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INVITATION TO PLATO

DIALOGUE, for Plato, was the only effective means of communication between human beings. For his purposes, it worked better than anything else. What did he intend? He makes it very plain. It was the teaching of virtue. Can it be done? How? Much of what Plato wrote should be read as the record of this inquiry. He wanted others to pursue this question. He knew that the little that *can* be accomplished in this direction would be possible only for those who had first learned what doesn't work at all. He had found that it was futile to tell people to be good. Yet he was sure that being good—embodying the virtues—was the key to making essential discoveries. The man of careless or low intentions shuts himself out from the areas where higher truths become known. He has Socrates go to great pains to make this clear.

But being good is more than a matter of imitating good people. People who are good only by imitation don't understand the good. They are too easily switched to imitating bad models by the persuasions of a clever leader or demagogue. Second-hand virtue may be better than no virtue, but it leads to the troubles which inevitably overtake those who live a second-hand life. Imitation is a quite limited phase of "becoming," a substitution of external images or reflections for the reality of Being.

Why did Plato choose dialogue as the best means of investigating such questions? He had, it seems, one basic reason. Thinking, he had decided, is the dialogue one holds with oneself. Interchange with another assists this internal process. Conversation is not the same as what goes on when we think, but it feeds the inner dialogue material. It is not real thought, but provokes it. So, when two people get together to talk about something, not just one dialogue takes place. There are really three—what they say to each other, and what each one says to himself. The outward speech is only gesture and effect, while the real dialogue or thinking proceeds inside each one. What one says to oneself, and demands of oneself, Plato held, is the only thing that counts.

Plato didn't think much of learned books. You can't interrupt. You can't answer back. All you can do is accept or reject what books say. If you accept it, you don't think but merely believe. If you reject it your position is not improved. A book is a complicated sign. You can't have a discussion with a sign. It just stands there, giving directions. No dialogue is possible. Yet signs, of course, have uses. If there will be accidents if you don't turn to the right, a sign serves as a reflex to avert disaster. Signs extend human perception of unambiguous necessity. But books usually deal with matters still undecided. They are filled with ambiguity, yet they have much in common with signs. Their apparent pretensions to certainty are misleading.

Dialogue serves best for the discovery of what one needs to know, but has not yet been generally found out. Dialogue deals with the kind of truth that does not become real unless it is independently discovered, realized, and confirmed by individual thinking. So there are these two kinds of learning—the technical data that belong on signs or are put into manuals; and the other kind, which is mysterious, yet very precious, and is called wisdom when finally acquired. It doesn't do to define one kind of learning in the terms of the other. That way lies the reduction of thought to either mechanics or vague wishing. The levels don't translate, yet there are various parallels, best indicated by suggestive metaphors. Dialogue introduces these metaphors, which function as delicate antennae of exploring thoughts. Dialogue is not intended to establish sure-fire certainties.

This is why, when the Platonic dialogues issue in no firm conclusion, Socrates remains undisturbed. He is not declaring finalities for all men to follow, as if they were eternal truth. He left that for Aristotle to attempt. Socrates goes about strewing parallels for use as stepping stones, not building an apodictic case. On the contrary, he delights in taking cases apart, showing that popular opinion heightens the walls of mental box canyons. He is hoping to be able to say something that will give off igniting sparks of thought, so that the one he is talking to may go home and make a discovery of his own.

What does Plato have to say about the human situation?

He suggested that its character is identified by contrasts with the ideal. The life of the gods is the ideal. They know how to think. They live in a universe of truth. They are not deceived by appearances. Not being gods, we are continually self-deceived. Yet we have in us the germs of godhood. We are moved by the godlike, if only occasionally. Fortunately, the longing in us for godlike wisdom does not die. It may be quiescent for a time, but it reanimates. The effort to know is renewed. Meanwhile there are terrible messes to cope with, one after another. So Plato said that we are like people in prison. Our confinement is due to ignorance, and ignorance is due to thinking we know when we don't—our worst ignorance has the form of mistaken certainties. So, for the most part, we confine ourselves.

How do you get people to give up their delusions? Well, Plato says, they won't give them up so long as the delusions seem to justify doing what they want to do. No one parts with an idea he thinks has proved profitable. To let it go one has to recognize that the delusion makes more trouble than it's worth. This gets very deep into the structures of motivation. How do all those tentacles of liking and disliking lose their grip and free the mind for the invitation of superior common sense? Plato said that you have to find a crack in the façade of illusion, some small doubt that needs to be fed, and work with that. Figure out how to bring an admitted reality into confrontation with a supposed truth. You are working with human feelings, longings, suspicions, and hopes—and perhaps an intuition or two. Both luck and management are involved. Maybe you'll get nowhere, as sometimes happened to Socrates. But who knows what seeds may light and rest in the soil of the mind? Who knows when a warm breeze will awaken the life in them, so that they send down roots and germinate. Spring may seem far behind, but it will come. Besides, there's nothing else to do.

