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NO SIMPLE STATEMENT

AN Englishman who has lived in the United States for close to twenty years, a writer and editor (on the staff of *Harper's*), offers minor criticism of a tendency in American life—minor because he doesn't say enough about a matter of major importance. In *Harper's* for July he remarks the replacement of literature with politics in magazines and other publications which once gave ample space to the works of serious writers. The fact of this decline of interest in literature is evident enough. The contributors used to write about books; now they write about candidates. The *Harper's* editor, Tom Bethell, notes the transformation in his own magazine. If, he says, you leaf through issues of a few decades ago, you find that "Politics, broadly defined, has replaced literature in the table of contents." He has a theory or two to explain what has happened, but a brief passage, left undeveloped, seems the key to the change. It comes in a definition of terms:

> I do not wish to put too narrow an interpretation on the words *literary* and *political*. They refer to domains far broader than the symbolism of Melville on the one hand or the Iowa caucuses on the other. Perhaps the best way to describe the crucial distinction that the two words make is to say that the literary point of view considers people individually, one by one, whereas the political point of view considers them in blocs, collectively (the farmers, the aged, blacks, Reaganites).

Practical politics, in other words, is a matter of figuring out what people will do, given the right stimulus, and then attempting to provide it. Such political planning is of necessity reductive of humanity. The technique is manipulative. A principle or two may be invoked, but there is no mention of anything that requires actual thought. The objective in politics is power, and good and evil are redefined by the politician in terms of their leverage in getting followers and votes. Meanwhile, the skills of the candidates in such pursuits make the subject-matter for today's writers. Mr. Bethell's opening paragraph shows how much they write:

> Every morning I am confronted by twenty-odd newspaper and magazine articles about the Presidential race, articles that for the most part seem to have been written for an audience of campaign directors and pollsters. I am invited to study "premises" with Jack Germond, "options" with Joseph Kraft, "tentative lessons of 1980" with Jules Witcover, local color with Mary McGrory, and, in one issue of *The New Yorker*, not just one but several speeches delivered by Sen. Edward Kennedy in various Iowa townships. A friend of mine who came here from England not long ago, and now finds himself professionally obliged to wade through daily acres of this arcane, finally concluded in bafflement that "politics is the American pyramids."

What these writers are celebrating is the practice of an art exactly opposite to the art of teaching. As Plato noted long ago, persuasive rhetoric is a form of flattery which founds its appeal on belief and ingrained prejudice, leading to conclusions planned by the speaker. Teaching, on the other hand, seeks to expose prejudice and test belief. No politician can afford to indulge in teaching save on rare and momentous occasions when the public and the personal interest happen obviously to coincide, and when, by a remarkable collaboration of history, the events themselves press people to think.

In what sort of "thinking" does politics instruct? Since success in politics depends upon majorities, the thinking is of necessity "average" or low-grade. This is not to suggest that political ideas are by definition untrue, but that they are for the most part "believed in" without the critical investigation that imparts actual validity. The art of politics is the engineering of consent. Its tools are the slogan, the poster, the headline, and the image. There is now hardly any difference between political enterprise and the advertising

business. We know what advertising does to people's minds—especially the minds of the young, whose chief cultural resource has become the TV commercials—and politics seems in most ways parallel in influence.

Well, there is another way of thinking about politics, and we are not without people who do it, but the *level* of political activity in a mass society renders them largely ineffectual except in gatherings such as town meetings and through small-circulation journals more devoted to social philosophy than to politics per se. One purpose of our present discussion is to show that an increase in thinking of this sort would be made at least possible if the quality magazines—and at least some of the newspapers—of our time would begin to restore the consideration of literature to their pages.

We have two quotations which illustrate the thinking that might result. One is from John Beer's *Blake's Humanism* (Manchester University Press, 1968), in which the writer summarizes the food for thought to be obtained from reading William Blake:

> The outbreak of the French Revolution and the death of his brother had constituted a double revelation, each modifying the other. Because of what he had learned from his brother, he would never allow his enthusiasm for liberty to draw him into commitment to any particular political movement. Liberty remained his ideal: but true freedom could not be brought about by political means. Only when men learned to exercise their own genius and to honour the genius that was in others would they find true freedom—and then political freedom would follow automatically.
>
> Blake's developed thought is thus of twofold application. He had evolved a political interpretation of human history and a view of the personal problems of his contemporaries both of which follow a similar pattern. Organized groups of men behave like individual human beings, since they suffer from the same lack of vision on a larger scale.

