

BEYOND DISPUTE

THE simplicity of a passage in the *Phaedrus*, Plato's dialogue between Socrates and a young man who discourses about Love, may be reason enough for overlooking that here Socrates sets the problem—the central problem—of the modern world of the twentieth century. Shall we, one wonders, ever get beyond the Greeks? It cannot be impossible, yet it seems certain that to get beyond them we must first understand them. The passage we have in mind is this:

Socrates: Well now, is not the following assertion obviously true—that there are some words about which we all agree and others about which we are at variance?

Phaedrus: I think I grasp your meaning, but you might make it still plainer.

Socrates: When someone utters the word "iron" or "silver" we all have the same object before our minds, haven't we?

Phaedrus: Certainly.

Socrates: But what about the words "just" and "good"? Don't we diverge, and dispute not only with one another but with our own selves?

Phaedrus: Yes indeed.

Socrates: So in some cases we agree, and in others we don't?

Phaedrus: Quite so.

Socrates: Now in which of the cases are we more apt to be misled, and in which is rhetoric more effective?

Phaedrus: Plainly in the case where we fluctuate.

Socrates: Then the intending student of the art of rhetoric ought, in the first place, to make a systematic division of words and get hold of some mark distinguishing the two kinds of words, those namely in the use of which the multitude are bound to fluctuate, and those in which they are not.

Phaedrus: To grasp that, Socrates, would certainly be an excellent piece of discernment.

Socrates: And secondly, I take it, when he comes across a particular word he must realize what

it is, and be swift to perceive which of the two kinds the thing he proposes to discuss really belongs to.

Phaedrus: To be sure.

The two agree that Love belongs with the disputed terms and continue their discussion.

Here our interest is in the category of disputed terms—or disputed ideas, whatever the words used to embody them. Science, as we know—the science that began with Aristotle—is the mode of thinking which refuses—and is unable—to use disputed terms. Its realities are things which can be publicly shown to be capable of definition in terms to which all can agree. Both iron and silver are such things, and a list of all of them would be endless, so that science, it seems clear, must go on forever. Without, to be sure, realizing its consequence, Galileo declared that science need be concerned only with the objective things that can be measured and manipulated, and with powers that we can learn to use and control. The thrill of the success of his observations and experiments fascinated all Europe. These are the things, the thinkers said, that we can really know. At this point "progress" was withdrawn from the category of disputed terms and by common consent was made to mean the advance of scientific knowledge and power. Little by little, also by common consent, scientific knowledge came to be identified as human knowledge—all that we can be sure of, and know.

Matters of justice and the good were still talked about, since the human heart demands that we try to understand them, but these ideal conceptions had lost their roots and were eventually traced to what seemed their origin in human convention. Finally they were held to be mere matters of opinion, endlessly relative, and never, therefore, to be resolved into certainties except in personal conviction. Perhaps, the scientists said, we'll get around to ethics after we

know more about the world and about the objects we call humans. Science must come first. Otherwise we'll just sit around and argue.

Today this view has triumphed almost completely. While dissenters on the sidelines speak up, their arguments and pleas have no noticeable effect on the seats of power. There are of course frequent genuflections to freedom, justice, and the moral order, but the practice of states, of industrialists and merchants, and of the professions (with occasional exceptions) is guided toward quite other goals. The broad human and social result is well described by Erich Kahler (in *The Disintegration of Form in the Arts*):

The overwhelming preponderance of collectivity with its scientific, technological and economic machinery, the daily flow of new discoveries and inventions that perpetually change aspects and habits of thought and practice, the increasing incapacity of individual consciousness that operates anonymously and diffusely in our social and intellectual institutions—all this has shifted the center of gravity of our world from existential to functional, instrumental, and mechanical ways of life. . . .

For a long time, human communication could be seen to be shifting from a discourse between the centers of inner life that is between people as human beings, to dealings between their functional peripheries, their occupational concerns. . . . In this process, functional rationality has gained the upper hand so as to displace human reason. Scholars and scientists, who in their research control most intricate rational operations, may be seen sometimes lacking all sense of reason when faced with issues of general human import.

