

## THE ROOTS OF CULTURE

THE last place to look for help in formulating a philosophy of life may be the philosophy departments in universities. The academics, as Lewis Feuer, one of their number, pointed out more than ten years ago (*New York Times Magazine*, April 24, 1966), are seldom interested in life, but mostly in words and disputation about their meaning. Mature minds seeking to understand the world and the times are not tempted to go back to school; instead, they turn to present-day and older thinkers who love truth and seek it. Truth is said to be changeless, something that can be relied upon in all seasons. As though finding it were not difficult enough, philosophers assume the almost impossible burden of attempting to say what the changeless truth means to a changing world, or a world at a particular moment of history.

Who are the thinkers in recent times who have sought to do this? Without meaning to exclude others, we might give three as examples—Tolstoy, Ortega, and Camus. These men brought what they believed to be eternal ideas to bear on the festering sores of the age. They had proposals and made recommendations on how to live despite such evils, and on how to begin changing them. Tolstoy focused on the degradations of war, Ortega on the impoverishments of the mass mentality, and Camus on the human agony and moral contradictions of war and revolution. These men persistently tried to live their philosophies, not finding it easy at all. (While Ortega served as an academic for most of his life, this hardly counts because he was so much more.)

Tolstoy wrote as an independent Christian thinker determined to go the whole way in applying Christ's teaching, with the result that he practically abandoned the Christianity of his time. This seems inevitable. We live in a world where

organized practice of a great moral idea invariably inverts it. Ortega was a kind of Pythagorean or Platonist who held that the duty of the philosopher is not only to think well, but to live a responsible, public-spirited life in the human community of his time, in order to leaven or raise its level by example. The philosopher does not seek power, which is completely impotent in relation to human development, but acts out his theories as best he can. Camus used his perceptive and magnificently impartial mind in an attempt to understand the cruelty and blindness of the twentieth century. He did not succeed very well, yet his effort is a lesson in heroism to us all.

Who are the real philosophers of the present? Several no doubt deserve mention, but we shall speak only of one, a man who, like the others we have named, is a distinguished writer. He is also a farmer. Why choose a farmer? A natural logic awakens the philosopher in a farmer, since the most pressing problems of the time turn on the use we make of the planet, on how we treat the earth, and what we think about all such activities. One could say that this is a time when all philosophers need to become farmers. Or they need at least to be successful in learning to think like farmers.

How does, or should, a farmer think, if, today, he is cast as our universal man? One answer would be to read Wendell Berry's book, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*, published late last year by the Sierra Club (\$9.95). Mr. Berry's aim is to show that the foundation of human culture lies in agriculture—our relations with the land are both symbol and fact of the kind of humans we are and the culture we have made. Symbol and fact seem to have interchangeable functions all the way through. This book is philosophical by reason of its demonstration of the importance to humans of how they treat the land, and also by showing how

the ultimate philosophic questions are either brought into focus or shut out of our lives by choices in the use we make of the land. Mr. Berry writes a clean and splendid prose—the spirit of the *Odyssey* moves through his pages—and Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Blake become his mentors. But he also writes about ditches and privies and hedgerows, plows and manure. Quotations from Albert Howard, F. H. King, and wise farmers known and unknown dot his pages. And that it all grows together, that nothing essential seems left out, makes the book a philosophic work.

Considerable attention is given to the champions of what we in America are doing wrong. A serious book combining philosophy with agriculture would have to do this, or seem written in a vacuum. Berry quotes from recent Secretaries of Agriculture, examining the roots of their thinking, exhibiting its flamboyant ignorance. But in general, Berry has no "enemies." The world suffers from misconceptions and, of course, some deliberate lies, but he is dealing with prevailing illusions for the most part "sincerely" believed in. He doesn't call names but shows from evidence that the illusions result in programs of self-defeat, ultimately self-destruction. One of his objects is to avert the extreme disaster that must come if we insist on waiting for "final proof" of our mistakes.

*The Unsettling of America* is the story of what happens to people who mine the land, always taking, never giving, never understanding that the land has a life which is part of our life, isolating themselves and their thinking from the life of the land and forgetting both the spirit and the practice of the arts of husbandry.

Today, out on the land, one sees mostly machines, not human beings. The work is done by the power of petroleum, not the energies of men. The market psychology governs all, or almost all, agricultural operations. One *lives* no more on the land, but only buys and sells it. Recognizing this, Mr. Berry says—seeing what it means and how it

affects our lives—opens the way to understanding why we are sick at heart, overtaken by so many irremediable inner and bodily ills. So many things go wrong that we cannot even define our troubles, much less find cures.

