VOLUME XXXIII, NO. 25
JUNE 18, 1980

# LEVELS OF COMPLAINT

THE psychologists have a term which they apply to what people think about the world in which they live—the "assumptive world," made up of the conclusions they have reached about their surrounding circumstances. While the world itself—whatever it is—probably doesn't change very much, human assumptions about it may change a great deal, so that we have the expression "world-view" to identify the differences which come about from one epoch of history to another. There are other expressions which don't so much describe the world as tell what people are doing in and with it. So we speak of the Industrial Age, the Electronic Age, the Post-Industrial Age, and the Nuclear Age, or the Age of Scarcity and the Age of Plenty.

Sometimes the world is defined in terms of human attitudes, the Age of Rising Expectations being an example, and Robert Heilbroner in a recent book declared that the Age of Optimism is over and the Age of Pessimism upon us. But more and more, these days, there seems justification for announcing the Age of Complaints. Surely we can all agree that things are not going the way we think they are supposed to, and it is normal human behavior to voice complaints. The letter columns of the daily papers and magazines are filled with these expressions, and the good sense of many of them may be confirmed by the reader. People complain, so to speak, to "the management," although it is far from clear just who is in charge. Perhaps we should say that they appeal mostly to the general forum of public opinion, as represented by the press, hoping that by dint of multiplying complaints some remedies will be found for what has gone wrong. (See Laura Nader's article on complaints in the December 1979 *Psychology Today*.)

There are two explanations for this increasing resort to complaint. First, it is natural to regard our problems as having solutions, for the reason that human beings are now more in charge of what happens in the world than ever before. The environment, we are told, and easily recognize, is increasingly man-made. The natural environment is of course still there, but its effects on us and our relations with it are through cultural institutions and numerous technological devices and filters which are supposed to order and regulate the impact of natural events. So *people,* we feel, are responsible for practically everything that happens, and since people are able to alter or improve what they do, complaints are in order.

The other explanation for so much complaining is that there doesn't seem to be much else to do. Most people are locked firmly in position so far as the conditions of everyday life are concerned. We talk a lot about "mobility" and make studies of the frequency with which people move around, but when the power lines fail or the phone is out of order, what can you do but complain? Traffic congestion has no remedy. A great many people can't get to and from their work without spending at least two hours in vehicles of public or private transportation. In countless ways what they think of as their hard-earned freedom is cribbed and confined by the impersonal complexities of the mass society. Human relations have been replaced by bureaucratic relations, and even a simple purchase in a store has to be entered on numerous pieces of paper and recorded in some sort of electronic brain. The efficiency, not of people but of machinery, rules the life of us all, or an increasing part of it.

The other day, looking at a California newspaper, we read a full-page real estate advertisement for a coastal area in which all the

homes advertised for sale were more than a hundred thousand dollars, with several listed at close to half a million, and one at $I.3 million. On the same day, in a large region, it became impossible to make any but local phone calls, because a movement of the earth, threatening three houses with collapse, had so disturbed the underground telephone lines that five or six days would elapse before normal communication could be resumed. California is a spacious state where industry and commerce are so spread out that one can hardly get a job without owning a car, and when you own a car you need to buy gas, which is sometimes a project requiring elaborate planning. Often the only convenient service station may be open for less than an hour, morning and afternoon. Food prices are continually going up, along with fuel, and clothing is the same. Stores in poor or modest neighborhoods charge almost as much as the fancy markets, and sometimes more. People aren't much interested in the causes of all these things because, when you look into the explanations of the experts, they are too complicated to understand and anyway beyond the reach of individual action. Our sturdy eighteenth-century ancestors would have laughed at these petty problems—they didn't of course have them—but all we can do is complain.

It seems evident that some law of diminishing returns is affecting the harvest of benefits from "modern progress."

All the gears of the march of progress in the Western world have signs which say, *Keep on going or the machine will break down,* but as we keep it going the little troubles grow into big ones, and the choices open to the individual are fewer and fewer because technological efficiency means that you get what you need in just one way or not at all. So there is increasing dislike, if not distrust, of the "system" on which we so completely depend. There is, however, another level of complaint—not really complaint, but rather searching critical analysis. Writing on the modes of function of modern mass societies, John Schaar likens them to "self-regulating machines," suggesting that, when something goes wrong, "A search for the responsible party leads through an endless maze of committees, bureaus, offices, and anonymous bodies." (*New American Review,* No. 8.) He continues:

> The functions of planning and control, and ultimately of decision making, are increasingly taken away from men and given over to machines and routine processes. Human participation in planning and control tends to be limited to supplying the machines with inputs of data and materials. And still the complexity grows. Modern man is haunted by the vision of a system grown so complex and so huge that it baffles human control. Perhaps the final solution to the problem of human governance will be able to make the machine king. . . .
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> This form of organizing knowledge involves a conception of knowledge which is also rational in specifiable senses. In the bureaucratic epistemology, the only legitimate instrument of knowledge is objective, technically trained intellect, and the only acceptable mode of discourse is the cognitive mode. The quest for knowledge must follow specified rules and procedures. Thus, many other paths to knowledge are blocked. Specifically, everything thought of as "subjective" and tainted by "feeling" must be suppressed. Any bureaucrat who based his decisions upon conscience, trained prudence, intuition, dreams, empathy, or even common sense and personal experience would be *ipso facto* guilty of malfeasance. . . .
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> This conception of knowledge entails a whole conception of reality. Reality is that which is tangible, external, measurable, and capable of being precisely conveyed to others. Everything that is left over—and some might think that this is half of life—becomes curiously unreal or epiphenomenal. . . . All that remains to be added is the obvious point that he who would gain this kind of knowledge of this kind of reality must himself be a certain kind of man. The model is the knowledge seeker who is perfectly "objective" and dispassionate, detached from the objects of knowledge and manipulation, and blind to those aspects of the world that lie outside his immediate problem.
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> Now, when men treat themselves and their world this way, they and it increasingly become this way.

This is a mode of thinking and acting which, almost by design, unfits those who have adopted it for any sort of self-criticism.

> It is a conception which means by thought only a process of calculating the most efficient way to handle materials, a conception which trains men how to behave efficiently but not how to act responsibly. When thought is so defined, the roles once filled by human leaders wither, and computers can perform them better than men. . . . In some remarkable way, Eichmann was no more responsible than a computer. Bureaucratic behavior is the most nearly perfect example (along with certain areas of scientific and technical experimentation) of that mode of conduct which denies responsibility for the consequences of action on the grounds that it lacks full knowledge of the reasons for action. All bureaucrats are innocent.

It is not in the least remarkable, then, that in a world so managed, if not so brought about, there should be little or no understanding of why so many things go wrong. Everywhere there is righteousness, with servants of the people following the directions in the book, doing what they are told, so how could there really be anything wrong, save for the disturbing influence of a few unreasonable persons who arm themselves by reading other books—or, what is worse, acquire first-hand acquaintance with what is happening, and stir up trouble with what they know?

The man in the street has his personal inventory of problems and complaints, and a great deal of uncatalogued anxiety which goes beyond food, clothing, shelter. He is oppressed by issues which, if less immediate for him, are ominous in implication. These are matters of world food supply, the waste and destruction of arable lands, the decimation of forests, the impoverishment of small farmers in every part of the world, and intolerable conditions in the cities. Or, again, the schools are made the object of investigation, from primary to graduate level, and all are found wanting in both useable content and consideration for the young. The press is examined by its own best representatives, and pilloried for systematic irresponsibility, likewise the learned professions. And the scientists, least of all, have immunity. Last year a critic wrote:

> I have seen a dramatic decay in pure science over the last ten years: the poetry and the philosophy are missing, the young are apathetic; budgets and profits have priority, the technical mediocrities spawned in the 1960s now dominate; and government funding is mission oriented. It is ironical that as we celebrate Einstein's birthday we are burying his legacy of play and passion.

Since the scientists had a great deal to do with establishing the conception of "objective knowledge," unaffected by the sway of human emotion, and above the blandishments of wishful thinking, a recent discussion of present-day scientists by a group of science journalists or reporters is of particular interest. The comments of the journalists were presented in the March/April *Technology Review*, introduced by a question from a *Technology Review* editor, who said:

> Professor Wolfgang Panofsky [Stanford University physicist] describes a "profound dilemma" for the scientist: "If he enters the public arena and advocates specific measures relating to the application of science and technology, then he is frequently accused by his colleagues and outside critics of abusing his stature, which he achieved through purely scientific accomplishments, in giving undue prestige to his opinions, which he is simply expressing as a citizen. Conversely, if he remains silent on the applications or possible dangers of the results of scientific work, then he is frequently accused, again by his peers or students or other social critics, of being callous, irresponsible, or immoral." How does a scientist resolve this dilemma—by choosing the lesser, or most tolerable, of the two "evils"?

