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MYTHS, NOVELS, "FACTS"

IN ancient Greece, the philosophers and poets, who were the teachers of the time, believed that the substance of communicable education was to be found in myths. "Plato," Werner Jaeger has written, "wanted the future citizens of his ideal republic to begin their literary education with the telling of myths rather than mere facts or rational teachings." Jaeger, scholarly lover of the Greeks, seems to agree. He makes this case, speaking of the Greek of the classical age:

> In early childhood they [the myths] were the first food for his spirit, which he sucked in, as it were, with his mother's milk. And as he grew older, he returned to them on a higher plane when he was introduced to the masterpieces of the Greek poets. Now it is true that even today millions of people learn the ancient Greek myths through reading Homer in modern translations; but at that time the mythical tradition reached Greek youth through hundreds of other channels, besides the stories of the Trojan cycle which survive in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for the poetry as well as the art of Greece was chiefly concerned with shaping the traditional legends. What the boy had eagerly absorbed as exciting stories, the youth found brought in its most perfect form in the art and poetry of his people. And later, when he grew to manhood, Homer's characters passed before his eyes on the stage of the Greek theater, in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, where their destinies no longer seemed a tale of long ago, but of immediate dramatic interest. The audience which filled the benches at these performances regarded the events and sufferings they beheld as the most profound expression of the meaning of all human life.

This seems a way of saying that the Greek myths gave the people a moral vocabulary for thought about their own lives.

Is there a modern way of thinking about these things? That will perhaps confirm Jaeger's evaluation of the educational value of myth? There may be a parallel in one of the essays of Joseph Wood Krutch (in *If You Don't Mind My Saying So*, 1964), titled "Novelists Know What Philosophers Don't," in which he dares to say "that art is more convincing than philosophy because it is, quite literally, truer; that, to take cases, Proust is truer than Bergson and Mr. Farrell truer than Marx." Krutch continues:

> The novelists are, to be sure, less clear and less precise. But for that very reason they are truer. Every philosophy and every "ideology" must sacrifice truth to clarity and precision just because we demand of a philosophy or an "ideology" greater clarity and precision and completeness than is compatible with human knowledge or wisdom. What is most true and most valuable in any philosophy is not the tight and inclusive system which it presents but those glimpses and divinations and *apercus* which the philosopher later formalized into his philosophical system. Most of us are not Platonists or Spinozans or Nietzscheans. We have accepted insight from each while rejecting the whole which each pretends to present. And it is just the philosophical superiority of art, not only that it suggests the complexity of life and human character, but also that it is everywhere closer to the most genuine and the most justifiable portions of man's thinking about life. . . .
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> The best as well as the most effective works of art may sometimes be those in which the author is in pursuit of a truth, but the only reason for composing a novel or a play instead of a treatise is that the author is unwilling to reduce to a formula an insight which he can present without violation only through a concrete situation whose implications he can sense but only sense. Once the meaning of a work of art can be adequately stated in abstract terms it ceases to have any *raison d'être*. It has ceased to be truer than philosophy and has become at best only a sugar-coated pill.
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> If those are right who maintain that the field of what we positively know and can state with precision is constantly growing, that even the uncertainties and ambiguities which still surround every insight are destined to disappear in the light of clear and positive knowledge until there is nothing important about man which we do not know with scientific precision, then the field and utility of art are shrinking, and the

> time will come when it will cease to have any function at all. But art will continue to exist and to be truer than philosophy just so long as—but no longer than—there are truths which elude formulation into laws.

This is the point of Plato's distinction between apodictic truths—truths that cannot be disputed—and truths which require the individual assent of the learner, which lack the manifest verity of "two plus two equals four." Such manifest truths require no effort, no struggle on the part of the learner for their admission. They have the coercion of the obvious. The effect of this, as Plato makes clear in the *Theatetus,* is that the learner becomes the servant of argument instead ¢f its master. It is Plato's view that conclusions adopted through logical necessity are second-class truths which allow the learner no freedom to dissent. In this case the master of a large number of "facts" feels wholly justified in becoming a dictator, since freedom is irrelevant in the discovery of such truth. The inner growth which results from the individual struggle to know for oneself does not take place.