Machines, it is argued, have made farming "simple," a matter of developing techniques of production and applying business principles. Agribusiness, it is claimed, has freed the rural population from onerous labor in the field. Complex machinery has "solved" such problems, making simple living—carefree days—possible for the once overworked farmer.

But this goal, Berry maintains, is a misconception of the good human life. Our ills, he suggests, direct attention to the question of what is really a good life, and how it may be brought within reach. He says:

There seems to be a rule that we can simplify our minds and our culture only at the cost of an oppressive social and mechanical complexity. We can simplify our society—that is, make ourselves free—only by undertaking tasks of great mental and cultural complexity. Farming, the *best* farming, is a task that calls for this sort of complexity, both in the character of the farmer and in his culture. To simplify either one is to destroy it.

That is because the best farming requires a farmer—a husbandman, a nurturer—not a technician or businessman. A technician or a businessman—given the necessary abilities and ambitions—can be made in a little while, by training. A good farmer, on the other hand, is a cultural product, he is made by a sort of training, certainly, in what his time imposes or demands, but he is also made by generations of experience. This essential experience can only be accumulated, tested, preserved, handed down in settled households, friendships, and communities that are deliberately and carefully native to their own ground, in which the past has prepared the present and the present safeguards the future.

The concentration of the farmland into larger and larger holdings and fewer and fewer hands—with the consequent increase of overhead, debt, and dependence on machines—is thus a matter of complex significance, and its agricultural significance cannot be disentangled from its cultural significance. It *forces* a profound revolution in the farmer's mind:

once his investment in land and machines is large enough, he must forsake the values of husbandry and assume those of finance and technology. Thenceforth his thinking is not determined by agricultural responsibility, but by financial accountability and the capacities of his machines. Where his money comes from becomes less important to him than where it is going. He is caught up in the drift of energy and interest away from the land. Production begins to override maintenance. The economy of money has infiltrated and subverted the economies of nature, energy, and the human spirit. The man himself has become a consumptive machine.

For Wendell Berry, the sense of man-in-the-world and the world-in-the-man is the governing principle of thought. Interdependence is the rule of nature:

We can build one system only within another. We can have agriculture only within nature, and culture only within agriculture. At certain critical points these systems have to conform with one another or destroy one another.

Under the discipline of unity, knowledge and morality come together. No longer can we have that paltry "objective" knowledge so prized by academic specialists. To know anything at all becomes a moral predicament. Aware that there is no such thing as a specialized—or even an entirely limitable or controllable—effect, one becomes responsible for judgments as well as facts. Aware that as an agricultural scientist he had "one great subject," Sir Albert Howard could no longer ask, What can I do with what I know? without at the same time asking, How can I be responsible for what I know?

And it is within unity that we see the hideousness and destructiveness of the fragmentary—the kind of mind, for example, that can introduce a production machine to increase "efficiency" without troubling about its effect on workers, on the product, and on consumers; that can accept and even applaud the "obsolescence" of the small farm and not hesitate over the possible political and cultural effects; that can recommend continuous tillage of huge monocultures, with massive use of chemicals and no animal manure or humus, and worry not at all about the deterioration or loss of soil. For cultural patterns of responsible cooperation we have substituted this moral ignorance, which is the etiquette of agricultural "progress."

Berry is talking about an attitude, not a program, although a program fulfilling the attitude could be added without much difficulty. His last chapter gives a number of illustrations of good farming practice, such as that of the Amish, who have lately been getting attention in scientific journals by reason of the productiveness of their methods. At the end of the book the author lists twelve steps which combine attitude with action. One of these steps would be to shift the loyalty of the agricultural colleges away from "agribusiness" and back to the farmers:

(1) The faculties should be opened, on a part-time basis, to farmers, just as faculties of medicine and law are opened to doctors and lawyers; and (2) faculty members could be paid half their salary in cash and given the use of a boundary of college farmland the potential annual income from which would be equivalent to the other half. In both instances the professor would be in a position to "take his own advice before offering it to other people." And much good might be expected from that. Professors might again become people of experience rather than experts. They might again be able to apply their learning to the small problems of ordinary people and to recommend means and methods not profitable to the suppliers of "purchased inputs."

Then there is the question of human scale:

How do we stay within it? What sort of technology enhances our humanity? What sort reduces it? The reason is simply that we cannot live except within limits, and these limits are of many kinds: spatial, material, moral, spiritual. The world has room for many people who are content to live as humans, but only for a relatively few intent upon living as giants or as gods.

