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REDISCOVERING THE LOST VISION

> We seek to restore the family, the neighborhood, the community, and the workplace as vital alternatives in our national life to ever-expanding federal power.
>
> —*Guess Who?*[1]

> The farm problem is not a financial crisis so much as a failure of culture. It will not be—cannot be—solved by a new farm program so long as the farm family is the primary locus for receiving money. The farm family cannot exist in any dignified sort of way without rural community.
>
> —WES JACKSON
> The Land Institute

THIS is an overview description and rationale for a project, or a set of integrated projects, in the humanities and arts, to help interested and determined rural Americans take a new look at old problems of chronic depression and decline in their communities.

The project derives from the consideration of three observations, evident to anyone who has lived in both rural and urban communities:

1. A reasonably successful and enduring rural community is not just a "miniature city," but has a broader, more complex, more intuitive and ecologically sensitive cultural structure than the industrial city;

2. Urban-industrial economic institutions cannot be scaled down to fit the rural community and the agrarian landscape, and 19th and 20th-century efforts to absorb the rural regions into the urban-industrial mainstream have only managed to erode and fragment the rural culture so tenuously evolving out of the American agrarian vision;

3. Our new awareness of resource limits and environmental degradation makes a more highly-evolved rural community, consistent with the intuitive vision of the founding fathers but modified and amplified by two centuries experience, not only desirable but perhaps necessary from the perspective of cultural survival.

With those thoughts in mind, this project is conceived to supplement a rural community education and development process, not to preserve the rural community as we have known it, but to recommence the original American mission to create it as a more culturally balanced, ecologically coherent, and flexibly free alternative to the increasingly unmanageable, culturally narrow, and evolutionarily vulnerable industrial city. This was a cultural problem that the founding fathers—some of them—could only intuit "as through a glass darkly" in the 18th century. Now we know more—more about what is ultimately untenable in our present culture, and more about both human and environmental needs and the kinds of cultural institutions that might better meet those needs. In this sense, the small rural community is not a relic of the past whose preservation is strictly a local concern, but a laboratory of the future, of national importance, where we can go now in the spirit encouraged by Jefferson: "to correct the crude essays of our first and unexperienced, although wise, virtuous, and well-meaning councils." And it will not be the sciences, as in the urban paradigm, but the disciplines of art and the humanities that will be our best tools.

The project is designed with small communities of less than 5000 people in mind, remote from urban centers, with a traditional agricultural background and an erratic record at best of other economic and cultural ties with the urban-industrial mainstream in America. The project is intended to supplement a locally-initiated process of community education and development, making available to the community some professional and specialized services and resources from the larger society.

This kind of assistance from outside the community, for the essentially intra-community processes of development, has evolved as a logical extension service of universities and government agencies to small communities in the period since World War II. Because this has been a period of extensive urbanization and industrialization in the

rural regions of America, with urban-industrial practices and values replacing fragmented and exhausted traditional rural values, most of the outside help offered to rural communities engaged in community development has been oriented toward facilitating the transition from a stagnant rural way of life to living on the fringe of the urban-industrial mainstream. To a certain extent, "community development" in this period has become synonymous with "economic development"; certainly the success or failure of a community development program has most often been measured in terms of new economic growth.

What is increasingly obvious, however, is the fact that there are many small communities which are probably never going to be absorbed into the urban-industrial mainstream in any way that is beneficial to the people of the communities. Many towns in both western and eastern Colorado show this in different ways. The mineral resources that have been the main reason for extending urban-industrial institutions into Western Colorado historically have generally proven to be too marginal, too remote, or too difficult to mine and process to be the economic foundation for stable communities. Only the large-scale urban-oriented recreation industries have shown potential for creating relatively stable urban-industrial "satellite" communities—but even skiing is beginning to show familiar signs of slippage into the boom-bust cycling that has been so chronically destructive in Western Colorado.

In Eastern Colorado, as elsewhere in the Great Plains, the effort of communities to join the urban-industrial mainstream (as advertised nationally in all media) has taken the form of a transition from "agriculture" to "agribusiness." The current farm crisis is due, more than to any other reason, to the belief that the farm can and should be financed and run like any other business or industry in the urban-industrial mainstream economy. This has led to the imposition, in the name of industrial efficiency, of economic structures and tools that simply do not fit agriculture, and are destructive not only to the farmer but to the land as well. This process has also contributed substantially to the chronic depression in the ranching valleys of Western Colorado.

