

The Senate Initiatives

THE MAIN THEME of Mitrinović's series of 'World Affairs' articles in *The New Age* written during the early 1920s had been the notion of the world and humanity as a developing organism moving towards the goal of a new commonwealth, a utopia of freedom and community he referred to as 'Universal Humanity'. This had become his dominant concern and it was to remain so for the remainder of his life. The New Britain Movement had been one of the vehicles through which he had attempted to communicate his vision to a wider audience than had been possible through the Adler Society. The main issue that concerned Mitrinović throughout this period was how to model a social order that would preserve the necessary synthesis between the values of individual freedom and liberty (so valued within the twentieth-century western world) and the value of community based upon the recognition of the interdependence between all that was one of the main insights of certain ancient cultures and belief systems of the East. How could one bring freedom-loving, self-seeking individuals to a consciousness of the part they had to play in the life of society as a whole, an awareness of their mutual dependence upon each other? What kind of social order would combine social equality with diversity, a developed sense of community with an awareness of individual uniqueness and freedom?

As we have seen, Mitrinović's model for such an ordering of social life lay in the natural organism. An organism such as the individual human being can be viewed as a single whole consisting of different parts. Each part can be characterised as performing a function, fulfilling a purpose, which contributes to the maintenance and well-being of the whole organism. Yet each part also functions

according to its own laws and principles, achieving its own ends in the process of serving the purposes of the more complex organism of which it is a constituent element.

Mitrinović and those who came under his tutelage would point to the three main 'systems' co-existing within the human organism and use this as a model for the ordering of collective life. There is the metabolic system by which nourishment is taken in to provide energy and waste is excreted, the respiratory and circulation system through which air is inhaled and energy distributed through the blood stream, and the nervous system which receives and interprets sensations from the outside environment and transmits impulses to action. All three systems permeate the whole body. There is no governing function. The body is only healthy when the major functions are all operating in proper balance. If one of the systems fails to function properly some or all of the others try to modify their own operation to try and restore the balance.

The Social State which was the focus of so much attention and discussion during the period of the New Britain Movement was an attempt to apply this kind of organic model to the social world. If one looked at society as if it were an organism, then individual human beings could be likened to single cells, whilst groups of individuals could be compared with the different organs performing different functions within the whole. Each individual and group thus had its own contribution to make towards the maintenance and well-being of the rest of society. Like the different organs in the body each would be autonomous and free to make that contribution in its own way, according to its own principles, fulfilling its own ends in the process, except insofar as their performance interfered with the functioning of other constituent elements of society.

The twin principles of devolution and federation which were at the core of New Britain's proposals for a re-ordering of society represented the expression of this idea of the organic social order in organisational terms. The principle of federation meant that all those with the same interest, performing the same function, should associate with each other and consult together; the principle of devolution meant that such groups should be self-managing with every decision being taken at the lowest possible level by those who would either have to implement it or would be affected by it. Similarly, the emphasis on the three-fold nature of the social state represented the application of the organic model to society. The

metabolic, circulatory and nervous system of the body could be viewed as the production, distribution and consumption systems of the organism. The metabolic system absorbs raw materials and produces energy, which is distributed around the body through the blood stream by the circulatory system and is eventually consumed in the activities stimulated by the nervous system. In the social organism these three major functions of production, distribution and consumption are performed by the economic, political and cultural systems respectively. Economics is concerned with the whole process of providing the material necessities and amenities of life. The realm of culture – including religion, science, the arts and education – is the ultimate consumer of products of the economic system. The proper concern of politics is with human relationships and in facilitating the distribution of the outputs of the economic system for the sake of the cultural realm. Each and every individual plays a part in each of these three spheres of society. Consequently any organic ordering of social life would need to take account of the fact that each individual has certain definite responsibilities and tasks in the realms of economics, culture and politics, and therefore people require the necessary power and authority to freely fulfil such functions to the best of their abilities.

In developing his vision of an organic social order Mitrinović was seeking to sketch out the guiding principles of the ideal society: a society made up of free and autonomous individuals where chaos is avoided not by the imposition of external force and central state coercion but by the feeling of unity between all as equal members of a 'common humanity', responsible to and for each other. The only feasible model for such a society was an organic one. An organism is not governed by any authority imposed from above. Each cell is 'free' to fulfil its own purpose as a function within the whole. There is no conflict between the 'self-fulfilment' of the individual cell and its function within the whole organism of which it is a part. Each cell is equal to those around it; there are no top or central cells which regulate the functioning of all the others.

It was this portrayal of the organic model that provided Mitrinović with his vision of society so organised that the twin values of collective unity and solidarity (community) and individual autonomy (freedom) could be achieved – a harmonious social order which would not be free of conflict but which, like the harmony in music, would be maintained so long as the tension between conflict-

ing notes was held in balance. In adumbrating such a vision Mitrinović, of course, was following in the line of earlier utopians, and like them he could be dismissed as the purveyor of unrealistic and misguided dreams. Apart from anything else there is a fundamental difference between a natural organism and society, especially with regard to the nature of their constituent 'cells'. The cell in the human body or any other natural organism lacks the essentially human characteristic of being able to interpret its own life and that around it in creatively symbolic terms. People are not programmed. They create their own activities according to their own interpretations of their own interests in the situations in which they find themselves. It is not 'naturally given' to human beings to act in pre-ordained fashion in ways that will further the general well-being of the collectivity of which they are a part. The idea that a group of random individuals could get together and immediately create the perfect society simply by each of them doing their own thing and being tolerant of those around them doing likewise is hopelessly naive. It is the rock upon which many utopian experiments have foundered. Somehow or other this group of people would have to agree to organise themselves functionally. Each would have to freely choose their function, and their choice be freely accepted by the others. Each would have to be completely satisfied with the functions chosen, foregoing any claim to impose their demands on others against their will.

The possibilities for malfunctioning and conflict are endless. The history of attempts to create utopian communities reveals the manner in which personal conflicts between individuals can undermine the project, whilst within this organic model there would inevitably be cases of people (cells) being envious of the functions of others; some functions would be more 'glamorous', more intrinsically rewarding, or more powerful than others. Some, out of dissatisfaction with their function or out of a feeling of inadequacy would refuse to play their part. Some would try to obstruct others in the performance of their function. Some would invest so much of their personality and sense of individual worth in a single function that they would be unable to cooperate satisfactorily in the functions of others. Moreover, the organic social order to which Mitrinović aspired could not be imposed on people by force or coercion. It could only exist on the basis of the free will and mutual cooperation of the participants.

Clearly, then, world change required self change, as the columns of *New Britain Weekly* had pronounced. To achieve an organic social order individuals would have to rise to a higher order of consciousness, to transcend the narrow confines of their individual consciousness. Such a level of consciousness would involve people living as much in and for the rest of humanity as they did in and for themselves. The belief in such a possibility could only be founded on a deep faith in the ultimate unity of humanity. As Polonius advised in *Hamlet*: 'to thine own self be true. And it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.' That is, if anyone expressed their true will and remained faithful to the innermost promptings of their soul, then their will would not prove incompatible in *the final analysis* with the reality of another person. As Weininger wrote: 'there is only one duty and only one morality. Man acts either morally or immorally, and if he is moral towards himself he is moral towards others.'¹

But how to bring about such a change of consciousness? How was such a transformation in the stance people adopted towards themselves and the rest of the world to be attained? Furthermore, even if an organic social order was created, even if the institutions of society were transformed in the ways advocated by New Britain, there would still be tensions and conflict between individuals and groups in society. How would these be resolved or kept in balance in the absence of a central state power to impose 'law and order' on society?

