VOLUME XXII, NO. 42
OCTOBER 15, 1969

# THE USES OF ALLEGORY

THE excellences of a good book, of a fine piece of writing—can they be explained at all? After all the rules and maxims have been consulted, basic questions remain. How did the writer know all that? Or if, which is more likely, he didn't claim to know much of anything, what guided his explorations into such fruitful realms, making the reader confident that he went in the right direction? How did he know what to examine and what to leave out?

These questions can hardly be answered. They can be considered, and ought to be, but they cannot be answered. A good critic will discuss them a bit and then, before he loses his readers in a maze of technical theory, generalize them with some widely acceptable symbol for the unexplainable mystery of human "knowing." For example, in a paper dealing with the difficulties of writing "current" history (Autumn 1967 *Virginia Quarterly Review*), Louis J. Halle identifies significant events as "signals," unimportant ones as "noise," then observes:

> The ability to distinguish the signals from the noise, at close range, is what is required of those who write contemporary history. It is an aptitude that some historians have in greater degree than others. We may as well call this aptitude by its common name, "insight." It is essentially the same insight as we find in the great poets and dramatists. To be a truly great historian, a man must have something of Shakespeare in him.

So we use these "code" words for speaking of what we have no causal explanation for in the behavior of human beings. Art is the secular mode for developing and refining coded expressions, while religion is our attempt to *break* the code, to grasp what the symbols really mean. Religion tries to weave a fabric of understanding with the threads of our ignorance. There is always religion in great art, and art in religion.

Allegory is one of the arts native to religion. In *Murder the Murderer* (1944), a passionate denunciation of war, Henry Miller retells the allegory which gave him his title:

> There is an old story about a man who had committed fifty-two murders. It bears repeating. . . .
>
> As the story goes, it was after the fifty-second crime that the murderer became conscience-stricken and decided to seek out a holy man in order to mend his ways. He lived with the holy man a few years, doing everything that he was prescribed to do and striving with all his heart to get the better of his vicious nature. Then one day the holy man told him he was free to resume his life in the world, that he need have no more fear of committing murder again. At first the man was overjoyed, but elation soon gave way to fear and doubt. How could he be certain he would sin no more? He begged the holy man for some sign, some tangible proof that he was really liberated. And so the holy man gave him a black cloth, telling him that when the cloth turned white he could be absolutely certain of his innocence. The man departed and resumed his life in the world. A dozen times a day he looked at the black cloth to see if it had turned white. He could think of nothing else—he was obsessed. Little by little he began to inquire of others what he could do to bring the miracle about. Each one suggested something else. He followed out every suggestion, but to no avail. The cloth remained black. Finally he made a long pilgrimage to the Ganges, having been told that the holy waters of the sacred river would surely make the black cloth white. But as with all his efforts this one too proved unsuccessful. Finally, in despair, he decided to return to the holy man and live out the rest of his days in his presence. At least, he thought, by living with the holy man he would be able to avoid temptation. So he set out on the long journey. As he was nearing his destination he came upon a man attacking a woman. The screams which the woman gave out were heart-rending. He caught hold of the man and implored him to desist. But the man paid no heed to him. On the contrary, he redoubled his blows. There was no doubt that he intended to kill the woman. Something had to be done, and quickly, if the woman was not to be murdered before his very

> eyes. In a flash the ancient murderer reviewed the situation. Fifty-two murders he had committed. One more could make no great difference. Since he would have to atone for the others he could just as well make it fifty-three. Even if he were to stay in hell forever he could not stand by and see this woman murdered. And so he set upon the man and killed him. When he came to the holy man he told him what had happened, whereupon the holy man smiled and said: "Have you looked at the black cloth I gave you?" He had forgotten all about the black cloth since the fifty-third murder. Trembling he took it out and gazed upon it. It had turned white. . . .

The subject is war, and Miller draws his moral:

> There are murders and *murders* then. There is the kind that enslaves and the kind that liberates. But the final objective is to murder the murderer. The last act in the drama of "the ego and his own" is to murder one's own murderous self. The man who with the fifty-third murder renounces all hope of salvation is saved. To commit murder in full consciousness of the enormity of the crime is an act of liberation. It is heroic, and only those are capable of it who have purified their hearts of murder. Murder sanctioned by the Church, the State, or the community is murder just the same. Authority is the voice of confusion. The only authority is the individual conscience. To murder through fear, or love of country, is as bad as to murder from anger or greed. *To murder one has to have clean hands and a pure heart.*

The allegory makes Miller's point, which is more or less apparent. No man can be innocent unless he stops caring about his innocence, claiming it, or pursuing it. Innocence is unattainable except by self-forgetfulness. Virtue is not something that can be gained, yet there are ways by which it is made to stand revealed.

