

A THOUSAND-YEAR JOURNEY

IT is natural enough that there should be occasions when we can't seem to think of the right thing to say, which means a fresh way to say what has been said before. If half a day goes past in this condition, the situation begins to get a bit desperate, but then, usually, something good happens. So we go on reading and pondering.

Just now we have been reading Nancy Todd's opening remarks in *Annals of Earth* (Vol. V, No. 3, 1987), in which she says that she is confronted by a dilemma of this sort. She has been asked to speak at the annual E. F. Schumacher lecture series, and what should she say? The previous speaker will be Jeremy Rifkin, who writes so well critically of the false benefits of genetic engineering and biological engineering, that he is a hard man to follow. She wrote:

I pondered in the garden and washing dishes, driving the car. . . . After a while I found myself recalling some lines of Gregory Bateson's that I had read years ago when I first began to wrestle mentally with the subject of women and ecology. He had said, "My complaint with the kids I teach nowadays—graduate students and such—is that they don't really believe anything enough to get the tension between the data and the hypothesis." I knew as I ferreted about in the recesses of my mind that there was quite a bit that I did believe beyond the despairing "Oi Vey!" that had been nonetheless a legitimate initial reaction.

We too had picked out that statement by Bateson, quoted it, making it a topic for development and discussion. Why did the young graduate students lack conviction about anything at all—what was the *matter* with them? Our interest, now, is in Nancy Todd's reaction. She writes:

My response turned out to be something like a cross between "Yes—but" and "And—yet." Yes, we are faced with an almost ludicrous array of potential threats—the analogy of loaded dice is not inappropriate. But—there is a rapidly growing number of people resolutely dedicated to counter the odds and not to let this chapter of planetary history end either in a nuclear bang or some sort of genetically engineered whimper. And I remember Keith

Critchlow saying years ago that it is apathy, not hate, that is the opposite of love.

And it seemed to me that, among the people I know who are involved in some aspect of this struggle, there is evolving a sense of larger life, of a shared life of humanity and the Earth that is held sacred, and that an empathetic identification with such a larger life is some aspect of what poet Gary Snyder, in *Four Changes*, called "the transforming energy." Such people are also likely to be characterized by an unwavering insistence on being absolutely true to themselves, to their ideals and values, in and out of fashion, unselfconsciously pursuing the path articulated by Carl Gustav Jung as individuation, a life truly lived.

If there can be said to be an emerging world view or sense of the larger life commonly, if tacitly, becoming acknowledged among them it is most likely to be closest to what Gregory Bateson, in the first chapter of his last book, *Mind and Nature*, described as "a sense of unity of biosphere and humanity which would bind and reassure us all with an affirmation of beauty." Later in the same work he further maintains that he holds that the collective loss, on the part of western cultures, of a "notion of ultimate unity that is aesthetic to be a serious epistemological mistake." And in the essay, "Form, Substance and Difference," with one of the most wonderful and accurate uses of the verb "to be" to be found anywhere, he wrote ". . . there is at least an impulse still within the human breast to unify and sanctify the total natural world—of which we are."

It was here that we found the content of something to say and write about. Who are we? What are we? If we start with the facts we shall answer that we are consciousness. We may have bodies but we *are* consciousness. We are able to say, "I am myself and no other." Wherever we have been, in whatever life or form, we have been able to say this. No more primary statement about our identity can be made. Is that enough? No, of course it isn't enough, but it is a true statement and one to begin with. What can we say in addition? We can say that we have both higher aspirations and appetites, desires to grow as humans, and hungers to satisfy.

At this point it becomes desirable to make comparisons. It would increase the range of the possibility of self-knowledge to read, for example, the life of John Muir. Here was one sort of man who learned far more from the mountains than he learned from books. Yet he devoted his life to the welfare of both the mountains and his fellow humans. Then for a second object of study, we might choose Arthur Morgan. About the most impressive and unforgettable thing Arthur Morgan said was something he set down in 1925. It was this:

A person without history or knowledge of the past must see the world as commonplace because, except at extreme times, he is going to live among commonplace people who have come to that conclusion. . . . The only way to get the sum and substance of human experience is to reach out beyond the years we have into the years of the past, into the significant experiences of the human race.

Another passage doesn't seem exactly exciting yet, when thought about, is recognized as profoundly true:

The educated man must have found his way into the company of great men. Greatness grows by communion with greatness. Socrates knew the poets, Jesus knew the prophets, Abraham Lincoln knew the Bible and Shakespeare. The educated man has developed the habit and desire of having company that inspired greatness.

