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FEELINGS WE CAN'T IGNORE

THE great philosophical argument—about how humans can best get at the meanings of things—keeps moving around but it never stops. If we go back to the Greeks for a look at its beginning—and we should of course go further—we find the Ionian philosophers (sixth century B.C.) deciding that the time had come to free serious inquiry from its traditional religious framework, uncritically inherited for the most part, and examine directly the world in which we live. As a writer of a few years ago said:

> They [the Ionians, beginning with Thales] observed everything around them, from the cosmos to the smallest rock-pool with its teeming miniscule life; and where they observed they speculated. (Xenophanes, for instance, noted the fossil imprint of fishes and seeds in the Syracuse quarries, and from them deduced a cyclical theory of geological history, with recurrent floods as the destructive factor.) They were the pioneers not only of natural science but also, as Professor Huxley points out, of the "first systematic geography" and also of "critical secular history." (*London Times Literary Supplement,* Aug. 24, 1967.)

The object of the Ionians, we are told by cultural historians, was "to explain the material universe as given in sensible perception; their explanation was in terms of matter, movement, force." We are, as nearly everyone admits, indebted to these thinkers for the very spirit of science, for the example of thoroughness in inquiry and for the daring and freedom of their speculations. Yet two hundred years later Plato raised the more important question—repeated ever since, although not with the same genius or wide implication: Why should we look at the world and not within ourselves? In the *Phaedo* he has Socrates present a challenge to physical thinkers. While waiting for his execution, this aging "midwife" of worthy intellectual offspring told his unhappy friends how, in his youth, he had heard of books by Anaxagoras which promised to explain the causes of things, with *mind* as the underlying principle of order.

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

The view that Socrates here opposes rather effectively—using common sense that Plato will develop into both metaphysical and moral theory—is virtually the same as what we nowadays call mechanistic determinism, still actively proposed and defended. In 1925, in his

introduction to Frederick Lange's *History of Materialism* (Harcourt, Brace), Bertrand Russell pointed out the consequences of this view:

> If physical determinism is true—that is to say, everything that we commonly regard as the motion of matter is subject to laws of the above [physical] kind—then, although there may be a concurrent world of mind, all its manifestations in human and animal behavior will be such as an ideally skillful physicist could calculate from purely physical data. Physics may still be unable to tell us anything about a man's thoughts, but it will be able to predict all that he will say and do. Under these circumstances, a man will be, for all practical purposes, an automaton, since his mental life can only be communicated to others or displayed in action by physical means.

Such "reductionism" in modern thought Russell (along with many others) attributed to Descartes:

> This point of view resulted from Cartesianism, though most Cartesians attempted to escape from its consequences. Lamettrie, author of *L'homme machine*, justly claimed that he had derived his philosophy from Descartes. Descartes . . . endeavored to safeguard human freedom by maintaining that the will could alter the direction of motion of the animal spirits, though not the amount of their motion. He did not however, extend this freedom to animals, which he regarded as automata. Nowadays no one would dream of drawing such a distinction between men and animals.

For an account of the state of this argument in 1925, Russell begins with a return to common sense:

> To common-sense it appears that our minds are affected by what we see and hear, and that, conversely, our bodies are affected by our volitions whenever we will to make any movement. There is no reason whatever to suppose that common-sense is mistaken in this view, although, of course there is great need of analysis as to what really takes place when we perceive or will.
>
> Lange advances, quite justly, as an argument against materialism, the fact that we only know about matter through its appearances to us, which, according to materialism itself, are profoundly affected by our own physical organization. What we see depends not only upon what is there to be seen, but also upon the eye, the optic nerve, and the brain. But the eye, the optic nerve, and the brain are only known through being seen by the physiologist. In this way materialism is driven back to sensationalism. If it is to escape sensationalism it must abandon the empirical scientific method, substituting for it the dogmatism of an *a priori* metaphysic, which professes to know what is behind appearances.

Russell concludes this summary with an aside that applies as much today as in 1925:

> Historically, we may regard materialism as a system of dogma set up to combat orthodox dogma. As a rule, the materialistic dogma has not been set up by men who loved dogma, but by men who felt that nothing less definite would enable them to fight the dogmas they disliked. They were in the position of men who raise armies to enforce peace. Accordingly we find that, as ancient orthodoxies disintegrate, materialism more and more gives way to scepticism.