Clearly one could not wave a magic wand and thereby transform the consciousness of people at a stroke. Such a change could only take place over time. Moreover, it could not be imposed, it would have to take place as an organic process. In order for a plant to grow it is necessary to plant a seed and nurture the seedling. The full potentiality of the mature tree is contained within that seed, but it has to absorb material from the surrounding environment if it is ever to grow to full fruition. Likewise, to create an organic social order, a seed needed to be planted: a conscious human creation by a few individuals who carried within them the vision of a fully developed organic ordering of life. Such a vision might grow into a small exemplar of the new society, as they sought to develop the new consciousness and the human relationships necessary for its realisation amongst themselves. By living their

vision, by the power of their example, they could influence others – so the new order might emerge, organically.

In a natural organism there has to be some means of maintaining the necessary balance between all the different parts and functions. A similar function was required by the new social organism in the absence of a coercive state-power. To this function Mitrinović gave the name senate. The function of senate would be to possess a clear vision of the necessary functions in the social state and their proper relationship to one another, and to steer the various groups in society towards a genuine functional relationship through devolution and federation. The senate, through providing each group with an interpretation of its own significance in the context of the whole, would perform the necessary integrating function whereby the requisite balance between groups might be maintained by mutual agreement rather than force. The senators who performed this function would be found in all walks of life, holding the balance between all persons and functions throughout the new social order. In any association of persons at whatever level of purpose, there would be those who were committed to function as senators. The authority of such senators would not reside in their control of the means of violence or persuasion, but on the recognition by others of their impartiality and their ability to perform their integrating function.

According to Mitrinović senators would not constitute a new power group or elite network with their own special interests. They would not constitute some kind of central council of experts. Rather, senate would be an alliance of individuals who shared the ability to view particular human problems and conflicts from a perspective that embraced a consciousness of the needs of the social organism or of humanity itself as a whole, and who would refrain from taking sides in any dispute.

How, then, would senate operate? What methods and techniques would senators bring to bear to transform destructive conflict situations along constructive channels? Mitrinović depicted the senate method as that of Third Force. The first and second forces were the two principles underlying federation and devolution: the one being the tendency to preserve unity and stability, the second force being the tendency to affirm the autonomy of the parts of a whole. In any conflict between two parties or forces, the matter

can never be settled in any deep and enduring fashion by third parties supporting one side against the other. If one side suffers a reversal, the resulting sense of resentment can lead to an intensification of the struggle at some later date. Mitrinović further maintained that intervening in a dispute in order to arrange a compromise in which each side agrees to give up some of their demands in exchange for similar sacrifices by others can also lead only to a temporary peace, as both sides will have lost and both will look for ways of regaining what they have forfeited.

The approach of Third Force was not the 'either-or' of taking one side against another, but neither did it consist in locating the truth somewhere in between the two. Rather, the approach of Third Force involved the attempt to re-frame the conflict, in the sense of locating it within a wider context. In other words the Third Force approach does not attempt to solve a problem in the context in which it is immediately presented. It seeks to transform and widen the context of any conflict beyond the limits within which it is being considered, to a wider one within which the points of view of the conflicting parties can be seen as co-related rather than contradictory. Mitrinović characterised Third Force as 'above, between, and beyond the extremes and opposites of reality.' Drawing upon intuitive vision or a basic faith in the organic unity of humanity, even if that unity had yet to be consciously attained, Third Force practitioners would seek to bring about the required balance between the parties in the light of this potential wholeness, above and beyond the limits of the immediate situation in which the conflict occurred.

In this sense the central role of senators, at whatever level they sought to exercise their function, was to maintain and convey to others their consciousness of the ultimate organic wholeness of humanity. Equipped with such a vision and ideal, Mitrinović maintained it would be possible, through sincerely and fully embracing the point of view of all sides, to arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement on the most beneficial way conflicts over how different functions might be performed should be resolved. In addition senators would be able to reveal to others the major contradictions (such as the private ownership of the means of production) which were the root cause of so many conflicts, conflicts which were in fact merely symptoms of the disease in the body of the organic social order.

All this sounds extremely far-fetched, and it is certainly hard to portray without using words for which it is difficult to imagine any corresponding practice. It is hard to imagine how senate would function in anything other than a utopia, some yet-to-be-achieved ideal social order. It seems utter naive idealism to suggest that it might be possible to permeate social life at all levels with senators who, by their imaginative wisdom rather than by force or propaganda, would be able to facilitate the emergence of a kind of synthesis from the thesis and antithesis contained in disputes and conflicts – and to achieve this by conveying to others their vision of the ways in which all beings are functionally related to each other and have their purpose in the ultimate scheme of things.

Yet Mitrinović was not a simple and naive idealist. His management of the coup at Leamington revealed his grasp of ‘real-politik’, whilst people who knew him have borne witness that he saw the difficulties of creating the social state, the organic social order, far more fully and vividly than they themselves. That is why it is important to recall the various far-reaching changes in the structures of society that Mitrinović advocated at the same time as he was developing his ideas on the role of senate and third force. Personal change and institutional change were equally necessary in his scheme of change, neither was sufficient on its own. Once the major contradictions or dysfunctional diseases in the body of society had been transcended, when people no longer had to fear material want, economic exploitation or political oppression, when they could exert control over their own lives through the devolved system of decision-making in the various spheres of life – within such a framework the exercise of the senate function as the integrating presence starts to appear somewhat less fanciful.

In the 1930s, as now, these transformations in the social order were not on the immediately foreseeable agenda of change. This did not and does not mean that one should not work for such changes and prepare for them. From Mitrinović’s perspective, however pessimistic a conclusion one might arrive at after a cold intellectual analysis of the condition of the world, it remained vitally important that one should act and talk as if social transformation was just around the corner. If one’s ideals were ever to become real, then it was imperative to act as if they were ‘realistic’; not only in order to embody them in microcosm in the here-and-now but also

in order to galvanise other people into action to break the fetters of their taken-for-granted views of the world and its future.

It was to the training and preparation of a group of individuals for that far-off social order to which, it was hoped, they would help give birth that Mitrinović devoted most of his time and energy from 1935 until the outbreak of the Second World War. Indeed, it would seem that Mitrinović viewed the New Britain Movement as a recruiting exercise whereby possible senators might be discovered and drawn into the central group gathered around him in London. After the demise of the movement the amount of energy spent on public initiatives was substantially reduced. It was a period in which Mitrinović and those around him attempted to work out the personal and interpersonal disciplines and standards which would be necessary for the realisation of senate. As part of this process they also attempted to evolve the pattern of an organic social order within the group itself.

The members of this group numbered between 30 and 40, although the actual personnel changed over the years as people dropped out and new recruits were drawn in. They included close associates of Mitrinović such as Valerie Cooper, Winifred Gordon Fraser and Lilian Slade who had been involved in his life and his work for many years. There were also those like Watson Thomson and Rex Campbell who had been involved with the New Britain Movement right from the start. However, the bulk of those who shared a group life with Mitrinović and each other during the latter half of the 1930s were from a younger generation of idealistic men and women, many of them university graduates, who had become actively involved in New Britain as a political movement and had gradually become 'absorbed' by the central group at the heart of the movement. To begin with most of them were only dimly aware of the process of personal and group development which Mitrinović was to orchestrate for them, but such was the impression he made upon them that they were prepared to throw in their lot with him and accept his guidance.