Is wanting to know where we go when we die a proper part of the general question—"Who am I?"—that we have been investigating? We can certainly say that it may be, but then we are required to take a leap of faith. This will be difficult for some, not for others—it is hard to say why. For most of us when the time for death comes, our lives are not complete. We have unfinished business, unfulfilled obligations. It is reasonable to think—if we suppose that the universe is a reasonable place—that we shall have a further chance. Where? Here, of course, where our unfinished business lies. When? Who knows? But it will be when the circumstances combine to make the right invitation, and then a reincarnation takes place, to which we are drawn by the magnetism of countless subtle alliances and bonds. Can we suppose that we knew our mother and father in this life for the first time only? Or that we shall never meet them again? The reasons for thinking in terms of reincarnation are many and include the bonds of

both affection and dislike. All these things need to be worked out as part of our lives.

If we are able to adopt this conclusion, that we are centers of consciousness, and in our case self-consciousness, and also reincarnating units of consciousness, then we have a fairly coherent account of who and what we are.

Now, for a change of pace, we go back to Nancy Todd's *Annals* article. She quotes from James Lovelock, author of the Gaia hypothesis:

Dr. Lovelock sums up the hypothesis for the layperson most succinctly when he says, "For me the Earth, quite definitely is alive. I have no doubts about that. And all life is inseparable. It's a single entity." The sense of planetary co-evolution conveyed by the Gaia hypothesis, although by no means the intent of its originators or any of their fellow scientific investigators, is an epistemology which eloquently expresses Bateson's ultimate aesthetic unity, affirming that we, as a species, are a small part of a much larger reality. Implicit to such an epistemology, is a potential for humanity to live informed consciously by a sense of a larger life which is at once as old as humanity and is beginning to be confirmed by the science—still our most credible arbitrator—of the late twentieth century. . . .

Those individuals whose work they feel to be on behalf of the larger life of the planet seem to be characterized by a tenacious stick-to-it-iveness that tends to be transformed into a life fully lived. Once, in a discussion many years ago, when Bill McLarney, whom *Annals* readers will recognize was asked about his work, which was not so different in essence then, he said something to this effect: "Well, I don't suppose any of us is fool enough to think that we can save the world. But if each of us were to look at some of the directions we'd like to see the world go in—and then put our little bit of force behind one of them—and to have a hell of a good time while we're doing it, well then, that's what we should like to do." McLarney's prescription rings as true today and echoes, in somewhat different style, what the scholar of myth, Joseph Campbell, once said when asked as how we, as modern individuals in these uncertain times ought to try to find our way. He replied, "By questing."

And so, still ruminating on what to say at the Schumacher lecture, I turned my thoughts to the people I have known who have been engaged in what might be characterized as "questing," in being absolutely true to themselves and the set of talents they were born with yet and have, in various ways, made a difference in the world. Quite a number came to mind. None are rich. None are powerful. Most of them are bright and tenacious, bordering on the pig-headed.

Then she goes on to name some of them, starting with Bill McLarney, then his friend, Steve Robinson, then Dana Meadows, and Wes and Dana Jackson, then Conn Nugent. Then she compared herself with the mythic Pandora—

I had opened the jar and, in my imagination, had let fly all the evils and afflictions that lie in wait for us. Then I looked into the jar again, right to the bottom and had found once more that hope was there still—always was and is yet. I remember that *In A Walk with A White Bushman*, Laurens van der Post had written of hope— "Love is the hope that ceases not, and ultimately love is certainty." And I knew I had found an insight that could "bind and reassure us all with an affirmation of beauty."

And then I found myself recalling Wallace Stevens' lines:

After the final no there comes a yes
 And on that yes the future world depends.
 Yes . . . But . . .
 Yes.

Some of the other contents of *Annals* add to the conception of the individual—in one case as a farmer. This is the contribution of John Quinney, executive director of the New Alchemy Institute, the research center established years ago by John and Nancy Todd and Bill McLarney, which has already made many contributions to sustainable agriculture. In the issue of *Annals* now under review, Quinney speaks of how organic methods have added elegance to agriculture. He says:

Let's look at a couple of examples. An organic vegetable grower plants every fifth bed to buckwheat. She lets the crop flower so that she can harvest buckwheat honey. The buckwheat flowers also attract parasitic braconid wasps that help control aphids on adjacent crops. And the buckwheat, when turned in, raises soil organic matter, improves filth and water-holding capacity. Now that's smart, and that's elegant agriculture. It's aligned with Bucky Fuller's idea of doing a lot with a little. It's resourceful farming. It's economical and it's fascinating.

Or let's look at a legume such as clovers or vetches. In trials in New York, researchers have planted broccoli in among legumes. The legumes produce nitrogen for the broccoli, control erosion and smother weeds. In some cases yields have been equal to those obtained with conventionally grown broccoli. Again, it's an elegant system that substitutes intelligence for horsepower, and skillful design for thoughtless tillage. Still other cover crops can be established in the fall, grown until frost, and

left in place as an early-season mulch. As these mulches decay, they release "biological herbicides" to control weeds. . . .

