

## THE POET'S ART

IN this, the first issue of our forty-first year of publication, it seems suitable to take note of the fact that from the beginning we have relied a great deal upon Plato. We have found in Plato's Dialogues the language of the serious thought of our civilization and the formulation of the moral issues which the best of human beings seek to resolve. We—that is, the modern world—part from Plato from time to time, yet we seem always to find our way back to him. Today there is something of a Platonic revival going on, bringing a fresh currency of some of his ideas. Reincarnation is an example, and enough has appeared in MANAS on this subject to make it clear that the editors are convinced that the periodic rebirth of the human soul is a primary reality of human existence.

However, there is one idea on which Plato lays frequent and strong emphasis which greatly puzzles modern readers. This is his criticism of poetry and the Homeric poets of his time. Why, we wonder, should Plato condemn a form of human expression which is for us so often a declaration of the freedom of the human spirit? Why indeed, since Plato himself was a poet in his youth, having a capacity in the use of words which has assured his works continued attention for close to twenty-four hundred years?

This question has been so besetting that it led one scholar of our time, Eric A. Havelock, to devote an entire book to examining it and to provide the answer that he found. That book, published in 1963 by Harvard University Press, is *Preface to Plato*, from which we shall quote at some length. Havelock begins by pointing out that Plato's *Republic* is only superficially devoted to politics. Its fundamental subject is education, and it is in relation to education that he develops his objection to poetry. Havelock says:

Nowhere does this become more evident to the reader than when he takes up the tenth and last book. An author possessing Plato's skill in composition is not likely to blunt the edge of what he is saying by allowing his thoughts to stray away from it at the end.

Yet this terminal portion of the *Republic* opens with an examination of the nature not of politics but of poetry. Placing the poet in the same company with the painter, it argues that the artist produces a version of experience which is twice removed from reality; his work is at best frivolous and at worst dangerous both to science and to morality; the major Greek poets from Homer to Euripides must be excluded from the educational system of Greece. And this extraordinary thesis is pursued with passion. The whole assault occupies the first half of the book. It is clear at once that a title like the *Republic* cannot prepare us for the appearance in this place of such a frontal attack upon the core of Greek literature. If the argument conforms to a plan, and if the assault, coming where it does, constitutes an essential part of that plan, then the purpose of the whole treatise cannot be understood within the limits of what we call political theory.

Havelock points out that in Plato's time the culture of the Greeks was still essentially oral, and that the poets functioned as the teachers and authorities of society. Poetry, especially Homer's, was the tribal encyclopedia. But the *Iliad* was no dictionary. Athenian youth learned to repeat after the verses of the poet, in their rhythmic phrases, the lines which gave form to Greek behavior. Only by such means could the content of the forms of behavior be preserved. As Havelock puts it:

One need only experiment today with the transmission of a single prosaic directive passed down by word of mouth from person to person in order to conclude that preservation in prose was impossible. The only possible verbal technology available to guarantee the preservation and fixity of transmission was that of the rhythmic word organized cunningly in verbal and metrical patterns which were unique enough to retain their shape. This is the historical genesis, the *fons et origo*, the moving cause of that phenomenon we still call "poetry." But when we consider how utterly the function of poetry has altered, how completely the cultural situation has changed, it becomes possible to understand that when Plato is talking about poetry he is not really talking about our kind of poetry.

Havelock notes that T. E. Lawrence, describing the muster of Arab warriors, spoke of the improvised verses of the commands given, "truly Homeric in their functional necessity." The epic style, Havelock says, was "a necessity for government and not just a means of recreation." And he says later on:

The Homeric epics constituted a body of invisible writing imprinted on the brain of the community. They represented a monopoly exercised by the epic technique over the culture language. Such control had to be linked with functional performance to be effective. The fact that the Homeric was not the vernacular tongue only heightened its power of control. The precise times and conditions under which the Greek vernaculars separated themselves out are still obscure. But throughout archaic and Classical Greece you still said things Homerically and tended to think Homerically. Here was not just a poetic style but an international one, a superior idiom of communication.

