

Harvey Swados

C. WRIGHT MILLS: A PERSONAL MEMOIR

I first met C. Wright Mills in 1941 or 1942, when he was a young assistant professor of sociology at the University of Maryland (at that time, at least, a singularly dismal-looking provincial school whose president was one "Curly" Byrd, a former football coach). I was about twenty-one, some five years his junior, and at the time I was either working the night shift in an aircraft factory or had recently left the factory to join the Merchant Marine; in either case, I was aware of what Mills was up to, from certain pieces that he was publishing, and we hit it off at once. He was living with his first wife and baby daughter in a coöp development which he supported on principle but otherwise ignored completely, since he was absorbed day and night with other problems. He might have said the same of the baby, who crawled about at his feet—if indeed she was old enough to—while he explained, to my youthful astonishment, that she was still a vegetable and would only be worth bothering with some few years later.

I last saw C. Wright Mills in 1962, late in January, at the Nice Airport, where I had driven him from my French home so that he could return to America, after many months of fruitless wandering about Europe, to die. His youngest child, who had been toddling about, tripped and split open his lip on the terrazzo floor. Mills was concerned, but unable to cope (fortunately his wife was). We shook hands, for the last time, and I looked back to see him walking slowly up and down with his child, being the dutiful parent because at this terrible moment he had nothing else to do with his time or with his life.

In the two decades between those two encounters, Mills and I were very closely attuned, psychologically and intellectually, so much so that we often quarreled violently, and there were years on end when we had absolutely nothing to do with each other. When we parted with that final handshake in Nice, it was with the tacit recognition that after twenty years neither of us really understood the other. More than tacit: We had just spent the better—or rather the worst—part of a month grappling vainly for clues that might lead us back to the whereabouts of an earlier Mills.

"At those crossroads of one's life," Manes Sperber has written in *Journey Without End* (incidentally, a book which I had tried unsuccessfully a year or two earlier to get Mills to confront), "when one ceases

to ask, 'What is still to happen to me?' and begins instead to wonder: 'What has happened to me? What have I done with my life?'—that is a time when it is easy to panic."

There are aspects to Mills which are badly understood or misunderstood, and which my experiences with him may help to clarify. He was an important and a characteristic American, and if I was not always able to predict and hence to rely on his conduct in a given political or personal circumstance, I knew him I think better than anyone else ever did, with the possible exception of my wife. However, if I were to attempt to unburden myself of the complicated tangle that our lives, and those of our families, became during those years, I would have to undertake an exercise in autobiography, a distasteful and impossible task.

Within those narrow limits, then, there follow some reflections on the man who called me his best and only friend (in all honesty I think he said the same to two or three others, depending on his mood and the kind of sustenance he needed from those others), and whom, far from regarding as my best friend, I must say frankly I never loved, often did not like, but always struggled to respond to and to aid. In the end I think that maybe I failed him, but that too is a personal matter.

Mills was a complex man because he was a bundle of contradictions. That is an easy thing to say—it needs some spelling out. In recent years he was perhaps more appreciated abroad than at home; but if the Europeans—and the Orientals and Latin Americans—understood what he was *saying* better than the Americans did, they could not possibly understand what he was *doing*. As a result we already find him described as a battler for the oppressed, which is absurd, or as a crusader without honor in his native land, which is ludicrous. In the United States there is a tendency to think of him as a disinterested clinical observer, which seems to me equally wrong, and to refer back to Thorstein Veblen.

I would suggest that if we think rather in terms of Theodore Roosevelt and Scott Fitzgerald, or if possible of a weird melange of the two, egomaniacal and brooding, hearty and homeless, driven by a demon of discontent and ambition, with faith only in the therapy of creative work, whether intellectual or physical, we will come closer to the mark. In all of his writing, as in his lecturing and his public stance, and indeed in his private existence, it was the blending of these forces that gave his work and life its ineluctable impact, its sense of a powerful mind and a forceful personality at grips not with the petty and the ephemeral but with the profoundly important questions.

My first inkling of the way in which this was to operate in our personal relations came in 1946, when I was living in Brooklyn Heights and Mills in lower Manhattan. I had to leave town for several weeks, and told him not only my schedule but my reasons for going. Yet upon my return I found a note in my mailbox from Mills, informing me that he had walked all the way from his house to mine with his little daughter

in tow, in hopes of finding me in (I had no phone). I was touched, of course, that anyone should go to so much trouble to see me; but as I thought about it, and discussed it with him on my return, I came to see that while he was truly anxious to talk with me about a number of problems, he was so absorbed in the problems—his own and not mine (which was almost always to be the case)—that he had no interest in and hence no memory of those of my movements and activities which were unconnected with his.