This makes Plato suspicious of didactic instruction, in which the teacher "reveals" the truth to his student. Like Socrates, who claimed to know "nothing," and only to involve his auditors in his search, Plato attacks the written words of instruction in two ways. Toward the end of the *Plaedrus* he has Socrates ridicule books by telling a story about the inventor of writing, an Egyptian named Theuth, who proudly describes this art he has originated to the king, Ammon, only to be told that he has invented a disaster—that practice of the art of writing will implant forgetfulness in the souls of men, giving them only the semblance of knowledge. They will seem to themselves to know much, reading in books having given them the conceit of wisdom, while they still know little or nothing, since they have not found anything out for themselves. Then, in the second Letter, he warns Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, of the harm he does by pretending to explain to others Plato's teachings, without really knowing them and without regard for the readiness of those who might read what the tyrant wrote. Plato said:

> Consider these facts and take care lest you sometime come to repent of having unwisely published your views. It is a very great safeguard to learn by heart instead of writing. It is impossible for what is written not to be disclosed. That is the reason why I have never written anything about these things, and why there is not and will not be any written work of Plato's own. What are now called his are the work of a Socrates embellished and modernized.

In the seventh letter (to the friends of Dion) he returns to this subject, saying:

> One statement at any rate I can make in regard to all who have written or who may write with a claim to knowledge of the subjects to which I devote myself—no matter how they pretend to have acquired it, whether from my instruction or from others or by their own discovery. Such writers can in my opinion have no real acquaintance with the subject. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining.

Plato believed that living dialogue is the best form of instruction, and while he wrote many books, they are all in dialogue form—an "imitation," so to speak, of spontaneous speech between two individuals. While writing it down did violence to the spoken word, it was still of value if no one made the mistake of taking what was written seriously, as "truth" rather than at best a provocative. This comparison applies also to Plato's view of laws. The wise ruler, Plato maintained, cannot be bound by any laws. As Paul Friedlander explains in his *Introduction to Plato:*

> For laws are rigid and impose limits upon the fullness and complexity of life. "It is impossible that a simple principle be applied to a state of affairs which is never simple." To be sure, in order to make his task easier, the wise ruler will also use laws. But they must not limit him, and as he has laid them

> down, so he will disregard them according to his own judgment. Yet Plato is the last person to give a free rein to arbitrary caprice. The judgment of the ruler can only be based upon true wisdom speaking through him; and as long as there is no such true statesman, that is, in all the empirical states, the laws must be observed all the more strictly. For whoever disregards the laws would throw matters only into a worse state than that which the written laws seem to have brought about. After all, laws are the precipitation of much experience, and good counselors urged the people to write them down. Laws are "copies of the truth." Strictest observance of the laws is the "second-best journey," when the best is impossible. If ignorant people presume to live without a law, this would truly be a bad copy of that pure wisdom which, in the ideal state, makes written laws superfluous. Here the contrast between the two greatest Platonic writings on the state becomes apparent: the *Republic* constructs the kind of state in which true wisdom prevails and which, therefore, does not need laws; the *Laws*, proceeding along a "second way," since the first, the way "for gods and sons of gods," cannot be realized, is designed to preserve the structure of this second-best state through strictest rules.

Yet Plato wrote all those books! We can understand this if we take into consideration that again and again Plato warns his readers not to regard his books as forthright exposition of true philosophy.

> Thus may we say that even the writing of books is playfulness—play compared with the seriousness of Plato's philosophizing and teaching, and yet serious play—precisely because it is related, under the aspect of imitation, to genuine seriousness? Because it is also, in some way, a form of education—thus not only a mimesis of something already created, but rather a demiurgic creation with a view to the prototypes?

Plato lived at a time when the myths were losing their hold on the minds of the Greeks. Accordingly, he developed the dialectic to take their place, yet also invented new myths for his philosophic purposes, and, as Friedlander says, created the great myth of Socrates himself. The concluding paragraph of Friedlander's chapter on Plato's written work rises to lyrical heights:

> Human life a play, man a plaything—yet what ethical strength did the old Plato, who said this, expend upon this life and with what sense of responsibility did he always look upon it as a task! Legislation a play—but is not the picture of the old man unforgettable, writing laws despite the failure of all his political aspirations, laws for the founding of yet another Utopia, this time called Crete? Literature, the new form of art, the whole set of dramatic philosophical dialogues a play-—what aesthetic passion and seriousness went into this play for half a century. Thus we are perhaps not entirely untrue to his spirit if we interpret, in a preliminary way, the meaning of his written word according to the model of the world of appearances, which, to be sure, is only a *copy* of the eternal forms, but a copy of *eternal forms*, though afflicted with all the limitations of transitory existence, yet, to the eye which has learned to see. pointing toward eternal being and toward what is beyond being.

