CHAPTER SIX

THE MAKING OF THE MATURE MIND AND ITS AFTERMATH

In his seventy-fourth year, Harry Overstreet produced the work with which his name is still best associated: *The Mature Mind*. In the description of what he labeled “the maturity concept,” Overstreet was able to synthesize a lifetime of effort into a stimulating book which became a great best seller beyond the dreams of the author or the publisher. Within three years more than 500,000 copies had been sold. It was on the top best seller lists for seventy-two weeks – nine of them as the number one non-fiction best seller in the country. In August, 1949, *The Mature Mind* was made a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. In 1950, the book had the honor of receiving a special citation from the National Book Awards as it did not fall neatly into any of the specialized categories. The book was translated into many languages and proved to have an international appeal.

The Preparation and Writing of The Mature Mind

Work on *The Mature Mind* had been a major writing project for Harry for more than seven years. When he was completing his book, *Our Free Minds*, in 1940 he began to see the need for a deeper psychological interpretation of the individual and of his relationship to our institutions. The central thesis of *The Mature Mind* came to Harry at this time and he put it into the form of an article, “Educating for Maturity,” published in the *Journal of Adult Education* in April 1940. In the years that followed, this thesis gave organizing direction to his research and writing and ultimately became the essence of Chapter III, “Two Old Theories and a New One.”

Pursuing the line of thought begun in the journal article, Harry began the research that became his major absorption during the next seven years. He followed the method he had pursued in the writing of all of his books. He began intensive research into the latest findings in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and mental health. Then as he gathered his materials he clarified and expanded his ideas through articles, lectures, and courses. Two eight-week courses for the University of Michigan in the Fall of 1945 and the Fall of 1946 were particularly helpful in developing his thesis. In those courses he worked out the “linkage theory” of personality and the “curve of growth” which he incorporated in Chapter II, “The Criteria of Maturity.”
During 1945 and 1946 Harry tried two tentative drafts under the titles “Design for Growth After Growth” and “The Unfinished Business of Being Human.” Several drafts were discarded and the semi-final draft was submitted to the publisher in the summer of 1947 under the title, The Mature Mind. It too was rewritten and the final manuscript was completed in the Fall of 1948. It had been in the making for nearly eight years. The book was, as Harry put it, “long in the making because the idea itself, in the full range of its individual and social implications, had to pass through its stages of maturing.”

Overstreet’s “Maturity Concept”

Harry Overstreet for many years had been highly esteemed in intellectual and academic circles and most notably as a lecturer, but now he was reaping “the harvest of the years of intellectual labor.” Those intellectual labors included the fields of philosophy, psychology, and mental health as well as adult education. And Harry Overstreet integrated the findings in these fields into the maturity concept which was the basis for The Mature Mind.

In his preface Overstreet indicated that his purpose was to heed the words of the educator and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, that it was the business of philosophers to “re-create and re-enact a vision of the world. . .penetrated through and through with unflinching rationality.” According to Overstreet The Mature Mind was concerned with the re-creating and re-enactment of such a vision through providing a new insight out of the psychological and psychiatric sciences to help in understanding the new problems of the post-war world. This insight was centered in man’s mental, emotional, and social maturing. Most importantly, Overstreet wrote that it “affords the clue to our possible advance out of chaos.” This insight must have had a special appeal to many other people because the public response to the book, as previously noted, was astounding.

In putting together “the maturity concept” Overstreet freely borrowed and integrated some of the major ideas of Freud, Binet, Pavlov, and Thorndike. They form the psychological foundation for the book. As described by Overstreet, the “maturity concept” is based upon five psychological insights, the last of which specifically involves adult education.

The first concept was the idea of psychological age, which stems from the studies of Alfred Binet: Chronological age does not necessarily betoken a corresponding emotional or social age. “Not all adults are adult. Many who look grown-up on the outside may be childish
on the inside.” The second was the idea of arrested development or fixation as the root cause for the halting of the maturing process. This idea had its inception with Freud. It is important to “look at the whole process of human growth, from birth to death – through infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood” . . . to “make us aware of ‘fateful years’ and ‘fateful’ experiences.” The idea of conditioned response was the third concept. Pavlov’s experiments gave us the clue that “maturity is achieved where conditions favorable to maturity exist.” The fourth concept dealt with the idea of individual aptitude uniqueness. Overstreet stated that this was not new because all of the major social and philosophical thinkers had been keenly aware of the fact of individual differences. However, he observed that for the individual “to mature is to bring one’s powers to realization” and the years of schooling, including adult education, can help to build one’s power. It was vital to the maturity concept that these powers be used “to affirm life” and this required involvement in the “process of living.” The fifth concept dealt with the adult capacity to learn. Edward Thorndike’s psychological research in adult learning established the fact that adults can and do learn and where there is failure it is rarely attributable to age. The actual reasons for failure are more likely to involve other factors within the individual or within the culture. “Obstacles within the culture arise from the unusualness of adult study: from the fact that the enterprise of organized learning lies outside the accustomed pattern of adult life.” According to Overstreet significance of these five concepts leads to one interpretation – that “the proper psychological undertaking of man is to move from immaturity toward maturity.” To achieve that end, the role of adult education was a vital one.