Finally, we need a standard by which to repair our lives. Having used "relativism" so skillfully and for so long in our intellectual justifications, Mr. Berry says, "we have no deeply believed reasons for doing anything."

Is there then an absolute good? The question does not embarrass Mr. Berry: "That absolute good, I think, is health—not in the merely hygienic sense of personal health, but the health, wholeness, finally the holiness, of Creation, of which our personal health is only a share."

The changes Mr. Berry would like to see cannot, he thinks, take place within a generation. We have gone too far in another direction and present methods have too many determined and dependent believers. Besides, culture cannot be imposed, it can only evolve. He gives little or no attention to all the compromises, half-measures, and improvisations that will be inevitable on the way back. Why should he? They will come anyway, arranged by our numerous experts in compromise. He undertakes mainly to set forth the vision, demonstrate its validity in principle and in instance, and to suggest certain positive steps that are now possible toward its fulfillment.

What about the other side? Unfortunately, the defenders of agribusiness are unable to argue the question at the level of this book. They've never raised their sights that high. In fact, they take great pride in their disdain for serious thinking, and ask: *How else* are we going to feed all these people? With a bunch of little farms that don't begin to grow enough food? The world is now *dependent* upon industrial agriculture! What other way is there to supply the people in the great cities around the world? We don't have any big theory, we're just *doing* it. Don't get in our way. And stop moralizing at us!

One of the problems in our society—a problem bound to beset any free society in this contradictory age—is the indifference of nearly all campaigners to the element of reason in what people on the "other side" say. Our adversary approach in controversy is very pure. Never concede a point unless you have to. The idea is to *win*, because we are *right*. Happily, there is not even a faint trace of this temper in Mr. Berry's book. As we said earlier, he campaigns against delusions, not against people. He deplors ignorance but does not stir up moral condemnation of ignorant persons—he wants to help them see. And there is at least the possibility that he will be heard by some who have never before given thought to the questions he raises.

The importance of this cannot be over-estimated. After talking with Mr. Berry, an editor of *Publisher's Weekly* said: "It is hard to believe this fully involved individual won't be taken with the utmost seriousness, that like William Blake he has written 'for those who did not support the truth'."

We need more writers who combine this generous missionary temper with the devotion to both vision and fact that is found in Berry's book.

What seems an example of what happens when facts are neglected by the Right Siders is provided by William Tucker's article, "Environmentalism and the Leisure Class," in *Harper's* for last December. Mr. Tucker describes the ten years of struggle by the Environmentalists to "save Storm King Mountain" (on the Hudson River in New York) from the machinations of Consolidated Edison. On the whole, Mr. Tucker is convinced that Con Edison has been much put upon by misrepresentation and emotional unreason. His article, at any rate, deserves reading. What seems clear is the fact that the opponents of a pumped storage plant for Con Edison at the foot of Storm King gave little or no consideration to the need of nine million people in the New York area for dependable light and power. If we assume that this writer read enough of the record to interpret fairly—although he may not have—then the Environmentalists whipped Con Edison mainly with demagogic appeals and high-priced public relations tactics. He may have given Con Edison's side of the story fairly, too, and even described correctly the major Environmentalist champions as in this case excessively wealthy people who care nothing for the needs of the people in New York.

But what seems unmistakably wrong is the easy transfer of this criticism to *all* environmentalists. No good cause is served by deliberately partisan claims. Mr. Tucker concludes:

"We're going to see a crisis atmosphere," John O'Leary, deputy secretary of the new Department of

Energy, said recently. "By the mid-80s, we may have very severe economic consequences as a result of our improvident attitudes of the late 1970s."

Yet environmental opposition is now working to hinder not only nuclear plant construction, but also off-shore oil drilling, importation of liquid natural gas, coal-mining, gasification of coal, hydroelectric plants, and practically every conceivable form of producing energy.

Where is the power going to come from to meet the needs of the next decade and the next generation?

The environmentalists say there are alternative means available.

It is for this reason that none of our basic problems is ever solved.

