

## LINE AND CIRCLE

WHEN a great wave breaks on the sandy incline of a shore, all that marshalled strength shatters into countless foamy fragments. The wave has lost its familiar, undulating unity, returning to the sea, which is itself. The watcher knows with certainty only that another wave will come. The process is eternal. There will be a difference—no wave is exactly like another—but that wave will follow wave is a kind of absolute knowledge, archetypal of the cyclic aspect of human experience.

The image of the breaking wave suggests various parallels. Our lives have the metaphysical shape of successive waves of purpose. We may think of the moment when the wave breaks, when our intention reaches and loses its climactic expression, as becoming for humans a moment of self-discovery. The act has been lost in a sea of future potentiality. Its motive is spent, setting the stage for an interval of reflection. What does one think when the bonds of purpose are loosened? To what end does one raise one's head and look around?

Whitman sought those moments out and celebrated them. They were avenues to his castles in the sky, his mansions of Platonic reverie. Whitman, you could say, was an activist in the pursuit of resultless thinking. He turned the idiom of action to the service of a reflective repose. He wrote to a friend:

You know it is a never ending amusement and study and recreation for me to ride a couple of hours on a Broadway stage. . . . You see everything as you pass, a sort of living, endless panorama—shops and splendid buildings and great windows: on the broad sidewalks crowds of women richly dressed continually passing, altogether different, superior in style and looks from any to be seen anywhere else—in fact a perfect stream of people—men too dressed in high style, and plenty of foreigners—and then in the streets the thick crowd of carriages, stages, carts, hotel and private coaches, and in fact all sorts of vehicles and many first class teams, mile

after mile, and the splendor of such a great street and so many tall, ornamental, noble buildings many of them of white marble, and the gayety and motion on every side: you will not wonder how much attraction all this is on a fine day, to a great loafer like me, who enjoys so much seeing the busy world move by him, and exhibiting itself for his amusement, while he takes it easy and just looks on and observes.

This was published in 1897. A year or two later William James, to whom the implications of the breaking wave were not unknown, read Whitman's letter and made this comment:

Truly a futile way of passing the time, some of you may say, and not altogether creditable to a grown-up man. And yet, from the deepest point of view, who knows more of the truth, and who knows the less,—Whitman on his omnibus-top, full of the inner joy with which the spectacle inspires him, or you, full of the disdain which the futility of his occupation excites?

Here, in this case a companion of Whitman's apparently aimless circlings, James is writing about "A Certain Blindness in Human Beings." He doesn't agree that Whitman's joyful spectatorship is an exercise in futility. He has his own way of agreeing with the poet. At the end of his little book (*On Some of Life's Ideals*), James speaks of the conflict between capital and labor then troubling the country. He found the issues, charges, and counter-charges beside the point of the values he had been attempting to bring to visibility. Each of the contestants, he said, "ignores the fact that happiness and significance are a vital mystery; each pins them absolutely on some ridiculous feature of the external situation; and everybody remains outside of everybody else's sight."

Is James saying that the struggle for economic justice has no meaning? Not at all; but he is saying that the explicit issues of controversy seldom touch the substance of human longing; that no matter how strong the momentum of the forces contending for external change, the wave

will break and the protagonists will be obliged to wonder what, if anything, has been gained. Other questions of this sort seem implicit in Lillian Smith's introductory essay to James Peck's book, *Freedom Ride* (1962), which suggests that there was only a contrapuntal relationship between the demonstrations in the South and the feelings and longings which precipitated them. The events of the confrontation, Miss Smith says, are but tokens of what is in the hearts of the demonstrators:

They are acting this out: human beings are on this earth for an unknown purpose; hence every one is important and in a sense holy, for there is something we call "human relations" which must be created and re-created again and again in new patterns, and who knows which of the three billion earth children is needed for a special point in the intricate design?

Their acts are saying this: dehumanization will cease only when we learn to believe that we have no inalienable right to a proof or an answer; the time has come when we must acknowledge that small answers won't do, the North's and the South's and the world's answers must be brushed away so that the questions, Who am I? What is death? Who is God? can be heard again. We are men; and as men we must declare our right to move freely in our search for meaning; we have a God-given right to be and to become. Sitting at lunch counters, riding the buses are symbolic rights. They are small, but we need to claim them, not because they are enough or because we really want them, but because an unclaimed human right bars a man in his search for significance.