To the comment that scientists worry too much about what their colleagues think, the *New York Daily News* science writer, Edward Edelson, said:

> I think you're making a mistake—an interesting one—that is very common with the public. It is the assumption that scientists are somehow different from the rest of us, that scientists will approach all problems in a logical, scientific way. In fact, scientists are pretty much like us. . . . We meet them

> all the time and they're just like us. And yet the going assumption, the unwritten assumption that creeps up on us all the time, is that they are somehow different. Scientists will do the cheap, cowardly thing most of the time because that is what the rest of us would do. That is why people take such delight when scientists begin fighting with each other.

The *TR* editor interjected: "People think scientists are objective and therefore different from everyone else—because *science* is supposed to be objective," and Edelson exploded:

> Are you kidding? Objective? You give me a scientist; I'll put 50 cents on the table and he will tell me 50 cents worth of what I want to hear. On the cyclamate issue, for example, all the studies supported by the Calorie Council showed that sugar was terrible and cyclamates were safe and all the studies supported by the sugar people showed the exact opposite. And these were honest scientists. They were not deliberately setting out to cheat; they just found exactly what they believed they were going to find.

A soberer comment came from David Perlman, science editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle:*

> The difficulty is that we seek certainty, and it's very reassuring, regardless of whether the decision is political or personal, when we believe our information to be certain and foolproof. In that sense I would agree . . . that scientists are just like everybody else. They, too, seek certainty. Now maybe I'm naive or overly idealistic, but I think the tools of science—properly used—can provide a measure of certainty beyond what is provided by pure intuition and hunch. And honest scientists, I believe, spend their professional lives looking for that kind of certainty. But when the scientist becomes a strong partisan and an advocate for a particular position, he begins, like everybody else, to forget about some of the *un*certainty and accept only that which supports his position. I can recall debate after debate. Hans Bethe [Cornell University physicist] versus Hannes Alfvén [University of California physicist] on the risks of nuclear power is the perfect example—two totally honest and knowledgeable scientists arguing diametrically opposite positions. Another is recombinant DNA, where this same kind of passion has developed and the objective realities that can be discerned in the laboratory have been forgotten.

To which the *New York Times* science editor, Walter Sullivan, added:

> I think those debates showed that science, when it works, works right. Participants and spectators finally reached a more rational level of compassion, so to speak. Because when you get one scientific authority debating another, you can pretty soon see who's right and who's wrong. And that's the way science ought to work.

Left out of this argument, although perhaps implied by Perlman and Sullivan, is the traditional conception of members of a profession which once described its work as the practice of natural philosophy, involving pursuit of truth. Just as lawyers are ideally held to be officials of the court, and doctors have their Hippocratic oath, so scientists are identified by their commitment to impartial search, and the popular respect in which they have been held, which still survives, ought not to be minimized and deplored because of the numerous corrupting influences of the time. It ought to be restored by being deserved. Actually, the weakening of the standards and ideals of the learned professions has contributed to the general helplessness of people who find themselves unable to understand why so many things are going wrong. What insight we have into what has happened to modern society is largely owed to the devoted work of professionals of integrity. Some day we shall see the point of tracing the influence of thinkers who took seriously the responsibilities of their profession. Some day it will be recognized that the semi-autonomous structures of specialized knowledge, represented by the professions, make possible society's differentiated organic function, and may also be the only available means of recovery through self-reform. What other sort of reform is possible for a self-governing people?

If basic reform comes about in the thinking and practice of science, it will be due in some measure, perhaps mostly, to the work of Michael Polanyi, a chemist who occupied the second half of his life with intensive inquiry into the foundations of scientific and human knowledge,

and whose mid-century book, *Personal Knowledge,* is already a text for those who believe that science *begins* with the assumption of responsibility to impartial truth, and will survive by nothing else. The changes in the meaning and content of psychology, already known to many, are likewise to be traced to the quite evident moral responsibility of theorists and practitioners such as A. H. Maslow and Carl Rogers. Meanwhile, it was an engineer, Arthur E. Morgan, who brought to the practice of his profession an example of social responsibility and vision that has inspired countless younger men (see *Dams and Other Disasters* and *The Making of TVA*), and led directly to major educational reforms which began with Morgan's revivification of Antioch College in 1901. A later generation of professionals is on the scene today, restoring to science and to society generally the meaning of serious professional practice. Californians think of the architect, Sim Van der Ryn, and his biologist associates, Helga and Bill Olkowski, founders of the Integral Urban House in Berkeley, and other professional trail-blazers in various parts of the state. Such individuals are to be found all across the country, applying their specialized knowledge to create practical avenues into which the human longing for change is able to flow, providing examples of constructive activity for the instruction of others who are wondering what they can do.