The upshot is that there are communities throughout the state and region which have forsaken a stagnant and fragmented rural culture in an effort to join, and participate in the prosperity of, the mainstream urban-industrial economy; but for various reasons the people of those communities have received only the problems but none (or few) of the blessings of participation in the mainstream. And given the general situation in the mainstream economy itself—the known limits to affordable resource production, the drag effect on the economy of the need to take care of environmental problems, and the decay of discipline and innovative imagination in the urban masses that now make up the vast bulk of the human resource—there is no reason to expect the mixed blessings of mainstream absorption to extend to these communities in the foreseeable future.

These communities are clearly in need of some kind of community development process of the most fundamental sort: they are almost starting over at the level of the basic "social contract." What kind of community can they create, out of the resources around them (including the human resource that is them), that is better than each just "going it alone" in some personal accommodation to the urban-industrial paradigm?

The related question, addressed by this project, is: what assistance and resources could be made available to people in that situation from the larger society, in a way that might genuinely help them come up with a workable cultural alternative to being maintained in state of dependency on credit bailouts, price supports, and other farm programs that seem almost modelled on Indian agency programs? Clearly the majority of the community development assistance programs evolved over the period of urban-industrial expansion are of limited value—the conventional approaches of planning for growth, creating new business and industrial jobs, impact mitigation, et cetera.

This project is based on the belief that there are largely untapped cultural resources in the American

heritage, both in the humanities and the arts, that are fundamental, first, to understanding the overall situation, and then to moving creatively and constructively toward a more conscious and fitting cultural response to environments where the mix of natural blessings and problems is both enriched and complicated now by the presence of vast cultural forces, which, like the weather, cannot be controlled from the small community, but must be adapted to culturally, and lived with as creatively as possible.

The project has humanities components and arts components, each designed for different but very much interrelated purposes. The rationale for each set of components is discussed below; then the components themselves are described.

An integrated, multi-discipline humanities program is envisioned: in order to create a more conscious historical ecological, and philosophical context for the important role of stable and culturally independent small communities in a free society; and—perhaps even more important—to avoid, for a change, the common historical problem of underestimating the true nature and complexity of the small agrarian community intuitively conceived as the cornerstone of the original American vision.

At the heart of this project is a slightly radical but defendable hypothesis: that the depressed and culturally fragmented rural communities of the present in America are not the remnants of a past we have grown out of, but the tenuous evidence of a future we have not yet managed to grow into.

That hypothesis is evolved as a logical resolution to the seeming paradox at the heart of American history: why did a nation which consciously set for itself the model of a decentralized agrarian republic, based on the family farm and the small town with its local businesses and manufactories, emerge within a century of constitutionally framing that vision, as a major urban-industrial power, whose small farmers and small towns were already in trouble and have been in trouble ever since? The agrarian vision of the "Jeffersonian" contingent among the founding fathers did materialize in bits and pieces, most effectively in the Old Northwest Territory in the late 18th and early 19th centuries; but it never attained the cultural dominance envisioned by the Jeffersonians. Why?

There are a number of reasons why, but two stand out and will be mentioned here. The most important reason why that agrarian vision never really matured in America was because there was no cultural paradigm that could have stood against the then incredibly dynamic urban-industrial juggernaut, moving out of England and Europe with a vast, rich, and wide-open continent to expand into. The agrarian vision was conceived by intelligent and well-meaning men, mostly out of concern at the impact of the paleotechnic industrial culture on both the natural world and human society; but it was highly idealistic and theoretical, often naively so, with much that wanted working out through trial-and-error in unpressured circumstances.

The urban-industrial paradigm, on the other hand, came to America as a "cultural pre-fab," most of its structures and engines already worked out and quite operational, needing only the "fuel" that America had in abundance at that time: vast quantities of easily exploitable resources, and sufficient quantities of immigrant people wanting to "better themselves"—spiritually as well as materially, perhaps, but first things first.

