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Robert Ardrey AFRICAN GENESIS

A Personal Journey into the
Animal Origins and Nature of Man
By the author of TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE



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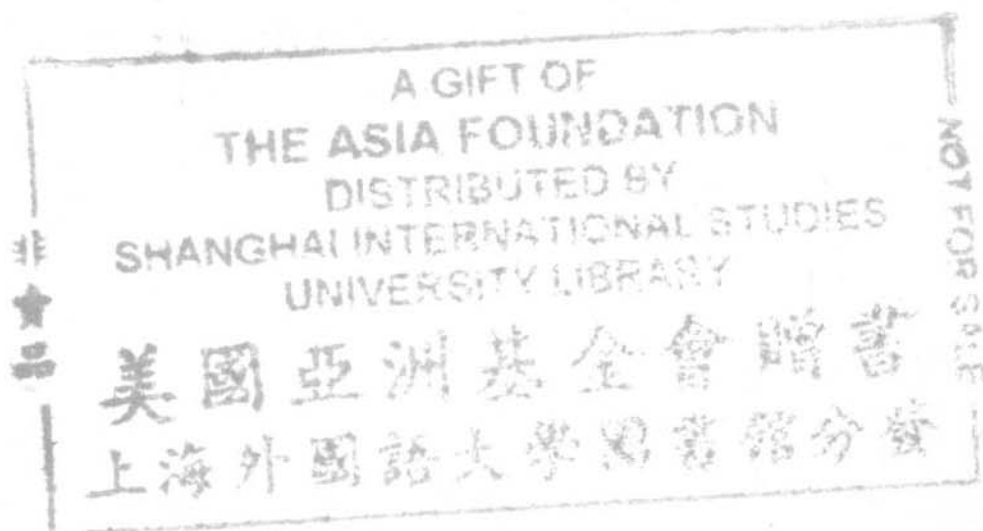
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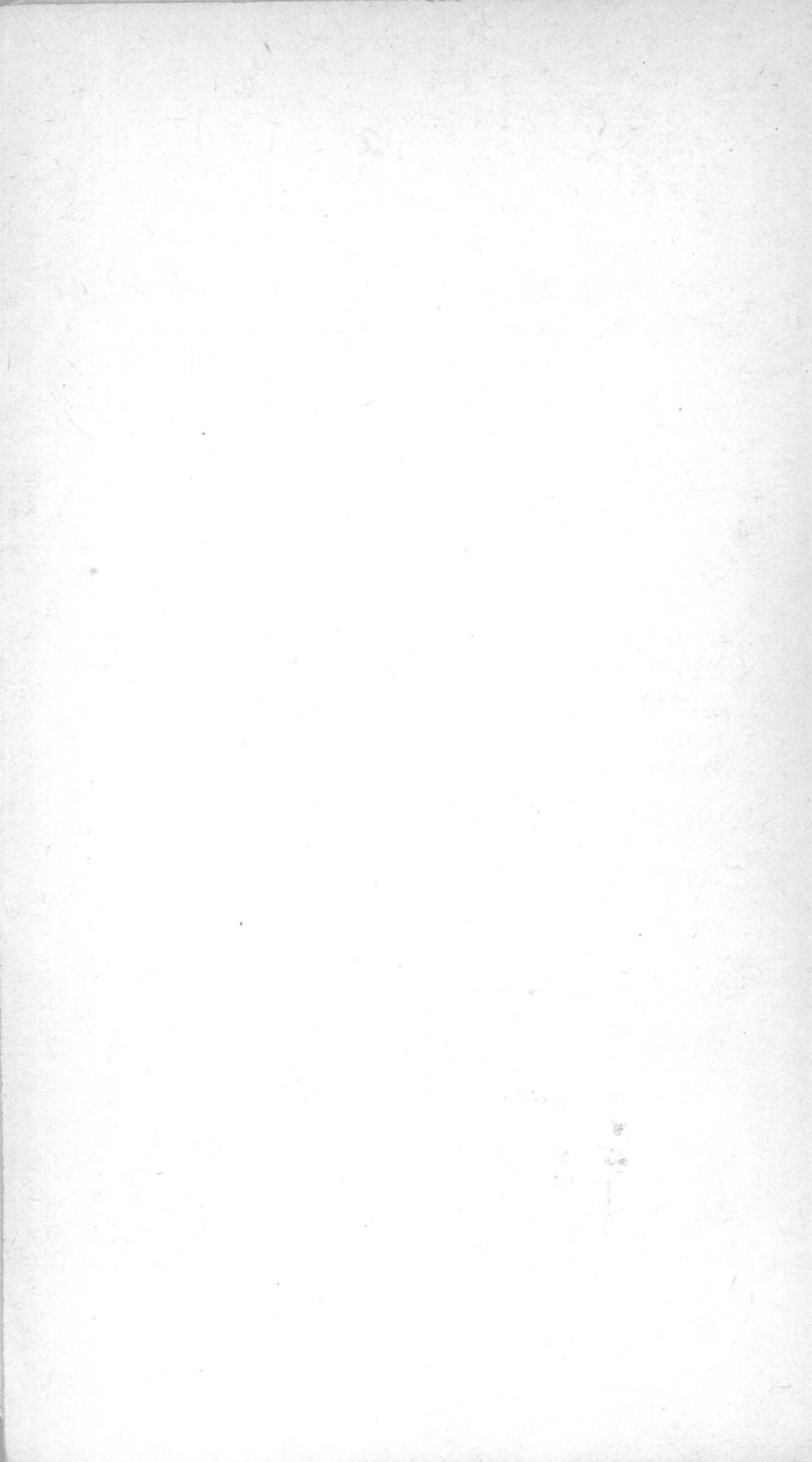
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"This stunning testament ... could become the scientific and philosophical cause célèbre of the literary season."