But this allegory—as with any allegory—seems to have other "points." This is an essential of allegory-making. An allegory must never *compel* agreement. Its logic has to have holes in it. You could read this one as saying, "If you can prove your heart is pure, it is right for you to go off to war." There are learned men who interpret the *Gita* in this way. A curious thing about great books is that they are always open to various readings. They risk the hazards of the learning process in human beings.

Meanwhile the story of the contrite murderer and his piece of black cloth could have much wider application. The guilt-laden civilization to which we belong hungers for innocence just as that old criminal did. A great many people admit that terrible things have happened, or even that we have done them. Our writers—most of them—seem now to be in the stage of inquiring how to bring about the miracle of innocence. They all have a piece of black cloth, their own or society's, and some are bold enough to promote a new dry-cleaning process for other people's guilt-feelings. But the ones with "something of Shakespeare" in them don't say anything about how to wash other people clean. They know the difference between the multi-meaninged allegories through which people find their own way to truth and innocence, and the sure-thing propositions that, by suppressing all ambiguity, eliminate both choice and growth.

There are two possibilities behind a really good book. Either the writer knows what he knows, and that he knows, or he doesn't. And the reader cannot be certain about such matters. This is an essential mystery arising from the practice of an art—the artist may sometimes work far over his own head. It happens again and again. We know this because such great performances by artists can almost never be repeated at will. It is for this reason, as we also know that there are so many overlappings between mystical doctrines and theories of creativity. Daimon, Muse or Unconscious—something we don't know about is at work in the human pursuit of truth and beauty, and scholarly revisions in the names of that "something" have not given us any sure-thing propositions about its nature. Genius, some say, is akin to madness, but no madman wrote *King Lear.*

But suppose the other possibility—even if unlikely—that the writer knows that he knows, and exactly what. His work might "objectively"

still have the same inexplicable wonder that one finds in other works of art.

Take the holy man of Miller's allegory. Did he *know* what the conscience-stricken murderer needed to do? That his case was hopeless unless he could forget himself? If the holy man knew this, then why didn't he say: "You suffer from sheer egotism, my little man. Forget it! There have been far more talented sinners than you, with much greater reason to be ashamed. Do something useful with your life!"

"But don't you see," the murderer might have replied, "these are *my* murders. I have to work out my salvation; I must *atone!"* And the poor man would go away completely misunderstood. He might even return to murdering, as the only thing he knew how to do with any skill.

Instead, the sage gave him a little piece of black cloth and told him "a story." Invent a laundering process that will remove the stain, he said. The murderer couldn't really think about himself in rational terms, so the holy man gave him some work to do. It was a better project than crime, even if it had no one-to-one relation to the innocence he longed for.

*Find how much strontium 90 there is in the bones of little children,* some wise or semi-wise man said to the scientists, a few years ago. *Find out how much DDT there is in the fish in the sea,* somebody else suggested more recently. We have a lot of these inspection projects going, these days. What are the figures on crime? This year our morals are three shades blacker, according to official cloth-watchers. *Wow!* I can do a book on that, a writer will say. Being modern, we have division of labor in such things. We get regular reports, with trained specialists keeping track of not just the blackness of the cloth, but every sooty molecule! We know a lot more about ourselves than some of those backward peoples who keep no records. Last year thirty-four books on Alienation were published, and this year will rack up a new high in studies of Anxiety and Anomie. Nobody understands the complexity of guilt and failure as well as we do. You'll see!

That indeed is the trouble with modern progress for anyone who would like to be an allegorist, today. Only the experts look at the cloths. Only they can claim to know our condition. They tell us it is very bad, that we ought to feel terrible (and we do), but then they give us impossible projects to work on.

So today the allegorist has to make like an expert, or try to. I'll become an *ecologist,* a good man may say, and then the people will imagine I know something. They'll think I'm a *scientist* and they'll listen to what I say. Or he becomes a psychologist. As we know, some of the psychologists are able to get attention for very good stories—even quite old ones. Rollo May, for example, holds large audiences with the story of Beauty and the Beast, and Henry Murray had some success with *Moby Dick.* A holy man has to be very ingenious, today, to get his stories across.

One of the loveliest of the old stories is that told of the Buddha and the young woman, Kisagotami. Kisagotami's baby was stung by a poisonous snake and died. She loved the baby so dearly that its death remained unreal to her. She came to the teacher with the small body in her arms and begged him to restore its breath. "I will," the Buddha said, "on one condition. Go to the village there and ask for some mustard seed. The people are kindly and someone will give what you need. But be sure that you accept the seed only from a household that knows nothing of death." So, filled with hope, Kisagotami set out upon her errand. While the inevitability of death was what she had to learn, her heart needed time. Finding, little by little, that death has a presence everywhere—no dwelling in the village had been without it—Kisagotami rose from her grief and buried her child.