What is the educational effect of the myth of Socrates? One answer would be to recall something that happened years ago in a Great Books discussion group. The topics under consideration were three Platonic dialogues, the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Phaedo*, on the trial, imprisonment, and death of Socrates. This was the first cycle of discussion of the selections for the first year, and near the beginning. A woman new to the group, one who had not before read or learned about Socrates, exclaimed in wonder, "I never knew there was anyone who stood up for his principles and spoke out as Socrates did!" It was as though courage had been born in her, through that discovery. Socrates was for her what Galahad was for the child brought up on the stories of King Arthur's Round Table, what the tale of Sigurd the Volsung was for the children of the Norse, and what Rama and Arjuna became for the young of India.

The world of myth, of gods and heroes, is a world of moral forces. Its concern is with the decisions of human beings who are subject to the play of these forces, and mainly with choices by the best men and women within the memory of man.

Wondering about the modern idea of knowledge and what we regard as education,

Joseph Wood Krutch said in another of his essays in the book quoted earlier:

> According to one theory of history, the degree to which a civilization may be called "advanced" is measured by the amount of power it has at its disposal. Although we command power to an extent that would have been unimaginable at any previous time, we summon it by the exercise of abstract thought, and it appears (or rather doesn't appear at all) in the form of invisible forces and fluids. We used to see the water wheel working until we exchanged it for the somewhat less obvious steam engine, and then exchanged the steam engine for the electric motor that goes round and round for no visible reason. The vacuum tube in which almost nothing seems to be happening gives way to the transistor that performs its miracles soundlessly without motion or any visible or audible activity. So far as any naíve observer can see, it is pure hocus-pocus—not technology but mere magic. To most of those who snap switches and push buttons it is all as mysterious as it would be if they were summoning genii by rubbing a lamp. Even the engineer or theoretical physicist lives in a world which is retreating further and further from the reach of the five senses that remain useful chiefly, not to make any direct contact with his world, but merely to read the instruments by means of which that world may be inferred.

Approaching the prevailing opinions of the modern mind from another stance, Krutch says:

> If nature knows no purposes and makes no value judgments, and if, at the same time, man is himself a part of nature, then from whence came his concepts of purpose and value? If they came from nature, then they are part of nature. If they do not come from nature, then man himself is touched by something outside nature's realm. The concept of purposes must be either immanent or transcendent.

He quotes what seems an echo of Platonic thinking from Samuel Johnson:

> The truth is that knowledge of external nature, and the sciences which that knowledge requires or includes, are not the great or the frequent business of the human mind. Whether we provide for action or conversation, whether we wish to be useful or pleasing, the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong, the next is an acquaintance with the history of mankind, and with those examples which may be said to embody truth, and prove by events the reasonableness of opinions. Prudence and Justice are virtues and excellences of all times and of all places; we are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance.

Was Johnson right, or as a modern man might say, altogether wrong? Krutch goes on:

> Today the vast majority of thinking men assume without argument that "knowledge of external nature" is the great, the frequent, and almost the only legitimate business of men. It is, they think, upon such knowledge of external nature that both our safety and the prosperity by which we set so much store depend. We are not perpetually moralists and geometricians only by chance. We have become geometers perpetually and moralists only by chance—if at all.
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> The most obvious result of the decision to consider knowledge of external nature the greatest, most frequent, and perhaps the exclusive business of the human mind—actually quite well formulated before Johnson's time—is the physical world in which we live with all its wealth, power, and convenience, as well as its perhaps illusory security. The second most obvious result is the loss of Johnson's faith that "Prudence and Justice are virtues and excellences of all times and all places," with the substitution for it of the various relativisms which have persuaded us to believe that prudence and justice are merely the traditions of a given society and that a moralist is merely a man who has not yet learned that morals are only mores.
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> Although Johnson was no doubt thinking only of physical sciences, Darwinism is merely an extension of them. One more result of the conviction that "knowledge of external nature" is, in fact, "the great and exclusive business of the human mind" is the Darwinian world in which man is merely an animal, and the animal merely a machine.

Ample confirmation that this is indeed the outlook of the modern mind, and of education in our time, is provided by an article in the *American Scholar* for last summer. The writer, Christina Sommers, is a teacher of philosophy at Clark University, one who has had much experience of the now "maturing" generation. The present—perhaps prevailing—form of moral education in the schools amounts to "a system of moral education that is silent about virtue." There is something called "Values classification," in which

the student is taught "awareness of his preferences and his right to their satisfaction in a democratic society."

> Some typical questions are: "Which animal would you rather be: an ant, a beaver, or a donkey? Which season do you like best? Do you prefer hiking, swimming, or watching television?" In one strategy called "Values Geography," the student is helped to discover his geographical preferences; other lessons solicit his reaction to seat belts, messy handwriting, hiking, wall-to-wall carpeting, cheating, abortion, hit-and-run drivers, and a mother who severely beats a two-year-old child.