The complaints are inevitable, and doubtless serve to demonstrate that the time has come for using what freedom is left to us in any useful way we can. The critical analyses are more valuable, since they help to bring human resolve to a head, while the activities of people with knowledge, on the land and in the cities, give a positive tone to criticism and offer options and array alternatives that would hardly be thought of by the majority of people, without hearing and seeing what these pioneers have already accomplished.

One thing in particular to notice about the "new" professionals is that their specialized knowledge and trained capacities do not set them apart from others, but bring people together in community sharing and teaching of what they know. The work going on at the headquarters of the New Alchemists, on Cape Cod, is an example of this.

Progressively, "science" is being redefined by such work. E. F. Schumacher, you might say, was the first to demonstrate how this should be done, by graphic illustration in the field of what he meant by "Intermediate Technology," helping people to help themselves. It may be a century or more before the complaints have reason to die down, but meanwhile it is possible to put to work some of the energies that would otherwise go into the mourning of a common helplessness.

# *REVIEW*
## A RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENT

IN these days, so far as journalism—and much else—is concerned, we live in surroundings made up of imagery and façades. As a result the reader is obliged to regard what is written about the times with routine suspicion, as if honest expression and accurate description were no longer to be expected of anyone. This has an immeasurably blighting effect on the life of the mind, for how can the mind be well used when the available materials all seem counterfeit and debased?

But if a writer can be found who deals with the course of current history in the terms of commonly shared human ideals and purposes, without pretending to know all, but with an evident persistence to find out all he can, and tell about it clearly, and who pursues his profession with unshaken resolve, and even enthusiasm, through hard and depressing times, one has the feeling that here is a man who can be trusted and is consistently worth reading. The life of such a writer becomes a continuous act of cultural restoration; we are able to think that there still exists an order of human communication that can be relied upon. Not that he is all the time right, but simply that he all the time tries to see clearly and report faithfully, judging by the principles he has adopted and on occasion made plain.

These musings are the result of reading *The Education of Carey McWilliams* (Simon and Schuster, 1979, $11.95), which is the story of the work, and therefore the life, of a man now best known for a quarter of a century as the editor of the weekly journal of ideas and opinion, the *Nation.* Born in 1905, McWilliams was first a Colorado cowboy on his father's ranch, then a young lawyer in the Los Angeles area, where he was inevitably drawn into the struggle for justice to the most exploited and abused section of American labor, the migrant farm workers; in the 1950s he went to New York to join the staff of the *Nation*, eventually to become its editor.

That he would be a writer became plain in his college years, when he began his first literary project, a biography of the colorful California journalist, Ambrose Bierce (published in 1929 and recently reissued by Archon). His major works, the classic *Factories in the Field*, studies of racial intolerance and prejudice, reports on California culture and politics, and *Witch Hunt*, which described the anti-Communist hysteria in California just as Senator Joseph McCarthy got going in the East, show the lines of his interest and enduring concern. (Of his ten books, all but two are still in print.)

It becomes evident that McWilliams is not and was never an "ideologist," but simply a man of firm principle who applied what he believed in to what was going on in America, whatever the result to himself personally. He responded to conditions and issues, not revolutionary programs or radical theories. He gives this account of his political views:

> Hannah Arendt once wrote that the radical is engaged in the unbiased search for those facts in everyday affairs that contain the roots for further development. She defined "radical" in the sense of "going back and reviving much that belongs to the very roots of the American radical tradition as well as much that belongs to the radical tradition everywhere—the tradition of nay-saying and independence, of cheerful 'negativism' when confronted with the temptation of Realpolitik, and of self-confidence: pride and trust in one's own judgment. These qualities distinguish the radical who always remains true to reality in his search for the root of the matter, from the extremist, who single-mindedly follows the logic of whatever 'cause' he may espouse at the moment." The radical is the perpetual outsider, the odd man (or woman) out, constantly critical of the power structure and of things as they are.
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> But I am also a socialist in the sense that I share the socialist critique of capitalism. But this critique does not tell us all that we need to know about socialism, precisely what it would do and how it would do it. And socialism in practice, while varied

> and feasible, has shown limitations that have disappointed its most enthusiastic advocates. It is easy to talk about "democratic socialism," but just how would an American socialist regime safeguard civil liberties? How could it prevent a slavish dependence on state power? How would it go about changing the structure of economic power? Could it avoid bureaucratic sloth? How would it stimulate social incentives? Could it achieve efficient management? How would it revive and sustain a sense of pride in work performed? Would it make for a more genuine public—as distinguished from bureaucratic—control of productive capacity? Would it be able to breathe new life into the constitutional concept of government of, by, and for the people? . . .
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> Over the years J have come to believe that radicals should be primarily concerned with values. If they could achieve substantial agreement on the kinds of values society should encourage, it might then be possible to proceed experimentally, tentatively, to invent new forms and institutional arrangements which would best safeguard and extend these values. Values, in a word, should take precedence over programs. This way the risks of the remedy becoming part of the problem could be minimized.