It follows that while people go on using the tools and weapons provided by science, there is growing distrust of scientific authority. But because "the discourse between people as human beings" has become not only weak, but intellectually as well as practically difficult—we have no common language to give orderly use to "disputed terms" and the public media of communication are, as a recent writer has said, "devoted almost entirely to selling mindless self-indulgence"—we have begun to live in a world which has no moral authority. The mandate of brute force is rapidly filling the vacuum.

Meanwhile, as Hannah Arendt made clear more than twenty years ago, the famous "objectivity" of the scientific method has been dissolving in subjective mists of its creators. In evidence she quotes from Werner Heisenberg's *Philosophical Problems of Nuclear Science* (1952):

The most important result of nuclear physics was the recognition of the possibility of applying quite different types of natural laws, without contradiction, to one and the same physical event. This is due to the fact that within a system of laws which are based on certain fundamental ideas only certain quite definite ways of asking questions make sense and thus, that such a system is separated from others which allow different questions to be put.

In other words, the questions men ask of nature determine the "objective" result. There are not, as Hannah Arendt says, "answers without questions." The scientists are the arbiters of objectivity, not Nature.

For this, and a multitude of other reasons, there is now a slow and faltering return to the inward realities of which, in Plato's time as in ours, we speak in "disputed terms." This, interestingly, although not unexpectedly, amounts to a return to the path chosen by Socrates. His way was the exact opposite of the course mapped by Aristotle, Galileo, and the legions of others since who agree that nature must first be understood. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates and Phaedrus take a walk in the country. They pick a place to sit, and Phaedrus asks if this spot was where the northwind god, Boreas, "seized Orithyia from the river." Socrates says "it was about a quarter of a mile lower down," with "an altar dedicated to Boreas close by." Phaedrus asks him if he believes the story about these two, and Socrates replies:

I should be quite in fashion if I disbelieved it, as the men of science do. I might proceed to give a scientific account of how the maiden, while at play with Pharmacia, was blown by a gust of Boreas down from the rocks hard by, and having thus met her death was said to have been seized by Boreas though it may have happened on the Areopagus, according to

another version of the occurrence. For my part, Phaedrus, I regard such theories as no doubt attractive, but as the invention of clever, industrious people who are not exactly to be envied, for the simple reason that they must then go on and tell us the real truth about the appearance of centaurs and the Chimera, not to mention a whole host of such creatures, Gorgons and Pegasuses and countless other remarkable monsters of legend flocking in on them. If our skeptic, with his somewhat crude science, means to reduce every one of them to the standard of probability, he'll need a deal of time for it. I myself have certainly no time for the business, and I'll tell you why, my friend. I can't yet "know myself," as the inscription at Delphi enjoins, and so long as that ignorance remains it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters. Consequently I don't bother about such things, but accept the current beliefs about them, and direct my inquiries, as I have just said, rather to myself, to discover whether I really am a more complex creature and more puffed up with pride than Typhon, or a simpler, gentler being whom heaven has blessed with a quiet, un-Typhonic nature.

This was the project of Socrates, throughout his life. Interestingly, at Plato's hands, he pursued it by trying to give an appropriate semi-certainty to the meanings of disputed terms, most of all to Justice.

What hope was there—and is there any today—for some success in this undertaking?

The difficulty is plain enough. What is justice? Is it "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"?—which seems now to be the mainstay of the apologists of foreign policies. Or is it making the punishment fit the crime, as jurists are supposed to do? Socrates may have thought that justice could be demonstrated by reasoning with an offender, or with one who defends the rule of might. Then there is the Gandhian rule of harmlessness and self-sacrifice as the means of disclosing justice to those who refuse its requirements.

Well, who is right? Is there a sense in which they are all "right," each in his way? This seems to destroy the meaning of being right. But if we cannot give up the meaning of being or doing right, the question becomes: How can our

knowledge of right or justice be improved? And how, if the possibility be admitted, will we know that there has really been an improvement?

At this point the question grows ridiculous. We'll recognize the improvement from the fact that our lives are better, our society better, and the clash of conflict over disputed terms has diminished. The dispute about what is justice will not so often become the ground of conflict because we shall begin to understand the different levels of determining justice and why the formulas seem so opposed. Opinions as to such matters will begin to converge from perception of wider horizons, reducing contention. Socratic dialogue—called the dialectic—is one means of opening up horizons.