Note the parallel here with Tom Bethell's observation, that literature considers people individually, whereas the political point of view considers them in blocs. A further parallel may be suggested: with the scientist's need to regard all "atoms" of an element as indistinguishable from one another, making possible the laws (at least at the Newtonian level) of physics. The politics of the mass society tends to reduce humans to "atoms," in order to anticipate and govern their behavior. It follows that excessive preoccupation with politics amounts to a submission to this tendency. We know how it works out in practice. *All* Iranians are guilty of holding American citizens as hostages in the embassy in Teheran—even Iranian students who have been here for years, including a schoolgirl who must not be allowed to take part in commencement exercises because of that collective guilt. Power comes from uniformity in thinking, and people trained in uniformity do things like that.

Our second quotation is from Lewis Mumford's *Works and Days:*

> When Europe went to war, I was eighteen, and I believed in "The Revolution." Living in a world choked with injustice and poverty and class strife, I looked forward to an uprising on the part of the downtrodden, who would overthrow the master class and bring about a regime of equality and brotherhood. In the subsequent years I learned the difference between a mass uprising and the prolonged spiritual travail and creation of a more organic transformation; politically, I am no longer naive enough to believe that any militant uprising can change the face of the world. But I have never been a Liberal, nor do I subscribe to the notion that justice and liberty are best achieved in homeopathic doses. If I cannot call myself a revolutionist, it is not because the current programs for change seem to me to go too far: the reason is because they are superficial and do not go far enough.

We are conducting a somewhat difficult argument. The point is that people who open themselves to the influence of literature have at least the opportunity to consider the issues of their time with less naïveté, less wishful thinking, less emotional vulnerability—and with habits of mind which question and look for underlying relationships. For an example of how such a mind proceeds, we turn to the work of the late F. R.

Leavis, called "England's most distinguished literary critic," in particular his *Anna Karenina and Other Essays* (Pantheon, 1967), drawing on the title essay. It is especially appropriate to quote Dr. Leavis since he was a severe critic of C. P. Snow's *The Two Cultures,* which he condemned as a rejection of the literary tradition of the West while advocating uncritical commitment to technological change.

Dr. Leavis' essay on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is a complex piece of work, as much a critique of D. H. Lawrence as an appreciation of Tolstoy's genius. He begins with a quotation from Lawrence, for whose artistry he has great respect. Lawrence had declared: "The novel is a great discovery: far greater than Galileo's telescope or somebody else's wireless. The novel is the highest form of human expression so far attained." Leavis comments:

> It is a large claim, but Lawrence made it with full intention; he was not talking loosely. He was prepared to say that by the "highest form of human expression" he meant the highest form of thought, the thought in question being, for him, thought about the nature, the meaning, and the essential problems of human life. . . . Thought, to come at all near truth and adequacy, must engage the whole man, and relate in a valid way—such a way, that is, as precludes and defeats the distorting effects of abstraction and selection (both inevitable)—all the diverse elements of experience.
>
> The organization of Anna Karenina expresses an intense devotion of this kind to the pursuit of truth, and Lawrence might have had the book in front of him when he wrote: "The novel is the highest form of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered."

These far-reaching propositions by a modern novelist (and a leading critic) are not demonstrable. They are rather invitations to reflections about what we care about, what we know, and how our understanding of human life is increased. In short, Lawrence's conclusions, unlike the conclusions of a scientific experiment, are not transferable. Even if you go through the corresponding labors—read and write as Lawrence did—you will not arrive at Lawrence's conclusions, but your own. They may of course be *like* Lawrence's conclusions—which Leavis found useful to repeat—but they will not be the same. This is the distinguishing or defining characteristic of humanist knowledge. It always has the individuality of its possessor. It may resonate and inspire, but it cannot be transferred.

Yet there are complications. The tricks of rhetoric can be taught. The wiles of seduction, which treat people as things and convert them into things, are transferable. So literature has its two sides—the authentic literature of the Tolstoys, Dostoevskys, Blakes, and some others, and the pseudo-literature now overflowing in the marketplaces where books and magazines are merchandised like candy and pills.

Curiously, according to the scientific theory of knowledge, only transferable knowledge is really knowledge. This is the meaning of public truth. Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. If a man finds out a law of nature, and puts it into a formula, the formula must stand or fall exactly as it is stated, or in exactly equivalent terms, after being tested by other inquirers. Science depends upon the elimination of ambiguity.

But literature lives on ambiguity, on the chords and beat-notes which express "the highest form of subtle interrelatedness that man has discovered." Literature is nourished by the endless metaphors of life, and seeks to generate a world where men will dare "to live," as Blake envisioned, "by their own inward genius and to delight in nature as a fountain of living forms"—a life that "would remove at one stroke both the tensions between individual men and women and the sterile struggles for power in larger group." Blake's Fourfold Vision is of the essence of the content of literature. And writers, it must be said, work at every level of the gamut from heartless mechanistic reasoning to the all-embracing vision which sees high and far yet knows the ways of every step below.

