



The Absolute Collective, Henry Miller

The Absolute Collective*

“WE CAN no longer live to live, but to create the new. That is the hymn of modernity; that is the new need. But how came the new need?

It came because star and fire, rose and tiger died within us . . .

Should our time grasp this, it would be a spiritual revolution which would lead right into the midst of the new time.”

This, from an essay called “World Conquest” which appeared in *Purpose* back in 1932, is reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence.

Like Lawrence, Gutkind is of the line of Akhenaton, Hermes Trismegistus, Plotinus, Paracelsus, Blake, Nietzsche: he is a visionary, a prophet, a man ahead of his time.

And yet, like all these figures, a man supremely of his time too. No man is born out of time! But the men who are most representative of their time, those who situate themselves in the creative flux, are always and inevitably rejected, if not crucified.

For such men are of sidereal time, which is the poet’s chronology and not the astronomer’s. The visionary predicts the stars and the planets which will be discovered, for he is of the stars as well as of the earth.

Gutkind is obsessed, in a superbly healthy way, by the new world which is in the making. He is obsessed too by the possibility of the miraculous which the birth of a new world-condition always engenders.

The miracle this time, in Gutkind’s opinion, is the birth of man. As a philosopher and diagnostician he has strong affinities with Nietzsche, Spengler and Lawrence: he too has had his vision of the end.

But he has also a clear vision of the future, an absolute faith in the new world-condition, which is not to be merely a new cultural cycle but a

complete new integration marked by a polarity which will establish the vertical axis of man. Man will come into his own by establishing a cosmic relationship with the universe, that is Gutkind's idea.

It is a very old and tenacious idea, this, one which has been given us repeatedly from the most varied sources. It comes now with new force because even the dullest professor, even the philosopher, is aware that the dissolution of our world is certain.

In the grip of a paralysis such as the world has never known before, filled with a premonitory dread such as perhaps only the Atlanteans experienced, we live from day to day, from hour to hour, awaiting the debacle.

In our very midst a great people is preparing the execution of the most revolting part of this program of annihilation. The world watches indignantly and fascinatedly, too bewildered perhaps or too deeply aware of the significance of this activity to do anything to counteract it.

Before our very eyes the Germans are creating the bomb which will destroy what is called our "civilization." With it they will destroy themselves, that is certain. Even the Germans are aware of that, hence their fervor and exaltation, their arrogance and recklessness.

In another part of the world the Japanese are educating the Chinese in our footsteps, paving the way to make their enemy the masters of the Oriental world and in turn to destroy it. These are patent facts which only the stern misguided "realists" refuse to see.

Gutkind, who is a German Jew (now in exile), because perhaps of the situation in which he was placed, is able to "violently demand that we may bodily experience the abysses instead of only philosophizing thereon."

It is a refreshing antidote to the apostasy of Freud, who tried to erect a metaphysics on the recognition of fear, creating a gray realism of scientific hue instead of a Dantesque reality of black and white.

Gutkind, living in the midst of the Teutonic world of technic, becomes an out-and-out Jew, a Jew of the Essenes stamp such as Christ was, a realist of the first water, as was Christ again, able to recognize the world for what it is and to embrace it for what it is in process of becoming.

In the midst of the non-human world he proclaims the human world, proclaims the transcendent in man which will not only free him from murder and death but enable him to live completely in the present.

For the world of man, he says, is the world that is completely alive! In such a world there is no place for murder, nor can there be a human world until murder is eliminated from man's consciousness. How is such a world possible?

The question cannot be settled forthwith, he answers. "We are only beginning to open the world, for we have never yet lived in an unbroken state . . . The opener of man is Reality . . . Everything can be both itself and a means to something else."

The world we are now living in is what Gutkind calls the Mamser world of confusion, idols, ghosts, the world of things, oriented towards death, a world in which man is nothing but an object waiting for redemption.

It is a world in which there is nothing but a dreary sequence of predictable events. God becomes an empty concept, man an isolated individual, the world a collection of things. It is the very picture of evil, with the most hideous of all punishment as penalty: death in life.

Against this false worldliness, in which all nations of the earth alike are guilty of living, Gutkind opposes a real "worldliness." Man's roots do not lie in consciousness, he asserts, but in reality.

He goes on again to speak of death, stating that death is not an essential part of man, that he can separate himself from it as from an

accident. "In the midst of life," he writes, "we are filled with death, and to die will bring us no release . . . Immortality does not yet exist.

Immortality follows from the complete aliveness of man when, purged of Tuma, the original corruption, he has been changed from a being locked up in himself to one that is opened and can speak . . . The isolated individual cannot, by dying, work himself free of the world of death.

