VOLUME XXVIII, NO. 26-35
JUNE 25, 1975

ADMIRABLE AS HE IS

[This article is Wendell Berry s review of *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (Knopf) by Theodore Rosengarten, reprinted by permission from the *Nation* for March 1.]

NATE SHAW is the pseudonym of a black farmer born in Alabama in 1885. He grew up as a field hand and sharecropper in the cotton belt. Because of his industry, ambition and intelligence, he prospered. By the early 1930s he owned a good team of mules, good farming equipment, two automobiles; his family was well cared for; he was on the way to owning an 80-acre farm. At that time he joined the Sharecroppers Union. He took a stand against some sheriff's deputies who had come to attach and carry off a neighbor's stock. The confrontation ended in a "shootin frolic," for which Nate Shaw was sent to prison for twelve years. He stayed the full term, refusing a parole bargain by which he would have had to leave his home country and move to Birmingham, and was released in 1945. Older, drastically reduced in means, he returned to farming, "a mule farmin man to the last," though the tractor era had come in during his absence. In March of 1971 he began to tell his story to a young white man, Theodore Rosengarten. The telling, recorded on tapes, took 120 hours; the result, much edited, is this book. Our debt to Mr. Rosengarten is large.

It is a remarkable book because Nate Shaw was a remarkable man. And it might be worthwhile to try to say exactly why he was remarkable. It is not because he belonged to "the tradition of farmer-storytellers." Most farmers of Nate Shaw's generation belonged to the tradition of farmer-storytellers, and I am sure that a great many of them were good talkers indeed. Nor is he remarkable for what Mr. Rosengarten calls his "awesome intellectual life." The adjective seems to me overwrought, as if in an effort to *make* Nate Shaw admirable, which is not necessary. Or it is the effort of an urban intellectual to accommodate his surprise at finding superior intelligence not associated with books. It is misleading because, with us, the phrase "intellectual life" suggests a life *exclusively* intellectual, a life apart from action, and Nate Shaw was remarkable because the life of his body and the life of his mind were one life. He was not a modern intellectual. His thought was not speculative or experimental; it was not an overrefined maundering among "alternatives." It was a meditation upon experience, always related to acts.

Shaw's words have the energy of passionate knowledge; he speaks as a man who has *seen.* It is characteristic of him to say: "Well, I looked into all that and seed. . . ." He had no schooling; his book learning is all described in one sentence: ". . . I can put down on paper some little old figures but I can't add em up." But he says of the failure of his lawyer's appeal, following his sentencing for the shooting: "That was my education right there—" In a sense, it must have been. That event—his stand against the deputies and his imprisonment—was not only the great event and the turning point of his life; it was also his life's measure, its clarification or revelation. He speaks with the pressing awareness that "I understand a heap of things today more clear than I did in them days. . ." And sometimes his memories hasten and crowd him almost beyond coherence. He exclaims at one point: "O, these words bring up others and they won't wait. . . ." His words are principled by his certainty that "there's nothin honorable before God but the truth."

I am troubled because Mr. Rosengarten's name appears on the book as author rather than editor, which he was, and because the book is subtitled *The Life of Nate Shaw* rather than *The Autobiography of Nate Shaw*, which it is.

More troubling is the comparison with Faulkner, initiated by Mr. Rosengarten in his preface and followed already by several reviewers. Rosengarten commits himself to this with a simple-mindedness hard to believe: "Faulkner writes about the white south; Shaw speaks about the black. Both focus on the impact of history on the family." The first sentence falsifies Shaw and Faulkner both; if there is any single truth basic to Southern history, it is that there never has been a "white south" or a "black south." The second sentence is useless because, though it is at least partly true, it is probably just as true of most other writers. The great difference between Shaw and Faulkner is passed over lightly indeed in the concession that one speaks and the other writes. That is a fundamental difference, and other important differences rise from that one.

The idea seems to be that until the blacks have *their* Faulkner they won't be "equal"; Rosengarten's sentences fairly sigh with relief. It is as if liberality required us to pretend that the whites and the blacks were exactly alike in everything but color, like salt and pepper shakers. This could be agreed upon, maybe, and we could make an etiquette of ignoring our differences. But what if the differences do exist? And what if the two races are useful and necessary to each other because of their differences? And what if they have access to certain aspects of their experience and their common nationality only *through* each other? As I see it, Shaw is valuable to us precisely because he is *not* like Faulkner. He is richly different.