That difficulty—an untried, idealistic vision overmatched by a proven, pragmatic, and well-financed way of life—was compounded by the fact that the majority of the people who came to America in search of some alternative to the Anglo-European industrial city seriously underestimated and misunderstood the agrarian vision. Even its leading philosophers imagined it as a "return" to some simpler, purer, more natural state for humankind, when in fact it was just the opposite, as many good people found to their dismay once they were down on the ground trying to work it all out. There is probably no form of community more complex than a relatively small, relatively close-knit but not "blood-bound" community of "post-urban" people, all willing enough perhaps to sacrifice some material opportunity for some vaguely conceived spiritual benefits, but physically and spiritually under-equipped for the difficult process of trying to work out, under survival pressures, all the details of how

to live creatively and democratically in harmony with their environment and with each other.

True agriculture—which is to say, a culture based on living intelligently and sensitively with the land rather than an industrial economy based on extracting the riches from the soil—has to be learned down on the ground with a great deal of dogged perseverance and creative awareness: not an easy or entirely natural combination. The same is true for effective democracy: it requires strong personal disciplines of patience, self-knowledge and self-confidence, tolerance and openness, capacities for speaking articulately and listening intelligently.

By contrast, the industrial city is a fairly simple cultural form, with its economic hierarchies and chains-of-command, its useful masses whose general ignorance and dullness is a convenience cultivated (not always consciously, but always) by the higher castes, and its simple machines of production and consumption uncomplicated (until just recently) by considerations of environmental limits or other long-term considerations. It is a "simple cultural form" compared to the envisioned agrarian landscape in the same way that the huge brontosaurus was a simple animal form compared to the first small mammals.

Given the substantial difficulties encountered in trying to hack a democratic agrarian community out of a vast and vastly indifferent wilderness, with semi-primitive hand tools and cultural tools even less evolved, it is small wonder that, generation after generation, even the more spiritually motivated Americans of Old World descent gradually slipped back into the forms of the "proven" Old World materialistic culture. By the time the tide of settlement was peaking in the last half of the 19th century, everything—the physical land itself, the law-making process, and the majority consciousness were so generally bound up in urban-based networks of finance, transportation, communication, and production, that the idealistic agrarian vision was thoroughly undermined from the start in most of the West, even though the nation continued to pay lip service to it.

Had the general world-picture continued to be what it was in the 18th and 19th centuries, the standard historical interpretation of civilization, in which larger social organizations succeed smaller ones, culminating in the industrial city at the very apex of civilization, might still suffice, with the farm community a beloved but necessarily abandoned stage in the succession—the kind of tale the great Jurassic thunder-lizards might have told each other for assurance, had they been a tale-telling family.

Where the overall picture has changed, however, just in the last twenty or thirty years for most of us, is in the increasingly irrefutable realization that the industrial city—now almost totally dominant in American culture—is a cultural form with a limited future, at least in the free and easy, whither-thou-will state that has made it so attractive these past five or six hundred years to freedom-seeking people. A decade of experience with various economic and technical devices, to try to limit the appetites and deal with the wastes of the urban-industrial juggernaut, has given us an inkling of what it will cost, psychologically as well as economically, to even begin to try to bring so huge and unwieldy a thing as the industrial city into some kind of balance with the world's capacity to support it. Given the monumental scale and complexity of such an undertaking, however, one has to look with a whole new perspective on that intuitive American vision from the 18th century, of the rural community—not as a town built around a railroad terminal and a bank that gets its money from the city, but as a culturally independent and self-sufficient, humanly-scaled, ecologically coherent, evolutionarily flexible, democratically conscious community, whose people are not trained to fill isolated and specialized economic niches but educated to collaborate intelligently on the maintenance and creative enhancement of their common niche in the larger unfolding of life.

If such a community is ever to be realized, it will only be through the further evolution and refinement of still-rough cultural tools that are clearly in the respective bailiwicks of the humanities disciplines—social philosophy, political theory, history, literature, environmental ethics, economic philosophy, cultural evolution, and others. This project to "rediscover the lost vision" of America

begins with an interdisciplinary forum on rural culture, for humanities scholars with a sense of that original intuitive vision; they will work out a program of study groups and scholars designed to articulate that vision in less naive and more detailed terms than has usually been the case. That study and workshop program will then be taken into communities which have extended the invitation, as part of a fairly intensive community education process, which in turn inaugurates a long-term community development process.

Griscom Morgan, of Community Service in Yellow Springs, Ohio, told of an illuminating comment from a German journalist who spent some time studying in the United States earlier this century:

> . . . When he was through, someone asked him: "Isn't this a terrible place?" He replied: "I'm tremendously excited about the United States. The United States is just being born. What you see are just the dying remnants of Europe. But what's coming is a wonderful thing and it s just being born out of the ashes of the old order."