James would certainly agree. And he would agree that the "small answers"—the achieved compromises, the contracts secured by a strike, the laggard alterations in habit and custom—are not the real issues of human striving:

Society has, with all this, undoubtedly got to pass toward some newer and better equilibrium, and the distribution of wealth has doubtless slowly got to change: such changes have always happened, and will happen to the end of time. But if, after all that I have said, any of you expect that they will make any *genuine vital difference* on a large scale, to the lives of our descendants, you will have missed the significance of my entire lecture. The solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing,—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's

pains. —And, whatever or wherever life may be, there will always be the chance for that marriage to take place.

And then he says:

In this solid and tridimensional sense, so to call it, those philosophers are right who contend that the world is a standing thing, with no progress, no real history. The changing conditions of history touch only the surface of the show. The altered equilibriums and redistributions only diversify our opportunities and open chances for new ideals. But, with each new ideal that comes into life, the chance for a life based on some old ideal will vanish, and he would be a presumptuous calculator who should with confidence say that the total sum of significances is positively and absolutely greater at any one epoch than at any other of the world.

James's conclusion, converted into a "small answer," declares the verdict of tiresome monotony. If there is "no progress, no real history," how pointless are our strivings! But he will not have it so. He ends by saying:

*There are compensations:* and no outward changes of condition in life can keep the nightingale of its eternal meaning from singing in all sorts of different men's hearts.

Walt Whitman, William James, and Lillian Smith, these three seem to have one thing in common—the capacity to hear the nightingale's song. They are not distracted by third-act climaxes or emotionally deluded by happy endings. They have in common something else—a richness of mind. The capacity to distill experience, to extract from it a Jamesian harvest, is not acquired save by some sort of Promethean descent into the grain of life. The melody of the nightingale has its pitch and modulations from unearthly themes. It is a sound which persists above the tumult of time—unchanging when the wave is a rising undulation, unchanging when it crouches, springs, and roars defiance as it breaks, and continuing as unmistakably when the wave falls in a thousand spattered clots to disappear in swirling mergers with the sea. Whitman must have heard its overtones when crossing the East River on a ferry:

Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry  
with the swift current, I stood, yet was hurried;  
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships,

and the thick-stemmed pipes of steamboats, I looked.  
 I too many and many a time cross'd the river,  
 the sun half an hour high;  
 I watched the twelfth-month sea-gulls—I saw  
 them high in the air, with motionless wings,  
 oscillating their bodies,  
 I saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their  
 bodies,  
 and left the rest in strong shadow,  
 I saw the slow-wheeling circles, and the gradual  
 edging toward the south.  
 Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the  
 ships at anchor,  
 The sailors at work in the rigging, or out astride  
 the spars;  
 The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups,  
 the frolicsome crests and glistening;  
 The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the  
 gray walls of the granite store-houses by the docks;  
 On the neighboring shores, the fires from the foundry  
 chimneys burning high . . . into the night,  
 Casting their flicker of black . . . into the clefts  
 of streets.  
 These, and all else, were to me the same as they are  
 to you.

Wherever Whitman looked, he saw the endless differences, precise diversity that would overwhelm a lesser poet's senses, in all that sameness. Why, one wonders, was it for him so wonderful and good?

He seemed to discover a realm of intermediate reality between the bawling confusion of our world and the majestic serenity of Plato's place of ideal perfections, where there is neither change nor impulse to change. How could a poet discern the unseen excellences of the world of action without some secret access to this other world of perfected Forms?

The mind of such a man is a migrating equilibrium, the resolver of opposites, the tuner of dissonance and din. All that persists for him is the lengthening of the radius of meaning. What is the measure of the achievement of such a man? Why do we remember him, speak of him fondly, introduce our children to him? Because he gave the world master works of the imagination.

It is a matter of great interest that when we wish to minimize the importance of something

claimed or reported, we say: "You imagined it," or "It's just imagination." But actually this puts the matter backwards. What has not been imagined has no reality at all. The key to knowledge of reality lies in the capacity to imagine. The to us inaccessible ideal world is always an imagined world. It becomes real for humans in direct proportion to their powers of imagination. Through works of the mind the ideal world intersects with our world. We suppose our world to be the real world, the other only "imaginary," yet our world gains its definable substance from the world of the imagination. In *Men and Nations* (1962), Louis J. Halle shows this to be the case with illustrations from geometry:

We accept the straight line as a concept of perfection that exists only in the imagination. We assume that the mark on the paper represents an attempt to imitate it with necessarily imperfect results. . . . The straight line, as we have defined it, presents itself to our minds as an elemental concept in nature, while the shape that corresponds exactly to the mark on the paper has no such standing. Everyone entertains the concept of a straight line; but that is not true of the putative concept of such a peculiar shape, which my mind could not hold to begin with. . . . The one fits a universal pattern in our minds while the other does not. Therefore, when we look at the mark on the paper, what it evokes is the concept, not of a shape to which it corresponds exactly, but rather of a straight line, to which it does not correspond exactly.