Shaw's vocabulary and usage will sometimes seem strange to readers not familiar with his region and way of life, but it will never seem empty or inert. When he speaks of "correspondin" a girl or says that his son "got stout enough to accomplish a place," we have no trouble understanding what he means, and we are also aware that his words convey insight beyond the reach of conventional usage. He speaks always in reference to a real world, thoroughly experienced and understood. His words keep an almost physical hold upon "what I have touched with my hands and what have touched me. . . ." Surely this is the power that we have periodically sensed in what is called (vulgarly) "the vulgar tongue." It is a language under the discipline of experience, not the discipline of ideas or rules. Shaw's words, always interposed between experience and intelligence, have the exactitude of conviction, whereas the words of an analyst or theorist can have only the exactitude of definition.

In a recent issue of *Saturday Review/World*, R. Buckminster Fuller has an article called "Cutting the Metabilical Cord," which is based on a virtually unqualified assumption that humanity has begun a process of unlimited improvement by way of technological progress. "Humanity knew very little when I was young," he says. And he recalls the "skilled craftsmen" he worked with on his first jobs; these people "had vocabularies of only about 100 words, many of which were blasphemous or obscene." Thanks, however, to radio and television, this lamentable ignorance has been corrected by a "historic information-education explosion and its spontaneous edifying of humans in general. . . ." This "explosion" of edification "completely changed the speech pattern of world-around humanity from that of an illiterate ignoramus to that of a scholar." These and many similar assertions culminate in a sort of Creed for Modern Times: "The great intellectual integrity of universe has cut the metabilical cord of tradition and parental authority—putting youth on its own thinking responsibility." And then occurs the essay's only note of caution, which is immediately buried beneath another avalanche of technological mysticism: the young people of 1974, "whose metabilical cord of tradition has been cut, now need a few years time to develop competence to take over the world affairs initiative, and that is exactly what universe is apparently about to do next."

It may be that Mr. Fuller's language can be put to some good use. I hope so. It could

certainly be used to promote the sale of television sets. Should his jargon catch on with the public, it could also be useful to any politician whose designs required a fit of public optimism. This gobbledegook of "universe" is representative of a lot of the sub-tongues spoken now by people who lead "awesome intellectual lives." It is speech so abstract, so far removed from anybody's experience that it is virtually out of control; *anything* can be said in it that the speaker has the foolishness or the audacity to say.

There is not a phrase in Nate Shaw's story so abstract, naive, ignorant, insipid or *tasteless* as this of Buckminster Fuller. An "uneducated" man, whose speech was formed long before radio, Shaw is nevertheless well able to say whatever he thinks, and he thinks whatever he needs to think as a man of exceptional competence, both practical and moral. In moments of joy or grief, he is capable of a sort of poetry. The burden—and so the discipline—of Shaw's language is what he knows from experience. For that reason nothing he says, if correctly quoted, will ever be useful to a salesman or a political propagandist. There is not a slogan in this book. He has no talk of "education explosions" or "metabilical cords." He does not say "Freedom now" or "Black is beautiful" or "Power to the people." He says: "My color, the colored race of people on earth, goin to shed theirselves of these slavery ways. But it takes many a trip to the river to get clean." He says: "They goin to win! They goin to win! But it's goin to take a great effort. . . . It won't come easy. Somebody got to move and remove. . . . it's goin to take thousands and millions of words, thousands and millions of steps. . . . And I hope to God that I won't be one of the slackers that would set down and refuse to labor to that end."

That is eminently responsible language. And it is deeply moving—especially when we realize that the man speaking almost in the same breath of faith, doubt, difficulty and of his own willingness to *labor* is 86 or 87 years old. The movement here is characteristic: the swiftly defined hope or vision or ambition, followed by the recognition of difficulty, the implication of labor. And these passages occur among *stories* that reveal the nature and the difficulty of effort and the characters of people, black and white. What this responsibility rests on is the knowledge of tragedy. Shaw's mind has dwelt upon his own limits, both cultural and human; it has dwelt upon loss and upon solitude. Buckminster Fuller writes, "Obviously, humanity if properly cooperative and scientifically coordinated can do anything it needs to do," without acknowledging either the enormous ifs that cling to "properly cooperative" or the political portent of "scientifically coordinated." Nate Shaw, a more unified man, who can speak of acting "with the full consent of my mind," has *done* what he *thought*, and so he knows the solitude of the man who acts upon principle. When he "stood up against this southern way of life," he had to stand alone; the other members of the union fled. He knew the exultation of his stand: "that made me merry in a way. I done what was right. . . ." But he also knew its tragedy: "when they shot me it didn't shake me, when they arrested me it didn't shake me. But it shook me to see my friends was but few."

