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IRREDUCIBLE VISION

A READING of some passages in a novel about the Civil War brought home the great loss which has resulted from scientific disdain for works of the imagination. The imagination, it was charged, departs from *facts,* so how can it serve any purpose beyond entertainment? The book we have been reading is *And Wait for the Night* by John William Corrington, issued by Putnam in 1964, and later by Pocket Books. With what "reliable" material is this work of the imagination to be contrasted?

The practical effect of the scientific view of knowledge has been well described by John Schaar in a paper that appeared in No. 8 of the *New American Review.* Prof. Schaar offers an account of the assumptions and function of modern bureaucracy, which has become the accepted application of the scientific outlook. He says:

> It would be superfluous here to describe the essential characteristics of bureaucracy: that has been done capably by a number of writers. What I want to do instead is describe what can best be called the bureaucratic epistemology, the operative definition of knowledge or information which is characteristic of all highly developed modern bureaucracies, for this is the screen through which information must pass before it becomes useful knowledge.

Bureaucracy, Schaar points out, is far from being a "neutral" tool. While regarded as an instrument to be used according to decisions from a higher level, bureaucracy "has a host of instrumental values and among these is a conception of what counts as knowledge or useful information."

> 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. The bureaucrat must define whatever is to be done as a problem, which implies that there is a solution and that finding the right solution is a matter of finding the right technique. In order to solve a problem, it must be broken down into its component parts. Wholes can appear as nothing more than clusters of parts, as a whole car or watch is an ensemble of parts. In order for wholes to be broken into parts, things that are in appearance dissimilar must be made similar. This is done by extracting one or a few aspects which all the objects dealt with have in common, and then treating those aspects as though they were the whole. This penchant for abstraction and comparison in turn requires measuring tools that will yield comparable units: among the favored ones are units of money, time, and power. . . .
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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. If it persists in its intrusions on the "real" world, then it must be treated as trouble; and those who act from motives embedded in the unreal world are treated as deviant cases, in need of repair or reproof. Bureaucrats still cannot quite believe that the human objects of "urban renewal" see themselves as victims.
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> 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.

While this analysis by John Schaar is itself a form of abstraction, it is very rich for critical purposes. With a little reflection we are able to think of dozens of ways in which it applies. Consider how frequently any question about human progress is automatically answered by reference to the Gross National Product, which is

of course measured in dollars, while what is called "the quality of life" is determined by the excellence of plumbing and the conveniences and luxuries which are commonly available. Problems of education are often dealt with in terms of money, as if learning were a purchasable item and the formation of character could be assured by proper budgeting of the funds for running the public schools.

Baldly stated in this way, the criticism may seem carelessly indifferent to the fine qualities of people who do their best to remain human in spite of this mechanizing and externalizing trend. Yet even they are beset by an irony to which John Schaar calls attention: "Now, when men treat themselves and their world this way, they and it increasingly become this way." As more and more people feel obliged to agree that money is the most essential element in the creation of the good life, their grasp of the meaning of actual human goodness diminishes, and they begin to think of it in terms of monetary symbols, which is more or less what the banks and insurance companies intend, as shown by their promotional and "educational" publicity. Surrounded by the endless repetition of this doctrine by political leaders, by industrial authorities, economists, and sometimes even educators who want to appear "practical," it becomes difficult for us to disagree. "That, after all, is the way to world works!" we are continually told.

Yet there are other voices, even expressions strong and clear, such as that by Lyman Bryson some years ago, who said:

> It is [a] mistake of thinking that a political process is justified by its public result. This is not true. A political process is justified by its private result, that is, by its result in lives of the members of the state, and the most important thing in the lives of the citizens at any time, even at a time of public danger, is the development of their own best selves. (*The Next America.*)

This is a truth we intuitively accept. People hear it and they heartily agree. But there seems no way in which they are able to act upon and strengthen the reality of this truth in practice. The processes established by the bureaucratic dispensation have continuous presence and authority in our everyday lives, and as Prof. Schaar says, the favored measuring tools employed by the managers of all these interrelated systems are "money, time, and power." There are those who play this game without believing in it, simply in order to survive, but it becomes very difficult for them to avoid infection. Who, indeed, feels able to say that he is wholly exempt from the influence of these "values"?