At New Alchemy, we're exploring elegance in agriculture, and creating an integrated small farm.

Two items of interest are reported about the work of Ocean Arks International, now the primary area of effort for John and Nancy Todd. First of all, the thirty-two-foot sailing trimaran, developed years ago, has at last been granted legal permit to fish in Costa Rican waters. W. described the development of this craft years ago and it is good news that the permit has finally been obtained. Its sailors are now in a position to demonstrate the advantage in competitive sail when the trimaran is pitted against standard motor-driven fishing boats. The other item is the introduction of another sort of fishing vessel, *Aquaria I* captained by Kevin MacLean. Speaking of *Aquaria I*; MacLean says:

I had no doubt, after looking the boat over, that here was a true fishing boat. Ruggedly built of balsa-covered fiberglass, the *Aquaria I* is 38 feet long by 14 wide and draws 5 of water. Underneath the waterline she is a modern cruising sailboat; her sleek hull, full keel, and separate skeg-hung rudder leave no doubt of her ability to slip through the water under sail. Up above she's a fishing boat with a layout not unlike a New England lobster boat. She has a deck house forward leading to crew's quarters for four. Aft of the accommodation, and separated by watertight bulkheads are the engine room, large fish hold, and rudder flat. I thought the boat, like a good tool, had a great potential.

Bringing the boat from Fort Lauderdale to Ocean Arks headquarters in Woods Hole was for MacLean a "shake-down" cruise, demonstrating that the boat was tough and capable and would be a good platform for a wide variety of fishing. He decided to undertake trawling as a test. MacLean reports:

We caught fish. We caught fluke and summer flounder and scup and tautog. In a ten-minute tow we had caught fifty to sixty pounds of marketable fish. We had done at least as well as the big guys. I was very pleased.

Subsequent tows and days at sea have reinforced the results of that first sea trial, proving that it is no fluke. The secret of the success of the *Aquaria I* as a trawler lies in the lightness of the boat, her mechanical equipment and fishing gear.

That the *Aquaria* is able to run by sail gives a small boat the range of a big boat.

The best fishing grounds are often far from fishing ports; small boats have very limited fuel tanks so that fuel burnt getting to the grounds reduces the amount of time available to fish and puts the small boat out of contention. The *Aquaria* class of vessel, with her comfort and ability to stay at sea, is a contender. Although here I have mostly dealt with trawling, we are not limiting our development efforts to solely one method. Mechanical equipment has been installed that readily adapts to other fisheries. We are going full steam—sail—ahead with our programs.

This means that the economies of sail are all available to the small boat fisherman.

One more article in the *Annals* deserves attention. It is Wes Jackson's "Six Assumptions that have Shaped American Agriculture." These assumptions, it becomes evident, have all been disastrous in effect. Here all we can do is summarize them. The first, then, is the farmer's assumption that his primary goal is to increase production. It is a great mistake. The second assumption is that "in the relationship between agriculture and nature, nature is to be subdued or ignored." This assumption has made us blind, unable to learn from nature. The third common assumption has been that in understanding the way the world works, "priority should be given to studying the parts of things rather than the whole." Jackson says:

This is usually called reductionism and many have argued, especially in recent times, for a more wholistic approach for conducting agricultural research. For those of us interested in agroecology, we are trying to make the case that to understand an ecosystem is as valuable as understanding the parts.

The fourth assumption lies in blind belief in the "laws of economics."

The field of economics is regarded as though it is loaded with laws as immutable as the laws of physics. It is frequently argued, for example, that the hard-headed realism which centers around economics ignores ecological necessity. Economics prevents us from stopping soil erosion or aquifer mining or placing agricultural chemicals in our ground water.

The fifth assumption is that rural life is stupid, more idiotic than urban life. This idea is found in the

Manifesto of the Communist Party by Marx and Engels, and many Americans seem to have sided with the authors.

More than the stereotyped beer-drinking TV watchers feel this way. A major newspaper carrying a review of the film *Country* concluded that Jessica Lange was "too beautiful to be a country woman." A reviewer of one of Wendell Berry's recent books noted that though Wendell Berry is a farmer, he is an "intelligent farmer."

Well, if you've ever stopped in at an eating place, say in Kansas, for lunch on Sunday, and listened to what people say and talk about, you at least understand the ground of this assumption, even though, because you also read men like Wes Jackson and Wendell Berry, you don't share in it.

