “to take up the gun.” We will never know, in fact, how many of the key figures in the underground groups that did exist were agents in pay of the government, or how much “action” was carried out at their insistence. We do know that in some cases, such as the well-publicized plot to blow up the Statue of Liberty, the agent was the chief pusher for the plan which he hoped to exploit at the end by overturning.

Rhetorically, the ante is up, and will stay up. But in actuality the most sustained and serious political efforts among black people are now going into, of all things, voter registration and electoral politics. The number of black elected officials in this country increases almost geometrically from year to year. It has sunk in that if whites are going to run from the cities, then blacks might just run them. A comparison of the 1968 and 1972 Democratic conventions make it clear that black people have made significant gains within the Democratic party; and they are bound to make more. Nowadays, when black political conferences are held, it doesn't matter whether they're sponsored by “nationalists” who once screamed that democracy is a racist plot or by congressmen who've been in the marketplace wheeling and dealing: the outcome is an agenda of demands for legislative action, some of them outrageous, most of them in threatening rhetoric, but beneath the posturing, what it amounts to is a shopping list. Regardless of how they talk, black leaders these days are practical and meliorative, lobbying for cash for projects

and programs, looking to push for more power, to widen that wedge in unions, media, police, and other basic institutions. Despite a few separatist planks—local control of schools, for example—the basic thrust is participatory if not integrationist. The ghetto is conceived of as a power base with its own separate needs, but there is a recognition that it is nothing without institutional connections to the larger society, and the effort is to widen those connections rather than cut them off.

Even Huey P. Newton, Minister of Defense and no longer Supreme Commander but Servant of The People, has admitted that the Black Panthers “defected from the black community,” to become a “revolutionary cult.” The dialectic according to Newton still calls for ultimate violence, but until the people are ready the Panthers will concentrate on their “survival programs,” mostly in Oakland: clinics, breakfasts, storefront factories. And although Newton said as late as 1971 that they never would, Panthers are now running for office in Oakland. Ericka Huggins, who was tried and acquitted as an accomplice in the torture-murder of Party member Alex Rackley, and thus gained for herself the “image” of a revolutionary martyr, now serves as an elected member of the Berkeley agency for distributing antipoverty funds.

All of this activity is based on the unspoken assumption that the country is moving, however slowly, and that the direction cannot and will not be reversed. Though the masses of nonwhite poor remain on the bottom of our society, it is now certain that the piecemeal but widespread welfare support they receive will not be withdrawn—it will even be reformed in positive ways. Even the Republicans have begun to accept the principle of some sort of income guarantees. The country now spends \$31 billion on “poverty programs”—enough, says Senator Ribicoff, to eliminate poverty if it could be distributed among the poor, instead of being used, inevitably, to create a poverty industry.

But tell me, how can a black leader step up in front of his people and say to them, "Look, we are getting welfare, and we're going to get more; eventually we'll get more jobs and more cash, more and more of us will break into the circles of power and prestige, and years from now, if we keep on plugging, the whites may let us in to the point where we draw even with them. Teach your children to be proud and strong, we need take no insult now. But for the time being they, and probably their children too, must go on fighting and suffering the effects of racism."

That is what the man knows in his heart, that is the assumption he acts upon, but he cannot say it perhaps even to himself. What is needed—what has always been strong among black people—is a religion, a set of beliefs wherein the righteous are rewarded, the pure in spirit inherit the earth, and one is never caught in the street without a word for anything that may come up. Traditionally, that religion for American Negroes has been Christianity, and those younger people who have abandoned it as a white man's device for social control do not flounder in scepticism. They replace Christ with other prophets, speaking still of the holy battle and the promised land. If you want attention you had better deliver like a preacher, and what's the sense of preaching if you haven't got the gospel truth.

If you've got that righteous word, you don't have to bring heaven down to earth. You make your hearers happy, for only you and they have an understanding of who will be saved and who damned. You turn their suffering into a medium of communion with as much beauty and power as you can manifest in your own hot flow of language, your own capacity to invoke that sweet moment of righteous vindication. The congregation dissolves their separate selves in communal response to the preacher; and the preacher in turn loses himself to the audience. Religion is the survival program of black people. It's the survival program without which no one could survive a survival program.