This writer doesn't say much about these "alternative means," except to try to make them appear inadequate and silly. He declares that Environmentalism is not scientific, only borrows the language of science to serve its purpose, and could "easily turn anti-scientific, and already has in many instances." Well, he might read the interchange of correspondence between Amory Lovins and Hans Bethe, in which Bethe, a distinguished physicist, began by saying Lovins' defense of "soft" energy technologies was not scientifically supportable, but ended by agreeing with him. Lovins is the best known advocate of what Mr. Tucker ridicules. Yet Tucker, on the other hand, thinks Con Edison has been badly mistreated, and he may be partly right. Obviously, in argument and criticism most of all, we need the spirit of wholeness, of which Wendell Berry's book is so fine an example. He says:

Because by definition they lack any sense of mutuality or wholeness, our specializations subsist on conflict with one another. The rule is never to cooperate, but rather to follow one's own interest as far as possible. Checks and balances are all applied externally, by opposition, never by self-restraint. Labor, management, the military, the government, etc., never forbear until their excesses arouse enough opposition to force them to do so. The good of the whole of creation, the world and all its creatures together, is never a consideration because it is never thought of; our culture now simply lacks the means for thinking of it.

The *Unsettling of America* is effective instruction in thinking in terms of the good of the whole.

## *REVIEW*

### AMORY LOVINS ON ENERGY

THERE are occasions—increasingly frequent occasions—when, the moral and the practical reasons for making a far-reaching change in direction become mutually supporting. Such a decision is now before the modern world: the issue is sources of energy. A book which combines the moral and practical reasons for a change in energy policy is *Soft Energy Paths: Toward a Durable Peace* (Friends of the Earth and Ballinger, \$6.95) by Amory Lovins. The author says:

This book is devoted to a comparison of two energy paths that are distinguished ultimately by their antithetical social implications. To people with a traditional reverence for economics, it might appear that basing energy choices on social criteria is what Kenneth Boulding calls a "heroic decision"—that is, doing something the more expensive way because it is desirable on other and more important grounds than internal economic cost. But surprisingly, a heroic decision does not seem necessary in this case, because the energy system that seems socially more attractive is also cheaper and easier. The technical arguments for this proposition take up much of this book.

Readers who want to clarify their thinking about energy and then to make up their minds about policy will find this book to be exactly what they are looking for. It may be fairly said that the energy issue is basically a contest between informed intelligence and the forces of habit, prejudice, and accumulating self-indulgence. Were it not for the often inaccessible character of these subjective opponents of intelligence, there would be no contest. People would at once see and begin to do what needs to be done. But habit, prejudice, and self-indulgence are notoriously immune to rational appeal, and those who represent intelligence cannot expect to prevail until, after a long process of patient repetition, explanation, and the display of increasingly indisputable facts, the opposition diminishes, as it must in time, to ineffectual failure.

Mr. Lovins seems to understand this well. Fortunately, his knowledge and talents are so impressive that he has the ear of both technicians and the public. Attention to his work began with publication in *Foreign Affairs* for October, 1976, of his article, "The Road Not Taken," in which he advocated systematic conservation of existing energy sources together with the progressive development of alternative sources such as solar energy, wind, and biomass conversion (the use of crop, wood, and other organic wastes). This article is expanded to make the second chapter of *Soft Energy Paths*. In a review of the book in the *Nation* for Nov. 12, a recognized energy consultant, Fred Baldwin, remarks that the importance of a piece of research may be measured by the number of times its report is photocopied. He refers to Lovins' *Foreign Affairs* article:

Numbers of increasingly faint copies circulated within the Energy Research and Development Administration at the time of its publication. The ideas of its author, an American physicist named Amory Lovins, continued to generate intense interest at the working-staff level in ERDA. They have not, however, had much impact on the agency's budget. . . . The main reason for Lovins' importance is that he has managed to redefine the energy problem, and thereby to change the frame of reference of a large number of technical debates. He has first-rate credentials as a nuclear physicist and, in his words, a "former high technologist." He is familiar with a staggering body of recent literature on energy. He writes clearly and often eloquently. All of these things help, but his appeal is that he has managed to define a pattern against which a jumble of technical choices can be compared and evaluated.

The question is not, How much energy do we need to go on living and using it as we do today, and how can we get it? The real question, which must be preceded by admission that we have been on a cheap energy binge for years, is: How much energy do we really need, what kind of energy for what purpose, and how can such several sorts of energy be provided at reasonable cost? The latter question has answers. As the *Nation* reviewer says:

Some of Lovins' points are unarguable. For example the desirability of rapid conversion to solar and wind energy is widely accepted in principle, and the debate is over the speed and extent to which it can be accomplished. Lovins correctly points out that the costs of solar energy should be compared with the costs of developing new sources of fossil fuels and nuclear energy, and not with the prices of existing sources which have been kept low by government regulation. He is also correct in emphasizing that solar technology is more thoroughly developed than its critics admit and is considerably less speculative than nuclear fusion.