There are many ways to be drawn out of oneself. The murderer found one way, this Indian girl another. Yet what elaborate devices are required of today's allegorists to convey the

simple truth of self-forgetfulness! The writer may have to set his performance at some level of complex analysis simply to have hope of being heard. If he is not careful, the critics will call him "philosophical," and he will be expected to creep away in total embarrassment. Or worse, he will be casually disposed of as a "mystic"—even though what little we know of originality and even of scientific discovery is probably due as much to psychological parallels found in the writings of mystics as to any other means of investigating this question.

Well, what *is* the fine line of balance that threads its way through a really good book? What enables the writer to range multiple forces, tendencies, circumstances, along with inchoate human longings and well- or poorly-expressed hopes, in an order that we find somehow suitable, that makes some sense out of it all? A first-class writer, remarks Storm Jameson, who ought to know, "draws subconsciously on a vast hinterland of ambiguities of sense and sensation." She adds: "The process is one of unimaginable delicacy."

Let us conceive of the free-association network of such a writer as subject to the governance of a magnetic field. The field has a kind of autonomy, with axes of insight in it. This is the primary vision of high human intelligence—the conceiving and ordering and affirming power at its noëtic best. It is something the man has grown—not built or devised, but *grown*—and it forms the stuff of his intellectual and moral being. He feeds this growth by serious thinking and it rewards his faithfulness with occasional hospitality to the Promethean fire. He has his limits, but he has learned to know them; he has his weaknesses but guards against them; and he has his guilts like everyone else, but he refuses to be unmanned by them.

A word on the question of "moral" behavior. In anything to do with right and wrong, there is an original and an imitative aspect—first the being-side of behavior, which is seen to be "morally right" only by looking *back* on it, which then gives rise to all the "ought" theories it is possible to think of. In Miller's allegory, it wasn't until the guilty "ought" feeling of the murderer was lost in the immediacy of an act of self-forgetfulness that he became free. His freedom lay in not wanting it, *moralistically.* The act which is eternally right because it is the spontaneous act of self-forgetfulness has a glory beyond good and evil, since all that we can repeat *about* good and evil is only after-the-fact calculation of plusses and minuses in relation to that act. Somehow, because we are men, we sense this final truth about all "morality," and announce Nietzschean condemnations of it; but then, because we are also less than men, we seek sure-thing guarantees of our manhood and a plan for proving it without the pain of continual becoming. Thus we commit the same offense that "moralizing" commits, but now at the secular level. We declare that there can be no certain "good" save from scientifically organized imitations of past discoveries. Morality, in the pejorative sense, is technique used as a substitute for *being.* This is what the holy man wanted the murderer to discover. There is a deep spiritual instinct in man which rejects the substitution of technique for *being.* But there is also a department of our nature which can only comprehend "morality," and, indeed, has great need of it. There is also the fact that we can write learned books about both morality and technique, but only allegories about *being.*

So there are deep, and one could say "natural," reasons for the desperate resort to another kind of "technique" to wash away our problems. The only difference is that we think we have learned how to redefine all our problems *amorally.* How much self-recognition will we need to shock us out of this delusion?

Plainly, we need some holy men. Perhaps we should be wryly grateful to the technicians for insisting for so long, and for very largely convincing us, that there *are* no holy men. Holy men no doubt exist, but the crime which brought on the terrible revolution of technique was the

false claim of some that *they* were the holy men, and that they had the only sure way to salvation. And the weakness which the rest of us indulged was believing them and relying upon them. The new holiness, then, will have to make its way unannounced, just as it did for the murderer. Where did his holiness come from? It came out of himself! Couldn't he have found it elsewhere? Well, he tried, but all that the holy man he went to (who must have been genuine) could or would give him was time. He told him a story. He used the moralistic language of the murderer's delusions, of his preoccupation with guilt, and left it to time and life to set him free.

What sort of books do we really need today? We need books which seek out the meaning of the pain of the times, but at a level closer to reality than, say, the backlash of technology, which is where many people now think it is. Our good books must also be able to hold their audience by understanding how *people feel* about their pain, by speaking to their common longings at this moment of history. And they must be able to raise the sights of the reader.

Was there ever any other sort of "good book"? The language of vision is not the language of evil. The language of health is not the language of disease. The language of freedom is not the jargon of prisoners. Yet to be understood to any effect, the writer must have some kind of feel for both languages, the one he can't set down and the one he can. At least, he must believe that there *are* two languages. Good writing is the persistent exploration of the paths revealed by this faith.

