

## ART AS ANALOGY

DISCUSSION of art seems to afford a certain release from responsibility to the writer. Superficially, at least, art is a playful area outside the ranges of moral obligation. What you think about art will not get you into deep trouble. *Æsthetics* is by many held to be a morally neutral area, and while totalitarian censors have discerned offensive political heresies in the works of both modern poets and painters, pluralist democratic societies don't seem to care much what their artists do. They need not be taken seriously. As George Steiner asks: "What text, what painting, what symphony could shake the edifice of American politics? What act of abstract thought really matters at all? Who *cares?*"

Both Steiner and Simone Weil believe that art forms and abstract thought matter a great deal, but these two have not determined the level of criticism in our "free" world. And if an artist can attract enough attention to dispose of his works at prices that will make him more than comfortable, no one objects. "News" about art, as we know, is usually in terms of the fabulous sum of money brought by some famous painting or sculpture, at an auction in London or New York. Issues of taste are not raised in these stories. Who will dare to argue about artistic values when figures like that are involved?

Yet the arts, for an important segment of the world of thought and culture, are of profound and continued interest. People talk a great deal about "creativity" and wonder where it comes from and how to define it. Too much, no doubt, is written about creativity, yet the preoccupation is central in the longing to know more about ourselves. Of equal interest is the extraordinary parallel between the artist and the philosopher. The artist—we speak, here, of an "ideal" artist—is one to whom it never occurs to work just for money. The object he makes becomes its own justification.

Moreover, making it is something he must do. His being demands it. What does the artist do? He represents. He makes a piece of something into something else which stands for the world or some universal aspect or current. The philosopher seeks the truth because he loves it. Nothing can stop or distract a real philosopher from his search for truth. He has to know, or to try to know. Socrates is perhaps our best example; and Blake makes a splendid illustration of the artist, one who happened also to be something of a philosopher.

We study artists, then, because we learn from them about ourselves.

What is a work of art? It is something to which its maker has given resonances which reach far beyond its objective limits. It may have utility, as in the case of a craft object, but its wonder is not in its use, although the two go naturally together. The wonder lies in the octaves of meaning its form excites. We begin to explore the panorama of associations, extended in time and space, that the artist felt, adding associations of our own. Depending on these associations, we call the object, good, or beautiful, or inspiring. It is an old argument which asks whether beauty is in the world or in our view of the world, the way we select things to look at, and while this argument should not be settled, one can hardly escape the fact that beauty is not a "thing" but a complex of relations that has to be seen in order to be said to exist.

The wondering about art and creativity draws many observers to inspect what we term "primitive" societies. These societies, writers say, reveal our *origins*. Their people show what humans were like before they were spoiled by civilization. The simplicities—behind which, we now find, are many subtleties—of such people suggest that we can find out a great deal about

human nature and human capacity by studying primitives. One noticeable difference between them and ourselves is that they do or did many things well, but without seeming to think much about them. The things that came naturally to them, but do not come naturally to us, compel our attention.

In an essay in *Sign, Image, Symbol* (edited by Gyorgy Kepes, Braziller, 1966), the cultural anthropologist, Edmund Carpenter, writes about the art of the Eskimos, people who live in a hard land which never thaws, and where nothing grows.

The mystery is not that men should be tossed by chance into this desolate waste; it is, rather, that within this prison of ice and wind they are able to draw from themselves images powerful enough to deny their nothingness.

Nowhere is life more difficult than in the Arctic, yet when life there is reduced to its barest essentials, art and poetry turn out to be among those essentials. Art to the Eskimo is far more than an object: it is an act of seeing and expressing life's values; it is a ritual of exploration by which patterns of nature, and of human nature, are revealed by man.

Carpenter's words, "to the Eskimo," need attention. He doesn't mean that an Eskimo artist would explain himself to a questioner in this way. He means that if the artist had a conceptual vocabulary like ours, this is what he *might say*. The anthropologist is attempting to bring to our consciousness the inner feelings of the Eskimo artist and articulate them in our language of self-awareness. The artist himself would probably say something like "Words fail me," or its Eskimo equivalent. We can understand that. Words often fail us, too. Yet Mr. Carpenter, we think, does rather well with the words he uses.

As the carver holds the unworked ivory lightly in his hand, turning it this way and that, he whispers, "Who are you? Who hides there?" And then: "Ah, Seal!" He rarely sets out to carve, say, a seal, but picks up the ivory, examines it to find its hidden form and, if that is not immediately apparent, carves aimlessly until he sees it, humming or chanting as he works. Then he brings it out: seal hidden, emerges.