In order to become an educated man, the young Greek was expected to absorb this idiom and make it his guide. The Greek who learned the *Iliad*—as did all who became able to repeat its martial phrases—was the passive recipient, through his mind and emotions, of the Greek tradition. Who was the model man for the Greeks? Havelock replies:

When confronted with an Achilles, we can say, here is a man of strong character, definite personality, great energy and forceful decision, but it would be equally true to say here is a man to whom it has not occurred, and to whom it cannot occur, that he has a personality apart from the pattern of his acts, His acts are responses to his situation, and are governed by remembered examples of previous acts by previous strong men. The Greek tongue therefore, as long as it is the speech of men who have remained in the Greek sense "musical," and have surrendered themselves to the spell of tradition, cannot frame words to express the conviction that "I" am one thing and the tradition another that "I" can stand apart from tradition and examine it; that "I" can and should break the spell of its hypnotic force; and that "I" should divert some at least of my mental powers away from memorization and direct them instead into channels of critical inquiry and analysis. . . . This amounts to accepting the premise that there is a "me," a "self," a "soul," a consciousness which is self-governing and which discovers the reason for action in itself rather than in limitation of the poetic experience.

The reality of this "soul" was the one thing that Socrates was determined to get across to the men of Athens, and which Plato took up as the heart of his teaching. The most familiar passage on this subject in Plato's writings is that which gives Socrates' autobiography, in which he begins by saying that in his youth he was intensely interested in discovering the causes of all that occurs. He described his numerous speculations and the confusions to which they lead. Then he said:

However, I once heard someone reading from a book, as he said, by Anaxagoras, and asserting that it is mind that produces order and is the cause of everything. This explanation pleased me. . . . I lost no time in procuring the books, and began to read them as quickly as I possibly could, so that I might know as soon as possible about the best and the less good.

It was a wonderful hope, my friend, but it was quickly dashed. As I read on I discovered that the fellow made no use of mind and assigned to it no causality for the order of the world, but adduced causes like air and æther and water and many other absurdities. It seemed to me that he was just about as inconsistent as if someone were to say, The cause of everything Socrates does is mind—and then, in trying to account for my several actions, said first that the reason why I am lying here now is that my body is composed of bones and sinews, and that the bones are rigid and separated at the joints, but the sinews are capable of contraction and relaxation, and form an envelope for the bones with the help of the flesh and skin, the latter holding all together, and since the bones move freely in their joints the sinews by relaxing and contracting enable me somehow to bend my limbs, and that is the cause of my sitting here in a bent position. Or again, if he tried to account in the same way for my conversing with you, adducing causes such as sound and air and hearing and a thousand others, and never troubled to mention the real reasons, which are that since Athens has thought it better to condemn me, therefore I for my part have thought it better to sit here, and more right to stay and submit to whatever penalty she orders. Because, by dog, I fancy that these sinews and bones would have been in the neighborhood of Megara or Boeotia long ago—impelled by a conviction of what is best!—if I did not think that it was more right and honorable to submit to whatever penalty my country orders rather than to take to my heels and run away. But to call things like that causes is too absurd. If it were

said that without such bones and sinews and all the rest of them I should not be able to do what I think is right, it would be true. But to say that it is because of them that I do what I am doing, and not through choice of what is best—although my actions are controlled by mind—would be a very lax and inaccurate form of expression. Fancy being unable to distinguish between the cause of a thing and the condition without which it could not be a cause!

It was in this way that Socrates made clear the duality of the human being—the thinking autonomous soul and its container, the physical body with its desires and fears. The aim of the soul is the realization of justice and the understanding of the world in which justice is to be distinguished and comprehended. The body is the representative of the world in man, where all partial and partisan processes are reflected, pursued and desired. According to Plato, the body is the prison of the soul, its confinements being the desires which arise in and through the body, leading the consciousness of the soul to be distracted from its own intentions and creating a mere image of the self constructed from the longings and impulses of desire. This is the Platonic psychology, essentially moral in structure, leading to the question all-pervasive in Plato's works: Can virtue be taught?

What is the soul, according to Plato? It is a spark of divinity, a ray of universal soul or deity. It is this kinship with the divine that produces the higher aspirations of human beings. Yet these longings—coming from our memories of a higher state of existence in which we existed before being born—which was our condition before the long cycle of reincarnations began—these longings are the best evidence we have of both our origin and our destiny. Yet now they are clouded, weakened, almost forgotten, covered over by the garment of our vehicle, the body, with its elaborate structure of inclinations native to itself, and by the resulting intellectual constructions of that aspect of the mind reflected in the personality, the external pseudo-self.