For many people this utter self-absorption was intolerable, and I must confess that there were occasions when it was for me also. But after a time it was borne in upon me that Mills could not function without the absolute conviction that what he was doing was not only right but was more important than what anybody else was doing. More than that, the unique thrust of his best work—I am thinking of the decade of the fifties, of *White Collar* and *The Power Elite*—derived directly from his egocentricity. These books would have been paltry if they had not been informed throughout with a sense of the magnetic self-assurance of their author.

The contradictions of which I spoke earlier worked in greatest tension during those years and issued in those books, written when Mills was in his thirties. Thus he was simultaneously sociable and aloof, democratic and snobbish, uneasy and bold, generous and close, humble and cocky, rationalistic and simplistic. Although he could still rattle off the Latin he had learned as a choir boy, he tended to make light of the effect upon him of Catholic dogma, and I incline to think he was right about this, for religion in any of its manifestations simply bored him. On the other hand, he insisted more than once that what had made him into a rebel and an outsider was the relentless hazing he had undergone as a college freshman before transferring to the University of Texas. He swore to me that for the entire year he had lived surrounded by a wall of silence, without another student addressing a single word to him. Perhaps. Yet he loved to romanticize his early years, even more than most of us do, and he conned people into believing that his background was such as to make it remarkable that he should have become an intellectual at all. The truth was, as I learned for myself in the course of a visit to San Antonio, that his parents were—and are—sympathetic middle-class people, proud of their son and his achievements.

This was, however, one of Mills's charms as well as strengths. I shall never forget his leading me stealthily to a bureau and then triumphantly pulling out the top drawer to disclose layer after layer of O. Henry bars. "I decided to lay in a man-sized supply because I never could get enough of them when I was a kid."

He never could get enough of anything. One afternoon he came upon us drinking a bottle of cherry soda, vile stuff I have always thought. For Mills it was a great discovery, so great that on our next visit we

tripped over cases of it that he had laid in and stacked outside his kitchen door.

He worked hard, often twenty-four hours at a stretch, and he relaxed hard. Since he knew nothing of tennis, swimming, skiing, even walking, he took his relaxation in the form of sleeping (he could recharge his batteries like a baby, for twelve hours on end), eating (he was the greatest trencherman I have ever known—one night at the Homestead Restaurant he enjoyed our steak dinner so much that after dessert he called back the waiter and ordered the same dinner all over again, from scratch), gadgetry, and building.

This gadgetry was another form—a very American form—of gluttony. When he found a gadget that pleased him he would seemingly try to corner the market in it; and when he became deeply involved in a mechanical hobby, as with cars or cameras, his passion to possess all the peripheral gimmicks was really unbounded.

Thus he started with an MG and worked his way up through a Porsche to a BMW motorcycle; along the line he acquired driving goggles of every conceivable tint, driving gloves of leather, cotton, and wool, and a shelf full of subscriptions to obscure and arcane British motoring journals, the contents of which used to drive us into hysterics—Mills included—when we read them aloud. He never participated personally in races or rallies, he didn't even care to drive fast (although there were times when we commuted down Route 303 at 85 miles an hour, with me riding pillion on the BMW), and he did not enjoy tinkering with motors (although he flew specially to Germany—his first glimpse of Europe! and his favorite country!—to take a factory course in servicing his motorbike).

I believe there were two principal reasons for this particular passion, both of them related to Mills's code, to his political attitudinizing, and to his published work. First was a respect amounting to reverence for the well-made object, its designer, and the man who knew how to use it properly. Among the Americans whom Mills respected most (in truth there were not very many) were a group of mechanics, factory foremen, and such, who had a motorcycle club—a serious one, not of the black-leather jacket variety—and were first-rate riders. His second reason was a hatred, which became more ostentatious as the years went by, of everything marked Made in America. It seems to me that the last American vehicle he owned, before the MG and all the rest, was that masterpiece of ingenious simplicity, the jeep.