It was always there: He did not create it. He released it: he helped it step forth.

Ah, yes, we say. That is the way creativity works—it has magic in it. There are those forms, struggling to come out, and the Eskimo artist finally senses the form that needs help. But in Africa another form would appear. There is a Proteus in every unformed object. Our problems or questions multiply:

Eskimos have no real equivalents to our words "create" or "make," which presupposes imposition of the self on matter. The closest Eskimo term means "to work on," which also involves an act of the will, but one which is restrained. The carver never attempts to force the ivory into uncharacteristic forms, but responds to the material as it tries to be itself, and thus the carving is continually modified as the ivory has its say.

For the Eskimo, apparently, there is little difference between making an art object and living a life.

This is the Eskimo attitude toward not only ivory, but toward all things, especially people: parent toward child, husband toward wife. Where we think of art as possession, and possession to us means control, means to do with as we like, art to them is a way of revealing.

In the Eskimo language, little distinction is made between nouns and verbs, but rather all words are forms of the verb "to be," which is itself lacking in Eskimo. That is, all words proclaim in themselves their own existence. Eskimo is not a nominal language; it does not simply name things which already exist, but rather brings both things and actions (nouns and verbs) into being as it goes along. This idea is reflected in the practice of naming a child at birth: when the mother is in labor, an old woman stands around and says as many different eligible names as she can think of. The child comes out of the womb when its own name is called. Thus the naming and the giving birth to the new thing are inextricably bound together.

In Africa, naming is still more important. In a book titled *Muntu*, which means man, but man who includes his ancestor gods, Janheinz Jahn writes:

The God of Israel said, "Let there be light," and there was light. In Africa every muntu is capable of such an utterance. Every muntu, even the least of them, is by the force of his word lord over every thing, over animal and plant, stone and hammer, moon and stars. If he says, "Let the sun fall from the sky!" then it falls, unless a more powerful muntu than he has already, by the force of his word, commanded the sun to stay in the sky. . . . The word itself is force.

If there were no word, all forces would be frozen, there would be no procreation, no change, no life. "There is nothing that there is not; whatever we have a name for, that is"; so speaks the wisdom of the Yoruba priests. The proverb signifies that the naming, the enunciation, produces what it names. Naming is an incantation, a creative act. What we cannot conceive of is unreal; it does not exist. But every human thought, once expressed, becomes reality. For the word holds the course of things in train and changes and transforms them. And since the word has this power, every word is an effective word, every word is binding. There is no "harmless," noncommittal word. Every word has consequences. Therefore the word binds the muntu. And the muntu is responsible for his word.

Since our concern is with art, we quote the following on poetry from Jahn:

According to African philosophy man has, by the force of his word, dominion over "things"; he can change them, make them work for him, and command them. But to command things with words is to practice "magic." And to practice word magic is to write poetry—that holds not only for Africa. Thus African philosophy ascribes to the word a significance which it has also in many other cultures, but there in poetry only. That is why African poetry made such a worldwide impression the moment it was heard beyond the bounds of Africa. African poetry is never a game? never *l'art pour l'art*, never irresponsible. . . .

When the Ivory Coast poet Bernard B. Dadié writes: "Stars in profusion, pure as the eyes of Sages, will be as brilliant as the destiny of men," this is not a description of a future occurrence, but an invocation of it. The stars *are* to shine. The event is created in the vision.

Such meanings are remotely embedded in our own language. "Poet" comes from a Greek word which means "make, create, produce." And as Eric Havelock points out in his *Preface to Plato*,

"neither 'art' nor 'artist,' as we use the words, is translatable into archaic or high-classical Greek." In short, there were no "artists" as a caste of "creative" people in ancient Greece. Phidias was a stonecutter. The Greeks honored *techné*, meaning craft or skill. Art, in our sense, did not yet exist. An echo of the Greek spirit may have been found among the people of Bali, who told Miguel Covarrubias: "We know nothing about art; we just do everything as well as possible."

A passage on Eskimo poetry in Carpenter's essay goes on to a reflective comparison of Eskimo "psychology" with the way we sometimes feel. He says:

A carving, like a song, is not a thing; it is an action. When you feel a song within you, you sing it; when you sense a form emerging from the ivory, you release it. The Eskimo word "to make poetry" is the word "to breathe"; both are derivatives of *anerca*, the soul, that which is eternal, the breath of life. . . . Eskimos often talk and sing to themselves. To them, thinking and speaking are one: there is no purely inner experience. Members of our culture who are indifferent to literacy also do this: the lone child talking to his toys, the drunk, the angry man who walks away mumbling, the senile, the insane. Momentarily or permanently, all have reverted to an earlier, perhaps more basic philosophy, in which individualism plays little part and thought is conceived of as an external experience. . . .