One of those who became actively involved in the New Britain Movement, and who came under the 'spell' of Mitrinović was Alan Watts. In 1934 he had been active in the Bromley group of New Britain. He was later to emigrate to America where, as a leading western authority on Zen, he was to exert a significant influence

on the 1960s generation of young people who were themselves seeking new ways of relating to each other and the world around them in the ranks of what came to be known as the counter-culture. In the mid-1930s, however, it was Mitrinović who exerted an influence over Watts, as he was later to recall: ‘... the atmosphere of Mitrinović fascinated me – his humour, the power of his eyes and voice, his secretive and night-owl habits, his oracular way of writing (under the pseudonym of M. M. Cosmoi), and his exotic tastes in art and literature.’²

Another group member had become involved with New Britain while at university and eventually encountered Mitrinović on a visit to London. Interviewed many years later he could still recall the excitement of those early encounters: ‘All he said seemed both exciting and imaginative and also right and reasonable. I felt sure in my heart that I had found what for so many years I had been looking for and almost expecting.’ Such was his enthusiasm that after leaving university he decided against taking a job in order to work full time for the movement, planning to live for a year off his savings.

After that I had no idea what would happen. But during the early months of 1935 it became obvious that the political movement was dissolving away and that DM was even encouraging this. I was disappointed, because it was a political movement which I had joined and to which I felt I had dedicated my life.

However by that time DM had opened up to me such wide horizons of other sorts that I felt great confidence in him personally and in the rightness of what he wanted to do ...

Gradually all DM’s work with us came to be concentrated on the notion senate. He had undoubtedly been working on this notion with those closest to him, but there came a time of extending this working to a wider circle of people – in fact to any of those from the New Britain groups who were prepared to stay with him into the new phase. So what happened at that time was a narrowing and reduction of political activity towards social state and a widening and extension of that activity which DM saw as a necessary condition for making social state possible. I did not at first fully understand this, and only worked it out as time went on, but some of those who had worked with him before New Britain – in whom I had great confidence – saw it quite clearly.³

At the core of the various activities in which the group engaged was an irrevocable commitment they each made to the other, the personal alliance that they established between themselves – to share their lives together, that whatever might happen they were fundamentally ‘for’ each other. Arthur Peacock bore witness to the fact that personal alliance was more than an empty phrase to the people gathered around Mitrinović.

They practised what they preached. To the common pool they gave their possessions and shared one with the other. An irrevocable bond of friendship exists between them all. Seldom in my life have I come across a body of people so sincere and earnest.⁴

If all things were mutually interdependent, then each member was responsible for the spiritual, mental and material welfare of each other. If each individual was a part of the whole, a single cell in the body of humanity, then in giving to others one was also giving to oneself.

The sharing of oneself, however, also necessitated the exercise of the utmost honesty and frankness in one’s relationship with others. Truthfulness to oneself and to others was a necessary condition for establishing right relationships with others. But only by making an irrevocable commitment to each other could the tension and distress that could be caused by plain truth-speaking be withstood. It was only on such a basis that a real community of real individuals could be established. By being loyal and truthful to each other, they were also being loyal and true to themselves and to the whole of humanity of which they were a part. Moreover, only by establishing such relationships with each other could they start to approach an intuitive understanding of the organic relatedness of the whole of humanity. Lived experience, rather than mere acquaintance with theories and facts, was the only basis from which such an insight might be grasped. And the way to obtain that experience was to start in the ‘here-and-now’ with immediate colleagues and friends.

As with so many of his complex and fundamental notions, Mitrinović coined simple aphorisms and terms taken from other contexts to express the essence of his thoughts and ideas. Thus, the twin dimensions at the heart of the personal alliance that the group members formed with each other were referred to as ‘Barley’ (the establishment of genuinely warm and caring human relationships) and ‘Cactus’ (the telling to each other the oft-times

harsh and uncomfortable truth). 'Barley' stood for an almost religious devotion to absolute community and a commitment to create a 'human household' with others. 'Cactus' stood for radical individuality and self-affirmation, with the rigorous dedication to truth of a scientist. Taken to their extremes, these two dimensions were incompatible and mutually destructive. Therefore a third dimension was needed to mediate between them. Mitrinović called this 'Hyacinth': the artistic sensitivity and capacity to hold the two opposites in some kind of dynamic tension or balance.

In similar vein, whilst the members entered into what they considered to be a lifetime's commitment to each other with the appropriate seriousness, the acceptance of a new member into the community or 'household' could be marked by a kind of theatrical symbolism which contained elements of comic relief. In his autobiography Alan Watts came close to breaking the bond of secrecy which those who entered into personal alliance vowed to keep. He was invited round to Mitrinović's apartment in Bloomsbury Street:

I found him sitting at the head of his bed like a plump Buddha, clad in a loose robe, smoking a fat Churchman's Number One cigarette, with a glass of straight Johnny Walker on the table beside him. After some amiable preliminaries in which he apologized for being 'a bit whiskey', he said, 'Alan Watts, I love you but I do not like you. Nevertheless, I am going to invite you to join an eternal and secret fellowship which will watch you, guard you, and keep track of you wherever you may go in the world. We call it the Wild Woodbines, named after the cheapest cigarette in England. Every member is to carry a package, and the sign of recognition is to produce your package and say, 'Have one of mine'. Now if you are inclined to enter into this masonry you must confer with the Jehovah which is in your heart of hearts, and answer me yes or no.' After a suitable pause, in which I realized how much I admired Mitrinović and how many close friends I had in his following, I said, 'Yes, I will' ... he produced a tiny package of Woodbines saying, 'Have one of mine!' And, as I accepted, all the other members in the room rushed up and embraced me.⁵

The ceremony and the Woodbine, like the marriage service and the ring, were symbolic of a change in the circumstances of life, a rite of passage. The secrecy stemmed from the fact that it was a life-long commitment to each other that they undertook, and it was a commitment to each other as unique individuals and members of the human family. As such it belonged to the private and personal

realm of life rather than the public and political, and should be treated with the appropriate seriousness and confidentiality. It was to be lived, not talked about. As Watson Thomson observed, reflecting on his life with the group:

Genuine community is the association of human beings – not because they belong to the same tribe or church or party, but simply because they are human. Yet it must be personal, a personal concern about particulars, about the unique beings each of us are.⁶

In making a commitment, they were making it to the whole person, warts and all. If they were to develop the ability to wholeheartedly embrace the standpoints of others, then it was a pointless practice just to share their life and concerns with those who felt, thought and acted just like them. Ultimately, as senators, they would have the task of speaking to other people on behalf of ‘humanity as a whole’. It was therefore crucial that they should be exposed to and share their lives with as wide a range of human types as possible – rogues and villains as well as saints and angels. I was told of one particular member of the group who had been actively involved in the organisation of the New Britain Movement who had proved himself to be almost completely amoral. To his contemporaries he was the archetypal male rogue – friendly, bright, not to be trusted with women, and continually letting down the other members of the group. So much so that they were eventually ready to reject him. At such times Mitrinović reminded them of the depth and the reality of their contract with each other – and with the culprit. ‘His badness is the world’s badness’, he would say. ‘That darkness we have to turn into the light. And how? Why, by swallowing it! Take it! Swallow it! Eat it up! It’s good for the stomach. It will make your stomachs hardier for the next meal and the next!’⁷

Whilst at such times it was the Barley element that was to the fore, this in its turn provided the context within which the painful spikes of the Cactus might be exposed. The understanding and acceptance of each other made it possible for them to make explicit the sharpest of differences. This was what took place in ‘group work’, when the harshest truth-speaking about oneself and about others was practised. It could be extremely painful for the ‘victim,’ as David Davies experienced on more than one occasion.