Considering the present condition of mankind in *Therapeia*, a book about Plato's method of healing, Robert E. Cushman asks:

What, indeed, is the cause of ignorance among men, especially the double ignorance which is conceit

of knowledge in the absence of it and which contrives to turn the order of being and value upside-down? . . .

It is to be noted, in the first place, that Socrates customarily regarded human wisdom as of little worth, and Plato shared his opinion. Taken at large, men are in a condition of lamentable ignorance. Their ignorance, however, does not consist in want of information about the things pertaining to their surroundings and the management of affairs. On the contrary, the ignorance of mankind was, in part, illustrated by Sophists whose versatility was notorious. Hippias, in particular, signaled the brimming sophistic repertoires of diversified "knowledges." Stuffed with scientific and historical information, he was ever ready and willing to disgorge his learning in the presence of any group of openmouthed bystanders. To Plato information without enlightenment was as good as, or worse than, nothing. . . .

In the opening speeches of the *Phaedo* Socrates reminds his hearers that knowledge of the truth must remain imperfect in man's present existence. Regrettable as it may be, the soul cannot evade intercourse or *koinonia* (community) with the body; so long as the body companies with the soul, so long, it is said, the soul is inhibited and prevented from attaining its real "desire," the truth of Being. Something there is, then, about communion of the soul with the body which frustrates the ultimate "wish" of the soul and obstructs knowledge. The obstructive factors shortly are identified with passions or loves and desires and fears. It is the clamorous insistency of these "affections" which so disturbs the exercise of reason "that it prevents our beholding the truth." . . . The cognitive faculty becomes captivated and wholly engrossed, so that, Plato affirms, men come to believe that "nothing is true" which does not answer to sense or affords no pleasure to sensation. Therefore, Socrates declares: "The lovers of knowledge perceive that, when philosophy first takes possession of their soul, it is entirely fastened and welded to the body and is compelled to regard realities through the body as through prison bars, not with its own unhindered vision, and is wallowing in utter ignorance."

Plato was no Pollyanna. He was thoroughly aware of the obstacles to obtaining knowledge, and it is this, as much as anything else, which should give us a measure of confidence in what he says. His understanding of psychology is indeed impressive:

In the *Phaedo*, Plato declares that "the most terrible thing about man's imprisonment is the fact that it is caused by the desires of the body, so that the man in bondage is the accomplice to his own bondage." Men are "self-deceived" in the sense that one interest is so masterful as to obstruct and suppress intrinsically superior inclinations. So it becomes fully evident that the cave-wisdom of mankind, which in Plato's view is "false opinion," does not derive from the simple fact of sense perception. To be sentient and "sense-bound" are quite different conditions. The latter, alone, is the dismal state of ignorance which Plato encounters in the mass of men. The words of the *Phaedo* best summarize the predicament: "The evil is that the soul of every man, when it is greatly pleased or pained by anything, is compelled to believe that the object which caused the emotion is very distinct and very true; but it is not."

On the strength of this, the conclusion is inescapable: Human ignorance is, in part, the product, not of the inaccessibility of true Being, but of a misdirection of the cognitive power.

For correction of this error, Socrates uses the method of question and answer, although with many more questions than answers, since no answer can be final. This method, called dialectic, is valuable because it teaches people to think. But Socrates holds that even the dialectic will lead nowhere unless the student is really in search of truth—unless his kinship with the highest reality leads him on. This is the part played by the divine *eros*, in contrast with earthly affections, and its awakening is wholly unpredictable. Yet the awakening may take place because of the love of the soul for its origin and source.

How can the teacher stir this love into active being? Only by his own love, his own example, his hunger to understand others and especially those who have begun to ask questions. Can such teachers be recognized? Only with great difficulty, since sometimes their love may seem extremely hard-hearted, or rather hard-headed. Their silences are as much a part of their teaching as their words. We may learn more from their acts than from their words, although they may at times run contrary to what we believe. Wisdom, we come to realize, consists in what we do not expect. How could it be otherwise, when we consider the mess humans have

made of the world? How could the truth please people like that?

Yet there is a singular beauty in the ideas of a real teacher. This is felt, if not known, by minds which have begun to cleanse themselves of preoccupations with the senses and the resulting constructions. Plato, as Havelock points out, "continually suggests the 'contemplation' of realities which once achieved are there to be seen."

The mental condition is one of passivity, of a new sort perhaps. The poetic type of receptivity gained through imitation was an excited condition emotionally active. The new contemplation is to be serene, calm, and detached. . . .