The old question, "What is the silent igloo-sitter thinking?", misses the point. Early ethnologists believed he was in a self-induced trance; Freudians said he was suppressing his anxieties. Both assumed there was an inner dialogue. But inner dialogue, far from being universal, is largely the product of literacy. It belongs to literate man whose mind is a never-ending clock which his will cannot stop, sleep cannot still, madness only makes go faster, and death alone silences. I do not believe the silent Eskimo with his impassive, tribal face is thinking anything.

Other writers have reached related conclusions about tribal peoples. In *Wind in the Sahara* (1944), R.V.C. Bodley, who for seven years lived with Arab herdsmen south of Algiers, gives his well-considered if less charitable view:

Storybooks and motion pictures have created a legend about the inscrutable faces and meditative

silences of the desert Arabs, supposed to conceal wells of wisdom. They conceal nothing but minds as arid as the Sahara. Even with the educated Arab this Oriental inscrutability is a fantasy. The Oriental is no more inscrutable than a Texan or a Scotsman. The unemotional expression, the meditative silence conceals, for the most part, an ability to make the mind a blank. That, in itself, is a feat; probably more of one than generating complicated thoughts. But that is all there is to it.

Back to the Eskimos and Mr. Carpenter's instructive text:

The Eskimo language contains no first-person pronoun, which in English is so important we make "I" upper case an honor otherwise restricted to gods and kings. Eskimo does provide a suffix to indicate participation of self in experience, but generally Eskimos avoid even this, and use an impersonal pronoun: "One has driven his spear into a walrus." Yet, despite the absence of individualism in our sense, there is often spectacular achievement, and though there is no "I," there is great dignity.

Carvers make no effort to develop personal styles and take no care to be remembered as individuals, but simply disappear, as it were, behind their works. Their goal is not to develop unique art styles, not to present personal views, nor even to bring to fruition biases peculiar to them personally; rather, it is to express to perfection a timeless tradition, breathing into it "the breath of life" so that each form is fresh, though the grammar is never violated.

This self-effacement of the artist in his work is—or was—common practice in the Far East. In the sophisticated culture of India, however, the merging of oneself with tradition and ancient practice seems conscious and deliberate. The Indian painter or craftsman is able to explain himself and why he will not sign his work. In *Gleanings from Buddha Fields* Lafcadio Hearn shows that Japanese art reflects another depersonalizing tendency, which he calls "the law of the subordination of individualism to type, of personality to humanity, of detail to feeling." Here, too, there is philosophic deliberation. Hearn remarks that "the reserves of Japanese art in the matter of facial expression accord with the

ethics of Oriental society," and he adds: "One key to the enigmas of Japanese art is Buddhism."

Once again, Carpenter on Eskimo psychology—if that is the right word:

The Eskimo view of self is not as clearly demarcated as ours, and its precise limits often vary according to circumstances. They do not reduce the self to a sharply delimited, consistent, controlling "I." They postulate no personality "structure," but accept the clotted nature of experience—the simultaneity of good and evil, of joy and despair, multiple models within the one, contraries inextricably commingled. Where literate man regards an "alias" as deceiving, representing something other than the "real" self, every Eskimo has several names, each a different facet of himself, for they assert that man's ego is not a thing imprisoned in itself, sternly shut up in boundaries of flesh and time. They say that many of the elements which make it up belong to the world before it and outside it, while the notion that each person is himself and can be no other, is to them impossible, for it leaves out of account all the transitions which bind the individual consciousness to the general. The Eskimo conception of individuality belongs in the same category of conceptions as that of unity and entirety, the whole and the all; and the distinction between spirit in general and individual spirit possesses not nearly so much power over their minds as over ours.

The concluding paragraph of Mr. Carpenter's paper is this:

The most interesting Eskimo masks known to me are great composite mobile puns: the same lines serve to depict Walrus-Caribou-Man; turned slightly, one form may be emphasized, but the others are never lost. There is no need for shape-lifting; all relevant forms are already present. Such a mask expresses the variety and infinite subtlety of personality; its power lies in preserving due proportion between diverse and opposite elements.

Against the background of Eskimo art forms, Edmund Carpenter has been developing the contrast between the mind of preliterate man and the modern mind of post-Renaissance man—the literate man of heightened self-consciousness who sharply separates the subjective and the objective, who is brilliantly analytical, and who now, in the present, is overtaken by deep longings for ancient

simplicities and freedom from torturing self-doubt. (Reading Mr. Carpenter, one has no difficulty in understanding why it has been said that Marshall McLuhan obtained from him the primary inspiration and seminal ideas which became widely familiar through McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and other of his works.)