The sixth assumption is that you have to be "up-to-date" to be a first class citizen. Commenting on this, a thoughtful farmer said it meant that he would have to hate his father, and he wouldn't do it. Wes Jackson goes on to discuss these questions, page after page, then says at the end:

Instead of production primarily, we have to think of sustainability. Instead of dominating nature, we have to acknowledge that nature is our source and best teacher. Instead of understanding the world in parts, we need to think about the whole. There are lots of economic realities: rugged individualism can take a back seat to community interest and we can still be individual men and women. People who respect the rural life are closer to nature and wisdom than those who are not. Our self-esteem need not suffer.

Gary Snyder reminds us that it is a one thousand year journey, 1492-1992. What will be in 2492 begins with us. The discovery of America still lies before us; so far we have only colonized it.

REVIEW

AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

WE have been reading what seems a strange book—strange because it is a life of Daniel Defoe, yet there is hardly mention of *Robinson Crusoe* until you have finished two thirds of the volume. Why should this be? Because, when Defoe wrote it, this was the only way he could think of to make money. And, of course, it did. Brian Fitzgerald, author of *Daniel Defoe*, published by Regnery in 1955, says that when Defoe turned in his manuscript to the publisher he "was wholly unaware of the significance of the occasion."

The father of the English novel we call him today, the pioneer of realism in European fiction, but Defoe saw himself—and *Robinson Crusoe*—in a very different light. For a man who had successfully engaged in political and religious controversy, who had written verse satire and prose satire, history and essays, odes and hymns and panegyrics, for such an author to turn to a tale of adventure, a mere fictitious or semi-fictitious prose narrative, was—in his own eyes and in the eyes of his contemporaries—undoubtedly to take a downward step in the world. A work of mere fiction! A novel! A book without Latin quotations and classical allusions, and devoid of literary embellishments—what gentleman or lady would read such a thing?

But as Fitzgerald says, Defoe did not dare to admit that his book was "fiction," although every one guessed it. And if ladies and gentlemen did not read it, "*Robinson Crusoe* was read—and went on being read—by the small shopkeepers, and artisans, the seamen, publicans and coachmen and cobblers, the soldiers and sailors, footmen and servant wenches, the apprentices, idle and industrious, and, in fact, the common people generally."

The book was published on April 25, 1719, and went through edition after edition. By August it had been reprinted four times. Believing that he had struck a lucky vein, which was true enough, he went on to write other novels—*Memoirs of a Cavalier*, *Moll Flanders*, *Colonel Jack*, and *Roxana*. None of these works was superficial.

H.G. Wells remarked that passages in *Cavalier* give a far better idea of the warfare of that time than any formal history." Fitzgerald says:

Defoe wasted no experience that came to him. Into *Robinson Crusoe* he put his self, his whole self. He had always been interested in the sea and seamen. As a boy he would wander down to the Thames-side, there to talk with "old soldiers and tars." He would get them to pour out their stories—tales of distant lands and foreign climes. All through his life the sea fascinated him—fascinated and terrified. News of a shipwreck would send cold shivers down his spine.

Why is there some importance about knowing the early life of Daniel Defoe? Because he was born early enough in the seventeenth century to feel the impact of the Revolution of 1688. Daniel was born into a Puritan family of Presbyterians. This was not very inviting for "a small, active, sharp-witted, sharp-eyed little fellow even at the best of times." We in our time have no idea of the oppressiveness of constant quotation from the Bible, from morning to night.

It was "the Bible saith this," or "the Bible saith that"—young Defoe had no rest from the Bible. When he was very young Daniel would start crying; then his mother stopped repeating biblical dogmas and paid attention to him. But when he grew older this became impossible. Then he had to endure his parents' pious jargon—and appear appropriately solemn. Poor little Defoe! It was not that his parents were not kindly folk. They were admirable in their way, James Foe was a sober and godly man. Born and bred in Northampton, the Civil War had brought him to London when a young man. He served his apprenticeship, set up business on his own account. His whole energies went into his business, and by dint of that hard work he got on.

Defoe was but six years old when the great plague overtook the city. The plague, fortunately, did not last long, but after it came the Great Fire of London which swept the city for five days. While the fire came close to his father's shop, it was spared. After the Plague and the Fire Defoe's father, James Foe, set up as a butcher, a much more profitable trade than tallow-chandler.

It was the twin catastrophes of the Plague and the Fire which, having wiped out the neighboring

shopkeepers, enabled him to do so. He prospered exceedingly. Highly regarded by his fellow-tradesmen, he was elected a member of the Company of Butchers. Thus was Puritan piety, allied to a shrewd Puritan application to business, rewarded by the Almighty. Godly discipline and economic virtue had triumphed after all. As for Defoe, poor little Daniel Defoe, who had had the scriptures and their meanings rammed down his throat ever since he could remember, he also was to have his reward for all the toil and tears that accompanied those mumbled prayers at his mother's knees. It was from the Bible that he acquired his vocabulary and his literary style.