Carey McWilliams' books are written in this spirit, and he edited the *Nation* from the same point of view. For the *Nation* reader—and MANAS editors have always been that—the present book takes him back over twenty-five years of almost incredibly thorough coverage of the national scene, bringing to light matters that a responsible citizenry must know about. The *Nation* had no large funds to pay for "investigative journalism," but its editor kept gathering material on major questions that deserved attention—the policies of the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover, the munitions business, the political corruption of New York City, the prosecution and perhaps the martyrdom of Alger Hiss, what the CIA was doing, the persecution of J Robert Oppenheimer, and the lying by government informers in the trials of supposed communist sympathizers—and found capable writers to put it together. The readers of the *Nation* have probably known more about what was actually going on in the area of national and international affairs than most other citizens.

In 1975 Carey McWilliams resigned as editor, although he still contributes a weekly column. He felt that an epoch had come to a close at about that time:

> . . . I felt intuitively that the post-Watergate-Vietnam scene would emerge rather slowly and would be quite different from the "worlds" I had known and in which I had been an active participant. This new world would represent a turning point, a "crunch point," as one UN official put it, in the history of industrial societies, socialist, Communist, and capitalist; less a new chapter than a new book. I could never hope to live long enough to see it take shape, and whatever editorial insights I had acquired would be only marginally relevant. The scene had changed; the cast was different. Nixon was not there to "kick around" any more, Hoover was dead, the FBI and CIA were fending off critics, and the treasury was depleted or nearly so; it would be a long and painful process for the American people to adjust to realities obscured by thirty years of Cold War folly and extravagance.
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> This was indeed a "crunch point" in history. "With a neatness history seldom offered," wrote economic historian John E. Sawyer in the New York *Times* of December 30, 1974, "the era now ending can be said to have begun five centuries ago with the great geographical explorations that opened the way to the outpouring of energies, ideas, and institutions of Western Europe." Seen in this light, the American Dream was an episode in a long historical process; now, at last, we would face a confrontation with our history, with ourselves. What Sheldon Wolin calls "the culture of increase," of endless growth and expansion, had been shaken by the realization that the potentialities of science and modern technology and communications may not be realizable within "the limits imposed by the realities, political and ecological, of this world." As he writes: "The prospects of managing a cooled-down society, accustomed to the intoxication of endless growth," is bound to have a sobering effect on the dominant elites with their "take-off" mentality; they cannot help but feel "suffocated and hemmed in," while the middle class feels surprised, disappointed, and apprehensive.
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> I felt, therefore, that it was a logical time for me to leave *The Nation;* another phase of my "education" had ended.
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> . . .

An adequate review of *The Education of Carey McWilliams* is possible only for writers who know the period which it covers, able to recall at first hand the drama of the struggle to bring reliable information and thoughtful judgment to *Nation* readers. Of the reviews we have seen, the best ones have been by *Nation* contributors who understood the extraordinary achievement of its editor from working with him day by day.

For others, the reason for reading the book is given in our opening paragraphs. If there can be such a thing as an unblemished record of serious journalism and commentary covering the middle years of the twentieth century, it is found in this book. That we have writers like that, who give their lives to the sort of work that, some day, may help to make actual self-government possible, and not just a hopeful dream, tells us something about the possibilities of human beings, and it tells us something about the country where they live and do what they set out to do. One hopes that there will be at least a few young men and women who will be inspired to try to do likewise by this substantial and intensely interesting book. In a way, Carey McWilliams was inspired by Ambrose Bierce, but in the end pursued a far more serviceable career of his own. The reality of his achievement should be made widely known.