Harry pointed out that today’s world, described by Eugene Staley as one of rapid evolution in politics, economics and technology, requires adults to unlearn and relearn facts in order to be responsible members of a democratic community. He agreed with Staley that the rapidly changing world meant there was a more important job for adult education than ever before, and that “adult education in these days should rank in importance with elementary, secondary, and college education.” Harry urged adult educators to speak out for the rights of adults to a kind of education “that recognizes their entrance upon a new and uniquely significant stage of life experience. . . and help us to move beyond the routines of a half-baked adulthood into the creative surprises of an adulthood that is truly maturing.”
In *The Mature Mind* Overstreet defines the maturing person as one “whose *linkages with life* are constantly becoming stronger and richer because his attitudes are such as to encourage their growth rather than their stoppage.” These attitudes are directed toward knowledge, social responsibility, adjustment to vocation, political responsibility, personal relationships, and communication skills. The maturing of any one of them has an influence on the development or growth of all of the others. Overstreet developed the concept into what he calls the linkage theory of maturity which sees man as a creature who lives by and through his relationships. (As has been noted earlier, the concept of linkages with life was not new with the publication of *The Mature Mind*, for Bonaro had discussed it in her earlier book, *How To Think About Ourselves*.)

Most of the reviews of the book were highly favorable. The eminent literary critic of the *New Yorker* magazine, Clifton Fadiman, wrote:

> *The Mature Mind* is not to be confused with the usual shallow “self-help” and “inspirational” books. It is the considered and, to date, the most important work of a responsible educator and philosopher. . . . many books entertain. Some instruct. This one, we think, really helps.16

According to Stubblefield “*The Mature Mind* represented an achievement of considerable importance in adult education.” The concept could be used “in measuring how well social institutions had promoted human growth,” and adult educators could use it as “a meta-goal which they should strive to attain in all their programs regardless of the subject matter under study.”17

That the book is still vital is attested to by the numerous citations from it made by the Australian adult educator Philip C. Candy in his book *Self-Direction for Lifelong Learning* published in 1991. Candy refers to *The Mature Mind* as a “classic book.”18

Another well-known historian of adult education, Malcolm Knowles wrote that “attempts to bring the isolated concepts, insights, and research findings regarding adult learning together into an integrated framework began as early as 1949, with the publication of Harry Overstreet’s *The Mature Mind*.”19

Paul Bergevin in his outstanding book, *A Philosophy For Adult Education*, summarizes twenty-two beliefs that are the basis for adult education. Overstreet would undoubtedly agree with all of them, but two are especially instructive and closely relate to Overstreet’s concept: “Adult education should be designed to help people to grow up, mature” and “adults need to live
together in community in order to grow and mature, and they need to learn how to do this.”

Bergevin provides a relatively short reading list at the end of the book with only a few books on adult education. The list includes Aristotle, Jefferson, Thomas Hobbes, and Alfred North Whitehead. The adult education books include only Eduard Lindeman, J. R. Kidd, C. Hartley Grattan, and Overstreet’s *The Mature Mind*.

In 1952 the New American Library published *Good Reading*, a guide to the world’s best books prepared by the Committee on College Reading. The book list is by literary categories and *The Mature Mind* is doubly honored by being listed under both Contemporary Philosophy and Psychology. The statement in the Psychology section reads “an inspection and a challenge to apply an adult social outlook to our home, our social, our economic problems.” Of the approximately 1250 volumes from every age and every field, *The Mature Mind* is the only book that could be classified as being involved with adult education.