Daniel was expected by his mother and father to enter the clergy of the Calvinist faith. Yet it was not long before he realized that such a life was not for him. He had been given a good education at Newington Green where classes were held in English, not in Latin. At eighteen Defoe was politically conscious and knew what was going on.

Defoe was already that new kind of person in seventeenth-century England—the liberal-minded man. Fortunately he was not alone. Dr. Morton's Academy [at Newington Green] included many liberal-minded young men. Less theologically minded than their fathers had been in the grand days of the 1640s, they were not less politically conscious. . . . There can be no doubt that Defoe was totally unsuited for the Christian ministry and he himself realized as much. An active young man with an active mind, he wanted to lead a life of activity. He was frankly worldly and wanted to get on in the world. He craved success. He wanted riches, vast riches. He wanted to achieve, he wanted fame and power. . . . He was serious, passionately serious, to do something that had a definite purpose in life. Yet he wanted to be a man, not a clergyman—"a man with a gold ring and gay clothes," who drove out in a coach and six, and had at his side a pretty girl with curls and bright red lips.

Defoe, as Fitzgerald says, got his way. He entered the City, not the Church.

London! Defoe came to work there, young but well-educated, rather puritanical, rather dangerously open-minded and very open-eyed, and with something—it was the common gift of all imaginative youth of the English Revolution—noble in him, nobler than the Restoration world and seeking fine responses. He wanted to live well and live happily,

certainly, but he wanted also to serve and do and make. Defoe started in work in London as a prentice. We are not certain as to the date—probably it was 1679—nor what was the exact nature of his work. We do know that he was employed by a hosier and haberdasher, a certain Mr. Lodwick. . . . probably . . . his natural talents and the excellent education he had received raised him above the majority of prentices, so that he was treated by Mr. Lodwick and his son more as a partner and companion than as an ordinary clerk. Honest and straightfonvard and independent, and incredibly industrious, Defoe was not slow to show his worth, and before long he had risen above such tedious tasks as weighing or measuring merchandise or tying up parcels. Then he would learn how to keep the books and make a good bargain. He would be entrusted with the job of dealing directly with the leading businessmen of London. By which time he would be ready to set up on his own.

Meanwhile he was in London, which he loved, had loved since a child. Lodwick allowed Defoe a great deal of liberty which he spent exploring London, finding great booksellers, places where men discussed important things, and other places where he could hear fine music.

Soon Defoe became a merchant on his own account. He traded in stockings, night-caps, socks, gloves, and the like, and dealt also in beer, port, tobacco, spirits, and snuff, commodities which took him on wide travels. At some point in his life he added the "De" to his name, for his father had been simple "Foe." He felt, Fitzgerald says, that the "De" gave a certain refinement to his identity. He married when he was twenty-three, a young woman, Mary Tuffley, who had money and bore him nine children. Otherwise the marriage was not a happy one and it had little inhibiting effect on Defoe.

After the death of Charles II in 1684 Defoe's principles drove him to action. He heard that the Duke of Monmouth had landed at Lyme and had raised the flag of Protestant rebellion. Monmouth was a man after Defoe's own heart. He was a champion of the rights of Englishmen and Monmouth's announcement brought Defoe's radical puritan blood stirring in his veins. So

Defoe rode with the rebels. But with the tragic outcome of the famous battle of Sedgemoor, Monmouth being taken and executed, Defoe accounted himself lucky to be able to return to London to make his fortune. In 1688 when William of Orange landed on the Devonshire coast with his Dutch guards to bring about the Glorious Revolution, Defoe joined him. To Defoe the revolution was "glorious" because it confirmed the right of the middle class to acquire property and get rich, which Defoe was bent on doing, and would have accomplished had he not been distracted in so many ways. He accumulated debts he could not pay, was involved from 1688 to 1694 in eight lawsuits which reduced him to the position of debtor without recourse—which meant, for him, the horrors of debtors prison.

These horrors overtook him, finally, including the pillory, which he had to endure for three days. But now his integrity saved him, which had become known to Londoners through his writings, and instead of pelting him with offal in the stocks the people draped him with flowers, cheered him, and indeed gave him a new lease on life.

He returned to London in 1693 at the age of thirty-three to make a new start in life. It was a fine start, for he recovered most of his fortune and was able to pay his debts. Meanwhile, he completed his first book, *Essay on Projects*, although not the first of his writings. Fitzgerald says of this work:

It is concerned with the things which most concerned men at the time—banking, insurance, bankruptcy laws, highways, and education. At the same time it brims over with fresh speculation that seeks everywhere the well-being of society by growth of material and moral power. There is a wonderful fertility of mind, an almost whimsical precision of detail. With these things go good sense and good humor to form the groundwork of a happy English style.

The last chapter is a long and strong recommendation of education for women.