In the discourse of reason, first principles determine the reach of the horizon. Socrates went about Athens asking those who wanted to talk to him: "What are your first principles?" The idea was to see the human condition and human resources whole—first in one's mind, and then, to the extent that reason determines behavior, men would become wise and just. Argument, Plato indicates, is useless unless there is a change of stance.

Fortunately, there are other means of improving the use of disputed terms. One can read, converse, and reflect; one can learn from experience in various ways. One may come to the conclusion that there is a plateau of consensus concerning justice and the good where originality of conception and analogical resemblance are more important than factual agreement. Here we inspire and fertilize one another instead of submitting to the coercions of finite fact. In the dialogue we have been quoting, Socrates, on his walk with Phaedrus, chooses a resting place beneath a plane tree, waxing eloquent in praise of its beauty and the charm of the spot. Phaedrus exclaims that Socrates sounds like a stranger to the scene, odd in a native of Athens. Socrates replies:

You must forgive me, dear friend; I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do. Yet you seem to have discovered a recipe for getting me out.

Socrates, one could say, was the founder of the civilization of dialogue, which has continued down the centuries since, sometimes interrupted, always more or less hemmed in, but never allowed to die. The places where it goes on are usually cities, which explains Socrates' fondness for them, but what someone might have said to him is that there are countrymen who renew and refresh the life of the dialogue. These visitors to the city have learned from trees, flowers, and open country. But how did they learn? With whom did they pursue dialogue? With themselves, no doubt. Indeed, Socrates declared this dialogue the most important of all.

Today a three-cornered dialogue is proceeding—of humans with themselves and with nature. The disputed terms are taking on fresh shapes of meaning and creating a harmony which can be heard above the din of the modern world. A new language, made resonant by the joy and pain intensely felt through experience of both ourselves and the world, is slowly evolving, and this language brings degrees of reconciliation to the disputes about justice, good, beauty, and truth.

In a letter to Hawthorne, Herman Melville wrote of the feeling which came over him, "lying on the grass on a warm summer day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling." At such moments one becomes part of the world, and begins to think like the world. Meaning flows into the heart and is given form and speech by the mind. Wendell Berry's book, *The Unforeseen Wilderness*, is a continuous musing on this sense of identity. While wandering through the Red River Gorge in Kentucky, he saw the slow decline of the surrounding country, considered the larger disaster threatened by the Army Engineers, and asked:

What will cure us? At this point it seems useless to outline yet another idea of a better community, or to invoke yet another anthropological model. These already abound, and we fail to make use of them for the same reason that we continue to destroy the earth: we remain for the most part blind to our surroundings. What the world was, or *what we have agreed that it was*, obtrudes between our sight and what the world is. If we do not see clearly what the nature of our place is, we destroy our place. . . .

The effort to clarify our sight cannot begin in the society, but only in the eye and in the mind. It is a spiritual quest, not a political function. Each man must confront the world alone, and learn to see it for himself. . . .

And so, coming here, what I have done is strip away this camouflage, the human facade that usually stands between me and the universe, and I see more clearly where I am. . . . Alone here, among the rocks and the trees, I see that I am alone among the stars. . . . And so I have come here to enact—not because I want to but because, once here, I cannot help it—the loneliness and the humbleness of my kind. I must see in my flimsy shelter, pitched here for two nights, the transience of capitols and cathedrals. In growing used to this place, I will have to accept a humbler and truer view of myself than I usually have.

Later, seeing more trash—"leftovers of what Edward Abbey calls the world's 'grossest national product'"—he mused again:

To be ashamed of one's species is a strange and sickening emotion. It goes against the deepest instincts of kinship and self-regard. And yet it is an emotion that I—and I think a great many others—have to contend with more and more often. When I think of the near-perfection of industrial and recreational pollution, of the near-universality of armed hatred and prejudice, of our scientists' ecstatic dance in the light of the first atomic explosion, of the utter destruction of land for its timber and coal—then I feel such a heavy disgust that I look at the so-called lower animals with envy. I would gladly give up several of the larger benefits of "progress" for the assurance that none of my kind had ever subjugated another people or destroyed a mountain or a watershed or napalmed a child. . . . I would try to get rid of such emotions if I did not recognize their truth. In these times they are a part of the responsibility of an honest person. I believe that I would be a dangerous man if I did *not* feel them.