Yet an undercurrent of resistance persists in the lives of many human beings. There are feelings which declare that we are living against the grain of our best inclinations. A vague sense of guilt is almost everywhere in evidence, only partly dulled by the habitual search for pleasurable sensation and the pressure of hedonistic propaganda. But meanwhile the young are becoming persuaded that goodness and truth are best defended by possession of the most advanced armament that technology can devise, as *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* suggest. What sort of cultural changes, one wonders, would be requisite for a Gandhian hero to achieve the same popularity as those fascinating robots which delight so many child-like hearts?

This is a way of asking: What will give authentic authority to conscience, and moral substance to the visions of idealists? We must note that the question itself is filled with hazard. What does "authority" mean? Has it here anything to do with affecting the behavior of *other* people? Should one man's conscience influence anyone besides himself? How much moral legitimacy can a "movement" have? How is individual integrity preserved in a campaign for righteousness that can be endorsed by *groups?* We know, or should know from experience, that when personal integrity loses its importance, the whole campaign turns sour, eventually becoming another "enemy" with which a fresh forlorn hope must contend.

We are able to band together in groups to bring aid to the victims of famine, to build levees along the banks of a flooding river, to construct roads and bridges, and to deliver first aid. Why can't we unite successfully in a common righteousness? We can all agree on ends, so long as we don't attempt to define the necessary means: What is missing in the kind of thinking we are able to do? Why do revolutionary movements, in order to be "successful," require the ruthless leadership of men who tolerate no dissent in the ranks and rule by a thought-control that seeks public definition of every kind of "truth" in order to be effective?

These psycho-moral and philosophical questions are almost totally without answers. Is it that the very meaning of "progress" and human good has been misconceived? That the balance between the material and the spiritual seems impossible to settle on a consensus basis for the reason that we don't really know what matter is, what spirit is, or anything about the sort of polarity these undefined realities have in human life?

Other ways of questioning might be: How does one become rational about the intuitions and the mandates of conscience? Does rationalization require uniformity of opinion? Can there be orderliness which does not require uniformity? Democracy, we say, is a way of learning how to agree to disagree, *within limits,* and to cooperate in behalf of a free social order. Where do you draw the line between agreement and permissible disagreement? What are the issues which govern the choices ranging between total self-rule and total obedience to the "general will"? And should these questions be decided "pragmatically," by rule of thumb, or are they matters of principle? Can science help us? And what if science is by definition deaf to conscience?

The present prospect of war—as anticipated by so many who are in positions of power and authority—is pressing such questions with increasing urgency these days. What about the feelings and convictions of individuals at a time, as Bryson puts it, of "public danger"?

War is today pretty much regarded precisely as von Clausewitz defined it many years ago—*"nothing but the continuation of state policy with other means."* What, then, is the relevance of the effect war has on individuals to the policy decision of going to war? Is this a pragmatic question or one of principle? Could it have a "scientific" answer; or if not, an answer from moral feelings, and would such responses bring the simple conclusion that looking at war from this point of view only makes "trouble" which should be disposed of as subversive interference?

Well, a person trying to decide such questions may feel obliged to agree, however reluctantly, with the national authorities. But then, suppose he reads a book like the one we mentioned at the beginning. *And Wait for the Night* is about the thoughts of Southerners who fought in the Civil War. The author says at the beginning that it is fiction, not scrupulously based on historical fact, but that he will vouch "for the accuracy of the feelings ascribed to the Southerners." After a few pages the reader will probably be willing to vouch for this accuracy, too. The book persuades by its psychological and moral symmetries. A good writer is able to deal with such matters in a convincing way. You begin to think that such writing may be far truer than fact.

In one place the author tells about a major in the Confederate Army. Badly wounded, he lies on his cot, thinking:

> For Sentell, the United States and its flag had ceased to represent anything worth fighting for. For him they had slowly changed from the instrument and symbol of liberty into the bludgeon and rag of tyranny. When he had accepted the Louisiana commission, there had been no anger in him: only the certainty that every Southerner would have to fight in order to stay free. There was no drama in his decision and when it had been made, when he had sent his acceptance to the Governor, there was no pleasure in it either. . . . Sentell had known enough about war, had remembered enough from Mexico, to wish that there were some decent way simply to

refuse service. He thought at first that he might leave the city and volunteer in Mississippi as a hostler or a stretcher-bearer or a courier. But the more he thought, the more he realized that this would not be the kind of war that Mexico had been, not the kind in which tender feelings could be saved, high impulses humored and indulged.