Again, a circle exists in our minds as a natural concept. If, now we are shown an object that has the shape of a circle except that its rim has been dented, that object will suggest the concept of a circle to us, and the deviation from circularity will present itself to our minds as an imperfection. The material object represents the concept of a circle imperfectly, rather than some other concept (that of its actual shape) perfectly.

What, in these examples of line and circle, is the basis of the distinction that impresses itself upon us between the true and the false claims to status as an elemental concept or idea?

The true concept has that regularity which makes it susceptible of expression in terms of simple formula-definition. It represents a logic. The false lacks this quality. It represents no logic. There is no such formula to describe the exact shape of the mark which suggests a straight line as I found to describe a straight line itself, because it lacks regularity. It has features that do not

occur according to any principle of logic. I can define a circle as a line extending in one plane and everywhere equidistant from a fixed point. But the distorted circle of my example, lacking regularity, is not susceptible of such definition.

I conclude that we have in our minds, as a matter of nature, a pattern of logical order that finds its expression in certain elemental concepts. When we look at the concrete world we do so in terms of this pattern. We look for correspondences to it, and what we find, at best, are only approximations, correspondences that are more or less imperfect. Finding them, our vision strains to see in them the correspondences for which we are looking. It strains to correct the disorder, to assimilate it to the pattern of the ideal order which exists as a fact of nature in our minds.

Geometry is a handy way of getting at the realities of the way we think, but the method has limitations, as Mr. Halle is aware. Lines and circles are unambiguous. Their definition is not disputed. But when it comes to other ideal forms—the ideal form of human society, for one—the disputes are endless. Yet our method of conceiving them is the same. It is the mode of realizing them that is at issue.

The arts—so resultless, so ineffectual, so void of practical effect—are among the best illustrations we have of the difference between the ideal world and our own. The arts, unlike other undertakings, are capable of no constraint. They have no program, no "constitutional order" to install. "Never in the history of the world," Maxwell Anderson declared, "has poetry of any excellence thrown its weight toward the practical or scientific reorganization of the affairs of men." Yet poets, Shelley said, are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." They have their effect by intimation and utopian vision. And the philosophers are similarly indirect, never demanding that the order of the other world be forcibly imposed on this one. In the ninth book of the *Republic*, Plato gave away the secret of the philosopher's calling, which is not to enforce an ideal order, but to practice it himself, no matter what. The philosopher, Socrates said, will conduct himself by the rules of the ideal city, which "can be found nowhere on earth," assuring

his hearers only that "there is a pattern of it laid up in heaven for him who wishes to contemplate it and so beholding to constitute himself its citizen." And he must be careful, the old Athenian warned, to "shun those that may overthrow the established habit of his soul."

The philosophers all agree that the order of the ideal world is never imposed by constraint. It can exist only by free assent. As one (Lao tse) who had access to it has said:

It is the Way of Heaven not to strive, and yet it knows how to overcome; not to speak, and yet it knows how to obtain a response; it calls not, and things come of themselves it is slow to move, but excellent in its designs.

A reverse order prevails in our world:

When the Great Tao falls into disuse, benevolence and righteousness come into vogue. When shrewdness and sagacity appear, great hypocrisy prevails. It is when the bonds of kinship are out of joint that filial piety and paternal affection begin. It is when the State is in a ferment of revolution that loyal patriots arise. . . .

The sage has no hard and fast ideas, but he shares the ideas of the people and makes them his own. Living in the world, he is apprehensive lest his heart be sullied by contact with the world. . . .

I have heard that he who possesses the secret of life, when travelling abroad, will not flee from rhinoceros or tiger; when entering a hostile camp, he will not equip himself with sword or buckler. The rhinoceros finds in him no place to insert his horn; the tiger has nowhere to fasten its claw; the soldier has nowhere to thrust his blade. And why? Because he has no spot where death can enter.

