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TWO PROPHETS

IN the *Statesman,* Plato compares three forms of government—the rule of one, government by a few (oligarchy), and rule by the many, or democracy, endeavoring to establish which is best. The highest of all he does not consider in this comparison because it is plainly unattainable by humans in their present stage of development, although he describes it briefly. We take an extract from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Pantheon), giving first a passage of introduction by the editors:

> The best government is lawless. It is guided by the true statesman whose rule is flexible and can be adapted to each individual case. The rule of law, on the contrary, is rigid and inflexible. The difference can be illustrated clearly if we imagine the two methods applied to any art, the art of medicine, for instance. If it were ruled by law, a majority in a general assembly would decide what methods should be used in doctoring people and that these should be invariably followed. Whoever was detected inquiring into its methods would be indicted in court on the charge of corrupting the young, persuading them to give medicine in an unlawful manner. If we were to do this in everything, science, art, agriculture, carpentry, and so on, what would be the result? They would all perish and could never spring up again because inquiry would be forbidden. "The result would be that life, which is hard enough as it is, would be quite impossible then and not to be endured."
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> The best government then is independent of law. Statesmanship is an art just as painting is. A good state can no more be produced and maintained by laws than a good picture can be painted by formulas for mixing colors. When the true statesman rules he knows of himself how to deal justly with all, whereas the law can be the cause of great injustice. But the state is not like a beehive; there is no single visible head. If no true statesman appears, the rule of law is the next best. Experience has played a signal part in drawing up laws. Unadaptable though they are, they are better than the forms of government without them. But only the true statesman can rightly weave the web of the state, bringing the many minds of men into firm and enduring union.

We go now to the latter portion of the dialogue, in which the Eleatic Stranger instructs the young Socrates. The Stranger has proposed three different constitutions for examination—the rule of one, the rule of the few, and the rule of the many. He then says:

> Now, however, we have excluded the perfect constitution from our reckoning and have before us those that have to serve as constitutions in default of it. . . .
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> The rule of one man, if it has been kept within the traces, so to speak, by the written rules we call laws, is the best. . . . But when it is lawless it is hard, and the most grievous to endure. As for the rule of a few, just as the few constitutes a middle term between the one and the many, so we must regard the rule of the few as of middle potency for good or ill. The rule of the many is weakest in every way; it is not capable of any real good or of serious evil as compared with the other two. This is because in a democracy sovereignty has been divided out in small portions among a large number of rulers. If therefore all three constitutions are law-abiding, democracy is the worst of the three, but if all three flout the laws, democracy is the best of them. Thus if all constitutions are unprincipled the best thing to do is to live in a democracy. But when constitutions are lawful and ordered, democracy is the least desirable, and monarchy . . . is by far the best to live under.

The Stranger, having the agreement of Socrates, goes on with his analysis:

> Therefore all who take part in one of these governments—apart from one based on real knowledge—are to be distinguished from the true statesman. They are not statesmen; they are party leaders, leaders of bogus governments and themselves as bogus as their systems. The supreme imitators and tricksters, they are of all Sophists the arch-Sophists. . . . So this fantastic pageant that seemed like some strange masque of centaurs or some band of satyrs stands revealed for what it is. At much pains we have succeeded at last in distinguishing them and setting

them apart, as we must, from all true practice of statesmanship.

Needless to say, Plato has not been the beau ideal of modern political thinkers, even though his love of Socrates should be sufficient evidence of his own allegiance to freedom. The true enemy of freedom, in Plato's view, was not populist passion and ignorance, but those who stirred it up and then made their own use of it—namely the Sophists. He attacked their modes of persuasion in many of his dialogues, and to complete his analysis of constitutions we need some account of why he held the Sophists so responsible. This is provided early in Robert Cushman's study of Plato's philosophy, *Therapeia* (Chapel Hill, 1958), in the second chapter:

> In the judgment of Plato, then, the bearing of the Sophistic teaching—mainly rhetorical in content, for the Sophists codified the art of rhetoric—was that of subordinating the quest for truth to the *status quo*—the existing incentives of civilized man. To persuade is to render plausible, and to render plausible is frequently to render something one believes and desires apparently conformable to what one's hearers also believe and applaud. Persuasion means some measure of accommodation. The rhetorician studies the opinions of the multitude and adjusts his words to suit the prevailing temper—now rousing and how soothing with fitting utterance and tone. Thus the politician, who employs the art of persuasion or practices rhetoric, finds himself compelled to give the public what it wants as the price of securing his own ends. But what the multitude desires in its present perverted state is no measure of the good or the excellent. Worst of all prevailing rhetoric inclines to adapt itself so far in the direction of existing mentality as to call the things which please the public good, and those that vex it evil.
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> By its inherent nature, then, the rhetorical art is dispensed to make the opinions of the average man the measure of right and wrong. The norm is not the noble Aristeides but the man of the prevailing ethos, the man bent on his own largest measure of private good. It is the man who measures *eudaimonia* [well-being] in terms of uninhibited desire. As Plato described him in the *Republic*, he is the sort of man who says to himself: "For a front and a show I must draw about myself a shadow-outline of virtue, but trail behind me the fox of the most sage Archilochus, shifty and bent on gain."
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> In Plato's opinion, the Sophists were, for the most part conventionalists. Far from upsetting the prevailing mores of cities they visited, they lived prudentially. The political theory of a few like Callicles and Hippias, may have been potentially subversive. On the whole, the Sophists exercised discretion and temperance and counseled their pupils to observe due restraint as the best policy. *Sophrosunê*, temperance, did not mean to them what it meant to Socrates. It was the *savoir faire* of discreet men who know how to pursue their best interests with resourcefulness, but with proper caution. It was the bearing and import of Sophistic rhetoric which troubled Plato, and he was always exposing it to acute dialectical analysis and critique. He was not misled, however. The real corruptors of young men were not alone the Sophists. A more fundamental and pervasive source of corruption was the dominant public mind which, by censure or praise, molded the young into its own likeness, a likeness unsavory to Plato, since it represented an unsifted and often debased set of values.

This, *we* might say, was Plato's psycho-moral reason for withdrawing from political activity, which he had come to regard as hopelessly corrupt, and devoting all his attention to underlying philosophical questions and matters on which the human community might be based. The resulting critique of the politics of his time—which applies equally to any other time—has been repeated again and again, but seldom with any greater clarity or accuracy.

A recent discussion, "Tocqueville and the Burden of Liberty," in the Autumn 1985 *Hudson Review*, by George Watson, a literary scholar at Cambridge in England, illustrates recurring themes in present-day criticism. This writer reports on the anxiety felt by Tocqueville regarding the abuse of the freedom that the people of the United States had won in their war of independence from Britain. John Stuart Mill was a particular admirer of Tocqueville and much influenced by him. Mr. Watson says:

> Tocqueville had taught Mill, among others, to see liberty as a dangerous responsibility to be borne rather than a right to be claimed and enjoyed. He is

> the author of mature liberalism, so to speak, as opposed to the utopian liberalism of Shelley and Byron, which was to have no future in the parliamentary state that followed their death by a few years, with the first Reform Act of 1832. In his *Autobiography* (1873) Mill acknowledges Tocqueville as the man who had shifted him from a naive belief in "pure democracy" to that "modified form of it" that Mill had cautiously expounded in *Representative Government* (1861). . . . Modified democratic sentiment is based on a sober fear of what Mill, echoing Tocqueville, calls the "tyranny of the majority," along with a dread of centralization based on what Tocqueville had seen of its effects in France. . . . Unless the powers of government can be curbed, the drive toward equality of condition could lead to the worst tyranny there could ever be: "the absolute rule of the head of executive," as Mill put it in the *Autobiography*, "over a congregation of isolated individuals, all equals but all slaves." . . . As early as 1835, when he reviewed *Democracy in America*, Mill had seen the point of Tocqueville's prediction about the forward march of the new world. The task now, as he remarked in his review, was less to welcome it than to prepare: "not to determine whether democracy shall come, but how to make the best of it when it does come," is the scope of M. de Tocqueville's speculations.

It should of course be emphasized that Tocqueville's worries were not an attack on democracy, but a lover's quarrel with the unlimited freedom it provided. Both Tocqueville and Mill, Watson says, lived and died lovers of liberty. "Their critique of democracy was never meant to discredit it. It was meant, rather, to engage attentions more critically, as men might brace themselves for a crisis they will soon have to face." Watson puts the anticipations of both these thinkers in modern language:

> Men are irreversibly what they are, regardless of laws and constitutions. And what are they will remain: greedy, suspicious, and fallible. Any theory that neglects all that is a cloudy phantasy, and it is for the political theorist to learn at last to cut his cloth to man as he is.
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> But what is he? He is, at all events, a creature that needs to be guided and ruled, however constitutionally free within the limits of law. He can be oppressed by freedom. "Thank goodness we don't have to *choose* tomorrow," I once overheard a schoolchild remark to another on the way home from a progressive school. A modern housewife is blessed by consumer-choice, on the whole; but in the biggest supermarkets that there are, her choices can be baffling and even agonizing. The supermarket puts the burden of liberty at its simplest. At its hardest, an openly competitive system can crush an individual, as Mill and Tocqueville first saw, with a sense of purely personal failure: he no longer has the excuse once afforded by the *ancien régime* of being called by God or King to an unchanging status in life, from cradle to grave.