So, according to Plato, we are imprisoned humans with the germs of gods in us, yet we make messes because of our involvement with the irrational elements in our nature—the passions and desires, which are compounded with convenient rationalizations. Our greatest difficulties come from presumption—we fancy ourselves authorities on what is the right or the most satisfactory thing to do.

Perhaps there is something somewhere in Plato which explains why people like ourselves should be thrust into so much trouble—why the universe is arranged that way—but we don't remember it. He mainly gives an account of the human situation and then considers what we need to do to get out of psychological jail—out of the Cave. And that, if he is right, is doubtless enough of a contribution!

Still, one can't help wondering if any larger end is served by a situation which imposes so much punishment. This is to ask what kind of a universe we are part of and about the sense of it all. Alas, the universe being everything that is, its explanation must be devised out of its own material. We can have no objectivity concerning "the All." The answer has to be found within its own workings—an operation bootstrap if there ever was one.

This question is not quite the same as the totally futile inquiry: Why is there anything? We *are*, and the meaning of our being begins with this

reality, not with a supposedly prior nothingness. It is impossible to imagine a time of nothing at all. Time is the creation of things. But why do the forms of being behave in particular ways, and why must humans endure what they endure?

Well, when you look for meanings, you look for persisting or "classical" patterns. We don't really know how to locate an ideal universe, in order to understand lesser cosmic attempts, but we have at least a little acquaintance with ideal humans. The germs of the godlike in us, one could say, reach out longingly toward the most notable humans we know or have heard of. We have a hard time distinguishing such humans from gods, and perhaps they shouldn't be; but if they are gods, what are they doing in our messed-up world? Why do they come here at all?

They have come here, they tell us, to help. And we admit, if we have any sense, that we need help very badly. Is that relationship the one between gods and men—a classical pattern? If the great religions and the archetypal myths have truth in them, the answer may be yes.

This is hardly a new idea, but it's no longer a familiar one. Yet if, say, Prometheus may be taken as an archetypal godlike human, then our role or appointed task is to make a contribution similar to his, no matter on how much smaller a scale. It is within our power to illuminate some portion of the world and its processes with our minds, and to see that everything works in a more cooperative way. What else do really good men ever do? And if that is the norm, then doing it is surely possible by studying what the best men have done in this direction. A. H. Maslow once sagely remarked that if you want to find out how things really ought to be done, you look for the very best models—the gold medalists in life. The gods, then, including the would-be gods (whom we call heroes), are gold medalists who return to earth to show how things ought to be done. What do they do? Well, they sometimes put up a few signs, but mostly they engage in dialogue, some of which gets written down afterward. This record is doubtless imperfect, subject to all the fault Plato found with books. A large part of our inheritance of great religious teaching is in dialogue form.

Why do people make catechisms out of the great dialogues of the past? Why do they convert inquiries into *signs?* Probably because this seems a way of avoiding the pain of thinking. The conversion is accomplished by replacing a question with a final answer and then memorizing it. This makes thinking unnecessary, even unpopular and feared. The more elaborate catechisms are ideologies.

We are in our present mess, then, because we are would-be-members—even hangers-on—of the tribe of heroes who have in themselves the makings of gods, but only the makings. The gods create themselves by their determination to be godlike—to be of help to the world and the beings in it. Any god we know about or worth remembering devoted himself to this task, so that it is no wild assumption to identify the gods in this way.

There is a lot of science psychological and otherwise—in helping, which makes it much more than a sentimental undertaking. But there is also a lot more than science in helping, which prevents it from being merely an application of technique. We probably should add that the present mankind, on this hypothesis, constitute a very junior class within the hero tribe—only beginners, often reluctant and unwilling, in the art of helping. We see other things we'd much rather do.

Why, if we are potential heroes, are we so unheroic in habit? Because, it may be, a hero is someone who has first to *decide* to be a hero to go about "his father's business," as one great religious tradition has it. If the would-be hero didn't have to make this decision, there would be nothing heroic about heroism. The gods would not be gods, but cogs in some mechanistic system of aimless perfection in which nobody has to *try*. Who could stand being part of such a system? A universe in which there are no choices would be drearily uninteresting. It would have no drama,

no mystery, no challenge. It would not be going any place.