This life of Defoe is indeed valuable since it acquaints us with the sort of man who invented

the English novel and who wrote the book which, even today, fascinates us as children—*Robinson Crusoe*.

COMMENTARY

THE SHAPING OF HISTORY

ONE thing that the quotation (on page one) from Arthur Morgan drives home is that our world is both commonplace and most uncommon, depending upon what happens to us and how we regard it. Our experiences, in short, are both ordinary and extraordinary. What Morgan says is certainly justification for giving attention to the life of Daniel DeFoe, in this week's Review. One thing we are driven to say, as a result of reading this life, is that DeFoe became far more than the influence of either heredity or environment can explain. Primary for him were his own intentions, which were indeed a mixture of motives, yet so intense that he left a distinct mark upon history, upon the lives of a great many people.

Yet the setting of environment has a great deal to do with what we decide to do. The atmosphere of the seventeenth century determined the direction of Daniel DeFoe's life, and by reason of its intensity he exercised a wide influence on the people of his generation, and in another way on those who came after.

Then, consider the impact exercised by Nancy Todd as an editor and writer—especially through the people she names and calls attention to in her discussion of her effort to plan her Schumacher lecture. What she says is valuable because it shows one of the processes by which history is made. All that she writes is a confirmation of the insight of Arthur Morgan, by noting the "rapidly growing number of people resolutely dedicated to counter the odds and not to let this chapter of planetary history end either in a nuclear bang or some sort of genetically engineered whimper."

Looking at this week's "Children" article, one finds a discussion by Wendell Berry of the effect of "ordinary opinion" in relation to an institution such as the Pentagon, and also what he says about the influence of television. As he puts it in the concluding paragraph quoted from him: "We are offered peace without forbearance or tolerance or

love, security without effort and without standards, freedom without risk or responsibility, abundance without limit."

All this is understanding which grows from the study of history—from recognition of what happens to culture when no attention is given to "the significant experiences of the human race."

CHILDREN ... and Ourselves A RARE VOICE

IN his *Recollected Essays 1965-1980* (North Point Press, 1981), Wendell Berry speaks of the delusion which the industrial outlook has imposed on our understanding of the problem of waste.

According to the industrial vision of it, the life of the farm does not rise and fall in the turning cycle of the year it goes on in a straight line from one harvest to another. This, in the long run, may well be more productive of waste than of anything else. It wastes the soil, it wastes the animal manures and other organic residues that industrialized agriculture frequently fails to return to the soil. And what may be our largest agricultural waste is not usually recognized as such, but is thought to be both an urban product and an urban problem: the tons of garbage and sewage that are burned or buried or flushed into the rivers. This, like all waste, is the abuse of a resource. It was ecological stupidity of exactly this kind that destroyed Rome. The chemist Justus von Liebig wrote that "the sewers of the immense metropolis engulfed in the course of centuries the prosperity of Roman peasants. The Roman Campagna would no longer yield the means of feeding her population, these same sewers devoured the wealth of Sicily, Sardinia and the fertile lands of the coast of Africa."

What Berry mourns is the general loss of the capacity to face dilemma, to experience tragedy. Take the choice between community and principle.

Facing exactly this choice between principle and community, on April 20, 1861, Robert E. Lee resigned his commission in the army of the United States. Lee had clearly understood the evil of slavery. He disapproved and dreaded secession; almost alone among the Virginians, he foresaw the horrors that would follow. And yet he chose to go with his people. Having sent in his resignation, he wrote his sister: ". . . though I recognize no necessity for this state of things, and would have forborne and pleaded to the end for a redress of grievances, real or supposed, yet in my own person I had to meet the question whether I should take part against my native state. With all my devotion to the Union and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I

have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home."

This was a most difficult moral decision, we hardly realize how difficult, yet, as Berry decides:

He was right. As a highly principled man, he could not bring himself to renounce the very ground of his principles. And devoted to that ground as he was, he held in himself much of his region's hope of the renewal of principle. His seems to me to have been an exemplary American choice one that placed the precise Jeffersonian vision of a rooted devotion to community and homeland above "the abstract feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen." It was a tragic choice on the theme of Williams' maxim: "No ideas but in things."

Looking for other illustrations, Berry turns to Gideon.

An exemplary man of faith was Gideon, who reduced his army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred in earnest of his trust, and marched that remnant against the host of Midianites armed, not with weapons, but with "a trumpet in every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps without the pitchers."

Beside this figure of Gideon, the hero as man of faith, let us place our own "defender," the Pentagon, which has faith in nothing except its own power. That, as the story of Gideon makes clear, is a dangerous faith for mere men; it places them in the most dangerous moral circumstance, that of *hubris*, in which one boasts that "mine own hand hath saved me." To be sure, the Pentagon is supposedly founded upon the best intentions and the highest principles, and there is a plea that justifies it in the names of Christianity, peace, liberty, and democracy. But the Pentagon is an institution, not a person; and unless constrained by the moral vision of the persons in them, instructions move in the direction of power and self-preservation, not high principle. Established, allegedly, in defense of "the free world," the Pentagon subsists complacently upon the involuntary servitude of millions of young men whose birthright, allegedly, is freedom. To wall our enemies out, it is to wall us in.