Some of these matters are arguable—a dozen or more brands of French dressing on the supermarket shelf may be irritating, and ridiculous, but it is not really oppressive. And staying in one place for a lifetime may please philosophers and craftsmen, but "upward mobility" is cherished by a great many men. Far more alarming is Tocqueville's picture of a world where "the spell of royalty is broken, but it has not been succeeded by the majesty of the laws." He found that in America—

> The division of property has lessened the distance which separated the rich from the poor; but . . . the nearer they draw to each other, the greater is their mutual hatred, and the more vehement the envy and the dread with which they resist each other's claims to power.

The people had their liberty, equality was being gained, but the third factor, fraternity, which eases and lubricates all the imperfections of both social order and social change, was missing in the American scheme. It is still missing, although a nucleus of fellowship is formed here and there, formations in behalf of the brotherhood of life. Meanwhile, for at least a hundred and fifty years, the confinements feared by Tocqueville have been closing in, hardly noticed by most people. The freedom to be different is still a costly prize. We are familiar with the rhetoric of freedom, echoing its slogans occasionally, yet noticing with Watson, and with wry distaste, that "Even dictatorships nowadays take care to describe themselves as democracies, or People's Democracies; and if anyone is afraid of freedom nowadays, it is highly unusual to hear him say so."

The only real remedy for our condition seems unavailable. We have its secret locked away in our history—in the villages and small towns of the past, whose governments, before the weight of national power was felt throughout the country, were simple, small, and efficient because they claimed no sovereignty and ruled through the town meetings in which everyone—or everyone who wanted to—took part. Life was not complicated in those days. People gathered in tens and twenties; there were no subdivided millions to cope with. And how could that ever be again? But we have not bothered to tax our ingenuity in order to answer this question. Here and there some people have found ways, but they do not, admittedly, offer a way to solve our "massive problems." Perhaps those problems have no solution and must exhaust their energies simply by wearing out the people involved in them.

Another article in a scholarly journal is of interest here—a study of Louis D. Brandeis in the Autumn 1985 *American Scholar*, by Thomas K. McCraw, who teaches in the Graduate School of Business Administration at Harvard.

In 1848 Brandeis's Bohemian Jewish parents had come from Europe during the suppression of the democratic movements of the time. They settled in Louisville, Kentucky, and did well merchandising grain. Louis was born in 1856. He was a gifted child and received a good education, entering the Harvard Law School in 1875, where he "made a phenomenal record." He graduated early, after three years. Mr. McCraw wonders about the hidden energies that shaped his life:

> What social forces, for example, had combined to transform an obscure young Southerner, who had quietly adopted the Brahmin style of life and had practiced in Boston for twenty-five years as a conventional commercial lawyer, into the famous *Brandeis*, a notorious muckraker and feared opponent of what he called the "curse of bigness"? Why, after a lifetime of disregarding his own Jewishness, had Brandeis in his middle fifties suddenly embraced his ethnicity and become an ardent Zionist? And why, once he had taken his seat on the Supreme Court, had he pursued political activities that almost certainly amounted to serious judicial improprieties?
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> Brandeis's career as a practicing lawyer, which began in 1878 and ended with his appointment [by Woodrow Wilson] to the Supreme Court in 1916, coincided almost precisely with the rise of giant corporations in America. Brandeis watched the business revolution as it developed, tried his best to understand it, and found it, on the whole, hostile to his own central values of autonomous individualism. For that reason he fought it, and in his crusades against the "curse of bigness," he was a formidable champion.

For Mr. McCraw, Brandeis's continuous and lifelong attack on "bigness" seems little short of an obsession which blinded the great man to the realities of economic life. This article, "Louis D. Brandeis Reappraised," by one who admires him greatly, is a carefully constructed argument to show that Brandeis was irredeemably wrong in thinking that bigness or smallness is simply a matter of choice. Some businesses need to be large, McCraw maintains, while others ought not to be. His argument:

> However accurate his view of consumers may have been in the end Brandeis's emphasis on the "curse of bigness" proved to be an illogical principle on which to base realistic remedies for the ills of modern life. Given the stark fact of a world population measured in several billions, the idea of a curse of bigness" becomes an aesthetic construct more than an analytical or prescriptive one. Certainly it is of little help in shaping economic policy. In the case of business organizations, bigness is indeed a curse for some industries (leather, apparel, food service); but for others (steel oil, automobiles), it represents not only a virtue but an inevitability. . . . For all Brandeis's brilliance, this inherent diversity of industries eluded him, just as it has eluded many later critics and crusaders. The reason in his case, and often in theirs as well, was that the implicit but transcendent test, the hidden litmus, has not been economic efficiency, nor even political liberty and social justice, but instead an aesthetic preference for small size; hence the "curse" of bigness.

