

events—a freedom that eluded even the dreamiest philosophers of the past. It is no longer enough to speak of “images” distorting “reality.” Reality is now reduced to a footnote to the images—a sort of unsatisfying afterthought, which only tends to spoil the mood that the images have produced. And politics, spinning in an autonomous realm of its own, is reduced to a diversion: the bemused public turns to it for entertainment, or perhaps for therapy (when it wants to “feel good about itself”), but rarely for results. Yet the old questions persist. Have the things-in-themselves really disappeared—been banished to some peripheral realm in which they have lost the power to disturb us? Can there be “phenomenal appearance without something that appears”? Isn’t there still a world out there: a world that is as harsh and real as the missiles pointed at our still defenseless cities, and that may one day—offended, perhaps, by our neglect—take a stern revenge?

A YOUNG friend writes about idealists of a different kind:

Most large decisions creep up on you, and it is hard to recall exactly when or why you made them. But I know that it was on the night of April 27, 1978, that I decided to go to Harvard. I had visited the campus that afternoon and, seeing posters announcing a demonstration in the Yard, had stuck around to watch. Shortly after dark, thirty-five hundred students, most carrying candles, lined up in long, glowing files, stretching from the statue of John Harvard back toward the college pump. Eventually, they began to march, and I with them. Up to the old Radcliffe quadrangle we surged, and down again to the Charles, always chanting. I can remember some of the slogans:

G.M., 3-M, I.T.T.,  
All South Africans Must Be Free

and

Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho,  
Racist Stocks Have Gotta Go.

And I can remember the feeling of daring—and of rightness. This was where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. As it turned out, no demonstration during my four years in Cambridge drew a crowd half as large as that one (which, in turn, was puny compared with the protests of a decade earlier). Some issue arose each spring to allow a sizable rally or two: fresh-

man year, the university decided to name a library for a man who had made a good part of his fortune in South Africa; sophomore year, President Carter reinstated draft registration; and so on. Each time, perhaps five hundred people would assemble on the steps of Widener Library for the usual speeches; each time, the Spartacus Youth League—a nutty far-left gang—would attempt disruptions; each time, some folk song or other would close the proceedings. And though I was not helping to organize the rallies I can remember my emotions’ running the same course each time: anticipation mixed with fear that no one would show up; exhilaration when people did; and frustration when the evening ended and I realized that that was it for the year. I would retreat to the offices of the *Crimson*, the university newspaper, to write editorials about student apathy. And then I would read bound volumes of the *Crimson*, studying the stories from the bad old days of the late nineteen-sixties. My zeal was not entirely artificial. In a circuitous and abstract way, I felt anger at injustice, and that was one reason all this interested me. But I am certain now that there were other, more complicated, more personal, and less noble reasons. And perhaps I was not alone; a good many of the people who wrote those fiery editorials in the late nineteen-sixties now practice corporate law.

Wayne Meisel arrived at Harvard the same year I did. I never knew him well. Occasionally, he got his picture in the paper, because he managed the women’s field-hockey team; he lived in Eliot House (the preppy bastion); and he usually wore a painter’s cap and a goofy smile. That was all I knew about him until the weekend before last, when, at a conference of campus activists from many colleges which I was covering in upstate New York, I spent some time listening to his story. “I wasn’t doing all that much while I was in college,” he said. “One day, I was just sitting in the dining hall, and a tutor I knew came up to me and told

me about this entertainment program for special-needs kids in Cambridge that was about to close down, because they’d lost the facility they were using. For some reason, he thought I should do something about it. Since I’m a preacher’s kid, my parents had sometimes sent me to play with retarded kids, and they scared me—they drooled or they smelled, or whatever. But this tutor thought I was the person to do something, and I couldn’t believe how good that made me feel. So I got things going—nine to three every Saturday. I’d run around getting anyone who could do anything to help out. If you could play three songs on a guitar, you were on. Modern dance. Anything. And, of course, the kids loved it—the program’s been going six years now. While all this was happening, I got cut from the soccer team, and I decided to coach local kids, but there was no youth league in the town. A couple of friends and I decided we’d need maybe thirty people to start one, and we weren’t at all sure we’d be able to get that many. We decided to set up tables outside several dining halls to recruit students, and we just figured we’d stay out as many nights as it took. Well, the first night a hundred and fifty people signed up. Some of them were All Americans and some had never seen a soccer ball, but they all wanted to help. And this is when it hit me—my idea. For as long as I could remember, I’d been hearing about the ‘me generation,’ about how college kids were only interested in their own careers. But that isn’t true. They still want to get involved—they just don’t know how to do it. I call it ‘structural apathy.’ People just need someone to show them how.”

After graduating, Mr. Meisel spent a year at Harvard setting up a program that linked each of the college’s thirteen houses with a Cambridge neighborhood; three hundred students now do regular community-service work. Then he went to Washington and tried to convince several large governmental and nonprofit organizations that they should support his efforts. “None of them were interested,” he said. “They all told me, ‘We know about students today.’ So I decided to see whether or not I was right. I wanted to visit a lot of campuses, but I didn’t have a car, so I got some friends to drive me up to Colby College, in Maine, and from there I hiked south for several months, stopping at every college along the





way. One college had closed. I got there, and it was just empty—talk about apathy. Everywhere else, I'd just arrive and ask someone if I could sleep on his floor. And over the next couple of days I'd track down the chaplain or the newspaper editor or the president and discuss community-service programs. And over and over again the person I talked to would get excited." After visiting sixty-five schools on foot, Mr. Meisel founded an organization—the Campus "Outreach" Opportunity League, or COOL—to provide detailed technical assistance to universities across the nation. Last year, he travelled to eight campuses, spending two or more weeks at each and setting up programs that involved thousands of students. This year, he is working with more than fifty colleges. "Last week, I got a nice letter from President Reagan," Mr. Meisel told me, a little sheepishly.