This was more or less the conclusion reached by Socrates and reported in the autobiographical section of the *Phaedo.* He was thinking about knowledge, virtue, truth, and self, and wondered how human beings might fit into the world around them. So he inquired of the "nature" philosophers. But in what they said he found nothing in common with what he felt within himself. He did not fit into their world, could not operate in it on a rational basis. There was no place there for beings who choose, who think and make up their minds, bettering their understanding and relationships in the process. Socrates decided: I can find out about myself only by consulting myself; and since I am in the world, self-knowledge must include inquiry into man's relations with the world. Primary evidence about the nature of human beings is to be sought within human beings, and the seeking is our dialogue with ourselves, for which our dialogues with one another are rehearsals or exercises.

Plato found that making these assumptions and then acting on them led to certain discoveries concerning the work he wanted to do. The truth cannot be "told"—knowing the truth is being it, and this, when done, is the end of the line, and we are far from being there. But we are on the way. The discoveries Plato made had to do with the best means of moving along on the line. These discoveries can be partly communicated, and an account of them is contained in the Dialogues of Plato.

Is Plato "relevant" today? The best answer we know to this question is the first paragraph of Robert Cushman's Preface to *Therapeia* (Greenwood Press, 1976, $20), his study of "Plato's Conception of Philosophy." This book was first published by Chapel Hill in 1958, and was out of print for years until the Greenwood edition came out. We have used this book again and again, finding it about the most valuable book on Plato we have come across. The coverage of Plato's ideas seems extraordinarily complete, and the interpretation always presents Plato on Plato. It is full of references to the Dialogues and the Letters, and one way to use Cushman's book is with the Pantheon edition (edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns) of Plato's *Collected Dialogues* close at hand. A scholar like Mr. Cushman is useful to readers who want to find their own way, suggesting what the words may hide or only hint at.

The Preface of *Therapeia* begins:

> Plato's *philosophia,* as a method of education, represents the supreme and most influential attainment of classical Greek thought respecting the way of human salvation. For Plato, salvation presupposes a profound and well-nigh universal distortion of the human soul, entailing a whole range of disastrous consequences for man's social and political existence. Plato's diagnosis of the plight of man as well as his *therapeia,* his provision for its remedy, form the central preoccupation of this study. And while it is an inclusive purpose here to see Plato's philosophy steadily and to see it whole, it will be our special task to reappraise the basis of Plato's pervasive and unyielding conviction that "metaphysical" relations actually obtain for man's finite existence whether recognized or not, and that upon these rest his present and ultimate hope. It will also be necessary to indicate under what conditions Plato believed these same ontological relations are discoverable and, conversely, under what circumstances they are hidden from the sight of the mind. If in our time, or, for that matter, since that of Francis Bacon metaphysics is to be regarded as the relic of outworn thought, then it will be our business to show that Plato long ago anticipated the kind of mentality for which this judgment is inevitable and even proposed means for its radical transformation.

Plato, in short, saw coming the confusions of the present. He was well acquainted with the claim that knowledge is power and that virtue is the use of power to satisfy our desires and further our interests.

> Against this trend Plato long ago strove to vindicate the rightful superiority of *philosophia* to *techné.* But in our time the ascendancy of *techné* over *philosophia* has entailed the disastrous subordination of wisdom to science. And, with the eclipse of ultimate ends of life, not only has human

> culture become devoid of unconditional loyalties, but for many, the very meaningfulness of life has been threatened.
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> If we allow Plato to speak, he will suggest that the question before us is whether we shall shrivel on the positivist vine or, with him, plumb the resources of the human soul and so recover, it may be, faith in the dignity of man. So we come to our point: It was the Socratic-Platonic probing of the human *psuche* which led to the Platonic metaphysics and, thus, to the subordination of science to wisdom (*philosophia*). . . . Plato believed that when man is cut loose from any meta-empirical rootage and, so, dispossessed of all transphenomenal responsibility, he is shorn of moral dignity and shrinks to the status which is allowed to him by those who exercise supreme power in the state. Long ago Thomas Hobbes enforced the view that, if there is no absolute in heaven, there must needs be, for man's good (!), one upon earth. Political philosophies of our time imbibed the lesson well and have accordingly contrived the earthly counterpart—the varying forms of the great Leviathan. Plato's absolute is not exclusively in heaven; neither can it be comfortably domesticated upon earth. But Plato found no solution to the human plight apart from winning for the Ideal Structure of Being the common acknowledgment of men. We are concerned to understand the basis of his conviction that the ultimate Reality may be discovered as a guide to life.