Anna Karenina is the story of a beautiful and sensitive woman who is married to an older man she finds vain and tiresome. She leaves him to live with a dashing young guardsman, seeking fulfillment, which she obtains at the level of their common passion, but in the end can find no relief from despair. The question asked by Dr. Leavis is why their love is not enough. Lawrence, in his account of *Anna Karenina*, declares that they fail because of a fear of social disapproval. Leavis regards this judgment as a blindness in Lawrence.

> Why aren't Vronsky and Anna happy in Italy? Why don't they settle down to their sense of a solved problem? They have no money troubles, and plenty of friends, and, if happiness eludes them, the explanation is *not* Mrs. Grundy or Society, at any rate in the simple way that Lawrence suggests. . . . The spontaneity and depth of Vronsky's and Anna's passion for one another may be admirable, but passion—love—can't itself, though going with estimable qualities in both parties, make a permanent relation. Vronsky, having given up his career and his ambition for love, has his love, but is very soon felt to give out (and it's marvellous how the great novelist's art conveys this) a vibration of restlessness and dissatisfaction.

In another place Leavis says:

> It is astonishing that so marvellously perceptive a critic as Lawrence could simplify in that way, with so distorting an effect. What the novel makes obvious is that, though they might live for a little in "the pride of their passion," they couldn't settle down to live *on* it, it makes plain that to live on it was in the nature of things impossible: to reduce the adverse conditions that defeated them to cowardice is to refuse to take what, with all the force of specificity and subtle truth to life, the novel actually gives. Anna, we are made to see, can't but feel (we are considering here an instance of the profound exploration of moral feeling enacted in the book) that, though Karenin is insufferable, she has done wrong.

The delicacies of Leavis' comment reveal the genius of Tolstoy:

> It's all very well for Lawrence to talk of thumbing one's nose at society—that is what he says Vronsky should have done. *Anna Karenina* compels us to recognize how much less simple things are than Lawrence suggests. The book, in its preoccupation with the way—the ways—in which the moral sense is socially conditioned, leaves us for upshot nothing like a simple conclusion. We have in the treatment of this theme too the tentative, questing spirit. There is a good deal in the book that we can unhesitatingly take for ironic commentary on the way in which moral feeling tends to be "social" in the pejorative sense; that is, to express not any individual's moral perception and judgment, but a social climate—to be a product of a kind of flank-rubbing. But on the other hand there is no encouragement to think of real moral judgment (and I have in mind Tolstoy's normative concern) as that of the isolated individual. It is necessarily individual, yes; but not merely individual. That, however, is no simple conclusion—which is what *Anna Karenina*, in its range and subtlety, makes so poignantly clear to us. A study of human nature is a study of social human nature, and the psychologist, sociologist, and social historian aren't in it compared with the great novelists.

Toward the end of this essay Leavis says:

> My summary has, as of course any summary of theme and significance in *Anna Karenina* must have, an effect of grossness from which one shrinks. The active creative presentment is infinitely subtle, and comes as the upshot of an immense deal of immediately relevant drama and suggestion in the foregoing mass of the book. . . . The greatness of *Anna Karenina* lies in the degree to which, along with its depth, it justifies the clear suggestion it conveys of a representative comprehensiveness. The creative writer's way of arriving at and presenting general truths about life is that which Tolstoy exemplifies with such resource, such potency, and on such a scale, and there is none to replace or rival it. Only a work of art can say with validity and force, as *Anna Karenina* does, "This is life."

Earlier Leavis pointed out the need of the artist to overcome "the distorting effects of abstraction and selection" in order to achieve this comprehensiveness. The artist is able to do this because he works out of a wholeness within himself. What then is the peculiar virtue of the novel?

It is the drama of life reproduced within the finite dimensions of a single instance. It is the story of a woman or a man, so garbed in circumstances familiar to us that we are able to identify with its protagonists. The novel is the

modern form taken by mythic meanings, as the great novelists demonstrate again and again, enabling Leavis to say at the end of his essay: "Anna Karenina, in its human centrality, gives us modern man; Tolstoy's essential problems, moral and spiritual, are ours."

We all of us have our social and political life to live, but if we allow ourselves to suppose that the issues of existence are composed of nothing else, we shall have more and more of the cultural impoverishment we now see on every hand.