The technique was simple. Six or seven of us would meet for a session of three or four hours, generally late at night, for one’s unconscious was supposed to be less remote in the deep night. One of the group

would start, perhaps, by criticising something I had done – a speech I had made, or the way I had behaved on some particular occasion. Against that criticism I would defend myself. By this time we were fairly launched, and gradually were out in deep waters. A member of the group would then say, in language that lacked nothing of brutality and candour, exactly what he, more frequently she (which made it worse!), thought of me. I was an unprincipled liar; or a shallow, pretentious poseur; a hollow, insincere tub-thumper; an impossibly vain, egotistic trumpet; a twister. And much else.

‘What about yourself?’ I generally answered. Adept at the art of stringing words together I did not ask myself what I really thought. I merely replied out of the anger and resentment aroused in me by the ‘truth-speaking’. Many of the things said to me were true, and I knew they were true. But the spirit in which they were said was rarely truthful. Frequently those group meetings ended in electric storms. After they closed, we all made our way to a cafe, generally Lyon’s Corner House, because it was open all night, for a meal, and the atmosphere cooled down. We were good friends once more.⁸

Another participant recalled going home at night ‘after very soul-searing sessions, very difficult ones – a lot of us were strained to the point where we wondered whether we could go on with it. All of us must have gone back feeling that. I remember I would go back and I would have to work out for myself what it was all in aid of.’

The worst fate that could befall a group member was when they were made the target of a bout of ‘truth-speaking’ from Mitrinović himself. According to Davies:

He had a way of penetrating one’s last defences, of peeling off, not only one’s clothes, but one’s skin, and flaying one alive.

Just as his masterly flattery made for ecstasy, so his equally masterly criticism made for torment ... The victim was helpless. He was battered (physically) into stupidity. But – amazing man! – he had a marvellous way of dissipating the hatred. At the end of the session (four, five, six hours), he would whisk me off in a taxi to a restaurant, and then explain that he was subjecting me to all this process, because I was important, because I was strong. He left the weaklings alone, he said; but I was destined to play a great part, therefore I must be disciplined, purified, hardened. Whom the Master loveth ‘He also chasteneth’. He rubbed salve into my wounds and soothed my vanity.⁹

One of the ways in which members coped with the physical and psychic strain of earning a living during the day, then spending the

evening until the early hours in some group activity or other – maybe being ‘grouped’ in the process – was to go on an ‘outing’ as it was called. Watson Thomson ran away regularly, taking himself off into the countryside to escape the tensions and the occasional torments of the intense group life they were leading. Invariably, once he was away he suffered heavy guilt feelings about deserting his ‘family’, who always welcomed him back with open arms.

There were, however, other sources of relief and outings of a more conventional kind. Mitrinović loved the theatre, and especially the variety theatre, the music hall. Groups would make regular visits to places like the Windmill Theatre where he particularly enjoyed the humour of comedians such as Sid Field and ‘Monsieur’ Eddie Gray. He showed his appreciation of his favourite performers by presenting them with elegant walking canes, of which he had quite a number. The story is told of one occasion when Eddie Gray came on stage, spotted Mitrinović and his friends in their usual seats in the front stalls, and suggested to the rest of the audience that they might like to leave for a while as ‘there’s a friend there and I want to have a chat.’ In later years the comedian Richard Hearne, who I remember from when I was a child playing the part of someone called ‘Mr Pastry’ on children’s television, recalled that: ‘It was always a great joy when one was appearing on the stage performing to an audience in which he was present. He was a great theatre-goer with a wonderful sense of humour. I shall always see his beaming face with his happy party of friends beside him.’¹⁰

He loved jokes, especially vulgar ones. He also had a healthy appreciation of good food. In the Bloomsbury and Soho areas of London that were his main haunts there were restaurants of almost every nationality under the sun. Group members would join him in visiting them, eating the food and drinking the wine of each country in turn. Alan Watts was later to describe the image that Mitrinović presented to the world on such occasions:

He was a stout Slavonic man with a completely shaved head, black wing-like eyebrows, and entrancing eyes. On the street he wore extremely formal clothes – an exalted bowler hat (a sort of cross between a bowler and top hat like the one used by Winston Churchill), cutaway morning coat, and striped trousers. He carried a walking stick with an amber handle, always paid his bills with crisp white five-pound notes, which in those days looked like legal documents, and smoked very fat Virginia cigarettes. He also drank formidable amounts of

whiskey ... He used to take us to dinner in the Hungarian, Greek and Russian restaurants of Soho, order six different dishes, and mix them all up.¹¹

Watts failed to mention that after such evenings out Mitrinović had been known to take his shoes and socks off and walk home barefoot.

Despite such apparent eccentricities and exhibitions of spontaneity, like the time he did a handstand in the corridor of the First Avenue Hotel after a formal dinner to launch one of the quarterlies, all those who grew to know him were sure that he never did anything without purpose – and there was usually more than a single purpose. Thus, dining out not only brought friends together and helped relieve the intensity of the group sessions, there was another and deeper reason. The function of senators was to represent the interests of the whole of humanity to those with whom they came into contact. They needed to be able to identify themselves with the whole of mankind. Consequently an important aspect of their training along this path to the ‘universalisation’ of the individual lay in obtaining an appreciation of different cultures, of the full range of world views held by different nations, races and other groupings in the world. Learning to appreciate the food and wine of different lands, along with their folk tales and music, was part of this process.

If senators were to be world citizens, then it was also important that they could speak the different languages of the world. Group members were directed to study a range of languages – the choice frequently suggested by Mitrinović himself. One young follower was sent off to visit Margaret Murray, the Egyptologist, to discover how to set about learning how to read the hieroglyphs. He directed Lilian Slade to study Spanish. Another group member, keen to study Indian philosophy, was encouraged to study Sanskrit. He himself was particularly interested in languages and spoke quite a number. He had taught himself sufficient Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese and Sanskrit to read the religious and philosophical texts in the original. Group members were also expected to study and become familiar with the different belief systems that commanded allegiance throughout the world. There were regular study sessions on philosophy and comparative religions, from Hegel and Marx through to the Vedanta, Buddhism and the Kabbala. He would

provide his own interpretations of the thought and belief systems of the world, both ancient and modern, East and West – his ‘pupils’ taking notes while he talked.

The ‘pupils’ themselves were also expected to make presentations on the different themes and books which they had covered as part of their course of study. All this took place in the context of the wider educational process that was an integral part of the group life. As one associate of Mitrinović later recalled:

As a young person at that time (the 1930s to the outbreak of war) I received in common with my companions a great widening of my general cultural horizons – in music, in art and in literature.

We heard wonderful music from DM’s collection of classical records, including the Serbian Folk songs, and we learned to respect the great composers. I remember that Beethoven’s music was only played on special occasions as he was a composer we learned to regard with extra respect ...

Books on art, with great reproductions of great paintings were available to us, and sometimes given to us to keep as our own.

We were taken to art exhibitions, also to museums, and our sense of discrimination was encouraged. DM entered into (or took up) the Surrealist movement in art and as Valerie Cooper entertained many of the painters in her studio for DM we met them also. At that time we were not only meeting political figures but painters, writers, and thinkers of the time.

In general I think that all of us would agree that our general cultural education was greatly increased and widened. We were made to form our own judgments on all we saw, heard or read.¹²

The main feature of the evenings spent together in Bloomsbury Street was the amount of talk that went on. Arthur Peacock witnessed a number of sessions.

... he would sit arguing hour after hour with his followers. The technique was strange, sometimes bewildering, and I think not very effective. All day, and sometimes until the early hours of the morning, Mitrinović would sit discussing matters. Talk would go from subject to subject. Politics and economics, philosophy and the occult, psychology came into the picture, too ...

The same topics would come up for discussion again and again. Blueprints would be drawn up and he hurried forward their completion as if the end of the world was at hand, and these blueprints alone would save it.