The *Timaeus* is Plato's final tribute to this kind of speculative vision. But it is a vision, not an argument.

Is this, Havelock wonders, a betrayal of the dialectic? He ends with this question. But we should perhaps assume that Plato could not at this point be guilty of so great a mistake. The *Timaeus* is filled, Havelock says, with "the dream-clothes of mythology," yet this imagery may speak in another way to the purified heart. Plato, indeed, knew how and when to use the poet's art.

## *REVIEW*

### AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN

FAITH in and loyalty to principle, when a reviewer comes across it in a book, makes the work of telling about it pleasant indeed. And when the writer under consideration finds these qualities in a human being and celebrates the man because of his devotion to principle, the discourse is lifted above the level of moral clichés and gains life in flesh and blood—when this happens the reviewer may experience a certain delight. It is for this reason that here, in the MANAS review department, that we often return to Albert Camus when the fare of books sent in for review seems lean and hardly worth writing about.

So, this week we return once again to Camus, to his book of essays, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, issued by the Modern Library in 1960, with translations by Justin O'Brien. Early in this book Camus speaks of René Leynaud, a Resistance journalist who was shot by the Germans in 1944. Leynaud was Camus' friend and they had spent many hours together. Writing in *Combat*, the underground French Resistance newspaper in that year, Camus relates that Leynaud had entered the Resistance at its beginning by reason of everything that constituted his moral life. "He had chosen the pseudonym that corresponded to everything purest in him; to all his comrades on *Combat* he was known as Clair."

The only private passion he had kept—along with that of personal modesty—was poetry. He had written poems that only two or three of us know. They had the quality he himself had—transparency. . . . As for everything else, he shared our conviction that a certain language and insistence on honesty would restore to our country the noble countenance we cherished. . . . In any case, the man we loved will never speak again.

In May of 1944 Leynaud was arrested by the Vichy Militia. He was carrying secret documents. When he ran to escape, bullets aimed at his legs stopped him. After a time in the hospital he was transferred to a fort where he remained imprisoned until June. When the Germans were preparing to evacuate Lyon, they selected a number of French prisoners who had worked in the Resistance and took them to the Gestapo headquarters. Then they were handcuffed and loaded into a truck with German

soldiers armed with machine guns. Out in the country they were ordered to walk toward the woods, and as they walked they were slaughtered by machine gun fire. Only one of them, badly wounded, managed to crawl to a peasant's house and later told what had happened. Leynaud, then thirty-four, was among those killed.

For all of us, Leynaud's death made an example of him.

. . . Living very quietly, absorbed by the love of his wife and his son, by the needs of the combat, he didn't have many friends. But I have never known a single person who, loving him, failed to love him without reservation. This is because he inspired confidence. Insofar as it is possible for a man, he gave himself completely to everything he did. He never bargained about anything, and this is why he was assassinated. As solid as the short, stocky oaks of his Ardeche, he was both physically and morally strapping. Nothing could make the slightest dent in him when he had once made up his mind what was fair. It took a burst of bullets to subjugate him.

Early in 1944 he wrote to Camus:

"May God grant us this year and a few others, and the joy of serving the same truth. These are my wishes for 1944 that I voice for you and for me because I am eager today not to dissociate you from a certain idea I have of myself, which is not, I hope, the least noble."

Later, in 1947, Camus muses:

What are duty, virtue, honors compared to what was irreplaceable in Leynaud's? Yes, what are they but the paltry alibis of those who remain alive. We were cheated of a man three years ago, and since then we have had a heavy heart, that is all that I can say.

Camus was an artist and so regarded himself. Replying to a question in an interview that was published in *Demain* in 1957 he said:

The aim of art, the aim of a life can only be to increase the sum of freedom and responsibility to be found in every man and in the world. It cannot, under any circumstances, be to reduce or suppress that freedom, even temporarily. There are works of art that tend to make man conform and to convert him to some external rule. Others tend to subject him to whatever is worst in him, to terror or hatred. Such works are valueless to me. No great work has ever been based on hatred or contempt. On the contrary, there is not a single true work of art that has not in the end added to the inner freedom of each person who has known and loved it. Yes, that is the freedom I am extolling, and it is what helps me

through life. An artist may make a success or a failure of his life. But if he can tell himself that, finally, as a result of his long effort, he has eased or decreased the various forms of bondage weighing upon men, then in a sense he is justified and, to some extent, he can forgive himself.