Another virtue of the novel is that it gives relief from the moral pressures of self-consciousness, with which we are especially afflicted these days. A great story embodies truth without fanfare or announcement. The "message," so to say, must be deciphered by each reader for himself. Indeed, the message ought not to be an overt intention of the artist, but something to be discovered in the authenticity of his work. Leavis has a good paragraph on this:

> "In a novel," writes Lawrence, "everything is relative to everything else, if that novel is art at all. There may be didactic bits, but they aren't the novel. . . . There you have the greatness of the novel itself. It won't let you tell didactic lies and put them over." What Tolstoy has to guard against is the intensity of his need for an "answer." For the concern for significance that is the principle of life in *Anna Karenina* is a deep spontaneous *lived* question, or quest. The temptation in wait for Tolstoy is to relax the tension, which, in being that of his integrity, is the vital tension of his art, by reducing the "question" into one that *can* be answered—or, rather, one to which a seemingly satisfying answer strongly solicits him; that is, to simplify the challenge life actually is for him and deny the complexity of his total knowledge and need. . . . The essential mode of the book carries with it the implication that there *could* be no simple statement of a real problem, or of any "answer" worth having. It is the very antithesis of a didactic mode.

Literature keeps alive this temper of mind. It is the art of self-correction practiced for the common good.

REVIEW
A SAD DECLINE

THE shade of Thomas Jefferson—if shades can read books—would be made utterly miserable by Mark Kramer's *Three Farms* (Atlantic & Little, Brown, 1979, $12.95), a book which tells what is happening to American agriculture, and what is likely to happen in the future. The author, himself a part-time New England farmer, soon generates in the reader confidence in his judgment and accuracy and his capacity to supply a reliable account of the way food is produced in the United States. He inspects and reports on the operation of three farms—a dairy farm in Massachusetts, a hog farm in Iowa, and a diversified agribusiness of 300,000 acres in California. They are all having a hard time, although for somewhat different reasons. Underlying their problems, however, is the ruthless trend to bigness in America, not only in agriculture but in everything else. Today the "successful" farmer must now know not only how to grow food; he must also have a thorough grasp of marketing, banking, and tax laws. Understanding of soils and weather, animal husbandry, and the craft of farming are still necessary, but far from sufficient. Farmers must now be managers and businessmen, simply in order to survive.

This is not a "cause" book, but it is a book that people devoted to causes need to read. The writer strives for objectivity, achieves it, and indulges no passion on developments that are angrily condemned by others. He has obvious sympathy for the human beings active on the three farms. They are hard-working, likeable people who know farming and cooperate with the inevitable. Their human qualities, skills and decencies provide most of the enjoyment in this book. The way they cope with the imperatives of technology and with the resulting economic patterns which now dominate their lives shows that "Yankee ingenuity" is by no means all gone. Yet from time to time Mark Kramer interrupts his careful and friendly reporting with brief asides that express his uneasiness. The comment is measured. Toward the end of the chapter on Joe and Mary Jane Weisshaar, who raise hogs in Iowa, he says:

> . . . technological advances have forced Joe to trade independence for participation in a market economy so complexly integrated that he is increasingly forced to specialize, to become an element in a countrywide, statewide, even nationwide production line that by its mere existence determines how his next dollar must be spent and what chores he will do in the next working day.
>
> If laborsaving technology and the world of big business have removed from Mary Jane the possibility of filling an urgent on-farm position, they threaten to do the same for Joe. More and more of his farming time is taken in managing costly inputs. Unlike farmers, managers are made, not born. They are interchangeable. They substitute regularity for wit, usual procedure for adventurousness, dutifulness for competitiveness, and obedience to policy for independence. They replace skill with system and accept corporate goals in place of goals that express personal spirit. In short, what farmers do, and what managers can't do by definition, is exercise craft.
>
> Loss of craft in farming is serious, not just to farmers but to the nation. It is the step before loss of pride, loss of personal ethics in trade, loss of stewardship of the land, loss of concern for quality of product. The loss reverberates all the way down the food supply chain. It can be felt at McDonald's, and in the aisles of supermarkets. It is part of a grander loss yet, the dying of a system of people making money doing things well. Supplanting the old system is a new one with slots for people to do what is prescribed. If farm women face a world that is sexist, farm people in general also face a world that is increasingly anti-individualist. If women count for little, so do we all, and the fights that Joe and Mary Jane in particular face are struggles against the same corporate and technological forces that trouble us all.