Just as there is diversity of energy needs, so there is diversity in solutions. In her foreword to Mr. Lovins' book. Barbara Ward, editor of the *Economist*, points out:

Mr. Lovins' study, based in the main on American evidence for specificity, proves that the means for a less wasteful, more rational, and more humane future are not only available: they are cheaper and less difficult than the plutonium economy. If other nations were to undertake the same range of review and enquiry, they would be forced to the same conclusions. But they must do their own studies, for the great diversity of energy problems in the world calls for an equal diversity of solutions. In many countries such as India and China, village-scale biogas plants can provide the driving force for rural development. In Brazil, starchy crops such as cassava can and will be used to make vast amounts of fuel alcohols, while in Finland and Quebec the same can be done with forestry residues. Wind machines are well suited to Denmark, solar furnaces to Saudi Arabia. Existing large hydro-electric dams can be complemented by new (or resuscitated old) small local hydro sets in Thailand as in New Hampshire. Solar heat in Mexico or Australia needs different technologies than solar heat in Scotland or Sweden, but all are practicable. The concepts behind the integrated food-water-energy systems that work so well in East Asia are being successfully adapted to maritime Canada and will be needed in England.

No two countries, no two parts of the same country, have the same energy needs or opportunities or should seek the same mix of energy technologies. No single book can offer a single prescription. But it appears, as the exciting search for appropriate answers gains speed, that each country and each person, in different ways, can achieve the same goal: capturing enough of the sun's bounty to give mankind

the chance of living—perhaps even happily—ever after.

The world does not *need* to spend its still remaining supply of energy on the erection of nuclear sources which are dubious and threatening in so many ways. As Barbara Ward says:

Much simpler, cheaper, and surer technologies that better match the end uses—space heating, cooking, mobility—are available. Most uses simply do not require the energies needed to produce atomic fireballs. A single nuclear reactor, meticulously engineered, carefully tested, and thoughtfully sited a safe 150 million kilometers away—in fact, the sun itself—is quite enough.

The diversity of solutions spoken of here—and throughout *Soft Energy Paths*—presents a strong socio-moral appeal. It hardly needs pointing out that diverse and mainly small-scale sources of energy will have a radically decentralizing effect. Economic requirements will become less compulsive, and people will have more control over their own lives. The relation between cause and effect in social decision will be less obscure, and the indivisible unity of freedom and responsibility will be increasingly understood. Cooperation with nature will be the instinctive when not conscious choice.

Such themes are well developed by Amory Lovins. In the chapter on values, he says:

As we learn to question the ability of present policy to serve both public and private ends, the legitimacy of those ends themselves comes up for review. Our know-how has far outstripped our know-why; and as we seek to redress the balance, old political concepts begin to reassert themselves. Grassroots democracy acquires a more concrete meaning.

... Control of property and land—a cornerstone of free enterprise democracy—comes to embrace control of energies essential to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, for to control those energies we must now control the land they lie under or fall upon. In the process we may start to approach Aldo Leopold's land ethic, or even the native American/Canadian/Australian concept that absolute, monopolistic ownership of land, at first incomprehensible, is in a sense blasphemous.

In an afterword the author adds:

Meanwhile, the very nature of discourse about energy policy, the type of questions asked, the breadth of answers expected, has broadened beyond recognition. Energy policy now embraces the macro-economic, the geopolitical, the anthropological, and even the moral sphere, and the social details of energy use are widely considered to be much more interesting and important than the technical options for energy supply. The effort made by this book and its predecessors to bring some modest synthesis to the enormous ferment and flux of energy thinking around the world seems by luck to have come to a focus at the right moment.

This seems quite accurate, except for the part about "luck." The readers and all those who benefit from Mr. Lovins' efforts are the lucky ones. The book is a product of vision, knowledge, timing, and sound management.



*COMMENTARY*  
**SOME HUMANS KNOW BETTER**

MICE are not people, yet recent research into the preferred diet of mice suggests that rodents and humans have some weaknesses in common. A doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Michele Bremer, tested the effects of three kinds of food on groups of mice. One group was fed food of the sort obtainable in an American supermarket; the second group consumed "natural foods," while the third (the control group) ate Purina laboratory chow. A summary in *Ifoam* (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) reports:

Results showed that the animals consuming the standard American diet (the "supermarket group") had a high incidence of obesity and significantly more body fat than the other two groups. (No obesity was noted in the other two groups.) In addition, the supermarket group seemed to have considerably less resistance to a staphylococcal infection which affected all three groups to some extent. The general physical condition of the supermarket group seemed inferior to both the natural food groups and to the control group, which enjoyed the best health of all three groups. . . .