Are there, perhaps, reciprocal relations between the ideal world and this one? We are able to think and work in our world because we are able to borrow the conceptual means of doing so from the other. But as James said, there is no real "progress" here. The progress, we may imagine, will not be evident until the ideal world obtains deeper and wider dimensions by the peaceable conquest of this one.

## *REVIEW*

### THE RICHES OF NECESSITY

MOST people, when they have questions or problems, turn to someone else for answers or help. Arthur Morgan directed his questions to himself and to nature, seeking replies that would need no further confirmation. In a talk he gave on his ninetieth birthday (in 1968) he spoke of the questions that seemed to him important, telling how he was led to ask them:

In my own case, asking specific questions was not a wholly voluntary occurrence. It was forced on me by circumstance. When very young I had an attack of cerebral meningitis which was protracted and very nearly fatal. My mother told me that, when I seemed to be dying, she hoped it would come quickly and be over with. As a result of that illness my bodily conditions seemed disturbed, and recovery did not come quickly. Often I asked myself, under these circumstances, what is the use of trying?

In various ways I sought for encouragement. I mutilated plants in our garden, and watched to see what capacity for recovery they might have.

One incident was of considerable interest. The "Sermon on the Mount" caught my attention. There seemed to be a suggestion of great possibility that a man might have some part in his own destiny. I read that many, many times. I could at least try, and the results could speak for themselves.

What happens to a person like that? Morgan did not make a great recovery. In the late 1890s, when he was close to twenty years old, he decided to go "on the road" and either toughen himself up physically or die trying. He worked as a laborer in mines and lumber camps, taking a few courses in schools and colleges when he had time, and he did toughen up some. He achieved the level of health it was possible for him to have and lived to be ninety-seven years old, actively working almost to the end.

The question of what happens to such a man is not of great consequence compared to another inquiry: What may such an individual accomplish with his life? This was the question Morgan asked

himself. Speaking of his boyhood and youth in St. Cloud, Minnesota, he said:

As I went about town I watched men and women to observe how fully they were realizing the potentialities of physical and mental well-being. In most cases, it seemed to me, they were far from meeting the full possibilities. If they should undertake to meet all of them, what wonderful men and women they would be. Was it possible that if I should make the most of possibilities, I might rise to the average actual condition of other men? I would do what I could, and find out.

The story of what Arthur Morgan was able to do is told by Walter Kahoe in *Arthur Morgan: A Biography and Memoir* (Whimsie Press, Box 166, Moylan, Pa. 19065, \$7.95), a book which becomes a special sort of history of a century of American life. It is history because the background of events in Morgan's life represents the vast changes that have taken place in the life of the nation and country. Morgan was personally involved in some of these changes, and he did what he could to turn them toward the common good. But it is also personal history—an account of how one man "coped" with the conditions and events of his time, and the extent to which he was able to influence those events. For Morgan, human life became a project in understanding what he called "Necessity"—the inevitable conditions and laws of life—using what he found out for the purposes he had adopted. In the essay we have been quoting (titled "Necessity"), he said toward the end:

I have nearly run my course. I live in the future—the future of mankind, and of all life. I do not look forward to personal immortality. I see the person I call me as not a separate unit of life. To me it is a thread in the fabric of life a moment in the course of being. I have had a chance to participate as a moment in that course of being. My immortality is in the continuity and the quality of that being. Day by day I live and have my joy, as part of mankind.

It may be difficult to believe that a man whose life spanned three quarters of the twentieth century was able to say things like this without being or sounding pretentious. Morgan wasn't in

the least pretentious. Nor can he be called a moralist. This sort of thinking was simply natural to him; it guided all that he did. And when speaking of his "philosophy," he could not write or talk in any other way. There is an austere dignity in his ideas which, through the years, has been a quiet and sustaining inspiration to others who have corresponding feelings, yet are shy to express them in a world so alien to their spirit.