He had taken his commission and held his peace, still silent when he boarded a train headed east in 1861. By leaving the fire-eating speeches for his neighbors to make, he had failed to satisfy them; by taking the commission when he was not sure he wanted to serve in combat, he failed to satisfy himself. But on the train, riding through the dusty crossroads and towns and townless parish depots on the way to Monroe, he realized why he had not wanted the commission and why he had taken it anyhow. He came to understand why he could not produce a rousing patriotic speech for his new country, and why, finally, he would fight as well as he could anyhow.

Because, no matter who won or lost, neither the South nor the North would ever be what they had been before. Either there would be two nations (and possibly a dozen since there was already talk of Louisiana's secession from the Confederacy when the danger from the North was put down), each struggling, plotting, threatening the other over expansion into the western lands, over commercial matters, over boundaries, over all the trivia of government which means so much to clerks and so little to the people who must pay for the quarrels and the clerking. Either that, or there would be a single monolithic giant of a nation with its heart in New York, its brain in Washington and its cells, the states themselves, only ciphers, only shadow governments to pass dicta from the central rulers to the people ruled.

Another officer, Masterson, who had soldiered with Sentell in the war with Mexico, raised a question.

Let me ask you something. Is this an honest fight? Are we right or wrong?

—It's an honest fight, Sentell said.—We were invaded.

—Was Mexico an honest fight?

Sentell did not answer. He remembered the long tortured negotiations that summer before the war with Mexico, the equally tortured logic of the administration, the coarse gleeful representatives in the Louisiana legislature who wanted a war that would net not only Texas to the Rio Grande, but the whole of the subcontinent down to Central America if the Mexicans gave trouble. He remembered the ugly selfish talk, the cheap self-assurance of the slave dealers who saw in their mind's eye a whole new country opened up with the fall of Mexico to the United States. And he remembered the pathetic Mexican government, caught between turmoil at home and armed blackmailers to the north, and later the Mexican people, dark and enduring, as the gringos marched through their land shattering every attempt of their young men to stop them. He remembered the deep personal shame of fighting campaigns they could not lose for a cause they should not win. Finally Sentell looked across at Masterson again.

—No, he said.—It was a low stinking fight. Isn't that what you want me to say?

This book is an intensive study of a basic conflict in human nature—between the instinctive or intuitive decencies which people feel and the loyalties they have grown up with, which now seem to produce unbearable degradation. If a man must harden his heart, ignore his sensibilities, in order to remain part of a group or mass action which commits continuous cruelties against other men, women, and innocent children, how can he live with himself? And if he refuses to do these things, how can he live with "society"?

War is probably the clearest *objective* case of this dilemma. Its resolution cannot be satisfactory—there is no satisfactory resolution of the difference between the dull averages guiding social behavior and the moral insight of individuals. We are all somewhat damned by the behavior of the collectives which support our everyday lives, and somewhat saved by the personal formulas we work out to go on living in a state of compromise.

Realization that this is the human condition comes as a shock to us all. It leads to the obliteration of moral vanity, which may be the only healthy condition for human life.

And Wait for the Night has a Socratic drive toward this conclusion. Some of the author's characters reach it, although they pay a terrible price. The two Southerners quoted above, who were Mexican War veterans, recall what they did to take the fortress of Chapultepec, overlooking Mexico City. After the stronghold fell a sergeant was counting the Mexican dead.

> —Lieutenant, the sergeant said softly,—maybe you ought to take a look over here.
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> The Mexican was barely five feet tall, dark and soft featured. He had no beard, and his eyes, wide and beginning to lose the sheen of living eyes, seemed to be fixed on them in a mixture of anger and utter disbelief. One of the enlisted men squatted beside him, turned him slightly, read laboriously the inscription on his belt buckle: COLEGIO MIETTAR DE MEXICO.
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> It warn't no soldier at all, one of the enlisted men said without inflection.—That ain't nothing but a goddamned caydet. He warn's but a kid. . . . a litle boy.
>
> He was right. And afterward, as the Americans marched into the city, a captured Mexican captain told them the rest. Told them how, in the closing days, the commandant of the military academy had given leave to the boys, had tried to scatter them to their homes before the retreating army fell back on the city and the fortress.
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> But it had failed, the captain told them. Before the commandant had even joined the advance guard of the army to take part in the hopeless bloody defense he had tried to spare the boys, they had met and reorganized into a battalion and had been told to fortify Chapultepec. And there, high above the City of Mexico, protecting their capital, they had stayed.
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> —*Los niños heroicos,* the captain whispered. . . .