In reply to another question in the same interview, Camus said:

Before he died in combat in the last war, Richard Hilary found the phrase that sums up [a] dilemma: "We were fighting a lie in the name of a half-truth." He thought he was expressing a very pessimistic idea. But one may even have to fight a lie in the name of a quarter-truth. This is our situation at present. However, the quarter-truth contained in Western society is called liberty. And liberty is the way, and the only way, of perfectibility. Without liberty heavy industry can be perfected, but not justice or truth. Our most recent history, from Berlin to Budapest, ought to convince us of this. In any case, it is the reason for my choice. I have said in this very place that none of the evils totalitarianism claims to remedy is worse than totalitarianism itself. I have not changed my mind. On the contrary, after twenty years of our harsh history, during which I have tried to accept every experience it offered, liberty ultimately seems to me, for societies and for individuals, for labor and for culture, the supreme good that governs all others.

Camus lived through what seemed to him darkest period of the twentieth century and he became what we usually call a pessimist. Skeptical of all religious ideas, he became convinced that human life was largely an absurdity, yet he decided that it was nonetheless worth living. The ground of this conviction was expressed in the briefest of his essays, "The Myth of Sisyphus," which takes up a scant four pages in another of his books. As he said in the preface to this book in 1955:

Written fifteen years ago in 1940, amid the French and European disasters, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism. In all the books I have written since, I have attempted to pursue this direction. Although "The Myth of Sisyphus" poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert.

As Camus reminds us at the beginning of the essay, Sisyphus "was the wisest and most prudent of mortals," according to Homer. Yet he offended the gods and was given the worst punishment they could

think of—to be eternally engaged in rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, only to watch it escape his hands and roll back to the bottom again. His was a "futile and hopeless labor," forever and forever, without choice. The moment when the rock begins its descent interests Camus.

I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lair of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would the torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

. . . crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. Thus Œdipus at the outset obeys fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well." Sophocles' Œdipus, like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, thus gives the recipe for the absurd victory Ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism. . . .

At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain. . . . The struggle towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

## COMMENTARY

### PYTHAGORAS AND PROCLUS

A LONG time ago, through an odd sort of swap, we obtained for our library two books from the Pythagorean Society—*Proclus's Biography, Hymns and Works* and the *Pythagoras Source Book and Library*, both translated by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, both produced by the Platonist Press, Teocalli, Yonkers, New York, the *Source Book* in 1919, *Proclus* in 1925. Production was by mimeograph, the only low-cost method in those days, mussy as mimeo tends to be, but we treasured them, since they provided source material on Pythagorean and Neoplatonic thought nowhere else available in English. The *Pythagoras Source Book* proved especially valuable since it contained four biographies of Pythagoras—by Iamblichus, Porphyry, Photius, and Diogenes Laertius, and also a "complete collection" of the writings of his disciples. Browsing in this material, one gets a feeling of what the life recommended by Pythagoras was like, and the extent of his influence, through the centuries. We know nothing of Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie save the fact of his devotion to the great Greek thinkers, Pythagoras and Plato, made manifest in his translations.

One can imagine, therefore, our delight in learning that new editions of both these works have recently been made available by Phanes Press, of Grand Rapids, Michigan (P.O. Box 6114) 49516, in paperback, the *Proclus* at \$9.95, the *Source Book* at \$17.00. They are handsomely printed and a pleasure to read. The editor of these editions, David R. Fideler, says of the *Source Book*:

In addition to containing all the texts of Guthrie's original edition, much new material has been added as well: additional translations by Arthur Fairbanks, four new appendices, illustrations, an index, a large bibliography, and a new foreword and introduction.

In his introduction, Fideler says of Pythagoras:

He was both a natural philosopher and a spiritual philosopher, a scientist and a religious thinker. He was a political theorist, and was even involved in local government. While he may not have been the first to discover the ratios of the musical scale, with which he is credited, there can be no doubt that he did conduct extensive research into musical harmonics and tuning systems. Pythagoras is well known as a mathematician, but few realize that he was a music therapist having in fact, founded the discipline. Pythagoras taught the kinship of all living things; hence he and his followers were vegetarians. Yet, while all these things may be safely stated, quite a bit of mystery still remains. This is due in large part to the fact that Pythagoras left no writings, although it is said that he wrote some poems under the name of Orpheus. Pythagoras' teaching was of an oral nature. While he seems to have made some speeches upon his arrival in southern Italy to the populace, the true fruits of his philosophic inquiries were presented only to those students who were equipped to assimilate them. Pythagoras no doubt felt, like his later admirer Plato, that philosophic doctrines of ultimate concern should never be published, seeing that philosophy is a process, and that books can never answer questions, nor engage in philosophic enquiry. . . .