We are all inextricably bound together. So long as one still belongs to death all will belong." And then he speaks of the Hebrew meaning of the word "eternity," which is that of victory rather than duration. "To die means to be cut off, it does not mean to cease.

One who is bound to others is free from the fear of death, for fear has its roots in separation. Where there is fear it is quickly followed by the flight to possessions. Far deadlier than any bodily decay," he concludes, "is the insidious principle of death within our souls."

It is impossible to overstress the importance of this theme. Death is the paramount obsession of our time, and it is the knowledge of death which is destroying us. The great exponents of reality today—of a false worldliness, that is—are all advocates of murder.

Even the pacifists are murderers at heart. The world is divided into idealistic camps, and not one ideal is proclaimed but means death to the other, death to all concerned. Men are fanatically ready, it would seem, to kill and to be killed. Never was a whole world so devoted to the cause of death and destruction.

Nowhere in the whole world is there a people exempt from reproach. Even the neutral countries, through their heartless profiteering, through their supine indifference, contribute to the death racket. This is the supreme reality of our death-like world, and this is a horror which must be faced by every individual, and not by legislatures and governments alone. But where are the individuals? Who is an individual?

Who has the courage to say No at the crucial moment—or even to meet the challenge in advance with a No! It is not to the men of this order and generation, I feel, that Gutkind's book is addressed. Gutkind, like Lawrence, is a man of the transition stage, the double-faced "hero-metaphysician" who looks backward with deep understanding and forward with exultation.

He is the Pluto-Janus type of which the German astrologers have been talking ever since the discovery of that new planet. Only, whereas the German people have identified themselves with the hero-death impulse, Gutkind identifies himself with the daring metaphysician, the man of the future whose face is set towards the established kingdom of man.

The keynote of this coming type of man is totality, integration, oneness. The man of today, the man of the transition period, split and straddled as he is between two worlds, pregnant with the germ of the future, is veritably crucified by his duality.

The great exploration of the Unconscious which was begun by Dostoievski, and subsequently pursued systematically by Freud and his disciples, bears a curious resemblance to the exploration and development of the New World in the time of the Renaissance. The expansion of the known universe always entails a split in the consciousness. We know how the Renaissance faded out—in an orgy of megalomania.

The "modern" nations today—Japan, Germany, America—are going mad in a similar way. No more wonderful examples of schizophrenia are to be found than in these "progressive" countries. The fury and enormity of their activity is the symbol of their impotence, their inability to bridge the split. This stupendous activity, disguised as progress and enlightenment, is only a means of spreading the death which they carry within them.

It is the function of such peoples to make the egg rotten through and through, to sever the bondage of the womb in order that the real human being may emerge. Themselves doomed, they act as carriers of the deadly germ which will sweep the ground clear for a new way of life. As Gutkind says: "Only the dead things in the world exercise power and restraint. The fully opened world that has been cleansed of idols is a deathless world."

It is indeed difficult for me to look at this book impartially, or criticize it objectively. It is the sort of book which I write every day of my life in my off moments. Only about a hundred pages long, its language is at once true, precise, necessitous.

It carries far beyond its scope and intention, as every vital book should. In my mind it situates itself exactly at that angle of time and space which is most portentous. More than any book I have ever read this one is born at precisely the right time. Turning its pages is like turning the pages of life itself, the life which we all know and deny, the life which has never been realized.

The prophetic is not set forth in the usual prophetic manner; on the contrary, the deep certitude which inspired the work creates a sort of axiomatic ecstasy, a residue of truth which is implicit and unshakeable.

The book is true in the highest sense, because based on acceptance, which is to say that it is entirely on the side of life. This acceptance of life is again merely to say recognition of the cosmic principle.

The climate of this opus is a sort of spiritual equinox in which life and death are seen to be at balance. Is it necessary to add that it is precisely at such moments that the miraculous nature of life reveals itself, at just such moments that the whole order of life can be reversed, or transcended?

The men who exerted the greatest influence over the world were those who stood at just such junctures and revealed the truths which were vouchsafed them.

In their wake they brought about devastating changes; they altered the face of the world—and more than the face of the world, the heart of the world! In each case the miracle almost happened; yet somehow something always intervened, the message was aborted, the vision lost.

This has happened so repeatedly as to create in the majority of men an ingrained pessimism as to the destiny of the race. The world is perpetually divided on the question of truth versus illusion.