Morgan's life had three major aspects. He is perhaps best known as the nation's leading flood control engineer. In 1933 President Roosevelt chose him to head the Tennessee Valley Authority, the story of which may be found in Morgan's book, *The Making of TVA* (Prometheus Books, 1975). He was equally eminent in educational achievement, by reason of his resuscitation and reorganization of Antioch College in the early 1920s. The third area of accomplishment was his lifelong devotion to the idea of Community. This grew out of his interest in the shaping of human character. His concern with education, evident in boyhood, led him to regard every aspect of the environment as a factor affecting the growth and development of the young. By midlife he had decided that what the sociologists call the "face-to-face community" is the most important influence of all. When his responsibilities with TVA ended he established in Yellow Springs, Ohio, the organization known as Community Service, Inc., devoted to both the theory and the practice of healthful community life. Morgan's essential thinking on this subject was embodied in an article he wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* (February, 1942), "The Community: The Seedbed of Society," in which he said:

Controlling factors of civilization are not art, business, science, government. These are its fruits. The roots of civilization are elemental traits—good will, neighborliness, fair play, courage, tolerance, open-minded inquiry, patience. A people rich in these qualities will develop a great civilization, with great art, science, industry, government. If the basic qualities fade, then, no matter how great the wealth,

how brilliant the learning, how polished the culture, that civilization will crumble. . . .

Only as such traits have opportunity to grow in the kindly, protective shelter of family and small community, where there is intimate acquaintance, and also mutual confidence, do they become vigorous and mature enough to survive. Unless supported by the surrounding community, the single family generally is too small a unit to maintain fine standards.

Morgan was sixty years old in 1938, when President Roosevelt relieved him of his responsibilities in the Tennessee Valley Authority. This allowed time to pursue other interests, although the subject which now occupied him was closely related to both education and community. He was drawn to study of the life of Edward Bellamy, author of the famous Utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, and in 1944 Columbia University Press published his life of Bellamy. Morgan regarded Bellamy as one of the few thinkers who gave adequate thought to large-scale cultural influences, and he concluded that Bellamy deserved to be called a "social engineer"—a man who understood the importance of social structure. After completing his life of Bellamy and a smaller work on his philosophy, Morgan turned naturally to intensive study of the great utopian writers of history. The question in his mind throughout these investigations remained the same: What are the ideal arrangements for the development of the indispensable human qualities he had listed in his *Atlantic Monthly* article? His book on Utopia, *Nowhere Was Somewhere* (Chapel Hill, 1946), was partly an answer to this question, and partly a demonstration that many of the features of the utopian classics were based on historical achievements in the distant past. Thomas More's *Utopia*, he showed, drew very largely on a traveler's reports of the social and political organization of the Inca Empire.

The diverse activities of Morgan's life, from the beginning of the century to a year or so before his death, are shown as making the unity of one man's character, in Mr. Kahoe's biography. Arthur Morgan's life, one realizes, grew into a

network of community influences. While the work he did in these several fields may seem subdivided, *he* was never subdivided. How should he be described or "summed up"? Words are pale substitutes for acts, but we are obliged to use them here: Vision, integrity, and an almost incredible persistence seem the right words to describe Arthur Morgan.

The integrity showed very early in his career. Morgan's notable success in drainage engineering, before he was thirty years old, attracted so much attention within the profession that in 1907 he was hired by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for the job of Supervising Drainage Engineer. (At this time, his biographer notes, "his practice as a drainage engineer was the largest in Minnesota.") His first assignment was to work on the desalinization of farm lands in the San Luis Valley in Colorado—a very difficult problem. He had hardly got into the project when word came from Washington that the allotment for this work was exhausted and he should go to Louisiana on another assignment. Morgan refused. He continued his research on desalinization in Colorado, staying there twice the time he had been given, then wrote his report, which was used as the basis for further work. In Louisiana, he did the same thing. The allotment was wholly inadequate to the wet lands reclamation project there, so, again, he remained on the job against explicit orders until he felt that plans for what should be done were sufficiently worked out. This behavior by a government engineer was unheard of, as Mr. Kahoe points out, but it had the long-term effect of placing Morgan among the most respected professionals in his field. He was a man who accomplished what he set out to do.

One extraordinary thing about Arthur Morgan's life was the way in which things "opened up" for him, despite the fact that he continually broke the conventional rules for getting ahead. From first to last, he stuck by his vision, his integrity, and his persistence. It is probably quite romantic to say that he won

mysterious collaboration from fortuitous events, but . . . well . . . read his life.

## *COMMENTARY* **WHAT WE SHOULD DO**

THE question asked by Arthur Morgan (see Review), "What is the use of trying?", keeps on emerging in relation after relation of human life. Morgan was discouraged by his persisting bodily ills, but he must have asked the same question about his efforts to bring about changes in the socio-moral structures of his time.

James wrestled with such discouragements by calling into question the whole idea of "progress." Whatever the external arrangements, he said, they won't make any real difference unless there is in individuals the union of "some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's pains." The *social* goals, in short, are meaningless unless they are ultimately realized in subjective terms.