The other side of the picture is needed for understanding what kind of book this is:

> This is my fondest memory of Iowa: Joe drives a red tractor across a green hill, painting the ground with the tankload of brown pig manure he draws behind him. He is far across a ravine and up a steep slope; his tractor makes only a blurry whispering sound, like the purr of a pleased cat. The children Weisshaar, Jeanie, Al, and even Julie, who almost

> feels too old for such things, cry out in boisterous shrieks of delight. They are behind the house, on a platform high up in a tree. They fly through the air, one after another, dangling by their arms from a trapeze that rolls on a pulley down a long wire cable to a pile of mattresses fifty yards away. They shout me up the tree, thrust the trapeze into my hands, and wait patiently while I take measure of my fading youth.

Two of the farms Mark Kramer describes are family farms, while the third, the 300,000 California acres of Tejon Agricultural Partners, put together to attract investors looking for a tax shelter, he calls a "farmerless farm." There are some real farmers working for TAP, but they don't seem able to stay there. Knowing what ought to be done, and when, they can't stand farming "by committee." The operations of this enormous aggregate are carefully planned, but things go wrong a lot of the time simply from the sheer size of what is attempted. After reading this chapter you have a clear understanding of why more and more tomatoes are oblong, thick-skinned, and tasteless. Accountants and banks make more and more of the decisions, and the real farmers quit Tejon to work for smaller enterprises where their good sense will have authority.

A sample of the problems of bigness is the enormous tractors with four-wheel-drive:

> Angelo Mazzei, the engineer who once ran TAP's maintenance shop, said, "We tried two-hundred-seventy-five-horsepower rigs and some experimental machines about twice as large. The big ones did a little more work, but the wheels slipped so much they wore out tires so fast they didn't pay. They tied up capital, too—when they were down, we were out of a whole lot of work. And they tended to compact the soil even more than the two-seventy-fives."
>
> Once a farm is of a size to use the largest equipment that can be drawn by the largest viable tractor, the next step to increasing farm size is to have two of these sets of largest tractor and largest equipment to go with it. And once a farmer gets much beyond two or three blocs of this nature, he is so busy with organizational chores of managing personnel, allocating work and capital, marketing, hiring, and firing that he is no longer driving one of the machines. It is at this point that field efficiencies begin to decrease.

Even the managers of farms of this size seem to agree that they have become far too big and the author concludes that motives other than really efficient farming are behind the increasing bigness. He learned that the banks are more eager to finance the very big ones. "It's wrong," one manager explained, "but its a fact of life here—financing." And the president of the Tejon operation in an earlier corporate phase wouldn't say anything except: "If you were a limited partner, how'd you like to hear that your farm was over the maximum level of efficient production?"

Another aside by the author:

> Our agricultural future is the vector of many wild and few controllable forces in the world of economics, foreign policy, population, and technology. Americans do not seem eager to legislate farm size, in spite of the obvious relationship between how big local growers are and the nature of the resulting community milieu. We suffer severe inhibitions against interfering with the growth of entrepreneurs' equity, even in the name of greater social utility, and that attitude is not likely to alter soon.

The "hero of Mr. Kramer's book is Lee Totman, the Massachusetts dairy farmer who has adopted all the technological improvements for producing milk, using them to keep his costs down and his production high. He also knows how to obtain better milk and was named Massachusetts Farmer of the Year in 1977. But Lee's father, Raymond Totman, is also a hero, proving an inexhaustible source of information for the book, having lived through the many changes affecting dairy farming in New England. "I am," the author says, "most of all indebted to the late Raymond Totman, a farmer's farmer and a poet's poet, whose chiding but affectionate counsel improved my aim throughout the period of researching and writing. How I wish he might have seen the book in print!"

A particular virtue of *Three Farms* is the author's alternation between vivid portraiture of

human beings at work on the land and the grinding economic processes they confront. The background of the story of the New England dairy is briefly given:

> Unlike Lee Totman, most Yankee farmers do farm widely scattered holdings—simply because in the rugged terrain of Yankeedom, there are few places outside the Connecticut River valley where there are many acres of tillable ground of a piece. With the coming of each technological improvement that increases the size of the herd a farmer can carry, New England farmers become still less able to compete with farmers in western New York state, or in Wisconsin, where large fields near the barn are more common, and where climate and geography permit grain to be grown and combined on the farm, rather than purchased. The industrialization of agriculture favors Wisconsin.
>
> As a result, about a third of New England farmland has gone out of production since 1960. The human dimension of this loss is particularly ugly. The most traditional farmers find themselves increasingly unable to cope with the demands of modern production. All the while thinking badly of themselves, they are forced to auction off stock and equipment and find what work they can.

From East to West, this is the story of American agriculture. The flatter the country, the bigger the operations. Petroleum, not farmer's craft, makes our food. But the petroleum won't last, and maybe, after a painful interlude, craft will come into its own again.