And what, actually, does our faith in the Pentagon mean to us, in practical terms? Berry replies:

Because its faith rests entirely in its own power, its mode of dealing with the rest of the world is not

faith but suspicion. It recognizes no friends, for it knows that the face of friendship is the best disguise of an enemy. It has only enemies, or prospective enemies. It must therefore be prepared for *every possible* eventuality. It sees the future as a dark woods with a gunman behind every tree. . . . Whereas the man of faith may go armed with only a trumpet and an empty pitcher and a lamp, the institution of suspicion arms with the death of the world; trusting nobody, it must stand ready to kill everybody.

All of the material we have been quoting from Berry is from the Section, "Discipline and Hope," and he relates much of what he writes to education. For example:

Of all the illusions of television, that of its much-touted "educational value" is probably the first. Because of its utter transience as a medium and the complete passivity of its audience, television is doomed to have its effect within the limits of the most narrow and shallow definition of entertainment—that is, entertainment as diversion. The watcher sees the program at the expense of no effort at all; he is inert. All the live connections are broken. More important, a TV program can be seen only once; it cannot be re-examined or judged upon the basis of study, as even a movie can be; a momentous event or a serious drama slips away from us among the ordinary furniture of our lives, as transient and fading as the most commonplace happenings of everyday. For these reasons a political speech on television has to be first and last a show, simply because it has no chance to become anything else. The great sin of the medium is not that it presents fiction as truth, as undoubtedly it sometimes does, but that it cannot help presenting the truth as fiction, and that of the most negligible sort—a way to keep awake until bedtime.

Berry muses:

Hearing the televised pronouncements of the political leaders of our time upon the great questions of human liberty, community obligation, war and peace, poverty and wealth, one might easily forget that such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson once spoke here upon those questions. Indeed, our contemporary men of power have produced in their wake an industry of journalistic commentary and interpretation, because it is so difficult to determine what they have said and whether or not they meant it. Thus one sees the essential contradiction in the expedient doctrine that the end may justify the means. Corrupt or false means must inevitably corrupt or falsify the end. There is an important sense in which

the end is the means. What is disturbing, then, about these three "sides" of our present political life is not their differences but their similarities. They have all abandoned discourse as a means of clarifying and explaining and defending and implementing their ideas. They have taken almost exclusively to the use of the rhetoric of ad-writers: catch phrases, slogans, clichés, euphemisms, flatteries, falsehoods, and various forms of cheap wit. This has led them—as such rhetoric must—to the use of power and the use of violence against each other. But however their ideological differences might be graphed, they are, in effect, all on the same side. They are on the side of their quarrel, and against all other, and all better possibilities. There is a political and social despair in this that is the greatest peril a country can come to, short of the inevitable results of such despair should it continue very long. "We are fatalists," Edward Dahlberg wrote, "only when we cease telling the truth, but, so long as we communicate the truth, we move ourselves, life, history, men. There is no other way."

It is hard to find consolation for Berry's comment at this point:

The political condition in this country now is one in which the means or the disciplines necessary to the achievement of professed ends have been devalued or corrupted or abandoned altogether. We are offered peace without forbearance or tolerance or love, security without effort and without standards, freedom without risk or responsibility, abundance without thrift. We are asked repeatedly by our elected officials to console ourselves with that most degenerate of political arguments: though we are not doing as well as we might, we could do worse, and we are doing better than some.

Yet that we have a man still able to say such things, and to be published, is a kind of consolation.

FRONTIERS ON THE WRITING OF HISTORY

BACK in January (Jan. 27) we quoted from Wendell Berry's recent book, *Home Economics*, a despairing comment which he titled "Loss of the University." His point was that the disciplines pursued in the university—those relating to the humanities—have become so specialized that they are all out of touch with each other. They no longer have or use a common language. As Berry puts it:

That is, the various disciplines have ceased to speak to each other; they have become too specialized, and this over-specialization, this separation, of the disciplines has been enabled and enforced by the specialization of their languages. As a result, the modern university has grown, not according to any unifying principle, like an expanding universe, but according to the principle of miscellaneous accretion, like a furniture storage business.