If Shaw's language is never far from experience, it is also never far from judgment, another of his qualities that will make him useless to propagandists. The amplitude of his experience, the energy of his intelligence, his great courage simply will not permit him to withhold his judgment. It is always working, and it can be fierce. But the same qualities that bring it into play give it the dignity of freedom from prejudice and special pleading. One must assume, having no evidence but Shaw's, that he may sometimes be wrong, but it could rarely be argued that he is partial. He is as hard on blacks as on whites. He finds good people in both races. He knew people of both races who were partly good and partly bad. And this intelligence of judgment aligns him with the best men who have taken the stand he

took: he knows that what he stands for, what he asks for himself, is a human and not a racial good. He knows that white people also stand to gain from what he has hoped to gain for himself and for his race. And he makes a careful distinction between white men and white moneymen: "Color don't boot with the big white cats: they only lookin for money. O, it's plain as your hand. The poor white man and the poor black man is sittin in the same saddle today. . . ."

Every page of this book is resonant with Shaw's intelligence, with his delight in the use of his mind. And this is a conscious delight: "I've learned many a thing that's profitable to me, and I've learned a heap that ain't profitable, but to learn anything at all is a blessin." And a few pages later he says: "And I treasures what I know and I so often think about it. . . ."

Similarly, his pride, his moral pride, is both an explicit theme and a quality implicit in every word. From childhood Shaw's life was governed by self-respect, love of work, pride in accomplishment, high standards for his own work and behavior. "I depends on myself to act just suchaway," he says. And: "If I has anything to do I must do all I can at it; I just feels terrible if I don't." And from the first he seems to have had an indomitable impulse to be independent: "I was dependin on the twist of my own wrist." "I was a poor young colored man but I had the strength of a man who comes to know himself. . . ." These virtues were the direct cause both of what he knew of prosperity and of what he knew of calamity. This passionate involvement of his mind and character in all his acts becomes finally the intelligence of his speech, and makes it memorable.

I do not see how anybody could consider the depth and range of the intelligence, the power, sensitivity, and precision of the speech, and doubt the superiority of this man. And yet, though Shaw knew his superiority, had carefully assembled and pondered upon its evidence, it seems to me that in part of his mind he remained half in doubt of it. This uneasiness springs from his lack of formal education. The book has two themes, counter-themes, that will show what I am talking about.

Shaw's pages are full of evidence that he was a farmer, not just by necessity of birth and condition but by choice as well. It is luck, o£ course, when one loves to do what one has to do. But the fact remains that Shaw loved to farm. He had an exultant interest in it. He says so directly, and there is an implicit joy in all the passages about his work. And yet his lack of education obviously nags at him, forcing him to suspect that his farmer's life was his limitation: "My boyhood days was my hidin place. I didn't have no right to no education whatever. I was handicapped and handicapped like a dog." And he says that the educational opportunities that followed the civil rights movement "brought light out of darkness."

I assent wholeheartedly to the first theme, and at least in principle to the second. But I feel an uneasiness, perhaps a conflict. I keep coming up to this theme of education and then hesitating. It seems to me one of the rare instances when Shaw exemplifies a problem that he does not illuminate.

A powerful superstition of modern life is that people and conditions are improved inevitably by education. Within the limits of the life he lived, and of the evidence he gives, this proposition certainly seems to apply to Shaw: he would have been less at the mercy of employers, landlords and creditors, for example, if he had been able to read. Or he might, maybe, have been a better farmer if he had had some schooling. Suppositions of this sort are blind, of course, but one has to suppose also that, if Nate Shaw had been well enough educated, he might long ago have become a spokesman, perhaps for his race, perhaps for small farmers of his sort in both races.

My uneasiness on this question is coming from two directions. I am aware, on one hand, of a powerful cultural inheritance—part of which Nate Shaw's story represents, and now joins—that rises from long before the civil rights movement or even emancipation, and that is perhaps not so much light out of darkness as light *in* darkness. A

fact too easy to ignore in our climate of conventional pity for the "disadvantaged" is that Nate Shaw is not *potentially* admirable; he is admirable *as he is.* And to assume that he could have become so admirable without drawing upon a strong, sustaining culture would be as fantastical as to pity him in light of what he might have been.