At times one came away feeling completely exhausted. But there was something intriguing about the man and most of us returned to participate once more.¹³

The New Britain movement was once characterised as ‘a bottomless abyss into which documents, plans and programmes disappeared for ever and ever.’¹⁴ A similar kind of observation might have been made about the speed with which sub-groups were formed, constitutions drawn up, then disbanded, reformed and revised within the group life around Mitrinović during the latter half of the 1930s.¹⁵ It occurred to at least one participant during this period that, as in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, they were all characters in Mitrinović’s dream – albeit a ‘dream’ which at least some of his intimates understood. It was the attempt to create in microcosm an organic social order in which the perennial conflict between individuality and community could be transcended, with each person fulfilling their own needs through the performance of specific functions which also met the requirements of the wider community.

No one person in real life could fulfil their potential for growth and self-expression through the performance of a single function – so it followed that the structure of an organic social order would be as complex as the individuals from which it was constituted. In attempting to create the prototype of such a structure Mitrinović was playing for real – hence the sense of urgency to which Peacock referred. The view Mitrinović impressed on those around him was that their experiments were crucial to the future of humanity. Dealing with the organisational problems as they occurred in their group life was necessary not only as a means of developing possible blueprints for the future, but also for the sake of the personal development of the individuals around him, over whom he exerted such a powerful influence. Performing the function of senate to the group as a whole, a considerable portion of Mitrinović’s time was devoted to trying to get the right relationship between personalities and functions; trying to create the contexts in which the members might begin to learn how senate should act in different situations, and start to acquire the qualities and aptitudes required of the potential senator.

The role of senators was to intervene at all levels of human life in the interests of humanity as a whole. If humanity is considered

as an organic whole with individuals as cells of this organism, then there lies within every individual the potentiality to become aware of the whole of human nature within themselves, to become a universal individual. The person who is most aware of all the different elements within their own nature is the person who is most aware of all the different aspects of human nature within themselves. To the extent that such people are not only aware of these different elements but are also able to control and choose which aspect they will express at any time, then those people are best able to get on with a wide range of other people, able to embrace and understand their perspectives and points of view, and hence able to fulfil the integrative function of senate. It followed then that the training to develop such a capacity required the creation of as many different contexts as possible within which potential senators would have to relate to many different types of people, relating to them not as abstract performers of functions but as complete and complex individuals with their own foibles and failings. As one of those who was involved in this process observed, it was too easy just to relate with those people that you liked: 'what was far more difficult was to see every other member of the group as an individual, to see their specialities – all the ways that each one of us could work with one another. These were the different contexts he was trying to create so that we all knew in what different ways we could meet together and integrate.'

Mitrinović was continually proposing new and different constitutions and group formations within the wider group, endlessly rearranging the personnel and the functions for which they were responsible. As in life, nothing was permanent. One informant advised that 'it would take many pages – or even many books – to describe all the changes we went through and all the different notions, mythologies and constitutions which he suggested.' Another described the constant shuffling and reshuffling of groups as possessing 'the complexity of a problem in higher mathematics but the kinetic intensity of a dervish dance', remarking that 'if stability comes from inertia and if inertia is the enemy of consciousness, we should have become the most conscious group of people in the western world.'

One of the more stable group formations within the wider circle was the division between the sexes. Each group met apart from the other, had its own constitution and its own allocation of functions

within the group. For instance, there would be a woman's senate and a man's senate. As with all groupings, the sexes each had their different function in Mitrinović's scheme of things, and consequently formed a 'natural' basis for group formation. Like many before and since, Mitrinović considered women to be essentially a force for the preservation of life, a unifying and reconciling influence. But distorted under the pressures of modern life the average woman had become callous, believing that change was impossible, whilst the ordinary male was distinguished by the aggressive pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others. Modern civilisation was a male civilisation. The male had become selfish, materialistic, uncreative, totally instrumental in his approach to life – always doing something for the sake of something else, without any sense of goodness or the glory of human values. New principles and guidelines were needed to stop the downward path. Such an initiative must come from women. Through joining together in mutual confidence they might recover and reassert their earnestness and commitment to the preservation of life. They could then provide the necessary support and guidance for men who might then reclaim their manhood and independence through acting to recreate the world. It was because of this sexual division of responsibility and labour that the men in the group were referred to as 'auxiliaries' – instruments of the feminine initiative. The real power lay with women; without their support and guidance men were directionless and helpless. Ultimately, of course, the goal was to become truly individual and human, transcending the characterological differences between the sexes – for women to seek truth as actively as men, and for men to care for goodness more than success. Mitrinović wrote:

There is a mystery in becoming truly human – in repenting of being a woman, of being English, of being a certain type. The true entity to be attained is the Ego which has no attributes. Then let men treat women as their sisters, and let women treat men as brothers. And let each make a pact about the child, so that both together live for the future.

The new male should be good; he should care more for failure and goodness than for success and truth. Would this not be a novelty? A man who would dare to fail; to go on failing like Christ in the World? And the new Woman: is there a woman who is not essentially a liar, does not Woman express enigma instead of truth? The new Woman should care for truth. Of course men must not cease to be true and

women good. Both must attain a higher level of truth than ever before. The new female should have as straightforward a desire to know and speak truth as a male. Such individuated females and males could start the new civilisation.¹⁶

The basic formation of male and female groups was cross-cut by a sub-division along age lines, whilst another relatively stable basis for allocation to groups was on the basis of one's 'colour' and personality. Mitrinović was well-versed in the field of psychology and psycho-analysis. He was, of course, especially familiar with the ideas of Alfred Adler. Apart from Jung and Freud he also derived considerable insight from lesser-known figures such as the American Trigant Burrow, author of *The Social Basis of Consciousness*, from whose work much of the theory behind the practice of group work was derived; Fritz Künkel, who gave a lecture, introduced by Mitrinović, at 115 Gower Street on August 14th 1938; and Georg Groddeck, author of *The Book of the It* and a warm friend of Mitrinović.¹⁷ In addition to his firm grasp of the theoretical area, people who came into contact with Mitrinović were impressed, if not shaken, by his profound psychological insight. Time and again people remarked that they sensed that he could see right into, and through, the deepest recesses of their being.

One diagnosis of character which Mitrinović introduced to group members was based on what he considered to be an individual's sense of time. Thus, 'Whities' were people who experienced time as continuous and who therefore possessed a strong sense of the past. Consequently they were less volatile, less mercurial than others because they were aware of the long evolutionary future ahead. They thus kept a more even keel than their fellows, less swayed by their emotions. 'Blackies,' by contrast, lived in the present, experiencing time as a series of discrete moments. They were not so concerned with what had happened in the past nor what might happen tomorrow; the immediate moment was what mattered. According to Mitrinović such people were always swayed by their emotions, and were always running away from them. 'Monsters' were those who were always looking to the future, always working towards some future goal. The purpose of such an analysis was to help the different *types* appreciate each other better, to enable group members to be more tolerant of the annoying habits of others – seeing them not merely as personal idiosyncracies but as 'whitie', 'blackie', or 'monster' characteristics.