The two co-exist in man, creating a perpetual duality, a seemingly unhealable schism. More tragic still is that the example which the lives of these great pioneers of the human spirit have given us sputters out in empty symbol and servile fetishism. The tremendous impulse which these great spirits unleashed stiffens into hobbling fetters and manacles imposed by stupid cult and religion.

Every inspired man has been at some time aware of the real significance of these great figures, but the inspiration passes off, unfortunately, into religiousness or into art. Art has been just as crippling as religion, because like religion it has always represented the triumph of man over an imaginary world.

The man of action, it is true, places himself in a real world, but his world is a diminished one and becomes finally even more illusory than the imagined world of the artist or the religious minded individual.

“We have not yet dared to face the world as we should!” writes Gutkind, and that is so. The history of cultural man is one long tale of evasion, of trial by error, of repetition, of cul-de-sac.

Here and there the isolated man of genius has had a vision of the way, but no one man can lead the way! Sacrifice, if it has any meaning, reveals to us that true progress can only be made by all simultaneously.

Today, from the most irreconcilable quarters, there is coagulating the conviction that this futile repetition which has marked the era of

“civilization” is destined to cease. We stand at the threshold of a new way of life, one in which MAN is about to be realized.

The disturbances which characterize this age of transition indicate clearly the beginnings of a new climate, a spiritual climate in which the body will no longer be denied, in which, on the contrary, the body of man will find its proper place in the body of the world.

Man’s domination over nature is only now beginning to be understood as something more than a mere technical triumph: behind the brutal assertion of power and will there lies a smoldering sense of the awesomeness, the majesty, the grandeur of his responsibility. Is he perhaps just faintly beginning to realize that “all the ways of the earth lead to heaven?”

Thus, the complete destruction of our cultural world, which seems more than ever assured now by the impending smashup, is really a blessing in disguise. The old grooves of race, religion and nationality are destined to go, and in their place we shall see, for the first time in the history of man, a community of interest based not on the animal in him but on the human being which he has so long denied.

The fight is between the death instinct and the life instinct. It has nothing to do with culture, or bread, or ideology, or peace or security. The schism has grown so wide that it is either self-destruction or a totality never before imagined. With each new conflict one is made increasingly aware of the real battle, which is inner, and which is nothing but a warfare between the real and the ideal man.

The ideal man must perish, and the ideal man will certainly perish, for the last props are now giving way. Man must open up, prepared to live the life of the world in all its worldliness, if he is to survive. For, as Gutkind cogently points out, even worse than the wholesale slaughter in which we indulge is what he calls “sublimated murder,” or the refusal to overflow.

I stress this aspect of the book particularly, because it has always seemed to me incontrovertible that war is just and necessary, so long as men insist on repressing their murderous instincts. War is not an economic affair, nor a curse of the gods, nor an inevitability: it is the reflection of an inner split, the projection of our continuous repressed lusts and hatreds.

That man has always lived in what Gutkind calls “a broken state” seems only too evident. Moreover, man has always known that this condition was evil and unnecessary. The sense of guilt which has accumulated throughout centuries of struggle towards enlightenment and liberation has at last become overwhelming.

It is absurd and wrong to wish to remove this sense of guilt. The sense of guilt is the spiritual barometer which we carry in our blood. It is not only useless to deny sin, it is impossible. Man has been throttling and strangling himself ever since the dawn of history.

He has been fear-stricken—more daring in his panic sometimes than God Almighty, and again more cowardly than the worm. He has never understood what the conflict was about precisely. He has never wanted to accept his real nature, his responsibility, which is creation, and which must begin with himself.

All the forces of coercion are maintained on the false theory of protection—protection against the wicked, or the insane, or the greedy. But the truly insane, the truly wicked, the truly greedy ones are we ourselves, we who try to bolster up the crumbling edifice with external remedies, with prisons, asylums and instruments of war.

Whom are we trying to protect? And against what? The real ghost is fear—we are confronted with it at every step. The whole movement of the social order is a retrograde movement, a retreat, a panic in the face of reality. The man who decides to live his own life is without fear; he lives positively, not negatively.

That is why men like Hitler and Mussolini, who are one with their destiny, move with lightning-like rapidity and assurance. What is there to hinder them? There is no resistance—there is only on the part of their opponents fear, which expresses itself in terms of “peace and security.” The moment one is on the side of life “peace and security” drop out of consciousness. The only peace, the only security, is in fulfillment. On the other hand, whatever needs to be maintained through force is doomed.

There can be no real life until murder ceases, that is incontestable. “The highest activity,” says Gutkind, “is an effect rather than an act.” In the highest type of activity there is a radiation of energy, as from the sun itself, he adds. “From a center that is at rest.” To overcome the world is to make it transparent, I believe he says, which is a remarkable statement and of a simplicity which is profound.