COMMENTARY
GANDHI'S COUNSEL

THE discussion (in Frontiers) of size and human scale in economic enterprise and political organization gives importance to the question: Is "bigness" some sort of sin of which highly intelligent entrepreneurs are guilty, or is it simply a mistake in which practically all of us have participated?

The fact is that the great majority of the American people have sought to develop bigger and better undertakings for long generations. Only recently have these enterprises been recognized as "immoral" in effect and impractical in operation. And even if this realization becomes widespread, we shall still have to cope with the structures and momentum of bigness for at least a generation, if not longer, until common sense joins with ethical perception to support the development of a society with institutions in human scale.

Gandhi began his campaign in this direction with publication in 1909 of his *Hind Swaraj*, a book which incorporates the seed ideas of many of the programs for change now advocated by dozens of (new) economists, agriculturalists, and reformers. And he wrote in *Harijan* in 1939:

> You cannot build non-violence on a factory civilization, but it can be built on self-contained villages. . . . Rural economy as I have conceived it, eschews exploitation altogether. You have, therefore, to be rural-minded before you can be non-violent. . . . The end to be sought is human happiness combined with full mental and moral growth. . . . This end can be achieved under decentralization. Centralization as a system is inconsistent with non-violent structure of society.

He also sought a more equal distribution of wealth. A year later he wrote in *Harijan:*

> How is this to be brought about? Non-violently? Or should the wealthy be dispossessed of their possessions? To do this we would naturally have to resort to violence. This violent action cannot benefit society. Society will be poorer, for it will lose the gifts of a man who knows how to accumulate wealth. Therefore the non-violent way is evidently superior. The rich man will be left in possession of his wealth, of which he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal needs and will act as a trustee for the remainder to be used for the society.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

ON ENGLISH AND SPEECHES

WE have always assumed that the continuous (and ongoing, in the sense of getting worse) vulgarization of the English language should be blamed on the newspapers and the advertising business. If circulation is the only thing that counts, then everything you say must be at the level of mass intelligence, which isn't very high. Reporters have some excuse—their editors won't stand for copy that would call for the actual exercise of intelligence by the reader—but the disdain of advertising writers for what used to be regarded as good English is notorious, and deliberate. Of course, copywriters, too, have their instructions.

If, however, you do a little reading on this subject, you soon realize that the list of offenders should be extended to include various others, from schoolteachers (or the people who give schoolteachers their instructions) all the way up to Presidents. In short, we are all guilty, more or less. This is a comfortable conclusion, since, as Dwight Macdonald once pointed out, "If everyone is guilty, no one is guilty." One can go on only by saying that guilt in offenses of this sort is always a matter of degree.

An aggressive text which blames the schoolteachers and their academic overlords is *Less than Words Can Say* (Little, Brown, 1979), by Richard Mitchell, who is, we learn from the jacket, a seasoned campaigner in the cause of plain English. He teaches at Glassboro State College, where he edits the *Underground Grammarian.* A paragraph makes his position clear:

> Not many years ago, it was a popular sport to collect and publish silly mistakes by schoolchildren in their compositions. Many books of these so-called boners were printed for the delectation of grownups who laughed and chuckled. "Heh heh, ain't they cute." Sometimes venturesome publishers went even further and printed collections of idiocies from the notes that schoolchildren brought from home. These were usually pathetic examples from barely literate people, but we chuckled and laughed some more. Now, like desperate drillers looking for new pockets of gas, we publish collections of the pomposities and malapropisms of politicians and bureaucrats. Again we chuckle and laugh. We don't find them quite as cute as those cunning kids, but we still laugh. It makes us feel superior. And because we feel superior we forgive; and we're willing to believe that a member of the city council, say, or a senator, shouldn't be judged too harshly merely by the inanity of his words. We'll still re-elect him. After all, anybody can make a mistake. We make this mistake because it does not occur to us that there is no other way to judge the work of a mind except through its words, and we pay attention only long enough to be amused. In fact, however, those silly little mistakes always mean something important.