# *COMMENTARY*
## THE OTHER HALF-TRUTH

THE art of the Sophist is to make half-truths sound like all that needs to be said. But this may prove unjust in some instances. There are times when only half-truths seem to have relevance. John Ball, a fourteenth-century social agitator in England, had ample reason to argue:

> When Adam delved and Eva span
> Who was then the *gentleman?*

He looked to the day "when there shall be no villeins or gentlemen, but that we shall all be united together, and that the lords be no greater masters than we be." About four hundred years after Ball was hanged for spreading his subversive doctrines, a new nation based on this idea came into being in North America. But while there weren't any "lords" in the United States, there were some extraordinary men and women who became the teachers and inspirers of their countrymen. They were, you could say, the public servants of the time, men who used their unusual intelligence for the common good. They sought no special status. The system of caste and class which the Americans abandoned was about the most corrupt and evil arrangement in their experience and they wanted none of it. Ball's fundamental truth triumphed.

Yet it was only a half-truth. The other half was the fact that the Founding Fathers practiced the virtues and fulfilled the responsibilities which the lords claimed but did not possess. See the writings of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. And of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton in the *Federalist Papers.* See *Liberalism and American Education in the Eighteenth Century,* by Allen Oscar Hansen (Macmillan, 1926).

The architects of the earlier traditional societies knew that you have to have such people, and they tried to guarantee their presence by relying on heredity to provide them. This didn't work, and in time the traditional societies were overthrown. If they had been able to learn from Buddhist wisdom that all human excellence is *voluntary,* they might have eliminated the necessity of the revolutions of the eighteenth century.

We, the inheritors of Ball's vision, now need badly the missing half of his truth that individual striving for excellence and devotion to the public good must replace the artificial hierarchical forms of the traditional societies.

Law is of no use in this. We have a few examples, but almost no studies (except for the work of A. H. Maslow) of how this ideal may be pursued and spread around. On the other hand, we have numerous books on what happens when the ideal of human excellence is forgotten. *The Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch gives chilling access to this literature.

# CHILDREN
## . . . and Ourselves

### PLATO'S MISSION

A FEW weeks ago we gave attention here to an article by Neil Postman in the *Los Angeles Times.* In discussing what he said we remarked that he didn't mention Plato, but we now discover that in his new book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity,* from which the *Times* article was taken, he not only mentions Plato but bases the thesis of the book on the Platonic idea of the role of education, drawing on Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (as we did) to explain and emphasize its importance.

Postman names his theory of reform "the thermostatic view of education," by which he means that education should respond to the existing culture in terms of what it leaves out. The business of the educator, in short, is to redress balances.

What was wrong with Greek culture in Plato's time, and what did Plato prescribe to give it balance? To answer this question, Postman says:

> Athenian youth were concerned to reproduce their literature, not reflect upon it. They did not so much evaluate characters and their situations as they identified with them and relived their experience. A sense of critical detachment was not only unnecessary, it was undesirable. As Havelock says: "You threw yourself into the situation of Achilles, you identified with his grief or his anger. You yourself became Achilles. . . . Thirty years later you could automatically quote what Achilles had said or what the poet had said about him. Such enormous powers of poetic memorization could be purchased only at the cost of total loss of objectivity."
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> A total loss of objectivity! This was the price to be paid for the perpetuation of the history of the society. It is a price an oral culture must always pay. And it was this state of affairs, this learning style, this use of the intellect, to which Plato objected and which led him to banish the poets. As Walter Ong remarks: "Plato was telling his compatriots that it was foolish to imagine that the intellectual needs of life in Greek society could still be met by memorizing Homer."

Memory, in other words, while an indispensable tool of thinking, is a tyrannical ruler. Plato was redressing balances. He wanted the thinker to rule, not one of the tools of thought.

> Plato meant to provide Greek youth with an alternative curriculum, one which emphasized abstract thought as against concrete imagery, and critical detachment as against subjective involvement. He meant to prepare Greek youth for the psychological and intellectual biases of the written word and to wean them from their orientation to the spoken word.
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> Plato grasped that writing, by providing us with a transpersonal memory, not only made ritualized memorizing pointless but opened the way to new uses of the intellect. The inscription over his Academy, "Let none enter who knows not geometry," was a rebuke to the biases of epic poetry and an invitation to exploit the abstract, disembodied, highly visual bias of the written symbol. For, as Plato knew, the written word directs our attention to symbols rather than things.

But Plato also knew, as Mr. Postman points out, that any tool, if relied upon too much, has an imprisoning effect. The point here is that one who is wisely engaged in redressing balances must be ready to switch emphasis, since *balance* depends on this capacity. The misuse of a tool should not lead to condemnation of the tool, but to exposure of the confining habits of its user. Writing, then, while useful for engaging the reader with abstract ideas, may also infect the reader with the idea that he "knows" something he has not experienced at all.

