

January 15, 1987 (vol. 2, no. 12)

Dear Colleague:

The young families of my colleagues are a constant source of inspiration for me. The latest stimulus bears the following fruit. We sat around to talk about a 13-year old who is intellectually precocious. He is a wizard at computer games and is moving on to laser beams. What next we wonder. Will it be radio telescopes? No. Next on the agenda is--girls! Biology, thank God, reasserts itself and we move back to, if not square one, then the beginning of sexual (as distinct from asexual) reproduction. Intellectual interests, whether they be computer simulation or flights of metaphorical fancy, take a back seat to hairstyle. The world narrows to a girl's eyebrow and language degenerates into baby talk. (Someone said that all the great love poems of the world were written to be read by the public. Imagine speaking to your lover in the language of Shakespeare! That's a sure way to cool one's ardor.)

Suppose biology isn't so insistent. Suppose it doesn't derail intellectual development. Then, by the age of eighteen, a child will be a Picasso, a Valéry, or a Fermi. Such a world is unlivable. It will lack altogether the human touch--the primitivity of touch. People will hardly ever sit face-to-face; instead they will sit side-by-side, for it is the world, not each other, that they are interested in.

The impersonality of creators is well known. Einstein once confided to Freundlich that there was no one in the world whose death would worry him. "I thought how terrible it was for a man with a wife and two children to believe and say such a thing." (R. W. Clark, Einstein: The Life and Times, p. 191-2). Artists are no better. Cézanne stayed away from his mother's funeral in order not to miss a day of work. (Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter to Cézanne, p. 37). Even the ordinary scholar can be inhumanly dedicated. The art historian Bernard Berenson used to worry when he did not hear from his close relatives. The reason? Well, he feared that a letter might suddenly announce their sickness or death which would disrupt the tranquil tenor of his life and work.

Three cheers, then, for biology. Be thankful that it puts a stopper to intellectuality just when it is about to soar and become a consuming passion.

Best wishes,