Nowhere in America are there more ashes than in what is left of rural America. But what is "being born out of the ashes" will not be born automatically or easily: only as people with the will, discipline, awareness, and experience work to bring it about. And the humanities disciplines, and the texts that are their record of past efforts, are what we have for creating and forging the processes through which we work to bring it about.

A multi-faceted set of arts-related programs and ideas is envisioned, for a direct frontal assault on the common perception in small and large communities that, as one Western Coloradoan put it, the community development process is "an intellectual exercise reserved only for the upper middle class who can afford to sit back and ponder all this heavy thinking."

A twofold challenge is implied in that criticism: to attract a broader group of participants to community efforts to work out a more conscious and fitting future; and to open up or broaden out the traditional "left-brain" intellectual channeling of the community's perception of itself.

The performing arts and the visual arts have considerable potential in dealing with both challenges, from both a participating and a "perceiving" perspective. "To hold its own," American philosopher and sociologist Baker Brownell said, "a town has to be interesting"; and it is the artists' business to try to keep things interesting, stimulating community interest and dialogue when that is lacking, and stimulating criticism and correction of the community when the community becomes oppressively hidebound or narrow in its approaches to problems. This project will use theatre, music, and the visual arts to help open up the people of the rural community, and hopefully to move the community toward a more rounded, more interesting, and more conscious conception of what community life can be.

GEORGE SIBLEY

[1]RONALD REAGAN

REVIEW
THE USES OF EARTH

VERY nearly any book the title of which has the word "adobe" in it gets attention here. Adobe houses use comparatively little wood and the "mud" that is called adobe may be free, on your land or lot. Years ago, when MANAS writers were young enough to contemplate such projects, one of us acquired within the city limits a good-sized lot—$1500 in those days—which was all black adobe. It wasn't choice real estate, but the street dead-ended at the top of a hill (little traffic) and was covered in many places with eucalyptus trees, helping to reduce the effects of smog. So the owner went to the library for books on adobe, finding a few. In one of them he learned, however, that an artist of some note in this area decided to build himself an adobe home, only to find that the building department made him build a conventional dwelling around it, according to code. So that plan was given up, but the enthusiasm for adobe remained and was devoted to the books we found on the subject.

The one we have now—a new edition of one that first came out in 1973—is *Adobe—Build It Yourself*, by Paul Graham McHenry Jr., a handsome and well illustrated paperback of 150 pages at $18.50, brought out by the University of Arizona Press.

Why use adobe to build a home? Because it is the natural and logical material in the arid Southwest, and because it saves trees, which are becoming scarce, and because of the economies involved for someone who has the time to learn how to do it. Other reasons would be that an adobe home is naturally cool in the summer and warm in the mild winters of California (southern) and building departments have become a bit more reasonable. Finally, adobe fits in with the landscape better than any other mode of construction and the first settlers (Anglo as well as Mexican) in this area used it because there was no other way to have a home.

Mr. McHenry begins by answering the question: What is adobe?

> Adobe is a word with several meanings. The first, and most common, is sun-dried mud brick; the second, a general term for the basic earth that forms the mud, and the third a term for a building or structure made of these mud bricks. Adobe bricks are perhaps the oldest manufactured building material. The word itself is Spanish, but comes from several similar sounding words in Arabic, meaning to mix, or smooth.

The material for adobe is available wherever there is dirt, and varying percentages of clay, sand, and fine particles, depending on the location. The references to "brick" in the Bible, McHenry says, mean sun-dried mud brick.

> Excavations at the site of the smelters for King Solomon's mines at Aquaba in North Africa revealed the use of adobe bricks in construction. The idea of using adobe for brick is very logical, and was undoubtedly arrived at independently in several parts of the world. . . .
>
> Solid mud-wall construction must have been thought of by some enterprising individual who reasoned that if the wall was of thick, solid mud, it wouldn't have to be repaired so often. This construction technique seems to have been done by packing damp mud into a wall shape, allowing it to dry, and then placing another layer. This process was improved upon by the pre-forming of mud balls of roughly molded shapes that could be stacked on top of each other thus speeding up the process of wall building. The construction of Casa Grande, a famous prehistoric ruin in Arizona seems to have been accomplished in somewhat this manner. It appears that baskets of mud, perhaps semi-dried, called "turtles," were used.