To recover our primitive being and virtue, but without losing either our capacity for objectivity or our inner experience, our animating individuality—this seems to be the project for modern man. Few have written of this undertaking with greater clarity—along with unavoidable obscurity!—than the French poet, Paul Valéry, who said in his study of Leonardo da Vinci:

The human characteristic is consciousness, the characteristic of consciousness is a process of perpetual exhaustion, of detachment without rest or exclusion from everything that comes before it, whatever that thing may be. . . *all these things are equal*. . . . All things are replaceable by all things—may not this be the definition of *things*?

Is there anything that resists the lure of the senses, the dissipation of ideas, the fading of memories, the slow variation of the organism, the incessant and multiform activities of the universe? There is only this consciousness, and this consciousness only at its most abstract.

Our *personality* itself, which, stupidly, we take to be our most intimate and deepest possession, our sovereign good is only a thing, and mutable and accidental in comparison with this other most naked ego; since we can think about it, calculate its interests, even lose sight of them a little, it is therefore no more than a secondary psychological divinity that lives in our looking-glass and answers to our name. . . .

But all the time each private life possesses, deep down as a treasure, the fundamental permanence of consciousness which depends on nothing. And as the ear catches and loses and catches again, and loses again through all the varying movements of a symphony some grave and persistent *motif* which ceases to be heard from moment to moment, but which never ceases to be there—so the pure *ego*, the unique and continuous element in each being in the world, rediscovering itself and losing itself again,

inhabits our intelligence eternally; this deep note of existence itself dominates the whole complication of circumstance and change in existence from the moment that it is heard.

Is it not the chief and secret achievement of the greatest mind to isolate this substantial permanence from the strife of everyday truths? Is it not essential that in spite of everything he shall arrive at self-definition by means of this pure relationship, changeless amongst the most diverse objects which will give him an almost inconceivable universality, give him, in a sense, the power of a corresponding universe?

Valéry, here, sounds like one of the gods. Perhaps, for a moment or two, he became one.

## *REVIEW*

### STAGES OF VISION

HAZEL HENDERSON'S *The Politics of the Solar Age—Alternatives to Economics* (Anchor, 1981, \$8.95) will no doubt be a challenge to its readers—it is meant to be—but it is even more of a challenge to this reviewer. The book is filled with recondite economic learning interwoven with common sense. We are able to recognize the common sense; but much of the technical criticism, even with the help of Mrs. Henderson's deft explanations, finds and leaves us at sea. This situation cannot be left without excuse, and for apologists we call upon a novelist, the late George P. Elliott, and a philosopher, the late Erich Kahler.

Elliott wrote in the *Nation* years ago (Nov. 14, 1959):

Nothing is harder than to have a clear, steady and sound idea of what society is and what it should be. I must speak for myself: I realize that I could not define the word to anyone's satisfaction; like many, I sometimes in desperation identify society with the state—whence horrors ensue. . . . The commonest analogy is to an organism; but which sort of organism? A tree? It is not mobile enough. . . . One of the dinosaurs? That sounds pretty good—a vast, bewildered, terrifying, vegetarian, self-extinctive creature. Yes, it will serve. Our new totem: the brontosaurus.

Prof. Kahler while less poetic, says the same thing, and something more:

Since no single man—be he ever so close to political developments—can understand or master the total situation, the true course of events . . . has become leaderless, a pure automatism. The individual, no longer able to grasp the highly complex situation or to pierce, with the help of reason, through the maze of overpoweringly material automatism, feels himself helplessly abandoned. He clutches desperately at some simplification by substituting for the whole any part that is within reach. . . . The individual human being who, for ease of comprehension and action, simplifies the situation . . . is completely unaware that he is thereby dismissing his reason. . . . We are thrown inescapably back to a human and moral transformation, a change in the attitude of mankind toward the whole.

Kahler's last sentence provides a bonus—a key to the intention of Hazel Henderson's book, and to the structure of its content. She gives evidence of how we are being "thrown back" on ourselves—by reason of the practical, intellectual, and moral breakdowns in society—and points to the increasingly populated avenues going in the direction of "change in the attitude of mankind toward the whole." As for signs of breakdown, we select two modest examples of the irrationality of the times. The first is concerned with taxes:

Ordinary citizens who do not own capital simply see the tax code as an instrument of the rich and large corporations, which can afford tax lawyers, to find or lobby for new loopholes for them. Meanwhile, the Internal Revenue Service is trying to nip in the bud the ingenuity of the desperate citizens with no capital and incomes below twenty thousand dollars a year. For example, a 1979 ruling in Milwaukee may put dozens of food co-ops out of business by forcing the members of the co-op who put in free labor at the store in order to reduce their food bills to pay thirty-five hundred dollars in back taxes and Social Security on their discounts, which the IRS says are "income"!