The purpose of Mitchell's book is to show why and how they are important. One reviewer said he is on a "cantankerous crusade," and the section on "Black English" will show why. He begins by pointing out that the academic approval of Black English is justified by the claim that it helps Black youngsters to have a "Positive Self-Image":

> Black English is even safer than Positive Self-Image, for it doesn't have to be taught at all, merely applauded, and the teachers who applaud it automatically earn merit as teachers of Positive Self-Image and even of Intercultural Understanding. Accordingly, Black English, a concept just about as sensible as Black Arithmetic or Black Botany, swept over the schools like the impis of Chaka.
>
> We were all feeling guilty in those days, anyway, and Black English seemed to offer us an opportunity to make up for past inequities and transgressions. Perfectly sane professors and even deans could be seen going around the campus in their hair dashikis and saying "right on" to each other. It was suddenly revealed to us that all subject-verb agreement was an instrument of imperialist oppression, and we were deeply ashamed of having expected it of any of our students, whatever their color. We were about to institute courses in Swahili, but somebody discovered that Swahili grammar requires that the speaker know how to make careful distinctions in the form and placement of object and subject pronouns and even requires subject-verb agreement. It turned out to be just another instrument

of imperialist oppression, and that was the end of Swahili. Besides, it was a foreign import, and we were all talking about the right to a language of one's own.

Now comes hard good sense:

> Like any argot, Black English can be eloquent and poetic. While it is not in any sense at all a different *language* from English, it is in social terms at least what Old English once was to Norman French, the private talk of the oppressed. It is rich in subtle invective. It provides vast arrays of synonyms in a few very special subjects, most notably money, sex, and the enemy. Its extravagant lexicon seems the result partly of a desire to exclude outsiders and partly of the exuberance of a skillful performance. In the mouth of a fluent speaker it is a powerful incantation. It is, furthermore, an illustration of the many differences between speech and writing, as anyone who tries to write discursive prose in Black English will soon discover.

More reflectively—

> The extensive, specialized vocabularies of slang are clearly not intended to describe the world of experience more and more precisely. They are, rather, exuberant outpourings of the joys of word-play, colorful elaborations perfectly proper to speech and poetry. That's why slang, and especially what we call Black English, can be so jaunty and rambunctious and pleasing to the ear. Its metaphors can be subtle and penetrating, and its blithe disregard of standard grammatical forms is as crafty as it is cocky. Unfortunately, however, it will not serve us when we want to explain or understand the rationalistic epistemology that informs constitutional democracy or how birds fly. A child who comes out of school knowing only Black English will never trouble us by seeking employment as a professor of political science or as an aero-dynamic engineer.

Mr. Mitchell is especially hard on the bureaucratic jargon now spreading in the schools. He maintains that people who use pretentious language can't or won't think, and he seems altogether right. He contends that such teachers shouldn't have privileged access to our children. What, one wonders, would be his response to the alternative proposed by John Holt?

For comment on the use of words at another level, we go to Neil Postman's editorial in the Spring *et cetera*, in which he considers the content of President Carter's State of the Union address last January. As some may remember, the President stressed that "we are the strongest country in the world." Why, the editor asks, is it important to belong to the "greatest" nation in the world?

> Another mystery: Why is it always military power that is the measure and meaning of great, greater, and greatest? Is it conceivable that any of us shall ever live to witness a political address in which the referent for "greatness" is, say, the number of biologists or archaeologists produced by a nation? Napoleon himself once remarked that "the only true conquests are those gained by knowledge over ignorance." Of course, he said this on the occasion of his being elected a member of the National Institute. When he addressed the people whose broken bodies would become the instrument through which he would attain his ambitions, he did not speak of victories over ignorance but of military glory and "national honor."

The President referred to the possibility of war. But what does "war" mean: War as in "Revolutionary War" (ours), or as in "The Mexican War?" No, it really means "a nuclear holocaust in which almost all of his audience would die." But this meaning did not come out in the speech. By a change of emphasis, Mr. Postman exposes the actual content of another statement:

> He stressed, for example, that the Russians must pay for their invasion of Afghanistan. He then listed the price: *we* will make plans to draft our youth; *we* will spend more for arms and therefore less for social programs, *we* won't go to the Olympics; *we* will give more power to our secret police. One can only hope that the Russians won't have to suffer any more than this, or else we shall collapse altogether.

He reaches a suitable conclusion:

> All of this is to say that there is nothing more humbling to a semanticist than to listen to a political address and to the huzzahs that follow closely upon it. Such speeches have not changed much in two thousand years.

More than the meanings of words and the quality of our grammar is involved in this question.

FRONTIERS

Big and Little Pictures

A MANIFEST trend in the present is the human rejection of "bigness," for the reason that people are finding that the size of their social and economic institutions is making even their everyday operations increasingly unpleasant. The conditions of ordinary life are no longer accessible to human control. How did this progressive confinement of human freedom come about?