—New York Herald Tribune

Robert Ardrey was born in Chicago, majored in natural sciences at the University of Chicago and thereafter became a successful playwright and screen writer. In 1955 he began his African travels and studies. **African Genesis** is the impressive result of these pursuits. Mr. Ardrey's latest book, also the result of these pursuits, is **Territorial Imperative**.





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AFRICAN GENESIS

by ROBERT ARDREY

A Personal Investigation into the
Animal Origins and Nature of Man



Drawings by Berdine Ardrey

A Laurel Edition



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to the memory of
Eugène Marais

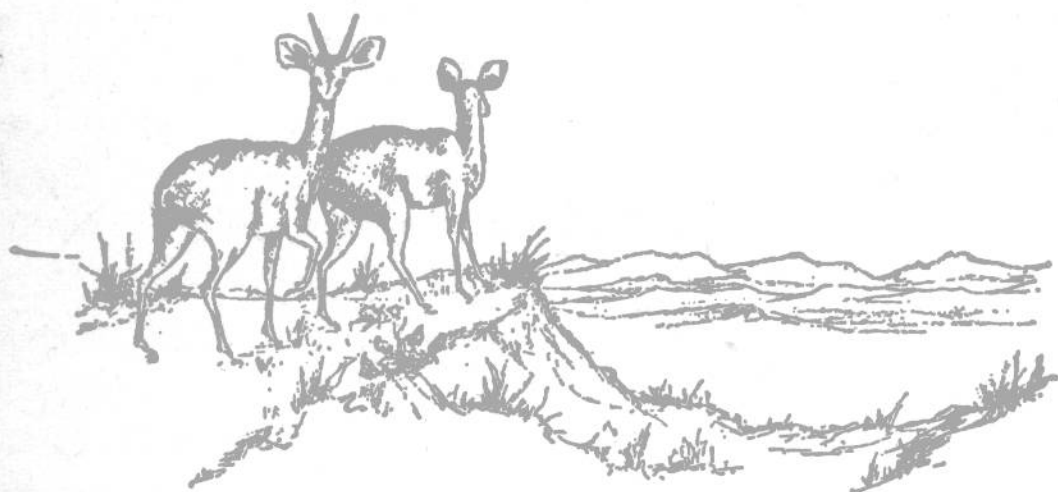
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AFRICAN GENESIS

Chapter 1

The New Enlightenment



Not in innocence, and not in Asia, was mankind born. The home of our fathers was that African highland reaching north from the Cape to the Lakes of the Nile. Here we came about—slowly, ever so slowly—on a sky-swept savannah glowing with menace.

In neither bankruptcy nor bastardy did we face our long beginnings. Man's line is legitimate. Our ancestry is firmly rooted in the animal world, and to its subtle, antique ways our hearts are yet pledged. Children of all animal kind, we inherited many a social nicety as well as the predator's way. But most significant of all our gifts, as things turned out, was the legacy bequeathed us by those killer apes, our immediate forebears. Even in the first long days of our beginnings we held in our hand the weapon, an instrument somewhat older than ourselves.

Man is a fraction of the animal world. Our history is an afterthought, no more, tacked to an infinite calendar. We are not so unique as we should like to believe. And if man in a time of need seeks deeper knowledge concerning himself, then he must explore those animal horizons from which we have made our quick little march.