The book ends with a quiet adventure. Berry, driving along, saw the mouth of a hollow he had not been in. He started out on foot with a notebook and a map, and soon the woods closed him in.

Where I am going I have never been before. And since I have no destination that I know, where I am going is always where I am. When I come to good resting places, I rest. I rest whether I am tired or not because the places are good. . . .

Somewhere, somewhere behind me that I will not go back to, I have now lost my map. At first I am sorry, for on these trips I have always kept it with me. I brood over the thought of it, the map of this place rotting into it along with its leaves and its fallen wood. The image takes hold of me, and I suddenly realize that it is the culmination, the final insight, that I have felt impending all through the day. It is the symbol of what I have learned here, and of the process: the gradual relinquishment of maps, the yielding of knowledge before the new facts and the mysteries of growth and renewal and change. What men know and presume about the earth is part of it, passing always back into it, carried on by it into what they do not know. Even their abuses of it, their diminishments and dooms belong to it. . . .

The thought of the lost map fallen and decaying like a leaf among the leaves, grows in my mind to the force of a cleansing vision. As though freed of a heavy weight, I am light and exultant here in the end and the beginning.

Even disputes live on usefully as structures of richer meaning.

REVIEW

CELEBRATIONS OF CHOICE

FOR a single word to describe the work of Rene Dubos only "benign" will serve. As scientist and humanist, Dr. Dubos gives his readers heart. In *Celebrations of Life* (McGraw-Hill, 1981), a book which rambles and instructs, he mingles reflective and colorful comment with bits and pieces of his own life. His tough-mindedness as a scientist comes out strongly in a criticism of the mechanistic assumptions of physical science as adopted by biologists and psychologists. Commenting on Edward O. Wilson's declaration (in *Human Nature*) that human behavior is "the circuitous technique by which human genetic material has been and will be kept intact," that "Morality has no other demonstrable ultimate function," and on the Behaviorist claim that humans are entirely shaped by conditioning, Dr. Dubos says:

Although behaviorism and sociobiology are scientifically poles apart in the biological mechanisms they invoke, they derive from a similar attitude with regard to human life. With either explanation, the human being loses identity as a *subject* since it is shaped and governed by forces over which it has no control. The person becomes a mere *object*, whose behavior and fate do not involve conscious choices. Human beings become products of "chance and necessity" for whom freedom and dignity are just meaningless concepts.

Dr. Dubos then makes his own declaration—that he will devote himself to "the characteristics that differentiate human beings from animals." Even animals, he finds, give evidence of the exercise of freedom, which increases up the evolutionary ladder. Humans, however, he says, "have the greatest degree of freedom and therefore the greatest range of creative adaptability."

There is a scientific barrier to agreement with this view but Dr. Dubos describes and then jumps over it:

There does not seem to be any way to demonstrate scientifically that we are endowed with freedom. In fact, philosophical reasons make it likely that it is not possible for the human brain to achieve a complete understanding of its own working and that the existence of free will must therefore be accepted on faith, as an expression of the living experience. In any case, lack of scientific proof does not weigh much against the obvious manifestations of free will in human life and perhaps in other forms of life. As Samuel Johnson wrote two centuries ago, "All science is against freedom of the will; all common sense for it."

He concludes this section:

I shall therefore take free will for granted, simply because I believe that human beings constantly make choices and take decisions that give the lie to absolute biological and behavioral determinism, but I shall nevertheless first consider certain aspects of human life in which the person involved cannot control either the environment or its effects, and therefore has little if any chance of manifesting freedom of response or action.

This seems a repetition of the old philosophical axiom that freedom is knowledge of necessity—if you know what you *must* do, you have freedom in what is left. For example, if you are a human being, you *must* go through adolescence. You can try to put it off or, once in it, determine to stay there, or otherwise mess it up, but there is no way of *avoiding* it. Adolescence is part of the necessary course of human experience. We also have to die, no matter how much we are opposed to death. If we take care of our health, we may live to a ripe and productive old age, but the final infirmity will arrive. Knowledge of these necessities makes possible a free life. If you want to use a ladder, you must step on the rungs. The freedom to climb depends on them.