It is precisely here that one detects the abysmal gulf which separates a Christ or a Buddha, let us say, from a Hitler or a Mussolini. With the latter it is sheer Will which manifests itself, and which in the end destroys itself. In the case of the former it is a vital emanation from a being at peace with himself and the world, and consequently irresistible. The use of the will is the sign of death; it is only as a half-being that the man of will triumphs.

What lives on, when he has worked his will, is the death which was in him. It is this exaltation of the will, the mark of the divided self, which emasculates the world of men and women. Thus, whereas the strong leader may or may not have been “wicked,” his followers certainly are never wicked, but simply weak. The instinctive nature of man gets used up: he tends to function more and more as a machine, a robot.

The proletarian, for example—is he not the last cog in the human equation, the lowest symbol of man that ever was? Who can deny that he is infinitely less than the most primitive man? And in what sense is he less? Because he has not enough food, clothing, shelter, security, leisure, learning? Some would like to have us believe that such is the case.

To me it seems that the real diminution of his power and substance has come about through his dividedness. He is without passion and without hope, a pawn in a game whose rules he knows nothing of. “A dehumanized commodity,” Gutkind calls him. “An object waiting for redemption.” No, there are no individuals any longer. There are monstrous tyrants—and the mob, the “masses.”

The progress of humanity is so infinitesimally slow that it almost seems like no progress at all. But there is that which is called “conscience,” which is not an empty concept but a very real factor in the human make-up, and this conscience does indicate the existence of another and a higher urge.

In its negative aspect it makes itself known through fatality, punishment, etc., but in its positive aspect it reveals the existence of an Absolute, of law. It indicates the hidden axis of our vertical life without which the “dreary round of predictable events” would make the world appear like a rat-trap.

As Gutkind rightly says, we have never dared to face the world as we should—or one might say with equal truth that we have never dared to face the world-as-it-is. Why does the word “reality” always have such a sinister, gray, fatalistic ring?

It is the realists—that is to say, the death-eaters—who are responsible for the pall which has come over the world. But the men who are thoroughly wide-awake and completely alive are in reality, and for them reality has always been close to ecstasy, partaking of a life of fulfillment which knows no bounds. Of them only may it be said that they live in the present. Through them is it permitted us to grasp the meaning of timelessness, of eternity which is victory.

It is they who are truly of this world. Their victory is one which each man must win for himself: it is a private and at the same time a universal affair. Nothing which is of value can be handed down,

bequeathed, preserved—as with our lamentable treasures of art. What happens must be realized anew by each man.

The history of religions emphasizes the stupendous difficulty which man has in realizing this truth. Truth crystallizes quickly into idolatry, servility, surrender. Everywhere we see life being lived vicariously. And yet life everywhere and at all times for any and everybody is simple, startlingly simple. We live on the edge of the miraculous every minute of our lives. The miracle is in us, and it blossoms forth the moment we lay ourselves open to it.

The miracle of miracles is the stubbornness with which men refuse to open themselves up. Our whole life seems to be nothing but a frantic effort to evade that which is constantly within our grasp. This which is the very reverse of the miraculous is nothing else but FEAR. Man has no other real enemy than this which he carries within him. Somewhere a French poet has written: “No daring is fatal.”

Provided, he should have added, that one is unified. Divided, everything is fatal and leads to catastrophe. This has been the history of mankind, yet no man of vision and integrity has ever accepted it as ordained and ineluctable. Man has the power to renounce and to accept; he can refuse to be a pawn and he can make of himself a god. He holds his fate in his own hands—and not only his own fate, but the fate of the world.

There is a justice which, fortunately, surpasses the comprehension of most men, else the world would go mad immediately. It is at the edge of madness that we attain to a glimpse of the overwhelming truth and simplicity of life. What confounds the mob, when confronted with a great figure, is the simplicity of the man’s behavior.

I repeat, it is the utter simplicity of life which defeats man. He has turned the earth inside out in a frantic effort to attain security, to arrive at wisdom. But he has never really attached himself to the earth, never sufficiently venerated it. He has tried to subjugate when he has had only to observe and enjoy.

Suffering is not the only way to victory—it is a way. And knowledge is the poorest way of all, for it means that only a part of man's being is struggling forward. The whole man must be there, ready at all times to act (or not to act), to move with the certitude of a sleepwalker, to dare anything because he is convinced that life is now, this very moment, and that it is inexhaustible and unknowable.