What makes men who dislike dogmas use them as weapons in argument? Only a strong feeling of *value*, which becomes an emotional constraint, has the power to do this. The value which made materialists out of openminded inquirers was their devotion to freedom of mind, so vigorously and on occasion lethally opposed by the Church. In becoming materialists—champions of mechanistic determination—they foresaw no evil result from making this assumption, while the terrible consequences of the religious assumption, to the effect that the will of God is known only to his authorized priests, were everywhere in evidence. But the consequences of the materialist assumption are now recognized as equally bad. Again we quote Bertrand Russell, who pointed out the effects of Materialism back in the '30s, in a *Nation* article. He begins by reminding us that the early men of science were confident that they were doing God's work and confirming His splendor. (Isaac Newton is a classic example.) Then he says:

> When with the progress of enlightenment this belief began to grow dim, there still remained the True, the Good the Beautiful. Non-human standards were still laid up in heaven, even if heaven had no topographical existence.
>
> Throughout the nineteenth century, the True, the Good and the Beautiful preserved their precarious

> existence in the minds of earnest atheists. But their very earnestness was their undoing, since it made it impossible for them to stop at a half-way house. Pragmatists explained that Truth is what it pays to believe. Historians of morals reduced the Good to a matter of tribal custom. Beauty was abolished by artists in revolt against the sugary insipidities of a philistine epoch and in a mood of fury in which satisfaction is to be derived only from what hurts. And so the world was swept clear not only of God as a person but of God's essence as an ideal to which man owed an ideal allegiance; while the individual, as a result of crude and uncritical interpretation of sound doctrines, was left without any defense against social pressures. (*Nation*, Jan. 9, 1937.)

Today, in consequence of these trends and their ramifying effects, a number of serious investigators are going back to what Russell calls an *a priori* metaphysic, although they seldom talk about it. Rather, in much of the thought of the new scientists, it seems that intuitive metaphysical assumptions (tacitly held) are the guide to action. As Ian McHarg put it a few years ago: "As far as I'm concerned, ecology is a kind of heavy-footed religion. It's a religious quest, this idea about some yearning which unites all rocks, plants, animals, and men." And John Todd, the marine biologist and co-founder of the New Alchemy Institute, speaks of the need of people to learn to be healthy parts of the whole—in order to make the whole itself healthy, beginning in tiny ways, with "a kind of sacredness of doing." The objective of the New Alchemists, he says, is "To provide the thinking, biological and physical, that would sustain regions or small groups of people with a fair degree of autonomy so that they would not be as subject to co-option or manipulation and could evolve to greater religious and artistic insights." The mystical and the metaphysical seem background ingredients (more like "hunches") in the thinking of a great many of the practical pioneers of the present, and Russell's warning about "the dogmatism of an *a priori* metaphysic" doesn't bother them much. The point is, they're out there in the field, working hard, and while they use theory a lot in their work, and to impressive effect, they're not really generalist theoreticians worried about the implications of assumptions or the logical consequences of metaphysical ideas.

In contrast, a book of theory about the world and why it works so well—and therefore why humans should learn to work with it instead of against it—is James E. Lovelock's *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford University Press). Recalling (for the reader) Lawrence J. Henderson's *The Fitness of the Environment* (1913), Lovelock says that the physical and chemical forces of nature work together so well to support life on our planet that it becomes proper to rename the earth for a goddess. The earth *seems* intelligent. As a critic, W. Ford Doolittle, writing in *CoEvolution-Quarterly* (Spring, 1981), puts it, quoting Lovelock:

> Hence the need for Gaia (loosely from the Greek, and meaning Earth Mother), which Lovelock defines as 'a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere oceans and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet," and for the Gaia Hypothesis, which "postulates that the physical and chemical condition of the surface of the Earth, of the atmosphere, and of the oceans has been and is actively made fit and comfortable by the presence of life itself."

Does this involve an *a priori* metaphysic? Actually, it only flirts with metaphysics, and the result is a curious blend (in theory) of blind forces with plainly benevolent chance! This is clear from Doolittle's comment:

> It is not novel to suggest that life has profoundly changed the Earth, but it is novel and daring to suggest that it has done so in a seemingly deliberately adaptive way, in order to ensure its own continued existence. This sounds purposive, but Lovelock is careful to avoid the teleological trap; he assumes Gaia is the product of natural selection. Just as natural selection has mindlessly molded the behavior of individual bees so that they maintain their common hive at an optimal internal temperature, it has molded the behaviors of all the individual producers and consumers of carbon dioxide, oxygen, nitrogen and methane, and of all the organisms whose activities can influence global climate and oceanic salinity, so

> that these parameters will be maintained within ranges hospitable for life as a whole.
>
> Gaia, as a cybernetic system, must have mechanisms for sensing when global physical and chemical parameters deviate from optimum, and mechanisms for initiating compensatory processes which will return those parameters to acceptable values (negative feedback). These admittedly will be difficult to identify, and Lovelock's imagination fails him in all but a few cases.