Another parallel is with the rule of the general semanticists, who say: Symbols have meaning only in contexts. The context of freedom is made of the inner and outer frameworks of our lives. Our use of the frameworks gives freedom its day-to-day meaning.

Some of this book is about how we treat the environmental framework, and what the results are or promise to be. He remarks that Americans have been rich in sources of energy—having a lot of wood, coal, petroleum, and natural gas—making it easier for us than for Europeans to spend energy freely. "As far back as a century ago," Dr. Dubos says, "the energy consumption per capita was already much higher in North America than in Europe."

He turns to the general effects of massive use of petroleum and gas by the industrialized countries:

It has converted them from predominantly agricultural and village-centered social structures to technological and urban-centered societies. .

It has enormously increased the number of occupational specialties and created new problems for the coordination and control of the work of specialists.

It has sharply reduced the participation of children in familial activities and thereby weakened familial institutions.

It has rendered obsolete many of the former functions of villages, communities, and neighborhoods.

It has made corporate and government bureaucracies the dominant institutions in management of ourselves.

It has rendered societal management more complex and thereby increased hostility to all forms of public authority.

It has made all high-energy societies much more vulnerable to various types of social breakdown.

Page after page describes other disasters wrought by the petroleum economy in the welfare of the planet, in the health of humans, and in agriculture, through nitrate fertilizers and pesticides. Dr. Dubos remarks that since present methods of large-scale farming are unlikely to be made more "efficient," production costs of agricultural products will therefore increase with the cost of energy." He concludes:

It is likely, on the other hand, that shortages of energy and its high cost will bring about beneficial changes in agricultural practices. The massive use of

heavy equipment, of chemical fertilizers and of synthetic pesticides results in much ecological damage; soils become compacted and lose their humus; waterways are contaminated by erosion and chemical effluents, fixation of nitrogen by bacteria is reduced by nitrogen fertilizers. More emphasis on environmental and biological considerations, based on modern ecological knowledge, could lead to a decrease of energy use in agriculture and create scientifically the equivalent of the empirical practices through which the peasants of old maintained soil fertility generation after generation. It might have the additional merit of improving the picturesque quality of landscapes through better adaptation of agriculture to the geological, topographical and other natural characteristics of each particular region. . . .

The energy crisis will be a blessing if it compels us to develop healthier and richer ways of life by giving fuller expression to the adaptive and creative potentialities of natural systems and of the human organism. . . . More importantly, the necessity to change will stimulate the use of imagination in redesigning society to make it more human. The quality of life is determined less by the mineral and energy resources available to society than by the resources and the energy of the human mind.

It seems obvious that here Dr. Dubos is relying on human freedom to make such changes. He might ask, What else will lead to doing what needs to be done?

The book is rich with encouragement in these terms. The author draws on history. One practical result of a determined application of human will was the most stable phase of the Roman Empire, due almost entirely to Augustus. The good of his rule was not unmixed, but in Gibbon's view "the human race had never been happier than during that period, approximately a hundred years after Augustus's death." The structures he created endured and functioned well for three centuries. Of greater interest to present-day readers are the human accomplishments in harmonious and productive relations with the natural world. As a result of measures taken by the London City Council since 1957, the sunshine over the city has increased by fifty per cent; "the songbirds mentioned in Shakespeare can once more be heard in the city parks, and salmon—that

most fastidious of fish—has returned to the Thames."

Dr. Dubos gives case after case of human intervention to reverse the drift of environmental abuse and decline.

The most dramatic, perhaps, is a story of Long Island:

Jamaica Bay, a large Atlantic bay adjacent to John F. Kennedy airport but within New York City, used to be so polluted as to be the most degraded area of the urban environment. Yet it has been restored to such an excellent state of ecological health that it is now the richest bird sanctuary on the Atlantic coast. One of the most interesting aspects of this renovation process is that it was begun by a minor civil servant, Mr. Herbert Johnson, the son of a gardener, who on his own initiative without official instructions, made it a practice to plant suitable grasses, shrubs and trees on the islands of garbage in the bay. The growth of these plants attracted bird life and this eventually encouraged the urban authorities to develop more elaborate plans for the saving of the bay.