One of the Southerners said, "I'm remembering the kids." And the other replied:

> That's where I was taking you. Back to those kids we slaughtered for less reason than a man would kill a cur. Back to the men who were traitors because the war pushed 'em too far and they didn't have the sand for it. If we'd stayed home, them kids would be men today—and them traitors, not meeting a situation they couldn't face, would have farmed or kept store or loafed away their lives instead of lying in unmarked graves with a length of army hemp around their necks. It was rotten all the way, and yet you and me stayed and did what we like to call—still twenty years later *have* to call—our duty. . . .

Not many men can bear to think the way these men thought. But surely it is worse to deaden the capacity for such thinking. Only in a terrible age like the present do the events of history press the old Socratic questions upon us. They may all be put as—or hidden behind a single query: Does the truth lie in facts or in works of the imagination? What sort of society would honor above all the irreducible vision of the mind and heart? What sort of "order" might such a society create?

REVIEW
AN EMERGING THEME

WHEN, from a stack of new books—as well as from passages in magazine articles that are current reading—one idea, or a cluster of closely related ideas, keeps on sounding its meaning, the paramount obligation of the reviewer may be to give that idea attention, even if this means not doing justice to these several works, one by one. Better than formal definition of the idea would be an example, and the example we have to begin with is from a small booklet, *What Is Man?* (Golgonooza Press, 3 Cambridge Drive, Ipswich, England, 1980) by Kathleen Raine. In this brief essay on education, the writer says:

> Western materialism is an unprecedented departure from human culture, as it has existed and developed from the stone-age to the present time. From the oldest examples of human art we see humankind seeking to express ideas, to discover a mental order; to explore our inner worlds in terms of pantheons of "gods" who personify the qualities of human consciousness, our moods and modes of experience. From the earliest known human records we see humankind creating abstract patterns and forms not found in nature; gods of strange unnatural aspect—the more unnatural the more profoundly "human." Modern Amazonian savages asked Levi-Strauss, that civilized Frenchman, why he and his kind did not paint their faces with abstract patterns in order (like the Amazonians) to affirm their humanity, their difference from the animals around them. They knew what Western anthropologists would seem to have forgotten, that to be human, is, precisely, to live our myths, to live according to an inner law which is, in terms of natural law, unnatural.

It becomes plain that for Miss Raine, "unnatural" means unearthly, yet still an order.

> All the great religious traditions have been attempts to cultivate the human soul. Our materialist civilization has concerned itself with the well-being of the naked apes, with food and shelter and the learning of the skills necessary to the survival of the body; but any attempt to bring order to inner worlds, to nourish the specifically human, has gone by default. Not altogether so, of course, for the past is still powerful and two thousand years of Christendom and all the wisdom of the Greek and Hebrew traditions before that are still with us; or at least with the educated sections of society, who are less at the mercy of current ideologies. . . .
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> Let me remind you that we are still considering the question "What Is Man?" I have suggested that man is, in truth, not a moral worm but a spiritual being, immaterial, immeasurable, who is never born and never dies, because spirit is not bounded or contained within the categories of time and space, of duration and extension. In this sense, we are immortal, eternal, boundless within our own universe. Yet of the kingdom that is truly ours, specifically human, we have realized very little.

Kathleen Raine's essay is a cry for knowing ourselves at first hand:

> This rediscovery, re-learning, is a long hard task—a lifelong task for those who undertake it; yet the most rewarding of all tasks, since it is a work of self-discovery which is at the same time a universal knowledge, "knowledge absolute" as the Vedas claim. So-called "creativity" and "self-expression" will not get us very far. The Grecian goldsmith, the Gothic sculptor, the painter of churches or elaborator of Islamic geometric patterns in a mosque were none of them "expressing themselves" in the modern sense of the term, far less breaking with the past, or being "revolutionary." They were making use of the shared knowledge of a spiritual tradition that illuminates their work, as it illuminated the inner lives of those who participated in its unity of culture.

Kathleen Raine writes as a philosophic scholar, one who has done much to restore our recognition of the transcendental tradition—especially that of the Neoplatonists—underlying the structure of the arts and sciences in the West, with William Blake as a major inspiration.