On the other hand, I am aware that such a man as Nate Shaw stands outside the notice, much less the aim, of the education system. From the standpoint of our social mainstream, the idea of a well-educated small farmer, of any race, has long been a contradiction in terms, and so of course our school systems can hardly be said to tolerate any such possibility. The purpose of education with us, like the purpose of society with us, has been, and is, to get away from the small farm—indeed, from the small everything. The purpose of education has been to prepare people to "take their places" in an industrial society—the assumption being that all small economic units are obsolete. But the superstition of education carries it even further; it assumes that this "place in society" is "up." "Up" is the direction from small to big. Education is the way up. The *popular* aim of education is to put everybody "on top." Well, I think I hardly need to document the consequent pushing and trampling and kicking in the face. The point is that if the reader joins Nate Shaw in wishing that he might have been educated, he cannot safely assume that he is wishing only for an improved Nate Shaw; he may be wishing for a different kind of human creature altogether. Educated—given his intelligence, his strong character, his local fidelities, and given a good deal of luck—Shaw *might* have become a well-educated small farmer. But he might also have become a "farm expert"—and thus have become the natural enemy of his economic class. Or he might have become another big cat, "only lookin for money."

What I am working toward is a definition of this book as a burden. It is a burden. I think it will become a moral task for anyone who reads it—in addition, of course, to being multifariously informative and delightful. At first I thought the burden would be Shaw's indictment of racism and economic oppression. His testimony on these subjects is fierce and eloquent—and burdening too, Lord knows. But on these subjects Shaw is only one of many witnesses. His response to those conditions—his *stand*—is what is rare. And he made his stand "with the full consent of his mind." I have called it an act of principle, but that is to give it the shallowest definition. It was the action of his character: it was prepared by his whole life up to that time; it was, as much as himself, native to his place in the world.

And that brings me in sight of what I want to say: Shaw burdens us with his character. Not just with his testimony, or just with his actions, but with his *character,* in the fullest possible sense of that word. Here is a superior man who never went to school! What a trial that ought to be for us, whose public falsehoods, betrayals of trust, aggressions, injustices and imminent catastrophes are now almost exclusively the work of the college-bred. What a trial, in fact, that *is* for us, and how guilty it proves us: we think it ordinary to spend twelve or sixteen or twenty years of a person's life and many thousands of public dollars on "education"—and not a dime or a thought on character. Of course, it is preposterous to suppose that character could be cultivated by any sort of public program. Persons of character are not public products. They are made by local cultures, local responsibilities. That we have so few such persons does not suggest that we ought to start character workshops in the schools. It does suggest that "up" may be the wrong direction.

This is the book of a black man; Shaw keeps a deliberate faith with his responsibilities as a spokesman for his race. But it is also, almost as constantly, a farmer's book. When he speaks as a farmer, Shaw transcends the limits of his racial experience, and enters into another kind of tragedy.

Shaw's book is full of the folk-agrarianism that undoubtedly lay behind the agrarianism of Jefferson, that survived in small farmers and even field hands and sharecroppers of both races until well into this century. It is the agrarianism of "Forty acres and a mule," the frustrated hope of emancipated slaves, but nevertheless one of the few intelligent and decent social aspirations that our history has produced. Shaw's book, either by his fault or his editor's, does not say how this tradition came to him or who his teachers might have been. Evidently it did not come to him from his father, whom Shaw held in some contempt as a free man with slavery ways, who "couldn't 1 earn nothing from his experience." But however it came to him, Shaw did inherit the aspiration, the attitudes and the know-how of this old agrarianism, and his exemplification of it is one of the values of his book.

His understanding of the meaning of land ownership is complex and responsible, as is his understanding of the relationship between property and labor. He knows that for men such as himself, ability is futile if it has no title to land; it simply comes under the control of whoever does own the land. He knows the dangers implicit in a man's willingness to own more land than he can work. It is exactly because of this knowledge that Shaw cannot be said to speak only about the experience of black people; the notion belittles him. When he "stood up" to oppose his neighbor's—and ultimately his own—dispossession, he had generations of the history of his people behind him, and he knew it. But in that act an important strand of white people's history reached one of its culminations, and in a different way he knew that.

Shaw's standing up stated and clarified a principle that his life worked out in detail. His ideal was independence, and that carried his mind to fundamentals. He was not a "consumer." The necessities of life were of no negligible importance to him. Provisioning, with him, was not just a duty but a source of excitement, a matter of pride. He knew that his hopes depended on a sound domestic economy. He raised a garden, kept a milk cow or two, fed his own meat hogs and so reduced his family's dependence on the stores. "I was savin myself a little money at the end of each year, getting a footin to where I wouldn't have to ask nobody for nothin."