> In the *Phaedrus,* Socrates spoke sharply against the intrusions of the written word. He explains that writing will reduce the power of our memories. Which it did. That it will make dialectic impossible since it forces us to follow an argument rather than participate in it. Which it does. And finally, that writing will undermine our concepts of privacy and social propriety since it is a "mass medium" of sorts. To quote him: "Once a word is written, it goes rolling all about, comes indifferently among those who understand it and those whom it no wise concerns, and is unaware to whom it should address itself and to whom it should not do so."

Again, this is not an argument against writing and reading, but against their mechanistic use.

> Plato, in other words, saw both sides of the picture. He knew the value of both speech and writing, but in the context of that time and place, he decided in favor of the written word. And he so decided because it was the spoken word that controlled the minds of the young. The written word was to release them from its grip. Though Plato did not say it, he must have believed that at that juncture the function of education was to free the young from the tyranny of the past. Sometimes the function of education is to free the young from the tyranny of the present. It depends on what is the character of the information environment. That is the essence of the thermostatic view of education.

Well, yes. But we should not forget that the *dialectic* uses spoken words and that it was the *mimetic* poets to whom Plato objected. The fault of the written word is its inflexibility, once set down. The fault of the spoken word is its hypnotic persuasion, especially when set to music and memorized. Plato wanted to avoid both these abuses, and when he wrote, while himself a poet with a poet's command of the magic of words, he wrote in imitation of the interchanges of speech—in dialogue form.

Mr. Postman, one could say, sets his argument at the institutional level. First you do one thing, and then, when that becomes too much of a good thing—which is a bad thing—you do the other. But Plato, it seems to us, wants speech that partakes of abstract ideas, and writing which leaves questions open and does not attempt finality. It is the cycle of going from one cultural extreme to the other which interests Mr. Postman, and this, you could say, is inevitable, since he wants to determine what can be done to improve the schools, short of having persons of Plato's finely tuned balance for teachers.

His book is nonetheless especially worth reading. He has an exceptionally agile mind, devises effective illustrations, and develops his arguments with a skill worthy of study. He is master of the anatomy of cliches and is likely to embarrass most of his readers, now and then, by reason of what they are in the habit of saying or accepting:

> There is no more depressing symptom of a "nonbasic" education than to hear a student ask for "the" definition of a term, since the question so often implies a lack of understanding of what a definition is and where definitions come from. Definitions, like questions and metaphors, are instruments for thinking. Their authority rests entirely on their usefulness, not their correctness. We use definitions in order to delineate problems we wish to investigate, or to further interests we wish to promote. In other words, we invent definitions and discard them as suits our purposes. And yet, one gets the impression that students (and not a few teachers) believe that God has provided us with definitions from which we depart at the risk of losing our immortal souls. This is the belief that I have elsewhere called "definition tyranny," which may be defined (by me, not God) as the process of accepting without criticism someone else's definition of a word or a problem or a situation. I can think of no better method of freeing students from this obstruction of the mind than to provide them with alternative definitions of every concept or term with which they must deal in a subject. Whether it be "molecule," "fact," "law," "art," "wealth," "gene," or whatever, it is essential that students understand that definitions are hypotheses, and that embedded in them is a particular philosophical, sociological, or epistemological point of view. One of the more interesting examples of this idea is found, once again, in the field of education. I. refer to the meaning of the word "basic," as in "back to basics." I would particularly like to call to your attention that the meaning given to this word by some educators is not its "real" meaning. It has been assigned certain meanings in order to further an education philosophy which is thought to be sensible and effective. The "basic" educators are entirely justified in doing this, but neither you nor I are under any obligation to accept their definition of what is "basic."

We'll get to Mr. Postman's positive proposals some other time. These extracts show that he is worth reading.

# *FRONTIERS*

## An Ominous Parallel

THE drama of the sudden decline and virtual disappearance of the civilization of the Mayan Indians has long puzzled historians and archaeologists. What did these remarkable people do—or fail to do—which wiped them out? Various explanations have been advanced, but one offered recently, while doubtless incomplete, suggests a parallel with worldwide conditions in the present. In *Not Man Apart* for April, Colin Norman, drawing on a report in *Science*, tells what happened to the Mayan civilization about 200 A.D.:

> One of its centers, in the tropical forests of what is now Guatemala, supported some five million people. But in the span of just three or four generations, parts of the civilization suffered almost total collapse. Population levels plummeted, and some areas remained virtually uninhabited until recent years.