Apart from such 'natural' groups as those based on sex, age and colour, there were more temporary or transient groups formed and re-formed. Frequently the focus of the group would be upon some public activity or other. Although the New Britain movement had ceased to exist in 1935 the area of public endeavour had not been completely abandoned. After 1936 a number of the group members were closely involved with the House of Industry League.¹⁸ Moreover, whilst the *Eleventh Hour* had ceased publication in the summer of 1935, a continuous stream of leaflets, pamphlets and news-sheets continued to be issued. Many of these were published in the name of the New Europe Group which continued to organise lectures, luncheons and discussions. Occasionally these activities would reach fever pitch, as at the time of the Munich Crisis when war seemed imminent. In the two-week period following September 20th 1938, the New Europe Group was responsible for fly-posting thousands of copies of sixteen separate posters throughout London. In addition some 20,000 leaflets were printed and distributed and scores of telegrams despatched to political leaders and opinion-makers throughout Europe. The call was for an American alliance with Britain and the establishment of a federation of Europe with Prague as its capital.¹⁹ The longest telegram was to Rudolph Hess. He did not reply. The Archbishop of York, Dr. Temple, conceded diplomatically that 'in the long run the Federation of Europe is the only solution of the problem', but Robert Dell telegraphed back his opinion that the proposal was 'inopportune and quite impracticable.'²⁰

In addition to the groups primarily concerned with external tasks, there were groups formed for a myriad of other purposes – for study; for dealing with visitors, potential patrons and newcomers. There were also on occasions attempts to create a model of the three-fold state within the group as a whole. One particular 'constitution' had three groups of people, all men, concerned with economics, culture and politics. They had their own particular names: 'Potentat', which was concerned with economic and financial affairs of the group; 'Orientat', which was concerned with cultural matters; and 'Administrat', representing politics, which was made up of those members who were active in outside endeavours such as the New Europe Group and had links with other organisations. Each group sent delegates to the others. It sounds like some enormous role-play situation, with the participants playing

out the various parts allotted to them, perhaps as a rehearsal for larger-scale experiments that might one day have to be mounted. But those taking part felt that they were involved in something that was very real. They were a community of people and the well-being of the group as a whole required certain functions to be performed – funds to be raised, people to be contacted, pamphlets to be written, lectures to be arranged, posters to be pasted, meeting rooms to be booked, interpersonal conflicts to be faced up to and managed.

Into such ‘constitutional’ groupings Mitrinović often placed discordant people together, deliberately trying to create a situation within which people had to make a serious effort to get on and work cooperatively together. However, particular functions were frequently performed by members of certain of the more basic ‘natural’ groups. Politics – going about meeting people, maintaining contact with outside social and political organisations – was frequently the function of Blackies and men, and most of all the Blackie men. The care of home affairs – looking after the financial concerns of the group and of the individual members, caring for the well-being of the members – was more the function of Whities and women.

As in any community there was conflict. One source of interpersonal tension was the creation of a nucleus of people to perform the senate function vis-à-vis the wider group. As one of them reflected some decades later:

Though the persons who took upon themselves this central function could be changed from time to time, there were in general some whom he judged from their whole general attitude to be more suitable for the role of senate than others. This implied no personal superiority, but only a greater aptitude for the function of senate. This differentiation within senate was characterised by DM as the distinction between senate and folk. Some persons were always in the role of folk, and DM tried to impress upon them that this was just as honourable and worthy as being senate. However it was very difficult to convince those who were not chosen to act as a ‘senate within senate’ that they were not being consigned to an inferior status, and those who were chosen for this role were often happier and more energetic in their action than those who were not. So none of us who took this work seriously could have any illusions about the difficulty of establishing a senate who were neither considered nor considered themselves to be personally superior to those performing other functions. However

the mere facing of this problem fairly and squarely was in itself a small first step towards overcoming it.²¹

Whilst many of the participants in the wider group life might have had only the vaguest of notions of what 'Universal Humanity' actually entailed, one thing was very clear – they were trying to create a human household, a family of people held together not by ties of blood and kinship but by a personal commitment to each other. Much of the group work, consequently, was devoted to working out the 'rules' and gaining experience in the dynamics of such a household.

He (DM) might talk about creating Human Household. ... You created, as it were, an invisible entity. These various invisible entities had different names. If it was Human Household you talked around that subject. You created a reality between you, so to speak. ... We spoke in a way imagining that we are now a Human Household. ... How do we proceed? ... So that as a result of it you felt that you had sort of built it in imagination and were able to reproduce it to someone else who knows nothing. You then had the experience. It was a reality that you had created. It was a composite reality.

You might have to write up the points that you had agreed on, so that you had some formulation. ... Then you would have to include someone else. Then it was taken for granted that it would be part of your attitude with anyone you met. ... It wasn't just a good idea. If you had created it and had agreed together that this was the right thing, the right way to be, then you would do it, you would be it.²²

In addition to such group formations there appeared to be a pattern which could be likened to concentric circles, with Mitrinović of course at the centre, and members graded according to their degree of intimacy with the more esoteric aspects of his thought and practice. On the periphery were those 'important personages' who, it was believed, could be of value to the wider aims of the group in some way or another. Perhaps they had access to the media or to circles which were not normally accessible to Mitrinović or his followers. Perhaps they had funds which could be tapped, or ideas and intellects which made them valuable contacts. They included people who had made major contributions in one way or another to Mitrinović's publications and with whom he shared certain areas of common ground, such as Major-General Fuller, Professor Soddy, S. G. Hobson, Ben Tillett, Charles Purdom and the like. They were not exposed to the possible

torments of group sessions – they were like visiting dignitaries and treated as such.

Within this outer circle of acquaintances, collaborators and patrons there were other circles or levels. Just as within the New Britain Movement there had been a central group at the heart, the membership of which was not widely known amongst the rank and file and to which access was only obtained by personal invitation, so within the group around Mitrinović there were ‘secret’ circles. It was a rule of group life that what transpired in one group belonged only to those who were in that group and was not to be divulged to anyone else. The link between the members of a particular circle might be, for instance, the possession of some particular insight or interpretation of an aspect of ancient mythology, gnostic scripture, or western philosophy introduced to them by Mitrinović. However, any sense of self-importance that ‘inners’ might enjoy rarely lasted long. A newcomer might, within a matter of days, be invited to join the innermost circle. Contrariwise, someone who had been very close to Mitrinović might find themselves excluded for a time. Nothing was ever allowed to remain unchanged for long. Nothing was ever final. The secrecy and the secret circles were always temporary and provisional. After a time he always revealed the ‘secrets’ to a wider audience and thus broke up the circles, only to create new ones.

Was it all a game with a Serbian magus deciding the rules as he went along to satisfy his own whims and pleasure? It can certainly be interpreted as such. Alan Watts, for example, likened Mitrinović to Gurdjieff as ‘a great magician and “rascal-guru”’, claiming that his own Buddhist and Theosophical friends were of the opinion that Mitrinović was a black magician.²³ Those who remained close to Mitrinović until the end of his life, however, had other explanations. As one of those who participated in this merry-go-round of ‘secret’ circles and groups expressed it:

This sounds rather like a game, but a game and a serious exercise have this in common, that they are both carried on with self-imposed and freely accepted rules. There was always a real content and meaning to each such ‘secret’ and those who heard it had its significance impressed more strongly on them by the observance of secrecy. Furthermore such secrets never stayed secret for long and Mitrinović never pretended that he was thereby imparting some mysterious revelation or ‘occult’ knowledge. It is in the sense of training in

discrimination that secrecy as Mitrinović used it should be understood and not as a love of the esoteric, of the occult or of mystery, nor as a conspiratorial passion and a love of secret societies.²⁴

‘Training in discrimination’, it was explained to me, meant the development of the proper use of one’s power of critical judgement. One form of discrimination resides in the awareness that we cannot communicate on the same level with everyone. People have different aptitudes and possess different levels of understanding and awareness in different areas. There is no point in divulging certain things to people who cannot understand them or are likely to misunderstand for one reason or another – images of those consigned to the category of ‘folk’ come into my mind. The most devoted of Mitrinović’s followers chose to interpret his use of secrecy and secret circles as a means of training those around him to a greater sense of discrimination and conscious control over what they divulged to whom in different circumstances.