As a consequence, he began "to rise up"—not to "the top" but to a sufficiency of ability and goods. There are exultant passages in which he tells of buying his own mules, new wagons and harness. Like thousands of men of his generation, white and black, his great pride was in his teams, and in his ability as a teamster. Some of the finest parts of his book are about his mules. Memories of the good ones carry him away: "O, my mules just granted me all the pleasures I needed, to see what I had and how they moved."

He had a fierce loyalty to his own country and to the investment of his own labor in it. He would not consider going north or to the city. He would not even use city water, though at the end of his life a new water line went right by his door: "I ain't livin in no city. I ain't too lazy to step outside and help myself . . . and the water ain't fit for slops." For his people, he is mistrustful of welfare ("since the government been givin em a hand-down," he says of certain people he knows, "they wouldn't mind the flies off their faces") and of the city jobs that leave "the possession and the use of the earth to the white man." His loyalty to his place made him a conservationist, and one of his most indignant outbursts is against polluters.

By the time of his imprisonment, Shaw's values were solidly proven in his life. He was a self-respecting and an accomplished man, and he was by no means the only one who knew it. Twelve years later, when he was released from prison, he had not only lost much that he had earned but had become an anachronism. A new kind of farming had come in: "I knowed as much about mule farmin as ary man in this country. But when they brought in tractors, that lost me." By the time he tells his story, he realizes that for his

deepest knowledge, the knowledge that made him a man in his own sight, he has no heir. An antique collector has come to buy his tools: "there's people decorates their homes with things that belong to the past."

Mr. Rosengarten says in his preface that Shaw's language is "enriched here and there by words not found in the dictionary." I collected several examples of what I assume he is talking about. All that I found *are* in the dictionary; Rosengarten failed to recognize them because he was unfamiliar either with Shaw's dialect or with farming. He spells hames "haines," backband "backbend" and "backhand," Duroc Jersey "Dew Rock Jersey." He has Shaw say that "the old horse went *backin* on off," when he obviously could only have meant *racking.*

This is more than a trifling editorial inadvertence. It is the upcropping in Shaw's own sentences of the cultural discontinuity that troubled his old age. Instead of coming in its live meaning to the ears of his children's children, his story has come to print through the hands of people who do not know the names of the substantial things that ruled his life—much less the use or the cultural importance of those things. The book that has saved him for readers—most of whom also will not know these things—thus shows how near we have come to losing him.

WENDELL BERRY

REVIEW
ON NOT BEING A GENIUS

ABOUT four or five months ago—subject to the lagging habits of surface mail from Europe—we received from Spain the first issue (for last September) of a new magazine called *Ajoblanco,* which means White Garlic. A friend translated an article for us, which we were happy to print a month ago in evidence of the kind of thinking now going on in Barcelona.

Barcelona! What do we know about Barcelona? Not nearly enough. It is a city (and province) in Catalonia, and was the region of heroic and tragic events during the Spanish Civil War. Accordingly, we reread Noam Chomsky's long chapter in *American Power and the New Mandarins* on the neglect by modern historians of the achievements of the Catalan anarchists in establishing voluntary collectivist farming and enterprise as part of their struggle against Franco—and how these efforts were sabotaged by the Communists who were solidly against any sort of anarchist success. Chomsky quotes at length from George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia,* which brings us to the subject of this week's review—George Orwell, or rather, Lionel Trilling's remarkable appreciation of Orwell in his introduction to the Harcourt Brace edition of *Homage to Catalonia* (paperback, $1.95).

Mr. Trilling has a faculty for making the best of a writer's work luminous. If you want to know about Orwell's disenchantment with Communism—or Stalinism—this book explains it, but here we are concerned with Orwell's prose, and with what Mr. Trilling says about him as a writer.

He starts out by telling about a conversation he had with a student who had decided to do an essay on Orwell. At that time Trilling was musing on what to say in his introduction to *Homage, so* the two exchanged bibliographical information. Not wishing to color each other's ideas, they didn't say much more. But the student, unable to resist revealing what was on his mind about Orwell, "said suddenly in a very simple and matter-of-fact way, 'He was a virtuous man'."

Trilling couldn't resist, either. That is, the student's remark, of which he wholly approved, became the basis of his introductory essay on Orwell. First he speaks of other English writers—the two Lawrences (T. E. and D. H.), Yeats and Shaw (both Irish), T. S. Eliot (an American, originally), and E. M. Forster, suggesting that they are "figures" in literature—something we seem to lack in America. Then he says:

> Orwell takes his place with these men as a figure. In one degree or another they are geniuses, and he is not—if we ask what it is that he stands for, what he is the figure of, the answer is: the virtue of not being a genius, of fronting the world with nothing more than one's simple, direct, undeceived intelligence, and a respect for the powers one does have, and the work one undertakes to do. We admire geniuses, we love them, but they discourage us. They are great concentrations of intellect and emotion, we feel that they have soaked up all the available power, monopolizing it and leaving none for us. We feel that if we cannot be as they, we can be nothing. Beside them we are so plain, so hopelessly threadbare.