How do humans come to follow this path? Plato was candid in admitting that the matter is puzzling, but pointed out that *some do.* Others can, too, he added. So the question is: How do we help people to make this decision? Preaching, he realized, is of little value. The germinal god in each one resists being told what to do; and the self-indulgent propensity resists change for the better, knowing only the language of a good time. So on these counts preaching is likely to fail. Is it really possible to encourage the germ of independent godhood to grow?

> As Plato states at *Sophist* 229e, the admonitory and preceptual method is not wholly ineffectual or worthless, but the efficacy of moral precepts . . . is limited to that margin of diminishing returns where self-interest whispers caution. The knowledge which constitutes real virtue—justice that does not succumb to expediency when the going gets rough—derives from another source. A man must look for it elsewhere: from the sure deliverances of his own mind—a mind which is presently reclaiming its truest "belongings." What is required, therefore, is a different kind of instructor. The true pedagogue is a dialectician. In the first place, he knows how to induce "perplexity" where ignorance is joined with conceit of knowledge. By plying the mind of his pupil with appropriate questions, he invites a reconsideration of conventional and engrafted opinion. He engages in "joint-inquiry" with his pupil. He does not prematurely intrude solutions. He solicits response and cross-examines each answer with a view to its implications. In this way he clears up the false assumptions of deposited opinion. He opens a path for the mind to move gradually in the direction of truth which is the objective of its native propensity. By letting the discussion have its head, being sure to divide and classify things according to their real similarities and differences, the teacher helps to dispose the learner's mind in the direction of reality so that the latter may discern for himself.

Sounds good. But where is the master-mind able to direct these proceedings?

Omniscience is not necessary in a Socrates, or in the Socratic endeavor. A teacher is one who gets rid of false certainties, and any intelligent man can find plenty of those to work on. Socrates did not pretend to teach *anything.* He did of course teach; he couldn't help but teach. But he didn't teach "things" or reach final conclusions; he taught a way of looking, how not to get caught in some blind alley of thought. An order of reliable truth seems to come through for people who do this conscientiously and well.

People have been reading Plato for a couple of thousand years and more. He doesn't wear out. You never get on top of Plato or outgrow him. But then, you don't want to, since he has become such a good friend. The Platonic Academy was an association of friends.

REVIEW
THOUGHT AND ACTION

A GOOD example of what Hannah Arendt called "resultless thinking"—by which she meant Socratic thinking—is the work of John H. Schaar, who teaches political science on the Santa Cruz campus of the University of California. Through the years we have often quoted from his "Reflections on Authority," which appeared in No. 8 of the *New American Review* (1970). Through the kindness of a reader, we now have two more issues of *American Review*, both with essays by Schaar—one called "The Case of Patriotism," in No. 17 (May, 1973), the other, "Power and Purity," in No. 19 (January, 1974).

What is "resultless thinking"? It is thinking, not in order to do this or that—the how-to sort of thinking—but thinking about the priorities in thinking, and what, in general, may be right or good to do. Resultless thinking is inquiry into principles and motives—in short, philosophy.

What ought a philosopher to do with the idea of patriotism? For many the term has become an explanation of nearly everything that has gone wrong with the modern world. Yet Mr. Schaar dares to say:

> The radicals of the 1960s did not persuade their fellow-Americans, high or low, that they genuinely cared for and shared a country with them. And no one who has contempt for others can hope to teach those others. A revived radicalism must be a patriotic radicalism. It must share and care for the common things, even while it has a "lover's quarrel" with fellow citizens.

For Mr. Schaar, Patriotism has the meaning it had for Gandhi, for Oretga, for Simone Weil; that is, a purified meaning. A recent expression of this meaning is Wendell Berry's book, *The Unsettling of America*. Love of country, in this sense, is *pre*political: it is the feeling of being at home and nourished by a particular place, a region, a countryside. Mr. Schaar puts the idea in general terms:

> To be a patriot is to have a patrimony; or, perhaps more accurately, the patriot is one who is grateful for a legacy and recognizes that the legacy makes him a debtor. There is a whole way of being in the world, captured best by the word reverence, which defines life by its debts: one is what one owes, what one acknowledges as a rightful debt or obligation. The patriot moves within that mentality. . . . The very tone and rhythm of a life, the shapes of perception, the texture of its hopes and fears come from membership in a territorially rooted group. The conscious patriot is one who feels deeply indebted for these gifts, grateful to the people and the places through which they come, and determined to defend the legacy against enemies and pass it unspoiled to those who will come after.