Researchers say that for many hundreds of years after their obscure beginnings the Mayans became more numerous, but at a gradual rate, taking about four hundred years for their population to double in number. (Today, in some countries, population doubles about every thirty years.)

> Population growth may have been so slow that its impacts were not perceived until too late. By about the third century A.D., much of the forest cover around the Mayan settlements had been cleared for agriculture, exposing the soil to the full impact of the region's rainfall. The result, according to the recent findings, was extensive soil erosion. Massive amounts of fertile soil were washed into lakes and streams, leaving the land seriously depleted of essential nutrients. . . . While other forces, such as disease or internal strife, may have contributed to the final collapse, the cumulative damage from mounting pressures on the region's agricultural base may have undermined the stability of the civilization.

Perhaps some of the Mayans saw what was happening and warned their countrymen, who failed to listen. The Mayans had their wise men, as we know from the Guatemalan *Popol Vuh.* Although written after the Spanish conquest, this scripture relates that "there was an ancient book which was concealed when the Spaniards came,' the contents of which, having to do with the origin of life and the beginning of history, were repeated by the unknown writer of the new sacred book of the Quiches. The Mayan sages were well acquainted with the doctrine of periodic destructions and believed that there were times when wisdom was destroyed. Perhaps they could do nothing against the destiny we now read in the record of environmental degradation of more than a thousand years ago.

Today such environmental degradation is worldwide. As Colin Norman says:

> As with the collapse of the Mayan civilization, the full impact of gradual ecological deterioration may be felt suddenly and drastically. . . . Curbing the slow deterioration of the ecosystems in many developing countries will thus entail a broad range of social and political reforms. . . . It is sobering to note that some of the Mayan farmlands have not yet recovered their full productivity—1,000 years after their full collapse.

Some measure of the present threat may be obtained from a statement by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, also in *Not Man Apart.* The writer, Robert Allen, says:

> The fertile soils of Himalayan valleys are being washed away in such quantities that a new island is forming in the Bay of Bengal, an island of soil which, if the land had been properly managed, would still be growing food. If present rates of land impoverishment are allowed to persist, one third of the world's cropland will disappear in a mere 20 years.
>
> Even in the IJ.S.A., with the largest soil conservation service in the world, so much soil has already gone that the country's potential to grow food has been cut by to to 15 per cent and perhaps by as much as 35 per cent.
>
> At present rates of clearance, the remaining area of unlogged productive forests will be halved by the end of this century. Tropical rain forests (genetically the richest land environments on the planet) are being felled and burned at the rate of 11 million hectares

(27 million acres) a year. At this rate *all* tropical rain forests will have disappeared within 85 years. . . .

We have not yet learned to live with the one indispensable feature of our world: the biosphere, the thin covering of the planet that contains and sustains life. This failure has led to a virtually permanent reduction in the productive and regenerative capacities of the earth. We have reached a turning-point at which, depending on if and how we act, matters will be resolved for better or for worse.

Still another article in the April *Not Man Apart* reports on changes in public opinion concerning care of the planet. The writer, A. Clay Schoenfeld, dates the awakening from Earth Day, in April, 1970, although there were several pioneers, such as Fairfield Osborne, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, and William Vogt, who had been sounding their own tocsins decades before. The press, this writer thinks, has played an important part:

If in fact there has been an emerging ecological conscience, it may be due in part to increased media attention to "the ecology beat." For example, in 24 sampled issues of the *New York Times* in 1962 there were 110 column inches of environmental news; fifteen years later the figure was 683. For the *Chicago Tribune* the comparable figures are even more striking: 1962, 70; 1977, 791. If it did nothing else, by putting environmentalism into law, the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act has given the press manifold news pegs on which to hang environmental reportage.

Whatever substantive issues emerge as long-term renewable natural resource management problems, their solution will hinge at least in part on public education—what Aldo Leopold called "the key log." While environmental education has made some progress in the past ten years, it probably has not kept pace with the forces of environmental degradation.

Interestingly, Mr. Schoenfeld speaks of "the final battle of Armageddon between economics and ecology," making occasion to draw attention to a new textbook, *The Challenge of Humanistic Economics*, which begins: "What kind of world do we want?" and affirms that the answer will depend on the values people have adopted. This book, by Mark A. Lutz and Kenneth Lux (Benjamin/Cummings, 1979), is quite evidently inspired by E. F. Schumacher and A. H. Maslow, and indicates a fundamental coming change in the way economics is taught in the schools.