The advocates of this sort of "education" speak highly of the precious legacy we can leave to "generations of young people if we teach them to set their priorities and rank order the marvelous items in life's cafeteria."

> As a college teacher coping with the motley ideologies of high school graduates, I find this alarming. Young people today, many of whom are in a complete moral stupor need to be shown that there is an important distinction between moral and nonmoral decisions. Children are queried about their views on homemade Christmas gifts, people who wear wigs, and whether or not they approve of abortion or would turn in a hit-and-run driver as if no significant differences existed among these issues.

Will these children turn out anywhere near as well as the Greeks who absorbed, as it were, with their mother's milk, the stories of Perseus, Theseus, and Hector? Or the children of India brought up on the wonderful tales in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana?*

With our growing appreciation of the complexity of the natural world, has not our understanding, if not our information, about it become *mythical?* Is human excellence no longer of any account in education? One could say that people no longer believe in the old myths, and fabricating myths with didactic teaching in them cannot be the right thing to do. Perhaps so, but Plato managed to generate the functioning equivalent in his time for the inherited myths, and even if we are not Platos, some imitation of him may now be in order.

REVIEW
THE POET'S PARDON

THE world of mind—which writers have both the daring and the necessity to enter—is a place of both wonder and horror, of vision and doom. For some, this world barely exists, and is regarded as no more than shadowy invention, held to be the creation of "a disease of the imagination," as Max Müller said of myth. Yet there are those who maintain, with or after Nietszche, that the world of thought is the only access we have to the true world, and if we destroy that true world by denying it, even our world, the "apparent world," will fade into a meaningless jumble. Recognition of this generates the necessity of the writer to take seriously the quest of the mind for reality. The result of this quest is what we call literature.

The responsible explorer makes maps of his investigations. The writer's maps are books, sometimes great works of art, sometimes but echoes of the findings of others. The work of the critic is to tell one kind of book from the other—to say, in short, what is worth reading. This means that the good critic is himself an explorer as well as the inspector of other explorers' reports. If his task is done well he becomes an educator, using the materials he works with as provocatives to invention and discovery by the reader. This is a form of the dialogue advocated by Plato in which no one is passive—living speech and reflection by both author and reader.

A book that serves as introduction to the world—or worlds—of the mind of contemporary (more or less) writers is *Unless Soul Clap Its Hands* (Schocken, 1984, $17,95) by Erika Duncan, herself a novelist and one of the editors of *Book Forum.* This book presents "portraits" of ten writers whom she admires and has learned from—writers, we must confess, we had not heard of save for one, the English poet, Kathleen Raine. Erika Duncan tells about them and quotes from their work. She went to see most of them—those who are still alive—and records her impressions. The spirit of her undertaking is well conveyed by what she says in a concluding essay:

> Although we recognize that some of the finest literary criticism of the past was done by writers with a deep personal affinity for the works they wrote about, often even by close personal friends of the writers, we ask our critics to be absolutely impartial and uninvolved, so that the value judgments which they ultimately arrive at will be as pure as possible.
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> Perhaps if we could become less interested in placing value judgments and more concerned about the meaning of literature as a form of sharing of perceptions on all levels, our reviewers would be free again to write about the works they love the most, for indeed it is the reviewer who is most affected by a particular piece of writing who can best illuminate the journey towards the understanding of it, if true understanding is what we seek, rather than the arbitrary assigning of importance or the lack of it. . .
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> A more compassionate mode of criticism based upon affinities would also eliminate the tendency of most reviewers to concentrate upon the unsuccessful aspects of the works which are considered. The current system of evaluation and elaborate technical dissection creates a relatively safe field of operation for writings of recognizable merit which do not deviate greatly from the norms and standards which we have set up. However, it creates numerous dangers for truly innovative works, which often in their reaching out towards new forms are flawed, especially in the early stages of any given writer's development.
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> In striving toward the unattainable, which is a quality we recognize in all great works of art in retrospect, the writer must explore previously uncharted realms. The more cosmic the aspirations, the more possible pitfalls will be encountered in the shaping of the final product.