The dual meaning of work has much to teach us all, and this is the theme of *A Way of Working* (Anchor, $3.50), edited by D. M. Dooling. One contributor, Jean Kinkead Martine, writes of the Middle Ages:

> However distracted the cathedral builders must have been, upon occasion, from the spiritual aspect of their work (for surely illness, family problems, all the continuing vagaries of the human condition beset these men as they do us), their inner hunger must have been fed by their way of working, a way indicated by their priests and guild masters who constantly reminded them that they were in the service of something higher, that their work was their means of serving and not an end in itself.
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> With what heart they must have worked then, entrusting themselves to this higher authority!—this same "heart," perhaps, that set the golden harp (surely a symbol of joy in work) side by side with the tools of gold that were unearthed by archaeologists in the Sumerian city of

Ur. The dweller in the golden age or an age of faith seems to have understood that he was living a double kind of life, one in the visible world and one in the invisible. Traditional man was apparently taught from infancy that all he manifested in his everyday living vibrated invisibly in another dimension and that it was his voluntary attempts to participate in his hidden dimension that set him apart from other living creatures—that made him, in fact, a transformer, a Man.

But today where are such teachers? Where are our priests? Our wise men? I try now to imagine what it would be like to be a member of a guild; to be an apprentice in a workshop at the head of which was a master in the original sense of the word; a man whose craft was truly his own, in his hands and heart and in his bones; a man who could impart the inner as well as the outer element of this craft to those working under him, not just by words and example, but by his very presence.

What I constantly forget is that I always have my place. It is here exactly where I am. Where else could it be? Here is this life that is uniquely mine, one whole unit of creation that is entirely my place and my responsibility.

I feel a great desire not to lose touch with this feeling-thought that is with me this morning. I have felt it before: a wishing for something more for myself or from myself. Is there a master in me to whom I can turn, if—like people in fairy tales—I can wish hard enough? I don't know, but something I have read comes alive for me now: "Wood and stone will teach me what cannot be heard from the master's teaching."

I have no wood or stone, but I have my job; that is my reality for now. "To take what there is and use it," Henry James wrote many years ago, "without waiting forever in vain for the preconceived—-to dig deep into the actual and get something out of *that*—this doubtless is the right way to live."

The idea we spoke of at the beginning is really more of mood than a "concept," it is a way of thinking, of looking up.

Next we have an extract from the back of No. 6 of *The Journal of the New Alchemists*, something by Sava Morgan, a teacher of painting. The New Alchemy project on Cape Cod is a splendid illustration of how the counterpoint of working/thinking is carried on, both deliberately and spontaneously. The idea is to live on and with the earth without diminishing it, and to show how this may be done. Inner and outer work go on at the same time, the one fertilizing and directing the other, and the other supporting and enriching the mind. Culture and cultivation become one. Answering a question about early childhood, Sava Morgan said:

The ability to view each experience in a unified sense is one of the most important aspects of the mytho-poetic stage of childhood. It is in this stage that children still perceive a story as a story, a holistic image, not as a series of paragraphs, sentences, dictionary words or letters. Reading stories in order to learn words and grammar and to spell removes the children from the content and meaning of the story. In promoting forms of linear thinking, such as spelling or counting, among children of this age, we destroy their potential for unifying each experience through their own connections. . . . In our haste to groom children for adulthood, we deprive them of a rich inner life at a time when it is ripe for development. We promote stereotypes. I don't deny that historically linear thinking has been and is of tremendous importance but I do think that the skill can be taught too early in children's lives.

In the mytho-poetic stage, the integration of one process with another occurs not through logical analysis but through artistic metaphor. Children may project the emotions they feel at a given moment on an animal or object they identify their experiences with an external world. Their realities are composed of passing series of experiences and feelings related, connected, to them. This is how they perceive their world as unified. If I understand morality as an interdependence of the entire world, then the mytho-poetic stage forms a basis of feeling for ethics.

Well, we have made three samplings of the kind of reading available these days, and our pile of books, mentioned at the beginning, has hardly been reduced. The point of the "idea" is that these writers have changed their thinking and feeling about both the world and themselves, and now, in their writing, they are changing the "information environment" for their readers—which is a way of speaking of what used to be called the "world view." The ranges of what we think and feel as human beings—which reaches sublime heights as well as bottomless depths—are gradually being made the primary reality for conscious decision. Eventually, this mode of thinking will be the means of transforming the world. The "teachers" Jean Martine wonders about may not be many, but they can be found.

COMMENTARY
WHY WAR?

IN this week's lead article (page 2), it is asked if science is able to throw light on the moral issues of war—on how war affects individuals, and the bearing that those effects should have on policy decisions. The answer to this question is yes, science does help with such questions, if by science we mean the sort of impartial light that may be given by historians.