Harry Overstreet as “Popularizer”

Newton’s third law of motion states that reaction is always equal and opposite to action. This may have a corollary in other fields as well. It came as no great surprise that the remarkable success of *The Mature Mind* brought some reaction that all of this was an oversimplification and thus the word "popularization" began to be used about Overstreet's writings. For some people "popularization" is a perfectly healthy term that describes a capacity to take useful information and present it in an attractive form so as to reach a wide audience. Dante, Martin Luther, Voltaire, Bertrand Russell and Herodotus, the father of history, were all popularists in much of their work according to Gustav Francis Beck. For others the term is pejorative and meant to be used disparagingly. This definition was used against the Overstreets for the most part by anonymous critics right up to Harry’s death in 1970. The New York Times unsigned obituary referred to him as a “popularizer” and quoted unnamed critics of *The Mature Mind* as complaining that it was an “over-simplification of a problem that was infinitely complex in its nature.” When a critic was named it was Morris Ernst whose comments in the *Saturday Review* had been favorable. Ernst, who was a famous attorney and one of the leaders of the American Civil Liberties Union, wrote that the book provided useful information in the fields of psychology and psychiatry and that Overstreet filled "the interstices with wise, temperate and calm observations.”
The Overstreets’ books and lectures were not as the critic Ernest van den Haag put it, the same as those of Dale Carnegie or Norman Vincent Peale: messages that that everyone could be happy and free from anxiety if they followed certain prescriptions or bought certain products. van den Haag went on to say that it was his contention “that by distracting from the human predicament and blocking individuation and experience popular culture impoverishes life.”25 The Overstreets do not fit this description. They offered no simple solutions or prescriptions. They faced the “human predicament” head on and discussed difficult problems. They emphasized the importance of working toward solutions through research, education, and sound thought processes. As Stubblefield pointed out, they “did not shrink from controversy,”26 as they fought for civil rights and for integrated communities, schools and the armed services. Nor was there anything the least bit pollyanish in their writing. After all, it was Bonaro who had written that one must have the courage to be willingly called a “nigger-lover” when the situation called for it.27

They worked with prominent mental health groups such as The Menninger Foundation and the Hogg Foundation in mental health research and treatment. They investigated, with long and thorough research, the tenets of communism and the methods of political extremism. And, above all, they decried any attempts to sway people from logical thinking. One astute media critic, Gilbert Seldes, noted that it was Harry Overstreet who was a major critic of the misuse of the mass media.28 In The Mature Mind, Chapter Nine is entitled, “What We Read, See, and Hear,” and in it Harry took on the debilitating effects of newspapers, radio, movies and advertising. For example, he wrote of advertising, “To put the matter succinctly, advertising halts our psychological growth to the extent that it makes us do too much wanting and makes us want things for the wrong reasons.”29

There are other aspects of van den Haag’s diatribe against popular culture which cause the writer to question his judgment. He makes numerous unsupported statements such as, “Why do classics clutter rather than enrich the minds of so many readers?”30 He states that people can “live happily and well without high culture,” and he seems to think we have mutilated the works of such composers as Mozart through cutting, condensing, rewriting and presenting him by radio or television, although any reasonable person can see that Mozart’s symphonies, piano concertos and operas are now enjoyed by tens of millions of people throughout the world today compared
to a few thousand in his own lifetime. It might be suggested that the “popularizing” of the classics this way may enable the public to hear artists perform who are superior in quality to any locally available. And, as one last criticism of the critic, this writer suggests that he was also seriously mistaken when he misapplied Thoreau’s famous observation in *Walden* that “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”\textsuperscript{31} Thoreau’s statement was not a puerile acceptance of “despair” as our natural lot. Thoreau was admonishing us to wake up and break out of the mold. One paragraph later in *Walden* Thoreau wrote, “It is never too late to give up our prejudices.”\textsuperscript{32} The writer accepts the term “popularizers” in its positive sense to describe the Overstreets, but thinks it is important to discuss what she believes the term means in relation to them. Stubblefield defined it as interpreting the research of the social sciences and translating “these findings into applications for adult life in a language that the lay people could understand.”\textsuperscript{33} Certainly the Overstreets did that. But as Stubblefield went on to say about Harry, “He was more than a disseminator of knowledge for popular consumption; he worked with social science materials to understand and improve human relations.”\textsuperscript{34} And how is “popularization” treated in the literature? To one of the most notable reform leaders in adult education, James Harvey Robinson, it meant how knowledge is “to be popularized and spread abroad among adults who have become dissatisfied with what they know and are eager to learn more.”\textsuperscript{35} Robinson of course was a contemporary of Harry Overstreet and in this area of adult education they are both part of the same tradition. In books such as *The Human Comedy*, Robinson commended Professor Overstreet for his observation that one of the aims of a college education is to “critically examine basic assumptions.”\textsuperscript{36} The title of one of Robinson’s most famous books, *The Humanizing of Knowledge*, seems to say it all. In the book Robinson went so far as to say the problem of humanizing knowledge “*is the supreme problem of our age and no one can hope to do more than to make modest contributions to its solution.*” (Italics are Robinson’s) One of the phases of the problem is “how is knowledge to be popularized and spread abroad among adults who have become dissatisfied with what they know and are eager to learn more?”\textsuperscript{37} In an article in the *Adult Education Quarterly*, Professor Rae Wahl Rohfeld of Syracuse University wrote Robinson’s espousal of the popularization of knowledge paralleled not only the views of many social scientists, but also of other adult educators.
For example, Newton D. Baker, a civic leader who served as the second president of the American Association for Adult Education, later told a prospective political science instructor, “The world’s trouble at the moment is not lack of knowledge of the kind which research provides but rather a lack of the dissemination and popularization of that knowledge. Motives varied, but the idea that knowledge had to be popularized in order to be applied to human betterment was common among intellectuals of the time.”