When given free choice, animals of all three diets displayed an overwhelming preference for the supermarket diet, even though their health deteriorated, when they consumed it for a period of three weeks. (*Ifoam*, Bull. No. 23.)

Instinct, it seems, so serviceable in a natural environment, is no protection to mice exposed to abnormally tempting concoctions. Like a great many humans, children and adults, they eagerly make themselves sick. The products of a perverted agriculture are precisely aimed at certain appetites in order to assure their sale, and the mice, never having encountered such dirty tricks in Nature, are defenseless. They know *no* better.

People, on the other hand, are supposed to know better. That some of them do is evidenced by the heroic struggle of a considerable number of mothers to keep their children from making themselves sick with junk foods. What do the food processors say about this? Mostly, they

claim that junk foods are highly nutritious, adding that their wide sale is an example of democracy in action—people are free to choose!

And so they are. This is precisely the situation confronted by Wendell Berry in *The Unsettling of America*.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves TOWARD PAIDEIA

PAIDEIA is Greek for the educational community—the natural social means of conducting the young to adulthood and the adults to maturity. It is now a utopian dream which here and there comes into being in bits and parts. In such a community, we suspect, there would seldom be talk of either "learning" or "teaching," just as, among people who eat sensibly, there need be no conversation about proper digestion. The wise seldom refer to wisdom and the good think little about "virtue."

But instead of Paideia we have an environment for the young that could hardly be more its opposite. In an article, "The Scourge of the Air Waves—The Language Pollution Fund," in *Contemporary Education* (Fall, 1977), Donald MacLeod and James Hollenbach recall how nineteenth-century educators could be confident that students would learn good speech and language-use from their associates and from older people who would provide examples. The community, in short, established a fund of good influences. This effect was hardly deliberate, but grew out of the transactions of everyday life. The wealth of language was acquired by the young "not from grammars or lexicons," but unconsciously, more or less as one breathes without thinking about it.

What is the present "fund of influence," obtained in similarly unplanned and casual ways?

The fund is a steady diet of fragmentary expressions, misconstructions, incessant slang and emotional appeals which distort and convolute the attempt at communication of most youth. The free rein of mass media is shattering. Its self-serving availability, seemingly gratis, continuously competes for the attention of American youth. Everything is "beautiful baby," "cool man cool," "dig, dig," even on the news all the time, where, as on D.J. shows, personality, projection, congeniality and counterfeit are more important than good structure, logic or accuracy. The events of 1984 have arrived! A top,

boisterous D.J. station in New York City actually delivers the news—not just the headlines—in nonsentences. These blend perfectly with the nonsentences of the music—only the drums are lower, so one is not really aware in a high euphoric state which the disc jockeys generate through the drug culture music, that the news is supposedly separate and not music.

After supplying further horrible examples the writers say:

Who, in his right mind, given the proliferation of stark evidence replete on the air waves day and night, can disagree with George Orwell: "If people cannot write well, they cannot think well, and if they cannot think well, others will do their thinking for them." . . . If constructions such as these are the models and students and children are the imitators, where does the blame for illiteracy logically lie . . . ?Does it lie with the "fund" . . .? Does it lie with the colleges who find their classrooms filling up with legions o illiterates? Does it lie with the grade schools? Yes and no. The disease of illiteracy is most frequently and most intensely generated by the contemporary version of the . . . "fund"—the media of radio, television, newspaper tabloids, unbalanced plays and a variety of shoddy advertising and money men who generally botch language.

Overcoming this influence of paideia-in-reverse is a lot to expect of the schools, yet they must try. The remedy, the writers say, "lies in a return to the careful introduction, reading, analysis, and understanding of the great writers of the early twentieth, nineteenth, and eighteenth centuries."

The classical models must be studied, their writings analyzed and juxtaposed with the misconstructions spouting from television and radio. . . . Electives in grade school and high school and the freedom they engender must be granted to those who have demonstrated that they have earned them. Not everyone, or should we say hardly anyone, has earned the right to pursue them. Immersing students in the works of star writers of the past is the antidote for the destructive, the negative, the retrogressive, indeed the curse that is the seedbed for the various origins of language ailments. A good steady dose of the likes of Huxley, Dickens, Conrad, Hardy, Scott, Austen, Hawthorne and Melville will turn the tide to a program of order so that balance, harmony and logic in writing is in the offing. Lots of reading,

narrations, and the searching out of examples for models to emulate should be the lot of the student in order to block out the contaminating bombardment that is readily his at the flick of a switch.