The only real reason why adobe is so little known and so little used as a building material—especially by self-builders of their own homes—is given by this author, who is himself an architect-builder in Albuquerque, New Mexico:

> Most research projects are funded by the private business community. Adobe suffers in this regard because its use mainly benefits the homeowner or small business, there being few ways that big business can benefit directly. Manufacturers associations such as the Portland Cement Association and the Brick

> Institute sponsor research projects funded by companies that promote increased use of the types of materials they manufacture. Adobe has no such champion so research efforts are limited by lack of funds and interest. Would-be homeowners, the most likely beneficiaries of such research, have no lobbies or funding resources.

McHenry gives directions for making adobe bricks. The main requirement is the right proportion of sand, clay, and fines. There are tests which determine this, enabling corrections. You need to build forms to give the bricks their shape. The size is usually 10" X 4" X 14", which produces a brick of less than forty pounds, about all a man can handle without soon getting tired out. There are lots of instructions about preparing the mud, shaping, and drying. It is good to soak the forms in motor oil before using them; then bricks come off easily. Stabilizing adobe blocks with asphalt emulsion added to the mix, resists erosion. The mortar for all adobe blocks is simply the same mud used to make the blocks. McHenry tells how to make the walls straight and plumb and how much mortar to use between the courses. He is an architect and pretty fussy, but he has good reasons, which he gives most of the time. None of it is just theory. He has himself done all the things he tells about.

A lot of this book is given to more conventional kinds of construction which are combined with overall adobe. His customers seem like a prosperous lot and their places are quite beautiful, but not wildly experimental. There are wonderful other books about this sort of adobe construction—especially *Mud, Space & Spirit* by Virginia Gray and Alan Macrae, with photographs by Wayne McCall, issued by Capra Press in Santa Barbara, Calif., 1976. But an owner-builder is likely to need all the practical advice he can get, to avoid trouble with officials if he is close to some town, and to not make serious mistakes that can hardly be corrected once the mud hardens.

> Slabs will crack! No matter how carefully you prepare, pour, and finish them, cracks will appear. Now that you have accepted this premise, you must try to keep them to a minimum. Where large areas of concrete will be required (20' X 20' or more) you must use an expansion joint. This formidable sounding term is merely a strip of resilient material, about 1/2" in thickness and as wide as the slab is thick. The most common material used is asphalt impregnated wood fiberboard.

Before the days of concrete slabs, floors were simply hardened mud. The Spanish and the Pueblos of the Southwest sometimes mixed animal blood into the clay for floors to add hardness. McHenry suggests brick:

> Bricks make an attractive, traditional floor that can be laid accurately by a careful amateur. . . .
>
> Assuming that you have the dirt floor reasonably level you should sprinkle the entire area liberally with insecticide, to hold back the ant and varmint population. Over this spread a plastic sheet (4 mil thickness is O.K.). This material may be bought in rolls, in widths up to 36 feet or more. Buy a roll width that is slightly larger than the narrowest width of most of your rooms. . . . On top of this spread approximately 1" of dry sand. I say dry because this seems to work best. . . . The sand should be leveled by the use of screeds, like the ones discussed pouring concrete slabs. . . . It is then a simple matter to place the brick firmly on the smooth sand bed.

In the concluding paragraphs of his preface, Mr. McHenry warns and appeals to his readers:

> Building with adobe involves a great deal of hard physical work. This has not changed. . . . A new development in the adobe industry is the hydraulic pressing machine which will make bricks at the rate of five to ten per minute, ready for use without further curing. This type of device, while logical and cost-effective for a brick manufacturer, may not be so for the homeowner. . . .
>
> The fundamental concepts and problems of building one's own shelter of adobe have remained unchanged for the most part. It is a trying but rewarding experience, both in personal satisfaction and in monetary consideration. It has been and remains a practical idea.

