

THE REMEMBERING MACHINES OF TOMORROW

THE human memory is a wonderful development but its fallibility is infinite. How can it be left to men? It has forgotten even its own story—the whole of evolution. It does not recall why the spirit of man walks with a limp. It can no longer say why, through a landscape of peace, fatness, and fragrance—his for the taking—of sumptuous birthplaces with meals already set, fires already lit, welcomes prepared for no one but him, he forces his bitter mouth and his naked hands farther and farther into his hunger, his cold, his namelessness, his desolation. What triumph will he recognize, what wind will he acknowledge, what sky will he warm for long? Everywhere, he dreams of a creator who remembers, and he continues the search for Him, hoping that in the end what he will find will be himself. But whenever he moves he forgets something. Whatever he adds to himself he adds at the same time to the void which gnaws at his organs—all of them. It is this gnawing, and no hunger he shares with the rest of the creatures, that drives him from them. He listens to the gnawing as though it were a song, and goes on, forgetting even that. How could things be left in such hazard? When he has finished forgetting the past he will have no choice but to start on the future. He has started already. No, it cannot go on.

Fortunately he still has his thumb, the inventor, and even before the problem has been clearly stated (oh, long before that) he has contrived the first steps toward its solution. The distance from the first notches bruised into bark, which were the ancestors of numbers, to the air-conditioned archives of the age of history represented only a few strides in his ignorant progress, a day in his forgetting. But once there, he noted with a certain shame that everything seemed to have left him, to hide in the intricate halls, where he could not again feel that it was really his, though the halls had been designed by minds like his own. His own story had now forgotten him. No, it could not be left at that either.

Faced before with crises, he had developed his other thumb, named (by him) Sacrifice. At each movement of utter risk he had held up this shell-faced totem and offered part of himself in exchange for—often that has been forgotten. What was given up was presum-

ably given up forever, but not all at once. The payment might be spread over a long time. He gave up his legs for the wheel. He gave up the strength of his arms for the lever. He gave up power after power of his physical form. And now at last, as more and more was forgotten, he began to relinquish his memory so that something would be remembered.

Since the great primitive repositories had been impersonal, and what he took to be their codified memories seemed to have less and less to do with what he still remembered as himself, a new link was needed.

THE rest of this does not allow of the past tense.

The first of the remembering machines is immense, immobile, no one's. It learns, that is true. But its learning is based on information fed into it by sophisticated procedures, consciously, voluntarily. It is constructed of fragments. Even though it can record anything about us that we can conceive of having recorded, it is still in the main a recorder rather than a memory. But its progeny is approaching us.

The machines will become, in time, more compact. They will become the pride of smaller and smaller institutions, the playthings of more and more of the privileged. They will no longer retain mere symbols in an arbitrary system but something which can pass, at least, for whole experiences—intellectual, sensual, visionary. The process—not so much of remembering as of confronting a memory recorded with mechanical objectivity—will be painful of course, but that has not proved an insuperable obstacle in the past and is not likely to do so in the future. It will be construed as part of the new sacrifice. And the develop-

ment of the remembering machines will come to be regarded as an important next step in man's evolutionary progress—something at once inevitable and worth anything it might cost. When the machines become small enough so that every person can have—then must have—his own, the day will be celebrated as the beginning of a new age of the Individual.

The machines will retain, in flawless preservation (though the completeness of what they remember will occasion some dispute, for a time), not only what their owners experience but what their owners think they have experienced, and will sort out the one from the other. More and more, such distinctions will be left purely to the machines. And it will be noticed that the experience to be retained is itself becoming a dwindling fauna, clung to by sentimentalists, from afar, who still lay aside their machines for days at a time and secretly yearn for the imaginary liberties of the ages of forgetting.

The simplification of private experience will be more than made up for by the rapid improvement of communication among the machines themselves. It will be possible to share more and more fully the memories of others. The memories of the dead will be available in the new repositories, and many will be privately owned. With the universal recognition of the therapeutic benefits and the practical advantages of a precise memory, children will be fitted with these devices at birth. Their prenatal experiences will have been picked up and played into their first sets. They will be given new ones as they grow older and can use them. The stages of such use will seem to reveal a new pattern in the growth of the individual and hence of the species. What man is will seem to be on the point, once again, of harmonious emergence.

Then here and there a ghost will be seen. Someone who has lost his machine. The terror he engenders will be discussed, collated, contained. It will be comprehensible, though the ghost himself no longer is. The apparition will be accorded its place, and will not long trouble those who still have their machines—any more than if, in the old days, they had seen some mutilated creature begging in the street, in the service of his unimaginable life. Little by little it will be remarked, with a mathematical coolness, that experience is not only flowing into the machines but that they, to an in-





"I suppose Macy's was bound to fall in line."

creasing extent, are becoming its source as well. Man's experience of the mechanized memory of his experience—that is what will fill more and more of his days on earth. Until, apart from the simplest bodily functions, his new life will come to revolve around nothing but the operation of the machines them-

selves. The memory of old risks will return, but faintly, vaguely, and so crudely that he cannot take them seriously. For perfection will seem to be in sight at last. Attached to every person like a tiny galaxy will be the whole of his past—or what he takes to be the whole of his past. His attachment to it will

constitute the whole of his present—or of what he takes to be the present. The neat, quiet instrument will contain all of each man's hope, his innocence, his garden.

Then one by one, with growing frequency, men will begin to lose their machines.
—W. S. MERWIN