In any case, there was a connection between the gadgetry and the love of building, which so impressed those who came upon Mills in the act of putting up with his own hands a house of his own design. In addition to its serving as his greatest relaxation after prolonged bouts of research and writing, it bolstered in his mind the proud belief that he, like the mechanics, drivers, architects, and designers whom he so admired, could do things that were utterly beyond the ken of metro-

politan intellectuals who could only write books, or worse, articles about books and articles about articles about books. Although we never spoke overmuch about this, it was a shared assumption, and I am sure that for him it had its roots in profound feelings of uneasiness in confronting dyed-in-the-wool intellectuals, particularly Jewish intellectuals who made him feel the outsider. Just so, I am sure that this was one of the two main links which bound us in our peculiar connection (the other being the fact that we were both constitutionally loners, incapable of fitting comfortably into the *Partisan Review* set, the *Commentary* set, etc., etc.), for over the years we exchanged a good many man-hours of labor on mutually helpful projects, as well as kicking around and even getting involved in a kind of subsistence farming.

I was always ready to pitch in, to the best of my ability, on his outlines, his drafts, his chapters, his galleys; and I spent many weeks working with him on *White Collar*, *The Power Elite*, *The Causes of World War III*, and *The Sociological Imagination* (a book which I did not very much like, even in its toned-down final draft, despite the fact that Mills dedicated it to my wife and to me). He for his part was always ready to advise me on problems of my house, and to put in time and labor too.

If I worked for some weeks laying the fireplace for his first Rockland County house and the footings for his second Rockland house, he showed me how and helped me, over a dozen years, to pull stumps with his jeep, to fit up my gutters, leaders, and drainage pipe, to construct and sink in concrete a new cover for my well, to build a closet in my daughter's room and last of all to tie into my new wing a comfortable typing table and an open file hooked to the wall (he was always appalled at my sloppy filing, particularly in connection with any work in progress). He was so patently my superior in all of these tasks, whether at his house or at mine, that I was perfectly content to do the dirty work under Mills's supervision.

When it came to writing, however, this was not the case, and I must say that I never had any particular interest in his opinion of my fiction. I never reciprocated his imperious demands for help by so much as showing him my work, for his taste in contemporary fiction ran to writers like the late Nevil Shute, whom he regarded in all seriousness as being one of the world's ten best living novelists; and, on the one occasion that I requested that he read something of mine in draft, because I needed technical clarification of some social science stuff, he put me off. I was hurt by this at the time, for I had never turned down a similar request from him, but God knows he had his troubles, and I did not continue to hold it against him. If that was my first request, it was also to be my last.

What I have said thus far has probably been weighted on the Teddy Roosevelt side of Mills's personality, his heartiness, handiness, ruggedness, and seemingly limitless gusto and self-assurance. But when I speak of his unending and humble desire to learn how to commit to paper with

precision and fluency all that he believed, I must refer to the Fitzgerald side of his character.

I am not attempting to point up the parallel between Fitzgerald's dashing about France without troubling to learn the language and Mills's wanderings about Europe without knowing a word of any foreign tongue, although that was true enough; nor between Fitzgerald's high living and Mills's living on unwritten books, although that was true enough too; nor even between Fitzgerald's crackup and Mills's terrifying conviction at the same age that he was written out, worked out, burned out, although that was horribly true. What I am thinking of are Fitzgerald's—and Mills's—devotion to their craft and their belief that through it they could express a unique vision of America.

This is what Mills's detractors have never been able to understand. Attacking him bitterly, often with as much venom as he attacked them, for the crudities of his style (of which he was painfully aware and worked unremittingly to overcome), for his unrefined methodology, his grandiose generalizations, his gross inaccuracies about the military or the educational system or whatever, his fascination with the supposed technological efficiency of totalitarianism, they were unable to understand how it was that he was not merely respected but looked upon as spokesman and mentor by many of the best of the young academics and by many thousands of plain readers, nor how it is that he is avidly attended by millions in Japan, in Russia, in Mexico, as a refreshingly different voice of America.

For a long time I have thought—I still do—that it was because all these people were responding to what was at bottom not merely a logical indictment which could be upheld or attacked, but a poetic vision of America; an unlovely vision perhaps, expressed with a mixture of awkwardness and brilliance, but one that did not really need statistical buttressing or the findings of research teams in order to be apprehended by sensitive Americans as corresponding to their own sense of what was going on about them, more truly and more unflinchingly than any other contemporary statement. They were responding, in that unlovely decade, the fat and frightened fifties, to one who refused to compromise or to make the excuses that others were making—excuses mislabeled descriptions or analyses—for what was happening to their country. They sensed correctly that, faulty and flawed as it was, the vision of Wright Mills cut through the fog and lighted their lives for them.