These teachers sound too optimistic, yet in principle they are undoubtedly right. What else but the taste and preference for good literature can immunize the student to the influence of junk? Yet the competition is fierce, the appeal of junk vulgarly exciting and continuous, while the habits generated in the young by the time they get to high school are largely against the sustained attention that appreciation of good literature requires. No wonder the schools seem weak and ineffectual. And not all teachers have the sort of determination needed for even small victories.

No wonder, too, that iconoclastic critics tend to give up almost entirely on the schools as not worth saving. Ivan Illich declares for deschooling society and John Holt has started a paper called *Growing Without Schooling*. What they are really saying, in effect, is that we should make a heroic effort to restore the conditions of paideia in our society; they are of course right in this.

Why aren't the schools better? But why, after all, *should* they be better, in a society which is able to believe that its upward and onward growth is somehow symbolized by the sounds and sights coming over the air and what we find on the newsstands? Ours is a specialist society, and it follows that the functions of community have all been subdivided and turned over to specialists. Our proudest specialty for many years has been education, yet today many intelligent teachers and critics declare that the schools are bad places for the young. With full provocation, if not with full justification, Ivan Illich and John Holt propose that we do without them. Historically, they tell us, schools are a recent innovation. They isolate the young from their normal environment. They subject them to the management of bureaucracy and the insight of accountants.

There is certainly truth in all these charges, well stated and documented in books that anyone can read.

But the case against the schools should not be thought of as really against the schools. The evidence is simply evidence of the multiple effects of the loss of paideia—of caring and solicitous attitudes toward the young—and toward one another. The fact is that, with occasional and wonderful exceptions, parents don't think of themselves as teachers of their children. Conditions, moreover, are not right or even natural for learning in either home or community. The father's work is hidden away in an office building or a plant. The mother's too, in a lot of cases. There was a time when the home and community environment completed the education of the child in all but "specialties." Schools, in fact, as Arthur Morgan pointed out, came into being as places where more recondite matters were taught—things seldom found in either home or community. Schools, then, have a place, but as supplements, not substitutes, as extensions, not replacements, of what is learned in the framework of natural experience.

What, then, can citizens—parents—do? One thing they might do is give some attention to the contents of No. 4 of *The Journal of the New Alchemists*, which is filled with splendid material on the restoration of paideia in its most fundamental aspect—the relation of human beings to the earth in activities of mutual support. The scientists at the New Alchemy Institute (P.O. Box 432, Woods Hole, Mass. 40843) have turned their specialized knowledge to the most general need of mankind—the development of efficient means of autonomous subsistence on the land, on a scale suitable for single families. Seemingly diverse-enterprises are united by this purpose. We learn from this issue of the *Journal* that Dutton has brought out a collection of materials taken from all four issues, calling it *The Book of the New Alchemists*. We don't have the price, but it should be in the stores by now. (No. 4 of the *Journal* is

\$7.00.) The contents of both the book and the journal are articles and pictures concerned with raising food, food fish, constructing alternate energy systems (wind and solar), and include accounts of both the Prince Edward and Cape Cod "Arks"—bioshelters applying principles learned at the New Alchemy Cape Cod "laboratory" farm and headquarters. The Prince Edward Ark is a large installation designed to pursue biotechnic research, while the Ark on Cape Cod demonstrates how a single family may approach self-sufficiency on the land.

## *FRONTIERS*

### **A Little Here, a Little There**

IN *The New Reformation*, a too-soon forgotten book by Paul Goodman published in 1970, the author says at the end:

My proposed little reforms and improvements are meaningless, it is said, because I do not attack the System itself, usually monopoly capitalism; and I am given the philological information that "radical" means "going to the root," whereas I hack at the branches. To answer this, I have tried to show that in a complex society which is a network rather than a monolith with a head, a piecemeal approach can be effective; it is the safest, least likely to produce ruinous consequences of either repression or "success"; it involves people where they are competent, or could become competent, and so creates citizens, which is better than "politicalizing"; it more easily dissolves the metaphysical despair that nothing can be done. And since, in my opinion, the aim of politics is to produce not a good society but a tolerable one, it is best to try to cut abuses down to manageable size; the best solutions are usually not global but a little of this and a little of that.