The business school professor calls Brandeis's concern about "bigness" an aesthetic preference. Another way of thinking of it would be as a determined intuition, a moral instinct which rejects

bigness as a form of anti-human rigidity. This feeling might err in relation to arrangements shaped by the massive requirements of a society which had developed on a scale fitted to the needs of millions of passive consumers who have adjusted to numerous mechanistic simplicities, prohibiting latitudes of individual decision, but it was not wrong in principle. Vast quantities of steel and oil may be required by the acquisitive society, with corresponding magnitudes in the industries which produce and supply them, but a society reliant on other, more flexible means of construction, which uses less demanding means of transportation is at least conceivable. While Brandeis may not have carried his logic of the virtues of smallness to so radical an outlook, he trusted his intuition and fought for it as a foundation principle. He had a lawyer's version of the rule proclaimed in later years by E. F. Schumacher, elaborated in another way for agriculture by Wendell Berry, and applied by ingenious entrepreneurs in retailing. Originality and invention were more important to Brandeis than narrow organizational efficiency and he demonstrated this beyond debate in his own practice of the law. He held that "economic size is in itself a danger to democracy." Objecting, Walter Lippman observed: "This means, I take it, that American voters are not intelligent enough or powerful enough to dominate great industrial organizations." Today we see with little difficulty that American voters are indeed unable to cope with the effects on their lives of "great industrial organizations," which proceed with an ancient momentum in their destructive functions. Both Tocqueville and Brandeis were prophets who saw far beyond their own time.

REVIEW
RECOVERY AND DISCOVERY

IN *The Language of the Birds* (North Point Press, $ 14.50), the editor, David M. Guss, a poet and an anthropologist, has put together what seems a strange book, a collection of stories and songs from all over the world, with comments thereon by the translators, which speak of the relations between humans and animals as understood by old peoples who felt that they understood the animals and sometimes could converse with them. All the animals, not just birds, have a part in these stories. High philosophical traditions such as Buddhist beliefs about the Buddha element in all living things—plants and trees as well as animals—are included. There are tales from Africa, from the Ainu of Japan, the Eskimos, and many from American Indians.

This book is an act of restoration. a deliberate attempt on the part of an artist to recover a living sense of the world we live in, leaving behind as a modern superstition the purely physical conceptions of Descartes and Newton. Its authors and writers give expression to the community of being as once understood by humans, and the editor looks to the day when "all things will be reconnected once again," saying:

> Its symbols, therefore, are those of wholeness—the four corners, the four elements, the four "roads and winds," the four faces of the Tetramorph, the four powers of the soul. This is the cycle of the Apocalypse, of miraculous deaths and rebirths, of the reunification of Earth and Sky, of human and animal, dream and reality, word and magic. It is the time when all opposites are joined and all divisions dissolved; the time of wisdom and completion.

Among the several essays appearing in this book is one by John Berger which enables us to recognize how alienated we are from the animal kingdom. He says:

> Public zoos came into existence at the beginning of the period which was to see the disappearance of animals from daily life. The zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters. . . .
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> A zoo is a place where as many species and varieties of animal as possible are collected in order that they can be seen, observed, studied. In principle, each cage is a frame round the animal inside it. They proceed from cage to cage, not unlike visitors in an art gallery who stop in front of one painting, and then move on to the next or the one after the next. Yet in the zoo the view is always wrong. Like an image out of focus. . . . However you look at these animals, even if the animal is up against the bars, less than a foot from you looking outwards in the public direction, *you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal;* and all the concentration you can muster will never be enough to centralize it. . . .
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> The animals, isolated from each other without interaction between species, have become utterly dependent upon their keepers. Consequently most of their responses have been changed. What was central to their interest has been replaced by a passive waiting for a series of outside interventions. The events they perceive occurring around them have become as illusory, in terms of their natural responses, as the painted prairies. .
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> All sites of enforced marginalization—ghettos, shanty towns, prisons, madhouses, concentration camps—have something in common with zoos.

For contrast we quote from Gary Snyder the account of how a friend of his from a Rio Grande pueblo hunts.

> He is twenty-seven years old. The Pueblo Indians, and I think probably most of the other Indians of the Southwest, begin their hunt, first, by purifying themselves. They take emetics, a sweat bath, and perhaps avoid their wife for a few days. They also try not to think certain thoughts. They go out hunting in an attitude of humility. They make sure they need to hunt, that they are not hunting without necessity. Then they improvise a song while they are in the mountains. They sing aloud or hum to themselves while they are walking along. It is a song to the deer, asking the deer to be willing to die for them. They usually still-hunt, taking a place alongside a trail. The feeling is that you are not hunting the deer, the deer is coming to you; you make yourself available for the deer that will present itself to you, that has given itself to you. Then you shoot it. After you shoot it, you cut the head off and place the head facing east. You sprinkle corn meal in front of the mouth of the deer, asking it to forgive you for having killed it, to understand that we all need to eat, and to please make a good report to the other deer spirits that he has been treated well. One finds this way of handling things and animals in all primitive cultures.