In other words, all this extraordinary adjustment and readjustment in behalf of favoring life is simply too much to expect from "mindless" Natural Selection!

Lovelock has a skillful defender in Lynn Margulis, a colleague, and he speaks well for himself, but it is plain from the three contributions (to *CoEvolution Quarterly*) that they are having an argument that will go on forever. Facts which some people read vitalistically or even animistically will be interpreted by others mechanistically (mindlessly), with the motives of the contenders being largely determined by intuitive (or anti-intuitive) feelings about what is "right" or the way things "ought" to be.

Take for example Doolittle's expression, "the teleological trap," which, he maintains, Lovelock has been careful to avoid. Now why is teleological thinking called a *trap?* According to a philosophical dictionary, Teleology is "The theory of purpose, ends, goals, final causes, values, the Good. The opposite of Mechanism. As opposed to mechanism, which explains the present and the future in terms of the past, teleology explains the past and the present in terms of the future." Why should Lovelock be careful to avoid the teleological assumption? Why is it dangerous, and to what?

There are two sorts of explanation. One provides causes, the other reasons. According to our present habits of thinking, behavior in nature is explained by physical or natural causes, while human behavior is explained by *reasons.* Reasons reflect purposes. Humans are teleological beings. They think. And as humans we try to relate to nature, but feel this to be very difficult unless we can find some purpose in nature, too. This, however, is scientifically forbidden. It is methodologically unlawful. Why?

Russell gave one explanation. He said that the materialistic dogma was set up by men who felt that nothing less definite would enable them to fight the dogmas they disliked. Why did they dislike religious dogmas? Ask Giordano Bruno. Ask Galileo. The other explanation is that you can't prove or disprove either dogmas or metaphysical principles in scientific terms. A proposition that cannot be proved or disproved is useless to the scientist. *Therefore,* metaphysical propositions are ruled out of scientific thinking. *Therefore,* James Lovelock is praised by Mr. Doolittle for carefully avoiding the teleological trap. Purpose is a metaphysical concept. It implies meaning in natural events.

Yet we human beings, filled with purposes, with perhaps one overriding transcendental purpose—the will to know the truth about life and ourselves—are a part of nature. How can we be so different from all the rest? Are we fooling ourselves? Is B. F. Skinner right, and should we put aside both freedom and dignity as childish illusions?

We feel that we know better.

Before us, then, is a task of reconciliation, a problem the very terms of which are flatly incompatible, as we use them. You can't fit together purpose and non-purpose, meaning and non-meaning, intelligibility and non-intelligibility, except in some senseless mechanical mix. What is wanted is a living organic blend, and we don't know how to make it. Has the universe a goal toward which all matter, life, and action are slowly moving—an "end" that as human beings we can understand? If you say there *must* be a purpose for all that is, then a scientist might reply that you *may* be right, but he'll also tell you not to mess with his research or try to infect his hypotheses with a meaning like that. He can't handle incommensurables. He will repeat for you, in

some sense justly, that "the will of God is the asylum of ignorance."

Yet, through the work of scientists like Lovelock and others, the profile of what seems purposive action—its pattern rather than its meaning—keeps on emerging. We get shadowy *outlines* of purpose, *rhythms* of meaning, feelings of synchrony in ourselves with some unknown but majestic intention in nature, and we cannot ignore those feelings, and don't want to. Poets know of them and have found suggestive metaphors for such intimations. Happily, a poem is not a dogma.

So the idea of meaning in the cosmic order keeps coming up, a bit more insistently each decade, in our time. Perhaps the idea of over-arching meaning had best be left to the poets until another sort of science—a science with two storeys, physical and metaphysical—gains more than abstract or inferential legitimacy.

We may see our way more clearly past the other obstacle or objection—the one to whom the martyrs to theological mind-control bore witness. Metaphysical propositions about the nature of things, about their meaning, need to be Gandhian in consequence, Platonic in content. What does this mean? It means that a proposition about meaning must be of the sort which, if adopted, will result in no one's harm. And it must be an unenforceable proposition. Plato cared only for propositions which obtain acceptance (validity) from inward assent. A proposition you can use as a club, to force people to get in line, was *humanly* indecisive for Plato. That is, it could never be more than a secondary truth. Gravitation is an example. It makes you stay in line. Defy it and you take a fall. Gravitation gives you no choice. Thus, as the philosophers say, Freedom is knowledge of necessity. And meaning is found only in the regions of choice.