In *The Coming of the Civil War* (Scribner's 1942), Avery Craven says in his Preface:

> It is not easy to write the story of the coming of the American Civil War. The three decades of bitter sectional strife which preceded open warfare left little in the way of historical material that was free from bias and distortion. The propaganda of the war days still further damaged truth. It gave official sanction to the wildest assertions of pre-war extremists and completed the false impressions which each section had been slowly forming of its rival. Then men could kill their fellow countrymen with clear consciences. The hating and romancing of post-war times did almost as much damage. The prerogatives of the victor at the North and the certainty of superhuman effort against great odds at the South, justified continued sectional pride and prompted elaborate defenses of the attitudes and actions which had been taken during the recent war: A Northern interpretation of the causes of the Civil War and a Southern interpretation of the struggle quickly developed. The Southern "point of view" served only by local needs; the Northern explanation of events, as evolved by Von Holst, Schouler and McMaster, became the orthodox history of the period. Textbooks followed their interpretation and gradually even the South itself accepted them as "sound" and "unbiased." What Jefferson Davis had said would constitute the South's most serious loss became a reality; the victor was writing the history of the War for future generations.
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> In recent years scholars have returned to a study of the Civil War as scientists and not as partisans. They have come to view the struggle as a national disaster. They have lost respect for simple explanations of the growth of sectional consciousness and sectional hatreds. Economic and social forces as well as political ones have been considered and the effort to fix blame has yielded to a desire to know why Americans only two generations away from the formation of their Union should have held positions so uncompromisable that only a war could alter them.

How is this kind of understanding of war—very nearly all wars—to be communicated to the people at large? This is a question for historians to answer. There was a time when scholars spent their time, not in libraries, but wandering around their country, singing their epics, and sometimes a poetic distillation of wisdom, to the people. Can that time be made to come again?

The people they would need to reach might be typified by the Confederate rifleman described by Craven at the beginning of his book:

> When Lee surrendered at Appomatox, a tall, gaunt North Carolinian stolidly stacked arms and fell back into line. . . . He had gone on fighting more from habit than purpose. He had quit because the orders were to that effect. Suddenly, with a sharp realization of what was taking place all around him, he turned to his neighbor and drawled: "Damn me if I ever love another country."

What should a historian, or a wandering minstrel, say to such a man?

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

LEARNING IS THE RESULT OF . . .

ONCE again we have evidence that if civilization is worth saving—and it is, of course, since we live in it—then only the mavericks are able to do the job. The evidence this time is a Plowboy Interview with John Holt in *Mother Earth News* for July/August. John Holt is the man who plowed his way to widespread attention among parents with *How Children Fail*, a book based on personal observation which came out in 1964. Holt is no longer trying to reform the schools. He is devoting his energy to encouraging people—parents—to teach their children at home: not the people who won't or can't, but those who can and will. He believes that this is best for the children and will also prove good for the schools.

Holt is a maverick because his thinking is wholly his own. No institution shaped his mind and opinions. At the beginning of the interview Plowboy asked him where he went to school:

> Holt: I won't answer that question.
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> Plowboy: You won't? Did I say something wrong?
>
> Holt: No, but I've come to believe that people's education is as much their private business as is their religion or politics. Let me just say that most of what I know I didn't learn in school, *or* in what people call "learning situations." I don't owe anything to formal education for my love of language, reading, and music. I had those interests before I went to school, I lost a lot of them *in* such institutions, and I've managed to get them back since.
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> Plowboy: . . . You lost your love for learning *while* you were attending school?
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> Holt: That's right. Take reading, for instance. I taught myself to read when I was four or five years old . . . even though hardly anybody read aloud to me. I just looked at all the signs on the streets of Manhattan's East Side, where we were living . . . until, one day, I noticed a store that always had shirts in its windows and realized that the letters over that shop must have spelled "laundry"!
>
> That was the first word I taught myself to recognize. I don't remember what the second word was, but I do recall that I liked to read, so I read lots of books that were too hard for me . . . which is the only way anybody gets to be a good reader. I even finished all of *The Three Musketeers* and other classic books of Alexandre Dumas—long, long books—in a single summer when I was about ten.
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> Plowboy: You must have been a good classroom student.
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> Holt: Well, I knew how to "Play the Game," so I never had any difficulty with school. But I got bored with it as I got older, and—by the time I reached high school—I wouldn't read a book unless it had been assigned. I didn't start reading again until eight or nine years after I got out of the Navy.
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> Plowboy: How could going to *school* have changed you so much?
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> Holt: That's easy to figure out. It's a well-established principle that if you take somebody who's doing something for her or his own pleasure and offer some kind of outside reward for doing it—*and* let the person become accustomed to performing the task *for* that reward—then take the reward away, the individual will stop that activity. You can even train nursery school youngsters who love to draw pictures to *stop* drawing them, simply by giving them gold stars or some other little bonus for a couple of months . . . and then removing that artificial "motivation."
>
> In fact, I think our society *expects* schools to get students to the point where they do things only for outside rewards. People who perform tasks for *their* internal reasons are hard to control. Now, I don't think that teachers get up in the morning and say to themselves, "I'm going to go to school today and take away all those young people's internal motivations" . . . but that's exactly what often happens.