The biographies of Pythagoras are unanimous that at an early age he travelled widely to assimilate the wisdom of the ancients wherever it might be found. He is said by Iamblichus to have spent some 22 years in Egypt studying there with the priests, and is also said to have studied the wisdom of the Chaldeans first-hand. These accounts are generally accepted by most scholars—as indeed they should be, owing to the high degree of contact between Asia Minor and other cultures—although it is doubtful, while not impossible, that he travelled to Persia to study the teachings of Zoroaster. In these distant lands Pythagoras not only studied the sciences there cultivated, including the mathematical sciences we may safely presume, but was also initiated into the religious mysteries of the "barbarians." As Porphyry succinctly observes, "It was from his stay among these foreigners that Pythagoras acquired the greater part of his wisdom."

Fideler's introduction is long and useful, drawing together diverse materials. He says in one place:

Pythagoras himself was heavily influenced by Orphism, an esoteric, private religion of ancient

Greece, named after the legendary musician Orpheus, "the founder of initiations," which also featured a distinctive way of life. . . . Pythagoras fully accepted the Orphic belief in transmigration or "reincarnation"—in fact, he is said to have possessed the power to remember his previous lives, and the ability to remind his associates of theirs as well.

John Mitchell begins his introduction to the life of Proclus by saying:

"Of that golden chain of philosophers, who, having themselves happily penetrated, luminously unfolded to others the philosophy of Plato, Proclus is indisputably the largest and most refulgent link." Thus wrote Thomas Taylor (1758-1835), the pious and noble-spirited English Platonist. . . . Taylor was the first to publish an English version of Marinus's biography of Proclus, appended to his translation of Proclus's *Euclid*.

We count these volumes valuable additions to our reference library.



## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

#### THE BASIS OF COMPETENCE

THERE are books about teaching and learning that need to be read over and over again. The books of John Holt are such books. Another is *The Lives of Children* by George Dennison, brought out by Random House in 1969. This book is the story of the First Street School located downtown in New York's lower East Side. Dennison started this school, which had "twenty-three black, white, and Puerto Rican in almost equal proportions, all from low-income families." Half the children had come from the public schools "with severe learning and behavior problems."

Telling about the school, Dennison says:

We didn't give tests, at least not of the competitive kind. It was important to be aware of what the children knew, but more important to be aware of *how* each child knew what he knew. We could learn nothing about Maxine by testing Eléna. And so there was no comparative testing at all. The children never missed those invidious comparisons, and the teachers were spared the absurdity of ranking dozens of personalities on one uniform scale.

Our housing was modest. The children came to school in play-torn clothes. Their families were poor. A torn dress, torn pants, frequent cleanings—there were expenses they could not afford. Yet how can children play without getting dirty? Our uncleanliness standard was just right. It looked awful and suited everyone.

We treated the children with consideration and justice. I don't mean that we never got angry and never yelled at them (nor they at us). I mean that we took seriously the pride of life that belongs to the young—even to the very young. We did not coerce them in violation of their proper independence. Parents and children found that they approved very much of this. . . .

The fact that we didn't charge tuition was made possible by a private (nonfoundation) grant sufficient to provide rent, salaries, equipment, lunches, trips, etc., for two years. . . . I need hardly say that it was fortunate we had the grant. Not only did we make a

great difference in the lives of some few children (and to an important extent in their parents' lives as well), but we had a chance to see the effects of a free school and children who, because they are routinely classified as underprivileged, delinquent, rebellious, etc., are usually treated to heavy doses of manipulation and control. . . .

When new children applied for admission, they first visited for several days so we could size each other up. As things turned out, we accepted everyone, except one pathetic little boy who had obviously suffered brain damage and could not have taken his place among normal children. It was not exactly that we had an open-door policy, but simply that we felt confident we could get results. We were correct in all cases but one, and in this instance we made a serious error. . . .

Here we want to repeat the story of a thirteen-year-old boy, José, a Puerto Rican who had been able to read Spanish at seven, but now could read neither Spanish nor English.