Noel Young, who runs Capra Press, has this to say about the book, *Mud, Space & Spirit*, the book his firm put out in 1976:

> The houses in this book are bursts of spirit, each unique from the other and far away, yet made from

common materials on common Southwestern land. The diversity of walls, for example. While consensus favors curving space, some find security in square corners and "masculine" angles. Such an arrangement of phobias and manias—nest rooms versus castles, planning against improvisation, symmetry opposed to free form, ruggedness compared to finesse, claustrophobia and vertigo. Two houses are completely underground, no silhouette to disturb the horizon. Another is perched on a high mountain ridge, where an eagle would be. Yet all of them are built from mud, the trunks of ponderosa pines, peeled aspen seedlings, and split cedar. . . .

While elsewhere more people are going back to the land, these visionary troglodytes are literally going *into* the land, burrowing in and pulling earthen walls like cloaks over their shoulders.

COMMENTARY
SANCTUARY

THE most informative report on the Sanctuary Movement that we have seen is by David Quammen in the December *Harper's.* It began in 1980 when twenty-six Salvadorans tried to walk through the Sonoran Desert across the border, and those who did not die of thirst were rescued by the U.S. Border Patrol. Since then, 500,000 Salvadorans and 80,000 Guatemalans have found their way into the United States where, as it developed, they are regarded by the Government as job-seeking emigrants and not as fugitives from persecution or death. "Denied almost any chance of asylum, denied exemption from deportation, Salvadorans and Guatemalans have no legal protection in the one country on earth that prides itself most stentorianly on being a haven for refugees."

Some Tucson Presbyterians began the sanctuary movement when their pastor, John Fife, told the members of his church what was happening. They decided to provide unofficial refuge for people taking flight from Central American governments, no matter what the U.S. claimed, and they made no secret of what they were doing. Why? Because, as this writer says, "Deportation is especially terrifying to anyone who has already fled the death squads. The very act of having gone north may be counted a sign of subversive inclination, or at least of disloyalty, and any deportee who lands at the San Salvador or Guatemala City airport is marked and vulnerable." Today—

> More than 300 Quaker meetings, Roman Catholic parishes, Protestant congregations, and synagogues are now involved—perhaps as many as 50,000 citizens. They are avowedly determined to prevent Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees from being deported back home, where they may face imprisonment, torture, and death. The Political Asylum Project of the American Civil Liberties Union has matched the names of fifty-two refugees who were denied entry into the United States with the names of fifty-two people whose deaths were reported in El Salvador.

Our government, however, has been adamant. The illegal emigrants must be returned to their own country, and U.S. citizens who aid them in escaping this fate are being triad in the courts. On May 1, 1986, a federal jury convicted eight persons of violating our immigrant laws.

Fortunately, plenty of publicity has been given to the sanctuary activity, and it will no doubt go on.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

EMASCULATING LANGUAGE

JACK SMITH, a columnist in the *Los Angeles Times*, is a writer generously endowed with common sense, which makes him very quotable. In his essay for August 14, he tells about his encounter with a new computer program meant to help would-be writers to do better work. He begins by saying that such programs may teach you something if your writing is simply awful—"pompous, inflated, long-winded, ungrammatical, and littered with misspellings, clichés"—but if, on the other hand, "you write well, they cannot only ruin your day, they can ruin your style."

> Writing software simply analyzes something you have written checking it against its own rigid rules of construction, diction and syntax.
>
> It does not understand what you have written. It does not know whether your work makes sense, or is engaging or dull. It has no idea whether it is artful, persuasive, banal or inane. The program prints out your piece and under every line in which it finds something bad, according to its rules, it goes bingo, inserting a line that spells out your error.
>
> The program has no ear for style; it has no common sense it is unmoved by poetry, unconvinced by logic, unamused by humor.
>
> You cannot make it laugh; you cannot make it cry; you cannot make it angry. You cannot even bore it.

Smith subjected one of his columns to this computer program, and was instructed that his sentences were too long (more than 22 words), that he shouldn't have begun a sentence with "But," and that he used 23 "uncommon" words. He also, here and there, employed the passive voice.

What, Jack Smith wonders, would the computer say about Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence? What would it say about John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row?* Of course, he muses that the program "is not designed to analyze historic documents or works of genius. It is meant only to improve the writing of ordinary contemporaries." He ends with the comment of a sentence fifteen lines long (in small type):

> I don't mean to compare myself with Jefferson or Steinbeck, but I think they prove that a sentence need not be short to be clear, and that a long sentence, if its structure is good, can convey more than a series of short sentences that RIGHTWRITER evidently approves of, it being more forceful to use a long word that says exactly what one means to say than a short word that everyone knows but which is less precise, because if you write constantly for readers at the fourth-grade level you are not likely to be engaging the interest of more educated readers, and if we cannot entertain the educated, what is the point of writing, since the object of the written word is to convey information and express ideas and to extend the limits of our understanding?