The pursuit of certain goals—briefly defined as stability and power—played an obvious part in the creation of big institutions. In America this began as a consequence of the Revolution. The United States could survive and prosper only by becoming strong and nationally independent. While the people of the colonies had made the Revolution, it was now the Nation, through its government, which embodied the American identity. This was a transfer from the people to an institution of the values for which they had struggled and fought. Among the Founders, only Jefferson was apprehensive about the result. Summarizing the decisive change that had taken place, Hannah Arendt wrote (in *On Revolution*, Viking, 1963):

> Only the representatives of the people, not the people themselves, had an opportunity to engage in those activities of "expressing, discussing and deciding" which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom. And since the state and federal governments, the proudest results of the revolution through sheer weight of their proper business were bound to overshadow in political importance the townships and their meeting halls—until what Emerson still considered to be "the unit of the Republic" and "the school of the people" in political matters had withered away—one might even come to the conclusion that there was less opportunity for the exercise of public freedom and the enjoyment of public happiness in the republic of the United States than there had existed in the colonies of British America. Lewis Mumford recently pointed out how the political importance of the township was never grasped by the founders, and that the failure to incorporate it into either the federal or the state constitutions was "one of the tragic oversights of postrevolutionary political development." Only Jefferson among the founders had a clear premonition of this tragedy, for his greatest fear was indeed lest "the abstract political system of democracy lacked concrete organs."

Some hundred and fifty years later Lyman Bryson confirmed Jefferson from experience:

> How could government be really ourselves? If an official thinks for us, we have not thought for ourselves. Even when a government official is most truly our servant, he is not a mere extension of ourselves; he is the custodian of our opportunities. . . . It is the mistake of thinking that a political process is justified by its public result. This is not true. A political process is justified by its private result, that is, by its result in the lives of the members of the state, and the most important thing in the lives of the citizens at anytime, even at a time of public danger, is the development of their own best selves. (*The Next America.*)

This is the realization, now spreading, that is behind the rejection of bigness, and it applies, of course, to an area much wider than merely political affairs. In *Next* for May/June, Kirkpatrick Sale described the trend in broad terms, calling it a movement toward the "Human scale." This sense of measure and fitness is coming to the fore in all human relationships. Originally an architectural term, "Human scale" also applies to communities and towns, to social arrangements, economic conditions, and educational and leisure facilities:

> The same sense of security and self-worth that a person inevitably feels within an effective community, the family member can feel within the home, the worker on the job, the citizen at the town meeting, and all for precisely parallel reasons. What it takes is a scale at which one can feel a degree of *control* over the processes of life, at which individuals become neighbors and lovers instead of just acquaintances and ciphers, makers and creators instead of just users and consumers, participants and protagonists instead of just voters and taxpayers.
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> That scale is the human scale.
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> This alternative kind of new age would certainly not be without its problems, some considerable, and would likely face crises of its own in the course of its

> development—a development that, even in the best of circumstances, would take place over several decades. At a minimum, it does suggest something in the way of obvious relief from the imperilment brought on by our present large-scale institutions. It would survive without the military/industrial complex, the agribusiness giants, the real-estate speculators. It would eliminate the convoluted system whereby, at present, the citizens of New York are governed by 1,487 different governments, agencies, and boards, and the citizens of California pay an accumulation of 454 taxes on a single loaf of bread. . . .
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> Probably as a result of the proven inadequacy of so many governmental, corporate, and academic remedies, and possibly in biological response to the increasing pressures of depersonalization and homogenization in our society, Americans are asserting a new kind of individualism, a claim for self-identity and self-worth. And when this concern is not taken to the point of abrasive selfishness ("meism"), it becomes, for me, a positive societal current.

That, you could say, is the "big picture." But if the goal is to get rid of bigness, then we need, even more, a lot of little pictures which tell, however fragmentarily and briefly, how people become part of that current. The trouble with general analyses and over-all pictures is the same as the trouble with statistics—the idiosyncratic reality of the actions of people is left out. You need the story of a man or a woman or a family to find out what people are actually doing. This applies to the change that Kirkpatrick Sale says is already under way.

One good example is Eliot Coleman—according to a writer in *Country Journal* (*June*), an "erstwhile ski instructor, shipwright, rock climber, stockbroker, cowboy, professor of Spanish literature"—and today a small farmer who is teaching others the science and craft of biological (organic) agriculture. Coleman came under the spell of the Nearings' *Living the Good Life*, bought forty acres of brush land from them, in Harborside, Maine, learned from their example, and grossed $4,200 in truck gardening produce during his first year. He is now showing that people can make a living on a small farm in New England, and spreading "the Coleman theory of invincibility, which holds that anyone can do absolutely anything he or she wants to do—providing he or she wants to badly enough." This is probably what it takes to make the transformation Kirkpatrick Sale hopes for come true.