What has happened to this meaning of patriotism, this spontaneous and self-enlarging feeling which we recognize in the expressions of great patriots of the past? John Schaar gives ample attention to this question. When people start thinking seriously, they become discouraged with what is done and defended in the name of patriotism. They decide, from the evidence, that patriotism is unrelievedly evil and should be excised from our emotional constitution. This judgment is based on the conclusion that patriotism is no more than service to the national state, and that the evils done by states in our time are almost immeasurable. Service to the modern state means the eventual reduction of the individual to an agent of calculating and ruthless self-interest. That's how states behave. Such agents lose the capacity for feelings such as Berry declares, and put in their place attachments that wear away at every decent impulse. As Simone Weil said:

> The State is a cold concern, which cannot inspire love, but itself kills, suppresses everything that might be loved; so that one is forced to love it, because there is nothing else. That is the moral torment to which all of us today are exposed.
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> Here lies perhaps the true cause of the phenomenon of the leader, which has sprung up everywhere nowadays and surprises so many people. Just now, there is in all countries, in all movements, a man who is the personal magnet for all loyalties. Being compelled to embrace the cold, metallic surface

> of the state has made people, by contrast, hunger for something to love which is made of flesh and blood. This phenomenon shows no sign of disappearing, and, however disastrous the consequences have been so far, it may still have some very unpleasant surprises in store for us; for the art so well known in Hollywood, of manufacturing stars out of any sort of human material, gives any sort of person the opportunity of presenting himself for the adoration of the masses.

Conventionally, the shortcomings of nationalism are supposed to be overcome by intelligent internationalism, but is an *intelligent* internationalism at all possible for those cold, metallic entities—the nation-states of the present—which seem to spread sterility and paralysis wherever their influence is felt? Mr. Schaar speaks to this point:

> In sum, I am suggesting that most internationalism today has utterly confused humanity and its possibilities with technology and its possibilities. No doubt, technology has unified the world in a thousand ways, producing a call on the part of many humane people for world law and the brotherhood of man. But it would be more straightforward for the internationalist to speak less about the brotherhood of man and more about the standardization of the technological order, for it is a brute fact that technology has destroyed and is destroying hundreds of forms of human life. It is a cruel confusion to call that brotherhood, unless one holds that brotherhood can appear only after those who were different are dead.

People who begin to see all this as a result of their thinking are horrified by what is done in the name of "patriotism." So they say, Let us do away with the patriotism and give our devotion only to the world as a whole. This declaration has much in common with the appeal of de la Mettrie, who (in 1747) wrote in *Man a Machine:*

> If Atheism were universally disseminated, all the branches of religion would be torn up by the roots. Then there would be no more theological wars: there would be no soldiers of religion, that terrible kind of soldier. Nature, which had been infected by the consecrated poison, would win back her rights and her purity. Deaf to all other voices, men would follow their own individual impulses, and these impulses alone can lead them to happiness along the pleasant path to virtue.

Mr. Schaar is of another school. He would ask, instead: What was religion before it acquired the habit of raising armies and installing torture chambers in the name and service of truth? And he now asks: What was patriotism before it became merely a resource for the nation-state? He goes from the spontaneous feelings of reverence for home and place to the deliberated devotion of a Lincoln, who reverenced the principles to which the people of the United States pledge allegiance. In a speech given at Philadelphia, in Independence Hall, on the way to Washington to take up the presidency, Lincoln said:

> I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. . . . I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this confederacy so long together. It was . . . something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance.

Thinking is indeed upsetting. It starts with seeing beyond pretensions to realities, then recognizes the perversion of great ideas in the practice of great corporate bodies which have assumed proprietorship over our lives, our fortunes, and our honor. But is then the thing to do to abandon the great ideas? Humans cannot live without great ideas. This is a realization that emerges again and again in the work of John Schaar. So, when thought brings disenchantment, the one great obligation is to think some *more,* and not to rush out waving axes and incendiary torches in a nihilist frenzy.

We have left little enough space for attention to "Power and Purity" (*American Review* No. 19). A single quotation will have to serve—enough, perhaps, to draw the reader to its source. Here Mr. Schaar brings home the fact that most people think as spectators, not participants. He suggests

that the divorce between knowledge and action unfits us for constructive judgment.