The other example is found in California:

. . . a new "consensus" between labor and management seems to be shaping up over work sharing, permanent parttime workers, job sharing, and the move toward a four-day work week. . . . Armco, Inc., is one of the corporations that tried the plan now in effect in California, which allows for state government subsidies to a company that puts its work force on short hours and short pay. The Armco plant manager noted that this allowed the company to avoid the cost of retraining green workers, by keeping on the more experienced ones, with California's tax payers picking up part of their wages. But since the state would have had to pay them unemployment benefits anyway, the companies have the taxpayers coming and going, and in California's case, the new work-sharing program was estimated to have cost some \$150,000 in subsidies in 1979.

In favor of this arrangement, however, government officials say that if the employees so benefitted had been laid off for ten weeks, their unemployment checks would have totalled more than a million dollars. Obviously, all is well.

*The Politics of the Solar Age* has three parts. The first is devoted to the proposition that economists don't know what is going on and that the management of society must be placed in other hands—the hands of people who recognize the need for far-reaching change and who have a sense of the direction in which to go. Part Two is a critical history of economic theory, ending with a chapter on the transition to renewable-resource societies, called a "Paradigm Shift." The third part is devoted to the new ways of thinking that are coming into being. In the first part Hazel Henderson defines the task immediately ahead:

We now must help create greater understanding of the fact that *today's "leaders" and "decision makers" are no longer in charge of events*, even though they still imagine themselves the "rational actors" of their decision models, firmly in command from their "war rooms," as they once believed in simpler, slower times. They are like ancient kings who commanded the ocean tides to come in, or the early priests and priestesses whose incantations "caused" the sun to rise. They, like all of us, are also puppets of all these larger forces. Thus the "spontaneous devolution" of their institutions has begun. . . .

The chapters present a great deal of evidence. We quote some of the resulting generalizations

We see today the increasing inability of all mature industrial societies to manage themselves. These strange new diseases of structural inflation and structural unemployment seem all too evident. Economists trying to deal with these diseases are continually rationalizing away the real reasons for them. Those reasons are better understood outside the discipline of economics. They are rooted in the way we use resources and raw materials, and they are rooted in the particular capital- and energy-intensive type of technology that we have developed.

Industrial leaders confuse us when they talk about being able to consume our way back to prosperity while at the same time trying to convince us that there is an energy crisis and that raw materials are becoming scarce. The problem is that most of these industrial societies are thought of as a monstrous abstraction: as an "economy." If we think all the dimensions of a human society can be reduced to an abstraction called an "economy," is it any wonder we are losing control of the society?

The author looks toward a possible tomorrow:

In the future there may be a whole new rationale of production and consumption. The American home has always been seen as the basic *consumption* unit, and we are now beginning to see emerging the American home as a production unit, the way it used to be before the industrial revolution. That goes from the solar collectors that people are putting on their roofs so that they can unhook themselves from the power company, to home canning, to crafts, and to the rise in home repair. This is basically an understanding of "use value," and this is what the counter-economy is about. . . . Our task, it seems to me, is nothing short of recycling ourselves and recycling our culture. Unfortunately, our social imagination has been pre-empted by all the existing technological furniture that surrounds us. These manifestations of our industrial value system insulate us from the primary reality of the biosphere. This technological environment is so intrusive and ever-present that it presents instant answers to questions we have not even asked ourselves. It suggests to us the technological fix, the quick way out. In order to restore and sustain our imaginative vision, which is now our crucial capability, we are going to have to re-vision our situation in time and space.

Hazel Henderson's book is encyclopedic in scope and diagnostically critical. It consolidates a great deal of present realization and articulates thinking about the future in terms that have intuitive sanction and measurable practical confirmation. She is an extraordinarily gifted amateur, which seems to mean that she sees things that professionals are unable to grasp. Her alternatives to economics reveal the promising substance of a slowly emerging way of life.

## *COMMENTARY* **SINK OR SWIM?**

BILINGUAL teaching is under attack these days—on the ground that children are in school to learn English in order to join our society, and that teaching them in their native tongue—mostly Spanish in this area—keeps them isolated from mainstream American life. Bruno Bettelheim says this in the interview quoted in "Children," and in the new edition of his book, *Teacher in America*, Jacques Barzun briefly condemns bilingual education as a method "by which the rudiments are supposedly taught in ninety languages other than English."