Mr. Trilling does not admire all Orwell's work—he thinks *Animal Farm* was over-rated—but usually, he says, Orwell's critical essays are excellent:

> And when they are at their best, they seem to become what they are chiefly by reason of the very plainness of Orwell's mind, his simple ability to look at things in a downright, undeceived way. He seems to be serving not some dashing *daimon* but the plain, solid Gods of the Copybook Maxims. He is not a genius—what a relief! What an encouragement. For he communicates to us the sense that what he has done, any one of us could do.

How did Orwell happen to do so well? The explanation seems to be that he took the traditional truths seriously, and lived by them. He believed in such simple things as responsibility, order in personal life, fair play, and physical courage, and practiced them. Mr. Trilling suggests that we all might do this—

> Or could do if we but made up our mind to do it, if we but surrendered a little of the cant that comforts

> us, if for a few weeks we paid no attention to the little group with which we habitually exchange opinions, if we took our chance of being wrong or inadequate, if we looked at things simply and directly, having only in mind our intention of finding out what they really are, not the prestige of our great intellectual act of looking at them. He liberates us. He tells us that we can understand our political and social life merely by looking around us, he frees us from the need for the inside dope. He implies that our job is not to be intellectual certainly not to be intellectual in this fashion or that, but merely to be intellectual according to our lights—he restores the old sense of democracy of the mind, releasing us from the belief that the mind can work only in a technical professional way, and that it must work competitively. He has the effect of making us believe that we may become full members of the society of thinking men. That is why he is a figure for us.

Well and good, but shouldn't we be quoting Orwell instead of Trilling? Perhaps, but Orwell needs reading, not sampling. And here we hope to show the value of Mr. Trilling's work, of the critic as teacher. Another teacher, Harold Goddard, who gave his life to understanding literature, can do much for anyone who sets out to read Shakespeare. After browsing in Goddard's *The Meaning of Shakespeare* you can't help but read the texts of the plays more carefully, and more imaginatively. And after reading Robert Cushman's *Therapeia* (not yet, unfortunately, a paperback), you can't help but return to Plato with stronger determination to find out what he really means.

Which is to say that these men are good critics and something more. They are also artists. In other words, the good books about books are themselves works of art. They have the power to engage the student or reader in direct apprehension of meaning, not only conceptually but also in terms in the ranges of feeling that have been generated by the work.

COMMENTARY
WHAT IS CHARACTER?

THE MANAS editors sought and obtained permission to reprint the review of *All God's Dangers* because Wendell Berry does in it one all-important thing: He removes from institutions, ideologies, and intellectual abstractions the qualities of a good and wise human being and puts them back in the man himself, where they belong, and where they should forever remain. To make a list of the tacit assumptions which are challenged and exposed as false by this review would take more space than we have available. They include practically all the false foundations of what a great many people imagine to be "civilization." Mr. Berry is tough-minded about this, but there is no rancor in what he says. He is simply uncompromising.

We don't as yet have a metaphysic to go with this critical analysis. In other words, we have no easily recognizable way of putting Mr. Berry's stance—where he writes from, in making his judgments—in positive terms. Maybe we'll develop one, some day; maybe, some day, we'll have enough content verified by experience to use general words (without a resulting emptiness) to describe Nate Shaw and the few others in the world who can stand as models of human excellence as he did. But we don't have such words now—not in common usage—and to invent or borrow them from little known metaphysical systems would be precocious to our capacity for comprehension. A general term which does not immediately fill itself in with rich meaning can only produce the illusion of knowledge, so we need to wait for better understanding before making synthetic language for such purposes.

Meanwhile, we have Mr. Berry's word for what he calls the *burden* of Nate Shaw's book. The word is "character."

> Shaw burdens us with his character. Not just with his testimony, or just with his actions, but with his *character*, in the fullest possible sense of that word.

Well, what is "character"? Fortunately, we get from Mr. Berry sufficient illustrations of its meaning to know what he means. We get the meaning from the grain of Nate Shaw's life—what he did, what he said, how he looked at life, what he cared about and thought important. So, after reading a while, we feel we know what character means in this case.

It is, for us, something like the Roman word "virtue" or the old Greek word *Arete*.

Why don't we have a better sense of meaning for the word "character"? Why are we reduced to vague, everyday language when we try to explain its content?