This gives a clear idea of what a writer may attempt. He has his longing, but hardly a clear idea of how his thinking about its fulfillment may be confirmed. Real risks may be involved, and he may be sure that the world will not understand them. The world of mind has not yet sufficient recognition for this. We might put here something said by William Butler Yeats of the poet—who is a writer—in an essay first published in 1918:

> He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs, for

> only when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall we be rewarded by that dazzling unforeseen wing-footed wanderer. We could not find him if he were not in some sense of our being and yet of our being but as water with fire, a noise with silence. He is of all things not impossible the most difficult, for that only which comes easily can never be a portion of our being. "Soon got, soon gone," as the proverb says. I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful when I understand I have nothing, that the ringers in the tower have appointed for the hymen of the soul a passing bell.
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> The last knowledge has often come most quickly to turbulent men, and for a season brought new turbulence. When life puts away her conjuring tricks one by one, those that deceive us longest may well be the wine-cup and the sensual kiss, for our Chambers of Commerce and of Commons have not the divine architecture of the body, nor has their frenzy been ripened by the sun. The poet, because he may not stand within the sacred house but lives amid the whirlwinds that beset its threshold, may find his pardon.

Among the writers who have won Erika Duncan's attention is William Goyen, who grew up in East Texas but whose novels and stories were "written over many decades of wandering far from home," and "are rich with the bizarre and wildly tragic quality that we have come to associate with Southern fiction." She found his work "strangely lacking in the cruelty and violence common to most other writing from the South." She relates:

> When I went to visit William Goyen, I asked him how it was that he had seen the same wild and weird violence that the other Southern writers saw, had heard the same irrational and scathing tales, yet wrote of them without a trace of wrath or of brutality. He told me he did not know exactly why that should be, only that he had always felt that he was there to help, that if he could enter the pain of others personally, he might be able to free them from it. When he was a child this overriding sense of mission got him into a lot of trouble, before he learned to channel it into his art. He was always "bringing strange, odd people home." If there was a crippled boy in his class, he would bring him home. His family had so much pain he was surrounded by it. In beginning to write, he had felt that he was called upon to be their messenger, otherwise they would never be heard.

Some weeks after talking to Goyen Erika Duncan had to take her eight-year-old daughter to the hospital for her broken nose to be repaired. While waiting there with the frightened child, she took out Goyen's short stories and read them aloud.

> The ward was filled with black and Puerto Rican children whose mothers could not be there, and I was the only adult in the room. As I began to read, a black girl who had hardly moved since I was there sat up in bed to hear the story of old Mrs. Woman, Sister Sammye, and Little Pigeon, three lonely old women who took turns being ghosts so that the haunted household that they formed would not have to feel empty. The black girl stuck her white bandaged hand taped up with intravenous feeding tubes through the bed bars in order to better support herself. She smiled a quiet smile and seemed to take each word I read into her being as a healing.

Tillie Olsen, born about 1919 to radical parents, grew up reading Tolstoy, Gorki, and Chekhov, and came of age as a writer in the thirties when many writers were touched by the poverty all about and the sense of need.

> There was a solidarity in thc struggle which broke down the barriers between people and broke through the mounting existential loneliness and feeling of detachment that had been building among American expatriates who had fled to Europe during the twenties, who were now returning because of the depression abroad. In order to get to know their country again, these expatriates began to travel and to talk to people. With WPA funds, artists, writers and filmmakers were sent to record lives that had previously remained unspoken and unseen. Suddenly there were photographed people who had never been photographed before. People who had never been to the theater before began to see plays and to create them.

During her childhood she heard the great socialist orators, some of whom stayed at her home when they came to Omaha to speak. She sat in Gene Debs' lap "and was one of three little girls chosen to give him red roses when he spoke at the town hall." From the poor side of town, she "crossed the tracks" to attend Omaha's only

academic high school, and there a beloved teacher "introduced her to Shakespeare and Edna St. Vincent Millay and to the prose rhythms in Sir Thomas Browne, De Quincey, and Coleridge, made sure that she was present when Carl Sandburg came to town to read and play on his guitar." She read all the 5-cent Haldeman Julius Blue Books, "met John Neihardt, the poet laureate of Nebraska who wrote *Black Elk Speaks."* Later her novel, *Yonnondio,* became the "on the road" for the "thirties."

> I asked her why Steinbeck had turned away after the thirties. She told me that the struggles of the farmworkers went on just as dramatically in Salinas Valley and elsewhere throughout the forties and fifties, the sixties, the seventies and still, only Steinbeck and others were not watching. As an aside she commented that the fame and the Nobel Prize "were not because of *Grapes of Wrath,* but because of the millions of human beings who made struggles of this kind and themselves visible. Remember, if not for the struggles of the thirties," she said, "and the interest they created, and the WPA Writers' Project, many books, photographs, and films would never have come into being. James Agee and Walker Evans would never have gone South and given us their imperishable *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* They, almost alone, brought to their work the rare mixture of quality, identification, and torment—torment because they knew they were only 'tourists'; they would write the book go back to their privileged life, and leave the people about whom they wrote in their unchanged lives."

