

MALTHUS ERGO GOTHIC

by David Giesen

The vogue for dark that has captivated the under-twentysomething crowd for at least since I came of age back in 1979 has welled up, I believe, largely because of the malignant persistence of the Malthusian bad seed. The eyes of teenagers heavily underscored in jet-black mascara; the voluminous black wraps ominously draping the lithe female figure; the brows lugubriously furrowed in German post-Romantic material dialectical conundrum: all this soulful gravity is the inevitable harvest of the cult of Ayn Rand grafted onto the 1970s raft of doom-saying treatises like *The Population Bomb*. For at least forty years—certainly since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published—there has lurked the cowl of Death in writers' imaginings of the future.

There have been Ecotopias, too, but the major nonprofits have all thrived with some variation of the refrain, "The last of the beavers... the pelicans... a previously unknown beetle (or some other of earth's magnificent life-forms) is about to go extinct." And it's true, the habitat of fauna and flora is in retreat before the onslaught of man. Yet until we grasp that every human being is entirely dependent upon earth for existence; and until we recognize justice as including the equal right by all to the use of the earth; and until we profoundly appreciate that the value of the earth—economic Rent—rises just as the complexity of society rises: until then we will be thrown back upon cult figures and political personalities to rescue us from the overwhelming specter of scarcity. Where the awareness that humanity is capable of astonishing collective spiritual growth has been overshadowed by fixation upon the personal, our culture has abandoned itself to impossible heroes, desperation, and despair.

What the feeling teenager and the hopeful adult longs for is a sense of the continuum of life. What they are

preponderantly faced with, however, is the cry of scarcity: not enough work to employ all who would labor for food and a home; not enough sky and water and forest to provide haven for the teeming human population and all the rest of life. And in the midst of this scarcity there soars the militant voice of an Ayn Rand which adjures the individual to discover personal exaltation and to abjure altruism because it fetters the individual from truly contributing to society.

The individual is left bounded by a picket of sociologists and natural scientists and philosophers who demarcate in their talks and books the line of scarcity. And where there is not enough for all, including the non-human life, there is left to youth emerging into adulthood only the cult of the daring individual who gets his own and trusts everyone else will get theirs if they can—though surely knowing that, as on the *Titanic*, there are not enough seats for everyone. Thus the gothic dress of youths. In their hearts youths yearn for a good world; they are not indifferent to the feelings of others and yet what good is their yearning if there is not enough for all? Or else, as a variation on the cult of the individual, we must depend on politicians of impossible integrity to fight those who don't care a fig for what others consider to be *the fact* of scarcity and who go on stuffing as much as they can into their investment portfolios and sports utility vehicles.

What hope for the continuum of good is there in that scenario? Soon enough every teenager has learned that, speaking of politicians, we should "toss the crooks out" or "damn the Rooseveltian Democrats" or "damn the heartless union-busting Republicans." And who's left to administrate society when it's only foxes in the henhouse? No wonder youths play bad or assume untoward gravity and steep themselves in the

gothic. Consider, though, that communities which work in association are the most productive. Consider that scarcity in land can, under terms of equality of opportunity, impel humanity to finer and more exquisite use of the earth's so-called scarcity. Consider that what is typed scarcity is the device that launches the thousand creative impulses of the human intellect and spirit to "aid in the process of the suns!"

Buckminster Fuller described human beings as problem-solving beings. The recognition that Rent arises both with the growth of population and with the growth in interdependent exchange of products and services leads thought into new channels.

New questions arise: If scarcity can, in fact, be the occasion of society's flourishing by prompting us to be ingenious in meeting our wants and needs with what's in hand, how do we nurture ingenuity? If scarcity of earth is not the bugbear it is made out to be, what is the cause of want and privation? And so we can turn to questions of justice and leave to natural functioning the laws relating to population. In short, when we leave off adding up and adding down the ability of the earth to carry the whole of humanity, we can inquire into what humanity is. It seems to me *that* is the big question, the real quest, the spiritual matter for that creature dubbed *homo sapiens*.

Just as, when one is not in a state of agitation, the respiratory and circulatory systems operate efficiently without concerted mental effort, when justice holds in society, the ideal human population will naturally find... *itself*. In paraphrase of Henry George, with the needs of the body met, what development of the spirit will then be possible!

Then our care will be not for sustaining life and security, but for making life beautiful. Q