More important, in the confusing conditions of modern times, so bristling with dilemmas, I don't know what is the root. I have not heard of any formula, e.g., "Socialism," that answers the root questions.

Goodman's modesty here becomes concealment of the fact that, all through this book, and his other works as well, he stresses his recognition that the "root" is the essential qualities of human beings—their good sense, their responsible use of what they know, and their moral courage—and that whatever strengthens these qualities serves mankind.

All his life Goodman went about trying to make some good things happen where he could—a little here, a little there. He admired the System no more than the next man, but he couldn't see that "destroying" it would do much more than cost immeasurable pain. So he tried to get teachers to be better teachers, engineers to be better engineers. In this book he also tried to get

economists to be better economists by reading E. F. Schumacher.

He even led some seminars for A. T. & T. executives who were "being groomed to be vice-presidents." He reports on one of these sessions:

I told them that Ralph Nader was going around the schools urging the engineering students to come on like professionals, and to stand up to the front desk when asked for unprofessional work. In my opinion, an important move for such integrity would be for the young engineers to organize for defense of the profession, and strike or boycott if necessary: a model was the American Association of University Professors in its heyday, fifty years ago. I urged the executives to encourage such organization; it would make the telephone company a better telephone company, more serviceable to the community; and young people would cease to regard engineers as finks.

It needs to be more widely recognized that many of the good things that do happen result from the integrities of individuals in the professions. Ralph Nader is a lawyer. Schumacher began as an economist who worked with Keynes. Amory Lovins used to be a "high technologist." Professional knowledge, professional skills are real, and when integrity is present the skills can be redirected. There are of course definite limits to what can be accomplished within any "system," and this is not—and never will be—"good enough." Yet continual changes in attitude go on among people still involved in some system or other. It is the thinking of the people who do the work that eventually brings a change in the system. We'll always have systems of some sort—as long as we try to adapt our lives to the system of nature—and some systems are better than others.

Reading in a life of Arthur Morgan (by Arthur Kahoe) that has just come out, we happened on a curious and perhaps unwelcome illustration of this. The time is about the turn of the century, when Morgan was barely out of his teens:

Arthur tried working in a coal mine. On the first day, although he had never before worked in any mine, he tapped the ceiling with his pick and decided

it was not safe. He went and told the foreman. He was ordered back to work. Three times this routine was repeated. Finally the foreman gave in and went to examine the room. He reached in and gave the roof a few light blows with his pick. Tons of rock crashed to the floor. A little later, in dodging a kick from a mule that was hauling coal carts in the mine, Arthur touched and was nearly electrocuted by an exposed live wire.

Appalled by the general disrepair and slovenly condition of the mine, Arthur decided to give up the job, badly as he needed the work. No precautions were taken against the hazards and there was little regard for human life. To have a man killed was not felt to be a great catastrophe, regrettable but something which was bound to happen now and then. A few years later the Rockefeller interests bought the mine and thoroughly overhauled it and brought it up to acceptable health and safety standards.

It involves no undue sympathy for the Rockefeller interests to be glad that they employed good safety engineers. Nor need one be dissuaded from one's conviction that the world will be better off when there are no more "multinationals," after reading, in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (November, 1977), that electronics multinationals, by establishing plants in such places as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea, have liberated a vast number of people (chiefly women) from unspeakable poverty:

By 1974 almost a million workers had been hired in the electronics and related industries. Cities with endemic unemployment were quite suddenly approaching full employment for the first time in history. Firms expanded in Singapore, Malaysia and Mexico in an effort to find new supplies of labor. . . .

Earning power should do more for the women of these countries than any amount of organization, demonstration and protest. . . . The benefits and freedom gained by these women from their employment in this new industry are almost always preferred to the near slavery still associated with the production of classical goods, such as *batik*.

It is already evident that these ultra-modern industries do not require colonial styles of paternalism for the stabilization of the labor force.

Meanwhile, *Technology Review* for October/November 1977 has an accurate, sensible

article on the radically changed conditions of energy supply in the present, which starts out:

Nothing we can do will restore the conditions which prevailed in the second and third quarters of this century; our energy *situation* in the future will forever be fundamentally different from that which has prevailed in the past.

Our "energy problem" does not have a solution in the sense that we can win a war or put a man on the moon rather, ours is a brand-new, long-term situation in which we must learn to live. And it raises a whole new set of issues with which we are largely unfamiliar and a set of social conditions with which we are poorly equipped to deal.

This informative and factually valuable article is by Ben C. Ball, a vice president of Gulf Oil Corp.