Because underneath it there stretches an abyss of fatalism and cynicism too terrible to contemplate.

Now we have young black people believing in the beauty of blackness, in the supreme black pearl of self-assertion: and at various times, in various moods and needs and circumstances, justified by the holy book according to Malcolm, Muhammad or Muhammad Ali. Or many others, and all at once. And to the question, do we believe in violence?, the only righteous answer has got to be yes!

For some that religion is very explicit, involving the saintly pantheon from Marx to Mao Mao. It is their "thing," for the time being; they live for it and by it, and some are ready to die for it. When they speak they are impressively serious and dramatic. The white radicals latch on to them, the media wheels in its cameras, and we have the *image* of revolution.

All kinds of people need that image in this country. Hoover/Mitchell/Wallace types need it, radicals need it, liberals need it: all to tell us who we are, whom we hate, and why what we believe is right. And so we finance it—the Left through contributions, the Right through undercover agents—and put it on TV. Or have we already gotten tired of the program?

For black prisoners, however, the revolutionary religion is a more desperate and accurate reflection of their life situation. How should the world look to a man who is incarcerated in a no-win situation where he falls ever farther away from society? Where his jail and jailers and fellow prisoners and parole board impose on him the most savage forms of American racism?

It all falls into place. I see the whole thing much clearer now, how fascism has taken possession of this country, the interlocking dictatorship from county level on up to the Grand Dragon in Washington, D.C.

I am quoting George Jackson,⁵ who writes

⁵ Quotes here are from *Soledad Brother* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).

with a weight of authenticity that makes the other new “revolutionary” writers seem calculated and literary.

The guy who earns a parole surrendered some face in the course of his stay here. . . . No black will leave this place if he has any violence in his past, until they see that thing in his eyes. And you can't fake it, resignation—defeat, it must be stamped clearly across the face.

Jackson had shit thrown in *his* face: the guards encouraged or permitted other prisoners literally to throw shit as they passed his cell. They convinced him they could have a recalcitrant prisoner murdered. Imprisoned at the age of 18 for a \$70 hold-up, Jackson spent the next 11 years in jail, often in solitary confinement in conditions where his books and writing materials were repeatedly confiscated. Under the circumstances it is impossible not to respect Jackson's solitary achievement in forging his mind and body into a revolutionary dedication which eventually brought him contact and reinforcement from the outer world. George Jackson freed himself in a way that is impossible for those who bear the stamp of defeat.

Yet he was not free. He was killed in jail, and before that, he was forced, perhaps, to become a murderer. Ultimately the prison system—and the society which permits it—must bear the burden of Jackson's imprisonment and death, of making him, as he put it, “a *total* product of my surroundings.”

Perhaps the revolutionary religion served Jackson well; perhaps it was the only way left to cope with his surroundings and at the same time to retain his remarkable sense of humanity. But we cannot say the existence of the kind of jail he was in confirms his historical-political-social analysis. Nor can we say George Jackson was well served by his friends on the outside who confirmed his belief that it did—who may have been accessories, ultimately, in his useless death.

The one element missing from the books of Jackson's writings is any reference to the prison violence in which he may have been involved. Of course Jackson himself could not refer to it, writing from prison. But it is a matter any concerned person would have to know about to decide exactly what happened to Jackson, since it was part of the web that held him. It reminds me of the Rackley case—or of the death of Malcolm X. There is a total social myth to cover the circumstances, and the myth serves so well that no one seems to care what really happened.

That's the trouble with absorbing actual social conditions and events into the fabric of a religion. You can get people killed for no good reason. The prison rebels at Attica, for instance: it is sad to think that many of them believed themselves part of a world revolution which gave them power to start international negotiations for their release. They sent for some popular figures to arrange for their flight to the land of the revolution. And apparently these figures failed to disabuse them.

It is no good pretending that all black convicts in American jails are “political prisoners”—and that the solution to their plight lies simply in setting them free. To believe that is to think in terms of religion, and to be ready to sacrifice the lives of others in a holy cause.