I have deliberately left out much. I must say a word, however, about Mills's fascination with the totalitarian variety of the global shift to what is called socialism. He and I had many sessions, some of them shouting sessions, over this, at about the time when he was writing *The Causes of the World War III*, and after his first (triumphal) visit to the Soviet Union. At the end, early this year, we had arrived at what I suppose you might call a kind of truce. The ever-accelerating race of history would demonstrate soon enough where the deeper truth lay, and each of

us was wholly persuaded of the other's good-will if not persuaded of the other's correctness.

What happened, it seems to me, is that Mills was caught up by the greatest contradiction of all, that which had carried him so far but was in the end to fall crushingly on his massive shoulders, the impossibility in our age of being simultaneously a Teddy Roosevelt and a Scott Fitzgerald, a public figure-man of action and an artist-thinker. Increasingly, with everything he wrote, Mills found that he was addressing himself to a defined audience. He was becoming a leader with a following. Not merely requests to speak, but pleas for guidance and counsel came pouring in on him, and after *The Causes of World War III* they became a flood. Under such circumstances the temptation to become oracular was almost irresistible; for a man who was absolutely sure of his own insight and analysis it was inevitable.

So was the tragedy. I do not think I am overstating when I say that Mills was never deeply affected by what totalitarianism did to great masses of people. To particular intellectuals, yes; but not to masses. For him Nazism was something that could be comprehended by reading Neumann and some other books; there were no horrible unplumbable depths. Hence he was impatient with my continually reminding him of German anti-Semitism: he regarded the murder of six million Jews as one of the terrible things that can happen when reactionaries take over and nation-states go to war. Nothing more. For him Stalinism in its turn was contemptible not for what it was doing to national minorities, to workers and peasants, to millions languishing in Siberia, but for its political vulgarity and intellectual emptiness. Its standard bearers throughout the world were crude epigones, parrots incapable of originality or vision, much less of redirecting mankind toward new goals.

For a while it seemed to him as though the Chinese Communists might very well be doing just this. The Great Leap Forward excited him enormously. Eager to be shown that the pro-Communist Australian—and other—Sinologists whom he read, underscored, and filed, were indeed right, he itched to be off to China to see for himself. But he was not able to get there because, like it or not, he was an American. Cuba, however, was still available, and people in both North and South America had been asking him what he had to say about the Cuban Revolution, an event far more anti-American in its implications than the Chinese Revolution.

Anyone who knew Mills's admiration for the motorcycle drivers could have foreseen his admiration for the successful Cuban guerrillas; anyone who knew his hurt at being ignored or patronized by his colleagues could have foreseen his reaction to Castro's assurance that he and his fellows had been studying Mills during their long months in the mountains. The result was *Listen Yankee*, in which Mills climbed further out on a limb than he had ever gone before.

For a new generation the Cuban revolution, together with its after-

math, was a crucial event comparable in magnitude, in resonance, to the Spanish Civil War for an earlier generation. For Mills it was definitive proof (as it was for many of us) of the blind rapacity of the American power elite; but more, it provided him for the first time with an emotional home. When this latter certainty was destroyed, everything was destroyed.

In his last months Mills was torn between defending *Listen Yankee*, as a good and honest book, and acknowledging publicly for the first time in his life that he had been terribly wrong. This would have meant not only caving in to the few whose opinions he valued, which I believe he would have been strong enough to do (I had waited until I believed—mistakenly—that he was recovered from his heart attack before telling him what I really thought of the book), but returning to the United States and telling not only his enemies on the right, but the hundreds of thousands who had, so to speak, voted for him, that he was not a rough rider after all, but only a man of ideas who could be wrong, as men of ideas so often are. The tension was too much, the decline of the revolution, atop his personal pains, was too much. I can only add that he declared to me in his last weeks that he was becoming more and more impressed with the psychological and intellectual relevance of non-violent resistance and absolute pacifism.

When I think of my friends who have died prematurely in recent years I mourn the missing sweetness of one, the incomparable insightfulness of another. I would be a liar if I were to say that Mills was a sweet and lovable friend, or that he understood and cared about many individual humans any more than he understood or cared about many individual artistic creations. But hardly a day passes without my arranging in my mind an argument to present to Mills about this event, that book, this development, that crisis. He was as combatively exhilarating as any man has ever been, he worked with the contagious wild passion of an inventor or a driven idealist, and when he was really dauntless he was the bravest man I have ever known.

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