Up to the present man has been an embryo, a unique one nevertheless, in that he possesses the power at any moment to leap forth into full being. At one jump he can leap clear of the clockwork, to borrow a phrase of Gutkind's. I believe it absolutely. I know it to be so from my own experience. All growth is a leap in the dark, a spontaneous, unpremeditated act without benefit of experience. Every sign of growth is a revolt against death.

Even death itself, finally, is regarded as the means to another kind of growth. In one form or another man has always regarded death as a portal opening the way to a new and greater life. Man has postponed his real life here on earth for a life to come.

Once he begins to realize that death is present here and now, in each and all of us, and that it is only necessary to open the door to have life immediately and in unqualified abundance and magnificence, what could possess him to withhold, to remain closed, to fear, to kill, to cling to his miserable possessions?

Compared with the splendor and magnificence of that life which we are constantly denying this life which we now lead is a nightmare. Perhaps this alone explains why it is easier to enlist men in the cause of death, why they prefer to be dead heroes, dead saints, dead martyrs in every sense of the word. Life itself has lost its value its attraction.

In a real sense, life is something which has not yet begun. Men are seeking life thirstily, but their eyes are in the back of their heads. Life can only be seized by the whole organism, as something felt, something which demands neither proof nor justification. Nobody can point the way.

Life is, and in this sense a man is or he is not. Life is not an “it” to be grasped by the mind. “Whoever has not been fully alive in this life,” says Gutkind, “will not become so through death.” Or, as Jacob Boehme put it: “Who dies not before he dies is ruined when he dies.” It is the same thing.

This is the Apocalyptic Era when all things will be made manifest unto us. I am not dippy. I have not become what is erroneously called “religious.” I am against all the religions of the world as I am against all the nations of the world and all the teachings of the world.

I speak illogically, intuitively, and with absolute certitude. Nothing will prevent the world from realizing its worst fears—nothing but the elimination of fear itself. The destruction of the world we have foolishly tried to preserve is at hand.

The death which had been rotting away in us secretly and disgracefully must be made manifest, and to a degree never before heard of. As Father Perrault said to “Glory” Conway—“It will be such a storm, my son, as the world has not seen before.

There will be no safety by arms, no help from authority, no answer in science. It will rage till every flower of culture is trampled, and all human things are levelled in a vast chaos . . . The Dark Ages to come will cover the whole world in a single pall; there will be neither escape nor sanctuary, save such as are too secret to be found or too humble to be noticed.” This is the dread prospect which faces us and which is our hope at the same time.

The wheel turns slowly, but it turns and turns, and not even death can arrest it. For death is a part of the endless process. For the time being there is no ceiling; if we are to make a real ascent we must break through the “metaphysical zenith.”

We have remained too long at the level of culture subject to the law of evaporation by which everything freezes into the stagnant flux of

civilization. "Our action," says Gutkind, "must have its root in the mysterious center of our dumb, unconscious being . . . Our ascent must take its start in the depths of the body."

All about us we see a world in revolt; but revolt is negative, a mere finishing-off process. In the midst of destruction we carry with us also our creation, our hopes, our strength, our urge to be fulfilled. The climate changes as the wheel turns, and what is true for the sidereal world is true for man.

The last two thousand years have brought about a duality in man such as he never experienced before, and yet the man who dominates this whole period was one who stood for wholeness, one who proclaimed the Holy Ghost.

No life in the whole history of man has been so misinterpreted, so woefully misunderstood as Christ's. If not a single man has shown himself capable of following the example of Christ, and doubtless none ever will for we shall no longer have need of Christs, nevertheless this one profound example has altered our climate.

Unconsciously we are moving into a new realm of being; what we have brought to perfection, in our zeal to escape the true reality, is a complete arsenal of destruction; when we have rid ourselves of the suicidal mania for a beyond we shall begin the life of here and now which is reality and which is sufficient unto itself.

We shall have no need for art or religion because we shall be in ourselves a work of art. This is how I interpret realistically what Gutkind has set forth philosophically: this is the way in which man will overcome his broken state.

If my statements are not precisely in accord with the text of Gutkind's thesis, I nevertheless am thoroughly in accord with Gutkind and his view of things. I have felt it my duty not only to set forth his doctrine, but to launch it, and in launching it to augment it, activate it.

Any genuine philosophy leads to action and from action back again to wonder, to the enduring fact of mystery.

I am one man who can truly say that he has understood and acted upon this profound thought of Gutkind's—"the stupendous fact that we stand in the midst of reality will always be something far more wonderful than anything we do."

* *The Absolute Collective: A Philosophical Attempt to overcome our broken state.* By Erich Gutkind. Translated by Marjorie Gabain.

The end