If one believes the revolution is coming, then the prisoners will be freed—from the outside. But what cowardice, what hypocrisy, what vicarious bloodlust to expect *them* to make the revolution! To arm them, urge them to attack, and then say, “Look, the system wiped them out!”

If one knows the revolution is not coming, then one is obliged to deal with the reality of the jail system, not as a matter for “revolutionary suicide,” but as a subject for knowledge and pressure and change—all of which are possible without underestimating the injustice or the racism.

Now we have a number of preacher fig-

ures who will use these prison deaths to add to their own symbolic self-images, as they pursue the mythic confrontation of revolution and fascism. They will find an audience that believes them, but only in the way that people believe preachers; and the preachers will show by their deeds that they do not even believe themselves.

The Plea of Innocence

"FREE Bobby! Free Huey! Free Angela! Free Ericka!" What does this mean?

Does it mean we, the revolutionary forces, are too strong for jails to hold us? We shall free our comrades? That would be a standard revolutionary proclamation.

But in practice, free so-and-so turns out to mean something quite different. It means, let us go because we are who we are. Let us go because you have no right to judge us. Let us go because you can't prove we're guilty. Be fair and let us go.

Up until the split with Eldridge Cleaver in April of 1971, the Black Panther newspaper was full of cartoons of cops getting ambushed, shot and stabbed, under the title, "We have no hangups about revolutionary violence." The analysis in the paper's prose maintained that cops were fascist pigs, that "Amerika" was a fascist state. One would think then that when a Panther was arrested for shooting a cop, he would say, "I did it and I'm glad! On with the revolution!" Certainly if America were truly fascist, or even a "people's democracy," he'd have no chance of a day in court, certainly no chance to advocate killing cops in a freely published paper.

But it turns out that every time a Panther is brought to trial, he maintains his innocence. He appears with a lawyer who screens the jury, attacks the evidence, and usually produces an acquittal. Now I personally am willing to believe in the possibility that every Panther charged may have been innocent, or that he fired in self-defense, or that he was framed. What I am not willing to believe is that the Panthers ever completely be-

lieved that America is a closed-up totalitarian society.

That there is police brutality, that cops have unnecessarily killed black people, we know. That the court system has been class- and race-biased, we know also.

But that "revolutionaries" deserve automatically to be freed, not by their comrades but by a supposedly fascist system, that's a difficult idea.

It seems to me inescapable that those who maintain it are using revolutionary attitudes to test and expand the limits of a system they know is at least formally democratic. When the chips are down, it seems the "revolutionaries" would still like to force America to live up to its democratic principles. They rely on their own civil rights, they count on them, lean on them, and apparently want to extend them to those who have had trouble getting them.

This is not to doubt their physical bravery, but when these same people put up an image of uncompromising violence, one feels a twitch of embarrassment. They are more dependent on American liberties than they seem to know—and the more violent the rhetoric, the more dependent the rhetorician.

Take Eldridge Cleaver, who broke with the Panthers because they were reluctant to start urban guerrilla warfare. (In order to be the "spearhead" of anything, Huey replied, you need someone coming along behind.) On October 1, 1968, speaking to white middle-class college students at Stanford University, Eldridge said,

Good white people, you've got to support me . . . or else the niggers are going to come into the white suburbs and turn the white suburbs into shooting galleries . . . They've got to move on, create conditions so that the pigs of the power structure will be forced to become more and more repressive to continue their exploitation.⁶

Then in an interview in *Playboy* published that same month, when pressed by Nat Hent-

⁶ From *Eldridge Cleaver*, ed. Scheer.

off to say how such tactics could possibly *win*, Cleaver replied: “. . . we don’t accept the analysis that we’re doomed because we’re in a minority. We don’t believe that the majority in this country would permit concentration camps and genocide.”

It is clear that Cleaver did not, at bottom, regard American society as totally repressive. The threat of shooting up the suburbs is designed both to create *more* repression and to get “good white people” on his side. To imagine that his side would then contain either the balance of power or a majority voice is a more optimistic reckoning of America than anything one could hear from the most starry-eyed liberal. But the new revolutionary is not obliged to say how the revolution will come or be won. It is his rhetoric which establishes him as a preacher, a figure and a symbol: all the more so because everyone understands perfectly well there will not be a revolution.