The speakable propositions about the nature of things, then, require no coercion, and become untrue when insisted upon. How can this be scientific? It can't; or obviously, another sort of science is called for.

It follows that the pursuit of meaning—ours and the world's—has for its object something made of both the objective and the subjective: something which does not really *become* except by being known. In this sense meaning is created as we go along. Recorded philosophy, then, is the deposit of past knowing—only the shadow, the echo, the outline and simulacrum of the meanings created by those who have come this way before.

REVIEW
A RANGING MIND

GUY DAVENPORT'S *The Geography of the Imagination* (North Point Press, San Francisco, 1981, $20.00), consisting of forty essays, some pleasantly short, some deservedly long, is a book to conjure with. Few books of the present show so well the riches of literature or illustrate so effectively the skills and joys of a schooled and active mind. "Conjure" means to summon by invocation, and that is what Mr. Davenport does. The essays, many of them reviews of a sort, are about writers and writing, and other artists. As you read along, you may wonder: What am I getting out of this? There are some facts, of course, and they sound reliable, even though the way they pop up to suit the writer's convenience and peculiar intent makes you a bit suspicious; how can the disorganized and angular world of "reality" supply him, on demand, with just the facts he needs for his highly personal evolutions? As Hugh Kenner observed in an appreciation of this book in the August *Harper's:* "There's no getting around the way Davenport's poets and painters as we get to know them, come to resemble Guy Davenport."

You are likely to conclude that the Davenport version of these artists is nonetheless worth looking at. His words on paper make the artists come alive. You feel this again and again. Finally you realize that he can't write in any other way. He does it by living himself in the world of the imagination. His book is well titled.

The four pages on John Butler Yeats, "one of the most gifted portraitists in the history of art, the father of Jack Yeats, Ireland's greatest painter, and of William Butler Yeats, Ireland's greatest poet"—a man who "spent his eighty-three years as if time did not exist"—begin:

> Of time, the tyrant and obsession of the rest of the world, the Irish know nothing and care less. Dublin, a Catholic city for 1500 years, has never gotten around to building a cathedral. They intend to, of course. From its inception the Republic of Eire (or The Irish Free State, or Ireland, or Poblacht na h-Eireann, or whatever name they decide on, in time) has issued postage stamps depicting a map of the country that jauntily includes a largish portion of the United Kingdom. Never mind; the day will come when it will be Ireland's again. The clock in the Joyce household, we remember, disagreed by hours with Dublin's other clocks.

The conjuror is at work, summoning a mood about Ireland and Irishmen. Foreground and background develop in the same flowing sentences:

> When the Rebellion began with an orgy of dynamite in 1916, one of the casualties was a studio full of his unfinished oil portraits. And he, always the level philosopher, would have been the first to admit that he probably wouldn't have finished them anyhow. At his death in 1922 there was a self-portrait on his easel that had been commissioned for the incomparable collection of John Quinn. It had been on the easel for fifteen years. A generation of American painters watched him work on it. He would charge his palette with colors, take up a brush, fiddle with an effect, and begin to talk. . . . He talked with William Morris and Sam Butler, Father G. M. Hopkins and Edward Dowden, with Lady Gregory and John Quinn, with Ellis the editor of Blake and John O'Leary. He spoke briefly on the street one day with James Joyce. It tells us much about J. B. Yeats's ambiance that he remarked to Quinn in later years that he was aware the people Joyce wrote about in *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* existed, but of course one had not met them.

Guy Davenport, too, is indifferent to time, finding the substances of literature in all ages. After showing that, consciously or unconsciously, O. Henry retold the myth of Persephone in one of his stories, he says:

> The appeal of popular literature must lie precisely in its faithfulness to ancient traditions. The charming little children's books by Carlo Collodi, *Le Aventuri di Pinocchio,* can scarcely claim to be included in a history of Italian literature, and yet to a geographer of the imagination it is a more elegant paradigm of the narrative art of the Mediterranean than any other book since Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* rehearses all the central myths, and adds its own to the rich stock of tradition. It reaches back to a Gnostic theme known to both Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson: "Split the stick," said Jesus, "and I am there." It combines Pygmalion, Ovid, the book of Jonah, the Commedia dell' Arte, and Apuleius; and will continue to be a touchstone of the imagination.
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> The discovery of America, its settlement, and economic development, were activities of the Renaissance and the Reformation, Mediterranean tradition and northern acumen. The continuities of that double heritage have been longlasting. The *Pequod* set out from Joppa, the first Thoreau was named Diogenes. Whitman was a contemporary of Socrates, the *Spoon*

River Anthology was first written in Alexandria; for thirty years now our greatest living writer, Eudora Welty, has been rewriting Ovid in Mississippi. "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" was a turn for a fifth-century Athenian mime.