> One of the most important differences between great actors—think, say, of Gandhi, or Lenin, or Lincoln, or Malcom X—and most of the rest of us is that they hold their views and ideas in a way we do not. They *are* their views. We *have* views. And most of us, when we think clearly, can acknowledge that we took, or received, most of what we call "our" views from others. We did not create them. Rather, we got them from others, who may have worked very hard for them, and now we call them ours. . . . the position of the spectator is self-confirming, self-perpetuating. The role produces its own conception of knowledge, and that conception contains a large element of condescension toward even those who act greatly. The role of the spectator, and the spectator conception of knowledge, are high obstacles to participation.

The failures of heroic action, as seen through the eyes of the multitude, would not be so frequent—nor would the lives of heroes seem so "impractical"—were the rest of us to close somewhat the gap between our thinking and our action.

COMMENTARY
ACADEMIC CLARITY

As incentive to reading Mr. Gross's article entire (see "Children"), we quote his reply to those who claim that the street speech of minority groups ought to be preserved for its unique "cultural" values, and to the argument that educators should not attempt to replace it with what these champions of colorful jargon call "the supermarket language of bland and utilitarian America." He says:

> It was an interesting rhetorical argument but a deceptive one—especially in regard to minority students, whose proficiency at the standard language was tantamount to learning the art of breathing the special air of America. The kind of deep creativity that is manifested in a private language—the blues or *Huckleberry Finn* or some of the poetry of Langston Hughes—is all the more powerful precisely because its vernacular clashes with the standard public language. The two languages must be simultaneously held in the mind of the reader as well as of the writer, at whatever counterpoint can be productively sustained. . . . In any event, for most students writing is expository, and exposition is standardized and should be clear (like Auden's windowpane) and logical. It is the obligation of every English teacher to give students this primary skill.
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> At the City College we . . . never surrendered the conviction that our first obligation was to offer the conventional language conventionally, and we tried to teach those unprepared students in the way that we had taught thousands of other freshmen. . . . But despite all the goodwill that a lifetime of liberalism and academic training dictated, the nagging doubt grew that we might not be able to take an eighteen-year-old who suffered deep linguistic shortcomings and bring him to college level verbal competence. . . .
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> Open admission students came with a sense of fear and self-doubt, confronting a standard language that was rendered even more complicated by their need to master, at the same time and in the same place, the separate language of biology or psychology. Their entire miseducation and bookless past rose to haunt them, and all the audiovisual aids and writing laboratories and simplified curricular materials we tried could not turn the trick.
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> The mistake was to think that this language training would be preparation for college education when what we were really instilling was a fundamental literacy that would allow social acculturation to grow. We were preparing our students to be the parents of college students, not to be students themselves.

But this, as Mr. Gross said, was a job that should be performed by the two-year community colleges.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
IT HAPPENED IN NEW YORK

AFTER reading "HOW to Kill a College"—by Theodore L. Gross in the *Saturday Review* for Feb. 4 the question that seemed paramount was: In what sort of society would the debacle Mr. Gross describes not have happened? He writes of the practical breakdown of a place of learning in a situation in which everyone involved seemed doomed to fail no matter what was attempted. His article is a portion of a future book by this dean of humanities at the City College of New York—*The Humanities in Higher Education*—which is likely to be worth reading when it comes out.

What sort of place does Mr. Gross write about?

> The City College has been the great tuition-free institution whose diploma has had so special a meaning for alumni—the hard-earned diploma of the poor. The alumni had been proud that they had been admitted to the proletarian Harvard, as the college was often called, and proud that they had been graduated; proud that they had studied with Jonas Salk and Alfred Kazin, Bernard Malamud, Arthur Kornberg, and A. M. Rosenthal; nostalgic about their youthful poverty and grateful to have escaped it through the college; strong-minded about their remembered hunger for learning and eager to preserve the meaning of their academic achievement.

That was City College in the past. The contrast between past and present is drawn at the beginning of the article. Today—

> Fifteen thousand students, day and evening, are enrolled in courses—to speak only of the humanities—ranging from Shakespeare to Cleaver, from Beethoven to Ellington, from Confucius to Martin Buber, from Basic Writing I for the poorly prepared to creative writing taught by the most sophisticated American novelists. The student population is multiethnic: 33 per cent black, 21 per cent Spanish, 12 per cent Jewish, 11 per cent Asian, and diminishing percentages of Italians, Irish, Ukrainians, Serbo-Croatians, and Slavs—a microcosm, as we proudly say, of the world.

This student population was the result of the policy of open admissions adopted by New York's Board of Higher Education in 1970, to "assure every high school student, regardless of his record, acceptance at a college of the City University." Some of the faculty opposed the change, but others were simply bewildered by the result.