And now we have on our desk a letter from "a former academic," one committed, he says, to writing the "old" history instead of the new, and as he goes on what he says make him a rather good champion of Berry's contention. He is, we should say, Page Smith, and we have the impression that he has been an academic of some distinction. In any event, he writes well, which makes him welcome here. He begins by commenting on a review by Prof. Stone of Prof. Himmelfarb's critique of the "new" history. We don't know Prof. Stone's work, but all that we have seen of Prof. Himmelfarb wins respect. But since Page Smith finds them both inadequate we allow him to go on. He says in his letter:

First off, Professor Himmelfarb and Prof. Stone appear to be in agreement that social history, in various flavors, is a major if not the dominating school of contemporary historical research. Of course they are both aware that social history is at least as old as Herodotus. Macauley's history of England is rich in social history, how people dressed, what they ate, how they made their livelihoods. Henry Adams' description of American society in 1800 has never been surpassed. What is at least somewhat new, as

both historians point out, is the disposition of many academic historians to act as if social history *was all that mattered*. Even that tendency is not new. I recall dozing through the elder Schlesinger's recitation of such stirring events as the invention of the first detachable celluloid collar and the laying of the first stretch of macadam highway. The "new" history is at least as old as James Harvey Robinson. The fact is that every generation of academic historians since the late nineteenth century has proclaimed itself an apostle of "the New History." Long ago a disgruntled champion complained that under the banner of the new history, tales of "drums and trumpets" had simply been replaced by accounts of "bums and strumpets" (I am personally in favor of the history of drums and trumpets *and* bums and strumpets and all categories in between).

I believe that Professor Stone is on the beam in crediting a number of contemporary historians with substantially enlarging our understanding of many facets of our past; he cites half a dozen commendable examples. But we pay, in my view, much too high a price for such infrequent gems. The price is the continued indeed aggravated fragmentation of the whole vast realm of history. Between the insipid textbook and the exhausting monograph, that often evoked collective entity, the general reader, has nowhere to rest his eye or refresh his spirit. The profession's scorn of the general reader appears limitless. The worst thing that can be said, in academic circles, of an academic work is that it is "popular." Even the Marxist historians (whose decline, as attested to by Professor Stone, is certainly encouraging) who should theoretically be writing for "the masses," are no better than their peers. Their turgid tomes are read, in the main, by other Marxist historians. By writing learned monographs for each other, academic historians have, in effect, withdrawn history from the public consciousness.

It seems appropriate to interrupt here, to call attention to the fact that our lead article for Dec. 2 of last year began with a quotation from Paul Johnson, a writer who explains that he is both a journalist and an historian, and a man who strongly deplores the decline of the writing of history into an "academic specialty." He says exactly what Page Smith says, although at greater length. Our article then goes on to provide samples of distinguished nineteenth-century historians, W.E.H. Lecky and H.T. Buckle. While

these two were widely read, you wouldn't call them "popular," either, since they were extremely serious analysts. We hope that readers who keep their issues will go back to that article and read it again. We now return to Page Smith's letter:

In the words of one critic, they have performed a "prefrontal lobotomy on the historical consciousness of the American people." As a people we are incapable of thinking historically. Witness the President of the United States, colossal historical ignoramus. His references to our past are so uninformed as to be a national embarrassment.

It may be appropriate to remind modern-day academic historians that in times past (times as recent as the nineteenth century) a historian was someone who wrote books about history that people read. In 1884 the Literary Society of Cedar Falls, Iowa, spent the winter reading and discussing Macauley's *History of England*. . . . George Bancroft and Francis Parkman got similar treatment in other years. Today the title of historian is reserved for scholars whose books, for the most part, nobody reads except a few other scholars in the same field.

Most disheartening is the fact that this circular, self-serving historical mode is "locked-in" by the way appointment and promotion procedures work in the academic world. A young academic with a disposition toward generalizing history is actively discouraged by his seniors; if he persists he is simply gotten rid of—"such," in John Jay Chapman's words, "is the power of natural law." The world of academic history is, in practice, an organized conspiracy against old-fashioned generalizing narrative history, be the historian dead or alive. One of the greatest American historians was John Bach McMaster, a truly democratic historian, still eminently readable. In five years of graduate study at Harvard I never heard his name mentioned.

It is difficult to exaggerate the moral and intellectual, not to say psychological, results of the withdrawal of written history from the realm of intelligent lay discourse. I suspect that much of our rampant cultism is one consequence. Man is either at home in history or adrift in the world. New history, old history, what does it matter as long as it's locked up in the academic world? For those of us outside the academic world, the fierce debates between cliometricians Marxists (who may also be cliometricians), social historians, cultural historians, political historians, diplomatic historians, on and on ad infinitum are no more than tempests in an

academic teacup; a real yawner. But we can hardly be blamed for wondering why the immense academic/historical machine can't produce general history (old-fashioned narrative history or what we might call in today's lingo holistic history) for the general reader that would both entertain and instruct.

We would like to have our history back!

Santa Cruz, Calif.

PAGE SMITH