The fragments of Holt's biography included in this interview seem especially valuable to the reader. One gets the impression that he, like a great many of the rest of us, grew up with the idea that we live in a great country where we do everything right, and then, after some first-hand experience, began to realize that we are doing a great many things—some of crucial importance—wrong. Schooling is one of the important things.

> Plowboy: So you decided that reforming public schools was an impossibility. What did you do next?

> Holt: I began advising people who were dissatisfied with traditional education to leave the public system and start their own educational centers. But the almost infinite hassles of forming and running a full-fledged school—and especially the necessary and never-ending search for funds—killed most such efforts.
>
> Finally, I realized that a parent whose objective was to establish a decent learning situation for her or his child might avoid all the fights and struggles involved in trying to reform the public school—*or* to start one from scratch—by moving *directly* to the objective. How? Just teach the child at home.

Holt thinks about 10,000 families in the country are attempting this. He says:

> I'm not expecting large numbers right away. After all, when you're blazing a trail, you're necessarily going to attract small numbers of people . . . but the more folks who walk a trail, the easier the path becomes to negotiate. For now, I'm hoping that in three years school districts will start seeing that they should cooperate with the home schoolers so that we can move out of the "combat phase" that we're in now. . . . The truth is the home-schooling movement is good for the schools. We provide, among other things, extremely important educational research. Besides that, if—in the long run-—schools are going to have a future, they will eventually have to function as learning and activity centers which more and more people come to voluntarily. . . . And I'd like to emphasize one last point very strongly. People, if you're smart enough to build your own home, design your own solar system, make your own fuel, redesign your car, raise your own food, and do all the things that many *Mother*-readers are doing . . . then you sure as hell are smart enough to teach your own children!

A Plowboy question drew this reply from Holt:

> I think that learning is *not* the result of teaching, but of the curiosity and activity of the learner. A teacher's intervention in this process should be mostly to provide the learner with access to the various kinds of places, people, experiences, tools, and books that will correspond with that student's interests . . . answer questions when they're asked . . . and demonstrate physical skills.
>
> I also feel that learning is *not* an activity that's separate from the rest of life. People learn best when they're involved in doing real and valuable work, which requires skill and judgment. These concepts are . . . mirrored in my magazine, *Growing Without Schooling. . . .*

For information about this paper and Holt's books, write him at 308 Boylston Street, Boston, Mass. 02116.

FRONTIERS

Small Is Workable

THE gap between the individual and society is almost certainly the only real frontier we need to recognize and understand, but it is apparently too wide for present comprehension, with the result that we define our difficulties in terms of existing social arrangements. This seems natural and inevitable, but as a method of preparing for change it may leave out what actually needs to be done. We want our "rights" back, but rights may be no more than two-dimensional reflections of responsibilities fulfilled, and having them might mean not thinking about them at all. A simpler society would help us to realize this, and then we could get on with more fundamental reforms in ourselves. Meanwhile, we devote much attention and energy to the need for simplicity, making that the frontier.

What has taken away our simplicity of life? If you read the social critics of the time you know that one answer is big government; and if you ask why we developed big government you will learn that the complexities of industry and advanced technology, along with the power that accompanies "progress," have made bigness inevitable. What's wrong with bigness? Its inaccessibility and its uncontrollable momentum in directions that are manifestly senseless.