> It was not always so. In the Sixties the college was almost entirely white and predominantly Jewish. Enthroned on a hill overlooking Harlem, it was an urban institution with high academic standards, a citadel that for more than 50 years had existed undisturbed amid the surrounding black community. As educators, we at City College were representative of the decade. We had abolished requirements and prerequisites and had arranged elective courses in a cafeteria curriculum that made basic skills and basic knowledge seem irrelevant, structure obsolete, and sequential study unimportant. The historical perspective was already so suspect that the liberal arts college functioned primarily on the pleasure principle. Students enrolled in the courses they wanted.

Then, on top of this came "open admissions." Sensing what would happen—that the ethnic mixed bag of youth eager for education would lack the background in language which alone could make the City College curriculum intelligible to them—Mr. Gross, as dean, said to the teachers of the English Department:

> Many of us have been trained for an elitist profession, but we are asked to perform democratic tasks; we have written dissertations on Spenser, but we are teaching remedial writing; we are committed to the book, but the students have been culturally shaped by television and film; we have studied a body of culture that is fundamentally Anglo-Saxon, but we teach many students who are black and Asian and Spanish; we pay homage to the history of English literature, but we are surrounded by the consequences of American history and the political presence of America; we are in an "English" department, but our work is involved with the literature and with the language that is spoken by Americans.

In short, the situation seemed well-nigh hopeless from the viewpoint of a teacher of literature. Yet they did what they could:

> In 1970 almost 90 per cent of City College students took some form of remedial instruction in writing—an incredible situation for any American college, let alone one that had had a great academic tradition. . . .
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> The problem for one third of the open admission students was literacy, for another third, competence, for last third college level English. In addition, the students themselves were altogether different. Suddenly, Asians and black and Hispanics crowded the classrooms, bringing with them language and dialect problems that prevented them from understanding the most elementary texts, face-to-face with a faculty that was intellectually unprepared and emotionally unwilling—liberals up against the wall. . . .
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> The traditional disciplines of philosophy and history and literature and political science diminished in significance and popularity because the students felt unprepared for them. We expected too much too fast from students, and we betrayed the notion of open admissions by holding students to standards they could never hope to meet.
>
> But articulating these conclusions at the time, even if they had been clear in one's mind, was impossible. . . .
>
> What really gnawed away at our innards and left us hollow, what began to create a sad yet anxious look in our eyes and a dreadful listlessness in the way we moved through classes or sat at committee meetings, what dulled our lunchroom conversations and made us depend more on each other than on the students—who had always been the great reward for teaching at the City College—what coursed in our bodies like an incurable illness was our growing realization and fear that in middle age we no longer had a profession.

What to do? The City College, Mr. Gross says, was forced to undertake a bridging function which belonged naturally to the two-year community colleges. They, he says, should be the open-admission schools—perform the "democratic tasks." To dilute and weaken if not destroy a place of higher learning because of political pressures on the Board of Education was plainly the wrong thing to do.

There is not a breath of complaint about the students in this report. They came to school with ardor and intensity, but their writing "barely made sense."

> The greatest difficulty for blacks, for example, seemed to be to put an "s" on the third person singular. Puerto Ricans and Asians had bilingual problems that prevented them from reading conventional college texts and from writing college compositions; on occasion, a student would even arrive with an interpreter so that he could register for classes. Yet the Asians were remarkable students of engineering and mathematics; and the blacks and Puerto Ricans had a real feeling for literature, sociology, and political science.

At the beginning we asked: What sort o£ community might have avoided this disaster? At the entry to the port of New York, in the harbor, there stands the Statue of Liberty with its generous invitation to the "huddled masses" of the world. This splendid renewal of the dream of men like Washington and Paine and Lincoln has been ignored. Both vision and generosity have faded away. New York was no fit host. Yet there are those, elsewhere in the world, who anticipate sudden population changes and make thoughtful provision for them. The housing and other plans of the Swedes, for example, over many years, have exhibited this foresight. They built decent low-cost homes and apartment houses in advance. Moreover, we need to look at population migrations in historical perspective before complaining about their effects. If it was a good thing for us to take over the possession of Puerto Rico from Spain, as we did by war in 1898, why didn't we give some attention to the island's economic arrangements so that the people there would not feel driven to emigrate in droves? And a community with a sense of social responsibility would not allow its board of education to respond to angry political pressures with hastily improvised but pretentious plans for " justice" that could not possibly work and, in failing, would destroy established and useful institutions.

FRONTIERS

Background on Intermediate Technology

ONE effect of the popularization of the idea of intermediate or appropriate technology—an accomplishment mainly of E. F. Schumacher—has been the beginning of a realization that two questions, not only one, need to be asked about a contemplated economic enterprise. The old question was: What will be good for this business and make it a financial success? Now another question is being added: What will be good for the business and at the same time serve well the people of the community affected by its operations?