# *REVIEW*
## JOHN STUART MILL—WHIPPING BOY

LIBERALISM, as the established and dominant political philosophy of present-day "free" societies, is on the run. Snapped at by bitter radical contempt, sneered at by conservatives who seem hardly aware that their own views spring from the same roots, Liberalism is now being mercilessly dissected by academic political philosophers. If we did not have for review Robert Paul Wolff's recent book, *The Poverty of Liberalism* (Beacon, $5.95; paper, $1.95), to offer in evidence, there would still be Henry Kariel's conclusive analysis in the *Nation* for Sept. 15, in which he says:

> . . . politics is seen in "realistic" terms as a mode of behavior in which individuals—to the extent that they are rational—strive to maximize their power. In widely respected economic theory, the citizen remains the economic man who has learned from *Federalist* No. 10 that he is driven by private ambition and that he will find it in his self-interest to enter the political market place, there to strike what bargains he must to extract what he can.
>
> This astringent ideology—the model of liberalism patented by Hobbes, Adam Smith, Hume and Madison—was ultimately to be qualified by the theory of pluralism. Sovereign individuals were replaced by sovereign groups: the new theory exalts a self-regulating process of interest-group competition. . . . interest-group liberalism can respond to social needs by activating itself, it cannot coordinate and focus its efforts. It cannot plan. Its power, though massive and dynamic, is delegated, dispersed, diffused, and ultimately exhausted. . . . Institutions of popular control atrophy; old structures of privilege are maintained; and adjustment to new social pressures is retarded. A pluralistic system-—one within which public policy originates at the top of hierarchies of private power—operates against the emergence of those laws which might give form and focus to common enterprises. As a result, domestic policy is characterized by drift and deadlock whereas foreign policy remains a sequence of incoherent *ad hoc* reactions unconvincingly rationalized by programmatic rhetoric. The problems posed by inner-city ghettos, racial conflict, income inequality and international anarchy fail to be met within the framework of interest-group liberalism.

This is the confusion wrought by Liberalism, according to Prof. Kariel. Prof. Wolff's analysis is pursued at another level. As a philosopher, he finds sufficient ground for explanation of such troubles in the principles of John Stuart Mill. Given Mill's Utilitarian view of human motivation in combination with his conception of government as a sort of umpire charged to prevent anyone from interfering with anyone else's pursuit of pleasure or happiness, what other result could come? Mill made his exceptions, of course—there has to be *some* interference—but with the advent of complex, technological societies, the need for exceptions grew to define the major role of political authority. Inevitably, the present scene is dominated by large-scale political enterprises which are *purely social* in conception and intention, yet whose efficiency is fatally compromised by the interest-group version of *laissez-faire.* Prof. Wolff has this persuasive illustration:

> The central problem ceases to be the regulation of each person's infringement on the sphere of other persons' actions, and becomes instead the coordination of the several actions and the choice of collective goals. It would be madness, for example, to suppose that the basic problem of a string quartet is to determine where the rights of the first violinist end and the rights of the cellist begin. For the quartet, the real problem is to achieve harmonious interaction. Now, of course, disputes arise which require resolution—for example, what composition to play. But these are not disputes over infringements of individual liberty, and they must be settled by some technique of collective decision-making, not by arbitration and the guarantee of self-regarding liberty.

In short, says Prof. Wolff, the times have changed, and with them the necessities of social organization, but we are still stuck with the pluralist, interest-group philosophy, and therefore neither the new organizations nor the old philosophy can possibly work well. Most of this book seems devoted to showing the accelerating unreasonableness or inapplicability of Mill's

psychology of motivation and of its political consequences, to existing social complexity.

It seems obvious that what is wanted is a conception of motivation that is more in keeping with the potentialities and needs of human beings. Yet people have been sold on self-interest, and persuaded that their "freedom" depends upon keeping it active. And they don't change their thinking in this area simply by being told that their "old ideas" aren't true any more. Who says so? they will ask. If the old authorities were wrong, why should the new ones be right? Meanwhile, the horrors of statism are no imaginary threat. Compelled social unity of ends—is there any other kind?—seems so undesirable that even an increasingly unworkable system which still *talks* about human freedom seems better than anything else.