For an account of totems and totemic cultures, the editor takes from Paul Shepard's *Thinking Animals* (1978) the following:

> As every child has learned, each creature not only has a predominant character, but the whole of his behavior is in harmony with other animals. The animal totems of the two members of a dispute, for example, are not appealed to as sources of power but as related to each other through myth or biology so as to evoke ideas and parallel logic for resolving the conflict. The logic is a kind of thought-wedge. The clues may range from details in myth to study of the animals' entrails, fur, or parasites, even to its most subtle responses to the environment and interactions with others. Modern urban people cannot appreciate the subtlety of such study because they so seldom watch or examine animals and are generally ignorant of the remarkable complexity and delicacy of non-human life. The crucial point of this sign-reading is that there is seldom a literal interpretation. Eating, fleeing, risingearlier-than, living underground, migrating, or howling do not imply those behaviors among people to the totemic watcher, but are merely indicators. . .
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> According to the prophet of this vision of totemic thought, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Nature for the mature human mind is a system of connected ideas, a language, represented by the species and its attributes. It relates the abstract to the concrete by using real creatures as sign-images bearing messages and ideas. It starts with a straightforward classification and progresses to symbolic classification, begins in observation of natural history and derives a way of thinking and explaining human social interactions. It is a homology between parallel series—species and human societies—in which the latter is rationalized by references to Nature, a medium translated by myth, using epic tales, music, and the other arts.

The enlightenment of Sakyamuni, the Buddha, took place as he sat under a tree, in Latin called *Picus religiosa*, which became, according to William Lafleur, "an extremely important tree, the stimulus and symbol for a lot of thinking about trees, plants, and nature in general."

> Some modern scholars have been slightly embarrassed by that tree, taking it to be the persistence in Buddhism of some kind of "primitive" tree cult, some unseemly vestige of "animism." But, of course, it was not so at all. The bodhi tree posed a question of critical importance: Just how and where does enlightenment take place? Is the tree merely an inert setting, something under which a man sat till one day something profound spread through his mind, the ganglia of his consciousness, and to the ends of his body? Or was it, rather, man's companion in bodhi, that without which he could have no perfection?

The question led to long theological debates in both China and Japan. An eighth-century Chinese Buddhist, Chan-jan, held that "Grass, trees, the soil on which these grow—all have the same kind of atoms. Some are barely in motion while others make haste along the Path, but they will all in time reach the precious land of Nirvana. . . . Who can really maintain that things inanimate lack buddhahood?"

If man is a microcosm, then Buddhahood is potentially his, and if he is made up of the principles of all things, then all things are in him. The old Buddhist thinkers, therefore, had no fear of what modern scholars call "anthropomorphizing." Mr. Lafleur remarks:

> If similes and analogies can be lifted out of the natural world so that man can explain himself to himself, why not explain nature in terms of man? The compliment ought to be returned. Metaphor, the language of poetry, is one of exchange . . . but it ought to be *mutual*, reciprocal exchange. It is almost as if these Buddhists of long ago anticipated William Carlos Williams trying
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> > —through metaphor to reconcile
> > the people and the stones.
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> Practice takes many forms. But it aims for perfection and reconciliation.
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> The whole mood and mode of Mahayana philosophy was to use logic to chop up logic's penchant for chopping up the world into multiple, disparate, and easily lost pieces. And then, of course, the philosophy had to slip into poetry. . . . We don't know exactly how the dialectics of the monks got out from behind the monastery walls and into the minds of the common people. In part it was through poems, celebrations of nature easily memorized and sung while walking mountain paths. In part it was also through a re-naming of the things of the world, provision of Buddha-names for them. Sensitivity to *sattva* seems to have spread far.

Publication of *The Language of the Birds* seems a clear sign that we are learning to think in broader and deeper ways, by both discovery and recovery.

COMMENTARY
SUB SPECIE AETERNITATIS

IT may come hard to us, in these days of the abuse of power even by those who have only a little of it, to accept Plato's account of democracy. It is natural, perhaps, to overlook the fact that in our experience, and also the experience of our ancestors, the possession of power seems automatically to mean its misuse. The superior man is in the position to take advantage of his fellows, and he nearly always does so. The foundation of democracy, therefore, rests solidly on basic distrust. Yet we know from experience, that those individuals who follow their conscience, even to the point of disobeying the law, often win our highest respect, and judges who use and even stretch their discretionary power earn the appreciation of citizens who recognize that they are animated by the will to do justice. These are considerations which help us to recognize the wisdom in Plato's evaluations of the forms of government.