In Guy Davenport we encounter an independent mind. He has his inclinations and doubtless his prejudices, too, but the wonder of any man of mind is what he does with incomplete information and by no means faultless vision. We are not ready for far-off perfections, and a writer who uses as well as Mr. Davenport the shared ignorance of the age, striking sparks from its hard opacities, gives evidence of ways to cope with the human condition. Embodied rather than metaphysical visions guide his thought, its leashes being reason and the ratios of metaphor. "Persephone in many guises is our way of seeing the soul lost and in trouble."

And if we ask why our artists have reached back to such archaic symbols to interpret the distress of mind and soul in our time, there are partial but not comprehensive answers. One reason, I suggest, is the radical change in our sense of what is alive and what isn't. We have recovered in anthropology and archeology the truth that primitive man lives in a world totally alive, a world in which one talks to bears and reindeer, like the Laplanders, or to Coyote, the sun and moon, like the plains Indians.

In the seventeenth century we discovered that a drop of water is alive, in the eighteenth century that all nature is alive in its discrete particles, in the nineteenth century that these particles are all dancing a constant dance (the Brownian movement), and the twentieth century discovered that nothing at all is dead, that the material of existence is so many little solar systems of light mush, or as Einstein said ". . . every clod of earth, every feather, every speck of dust is a prodigious reservoir of entrapped energy."

We had a new vision that death and life are a complementary pattern. Darwin and Wallace demonstrated this, but in ways that were more disturbing than enlightening, and Darwin's vision seemed destitute of a moral life. The nearest model for a world totally alive was the archaic era of our own culture, pre-Aristotelian Greece and Rome. From that world we began to feel terribly alienated, as the railroad tracks went down and the factories up, as our sciences began to explain the mechanics of everything and the nature of nothing.

The first voices of protest which cried that man is primarily a spirit, the voices of Blake, Shelley, and Leopardi sounded sufficiently deranged, and we had to hear the equally dubious voices of Nietzsche, Freud, and Jung before we could seriously begin to listen.

It was, however, the artists who were performing the great feat of awakening an archaic sense of the world. The first effort was a clear outgrowth of Renaissance neoclassicism and led to a revolution in which the themes were subversively rejuvenated: Shelley's Platonism, for instance, and Blake's kitchen-forged mythology, the meta-cultural visions of a Novalis or Baudelaire.

Davenport has his dislikes—academically "correct" literal translations, for one—but mostly he writes of his enthusiasms. The essay on Whitman is a gem of brevity and wit:

Whitman is a kind of litmus paper, perhaps a seismograph. Reading him, we become aware of an awful, lost innocence, and are not certain whether the innocence was real or in Whitman's imagination. He gave his whole life to a book, he freed literature to go courses that were until Whitman unsuspected. He had the power to move even unwilling hearts (witness Gerard Manley Hopkins reading him because he couldn't not read him, knowing the author to be "a scoundrel" and the poetry to be wicked). Pound in a cage at Pisa remembered a University of Pennsylvania philologist who was surprised at attitudes toward Whitman, as "even the peasants know him." The Japanese publish a journal devoted to him. The Russian Futurists and Mayakovsky considered Whitman to be the founder of their school.

Many excellent books have been written about him, his place in world literature is assured. He is still, however a renegade, disreputable still. That he was a master of words and rhythms is affirmed and denied with equal passion. His cults come and go. He is, like Goethe in Germany and Victor Hugo in France, inextricably part of our history. Like Jefferson and Franklin he has been woven into our myth. He is our archetypal poet, our great invention in literature, our lyric voice. I like to think that eventually he will shame us into becoming Americans again.

What did Whitman do?

He closed the widening distance between poet and audience. He talks to us face to face, so that our choice is between listening and turning away. And in turning away there is the uneasy feeling that we are turning our backs on the very stars and on ourselves.

COMMENTARY
A NOTE ON WALT WHITMAN

ON page eight Guy Davenport is quoted as saying that Whitman "is our archetypal poet, our great invention in literature, our lyric voice." A good review drives you to the text, so we went to *Leaves of Grass,* an edition published by McKay in 1891-92, and after some of the poems read the closing essay called "A Backward Glance," in which the poet tells something of the origins of the book to which he "gave his whole life." According to Whitman, what Davenport says is exactly right.