Prof. Wolff says one other thing about Mill which deserves attention. He finds a logical difficulty cropping up repeatedly in the writings of Mill: "his noblest and most inspiring thoughts are almost invariably those which cohere least well with his professed utilitarianism." In other words, *at his best, Mill was not himself animated by utilitarian pleasure-seeking.*

Why, then, expound a theory of the social order based upon nothing else? If we literally *teach* in the schools and universities a low estimate of man and a dog-eat-dog philosophy, why wouldn't we get behavior reflecting that teaching? Mill's system, let us note, while indeed devoted to freedom, is entirely based on arguments against restraint. Is that what freedom really is—the absence of restraint? With argument against restraint as the focus of attention, how could there possibly be much development of the human qualities which render restraint *unnecessary?*

Briefly, then, Mill's model of man was a partisan version of qualities which, when extrapolated beyond the limits of Mill's experience, could not function to create a good society. What other models are there?

We might take a big leap back to a thinker belonging to a very different culture, simply to see how much of his conception of man we can bring ourselves to accept. For contrast, then, there is this account of an ideal society by Chuang Tzu, the Taoist philosopher:

> They were upright and correct without knowing that to be so was righteous. They loved one another without knowing that to do so was benevolence. They were sincere without knowing it was loyalty. They kept their promises without knowing that to do so was to be in good faith. They helped one another without thought of giving or receiving gifts. Thus their actions left no trace and we have no records of their affairs.

Apparently, they were men who generated no history:

> In the days of perfect nature men were quiet in their movements and serene in their looks. They lived together with the birds and the beasts without distinction of kind. There was no difference between the gentleman and the common man. Being equally without knowledge nothing came between them.

This is all somewhat mysterious, but may be understood through Lao-tse's conception of the "uncarved block." Men in their original nature were simply what they were, unknowing of pretense, spontaneous in action—the Chinese version of the noble savage, you could say. Can we make any use at all of this idea? Well, it helps to explain, perhaps, how Mill could have "noble" thoughts without even noticing how inconsistent they were in relation to the foundation of his social theories. It suggests that spontaneous nobility is a part of human potentiality. We certainly have no business in denying this possibility because of the heroism it now requires to find expression—after all, we have lived for a long, long time under a social system that makes continual propaganda against it.

Well, suppose we were to argue that this "uncarved block" potentiality becomes mythic memory, Golden Age nostalgia, and is actually the inspiration behind every utopian longing, every social dream. Is our problem, conceivably, that

we must learn to take it into account, along with our rational schemes? Mill, for example, was apparently unaware of such qualities in himself. He was after the good, all right, but he felt obliged to rationalize his scheme of the good society, not in terms of how men might somehow dwell *in* one another's well-being, but in terms of explicitly separatist tendencies. Prof. Wolff makes a sharp critical point of the fact that Mill thought he could define precisely the difference between a man's private, separate existence—where he could be and do what he pleased—and his outer relationships which affected others. There is no subtle interpenetration of beinghood, for either good or ill. Obviously, the affections have no place in such a conception. Love does not figure. Such a society is not true to life.

But Mill, it will be said, was talking about law. Indeed he was. He talked, you could say, of nothing else. But law supervenes only where the virtue of natural interpersonal relations breaks down. Law is last-ditch correction, yet we talk and write about systems of law as though they were the whole thing—as though they could actually define an independent social good!

While there is nothing "mystical" about Prof. Wolff's thought-processes, his last chapter goes in a direction that could meet certain mystical ideas halfway. That is, he is at pains to demonstrate the grounds for authentic altruistic behavior in man's nature and he develops the idea of "rational community" in a way that might approximate a conscious realization of the spirit of the uncarved block:

> Rational community is not merely the efficient means to such desirable political ends as peace, order, or distributive justice. It is an activity, an experience, a reciprocity of consciousness among morally and politically equal rational agents who freely come together and deliberate with one another for the purpose of concerting their wills in the positing of collective goals and in the performance of common actions. . . . It is shrewd of the philosophers of liberalism to insist that their world of private values is the only possible world. So long as they are permitted to maintain that fiction, dissatisfaction with the ideals of liberal society can be dismissed as nostalgia for youthful enthusiasm or as a grumbling protest against the human condition. Once the ideals of affective, productive, and rational community are defined, however, we see quite clearly that the dissatisfaction stems not from the poverty of human experience, nor even from the poverty of political philosophy, but simply from the poverty of liberalism.

Incidentally, Mill is not nearly so bad as he is made to sound, in this discussion. He has written a fine footnote concerning the kind of law that would preserve the rights of free men, but left out the main body of the work to which the footnote might have usefully applied—a work giving an account of the educational and other voluntaristic cultural undertakings by which men could learn to *deserve* the freedom Mill cherished and hoped to safeguard.

# *COMMENTARY*
## CHARGE AND COUNTER-CHARGE

JOHN W. ALDRIDGE begins the leading article in *Harper's* for October with this sentence: "By the end of the Sixties this country will have been dominated by children for almost twenty-five years." He then devotes sixteen large pages to explaining how the young have gained all this power over older people. Much of his article is pertinent criticism of the coming generation, but if what Theodore Roszak says in *The Making of a Counter Culture* can be credited, the literate segment of these young will pay little attention.