Yet government without law, but by wisdom applied to particular people and situations, is so utopian a conception that we are unable to take it seriously. We know that government by law is safer than the questionable wisdom and integrity of our rulers, and today we are proud to say we have a government of law and not of men. But sooner or later, we see that the laws eventually conform to what influential men decide, and a few men use them for their own purposes. And today our laws have grown so complicated that only lawyers are able to understand and explain a great many of them. Is a democracy possible under such circumstances?

Yet Plato is almost certainly right in saying that for unprincipled men, democracy is the best form of government. He understood the character of both his and our time. True statesmen come too few and far between, even though, when one happens to be in office, we are profoundly grateful. Plato, we may be able to finally admit, had a vision of the good society and a population becoming wise as the basis of his opinions. We may see that he wrote for a dark age, both his and ours, but from the stance of a visionary philosopher. That is the reason he gave for withdrawing from politics and devoting himself to philosophy. His politics was an allegory of his quest for the method of developing wisdom in individuals. He made this plain at the end of the ninth book of the *Republic*.

It seems a natural transition to go from Plato to the wisdom of Shakespeare, which Harold Goddard considers so perceptively in the brief quotation from *The Meaning of Shakespeare* on page 8. The meaning Goddard gives to *Antony and Cleopatra* is far from obvious, yet Goddard writes with what he believes to be an understanding of Shakespeare's vision. "He certainly is saying that there is something in comparison with which battles and empires are of no account." The love between Antony and Cleopatra, both quite imperfect beings, brings to them something which transcends their weaknesses, their all too human qualities, turning what seem their follies into the nobility with which their lives come to an end. Was it Shakespeare's subtle intention and hope that the playgoer should recognize this? If so, it was the intention of the poet in William of Stratford, not that of a playwright and entertainer.

Shakespeare was indeed a playwright, but he was more than this, as his sonnets show. What is the difference between a playwright and a poet? The playwright constructs something that will catch our fancy for an hour or two and bring the audience back to enjoy another of his dramas. But the poet has another scale of values. He writes *sub specie aeternitatis*—under the order of eternity—and with a corresponding depth of meaning. Some feel this, sense it, or suspect it. Those who do make Shakespeare's true audience, from the sixteenth century until today. His plays have also remained living dramas until today, for the same reason, however it may be concealed.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
UNEXPECTED TRUTHS

A READER—probably someone in the teaching profession—kindly sent us a copy of a chapter in *Teaching Shakespeare* (edited by Walter Edens, Princeton University Press, 1977), by Norman Rabkin, who is, or was, chairman of graduate studies in English at the University of California in Berkeley. After a long introduction in which he describes the complication of studying Shakespeare by the work of numerous scholars who are continually turning up new "facts," making specialization a necessity for future scholars in this field, Mr. Rabkin tells an interesting story:

> Several years ago, in working with the Berkeley school system, Herbert Kohl, the author of *36 Children*, set up an experimental program for junior and senior high school students who were turned off by the conventional system and were on the verge of dropping out. The program was an umbrella for a number of projects that took place outside the walls of the schools; according to their interests, students apprenticed themselves to theatrical groups or television stations or gurus of various sorts. Despite the fact that I had, and still have, considerable reservations about such programs, I tremblingly accepted Kohl's invitation to teach a group of young people who wanted to study Shakespeare. A few who showed up at the first meeting never returned, but to my surprise the majority, a half-dozen ranging in age from thirteen to seventeen, came faithfully to my office once a week, through rain and sometimes tear gas, and we read Shakespeare together. One member of the class was a talented actress who has since begun a professional career; another was passionately addicted to Renaissance music, costume, and history, and she wanted her school experience to serve her intellectual and spiritual needs (a naive wish, of course); the others were simply curious. Casting about desperately for a new structure to teach what was for me a new kind of student, I hit upon the idea of asking them to agree on and read carefully in advance a given play, and then to devote the class to reading the play line by line, each student reading a line or two and then asking a question that had bothered her or making a comment on anything about it that seemed interesting to her or explaining her acting interpretation of what she had read. In the course of a year we read three or four plays, beginning with *Macbeth.* To my constant delight, those young people found that reading and talking about Shakespeare generated a kind of enthusiasm they had never felt before, and they asked for books to read and spent hours in preparation for our meetings.
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> That in itself is not at all surprising. What did astonish me, however, was that week after week, simply by attending to the text and to their own responses and by acknowledging their difficulties, they came up with perceptions that were not only right but often new; they said true and important things that no one, as far as I knew, had said before. I can no longer remember the particular questions and insights they brought, because as always happens with the best criticism and the best classroom discoveries, what we did together has merged into my own total response to the plays. But I shall never forget the sheer intelligence of unaffected, unself-conscious, self-motivated response to Shakespeare that made each of those hours the intellectual experience of the week for me.