Morgan seemed able to resolve his own sense of meaning by linking his idea of himself with the rest of life, as a "thread" in the fabric of the whole. And Lillian Smith declared that the "small answers"—the concrete social objectives—must give way to the larger inquiry: "Who am I? What is death?" The social goals are only "tokens," but, she added, "we need to claim them, not because they are enough or because we really want them, but because an unclaimed human right bars a man in his search for significance."

Morgan's final answer to the question, "What is the use of trying?", was: "I have had a chance to participate as a moment in that course of being. . . . Day by day I live and have my joy, as part of mankind."

For James, fulfillment meant hearing the nightingale of life's eternal meaning, "singing in all sorts of different men's hearts." He thought that the noise of struggle for definable goals made the voice of the bird hard to hear, and Lillian Smith believed that "small answers" are a distraction.

Bill McLarney, one of the founders of the New Alchemy Institute, has another way of speaking of fulfillment.

Well, I don't suppose any of us is fool enough to think that we can save the world. But if each of us were to look at some of the directions we'd like to see the world go in—and then put our own little bit of force behind one of them—and to have a hell of a good time while we're doing it, well then, that's what we should do.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves THE PROBLEM SOCIETY

THERE is surely a sense in which the greatest service to education would be to stop talking and writing so much about it. An implicit assumption of practically all such talk is that if there is something wrong with the schools and the treatment of the young, the situation can be remedied by changing what we do in the name of education. This assumption may be almost completely wrong. For helping to change what affects the young, the educational experts may be the most helpless people of all. And discussions of education by educators, unless they write as ordinary human beings, and not as "experts," may be the most futile of undertakings.

A British physician, Peter Lomas, said something along these lines about psychotherapy, which has close parallels to education. The kind of help a psychotherapist hopes to give, this doctor says, "depends more on being able to apply a realistic experience of ordinary living to the special situation of psychotherapy than any other factor." If he imagines otherwise, supposing his "technique" can "supplant or transcend the application of his ordinary experience, then the whole endeavor is threatened." Not that the background of a therapist in human troubles and struggles is without value; the point, rather, is that the use he makes of this specialized experience will depend upon his depth and quality as a human being. Dr. Lomas says:

It will be creative, sterile or destructive depending on the degree to which certain virtues enter into the relationship; and what is or is not a virtue is, of course, a question to which man has sought an answer since the beginning of history and for which there appears to be no foreseeable consensus of opinion. It is the eternal question: "How should a man live?" There are no definable, formal qualifications that enable one to answer this question, and therefore there are no definable formal qualifications that enable one to practice psychotherapy or even to define the aims of therapy. One can only give an opinion that certain human qualities and certain experiences are likely to be helpful.

Dr. Lomas hardly expects that an entire helping profession will dissolve itself because of this critical analysis, but he probably hopes that some of the practitioners in this field will find their own intuitions confirmed by what he says, and pursue their work with a little more insight and confidence as a result.

Many good teachers doubtless have similar feelings. Something further, however, needs to be said, since so much of what is wrong is not in the least their "fault." The fault lies in the "basic habits and resulting structures of modern society. In an article in the *New York Times* (Nov. 16, 1977) John L. McKnight pointed out that as the result of a technology which increasingly eliminates productive labor by humans, people are gravitating more and more to jobs in the "service" professions and activities:

Most of America's employed people never touch ingots, hogs or wheat. Instead, we are teachers, bankers, therapists, sales clerks, lawyers, consultants, motel-keepers, doctors, counselors, bureaucrats. Rather than making hard goods, two-thirds of us derive our income by producing those "soft" things called services.

For years social observers have declared this change in employment to be a sign of "progress." Having solved our production problems by machines and automation, they said, we are now free to devote ourselves to the better things of life. And they point to the growing number of people and social situations defined as greatly in need of "help." Summarizing, Mr. McKnight speaks of "family disarray, psychic malaise, educational failure, litigious conflict and underdeveloped human potential." The symptoms of social and cultural disorder can be seen everywhere. McKnight's point, however, is that in a society where machines do so much of the work, having enough jobs for people depends upon multiplying the "service" needs of the population, and this is conveniently arranged as a result of the built-in tendencies of a machine-dominated civilization. "Increasingly, our serving society depends upon young and old people who can be defined as problems rather than productive participants."