An annotated bibliography, *Economically Appropriate Technologies for Developing Countries,* compiled by Marilyn Carr, and published by Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd. (£2.75), shows the pervasive presence of this second question throughout the planning efforts in behalf of the developing countries. Nearly three hundred sources—books, articles, reports—are listed, with comment on their contents. Following is the summary of an article by K. Marsden, "Progressive Technologies for Developing Countries," in the *International Labour Review* for May, 1970:

Includes two case studies relating to building materials:

> (1) A case study of inappropriate technological choice in the floor and wall-tiles industry. A ceramic factory making floor and wall-tiles formerly imported hand-operated presses. In cooperation with small engineering workshops in its locality it was able to have replacement presses made locally, using castings, moulded from scrap metal in small foundries and machined on general purpose lathes and drilling machines. The tiles themselves were made of indigenous clay deposits, and fired in kilns composed of local refractory bricks. Thus output, income and employment were stimulated in a number of other industries and trades. This multiplier effect was just beginning to make itself felt when it was decided to build a modern large-scale ceramic plant in place of the existing one, with high-speed fully automatic presses, continuous tunnel kilns, etc. This equipment required special steels and engineering skills, refractories with a high aluminum oxide content and technical know-how which were not available locally and had to be imported. Also, because of the high speed of operation, very malleable clays were required, and these too had to be imported. In the end, the consumer got a poorer quality, dearer product because breakage rates were higher due to inadequate temperature control in the tunnel kilns and clumsy handling during the glazing operation. Employment and net output declined in the ceramic and allied industries, and the country's trading deficit widened.
>
> (2) A case-study of a fibreboard plant in an African country showing that an advanced capital-intensive technology is sometimes the most appropriate. The plant cost 2 million dollars and employed only 120 workers directly. However, it processed the residue of sugar-cane and maize stalks which would otherwise have gone to waste. Thus the value added during the process was high and it provided additional income for the farmers. The finished product was a good cheap substitute for certain kinds of wood for housing and furniture. The wood had previously been imported, so foreign currency was also saved. This project therefore served the national interest in several respects.

The complex relationships involved in introducing changes are illustrated in a report by L. T. Wells Jr. on six industries in Indonesia:

> In general, intermediate technology provided 3 times as many jobs for the same output as the capital-intensive technology; and labour-intensive technology provided 10 times as many jobs as the capital-intensive technology in the same industry.
>
> The author found there was no simple relationship within an industry between factory costs and technology chosen. Nor did the choice of technology appear in all cases to represent a simple attempt to minimize costs. Further, no significant relationship was found to exist between the choice of technology and whether the firm was foreign or domestically owned, quality of output, or scale of operations. Choice was found to be most closely related to the competitive position of the firm. If a brand image allowed the firm to hold a monopolistic position, then managers were influenced by non-economic factors, such as the ease of management with capital-intensive methods, and the preference of engineers for sophisticated equipment. When price

> was an important consideration, however, then there was a tendency to use more labour-intensive methods, which were profitable due to low wage rates.

A report on maize-grinding in Kenya shows that the appeal of "junk food" is an obstacle not limited to the progressive West:

> Four techniques are compared: hand mills; water-mills; hammer-mills; and imported roller-mills. Variations in product characteristics were found to be the key determinant in the choice of technique. The small-scale "intermediate" technique—the hammer-mill—was associated with greater employment, output and investable surplus than the more capital intensive roller-mills. However, the latter were increasingly popular because the product, though more expensive and nutritionally inferior, was widely preferred.

Those whose ideas about intermediate technology have been born mainly of enthusiasm for its over-all social and moral appeal would do well to discover from such a survey of the literature the numerous practical considerations which enter into the application of intermediate technology in on-the-spot conditions, which vary widely. Yet Marilyn Carr's bibliography also dramatizes the progressive subordination of economic to social and human values—the great change called for by the times.

We are happy to report another printing of *A Landscape for Humans* by Peter van Dresser (by The Lightning Tree, Santa Fe, N.M. 87501). This study unites modern ecological thinking and planning with lessons from the past, in an analysis and projected future for a mountainous region of northern New Mexico. It is the hope of the author, who lives in the region, that it can be developed as "an uplands province of dispersed and decentralized small towns and new-era villages" which has an economy scaled to local resources. Mr. van Dresser provides in this book a complete case study of an ecoregion where many and various applications of intermediate technology are quite evidently required.