Yet if a somewhat exotic collection of pied pipers now has exclusive access to the spirited young, it is not the proprietors of conventional culture who have a right to complain. For the fact is that a basic honesty is largely missing in our society—the admissions that need to be made in order for the young to regain confidence in the older generation are not being made, while charges which are transparently accurate are brought by the pied pipers. For example, in *Earth House Hold* (New Directions, 1969, paper, $1.95), Gary Snyder, called "the most influential spokesman for the sub-culture of revolt which has swept America in recent years," articulates feelings very near the surface in numerous members of the coming generation:

> No one today can afford to be innocent, or indulge himself in ignorance of the nature of contemporary governments, politics and social orders. The national polities of the modern world maintain their existence by deliberately fostered cravings and fear; monstrous protection rackets. The "free world" has become economically independent on a fantastic system of stimulation of greed which cannot be fulfilled, sexual desire which cannot be satiated and hatred which has no outlet except against oneself, the persons one is supposed to love, or the revolutionary aspirations of pitiful, poverty-stricken marginal societies like Cuba or Vietnam. The conditions of the Cold War have turned all modern societies—Communist included—into vicious distorters of man's true potential. They create populations of "preta"—hungry ghosts, with giant appetites and throats no bigger than needles. The soil, the forests and all animal life are being consumed by these cancerous collectivities, the air and water of the planet is being fouled by them.

While some of what Gary Snyder says in *Earth House Hold*—an eccentric blend of Zen Buddhism, disturbing tantric permissiveness, American Indian tribal mysticism, and a muscular commitment to the simple life—may not be acceptable to many readers, the accuracy of this indictment can hardly be questioned. Those who address the young will gain no audience until they take it into account.

# CHILDREN
## . . . and Ourselves
### ACCESSIBLE NEW HISTORY

COULD history be taught out of pamphlets instead of weighty texts? The question is prompted by a reading of *Vision of America,* embodied in 44 pages of typescript prepared by an American professor for use with South American high-school teachers. The author, Hugh Fox, wrote it to provide reorienting conceptions of the history of the United States. Big books filled with "facts" will always have their uses, but this sort of keynoting over-view may serve to free the study of history from its almost omnipresent ethnocentric bias. One thinks of the new experimental schools burgeoning all over the country, especially in California, and of the need for educational materials in tune with the inspiration of such enterprises.

During the past twenty years there have been far-reaching changes in attitude toward the roots and the meaning of American history, but it takes a long time for such changes to filter into the books published for use in conventional schools. Meanwhile, practices established in both law and custom continue systematic injustices against the Indians, against black Americans and other non-white segments of the population. The resistance of the white majority to legislative reform is obviously due in large part to the cultural egotism which many school texts reflect. Hugh Pox (of University College in East Lansing, Mich.) obtains a contrasting effect by beginning his *Vision of America*, not with the coming of Columbus, but with the kind of people who were here long before Columbus. There is this account of the ideas and feelings the ancient Amerindians lived by:

> They felt themselves to be a part of nature. They lived with nature; they participated in the "feelings" of the animals that surrounded them. The spirit world had as much or more importance to them as the material world. The Shaman (Medicine Man) served as an important intermediary between the spirit and the material world, but everyone had some contact with this spirit world. By putting on a mask representing a particular animal, an individual created a kinship with the animal. All nature was really "one"—only the surfaces were different.

Several pages are devoted to developing this theme through description of Indian rituals and customs. Then the quite different attitudes of the invading and colonizing whites are examined. While Columbus expressed earnest concern for converting the Indians to the worship of Christ, the rationalistic-commercial side of his European heritage would often dominate. He predicted to the king of Spain that exploration of the New World could bring great quantities of gold and an unlimited supply of *slaves!* The later white settlers' ideas were a curious mixture of medieval religion and the beginnings of the scientific outlook. As an educated "modern man" of his time, Cotton Mather ridiculed believers in Islam for thinking that angels caused the wind and thunder, but saw nothing exceptionable in attributing the destruction of cities by earthquakes to the wrath of God.