The writer draws this contrast:

An economy based upon the sum of its peoples' *deficiency* is a served society—a nation of clients whose wellbeing is measured by their capacity to consume good works.

A society based upon the sum of its peoples' *capacity* is a democracy—a nation of citizens whose well-being is measured by their ability to do good work.

Mr. McKnight suggests that with so many people serving others as "clients" who have deficiency needs, we can't help but develop a society ruled by an elite caste of specialists in dealing with people and their problems. This caste is already quite large, with numerous professional and semi-professional journals filled with material on how to help people "grow," "relate" to each other, "find themselves," and "develop their true potential." Much of this talk has leaked into the educational journals, contributing to the supposed skills of showing others how to become "whole human beings." This is a system, Mr. McKnight says, which "teaches our people that they will be better because someone else knows better."

What if all these "deficiencies" and "problems" would be mopped up and made to disappear if people began once again to do their own productive work? Mr. McKnight seems convinced that a society which delegates most of its productive work to machines is making democracy impossible.

What chance has education to solve its problems under such circumstances?

Wendell Berry's latest book, *The Unsettling of America*, is entirely devoted to inquiry into questions of this sort. In an early chapter he begins with a quotation from a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Agriculture who said in a speech: "But just stop for a minute and think about what it means to live in a land where 95 per cent of the people can be freed from the drudgery of preparing their own food."

For the official this was a proud boast, but Berry regards it as a declaration of cultural bankruptcy. This idea becomes the theme of his searching criticism—the explanation of the fragmentation and moral confusion of present-day

life. Berry sees the withdrawal of human beings from natural and productive work as the logical cause of the unending "deficiencies" which Mr. McKnight identifies as the foundation of the "service" economy. In Berry's view, for example, the so-called "identity crisis," so much talked about, is an inevitable result of the failure to live natural lives—the separation or disconnection of our work from relations with the earth. Whatever is our real identity—whether, as Berry says, "psyche, soul, spirit, self, mind"—if it is divided from the body or earth and made to function in a vacuum, some kind of identity crisis is surely to be expected. "It seems likely," he says, "that the identity crisis has become a sort of social myth, a genre of self-indulgence."

It can be an excuse for irresponsibility or a fashionable mode of self-dramatization. It is the easiest form of self-flattery—a way to construe procrastination as a virtue—based on the romantic assumption that "who I really am" is better in some fundamental way than the available evidence proves.

The fashionable cure for this condition, if I understand the lore correctly, has nothing to do with the assumption of responsibilities or the renewal of connections. The cure is autonomy, another mythical condition, suggesting that the self can be self-determining and independent without regard for any determining circumstance or any of the obvious dependences. This seems little more than a jargon term for indifference to the opinions and feelings of other people. There is, in practice, no such thing as autonomy. Practically, there is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence. Inevitably failing this impossible standard of autonomy, the modern self-seeker becomes a tourist of cures, submitting his quest to the guidance of one guru after another. The "cure" thus preserves the disease.

In effect, Mr. Berry asks: In what sort of society do we expect the education of the young to take place? Instead of debating issues in "education," why not devote attention to determining the balances in human life which any successful learning will require?

## *FRONTIERS* The Drift and a Vision

Two articles occupying a page in the *Los Angeles Times* for last Dec. 4 present unarguable facts concerning the food resources of the planet. One is by Lester Brown, of World Watch Institute, which shows that the concern for "security" is rapidly changing from anxiety about armaments to questions concerning food supply. What good would it do to win another "great" war (supposing it could be fueled), if afterward neither the victors nor the defeated nations had enough to eat? To demonstrate that national security is now a problem of adequate food supply, Mr. Brown describes what is happening to the four major biological systems on which the world depends for all forms of nourishment—oceanic fisheries, forests, croplands, and grasslands:

Since the early 1970s, the world's fisheries—humanity's principal source of high-quality protein—have failed to show the steadily increasing yields that were typical of the '50s and '60s. Between 1950 and 1970, fish supplied an expanding share of human protein needs. In 1970, however, that trend was abruptly and unexpectedly interrupted. Since then, the catch has fluctuated between 60 million and 70 million tons a year, clouding the prospects for an ever bigger catch. Meanwhile world population growth has led to an 11% decline in the per-capita catch and to rising prices for virtually every edible species of fish.

As though that were not enough, forests are shrinking on almost every continent as the cutting of trees exceeds their regenerative capacity. Almost every country undergoing rapid population growth is being deforested. Most of the Middle East and North Africa, and much of continental Asia, Central America and the Andean regions of South America, are now virtually treeless.