One understands the motive behind such sweeping statements, but these distinguished educators would do well to consider the actual experience of bilingual teachers in an area like Los Angeles, where so many children are of Mexican descent. In an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* (Oct. 30) Melinda Burns, a bilingual teacher here, gives one of the reasons for the dropout rate of 80 per cent in sections of the American Southwest. She tells about Mexico-born Felipe, a seventh-grader, who couldn't read simple words like "start" or "quickly." Why?

On his arrival in Los Angeles four years ago, he was placed in an all-English third-grade class and continued during fourth and fifth grades in regular English classes. His first American teacher told his mother not to let him read in Spanish at home because it would "confuse" him. In other words, it was "sink or swim" for Felipe.

Not surprisingly, Felipe sank.

From this example Melinda Burns goes to the numerous studies of such children, showing that most of them "sink" without bilingual education. The common sense of this teacher's recommendation seems obvious:

Good bilingual education teaches a child in the language he understands best, so that he won't fall behind in the academic subjects. At the same time, the child receives daily instruction in English, instruction which gradually increases until it may be

80 per cent of the curriculum by grade six. When the student is working at grade level in his own language, and can compete on English tests with his peers, he can be switched into an all-English program and will be successful there.

She tells how this works:

Bilingual education is a paradox: you teach in the native language for academic achievement in English. But for most language-minority children, it's the only method that works. If Felipe had learned to read in Spanish, learned to conjugate complex tenses, spell, punctuate, write paragraphs, multiply and divide in Spanish, he wouldn't have been the academic failure he is today. He would have transferred those literacy skills over to English very quickly.

Testimony to this is the fact that in my own junior high school ESL [English as a Second Language] classes, the best students are those immigrants who received a fifth- or sixth-grade education in their own country.

There is more general confirmation:

The fact is that it takes between six and seven years for immigrant students who arrive here after the age of six to approach grade level in English academic skills, according to a recent study for the California State Department of Education by James Cummins. These same students can pick up communicative skills in English appropriate to their age group within only two years.

It seems completely clear that teachers who work at these problems should have a major voice in deciding what should be done. Judging from what Melinda Burns says, abolishing bilingual teaching would only make the children grow up illiterate in both languages.



## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

#### AFTER SEVEN YEARS IN SCHOOLS

"THE one-room school," Bruno Bettelheim declared in an interview in the *July Psychology Today*, "was the best school we ever had." Dr. Bettelheim is a famous child psychiatrist who in recent years has given much thought to education. Agreeing with what he says is easy for a great many parents. They remember—or have heard—about the excellences of the one-room school house. There are fine books on the subject. The children teach—taught—the children, and that was good for everybody.

The neighborhood where we live had a one-room school house twenty-five years ago. The last parent in the area who remembered the school—she has moved away—said that when the children were transferred to the consolidated school a few miles distant, the ones from our neighborhood were a year ahead, academically, of all the others. The last man who attended that one-room school has also moved away—to the wide-open spaces of Idaho—but before he left he liked to talk about how good an education he got from that single teacher who taught all the grades.

Such testimony makes for strong and participatory cultural nostalgia. Even though, now, it seems hard to imagine having a one-room school here again, the thing is not impossible. One mother has made a beginning, by teaching her little boy at home. *She* has started a one-home school, and she reads John Holt's *Growing Without Schooling* for encouragement and ideas.

Much encouragement on negative grounds comes from Dr. Bettelheim who, from 1971 to 1978, "spent countless hours sitting quietly in primary school classrooms and observing the way young children are taught." The *Psychology Today* interviewer, Elizabeth Hall, asked him about the readers the children use in school. "What does the content of the stories tell children

about learning to read?" His reply to this (and several other questions) was that they learn—

That reading is unimportant, and that what one reads is a bunch of lies. . . . First of all, you never see a picture of a parent or child reading in any of these readers, nor is it mentioned that people read. You might see a television set. But never a book. Not even a newspaper. . . . So why learn to read? Nor do readers ever show children at school. They're always playing. Life in these books is nothing but a succession of pleasurable activities on the shallowest level. And there are no real emotions in the readers. Nobody is angry. Nobody has a fight. Nobody suffers.

If a child takes what he reads seriously, he comes to think his own family is terrible, because no family can live up to the expectations about typical family living raised by these stories. So as the child learns to read, he is projected into serious conflicts. He decides that there must be something wrong at home because his family is not like the people in the readers.