At sixteen he read all of Walter Scott's poetry—a thousand pages of it. Then, "loafing" on a Long Island Beach, he read the Bible, Shakespeare, Ossian, translations of Homer, Eschylus, Sophocles, the Nibelungen saga, ancient Hindu poems, and Dante. He muses:

> I have wonder'd since why I was not overwhelm'd by those mighty masters. Likely because I read them, as described, in the full presence of Nature, under the sun, with the far-spreading landscape and vistas, or the sea rolling in.

After reporting his response to Poe, which was mixed—he liked Poe's prose best—he said:

> I saw, from the time my enterprise and questionings positively shaped themselves (how best can I express my own distinctive era and surroundings, America, Democracy?) that the trunk and centre whence the answer was to radiate, and to which all should return from straying however far a distance, must be an identical body and soul, a personality—which personality, after many considerations and ponderings I deliberately settled should be myself—indeed could not be any other. . . .
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> These, however, and much more might have gone on and come to naught (almost positively would have come to naught,) if a sudden, vast, terrible, direct and indirect stimulus for a new and national declamatory expression had not been given to me. It is certain, I say, that, although I had made a start before, only from the occurrence of the Secession War, and what it show'd me as by flashes of lightning, with the emotional depths it sounded and arous'd (of course, I don't mean in my own heart only, I saw it just as plainly in others, in millions)—that only from the strong flare and provocation of that war's sights and scenes the final reason for being of an autochthonic and passionate song definitely came forth.
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> I went down to the war fields in Virginia (end of 1862) lived thenceforward in camp. . . . Without those three or four years and the experiences they gave, "Leaves of Grass" would not now be existing.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THE EXAMPLE OF SOCRATES

DURING the early days of the American republic, leading citizens interested themselves in the formulation of plans for a national system of education. After the Revolution the American Philosophical Society—constituted by the union of the Junto (organized by Ben Franklin in 1727) with another group formed by Franklin and others (in 1743), of which Thomas Jefferson was president for nineteen years—set a competition and offered a prize for "the best system of liberal Education and literary instruction, adapted to the genius of the Government of the United States; comprehending also a plan for instituting and conducting public schools in this country, on principles of the most extensive utility."

The winners of the contest were Samuel Knox and Samuel Harrison Smith, and while there were numerous other entries, only the contributions of these two now exist (their substance is given by Allen Hansen in *Liberalism and American Education in the Eighteenth Century*, Macmillan, 1926). These plans, as well as others independently proposed in the same period, were saturated with the progressive and optimistic spirit of the Enlightenment. Summarizing Smith's proposals, Allen Hansen says:

> The scientific attitude should be the chief aim of American education. The open-minded impartial outlook that would put to the test of utility the most sacred creeds and customs and consider nothing as beyond question and scientific investigations, as the *sine qua non* of democracy. . . . To assure this open-minded scientific attitude the state should take charge of the child before parents could instill dogmas and superstitions inimical to progress. The nation was obliged to enforce the principle of universal education and to provide the means necessary for all to prosecute it. . . . Man's genius for invention was what separated him from the other animals. Democracy must harness this genius for humanitarian progress. In the development of this power of invention lay the future of mankind. In order that man might continue to grow in effective living after he left school some means of continuating education should be provided. In order to energize universal education a Board of Education should be established that would have supervisory and certifying powers. This board should represent the best scholarship and genius of the nation.

For concise embodiment of the thinking typical of the American leaders, Hansen turns to the writings of Richard Price, an English moral and political philosopher who exercised a great influence in the Colonies. Price saw in the American Revolution "a new prospect in human affairs" which would begin "a new era in the history of mankind." The revolution would be the foundation "of an empire which may be the seat of liberty, science and virtue, and from whence there is reason to hope these sacred blessings will spread, till they become universal and the time arrives when kings and priests shall have no more power to oppress." Education, for Price, was the key to all hopes for a better world. "So much is left by the author of nature," he said, "to depend on the turn given to the mind in early life and the impressions then made, that I have thought there may be a *secret* remaining to be discovered in education, which will cause future generations to grow up virtuous and happy and accelerate human improvement to a greater degree than can at present be imagined." He continued:

> "Education ought to be an initiation into candour, rather than into any systems of faith; and . . . it should form the habit of cool and patient investigation, rather than an attachment to any opinions." While "hitherto education has been on a contrary plan. It has been a contraction, not an enlargement. . . . Instead of . . . teaching to think freely . . . it hath qualified for thinking only in one track," it was now the opportunity for America to liberate humanity through a scientific, experimental, open-minded mode of education. This was the dynamic conception of the state and of education that was set forth in the plans for a national system of education.