It is possible to attribute a similar serious intent to other aspects of the group life which appeared, on the surface, to have a certain game-like quality. For example, there was the institution of ‘Thomson’s Ticket’. One of the ‘gate-keepers’ charged with issuing or withholding the ‘tickets’ explained the process:

There were three of us – Watson Thomson, myself and another woman. At one time or other we were charged with interviewing singly everybody in a certain group. It was interesting because we had to work in accord and we had to discover whether there was any artificiality – we didn’t speak about this as our aim – but talking to that person we could see whether they were really speaking from the very centres of themselves or just ‘mentalising’ or just trying to be clever. If they tried to be clever and artificial, they weren’t given the ticket. If they threw all that out and really spoke genuinely, they had what we called the ‘Thomson Ticket’. DM used this device to try and get to the centre, the core, of people – because there was a lot of jockeying for position and being clever and all that sort of thing ...

And when you got your ticket? That really meant nothing. All it meant was that for that occasion, at that moment, you had your ticket. But you could lose it the next day – nothing was ever permanent. One had to be got out of the thing that most people tried to do, which was to do the things that they thought would please DM and other people rather than what was really them.²⁵

It was not too surprising that people tried to please Mitrinović rather than themselves, given the impression he made upon those with whom he came into contact. Apart from anything else there was the sheer scale of his visionary imagination, coupled with the depth and range of his knowledge and learning. Charles Purdom, writing after the war, described it thus:

His mind is encyclopaedic. There is nothing in which he is not interested; his reading is comprehensive in half a dozen languages, and includes art, philosophy, philology, theology, history, anthropology, archaeology, physics, biology, psychology, politics, science and economics. A student of Sanskrit, in recent years he has been learning Chinese. He is passionately devoted to music. He knows as much about modern as about ancient pictures and sculptures ...²⁶

As one young associate explained: 'You really felt you were in the presence of someone who was so immeasurably above anything that you knew.'

Watson Thomson remarked that 'the important difference between oneself and DM was one of scale and dimension.'²⁷ This applied not only to his vision, his learning and his imagination, but also to his temper. If you were not awed by his mind, then there was a good chance you would be cowed by his storms of fury. On more than one occasion Thomson was the victim of one of Mitrinović's rages. Once a group of people had gathered together at 55 Gower Street to discuss the organisation and constitution of one of the four movements that emerged, on paper at least, from the ashes of the New Britain Movement. Mitrinović broke up the proceedings by kicking over a coffee table, laden with glasses, and haranguing the shocked people for half an hour on their passivity and lack of independent initiative. Another time a formal dinner had been arranged by Mitrinović in honour of some visiting Yugoslavs. One of the after-dinner speeches was delivered by Watson Thomson who had drunk a little too much wine, was ill at ease, and his speech was an abject failure. After the dinner a number retired to the Regents Park home of Rex Campbell. Thomson went upstairs to sleep, only to be woken by shouting and heavy footsteps on the stairs. It was Mitrinović, who cursed everything about him, what his mother had made of him and what he had become, for despoiling the evening 'with your miserable bit of unconsciousness'. The confrontation was concluded by Mitrinović smashing

his walking cane, decorated with ivory and silver, down onto the banister with such a force that the stick splintered into pieces.

Yet, despite the fury which he would vent, there was occasionally a glimpse that he was never totally immersed in his passion. At the end of one explosion when he directed his wrath at one of the women in the group, he held out his wrist to one of those sitting next to him after the woman had left the room. The pulse was apparently perfectly calm and steady. He rarely if ever did anything without there being some purpose to it – even losing his temper. According to one of his associates: ‘He would get tremendously cross with a person who was afraid of anger. Somebody who wasn’t particularly afraid of anger, it wouldn’t have had any effect on them.’ Very often his anger was directed against those who, he claimed, were too deferential towards him. ‘Be equal with me’, he would plead. He bemoaned the dependence of group members upon him, referring to the miserable throne upon which they had elevated him which prevented him from becoming a mere comrade amongst comrades, one amongst equals. Only by facing up to each other, and him, in full honesty and frankness, including losing one’s temper, could they really learn to know and love each other as individuals. He was invariably disappointed, but such a powerful and ‘larger-than-life’ character such as he should not have been surprised.

Indeed, there was little that was predictable about Mitrinović. To the extent that he had a routine, it involved waking up in the late morning, afternoons spent browsing in his favourite bookshops, wandering round art galleries. As often as not one or two people would come round to see him of an afternoon, when the discussion and talk could easily go on into the small hours of the morning without a break. As the evening progressed they would be joined by others who had been at work during the day. Eventually people would begin to drift back to their respective homes. Then came the time for relaxation. He would retire to his own rooms with a small group of his most intimate friends and associates. This was the time for being what he called ‘small friends’ – for sitting back and relaxing, listening to music or just chatting. If things had gone badly during the day for some reason – if he felt that someone had let him or themselves down, if some scheme had failed to come to fruition – then it was also the time when those closest to

him caught a glimpse of the self-doubt that he would suffer, the occasional periods of resignation.

But if he experienced doubt and dismay himself, he was no less moved by the sufferings of others. If someone arrived during an evening who was in some kind of distress he would send everyone away, cancel everything that was planned for the evening, in order to cope with the personal problem. When S. G. Hobson died in poverty, it was Mitrinović who raised the bulk of the money to pay for the funeral. In his autobiography Charles Purdom recalled the support and comfort he derived from Mitrinović on the death of his son Philip. David Davies observed that Mitrinović 'would take infinite pains with individuals and allowed nothing to put him off', remembering the time when Watson Thomson had returned home to Edinburgh suffering from a bout of malaria and Mitrinović insisted on travelling north to visit his sick friend.²⁸ Even Davies, who had his disagreements with him, admitted that 'there was not a trace of malice in him or any bitterness. Never have I met anybody more free of either.'²⁹ For Davies also, 'Mitrinović was a man of amazing generosity. He had no sense of *meum* and *tuum*. For property and money (its symbol) he had utter contempt.'³⁰ Indeed, Mitrinović had spent the money of others with apparent profligacy during the New Britain period, but he was generous in helping other old friends and colleagues from the New Britain days and before who relied on him for 'loans' and subsidies during times of financial embarrassment.

How does one reconcile such personal generosity and kindness with the merciless assaults that he would regularly launch against one or other of those around him? So much about Mitrinović seems paradoxical. For example, he was always telling people what to do, often with a ferocity and insistence which was hard to resist – they should leave him, they should read this book, they should pursue that course of study, and so on. But within a short time-period he would give forth with mutually incompatible pieces of advice or instruction. He could get furiously angry with someone for doing exactly as he suggested, whilst he would often praise people for acting contrary to his advice. He would impart to those around him some thought or interpretation of an event or book as if it was the final and absolute truth on a particular matter, only to advocate a totally contradictory insight and analysis with equal force and

conviction the next night, or even on the same night to a different group. The result of such apparently unstable and certainly unpredictable behaviour was that there was never any question of trying to earn his praise or avoid his wrath, because one could never be sure of how to do so. One was therefore forced, in a way, to exercise one's own freedom rather than rest secure under his direction and will.