How do the readers affect the children's ideas about themselves?

Well, mostly children think that those who wrote the textbooks and those who teach them to read believe that they're dumbbells. Look at this book. Here are Mark and Janet. They are the same age and have the same parents. They must be either fraternal twins or adopted, or perhaps the children of different marriages. These children are the main characters in an entire series of readers, yet such an important issue is never mentioned; our children are treated like idiots who would not wonder about it. That's my point. Reading should stimulate thinking, but this reader can't stimulate thinking. And there we get to the root of the problem: Children are not taken seriously.

Later Bettelheim says:

I am very much in favor of fairy tales. Anxiety-provoking things happen, serious things happen, still there is a happy ending. But you don't have to use fairy tales. Let's have a serious story about the Puritans, one that goes beyond turkeys and Thanksgiving. Why not talk about the fact that the Puritans were so rigid the Dutch couldn't stand them and kicked them out? Speak about how undesirable rigidity can be and the need for tolerance.

But what would happen to a school board that approved such readers?

That's why we don't have the books. It takes up to \$20 million to prepare these terribly expensive series, and in order to recoup their investment, publishers must sell all over the country. But boards of education are always afraid of criticism. If there's not a bond issue, there's a schoolboard election. So what happens? You include something that pleases each group and you get a reader that pleases nobody.

Bettelheim doesn't come out directly for teaching children at home, but is emphatic on the far-reaching influence of what happens at home, remarking that "all studies of reading achievement have shown that the best predictor of reading achievement is the literacy level of the parents."

Habits are formed in the home by copying one's parents. It's not enough that the parents read, they must enjoy it as well. If parents don't enjoy reading or say what was gained from it, children may learn to read signs and labels and ads on television, but they do not grow up into literate persons—that is, they never find reading meaningful or gain important values from reading.

The interview was meant to find out what schools can or ought to do, according to Bettelheim. However, he said that sometimes teachers who don't work in schools can help to raise the level of literacy in "culturally deprived" homes:

One of the best jobs in this respect was done not by the schools but by a teachers' college. Social workers and psychologists went into homes and taught mothers how to play games that they enjoyed so much that they then taught them to their children. They also helped these mothers to budget and shop, skills that the middle class takes for granted. But language differences continue to be a crucial problem in our society. Therefore, those who insist on teaching Hispanic children in Spanish or black children in Black English make the damage even worse. Teaching a second language is a very subtle way of keeping the culturally deprived out of the mainstream of American life.

Liberal anthropologists, Bettelheim said, tell us that all cultures have "the same moral value."

They may be of equal merit, but they're not all equally suitable for making it in the United States. We destroy school for minority children in other ways. We destroy it by telling children that because of their background they are entitled to special consideration. So if they fail, it's racism, and if they succeed, they make it because of white guilt feelings. That destroys their self-respect.

There seems no end to Dr. Bettelheim's insight or sagacity. He points out that minority parents have problems too, as when one of them said, "If my children become successful, they will look down on me." The psychiatrist recalled a story told him by a Canadian first-grade teacher who had explained to her class the difference between a circle and an ellipse.

The next day, a very bright black girl said that she had gone home and asked her mother, "Do you know the difference between a circle and an ellipse?" and the mother slapped her daughter's face and said, "Don't use that uppity language with me." The teacher was astounded when I said the mother was absolutely right. You see, a bright seven-year-old knows the level of her mother's language skills. If she had said, "Mother, I learned something interesting in school today. The teacher told us the difference between a circle and an ellipse," there would have been no violent reaction. But when the child says, "Do you know the difference?" and she jolly well knows the mother doesn't know the difference, then the girl is trying to show her own superiority. And that is uppity.

One-upsmanship with one's parent is not a good thing. The schools, of course, are no more to blame for this than any other influence. But the teacher shouldn't have been "astounded" by Bettelheim's view.

## *FRONTIERS*

### Intentions and Sense

TWO questions are raised by practically all the serious problems of our time. One is: What should the country do? The other: What should I do? Both questions are in a sense rhetorical, and in another sense not. When you ask what the country should do about, say, agricultural problems, and then propose an answer, you describe what ought to be done, supposing that all the actors involved have good intentions and good sense. All of them *don't*, and we know it. That makes the question rhetorical. But it still needs to be asked because a clear idea of what *might* be done is absolutely necessary to the beginning of any solution at all. This is not rhetorical.