We have quoted from Hansen's book at some length in order to illustrate the spirit of the closing years of the eighteenth century, in relation to education. The champions of a "national system" were unqualified believers in the idea that the institution of a free government could accomplish a wonderful change in the affairs of men. But to what extent was their dream illusory? Did these devoted

founding fathers expect too much, not only of the new democratic government, but also of the system of education it might be able to provide?

As a country, we are now about two hundred years older. Both the nation and its systems of education have suffered numerous vicissitudes. In the Berkeley (Calif.) *Independent and Gazette* for April 22, Catherine Roberts, a microbiologist, contrasts the temper of the University of California at the turn of the century, when Benjamin Ide Wheeler became its president, with the present-day mood on the campus.

> For 20 years President Wheeler strove to realize on the campus the classical Greek ideals of liberal education for free men living harmonious, ordered lives in study, inquiry, and discourse.
>
> The times have changed. The 113th Charter Day exercises, held this year, as in the past, to honor the University of California and its academic traditions, were an ignominious spectacle in which the participants and the audience were treated with unbelievable contempt by a group of raucous students (possibly abetted by outsiders) who protested the university's continued involvement in nuclear weapon research.
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> The vulgar belligerency of the demonstrating students seemed in every way the direct antithesis of the spirit of Hellas which had earlier pervaded the Berkeley campus.

Now comes an interesting comment:

> Yet one need only turn to Plato's *Republic* to realize that on the afternoon of April 9, 1981, the Greek Theatre, in one sense, did become the living embodiment of ancient Athens. For here we saw what happens when democratic freedom is carried too far. With the insults and obscenities of the demonstrators drowning out most of the ceremony, and with the university tolerating unlimited freedom of speech, everything was, in Plato's unforgettable words, "just ready to burst with liberty." .. .
>
> We are concerned here with freedom of speech in a democracy. From the platonic point of view, the students' abuse of it was outrageous and the university's toleration of it was humiliating and degrading. . . . As it happens, I, too, oppose the university's involvement in the nuclear weapon research program. There is no way to make me accept the view that the production of weapons of unprecedented destructiveness, even for the purpose of national defense, is reconcilable with the goals of this university. Its task is rather to draw forth and articulate human thoughts to prevent war through spiritual insight rather than military might.
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> But the goal of separating the University of California from the production of nuclear armaments does not justify all conceivable means. And the means employed by the student protesters on Charter Day were not only unjust but seriously damaging to their cause. On this, at least, there is widespread agreement. For who will now be attracted to the rational arguments of self-indulgent "idealists" who lack every shred of self-control?

Dr. Roberts proposes a return by both students and administration to the practice of Greek idealism. Both Plato and Socrates, she says, "saw education as a process whereby human beings become more godlike," adding, "surely the students and the administration of this university should be able to rise above rude belligerence or almost spiritless deference to it." Because our society is in a difficult period of transition, there is a tendency, she added, "to excuse all kinds of behavior," but this attitude does not take into account that "we are passing into a new age of spiritual awakening."

Dr. Roberts' points are well made. The submission of the university to the disturbance was without dignity, while the behavior of the students was a contradiction in terms: Why did they go or stay there for education if it was a place deserving of only contempt?

The times, as Dr. Roberts says, have changed. Conceivably, it may be time to stop thinking about education in terms of institutions. The great experiment initiated by the founding fathers two hundred years ago bore worthy fruit, but its animating spirit of the Enlightenment exploded into a mushroom cloud in 1945. Meanwhile, if we are to restore the Greek ideal of education, we might remember that Socrates, who was Plato's inspiration, stayed away from the institutions of his day—then in the hands of the Sophists. Instead he went out into the streets to find free and hungry minds.

FRONTIERS

Questions of the Time

"EVERY year in the United States," a familiar headline reads, "we lose not less than three million acres of cropland." What does this mean? Daniel B. Luten (University of California in Berkeley), aware that "most of the numbers cited on farmland loss are not intended to be used in arithmetic but only to catch attention and raise concern," decided to pursue this question. After all, as he says:

> Everyone in California has been told so many times about paving over wonderful soil that they have no doubts about it. San Jose and its growth is a prime example. Yet Santa Clara County's agricultural production in 1978 was over $100 million and in 1974 the value of its agricultural production exceeded that of all but one of North Dakota's counties.