The conference at which we met drew campus activists from as far away as Iowa City—Progressive Students and Democratic Socialist Youth and the like, all concerned with organizing anti-apartheid demonstrations and championing other good causes. They were earnest, smart, and committed, and I felt drawn to them in a nostalgic way. But I've become less and less interested in the political and more and more concerned with community-service projects, and so Mr. Meisel's notion meant more to me. It has been a slow shift—one of those decisions that cannot be dated—but I do know that I first realized its underpinnings when I read George Orwell's essay on Dickens. Orwell sounds so sensible to so many ears because he can appreciate that with which he disagrees. Though Orwell is a radical, or was in 1939, when he wrote this essay (he scolds Dickens for not having "the vision to see that private property is an obstructive nuisance"), he nonetheless understands the power of Dickens' belief in good men. "Two viewpoints are always tenable," he writes. "The one, how can you improve human nature



until you have changed the system? The other, what is the use of changing the system before you have improved human nature? . . . The moralist and the revolutionary are constantly undermining one another. Marx exploded a hundred tons of dynamite beneath the moralist position, and we are still living in the echo of that tremendous crash. But already, somewhere or other, the sappers are at work and fresh dynamite is being tamped in place to blow Marx at the moon. . . . Dickens . . . had the vision to see that 'If men would behave decently the world would be decent' is not such a platitude as it sounds."

In the most general sense—maybe just for argument's sake—let us say that the political activists at the conference represent one end of that seesaw. In their effort to improve the world, they put their weight into changing the world's institutions. And, again in the most general sense, Mr. Meisel and his corps of guitar players and soccer coaches are the totter to their teeter, concentrating on

service. The two ideas are not necessarily in opposition—almost everyone at the conference seemed to approve of COOL—but they are different. Orwell says the two positions "appeal to different individuals and they probably show a tendency to alternate in point of time." He is convinced that the "ordinary people in the Western countries" will become more political (by which he probably means more inclined to socialism), and that this shift will render the Dickensian ethic as "out of date as the cab horse." That almost happened in the late nineteenth-sixties (if my reading of the history is correct), though mainly among college students. The war—the napalm—and the revelation of American racism and the stinging crackdown on dissent and the idea that hypocrisy clotted our whole culture led to what one veteran of the "movement" who spoke at the conference called "a crisis of legitimation." For a few years, students considered the entire shebang and wondered if it should and could continue. Was capitalism incompatible with hu-



manity? Was our government a democracy or was America a police state that needed smashing?

But the system survived—that is the point. How it survived is an interesting question (probably, as many have said, the answer has to do with the system's ability to change enough to absorb the fury) but is less important than the mere fact of its survival. The wax that softened in the nineteen-sixties has hardened, and it is difficult to see what will be hot enough to melt it again; it took Vietnam then, and perhaps the system has learned to avoid Vietnams. Our institutions are at present secure from frontal assault. This is not to say that the problems are solved, or that there is no reason for anger. Thank heaven there are people demonstrating about South Africa. But the reason such movements are not sweeping campuses—the reason they only smolder instead of bursting into flame—is that they do not mesh with the moment. Students, as far as I can tell, sense that idealism expressed as radicalism is “old hat,” a throwback.

Idealism, however, lives. It can be expressed in several ways, among them brightening things up for retarded

kids and sitting up at night in some church basement watching homeless men sleep off their sadness. But aren't these good works just kisses on the cheek? How can anything that President Reagan supports truly help the poor? The answer may be that Orwell's two categories are not mutually exclusive. Consider what happens when a college student from a white suburb reports once a week to an inner-city housing project in order to run a Boy Scout troop. He will most likely not end up wanting to smash the capitalist state—that is not in the air, and would not be likely to help much anyway—but he may very well be shocked, and the shock will be different from the one he would get if he simply read about the housing project in a newspaper. The effect on the children who live in the housing project may be minor (though concrete, and all to the good), but the effect on him will be subtly dramatic. Experience can silently corrode myth, even myth ingrained as deeply as the myths about our society—that the poor are lazy, that there's a job for everyone, that no one is hungry. Having volunteered in a tattered, frantic city school should

NOVEMBER 18, 1985

make it hard to be glib about tax cuts. Compassion, like any virtue (or vice), grows with regular exercise. And in a country where most of the people live in comfort—and in a world where we are, by all comparisons, rich—compassion counts. At the least, people will think, and thinking is the great enemy of smugness and self-satisfaction.

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### *Goldfinch*

AND another friend writes: I live in an old district of New Rochelle. Towering trees line the grand boulevards and shield the once grand and still grand mansions from view. For the many wild animals that live here, it is not a planned residential park that was laid out on generous grids a hundred years ago but a mature sixty-some-acre woodland—a congenial pocket of wildness only “forty-five minutes from Broadway,” as the song goes. Yesterday, a skunk with the most luxuriant mane of white fur I've ever seen was run over on the corner. In my neighbor's yard, a raccoon routinely snoozed in the hollow tip of a huge dead oak, twenty feet up, until Hurri-