As for the world's croplands, their biological carrying capacities are being reached—and exceeded—to meet the needs of the earth's 4 billion humans. Continuing erosion of cropland is undermining soil productivity. By itself, of course, soil erosion, a natural process, is neither new nor necessarily alarming; but when erosion outpaces the

natural formation of new soil, inherent soil fertility declines.

Security, Mr. Brown says, now means above all the preservation of the common resources of civilization. He lists the requirements for present-day nations:

—Make a rapid shift to such sustainable energy and renewable energy resources as solar power.

—Move toward establishing a stabilized population size.

—Decrease their [the nations'] dependency on North American food exports by increasing their domestic production.

—Pledge themselves to maintaining the environment in stewardship for future generations.

It would be logical, he says, to support these objectives with funds now devoted to armaments.

The other *Los Angeles Times* article is by Walter Goldschmidt, who teaches anthropology at the University of California in Los Angeles. He reminds his readers of what he and some research associates discovered thirty years ago about large-scale industrial farming in California (as reported in *As You Sow*, Harcourt, Brace, 1947). They chose for comparison two towns in California's Central Valley. One was Arvin, a community dominated by corporate, big-farm agriculture, the other, Dinuba, was a center for family-operated farms. The study disclosed that—

Dinuba, with its individually owned farms, had a strong local government, supported 20% more people at a higher average annual income and offered a better standard of living to its citizens than did Arvin. Compared to the corporate farm town, Dinuba also had:

—Nearly twice as many local businesses and over 60% more retail trade.

—Nearly three times as many independently employed breadwinners.

—More social amenities, such as paved streets, sidewalks and garbage and sewage-disposal facilities.

—Four elementary schools and a high school, compared to a single elementary school in Arvin.

—Three public parks, compared to Arvin's one loaned playground.

—Twice as many civic and social clubs, as well as churches and youth-oriented activities (which were almost totally lacking in the corporate farming town).

—Two newspapers each larger than the single weekly in Arvin.

Considering all these differences, the citizens of Dinuba, not surprisingly, generally viewed their town as a desirable place to live, while Arvin residents tended to regard their town as a place to escape as quickly as possible.

What has happened in the United States in the thirty years since publication of this report? Figures in the November 1977 *NCAT* (National Center for Appropriate Technology) *News* give a brief reply:

Twenty-two per cent of food production in this country is now controlled directly or indirectly by great corporations. And 38% of all farmland is rented, almost all of it from landlords outside of farming. This creates insecurity for the family farm owner and portends future food insecurity for the entire nation. Today only 5.5% of all farms in the United States control more than 50% of all farmland. Six grain corporations control 85% of all grain exports. Fifty of the almost 30,000 food manufacturers in the nation control half of all the food industry's assets. The result has been that each year America's food bill goes up almost 20 billion dollars, while poverty and malnutrition for many Americans are on the increase and millions of rural farmers have lost their livelihood.

The most hopeful antidote we could find to this depressing information is a statement by Sim Van der Ryn (of Farallones Institute and the California Office of Appropriate Technology). Mr. Van der Ryn thinks the time has come for a nationwide change in outlook. He said in *Rain* for last November:

There is a Zen saying: "Move the right rock and you start an avalanche." As I see it, now is the time for the appropriate technology movement to find the right rock. For the first time in several generations, the culture has no powerful shared image of the future. Materialism and technology do not offer a vision. . . . No image of the future moves Americans.

Yet the outline of an image is there, and our task . . . can be to give it form and substance. Our diverse skills need to focus on the complex task of

bringing into being urban neighborhoods that are truly self-reliant communities, that declare their autonomy from the inefficient and alienating monoculture of today's life support systems. We *can* have neighborhoods that raise much of their own food by recycling streets into gardens and returning organic wastes to soil productivity for food and fiber. We *can* restructure our housing and transportation to reduce the need for fossil fuels by 90 per cent, reserving petroleum and electricity for their highest potential uses. . . . Resources can be managed on the basis of ecological boundaries rather than through arbitrary political and economic dependencies. The array of tools knowledge and human energy to create integral neighborhoods exists today. What is needed is a lens to focus what we know in order to create some working examples which in their fully developed form can be whole systems of such mythic and logical elegance that they will replicate themselves. . . .

That is the continuing vision. I hope it will emerge to fill the vacuum of today's quiet drift.