Well, there is more, a lot more. Other writers with whom Erika Duncan had a brief but intense incarnation are Marguerite Young, Meridel Le Sueur, David Gascoyne, Charlotte Wolff, Olga Broumas, Mary Webb, and Djuna Barnes. What have all these artists in common? The capacity to put themselves in the place of another—feel with them, think with them, love with them, and suffer with them.

COMMENTARY
FACTS AND MEANINGS

THERE are bound to be those who will argue strongly against what Joseph Wood Krutch maintains about the superiority of the novelist's insight to the precision of the abstract statements of philosophers (see page one). We get more, he says in effect, from a story than from a bald statement of fact.

Well, assuming for the moment that Krutch is right, why should this be?

The best argument is to say simply that we are able to identify with the characters in stories, while no one is inclined to set himself down as a mere "fact." That, indeed, accounts for the great difficulty we have in thinking of ourselves as part of the universe described by science—there is nothing that sounds like ourselves in the physical account of "reality." There is nothing in the scientist's "Nature" which hopes, longs, strives, suffers—nothing for which we can have a fellow-feeling.

Meanwhile, today, the scientific journals and books represent accumulations of vast heaps of facts that we cannot possibly assimilate and don't know what to do with—even scientists complain about the excess of facts which has led to endless subdivision of science into specialties in which the workers lose touch with all but a narrowing segment of their field. Humans, after all, learn from meanings, not from facts.

But relying on myths, stories, allegories, and analogies will mean the retirement of the "public truth" of fact and science to second place, and think of the anxiety likely to result among people who feel helpless without an "authority" to quote. There are, one suspects, just as many "fundamentalists" among the materialists as among the true believers in Revelation. It is painful to think that we must begin to think for ourselves. Who feels competent to do this without assistance?

Well, we can still learn from one another, profit by each other's mistakes, examine each other's certainties. Some facts are at least more important than others. And we know that often deep meanings emerge from the just arrangement of facts. Facts, then, remain as the raw material of learning. Facts set the problems of life, while meanings enable them to be understood.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

THE BLIGHT OF SPECIALISTS

IN *High Country News* for last Dec. 24, George Sibley, a Colorado writer, tells about what he found out from two years of study of the U.S. Forest Service planning process for the National Forests. In a way, what he says shows the deadly effect of making some aspect of the environment and of our lives in it into a professional specialty. The more of a specialty it becomes, the less relation it has to people as human beings. This may be true of anything that is made into a "subject" requiring training in order to understand it. The Forest Service has to deal with all the tensions which arise from the fact that trees are both useful (commercial) and beautiful. Forests supply the wood that is made into our homes, but they also nourish us in indescribable ways through how they look, the atmosphere they create, and the majesty of their being.

Sibley asks, What will the forest—"my" forest, the Gunnison in western Colorado, where he has '"walked, skied, camped, climbed, hunted, collected firewood, worked, fought fires, loafed and invited my soul for 17 of the past 18 years"—look like after the plans of the agency are carried out? This is what he wants to know, and the Forest Service can't really tell him.

> In the case of my own Gunnison National Forest (with apologies to all the others who also claim it) neither the Forest Plan nor its Environmental Impact Statement were any help. There was a certain amount of verbiage about "visual resources" and a couple of pages in the "management activities" section about "visual resource management, but it was all couched in abstract and obscure jargon that seemed intolerably—and insensitively—vague and generic: it all had the sound of letter-of-the-law boilerplate, and was impossible to relate in any direct way to the unique qualities I treasure in the forest I know.

It becomes apparent that something beyond even bureaucratic genius is called for to overcome what happens to a forest in the eyes of professional management. Sibley is not an enemy of the Forest Service. He did his best to understand their problems and their difficulties. He has what amounts to high praise for USDA Agriculture Handbook No. 462, on landscape management and says it should be in every community library and read by all environmentalists. It makes uncommonly interesting reading, he says, and made him "more aware of how I look at things and better equipped to talk about what I see." After talking to Forest Service Landscape Architects and reading their plans, he said:

> In sum, I think that the landscape architects in the Forest Service are working up a pretty impressive array of tools for landscape inventory and management. If the Service can somehow refrain from its usual tendency to unveil such things as if they'd been brought down carved in stone . . . and truly make the program an accessible foundation for dialogue with people who "don't know much about forest management, but know what they like," then I believe it could go a long way in bridging that gap between scientific forest management and forest aesthetics.

Yet quite plainly, the problem will always remain for as long as we have subdivided lives and specialists to deal with the complex areas of our experience. We know how true this is—doctors treat diseases, not patients or people—bankers have charge of money and can allow themselves to be human only on rare occasions.

