

## "Vital Signs"

If the opposite of dreams in "The Pass" was deadly despair, hope's opposite in "Vital Signs" (*Moving Pictures*, 1981) is deadening conformity. Here we find some of the same themes we considered in an earlier chapter ("The Mass Production Zone," Chapter II). This song speaks eloquently and evocatively of the ferment of youth, the time when one decides what one is to be and what life is to mean. In this period everyone witnesses and experiences the truth articulated by the Existentialist philosopher, novelist, and playwright Jean Paul Sartre, that with human beings, "existence precedes essence." That is, we are unlike animals whose nature is entirely defined for them by heredity and environment. Though we, too, are to a great degree defined by these factors, there is one great difference. We have *freedom*.

There are many more options open to us in the environment which not only nature but men and women before us have created. With us, the shape of our bodies, the number of our senses, and other such biological "givens" are not the half of it. True, these features in some measure serve to draw the parameters of the game board of life, but much is left to us. There is no true "human nature" as such, that would accurately describe all human beings. No, each is an individual and can "authenticate" his or her own existence through the actions one chooses to perform. You might say that "you are what you do," not what you have inherited from chromosomes and genes.

In the period of youth, then, it is given us to scan the menu of possibilities and to decide what would be right for us. Especially in our culture, this is no easy process. Since there are so many options for careers, even for identities (a good thing in itself), many find themselves paralyzed before the bewildering range of alternatives, stricken by the shock of "overchoice."

Picture once more Dustin Hoffman's character in *The Graduate*: he stands passively at his own graduation party, a silent sounding board for all the unwanted advice of adults, each with his own set of self-imposed blinders, each with his own agenda to push. Each and all tell him what he would be wise to do with his life. Eventually he rejects all these attempted manipulations, but that is only half the Graduate's problem. The real difficulty is that he stands motionless before the great galaxy of possibilities without a clue as to how to decide which to choose. He is just like the donkey in the fable who starved to death while standing in front of two tasty-looking haystacks—because