One can't help but wish that a teacher like that wasn't salted away in a university, that he was available to high school students everywhere. But the wish is really a fantasy, since to react as he did he needed a selected group of students; not only that, but somebody like Herbert Kohl is required to make the kind of focus that draws such students together. But the class in Mr. Rabkin's office was no fantasy; it actually happened; so we know that it could happen more often if we had the kind of society that has learned how to put things together in the right combinations.

The teacher decided to try the same plan with his graduate students, but this didn't work, or not well.

> What ensued passes belief. Each student felt the obligation to be brilliant and learned, to ask questions even when he didn't feel like asking questions, to put obstacles in the way of other students trying out their ideas, to argue endlessly about matters of character or glossarial ambiguity that sometimes did not seem to interest even the speaker. Students came in delegations to request that I censor class discussions and turn people off when they talked too much or strayed too far, but I told them individually and as a

> class that it was their problem, that self-discipline and judgment would have to be their responsibility, that they should aim only for the essential in their contributions, that they should not say what they did not believe. A few people withdrew into surly passivity, but for the most part the class disability persisted like crabgrass.

Was it that graduate courses in a famous university made the wrong kind of focus for the selection of students? It certainly seems so. But Mr. Rabkin does not draw this conclusion. He says:

> In frequent moments of discomfort in class I realized that these really talented and attractive students were responding and using their minds less well than undergraduates in the senior seminar and the other Shakespeare courses of our major curriculum. And I realized that what these students needed, aside from the professional and specialized knowledge and methods the course opened up for them, was not a graduate course in Shakespeare but the kind of course we normally teach to undergraduates, nonmajor as well as mayor students.

What sort of course is that?

> In such a course the aim is, or should be, to provide a model of the intelligent reader of Shakespeare, trusting of his emotional responses, ready to use secondary knowledge when he feels it necessary but not to let it seem more important than the text, groping to understand, and above all ready to make himself an active audience. We teach Shakespeare, or anything else, to graduate students as knowledge, as part of the repertoire they will employ as professionals whose commitment we take for granted in their presence among us. But we teach Shakespeare to undergraduates because we want them to see why we read him, and professional skills are a tool, as transparent as we can make them, to help us reach that goal. There is nothing that we say in undergraduate courses that we don't want our graduate students to hear; and if those courses are any good, there is very much there that can only help them find the right place for Shakespeare in their own reading and understanding as they go on to teach other literature.

Well, we—the rest of us, all around the world—do not have a Mr. Rabkin nearby, waiting for us to call and read Shakespeare with him. But there are two books that might prove almost as good—the two volumes of *The Meaning of Shakespeare* by Harold Goddard—still in print, so far as we know, in the paperback edition of the University of Chicago Press. Goddard's essays, first published in 1951, just after the author's death—one for each of the plays, and more besides—read like what we suppose the conversations which went on in Mr. Rabkin's office were like. It is a consoling thought. See what Goddard says at the end of his discussion of *Antony and Cleopatra*, in his opinion the play that best represents certain aspects of Shakespeare's genius.

> Can anyone doubt for a moment whether Shakespeare considered the tragic-poetical or the historical-political the profounder way of regarding life? Certainly the last thing Shakespeare was offering us at the end of his trilogy was any doctrine of "all for love" in the cheap popular sense of that phrase as suggested by the title of Dryden's famous version of the story of Antony and Cleopatra. But he certainly is saying that there is something in life in comparison with which battles and empires are of no account. As statesman and soldier it was Antony's duty to fight to the bitter end at the Battle of Actium for his half of the empire. If he had, at the price of depriving the world of the story of Antony and Cleopatra—including Shakespeare's play—is it certain that the world would be better off? The destiny of the world is determined less by the battles that are lost and won than by the stories it loves and believes in. That is a hard saying for hardheaded men to accept, but it is true. Stories are told, and are remembered. Battles are fought, fade out, and are forgotten—unless they beget great stories. We put up massive monuments to military heroes because otherwise their very names will be erased. We do not need to put up monuments to great poets nor to those heroes they have made immortal.

As in Shakespeare, so in Goddard. You find unexpected truth in both.

FRONTIERS

The Culture of Agriculture

GOING through a pile of unused material, we found a discussion of what the writer, Jan Wojcik, a teacher of English at Purdue University, calls the "Wisdom Literature of Farming," in a back issue (Fall, 1984) of *Agriculture and Human Values.* At the outset he draws on Varro's *De Re Rustica*, written about 2,000 years ago, on Virgil's *Georgics,* and Job, then skips to Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* and Thoreau, and winds up with Wendell Berry—in all a fairly rich review of an old, old argument about how humans should relate to the land. He concludes that not enough people—not even enough farmers—care enough about the welfare of the soil.