These are portraits that could be amplified by intensely interesting supplementary reading. John Collier's inward grasp of the mystical attitudes of the American Indians (*On the Gleaming Way*, Sage Books) would fit in very well with the more scholarly deductions of the cultural anthropologists named in Mr. Fox's footnotes. Benjamin Lee Whorf's profound insight into the intellectual potentialities of Indian tongues (especially the Hopi) in *Language, Thought, and Reality* (M.I.T. Press) removes any suggestion of "noble savage" romanticism from thorough-going appreciation of the philosophic values of Indian culture. And George F. Willison's *Saints and Strangers* (Ballentine) is a required and enjoyable antidote to the exaggerated claims made for the Puritans and the Pilgrim Fathers, whose incredible self-righteousness was directly responsible for their nonchalant treachery to and exploitation of the Indians. This is a pattern that is monotonously repeated from Coast to Coast, as S. F. Cook's account of the decimation of the California

Indians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries makes abundantly clear.

The revealing light of such studies penetrates all too slowly into conventional texts, and what good are the facts and dates required of students so long as history fails to illuminate the moral distortions and imprisonments that result from sectarian and chauvinistic conceits? The following, taken from Edgar L. Hewett's *Ancient Life in the American Southwest* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1930), was written at least forty years ago, yet how "new" it would seem, even today, in a book for the general reader or high-school student:

> The European brought to the Indian world (America) a densely materialistic mind developed by ages of experience in human society that could have no other destiny than that which has overtaken it. It was a racial mind formed by immemorial strife in a restricted environment—an environment which fostered distrust, war, destruction, armament for offense and defense. All this was accelerated by the discovery and use of metals. In the chaotic ethnic conditions of ancient Europe kingship, overlordship, dynastic government, were inevitable and individual freedom well-nigh impossible. European nations developed one common characteristic, that of using force for all purposes. Small nations fought for existence, large ones for expansion, powerful ones to impose their will on others. Plans were devised from time to time for getting along with one another, but always to fall back after a brief trial upon the primal method of tooth and claw. Such a life tends to disintegration of cultural activities, industry, esthetics, religion and social order.
>
> The European mind was not prepared to understand a race so different from its own in character and culture as was the native American. Its disposition was to subdue, to subjugate and to convert. One can readily understand the paralysis that would overtake a non-warlike race in such an unequal conflict. To subdue was comparatively easy with superior material equipment of horses, guns, and training in destructive warfare. To convert was a different matter, involving the eradication of age-old culture, the destruction of the soul of a race.

There was indeed another "vision of America" seen by men like Richard Price in England and voiced by Thomas Paine and a few others—a vision as yet unrealized and very different from the nightmare imposed upon native races whose rhythm of life could not possibly adjust to the restless industrialism and aggressive acquisition which animated the lusty, new American civilization. Arthur M. Schlesinger's paper, "What Then Is the American, This New Man?" (*American Historical Review*, January, 1943), is a valuable account of aspects of the original American Dream, with attention, also, to the forms of its betrayal. And in a now forgotten letter (addressed to the celebrants of the 333rd anniversary of the founding of Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1883 ), Walt Whitman gave the Dream renewed utterance:

> The seething materialistic and business vortices of the United States, in their present devouring relations, controlling and belittling everything else, are, in my opinion, but a vast and indispensable stage in the New World's development, and are certainly to be followed by something different—at least by immense modifications. Character, literature, a society worthy of the name, are yet to be established, through a Nationality of noblest spiritual, heroic and democratic attributes—not one of which at present definitely exists—entirely different from the past, though unerringly founded on it and to justify it.

We want, in short, history that tells the truth, but truth in the light of a vision of what might be. Much history of this sort has already been written, but it is not sufficiently accessible to the young.

# *FRONTIERS*

## On Righting Wrong

SOME evils and disasters we simply cope with; others make us angry. Flood victims excite our sympathy, but reading about the defenseless targets of the *apartheid* policy in South Africa commonly generates a mixed response—sympathy *and* indignation. This evil seems plainly avoidable and talk of "patience" concerning such situations only a guise of moral indifference. Yet we often can do almost nothing about them, and they go on and on. Meanwhile, as world communications improve, the number of evils of this sort multiply—that is, we hear about more and more of them. Provocation, at any rate, promises to be endless.

Could such wrongs be recognized and chipped away at, without incendiary moral indignation? One answer might be that *mass* action can never be organized without emotion behind it, and anyone can see that nothing less than mass action will be "effective." This is a law of political action for good, you could say, variously cited by the people who claim to know right from wrong. If you question them, they simply ask, "Well, *aren't* those things wrong?" Of course, you have to agree.

Letting this side of the argument go, there is still the question of whether such evils can be erased by aggressive attack against the people who are responsible. Modern confidence in the human capacity to eradicate evil rests on firm faith in two resources: democratic politics and science. For two hundred years we have told ourselves and taught our children that modern man knows how to end injustice and supply plenty. The people just have to *do it.* We have no patience with people who don't, or won't. What excuse have they, with our example before them? So we get mad at those who delay. What else is there to do?