Or take Angela Davis, who was put on trial because a gun she purchased was used by Jonathan Jackson to kidnap and kill the judge who was about to try his brother. It did not take a fascist state to try Angela as an accessory under the circumstances. It is one thing to say she should have been given bail; quite another to say she should have automatically been freed. Eventually the prosecution could not convince the jury of Angela’s guilt. In the meantime the Communist party did its best simultaneously to get her off and to establish her as a martyr of American fascism.

While Angela was in prison, she taped a half-hour TV interview which was shown on a major network. The interviewer was a friend of hers who opened and closed the interview with a hug, and in between asked a series of questions set up to elicit an unchallenged expression of Angela’s political views. With dialectic skill she moved from discrimination in jails and courts to a definition of all black prisoners as political and an indictment of the society as fascist. Upon her acquittal, Angela triumphantly flew to

the Soviet Union, where prisoners rot in jail for their politics, or simply for trying to speak to the public in a land where that right is controlled by the state, which also controls the right of citizens to leave or reenter.

It may be noted that the revolutionary hero Angela Davis did not say she supplied the gun and she was glad. She pled innocence, as was her right; and one could hear in her plea the cry of dependency, and reflect on the pathos and weakness of a leader who must rely on the liberties of a society whose injustice she would exploit to the hilt.

Young people, black and white, can hear the cry within the plea of innocence. For a while they raise their voices in psychic identification. When it comes to the crimes that stem from racism, aren’t we all in some ultimate sense innocent?—just as all of us are guilty. We can spend a good deal of time in the luxury of proclaiming our innocence and our guilt.

But such proclamations proclaim most of all our helplessness. They weaken the morale, they sap the capacity for long-term political commitment.

Black and White Mirroring

AS THE ROMANCE of violence begins to fade, it is fitting to close with the image of a dead end, endlessly reflected. Helplessness, it seems, begets more helplessness. One of the most pathetic aspects of black violence is the moral ammunition it exchanges with titillated white radicals. Black and white ideologues line up as mirrors for one another, stand face to face and read fantasies of the superman in the slogans printed on one another’s foreheads.

And so we get Eldridge Cleaver copying the worst passages of “The White Negro,” Angela Davis reciting the bromides of the stalest Stalinism, the Black Panthers glorifying Kim Il Sung and the “workers paradise” of North Korea, Huey Newton solemnly informing us that “contradiction is the ruling principle of the universe.”

Sadly, it would be hard for young black

people to avoid identification with three connected prototypes created more than partly by the psychic needs of white men.

1) *The Noble Savage*. The standard psychological conversion applied to people who are darker and of inferior caste. The process involves a romanticization of the conditions of lower-class life into a state of original innocence, where man is a free, instinctual animal, unhampered by the load of civilized guilt. The main fallacy to this approach is that lower-class man is just as civilized—in the sense that his life is just as unnatural, just as deformed by society—as middle- or upper-class man.

The black man as noble savage is particularly useful for the ideologues of the counter culture, and one could scarcely find a more classic example than this passage from *The Pursuit of Loneliness* by Philip Slater:

Some blacks are much absorbed in rediscovering and celebrating those characteristics which seem most distinctively black and in sharpest contrast to white Western culture: black expressiveness, creativity, sensuality, and spontaneity being opposed to white constrictedness, rigidity, frigidity, bustle, and hypocrisy. For these blacks, to make too great a commitment to the power game is to forsake one's blackness. Power is a white hangup.

Men used to say the same about women. It's the kind of remark you can make only about people who are carefully kept apart from you.

And I trust the reader will not miss the implicit condescension. From here it is just one step to a lower standard for judging black behavior. If any group is seen as creative and spontaneous, etc., oppressed by rigid, frigid power, their acts of violence can be admired as the natural rebellion of children. From which it would follow that black people cannot be taken seriously in a political sense, i.e., in terms of power-seeking. ("Power is a white hangup.") Which means in turn that it will be harder for black people to take themselves seriously, they

will have to fight a tendency to act with the slyness and cynicism of children who are testing parents.