The illustrations of human ingenuity in the restoration and maintenance of the land go on and on. The literal *building* of their coastal land by the Netherlanders, from the seventeenth century on, with the draining in this country of the Zuider Zee—a large body of water made shallow by silt deposits from rivers—turning the submerged land into "polders" rich in soil for agriculture, has lengthy description. Holland is indeed a man-made country, and so is the Ile de France region where René Dubos was born.

A parting thought of the author:

Science and technology provide us with the *means* to create almost anything we want, but the development of means without worthwhile *goals* generates at best a dreary life and may, at worst, lead to tragedy. Some of the most spectacular feats of technology call to mind Captain Ahab's words in Melville's *Moby Dick*: "All my means are sane, my purpose and my goals mad." . . . the demonic force is not scientific itself, but our propensity to consider means as ends—an attitude symbolized by the fact that we measure success by the gross national product rather than by the quality of life and of the environment.

The theme of this book is expressed on the last page: "Wherever human beings are involved, trend is never destiny because life starts anew for them, with each sunrise."

COMMENTARY **ONE REAL PROBLEM**

THERE is a direct connection between the books (or "nonbooks") the chain bookstores are now demanding and selling to the public (see page 6)—"more schlock saga, regency romance, and nonfiction devoted to sex, dieting, and money"—and Socrates' insistence that self-knowledge is more important than scientific theories. These bookstores are no longer in the book business. They are in the temptation business, which pays better, they have found, than serious inquiries into ideas and their meaning, or works of literary excellence. And a great many publishers have succumbed to the demand of such stores. They would probably explain that they have no choice if they want to stay in business.

Socrates, however, would remind them that, as Celeste West says: "The splendor of book publishing is that it is often founded on a personal moral commitment with passion for truth, culture, and social responsibility." Wendell Berry, in turn (see page 7), would argue that activities which make one "ashamed of one's species" should be left strictly alone. He, incidentally, has shown in practice that writers need not be suppliers to the temptation business in order to survive.

Miss West says: "Our values, opinions, tastes, and voting habits are much in the hands of very few corporations who control them." There is truth in this, but the "our" is misleading. Obviously, those corporations don't control *her* "values, opinions, tastes." She means that they control the likes and views of *other* people who don't seem to know any better, and she wants laws to slow down mergers among publishers, so that they don't get so big and powerful, and therefore irresponsible.

But since when, one must ask, have the big boys been controlled by law? Sumptuary laws never work well, as the Food and Drug Administration has proved. Prohibition, we nearly all admit, was a failure which made criminals out

of a lot of once decent people. There is only one real problem: How do you elevate taste? Or, as Socrates put it: Can virtue be taught?

CHILDREN

. . . and Ourselves

THE BONDS OF CONCERN

DESPITE the fact that censorship—as with "loyalty oaths"—has never worked, present-day schools around the country, under pressure from organizations like Moral Majority and the Christian Broadcasting Network, are removing disapproved books from their libraries, even minor classics such as Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. This is bad enough, but what seems far worse is a *New York Times* report that in Plano, Tex., as a result of parental anxiety, "teachers no longer ask students their opinions because to do so, they have been told, is to deny absolute right and wrong." There is also, in some towns—probably only a few—a drive "to revise such things as the open classroom, new math and creative writing, asserting that these relatively unstructured academic approaches break down standards of right and wrong and thus promote rebellion, sexual promiscuity and crime."

It would probably be useless to suggest to these people that book-banning and suppression of questions are tried and true formulas for rebellion, or that the efforts of these Protestant sects run counter to Luther's slogan, "Every man his own priest." To the curious and enterprising young, forbidden books are likely to mean precocious delights, and discouraging their questions will only remove still further the content and practices of education from the realities of everyday life.

While it is true enough, as some of these "religious" groups maintain, that "secular humanism" is largely grounded in the materialist or agnostic assumptions of the scientific method, and that this outlook pervades the curriculum of the public schools, the proposed adoption of Bible-based "science" is a hopeless alternative, more likely to result in the anarchy of no assumptions-at-all for the foundation of learning. The teachers of science, we may assume, at least try to be responsible reasoners, and the undeniable virtue of science, whatever its faults or omissions, is its spirit of self-correction.

Organized religion is notably lacking in this quality. Institutional religion is modified or liberalized only by "revolutionists" such as Martin Luther—or, we might add, Thomas Paine.