One answer to this question is that we haven't *thought* about the sources and meaning of character for generations. Ideas about the nature of man have been left either to scientific inquirers, who have no place for moral qualities as such in their investigations, or to the clichés of inherited religion. Consider what Catherine Roberts says (in *The Scientific Conscience*) about the qualities suggested by *arete:*

> Actually, such traits—the most significant of all for human evolution—may, for all we know, have no direct genetic basis at all. History records numerous instances of human beings who are remembered for their virtue and their nobility of character but whose offspring (and/or parents) were either morally neutral or actually immoral or degenerate. As pointed out long ago by Socrates, that rare combination of extreme virtue, intelligence, and emotion, which is called human arete (denoting in Greek supreme excellence which cannot be adequately translated by a single word) and which has ever distinguished the truly outstanding individual, does not appear to be inherited. Twentieth-century geneticists would undoubtedly attribute arete to some rare combination of genes, but in the complete absence of proof of such a contention, one can with equal justification regard it, at least in part, as non-genic. . . .
>
> It is even conceivable that one of the unrecognized mechanisms of human evolution might be the appearance in its psychosocial phase of

> individuals who possess such an attribute over and above genetically determined intelligence. Without it, man's highest potentialities cannot be realized and the highest arete cannot exist. Little wonder that both Pindar and Socrates consider that human arete might be a gift of the gods! For it does appear to be man's closest approach to the divine, and therefore any desire to breed for it by elevating the genetic level to produce saints and moral leaders seems misdirected, if not arrogant. Whatever its origin, it has appeared, unbidden and unexpected, at rare moments during the psychosocial phase of evolution as one of mankind's supreme blessings—and it will undoubtedly continue to do so. It seems to me to indicate a blatant disrespect for life itself when twentieth-century scientists confidently envisage the day when a combination of luck and applied genetics will enable them to produce not only super-intellectuals but a Plato or a Christ as well.

Well, if we have no idea where character comes from, we might do well to look at Plato's explanation, which is found in the *Phaedrus* myth as well as in other places. We do need a meaning for the word, and we have to start somewhere. Myths at least do not confine or distort, since they make no pretense at precise definition.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY

IN "Children" for April 9 Arthur Morgan told of the difficulty he experienced in getting a physics teacher and a chemistry teacher to consolidate and combine their material to make a single, one-year college course covering both subjects. It didn't work, mainly because both teachers felt obliged to include so much that the course became unmanageably heavy. Probably there will be no solution to this problem until we learn better ways of generalizing scientific conceptions.

But what about other areas of learning? How, for example, could history be consolidated for the purposes of general education, along the lines of Dr. Morgan's suggestion of teaching only the *essentials*, so that there will be room or time for the essentials of other areas of learning?

The idea is to reduce detail without turning the course into a superficial "survey" that does not give students anything to bite into.

Well, what *are* the "essentials" of history? Needed for answering this question is a basic theory or philosophy of history, and for modern scholars, as Clyde Kluckhohn remarked years ago, "theory" is slightly indecent. In short, there is no commonly accepted theory of history in terms of which the content of a course might be reduced to essentials. What then do you do when you don't have a theory? Teach "all about everything," as the New Historians of a past generation claimed was necessary? This would be going down to defeat, just as happened at Antioch in the attempt at consolidating physics and chemistry.

Fortunately there is another approach—one suggested by the "core" idea applied at Franconia College in the 60s. As the Franconia catalog put it:

> We choose twelve moments rich in meaning—from the distant past to the present. We search for the heart of these moments by not restricting our tools to those of any single discipline. . . . For example last fall we started with the moment when Socrates drank the hemlock: an exact moment which is clear and exciting.

It seems fair to call such a moment an access to the "essentials" of history. If you go back to that time and read, say, Plato's *Phaedo*, and then ask *why* the Athenians feared Socrates, and for answer go to the *Apology*, and from there to wherever you are led by further questions—if you do all this, then you have, from an essential point of departure, moved by inner stimulus to as much or as little as your desire to understand and know will take you.

Can education do any more than this? Should it attempt less? As Ortega said, the function of the teacher should be to stir the desire to know, not "transmit the heritage." The "heritage" is a collection of what other men have believed to be important.

The teaching of history, then, should deal with nuclear beginnings and provide sample avenues of further study—avenues selected by students' questions, not by curriculum planners.

The condemnation of Socrates is an obvious choice of a nuclear beginning. What about modern times?