We go now to the Autumn 1986 *American Scholar* to sample the irritation—not quite wrath, but close to it—of Jacques Barzun, who takes pleasure in the English language and does what he can to oppose mechanistic attempts to "improve" its use by means that can't possibly work. This, he shows, is the age of reference books, many of which we would be better off without. He is not against dictionaries or related aids to the writer—there are some both good and pleasant to use—but opposes without mercy works of reference which are rigid, opinionated, and righteous. He reminds us "that the great Elizabethan and Augustan writers did not even have dictionaries."

He does not care at all for helpers in the use of English who have computer-like minds, saying,

> Surely the failure of all this well-meant aid is due in part to its poor quality. The mentors repeat futile advice in chummy tones: "Don't be afraid of rules!" "Write short sentences," as if the difficult craft of brevity were a cure for nonsense and malaprops. For example, the large *Dictionary Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk* blurs nuances right and left, sarcastically pointing out "the truth." Thus *"direct mail:* unsolicited mail or, descending one more notch toward reality, junk mail." Thanks to this hairy-chest attitude we learn that *homicide* is a genteelism for *murder* and *illegal* for *criminal*—as if manslaughter

were not also homicide and illegality broader than crime.

Mr. Barzun has one particular target:

> It is *The Wordtree* by Henry G. Burger, a quarto of 380 closely packed pages, addressed below its title to a list of some thirty professions and described as "A Transitive Cladistic for Solving Physical and Social Problems." The compilation is said by the author to serve this purpose by analyzing a quarter-million words "by their processes: (it) branches them binarily to pinpoint the concepts . . . to produce a handbook of physical and social engineering."
>
> How this magic is accomplished, according to the compiler, is through the pairing of ideas with their causes and effects as these are embodied in words. Roget's familiar *Thesaurus* gives only synonyms and associates; the user has to choose among them according to his sense of nuance. In the interlocking vocabulary of *The Wordtree*, the user is guided by the hand toward terms of process and procedure, antonyms and alternatives, and kindred sort of linkage. Not that this labyrinth is easy to follow. In addition to some fifty abbreviations (rather poorly devised), there are a dozen symbols, whose position or combination signifies connections said to be factual. The rest of the interweaving relies on reference by number from an Index to a Hierarchy. To master the system it is necessary to study fifty pages of explanation.

Barzun believes that anyone smart enough to understand how to use this book can very well get along without it. Commenting broadly, he says:

> It may seem curious that words should so often excite the interest of persons who have little native gift for using them enjoyably. But it is obvious that words as bare items offer a splendid array to the collector and classifier. Not only is there for his purpose no need to regard the aesthetic and psychological aspects of language, but to do so might complicate his operations. The linguists have preached this dogma repeatedly, arguing that theirs was a science and a science must deal with objects stripped of individual merit and charm.

Thus the lexicographers and the linguists would have us abandon the blessed ambiguity of words, instruct the young in the inflexible certainties of scientific definition, outlaw the poets by rules far sterner than Plato's, leaving nothing in speech that requires the imagination. As Barzun puts it, "It is the lexicographer's occupational ailment to become a hardware dealer who tosses nuts and bolts into bins, judging by externals only. Ridden by his 'science,' he is blind to the art of words and misconceives what he calls the life of language." It seems a good idea to keep the young as far away as possible from these people.

FRONTIERS

Not Learning from History

A LARGE part of the state of California was once little but arid desert, and is now said to be returning to that condition. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has by various means brought water to these desert areas, making California the primary source of fruit and vegetables for the nation, but now it is discovered that irrigation of the desert lands has in many cases brought to the surface of the lands too much salt, and in some cases more selenium than is good for either animals or humans. Without irrigation, the land is worthless for commercial agriculture; with it, the land is salting up—according to an article by Gina Maranto in *Discover* for June 1985.