Why don't we do something about all this? Because we can't. As Kirkpatrick Sale put it in the *Nation* for May 31:

> The simple fact is that in a system as large as ours it is essential that the individual *not* have a regular voice in political affairs. To allow each of 220 million people or even the 150 million over 18, to participate in politics in a serious way would simply be too unwieldy, too chaotic, not even the wildest of technofix schemes of telephone voting and computer tallying could solve the sheer logistical problems if every person were to behave as, for example, the Greek citizen of Periclean Athens, demanding to know the issues of the day, judging them, debating them, determining which were capable of being effected and when and how and by whom.

Athenian democracy was obviously better than ours. If an Athenian citizen voted for war he went home and sharpened his spear. He did the voting and he would do the fighting. Decisions were fewer, and they were clearer. For similar reasons Emerson declared that the New England town meeting was the schoolhouse of democracy.

Well, fine, but the Athenians made a mess of their city-state affairs. They exploited their neighbors abroad and executed Socrates at home for telling them some home truths. And the town meeting lost out in public interest to national politics. Even if we could get those simple, manageable institutions back, what's to prevent our "outgrowing" them again? Nothing much, except that, having another chance, we might do better this time. And we might learn something from the long struggle involved in getting them back, which would mean deliberately cutting our political operations back to a human scale. Richard Goodwin said in *The American Condition* that people give only small fragments of themselves to political decision and action, and that seems about right. We need a society in which that much attention to politics is enough.

But is it even possible, now, to simplify our lives? It is always possible to simplify, *within limits*. Whatever we do is always within limits, and after a few steps in simplifying directions you become able to see how the limits can be extended. In practically every case, taking on once delegated responsibilities is involved. Accepting responsibility has to be a natural habit before we are able to see clearly what to do next.

What "few steps" might make a way to begin? The best answer we know of to this question is found in *Decentralism: Where It Came From, Where Is It Going?* by Mildred Loomis, published by the School of Living Press, RD 7, York, Pa. 17402. This author has been simplifying and accepting responsibility for the whole of her long life. She writes about the activities of that life and what various others have accomplished on the land and in home and community. There's some

theory—enough—but mostly the book is about the restoration of natural life by people who embraced as much responsibility for it as they were able.

First comes Mildred Loomis's own work and collaboration with Ralph Borsodi and the story of the School of Living, where, sooner or later, practically everybody worth mentioning turned up and found inspiration—J. I. Rodale, for example, who later began publishing Prevention and Organic Gardening. There are chapters on Henry George, Arthur Morgan, the Co-ops, Peter Van Dresser, Ken Kern, Robert Swann, and notes on dozens of others whose work, because of its tangible value, has had noticeable impact on countless people. The book has this conclusion:

> Decentralists are making progress in their essential American, fourth Revolution. Any daily newspaper tells why decentralism is so necessary.
>
> Although Americans live longer, have more wealth and education than at any time during the century, America ranks first in the world in murder; violent crime against people and property tripled in the last 15 years. The annual rate of divorce and annulment has more than doubled. Although Americans spend more time in school, the practical knowledge of educated persons has declined. Less than half can complete income-tax and insurance forms without help.
>
> To those who claim "there is not enough time left" to allow non-violent persuasive forces to win, the answer comes: "in employing decentralist forces we create stability and *extend* our time." The choices are clear and increasingly persons are choosing decentralist alternatives.

The rejection of bigness, especially big government, is already in the air. Kirkpatrick Sale began his *Nation* article by reporting on the increasing failure of Americans to vote, which is the only function as citizens left to them. And many of those who vote do it almost as a reflex, with little conviction. People are tired of politics they can't understand. He concludes:

> Inchoate, to be sure, unexpressed except by a few, this sentiment is nonetheless found today in a thousand guises. It penetrates issues as diverse as laetrile and the metric system, nuclear power and Proposition 13. It lies behind the antitax revolt and the commune movement, the ecology and alternative-technology movements, the campaigns for neighborhood and small-town revitalization, the growing attachments to holistic health, natural foods and organic gardening. It has been the bedrock source of the civil rights and antiwar movements, it energizes every drive for local control and community development and decentralized government today, and when it collides head-on with all the old rubrics of "government of the people," it produces the widespread cynicism, apathy and bewilderment that the pollsters have found endemic in the nation.
>
> It is this that may ultimately point the way to a human-scale polity. I do not mean to suggest that it is around the corner or necessarily inevitable. But I do think it is possible to perceive everywhere the strength of the new localism at work—not just in this country, I should point out, but around the world—a new insistence on the values and potentials of one's own region, one's own ecosystem, one's own culture and traditions.

How do such changes actually come into being? Mildred Loomis's book provides many examples.