It was obvious that his problem was not a question of the mechanics of reading. Something primitive in the process had been destroyed. What was it? And why is it that precisely reading, which children can teach one another (Tolstoy mentions this repeatedly), should so often prove to be problematical?

White children did not have José's difficulties. The words printed on paper were *their* words. But—

José staring at the printed words, his forehead lumpy, his lip thrust out resentfully—anger, neurotic stupidity, and shame written all over him—seemed to be saying, "This belongs to the schoolteachers, not to me. It is not speech but a task. I am not meant to possess it, but to perform it and be graded. And anyway it belongs to the Americans who kick me around and don't want me getting deeper in their lives. Why should I let them see me fail? I'll quit at the very beginning."

Dennison understood the rebellious boy. He just wanted to stop failing, not to really learn to read. He wanted to *have already* learned to read, as Dennison puts it.

I had known from the beginning that José had learned very little in school, yet I was surprised by his ignorance. It was the ignorance of a boy who again

and again had drawn back from experience in fright and resentment. He did not orient himself in space and time as do middle-class boys of thirteen. He did not know in what month he was born, or the months of the year, or the meaning of hours, days, weeks, years, centuries. And this is not to say that he lived with the sensory immediacy of a child. His sensual experience was similarly impoverished. Elena, José's sister, assimilated information and skills with sometimes dazzling rapidity.

Dennison got to know the boy well, sometimes putting his arm around him and helping him to be at ease. In one place Dennison quotes from John Dewey:

Under normal conditions, learning is the product and reward of occupation with subject matter. Children do not set out, consciously, to learn walking and talking. One sets out to give his impulses for communication and for fuller intercourse with others a show. He learns in consequence of his direct activities. The better methods of teaching a child, say, to read, follow the same road. They do not fix his attention upon the fact that he has to learn something and so make his attitude self-conscious and constrained. They engaged his activities and in the process of engagement he learns. . . .

Dennison remarks:

José and I never did reach this stage of engagement with a compelling subject. His difficulties were too extreme. He was trapped too desperately in awareness of himself. My strategy was to take him *through* this awareness by giving him the means to turn it to account. . . .

It was not until the end of the year that ordinary books finally took their place in our reading lessons. This happened in a natural and desirable way. Vicente, who had done most of his reading with Gloria, took to visiting our room at the end of José's lesson, bringing with him the book he was currently engaged in. He would sit down beside me and read aloud until he had satisfied himself. He never asked for help or allowed me to interfere in any way, but would simply read for a while and then stop. José lingered and listened while Vicente read. One day he went to the book closet and rummaged about for a long time, and came back with a book. He had chosen it, I think, by noticing the relative proportions of pictures and words, knowing that few words, big pictures, and large type meant infallibly that the book had been designed for beginners. In the next three

days José read three first-grade readers with ease and understanding. On the one hand, this was not much of an accomplishment for a thirteen-year-old boy. On the other hand, he had reversed a habit of failure that stretched back for six years, and had made a definite and not unpromising beginning. Most important, his attitude had brightened enormously.

Towards the end of his book Dennison speaks of the influence of the First Street School on the parents of the children who came there.

The parents got to know one another. The social exchange was inspiring, but soon there was much more, for they had many needs in common and found that they could help one another. They swapped clothing, took care of one another's children, chipped in and hired an older child to escort the young ones to school. . . . Some became interested in civil rights, and are now involved in black power and community actions. Many helped at school during special activities and on trips.

A conclusion of the book is that "there is no such thing as competence without love."

In naming love as the necessary base of competence in human affairs, I am referring not only to the emotion of love, nor just to the moral actions and feelings that belong to caring, but to loving and caring in the very generalized, primitive sense in which they constitute a background condition of life, as we say of young children they live "as if in love," and as adults, when they are simplified by disasters and extreme demands, reveal a constructive energy and compassion which are obviously generalized and basic

## *FRONTIERS*

### **Oxfam Projects**

FROM a recent report by Oxfam America, a nonprofit, nonsectarian agency that neither seeks nor accepts U.S. government funds, we learn of Oxfam's support of projects undertaken by poor women in both India and Bangladesh.

Most projects have two main objectives: to increase women's economic security (through the provision of credit, training, and materials); and to develop and support autonomous local organizations that help women gain more control over decisions that affect their lives.