In the past thirty years a revolution has been taking place in the natural sciences. It is a revolution in our understand-

ing of animal behaviour, and of our link to the animal world. In sum, therefore, the revolution concerns that most absorbing of human entertainments, man's understanding of man. Yet not even science, as a whole, is aware of the philosophical reappraisal which must proceed from its specialists' doings.

Assumptions concerning the nature of man, today unquestioned by education, by psychiatry, by politics, by art, or even by science itself, are being eroded by the tiny streams set loose from obscure scientific springs. And few of us, scientists or laymen, know.

That the contemporary revolution in the natural sciences has proceeded thus far in almost total silence must not be regarded as too great a wonder. Other and noisier revolutions have overwhelmed our unquiet time. As compared with the fortunes of the totalitarian state, of nuclear physics, of anti-biotics or the long-playing record, the fortunes of the palaeontologist may seem remote from our daily life. And the work of the revolution has been accomplished by such extreme specialists that it has been recorded only in such inaccessible pages as those of the *American Journal of Anthropology* or the *Biological Symposia*. Such heralds gain few hearers in the modern market-place.

Still more important than the obscurity or specialization of the revolution has been its suddenness. When in 1930 I emerged from a respectable American university as a respectably well-educated young man, no hint had reached me that private property was other than a human institution evolved by the human brain. If I and my young contemporaries throughout the following years wasted much of our fire on social propositions involving the abolition of private ownership, then we did so in perfect faith that such a course would free mankind of many a frustration. No part of the curriculum of our psychology, sociology, or anthropology departments had presented us with the information that territoriality—the drive to gain, maintain, and defend the exclusive right to a piece of property—is an animal instinct approximately as ancient and powerful as sex.

The role of territory in general animal behaviour lies today beyond scientific controversy; then it was unknown. We of the Class of 1930 had to emerge into a world of tumultuous evaluation without benefit of this most salient

observation. Similarly, we could not know, as we bemused ourselves with the attractions of the classless state, that hierarchy is an institution among all social animals and the drive to dominate one's fellows an instinct three or four hundred million years old.

There is a classic experiment which may be performed with sword-tails, those darting red fish that decorate many a tropical tank. Half a dozen male swordtails gathered together in a tank will rapidly arrange themselves in a straight-line hierarchy, each through strength and pugnacity and determination finding those he may dominate and those to whom he must submit. His rank determines many a prerogative, whether access to food or to females or to an undisturbed corner of the tank, and his defence of that rank will remain his most belligerent preoccupation. Just how profound is the instinct for dominance in the swordtail may be tested most simply. Let the water in the tank be gradually cooled. The time will come when the male will lose all interest in sex; but he will still fight for his status.

We of the Class of 1930 could not know of the experiment with swordtail fish, for it had not yet been performed. And it would be almost ten years before the head of my own zoology department at the University of Chicago, Dr. W. C. Allee, would publish his *Social Life of Animals* and establish the thesis, today no matter for controversy, that dominance in social animals is a universal instinct independent of sex. By that time, however, I was a practising playwright no longer *au courant* with what the natural scientists were up to. Any convictions which I may have held concerning such human tendencies as tyranny, aristocracy, or keeping up with the Joneses had been formed without knowledge of the ways of my animal ancestry.

Many were the unblemished fallacies that the well-educated young man of my generation took with him into a rambunctious world. From the time of Darwin, for example, it had been assumed by science that man evolved from some extinct branch of happy apedom not radically different from contemporary species. No assumption could have been more reasonable, since without exception every modern primate, whether gorilla or macaque, chimpanzee or vervet monkey or gibbon or baboon, is inoffensive, non-aggressive, and strays no farther from the vegetarian way

than an occasional taste for insects. And so our psychology, sociology and anthropology professors had no reason to believe that the human ancestor led a life less bland. Yet within a decade African palaeontologists would demonstrate beyond doubt the presence on that continent of a race of terrestrial, flesh-eating, killer apes who became extinct half a million years ago. Within another decade the human emergence would be demonstrated as having taken place on that continent at about that time. And the final decade of the contemporary revolution would establish the carnivorous, predatory australopithecines as the unquestioned antecedents of man and as the probable authors of man's constant companion, the lethal weapon.

We, the approximate Class of 1930, today furnish trusted and vital leadership to world thought, world politics, world society and to whatever may exist of world hope. But we do not know that the human drive to acquire possession is the simple expression of an animal instinct many hundreds of times older than the human race itself. We do not know that the roots of nationalism are dug firmly into the social territoriality of almost every species in our related primate family. We do not know that the status-seekers are responding to animal instincts equally characteristic of baboons, jackdaws, rock cod, and men. Responsible though we may be for the fate of summit conferences, disarmament agreements, juvenile delinquents and new African states, we do not know that the first man was an armed killer, or that evolutionary survival from his mutant instant depended upon the use, the development, and the contest of weapons.