Soon after Robinson’s book was published there was a reaction to the subject of popularization. The 1936 anthology, Adult Education in Action, published by the American Association for Adult Education, carried an article by Gustav Francis Beck of New York University titled, “Is Adult Education Overpopularizing?” The article was actually written in 1929 when Beck was Director of the Labor Temple School. It is somewhat ironic since the Labor Temple School was founded by Will Durant who was often targeted by critics as a major popularizer of the period. (The Labor Temple School, at which Harry Overstreet sometimes taught philosophy, unfortunately could not make it through the depression years and closed in March, 1935.) It was Beck’s view “that the terrific industrial and commercial drive of our age is probably the chief cause of the pathetic universal demand for popularization.”

Beck was not completely opposed to popularization. He made a clear distinction by citing Dante who had the rare gift of amalgamating art, instruction, propaganda and popularization without a visible flaw. He indicated that “the old dry-as-dust style of teaching in book, lecture, and pulpit seems to have vanished for good, and for this by-product of popularization we may be truly grateful.”

What Beck apparently disapproved of were the “short-cuts” to history, psychology and the various sciences. One of the authors of whom he disapproved was H. G. Wells, the “self-appointed universal historian.” In a sense, how a reader feels about H. G. Wells and his huge best seller, The Outline of History, written in 1919 seems a good litmus test of the subject of popularization. Many historians were critical of the book, but James Harvey Robinson praised it wholeheartedly. Robinson wrote, “when one of Mr. Wells’ hundreds of thousands of readers has finished his Outline of History he does not say, ‘I have had history’ . . . and why? Because Mr. Wells manages to humanize the past of mankind.” This humanization, according to Robinson and others, stimulates the reader to learn more.
Other critics of popularization include Bernard Rosenberg in his article, “Mass Culture in America,” which was the first entry in an anthology which he co-edited. He quoted Ernest van den Haag as suggesting that there are two false assumptions “underlying all mass culture: (1) everything is understandable, and (2) everything is remedial.”

In the 561 pages of Mass Culture there is not a word about a book that was exceptionally popular in the early 1950’s and which takes that first assumption head on. The book was The Universe and Dr. Einstein by Lincoln Barnett who was neither a scientist nor a professional educator. The book was intended for the general public and attempted the formidable task of presenting a clear explanation of Einstein’s theories, -- theories that had seemed to be beyond the understanding of all but highly educated scientists. On publication, some critics said it was an oversimplification. But fortunately for Mr. Barnett, Dr. Einstein was still alive and provided a foreward for the paperback edition. Einstein said that it was extremely difficult “to present a rather abstract scientific subject in a popular manner.” He went on to say that “Lincoln Barnett’s book represents a valuable contribution to popular scientific writing. The main ideas of the theory of relativity are extremely well presented.” Critics of mass culture such as Rosenberg, van den Haag, and Joan S. Rubin are capable of being dismissive of many writers as popularizers, but nobody seems to want to take issue with Albert Einstein on his defense of popularization.

Rosenberg chose to prepare the reader for the book of criticisms by beginning it with high praise for Morris Cohen. The very first words of Rosenberg’s article are more interesting and ironic than he knew. He wrote:

The late Morris Raphael Cohen, an extraordinarily gifted teacher, was perhaps best known in and out of his classroom as a superb critic of other philosophers. From time to time students would grumble about his negativism; Cohen tore down whole systems of philosophy without offering an alternative view of his own.

This was Rosenberg’s way of warning the reader to accept the criticisms but not to expect any positive proposals on the subject of mass culture.

However, Rosenberg’s view of Cohen which emphasizes his “negativism” is somewhat at odds with that of Albert Einstein who wrote a message to the Morris Cohen Student Memorial Fund stating, “I knew him well as an extraordinarily helpful, conscientious man of unusually
independent character and I rather frequently had the pleasure of discussing with him problems of common interest.”46 Einstein then wrote about Cohen’s book, Logic and Scientific Method, which “fascinated” him.