Concerning selenium, this writer says:

> One of the most widely distributed trace elements on earth, selenium is a necessary dietary supplement for people and animals. But selenium accumulates in the tissues, and some scientists now fear that ingesting more than 500 micrograms a day can be harmful. In 1983, embryos and just-hatched chicks of waterfowl that had nested on the [Kesterson] reservoir's twelve ponds, which are adjacent to a 4,700-acre wildlife refuge, began showing up with some of the most disturbing birth defects ever seen in the wild. Misshapen embryos had no wings; chicks hatched eyeless and with twisted beaks. Wildlife biologists were convinced that selenium, leaching from soil on the irrigated farms, was causing the deformities. . . . growers in the Westlands water district, which covers 942 square miles from Mendota to Kettleman City, aren't off the hook.

The farmers have been ordered to halt the runoff from their land into the 82-mile-long San Luis Drain which leads to the Kesterson Reservoir. This means somehow disposing of 326,000 gallons of water each year. Maranto goes on:

> The poisoning of the Kesterson Reservoir is only a symptom of a far more serious and widespread ecological malaise, one that has begun to plague farmers throughout the arid West. The problem is that irrigation, which not long ago turned vast stretches of western desert into the world's most productive farmland, is now ruining hundreds of thousands of those same acres. It's also polluting marshes, rivers, lakes, and estuaries in California, and other western states.
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> The states are in this predicament mainly because the Bureau of Reclamation, in its multibillion dollar drive since the early nineteen hundreds to convert barren western lands into productive farms, ignored a lesson almost as old as agriculture: irrigation of scrub desert is like a lousy marriage—neither partner, the alkali soil or the water, gains much from the association. The water gradually degrades the land by causing a build-up of salts, including sodium, calcium, and magnesium chlorides. Meanwhile, the land, which in some regions is laced with selenium, arsenic, boron, and other naturally occurring poisons, taints the runoff. The pollution of the Kesterson, where poisons have become concentrated, is an example. But a far more widespread and economically troublesome result for the Westlands irrigation has been the salting up, or salinization, of the soil there. It's a process that's becoming increasingly evident throughout California farmlands.

How much "salt" is involved? According to Jack Norlyn, a researcher at the University of California in Davis, one could think of it this way:

> Imagine a train going sixty miles per hour, composed entirely of box cars full of salt. If there were enough box cars to haul all the salt that California rivers contain each year, it would take thirty-six hours to pass you. Since eighty-five per cent of that water is allocated to agriculture, most of the load is being deposited on California farms.

Maranto goes on:

> As salinization spreads, the survival of agriculture in the Central and Imperial valleys, which supply slightly less than half of the nation's fruit, nuts, and vegetables and about one quarter of its cotton, could be at stake. In the past year, agriculture researchers have warned that as many as 1.5 million acres in the Central Valley—roughly a third of its irrigated farmland—could be knocked out of production by the year 2000. The statewide toll could be more than double that. Surveys by the U.S. Department of Agriculture reveal that 2.9 million of the state's 10.1 million irrigated acres show signs of salt damage. Salinization may now affect 25 per cent of all irrigated acreage across the nation.

Actually, there is nothing new about salt intrusion on agricultural land. The first thing farmers do is switch to crops less vulnerable to salt—from lettuce and beans to barley, cotton, and sugar beets. But sooner or later the land gives up—becomes "salted out" and covered with a white crust. The Iraquis, Maranto says, now struggle to extract a crop from land between the Tigris and the Euphrates which is still infertile from over-irrigation by the Sumerians six thousand years ago. Salted land is unforgiving. In those days that land was known as the Fertile Crescent. The Californians now seem to be repeating that history:

> San Joaquin Valley growers have fought against salt intrusion since the 1870s, when they began diverting streams for irrigation and, later, started using well water. But the intensity of today's corporate farming makes the battle all the harder. The survival in the late 1960s of cheap water via the $1.3 billion San Luis Unit, part of the world's largest reclamation project, stepped up production on 500,000 acres of land in the Westlands water district, where drainage is poor and water table high.

This meant that the salt showed up sooner because of a layer of clay from 20 to 100 feet below the surface. Irrigation water can't get below the clay. Saline water sits on top of the clay and eventually drowns the roots that penetrate deeply—of crops like cotton and alfalfa.

In 1967 the Bureau of Reclamation began to send the water drained off the farmers' fields to the reservoir, but later decided to carry the waste water to San Francisco Bay. But after building 82 miles of drain, they ran out of money. People now agree that they will never have the money for it, and there doesn't seem to be anything else to do.