2) *The Hipster*. Norman Mailer in 1957 saw the Negro as the most desperate case of modern man totally trapped and dominated by his surroundings.

The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could.

Morality, Mailer implies, is the luxury of those who share social control, the "Squares."

But the Negro, not being privileged to gratify his self-esteem with the heady satisfactions of categorical condemnation, chose to move instead in that other direction where all situations are equally valid, and in the worst of perversion, promiscuity, pimping, drug addiction, rape, razor-slash, bottle-break, what-have-you, the Negro discovered and elaborated a morality of the bottom, an ethical differentiation between the good and the bad in every human activity.

...

Let's pass by Mailer's symbolic contention that the Negro is a stranger to "categorical condemnation" (which would make him indeed a unique human being). Mailer's central notion, as I read him, is that the Negro in his extreme state of confinement and peril is the one to show us how to break our social bonds, the chafing of which will otherwise reproduce the mass murders, the technological disasters of the 20th century. The way out, the only way "to grow," is to live like psychopaths, seeing every personal encounter as a battlefield on which one must win or lose one's self-conception, one's energy to go on existing.

... the destructive, the liberating, the creative nihilism of the Hip, the frantic search for potent Change may break into the open

with all its violence, its confusion, its ugliness and horror, and yet like all Change, the violence is better without than within, better as individual actions than as the collective murders of society. . . .⁷

This is not the moment for a full-scale argument with Norman Mailer. Yet it seems to me his theory is based on a false polarity. Are individual and social violence diametric opposites, or do they arise from a common pathology? Does an act of personal violence deplete or increase the energy available for mass violence?

Or to put it in terms more relevant to our discussion: is the black man really a child of nature, striking out against his crushing environment with instinctive creativity—or is his violence part of the environment itself, a sickness inseparable from the larger social disease?

The question is not unimportant, for Mailer's theory has been all too useful and influential in a way he may not have intended. Mailer in effect provided a transitional figure between the noble savage and the black revolutionary. The hip Negro mirrors the white hipster "engaged in one primal battle: to open the limits of the possible for oneself, for oneself alone, because that is one's need." Since he proceeds from something "primal" directly to a fulfillment of his "need," there is no point along the way where he can be held morally accountable by any social code. It's not strange that Mailer's admirers missed this; it's a dish better eaten in the dark. Mailer ends up expounding a superman theory which grants moral license to certain individuals only: those who have the primitive instinct/need/courage to take it (even if vicariously). Those who refrain from taking it, or who are simply not strong enough, or who have other things to do, are by process of elimination square and not to be pitied.

One wonders how far this is from the

rationale of the generalissimo. Is there that much difference, finally, between the psychopath in the street and the psychopath in the state?

Anyhow, it is no service to connect the black man with either one.

3) *The Black Proletarian*. This is one of those perpetually recurring brainstorms of the American Left. Wouldn't it be nice if history had it arranged for the black man to play the role of the American revolution-bringer. Then every expression of black rage could be seen as a coming to the proper pitch of consciousness, every death a preparation for the purgation to follow. Meanwhile each little sect can claim to attach the mainstream of black action to its own grand future.

What is new is that for the first time a handful of young black people are willing to look into this mirror and be rewarded with the picture of themselves as the local vanguard of an inevitable worldwide process. They in turn hold up a mirror in which the white ideologues see masses of black revolutionaries, for these whites are eager to take the theater of violent language and the desperation of delinquency for the reality of revolutionary commitment. This is a mistake which costs them little, but for which others have already paid with their lives.

Of course one doesn't have to be a radical or an activist to buy the revolutionary image. All one has to be is hip—that is, (Mailer notwithstanding) a consumer of hip products. In this case the product is a vocabulary of leftist simplisms which enables the users to identify himself with anything anyone thinks is new.

But how many ways are there to say it? To retail any image of the black man which depicts him as specially immune from moral responsibility is to patronize him and ultimately to reinforce his sense of inferiority and inadequacy. To advocate black violence as a political act is politically wrong and leads to the psychic crippling, and the useless deaths, of black and white alike. □

⁷ This quote is from *Advertisements for Myself*. All the rest are from "The White Negro," *DISSENT*, Summer 1957.