The same thing happens in education—a field where teachers are obliged to use a jargon relating to the various aspects of their work, with many words which awe and confuse the parents. John Holt often writes about this in *Growing Without Schooling.*

In last fall's *Et Cetera*, Gordon M. Pradl, professor of English education at New York University, applies a similar analysis to what is happening to the field in which he works. He says:

> As part of the ongoing debate over declining test scores our schools have been accused of graduating a generation of illiterates. Permissive educational practices have supposedly been catering to the self-gratifying whims of students, with the result that social cohesion and discipline seem to be disappearing completely. Amid the hyperbole and the rhetoric surrounding this sensitive issue is the inevitable seductive cry for simple and direct solutions. In general this cry has resulted in two related courses of action: a pervasive move toward *accountability* and wholesale programs of *back -to-the-basics.*
>
> Now it would be foolish to argue against the notion that our schools should be accountable for what and whether students learn; it would be equally foolish to suggest that "basics" should not be a fundamental component of a child's education. Nevertheless, what is lost sight of is that these two trends, working at the expense of the other demands placed on the curriculum in a free democratic society run the risk of reducing education into mere training, and in the process denigrating character development in favor of practical vocational preparation. Resolving these various claims on the curriculum is no easy task, yet how it is done finally will decide the nature of what passes for learning in America during the next decades. For what is at stake here is nothing less than how we define literacy—as a deciphering skill or a transforming process—and whether or not we become victims of the potential tyranny of testing and evaluation.

By "tyranny of testing" Prof. Pradl means that we become obliged to agree that education consists of measurable values: Can he *spell?* Are his sentences grammatical? Is his handwriting legible? Increasingly, the capacity to recognize meanings and implications, to use the imagination in considering a book or article, to have some genuine inspiration now and then—in short, education as "a transforming process" in behalf of character development—is left out of account. *That* kind of accountability is ignored because it is arguable, not measurable in simplistic terms.

This is the *moral* aspect of what may be gained or learned from a degree of command over the language we use, the resources it makes available. In this sense, literacy is a requirement of ethics. Prof. Pradl suggests that as we live our lives, we write our own stories. If we make a story worth repeating or remembering, we have the literacy of being human.

> For a story or myth is the first aesthetic creation and simultaneously the beginning of our ethical stance toward experience—our deciding this and not that is the way to act, in order to highlight the themes and issues that shape our character. If our commentary on the acts that make us what we are is never allowed to develop and consequently be socially criticized (and, before the widespread use of writing, in this context it would be proper to speak of oral literacy), we lose the power of the creating/judging cycle and thus become less than human, unable to follow the patterns of our very lives, and thus unable to even realize that we should be accepting responsibility for them.

This teacher is saying that when "English" is reduced to no more than a "skill" of communication, taught in the way that one learns, say, to use a typewriter, or memorizes the capital cities of the states, the psychological, philosophical, and moral treasures which become accessible from knowing English are no longer even in sight. English is not a "subject," but the passport to a definable country where the riches and the wonders of the world are stored. Eventually this starvation diet makes use of the skills of language ineffectual and mean, and finally it shows in the test scores we find so upsetting. Mr. Pradl says:

> . . . by becoming a "subject" English inherited all the inertia that such a classification seems to entail. From a living dialogue between author and reader, literature was transformed into a body of seemingly endless and unrelated facts . . . forced upon unwilling children in the form of rote memory work and mindless tests. The results of such English training become clear enough: I. A. Richards, for example, revealed in the 1920s that university students could barely extract a literal meaning from a poem, let alone offer an original and sensitive interpretation. There were exceptions to this bleak picture, and literature, of course, survived, but really only outside a pedagogical context. In the schools and universities, the literature that was passed on had had the life wrung out of it; simultaneously the profession of English became solidly entrenched.

What had happened? The institutions had adapted themselves to the low-grade standards always found in a mass society, where mediocrity is the measure of equality and becomes almost a practical requirement. Prof. Pradl is criticizing the same inevitable tendency in education that George Sibley found so oppressively meaningless in the verbiage of some of the U.S. Forest Service literature and reports.

What to do about it? Stop relying on institutions as the means for sustaining and renewing the human qualities of human beings.