“The results were not presented as ready-made, but scientific curiosity was first aroused by presenting contrasting possibilities of conceiving the matter. Only then the attempt was made to clarify the issue by thorough assignment. The intellectual honesty of the author made us share the inner struggle in his mind. It is this which is the mark of the born teacher.”47

And what did the “born teacher” himself have to say about his methods? Cohen wrote in his unfinished autobiography, A Dreamer’s Journey

The fact is that my teaching bore many resemblances to the instructional methods of a drill sergeant. Not only had my childhood experiences with education been filled with whippings and the fear of whippings, but my student days at City College itself had been dominated by the harsh standards approved by the first presidents of the College, both West Point graduates. . .It took me a long time before I could rid myself of my drill-sergeant attitude. I have always been grateful to Harry Overstreet, who came to the College without a trace of that attitude. Under his influence I found my teaching methods gradually becoming less harsh.48

We now come full circle. On the one hand Rosenberg considers Cohen to be a “gifted teacher” and “superb critic” but would relegate Overstreet, who regularly taught classes for universities and regularly published articles in scholarly journals, to those he places in the category of mere popularizers. (For although Overstreet was not mentioned by name by Rosenberg, the book is dedicated in part to van den Haag who had made his position quite clear.) On the other hand, it is Overstreet who Cohen credits with helping him become a better teacher and who, over strenuous opposition, brought Cohen in 1911 to teach philosophy at C. C.N.Y., “the first Russian Jew to do so in the United States.”49 And Cohen, his family, and his son’s family all have paid tribute to Harry Overstreet and the important influence he was in all of their lives.

Overstreet and Cohen worked together for more than twenty-five years. When Cohen retired in 1937, Overstreet contributed this profile to The Faculty Bulletin which also seems to contradict Rosenberg’s description of Cohen’s negativism:

... I have been in almost daily contact with him for the entire time of his service in the Department, and yet when I try to reduce him to a formula, to say what I have discovered in him, I find I am at a loss for
words that will exactly turn the trick.

And yet it is not that Cohen is an enigma. The difficulty is that he is a phenomenon. If you listen to him expounding an idea -- and he is generally doing that -- you will be astonished at the ease with which he moves on intimate terms with the worthies and unworthies of all the ages. He brings forth their wisdom or their folly as familiarly as if he had just met them at breakfast. . .

We love him for his courage, his passion for the philosophic life, his deep and never faltering interest in his students, his wise counsel, his profound insight into the difficult problems of our time. . . 50

The story does not end there. Overstreet played a key role in bringing important scholarly legal papers to the public. Morris Cohen’s son, Felix, who became an outstanding lawyer and who was a champion of civil rights for the underprivileged and a fighter in the cause of American Indians, studied under Harry Overstreet and considered him a mentor and close friend in his professional life. Unfortunately, he died at age 46, but under the urging of Overstreet, his widow compiled a book from his papers titled The Legal Conscience. In her introduction she singles out “Harry Allen Overstreet, Felix Cohen’s teacher of philosophy at City College, who first expressed his own need for a collection of papers in one accessible volume.” 51

Harry Overstreet in his writing and lecturing, and in his joint efforts with his wife, dealt with difficult and complex areas of the human condition. Both continued throughout their lives to communicate with other scholars in the fields of philosophy, psychology and adult education and to publish scholarly articles in the professional journals of these fields.

The Overstreets considered their profession to be adult educators. Always foremost in their minds was the importance of adult education in helping adults to face the world with intelligent, mature behavior. We may dub them as “popularizers” since they were indeed popular with multitudes throughout this country and abroad; however the writer prefers to think of them first and foremost as “adult educators.”
NOTES

1 Harry Overstreet letter to Howard Wilson, March 26, 1949, Overstreet mss.II, Manuscripts Dept., Lilly Library, Indiana University.
3 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 9
6 Ibid.,
8 Ibid., 27.
9 Ibid., 32.
10 Ibid., 35.
11 Ibid., 37.
12 Ibid. 17.
13 Ibid. 38.
15 Ibid., pp. 284-285
17 Ibid.
21 Committee on College Reading, Good Reading (New York: The New American Library, 1954), 168.
24 Ibid.
26 Stubblefield, 156.
30 Van Der Haag, 528.
31 Ibid, 536.
33 Stubblefield, 156.
34 Ibid.
37 Ibid, 73.
39 Gustav Francis Beck, 438.
40 Ibid., 439
41 Robinson, 85.
44 Ibid.
45 Rosenberg, 3.
47 Ibid.