Even if we don't have a theory of history, there are people writing about the present with a strong sense of meaning, scholars who take the affairs of mankind with the utmost seriousness. Instead of a theory, they have leading intuitions. They are not always historians; they may be novelists who draw into consideration much or all that is happening and regarded as significant by the best intelligence of the time. You could go from country to country and pick such writers as sources of starting-points. Italy, for example, might be represented by Carlo Levi, Ignazio Silone, and Danilo Dolci. If you read Silone's trilogy (*Fontamara, Bread and Wine,* and *Seed Beneath the Snow*), then Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* and his *Of Fear and Freedom,* and finally one or two of Danilo Dolci's books, say, *Report*

from Palermo and *A New World in the Making*—and still don't have any idea what to do next, well, there's not much use in studying history! Such books are not dull. They are exciting and provocative, and can be depended upon to rouse a vital interest in the movement of thought and feeling that has shaped modern Europe.

For France, one could start with Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots*—the book she wrote as a proposal for the reorganization of France after the liberation from the Nazi invasion. (Her letter to George Bernanos on the Spanish Civil War, expressing both allegiance and agony, would be a way of trying to get at the meaning of that tragic struggle.) For more on France, Sartre's introduction to Henri Alleg's *The Question* (Praeger) would bring in the essentials of imperialism and the moral dilemmas it creates for subsequent generations. Camus' essays would set problems in still another light. What should one understand about modern France and Europe to be able to feel something of what Camus felt?

This is of course an approach to history according to the Shelleyan proclamation that poets are the legislators of mankind. Poets are synthesizers of historical meaning. If twentieth-century historical studies had been guided, say, by the preoccupations of Carlyle and Ruskin, instead of the chronicles of political events, today's writers such as Lewis Mumford and Theodore Roszak would not be obliged to repeat so much of what they said, because the Western world's understanding of itself would now be very different—much better. And Mumford and Roszak would be able to write about other, much larger matters—of which they are obviously capable—instead of trying to wake us up from so much stubborn misdoing.

What we are advocating here in the study of history is what Doris Lessing recommends for reading in general:

> There is only one way to read [history], which is to browse in libraries and bookshops, picking up books that attract you reading only those, dropping them when they bore you, skipping the parts that drag—and never, never reading anything because you think you ought, or because it's part of a trend or a movement. Remember that the book which bores you when you are twenty or thirty will open doors for you when you are forty or fifty—and vice versa. Don't read a book out of its right time for you.

There is hardly any way to contradict Mrs. Lessing if you are serious about education. Can this be proved? Well, consider what history is *for*. We have two definitions to offer. One is Joan Robinson's account of what the social sciences in general are for. In *Freedom and Necessity* she distinguishes between the social sciences and the "hard" sciences:

> . . . even if the social sciences could improve their methodologies and raise their level of intellectual discipline, it would not be possible to provide a basis for "social engineering" comparable to that which the physicists have provided for space engineering. The reason is obvious. The objective of an engineering programme is given to the engineer; for the social scientist the objective of the programme is precisely what he has to discuss. . . .
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> *The function of social* science *is quite different from that of the natural sciences—it is to provide society with an organ of self-consciousness.*

Reaching self-consciousness is distinctively a self-guided and self-animated activity. Social science, then, does not actually begin until the student gets to the point where he makes—and insists on making—his own curriculum.

There is no self-consciousness possible from studies which do not follow from the individual desire to know. Self-consciousness is intrinsically related to autonomy of mind. What are we saying? We are saying that the "discipline" of history, insofar as it is achieved, is all in the student, not in the curriculum.

The other definition or statement of the importance of history is by Arthur Morgan:

> 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.

We have one more defense of this program. It is to notice the fact that worthwhile students have already adopted it, will follow it anyway, no matter what. Dorothy Samuel described these students ten years ago, and her account still applies:

> On every campus will be found unfashionably clad students lolling in cheap rooms, reading inexpensive paperbacks or second-hand editions of great books. . . . They browse among the courses and disciplines. If a book speaks to their condition, they may skip a few weeks' required work to peruse everything the author wrote. When the grade card reflects what they did not learn rather than what they did learn, they couldn't care less. Top grades are meaningful only to employers; these students have not seen any jobs worth doing. . . . And so the exodus has begun. In ones and twos, undramatically, thoughtful lads and lasses are dropping out of college, at least off and on, so they will have time to think. . . .
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> They are, in short, philosophic in an age which seems to offer no forum for discussion of principles and values and verities. . . . They would be Emersons and Thoreaus in a day when journals and podiums seem open only to statisticians and reporters. (*Contemporary Issues*, Spring, 1965.)