FRONTIERS

The Price of Institutions

THE fourth 1984 issue of *Ecologist* (Worthyvale Manor Farm, Camelford, Cornwall PL 32 9TT, U.K.—$28 a year) has in it two articles which demonstrate what may be a law of human nature at a certain level of organization. The law is that the quest for truth, when embodied in institutions, eventually becomes subordinate to the progress and power of the institutions, amounting to a betrayal of the intentions of the founders and also of the public interest the institutions are supposed to serve. Since the existence of institutions is inevitable in any highly organized and complex society, this is a serious state of affairs. Fortunately, a growing number of people have become aware of this betrayal and are exposing it to readers—many of them sparked by the work of E. F. Schumacher, especially his *Resurgence* article (May-June, 1975), "The Critical Question of Size." He put the law in these words:

> The bigger the organization, the less it is possible for any member of it to act freely as a moral being. . . . As a result, big organizations often behave very badly, very immorally very stupidly and inhumanely, not because the people inside them are any of these things, but simply because the organization carries the load of bigness. The people inside them are then criticized by people outside, and such criticism' is of course justified and necessary, but it bears the wrong address. It is not the people of the organization but its size that is at fault.

What he means is that bigness increases human weakness and willingness to compromise and works against individual moral perception, characteristically suppressing it by one or another means. The *Ecologist* articles are case studies of the operation of this law.

The first is "Telling Them What They Want to Hear," by Charles W. Heckman, a hydrologist and writer on aquatic toxicology. He began his examination of institutional science about ten years ago, after reading a large volume reporting research on the feasibility of a mammoth dam across the Mekong River in Vietnam. The "data" collected for this report seemed to him almost impossible—impossible either to gather or confirm. The U.S. Agency for International Development wanted to build the dam, so steps were taken to produce favorable "data." The writer tells of conversations with other scientists who had become similarly skeptical of data in support of giant dams constructed with the support of the World Bank. He says:

> The measurements and analyses are supposedly performed by private firms for enormous fees, and there is little chance that an impartial and independent organization would ever be willing to expend the enormous effort to check the accuracy of the recorded values. The World Bank is interested in winning public support for its projects, and the bankers will certainly not look very closely at data that tell them everything is fine.

This is apparently how various big projects gain approval, these days. It was not always so. Heckman says:

> A few decades ago, the professional ethics of a scientist and fear of losing his reputation among his peers would probably have inhibited him from taking part in such a system. Today, with about 100 qualified applicants for every available job in the biological sciences, it is easy to recruit a black sheep by offering lucrative research contracts. Perhaps the white sheep still predominate, but the system is certainly one that seems to reward unethical behavior. For example, one man who provided falsified data to the FDA and probably to the EPA, as well, was not even disqualified for performing subsequent tests until the matter became public, while the EPA under its former administrator kept blacklists containing the names of eminent scientists reputed to be over concerned about environmental issues. Similar blacklists of scientists that have come to light with great regularity have tended to include persons who expressed unwanted views rather than those found wanting in integrity. Obviously, "loyalty" and "team spirit" are beginning to count more in government than professional integrity. As the former head of the EPA, Mrs. Burford, said in explanation of why she dismissed a number of scientists from an advisory panel: "Oh no, they are good scientists, except we want our scientists and not their scientists." A recent summary of the situation in the British journal, *Nature*, carried the provocative title, "Is Science Really a Pack of Lies?"

The writer says at the end of his article that only the scientists themselves can alter this situation by refusing to "sell out" to agencies and organizations with vested interests.

The other article in the *Ecologist* is by Alwyn Jones—"Alternative Medicine—Alternative Society." He champions what is often called "Holistic Medicine" in contrast with the conventional medical approach based on the Cartesian view of nature and man. The latter has become a fairly effective monopoly by reason of the prestige of science and the association of medicine with scientific method. "The scientific basis of modern medicine," he says, "is reflected in its criteria for making diagnoses in which health is assumed unless there are *readily observable* physical symptoms in the individual which indicate the presence of disease." The result has been a model of "normality" as a biological organism in a state of health "defined almost exclusively by physical criteria"—criteria which can be observed and are measurable, and therefore "scientific." Mr. Jones, who teaches sociology at the Polytechnic of Wales, points out that the institutionalization of this view of scientific medicine has given power to medical orthodoxy, claiming that its form of training is "the only criterion for the right to practice medicine" licensed by the State.

> The institutionalization of scientific medicine has given doctors the power to ensure that their definition of health—i.e. the absence of physical symptoms of disease—prevails in the community as a whole. Moreover as the lay person is not privy to the jealously guarded knowledge and skills upon which medicine is based the sick person must submit himself/herself—as a "patient"—to whatever therapeutic administration is considered necessary to get the "machine" back to work again. This mechanistic view of health, based on biological reductionism, fragments a broader perspective or definition of health which would include in addition to the physical, its spiritual, moral, social and mental dimensions.