> It is simple economic reality. It is as if there was a spring coiled up inside of every culture that uncoils as it expands leaving a larger and larger empty space at the center. That space is the farm ground, the heartland that empties of people and fertility. No culture has yet discovered how to wind the spring back far enough to keep in touch with its core, to keep its temper vibrant. Not even ours, for all its scientific experts.

Of wisdom, which is his subject, Mr. Wojcik says:

> Wisdom is a traditional way of thinking about the earthy or the humble nature of human beings . . . the mortality their dependence on the life of the earth, the essential relationship of human beings to the land in general, of which the farmer on the land is a special case. . . . The wisdom literature of farming are those works which work wisdom into a discussion of farming in the belief that the best farmers recognize some affinity between his own life and a handful of dust. It is down-to-earth, humble in the root sense of being aware of the *humus*; and furthermore, the farmer who reveres the earth by taking care of the soil is the only one on which the city folk can depend; that is because only such a farmer will make sure that the nation's treasure chest of good healthy soil will be kept full no matter what.

But then he says:

> Wisdom is essentially a tragic way of thinking because she is compelled to recommend what she knows cannot come to be. The wise way to farm is to attend, foremost, to the needs of the soil, producing cash crops as a by-product whose value is helping support the enterprise of the farm.

Why can't this come to be? Must farming always have a tragic ending? Not, this writer suggests, if you are one of the healthy Hunza. Not if you are an Amish farmer. But Americans are not, he thinks, about to adopt these strange ways. So he says:

> Obviously I write this because I think these few wisdom books [Berry's *The Unsettling of America* and some others] should be listened to again. . . . Can it really be possible that humans are still very primitive organisms, with a need to have a considerable amount of our population in close, intimate contact with the natural soil if we are going to survive at all?
>
> There are some ominous signs that there is some truth in this. A recent report of the Worldwatch Institute estimates the loss of topsoil from world croplands at 25.4 billion tons a year. Most of this harm is caused by the widespread use of heavy commercial farm machinery in the U.S., the Soviet Union, India and China. Where Roman soil lost fertility, modern soils are lost themselves. . . .
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> I think the literary scholar's function in this matter is simply to let the words of muted farmers speak for themselves, if only so that we might all better understand the odd answer some of our neighbors persist in putting to the question with which we began. The survival of the answers after all these years and all this neglect says something about their vigor . . . like the weeds that come up through the cracks in the pavement.

He quotes from Berry, who is fortunately an unmuted farmer:

> "It is the nature of soil to be highly complex and variable, to conform very inexactly to human conclusions and rules. It is itself a pattern of inexhaustible intricacy, and so it is easily damaged by the imposition of alien patterns." Berry compares the soil to the complexity of language. Every farm has soil with a distinct vocabulary given to it by its geology, pre-agricultural inhabitants, the weather then has fallen on it, and the work of previous owners and cultivators. This soil can talk, listening to the rain as it distributes moisture and nutriments, and answering back with tilth and micro-organisms that direct the rainfall what to do . . . whether to thicken

the soil or erode it, the soil can speak to the farmer about its own best use. . . .

Modern agriculture frightens Berry because it lacks all humility in this sense. Instead of carrying on a conversation, it dictates to the land. It radically simplifies the soil in order to impose human will on it, chemicals and hybrids and machines ordering continuous beans or corn or whatever else the farmer or manager or extension agent decides. These forces concentrate economic purposefulness in the soil whatever its textures or lay, causing "the diminishment" of its life and liveliness.

Concerning the Amish:

Berry is bold enough to suggest that these farms provide models for possible secular farms today, because he rejects out of hand that argument that society is better off with few, bigger, and more productive farms. If the 56 out of 57 farmers who left American farms since the 1920s had stayed, there would be fewer people on relief, in jail, or in dead-end factory jobs, and more people taking care of smaller pieces of ground, feeding themselves and the off-farm population just as fulsomely as they are fed today . . . with fewer middle men skimming the profits. Berry is also unimpressed with arguments about the need for great farm surpluses in foreign trade. Most countries would be better off growing their own native food than buying our cheap grain and depressing their own farm economies.

More subtly, these old time farms provide Berry with test cases or control groups for comparisons with the full dimension of the modern chemical-industrial farm. The modern farm beats the old time farm only when one compares their greatly different productivity; the comparison is not so favorable when one factors in the wholesomeness of one with the debt burdens and anxieties of the other.

Add the health of the small community which small farms help to generate and support, and the argument for big farms breaks down altogether. But how much collapse is needed to make this clear?