Women are commonly regarded as second-class citizens in many parts of Asia. While they are major contributors to milk production and animal husbandry, government officials and dairy federations have, Oxfam says, "completely overlooked women's role." In consequence, they have little access to cooperatives, veterinary services, technical assistance, and credit. But a change has begun.

In 1980, the Self-Employed Women's Association began organizing various groups in rural areas, including agricultural laborers, small farmers, artisans, and milk producers. Oxfam America's grants have helped SEWA to organize dairy cooperatives that provide village women with credit to buy dairy cows. In return, the women agree to sell their milk through the SEWA co-ops and to repay their loans with the first female calf born to their cow.

What difference does a dairy co-op make? The women are not just hired laborers now; they own their own cows, and they can work for others when they like. In addition the SEWA co-ops provide a good marketing alternative to private dairies, which sometimes take advantage of poor and illiterate people by short-weighting the milk or falsifying records.

This applies mainly to rural women. Poor women in cities have other problems.

Many poor women in the slums of Bombay earn their livelihood by preparing meals every day for migrant factory workers. Unable to obtain bank loans to buy the staple foods and cooking supplies needed for their work, these women were forced for years to

take credit from moneylenders at exorbitant rates of interest. Sometimes they had no choice but to pawn their cooking utensils in order to repay the loans.

But in 1973, these women formed an organization called Annapurna Mahila Mandal (AMM), which now has 8,000 members. (Annapurna means "goddess of food.") AMM's main function is to procure bank loans for members on a group-guarantee basis, freeing the members from reliance on moneylenders. If one member is forced to default on her loan, the entire group takes responsibility for repaying it.

Oxfam supports this program, which provides legal counseling, vocational training, and medical services for women.

The "Green Revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s had a mixed effect in both India and Bangladesh. While it increased food production, it was hard on the small farmers who went into debt to buy expensive seed, and the fertilizer and pesticide which the new technology required. By reason of these costs many small farmers lost their land. "Between 1964 and 1974, the number of landless agricultural laborers in India increased from 30.8 million to 46.4 million. In Bangladesh, nearly 45 per cent of the population are landless."

The report continues:

In Bangladesh, thousands of rural women have come together to form "samities" (village women's savings groups) in order to increase their personal and financial independence. Through the samities, the women participate in income-generating activities like making embroidered quilts, spinning silk, or rearing poultry. They save their money and sometimes make group investments in small business ventures or land rental. . . .

The benefits of a samity were evident in the comments of Bilatan, a member interviewed by Oxfam America staff.

"During the dry season I used to work in other households," Bilatan said. "In return I received a little food, which wasn't enough for survival. . . . In the rainy season, my family ate only yam roots or water lilies, which I picked up from the roadside. A few years ago, BRAC [Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee] came to our village and organized us in a samity. I became a member and

received training as a poultry extension worker. I'm earning money now."

As an extension worker, Bilatan offers technical assistance in poultry-rearing to other women in her village. With the additional income she earns, she is better able to feed and support her family.

The samities afford opportunity for self-education.

Each samity also serves as a forum for the women to discuss economic and social problems—such as low wages, the dowry, polygamy, family violence—which affect their daily lives. As their awareness of their legal and political rights increases, the women begin to exert pressure to obtain those rights, and often decide to challenge oppressive cultural traditions or powerful vested interests in their village.

Women of India and Bangladesh have great need of help of this sort. The Green Revolution displaced many of them from agriculture. As a percentage of small-holder agriculture in India, women decreased from 56 per cent in 1961 to 30 per cent in 1971. In both India and Bangladesh, poor women face similar social and economic disadvantages. In both countries, women are less valued than men.

Women in both countries have less opportunity than men to participate and exercise control in legal, social, and political institutions . . . Most poor women are part of the "informal sector" of the economy that encompasses most of India's labor force—people who are self-employed or who work for a daily wage, generally for low pay and with no job security. . . . women's traditional productive activities have in many cases come under men's control. In Bangladesh, for example, the introduction of post-harvest mechanization (rice mills), operated by men, displaced many women from one of their customary employment options. Men, rather than women, tend to receive training to operate new technology. Government credit and extension services are also generally aimed at men, not women.

For all these reasons the help afforded through the support of women's groups by Oxfam is widely appreciated. Oxfam was founded in England in 1942 to aid in famine relief. There are now seven independent Oxfams in a number of

countries. The address of Oxfam America is 115 Broadway, Boston, Mass. 02116, with another office at 513 Valencia St., No. 8, San Francisco, Calif. 94110.