There are practical limitations, however. Forceful action requires power, and the people who *really* know right from wrong often don't have it. What then? There are two courses possible: One is to agitate for power; the other is to try to spread around a clearer understanding of right and wrong. Gandhi made a heroic effort to combine both courses in what has been called the power of non-violence. Plato, disillusioned by the corruptions of power, withdrew from politics and wrote the *Republic* and other dialogues, hoping to influence the future, since his present seemed irredeemable. Jonathan Swift wrote *A Modest Proposal.* Francois Villon wrote street songs. So do the Beatles. Today, literate men write books, articles, and letters.

In illustration of the futility of force as a substitute for a clearer understanding of right and wrong, we quote from a letter sent to the *Saturday Review* (Sept. 20), which the editors thought important enough to print in full. The writer is Gordon S. Livingston, M.D., a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and recently a medical officer in Vietnam. He arrived in Vietnam in November, 1968, joining the armored cavalry regiment commanded by Col. George S. Patton, son of the World War II general. A few months later, at an Easter Sunday celebration honoring Col. Patton, Dr. Livingston circulated a "prayer" conceived in the spirit of Swift's "modest proposal." He was immediately relieved of his duties, and soon after discharged from the Army (his resignation was accepted) as an "embarrassment to the command." His letter begins:

> Public disaffection with the war in Vietnam is now general, and as a result the American agony there may be near an end. But several of the fundamental reasons for our failure there are not acknowledged. Thirty thousand dead Americans and countless Vietnamese require some sort of an accounting.

Unlike many of the criticisms of the war in Vietnam, this letter is neither pacifist nor political in content. Nor is it angry. While Dr. Livingston found Col. Patton to be a man much like his father, he speaks of him as "neither the best nor the worst of the military in Vietnam." The

commander, he says, "is simply the product of the misbegotten and misguided idea that a single-minded dedication to destruction is to be highly rewarded." He adds:

> That he [Col. Patton] was unable to grasp the essentially political nature of the war is not surprising. What is surprising is that our society should expect its soldiers to function in a political role and believe them when they say they can.

The persuasiveness of Dr. Livingston's letter lies in its simplicity. He has no theories. He just couldn't stand what he saw with his own eyes. He has no scapegoats, only his own story to tell:

> It is difficult to summarize the experience that led to my expression of disaffection with our effort. In the end what I objected to was not so much individual atrocities, for these can be found in any war; war itself is the atrocity. What compelled my stand was the evident fact that at an operational level most Americans do not care about the Vietnamese. In spite of our national protestations about self-determination, revolutionary development, and the like, the attitude of our people on the ground, military and civilian, is one of nearly universal contempt.
>
> This arrogant feeling is manifested in a variety of ways, from indiscriminate destruction of lives and property to the demeaning handouts that pass for civic action. The Vietnamese, a sensitive and intelligent people, are well aware of our lack of regard and generally reward our efforts with the indifference or hostility that they deserve. We in turn attempt to create the illusion of progress by generating meaningless statistics to support predictions of success which have proved invariably incorrect. And the dying goes on.
>
> Specific examples of our disregard for the Vietnamese are legion. At one point the corps commander issued a document entitled "U.S.-Vietnamese Relations" detailing many of these instances. It represented official acknowledgement of the problem, but its exhortation to "avoid creating embarrassing incidents" was an exercise in futility. Numerous examples are available from my own experience including the running down and killing of two Vietnam women on bicycles with a *helicopter* (the pilot was exonerated); driving tracked vehicles through rice paddies; throwing C-ration cans at children from moving vehicles; running truck conveys through villages at high speeds on dirt roads (if the people are eating rice at the time it has to be thrown away because of the dust).
>
> In the area of medical civic action, it was the policy to give no more than a two-day supply of medicine to any patient lest the excess fall into Vietcong hands. Since visits to any given village are generally infrequent, this meant that the illusion of medical care was just that.

There is more—nothing very dramatic, just one sign of cruel or thoughtless indifference after another. "How we," Dr. Livingston says, "can presume to influence a struggle for the political loyalties of a people for whom we manifest such uniform disdain is to me the great unanswered, indeed, unanswerable, question of this war." He feels that the occasional small successes in the medical program for civilians were diluted in value "by the pervasive myth of American superiority, and the result is that civic action in the majority of instances I observed represented little more than patronizing handouts." And his commander, Col. Patton, he says, "was never more honest than the night he told his staff that 'the present ratio of 90 per cent killing to 10 per cent pacification is just about right'."

So Dr. Livingston wrote a letter. He knows right from wrong, but nothing he has said in his letter will add to the amount of pain or wrong in the world. There may be a small amount of increased understanding as a result.