Mr. Luten reports in *Landscape* (No. 2, 1981) that he found in a National Agricultural Land Study, "Where Have the Farmlands Gone?", the statement: "One million acres of America's prime farmlands are urbanized each year. . . . We are losing another two million acres of less quality, nevertheless productive agricultural land, to nonagricultural conversion each year." He wrote to the NALS director of research for more information, asking how these figures are built up.

> He [the director] explained that a high percentage of new single-unit housing starts during the last decade was in nonsewered areas, and therefore likely to remove considerable land from farms. He also pointed out that annual conversion to urban and transportation uses is estimated at 675,000 acres of cropland, 400,000 acres of range and pasture, 550,000 acres of forest land, and 520,000 acres of other uses. Also, agricultural land converted to water uses, such as reservoirs, is 75,000 acres of cropland, 135,000 acres of range and pasture, 270,000 acres of forest, and 355,000 acres of other uses. The total land converted to urban, transportation, and water uses adds up to 2,980,000 acres—close to the three million commonly cited.

Mr. Luten notes that such figures are "terribly difficult to generate." Agricultural censuses show only how much cropland has changed use since the last census, omitting additions and losses, and the census interrogators don't reach "ex-farmers who have sold out to developers." The Land Study attempts to get at the facts at the county level through the Soil Conservation Service.

Mr. Luten is troubled by the inadequacy of the figures, feeling that slogans and horror stories are not the best means of educating the public in such matters. Moreover, he says that "communicating with this intensely urban society about agriculture is not easy."

> In despair an American Agriculturalist coined the ironic question, "What need have we of farms so long as we have supermarkets?" A primary problem of American environmentalism is that its self-assigned tasks are complex almost beyond the capacity of single minds to grasp. To demand synthesis, to demand holistic thought in a world of specialists is to demand superbrains. It is a testimony to failure that environmentalism has well nigh written off education in favor of indoctrination. Out of which comes another irony: "Holistic thought reminds one mostly of Swiss cheese not from the odor but because it is full of holes."

Such cautions are certainly in order. The status quo is complicated and changing it will be more so. How to justly combine hopes with realities is probably the most difficult of all journalistic tasks. Mr. Luten concludes on a melancholy note:

> What can we do? If we become competent in this field, what other field will we have to abandon for lack of time? If we are to be educated rather than indoctrinated, whom can we trust to teach us? Can the environmental movement turn from indoctrination to education? Probably not. The universities? It is doubtful.

Two people in Ukiah, California—Alfred and Dorothy Andersen—raise other questions in a letter to the May-June *Community Service Newsletter:*

> Granted that in relation to the present situation, because institutions (including governments) have developed power far beyond their ability or commitment to use it wisely and humanely, we must move in the direction of decentralism local autonomy, etc. This still leaves unanswered the question as to

> what are the factors which should determine the extent of decentralization beyond which, at any given time and circumstance, it is hazardous to go. Obviously "no man is an island." Nor is the answer a series of the impossible dream, "the self-sufficient homestead." How, then, do we tell when we have decentralized enough, or too much?
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> The second . . . is a question about organizational structure. Clearly, if a group is small enough, with sufficient face-to-face relationships, and good communication, goodwill, etc., many kinds of organizational *structure* can work, and work with humaneness and equanimity. . . . [But] when we get beyond such face-to-face relations, which humans invariably do, our moral senses cannot and do not function adequately *without organizational assistance.* Thus, the question . . . is: What are the essential ingredients in organizational structure which will adequately assist our moral senses in relation to this or that level of organizational complexity?

The Andersens (10 Cherry Court, Ukiah, Calif., 95482) have some tapes and slides for sale or rent addressed to these questions. Meanwhile, it occurs to us that if the American people are smart enough and determined enough to really decentralize, they are likely to know what lines of cooperation and communication are needed to keep touch and relation with the rest of society and the world.

But any effective sort of decentralization means first getting rid of war, as Gandhi realized and made plain. It seems unlikely that the ideal goals of the decentralists can be reached so long as the national state and its powerful military apparatus continue to exist. The slow erosion of big and elaborate organization will take a great deal of ingenuity and persistent adaptation—activities or qualities which are mothers of invention. The return of responsibility to individuals, inch by inch, hour by hour, cannot help but disclose the best use of organization and how to set limits to its power. Growing these abilities might prove better than trying to plan much beyond the practice already achieved.