Then, as for what individuals ought to do—the fact is that each human being lives under different circumstances and has different capacities, so that what he does will and must vary greatly from what others do. He can't copy or follow a well-defined plan, but must adapt his intentions—originate and devise his own means for the solution he seeks. So, this question, too, is rhetorical, although, as inspiration and motivation, the answer may not be rhetorical in the least.

We might call articles about what the country should do "big-picture" proposals. We need them, for warning, guidance, and motivation. We have been reading two such articles on the problems of agriculture in the United States—the best criticisms we have come across in recent months. One, by Wendell Berry, is "Solving for Pattern: Standards for a Durable Agriculture," which appeared in *New Farm* for January, 1981. The other is Richard Merrill's "The Suicide and Rebirth of Agriculture—Some Preliminary Thoughts on a Bioregional Food System," published by *Rain* for last April. The two writers say similar things. They list what is wrong with the national practice and then the things that ought to be done. They are explicit on what "everybody" should do, in terms of basic recommendations. They imply

what individuals should do, with the experience of personal practice behind their thinking. Berry is a farmer himself and Merrill an associate of the New Alchemy Institute, a group which works on practical gardening programs for families and communities.

In what sense could these valuable discussions be termed rhetorical? Well, to start with, it could be said that they appeal to a tiny audience of actual farmers—less than four per cent of the population now work on the land. Of that four per cent, many are probably powerless people—not, that is, decision-makers in farming practice and planning. Then, as E. P. Thompson pointed out recently, the existing decision-makers in any major economic activity are the people least likely to respond to arguments and appeals for change. They like things the way they are, for self-interested reasons. Well, aren't they reasonable? Yes, being human, they are reasonable, but they wear blinders. The logic of reform is not compelling for them. They will respond, after a time, to the compulsions of nature, which both Berry and Merrill describe at length, but their response is likely to be too little and too late, again as Berry and Merrill point out.

As for individual action, we turn to Berry, because, while he gives the big picture, he believes that only individuals, acting out of their own intelligence and purpose, are able to see and do what is necessary. In defining the problem, he talks about farmers—mostly big ones—in general, but when he talks about solutions he gravitates to the single farm.

A good solution always answers the question: How much is enough. Industrial solutions have always rested on the assumption that enough is all you can get. But that destroys agriculture, as it destroys nature and culture. The good health of a farm implies a limit of scale, because it implies a limit of attention, and because a limit is invariably implied by any pattern. . . . A healthy farm incorporates a pattern that a single human mind can comprehend, make, maintain, vary in response to circumstances, and pay steady attention to. That this

limit is obviously variable from one farmer and farm to another does not mean that it does not exist.

Notice that agreeing with Berry will depend on recognizing what he calls *implications*. Implications are concerned with goals and move toward or away from them. If you don't share the goals you can't see the implications, or won't think of them by yourself. In Berry's discussion, the solution, by implication, grows more and more individual:

It is the nature of any organic pattern to be contained within a larger one. And so a good solution in one pattern preserves the integrity of the pattern that contains it. A good agricultural solution, for example, would not pollute or erode a watershed.

But we must not forget that those human solutions that we call organic are not natural. We are talking about organic *artifacts*, organic only by imitation or analogy. Our ability to make such artifacts depends on virtues that are specifically human: accurate memory, observation, insight, imagination, inventiveness, reverence, devotion, fidelity, restraint. Restraint—for us, now—above all: the ability to accept and live within limits; to resist changes that are merely novel or fashionable; to resist the temptation to "solve" problems by ignoring them, accepting them as "tradeoffs," or by bequeathing them to posterity. A good solution, then, must be in harmony with good character, cultural value, and moral law.

These are qualities of individuals. Industries don't have them, but may eventually reflect them. Now they reflect their opposites. That is why the "big picture," where the problems show up, must be described.

Richard Merrill's article ends on what could be called a communitarian note:

Every region of the United States has its own unique climate, geology, resources base, vegetation, watershed, topsoil, culture, economy, and food needs . . . its own "bios" or set of potentials for adaptation and survival. By decentralizing our food system, that is, by encouraging each region of the country to become more self-reliant—more dependent on its own bios for growing, marketing and distributing food—the larger food system becomes more stable and adaptable. There are several reasons for this. For one thing, energy is reduced through decreased

transportation and processing. Also, fresh, nutritionally superior food is made available through direct marketing of locally derived crops. In addition, more jobs are created in the region and the regional economy becomes more stable and viable. Finally, the grower is able to use farm technologies and techniques that best utilize the local resource base, and thus reduce dependence on distant (non-renewable) resources controlled by unstable forces.

As we said, these articles are filled with good sense—the sense that individuals without blinders can recognize and apply, although ingenuity may be required.