In this sense, it was explained to me by some of those most closely associated with Mitrinović, the process of initiation that he orchestrated closely resembled that of Zen. In Zen the person being initiated is expected to see the whole wide panorama before them, to feel strongly all the reasons for and against any action, and then to act freely in that situation 'in a positive way in which the opposites are perfectly harmonized', transcending the antithesis between 'either-or,' 'yes' and 'no'.³¹ This was the notion which Mitrinović expressed as 'Above, between and beyond the extremes and opposites of reality.' According to Suzuki: 'the Zen method generally consists in putting one in a dilemma, out of which one must contrive to escape, not through logic indeed, but through a mind of higher order.'³² Thus, the initiate might be placed in an impossible situation in which everything they did was wrong. They then had to act. If the action revealed sufficient imagination, intelligence and common sense, if it flowed out of their innermost being, it was accepted by the master.³³

To talk of initiation and to compare Mitrinović's method with that of a Zen master would seem to imply that the group life was, in essence, an 'esoteric school' run by a powerful master figure concerned with imparting to the pupils a higher order of knowledge and awareness – something akin to Gurdjieff's Château du Prieuré at Fontainebleau, or the anthroposophists who studied under Steiner. And certainly there were many similarities, and this was the view held by Philip Mairet. However, for the most committed of Mitrinović's followers and co-workers such a view would be erroneous. True, the group life did involve a process of initiation in the sense of introducing people to new spheres of knowledge and new ways of comprehending the world. But this initiation was directed towards wider social change rather than the mere introduction of higher realms of consciousness to the students. He was concerned that those around him should develop a sound basis for

the changes in human action and social relationships which he saw as an indispensable condition for bringing about the changes on the larger scale of social life which he deemed necessary. From this perspective the contrast with Gurdjieff, who had little or no direct social concern, is particularly strong.

It might also be argued that he was deeply concerned with the personal relationships between the individuals around him and between them and him, in a way that Steiner and Gurdjieff were not. This is not to deny that for a number of those around him he remained the 'master', the fount of all wisdom, the hallowed source of all true knowledge. But many of those who managed to stay the course, who succeeded in surviving the pace and intensity of the public and private group activities of the pre-war years, did begin to grasp what he was driving at. According to one such survivor:

DM foreswore the position of being the sole initiator and involved us in a process of mutual initiation. It was an initiation, which we were working out as we practised it, towards that most difficult human accomplishment: how to be a more normal human being, neither superior nor inferior but equal to other individuals in society – and particularly how to reconcile this equality with the acceptance of natural differences of quality, mind, character, and abilities ...³⁴

They began to realise that the flow of influence was not all one way, even if they rarely felt adequately equipped to contradict and question him openly. 'All silence is resistance' was one of his favourite aphorisms. They perceived his sensitivity to the reactions of others. If he sought to develop some particular idea or suggest a specific course of action which commanded less than total affirmation from those present, he would more often than not take this as valid criticism and change his approach or drop the notion completely.

It wasn't a situation in which he was the person with total wisdom. ... He was learning and working things out with us in a very definite sense. Now, he may have been more adept at the working out than we were, but we felt it as a co-working out.

I have known him throw out a notion into some small group of people, and because those people didn't react and accept it, that notion was done away with. We were a sort of sounding board. Unless we cooperated – and not just superficially, it was no use just saying 'Oh yes, I agree' – he would see through that and so would the people round about you.³⁴

It was as if Mitrinović was the conductor and they the musicians. Like members of an orchestra, they showed their dissent or disagreement by not playing their part with full commitment rather than by refusing to play at all. But in addition to being the conductor, he was also the composer who wrote the score. As with any great artist, the players would not object to a note or a harmony while the composition was in progress. They would wait until they saw the significance of the whole composition before commenting, knowing that a creative genius can achieve the most marvellous results by the most extraordinary means. In other words, one might not understand all that was going on, one might be unable to comprehend the paradoxes and contradictions in his character and behaviour, but people stayed the course because they had sufficient belief in the person at the centre and commitment to the ultimate goal. They were prepared to trust that whatever happened, it was for a purpose and that it had its place in the overall design.

Everyone was aware and felt that ultimately, whatever happened, DM was for you. There wasn't a single person in the room there who didn't feel absolutely that in the end, whatever your problems, he would move heaven and earth to see you through. That was never doubted by anyone. Those who left him left him because the heat was too great. They didn't leave him because they doubted his good will towards them. Then, in addition to that, he was someone who you knew was far more in control of every single action than anyone, certainly, that I have ever met. He knew exactly what he was doing. As he himself once said, 'I don't do anything unless there are three different ideas on hand at the same time.'³⁵

They felt they were pioneers, forging a path towards a new society created by new individuals. The path demanded changes in the institutional structures of society but also required the creation of new, 'universal' individuals: people with a real community of feeling for whom 'we' and 'ours' was as significant as 'I' and 'mine', but who also retained their individuality, who were able to be equal with everyone and yet recognise and acknowledge the manifold differences between people. They wanted 'heaven on earth', with people fulfilling their potential as God-like creators of this new reality. They had the model for such a new age, they were training to become the new individuals it required, and they had an exemplar before them in the shape of their guide and 'co-equal' Mitrinović.

In practical terms they failed. The war came, the group was dispersed, and that stage of the initiative came to an end, as they

must have known it would some day. But if people never aspire to reach their dreams, that is all they will ever remain – distant images beyond the bounds of reality. The only way to translate one's 'utopian visions' into reality is to try, and to be brave enough to risk failure. Even if they did fail to reach their goal, they did not lose. Those who were involved caught a glimpse of the 'world-as-it-might-be'. For them, 'something happened which was new in the realm of human experience.'³⁶

NOTES

1. Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, London: Heinemann, n.d., p. 175.
2. Alan Watts, *In My Own Way*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1972, p. 110.
3. Personal communication with author.
4. Peacock, pp. 88-9.
5. Watts, p. 123.
6. Thomson, p. 9.
7. Unpublished manuscript, archives of New Atlantis Foundation. At this point it might be relevant to note that certain aspects of Mitrinović's intimate life were kept hidden from me during the time I was researching and writing the first edition of this book. I subsequently learned that one of his followers had destroyed those personal notes and other materials within the New Atlantis archives that they considered 'too private' to be divulged. It is pointless to speculate on the more intimate relationships between Mitrinović and his followers, but certainly the tone in Valerie Cooper's memoirs and the manner in which she was described to me as his 'companion' would indicate that they were lovers. I have no idea whether he had other such relationships.
8. Davies, pp. 141-2.
9. Davies, pp. 142-3.
10. Telegram to commemorative meeting, January 29th 1953. A telegram from Eddie Gray to the same meeting described Mitrinović as 'kind and always had a smile for everyone.'
11. Watts, p. 109.
12. Personal communication to author.
13. Peacock, p. 88.
14. Quoted in Davies, p. 131.
15. Mitrinović once remarked that a psychoanalyst would say he was someone with a neurosis about constitutions.
16. Notes of one of Mitrinović's talks. New Atlantis Foundation archives.

17. Mitrinović once remarked that Groddeck was the only European of his generation who could be understood by a Chinaman! According to Edwin Muir Mitrinović used to say of Bertrand Russell, 'When he die, the angels they find nothing to eat on his bones.' Edwin Muir, p. 245.
18. See Chapter 6 above.
19. The idea of an Atlantic Alliance had first been raised in the pages of *New Britain* in 1933. By the spring of 1939 the New Europe Group was calling for an Atlantic Alliance of Britain, the British Commonwealth, the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union.
20. Letter to Ben Tillet, joint President of New Europe Group, in archives of New Atlantis Foundation.
21. Personal communication to author.
22. Personal communication to author.
23. Watts, p. 109.
24. Personal communication to author.
25. Personal communication to author.
26. Purdom, p. 267.
27. Thomson, p. 14.
28. Davies, p. 144.
29. Davies, p. 144
30. Davies, p. 118.
31. D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, London: Rider, 1969, p.69.
32. Suzuki, p. 69
33. Suzuki, p. 68.
34. Personal communication to author.
35. Personal communication to author.
36. Personal communication to author.