We do not know these things, since they are conclusions to be drawn from the contemporary revolution in the natural sciences. We should know, however, that acquired characteristics cannot be inherited, and that within a species every member is born in the essential image of the first of its kind. No child of ours, born in the middle twentieth century, can differ at birth in significant measure from the earliest of *Homo sapiens*. No instinct, whether physiological or cultural, that constituted a part of the original human bundle can ever in the history of the species be permanently suppressed or abandoned.

The ineradicability of a cultural instinct finds a fair example in the history of beavers on the River Rhône. A

beaver colony creates its dams and ponds and lodges by communal effort, and does so only when the numbers of its society are at moderately full strength. From ancient days the European beaver was hunted for its fur until it very nearly became extinct. A few stragglers hung on in a few tiny colonies, but they built nothing. For centuries beaver dams were unknown in western Europe. Then the French government extended protection to a scanty beaver population in the Rhône valley. Slowly, through several decades, their numbers grew. And at last the beavers went back to work. For the first time in many hundreds of years dams and ponds and lodges appeared in the tributaries of the River Rhône. And they differed in no least degree from the dams and the ponds and the lodges built five thousand miles away by distant Canadian cousins.

The problem of man's original nature imposes itself upon any human solution.

I have attributed the silence of the contemporary revolution to the distractions of our time. Yet so brilliantly is every modern circumstance illuminated by the revolution's flares, that the reason seems inadequate. I have attributed the silence to the obscurity of such highly specialized scientific findings; yet the even more specialized endeavours of the nuclear physicists have scarcely gone unnoted. I have attributed the silence to the newness of the revelations, and lamented an educated generation born too soon. Yet the approximate Class of 1960, thirty years later, emerging from its respectable universities as respectably well-educated as were we, has been taught not a whit more.

The contemporary revolution in the natural sciences has proceeded in something more striking than silence. It has proceeded in secret. Like our tiny, furry, squirrel-like, earliest primate ancestors, seventy million years ago, the revolution has found obscurity its best defence and modesty the key to its survival. For it has challenged larger orthodoxies than just those of science, and its enemies exist beyond counting. From seashore and jungle, from ant-heap and travertine cave have been collected the inflammable materials that must some day explode our most precious myths. The struggle towards truth has proceeded, but as an underground intellectual movement seeking light under darkest cover.

Is man innocent? Were we in truth created in the image

of God? Are we unique, separate and distinct creatures from animalkind? Did our bodies evolve from the animal world, but not our souls? Is man sovereign? Are babies born good? Is human fault to be explained successfully in terms of environment? Is man innately noble?

The contemporary revolution in the natural sciences, unorganized, undirected, and largely unrecorded, has with a strong instinct for survival challenged the romantic fallacy in a voice unlikely to be heard. When a strident voice from southern Africa has repeatedly lifted itself in challenge, science itself, as we shall see, has unwittingly combined to mute, to divert, or to discredit the call.

A certain justification has existed until now, in my opinion, for the submission of the insurgent specialists to the censorship of scientific orthodoxy. Such higher bastions of philosophical orthodoxy as Jefferson, Marx, and Freud could scarcely be stormed by partial regiments. Until the anti-romantic revolution could summon to arms what now exists, an overwhelming body of incontrovertible proof, then action had best be confined to a labyrinthine underground of unreadable journals, of museum back rooms, and of gossiping groups around African camp-fires.

For six years I have lived with that underground. Why a dramatist should have become the accountant and interpreter of a scientific revolution is a paradox that need not divert us here. The rare reader who finds himself unbearably curious is invited to turn to Chapter Seven and to get his impatience over with. What need only concern us at this point is that a dramatist is a specialist, in a sense, in human nature. In another sense, however, he is a specialist in nothing, and therefore a generalist. And while the generalist may be the most suspect of creatures in the view of the modern, specialized human animal, a generalist was what a revolution of specialists demanded. And a generalist was what it got.

For the task of this account, I have brought a fair experience with the human condition; the innocence of the Class of 1930; a willingness to trade the theatrical posture of the playwright for that of the audience; and no too great disinclination for adventure. Departing from theatrical procedures, I have been a touring, one-man audience on an endless series of one-night stands. I have listened to geologists, ecologists, and zoologists in America; anthropologists,