The intrusion of dogma into public education will probably hasten this historical result. Meanwhile, we may be grateful to the American Civil Liberties Union for defending the right of all Americans to religious and intellectual freedom, even when the importance of this right is neither understood nor appreciated. The United States is a secular state, for excellent reasons which the Founding Fathers well understood, and which can be demonstrated from history. Separation of church and state is a rough and ready arrangement that may be in some ways paradoxical, but the best we can do at the political level to prevent the worst sort of psychological tyranny. Incipient religious tyrants cannot be expected to recognize this need.

The really good things in education almost always come—or begin—with the activity of individuals who have not been ordered by law or told by pressure groups to do what they must or ought to do. An example is the teaching carried on by Frank F. Fowle, a young Illinois lawyer who fell in love with Homer's *Iliad* and is now acting out its essential drama for high school and college audiences. A story in the *Wall Street Journal* for last Oct. 21 relates:

Mr. Fowle certainly didn't plan a zealot's life. He performed in his high-school play, but didn't display any hints of ham in college or in two hitches in the Navy. After following a family tradition and entering law school at St. Louis's Washington University, however, he received the word.

It started innocently enough, with a \$125 investment in a used set of "Great Books of the Western World." That introduced him to Homer. Then came a law class in 1978, in which he tasted the "delectable joy of performing" from actor Richard Burton's recording of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. "He enlivened mere words," Mr. Fowle recalls wistfully.

Hopelessly smitten, he memorized the poem and convinced the university's student-activities office to pay him \$15 for a performance of it. After that he

adapted "The Iliad" to the stage and started marketing it.

The *Wall Street Journal's* insistence on financial data and Fowle's "business" approach to his future career cannot spoil the account of what actually happened. Fowle's devotion to Homer meant that his law career, which he tried for a year to combine with acting, was left behind.

"I was returning from a particularly satisfying performance in Ottawa, Ill., and I said to myself, 'Frank, this is more fun and you're doing more of value,'" he recalls. So he hit the road, bringing students Homer's tale of the Trojan War and of Achilles, the bravest of the Greek warriors. "I want to entertain and educate," he explains. "I could talk about Achilles till the cows come home."

How does he perform? He begins by putting on a black, long-sleeved shirt and black slacks. Then—

For 50 minutes, he dramatizes the centuries-old war and plays all its characters with a resonant, pliable voice as his only prop. He swoops in circles to simulate a chariot race, and extends his hands as Priam, exhorting son Hector not to challenge Achilles. . . . Finally, as Achilles, he hurls an invisible spear and then, as Hector, catches it in the neck and collapses, dead. . . . Drenched in sweat, Mr. Fowle proceeds to a 45-minute seminar for English, humanities, and drama students.

The principal of one Illinois school praised his performance highly, saying, "We can bring in a rock band, and when the students leave at the end of the day, they aren't any different than when they came to school." Another principal said that the students of a school in Peebles, Ohio, "were much more attentive than when we showed the movie 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid'."

These young people will have a lot more than hearsay to recall when, later on in their lives, Homer is mentioned. Some of them might even go to Homer's texts. "Nothing matches Homer," Fowle declares. "Not many people talk about virtue any more; virtue is the only true way to happiness."

One could say that Mr. Fowle is in his way a natural popularizer, a very good one, and thank him for what he is doing. This brings us to another effective popularizer who works at another level.

Robert C. Solomon, who teaches philosophy at the University of Texas in Austin, also writes for the newspapers. In the *Los Angeles Times* for Nov. 24, 1981, he presented an essay on Spinoza that makes you read it more than once.

Born in Spain in 1632, Spinoza migrated with his Jewish parents to Holland to escape the Spanish Inquisition. Wanting to understand the mishaps of human experience and to put his life in order, he went at it in an unusual way. Unlike most others, then and now, Solomon says, "he insisted on doing it all by himself, instead of accepting the ready-mixed prescriptions for piety combined with selfishness which then, as now, were popular."

The central point of Spinoza's philosophy was mutual toleration and understanding. He decried the attempts of every sect to declare itself the "true" religion, and he developed a conception of God that could be common to us all, from our own, quite different perspectives. The problem was, his God was not the prescription God. . . .

Spinoza's philosophy, and his conception of God, ultimately comes down to just this: The cosmos is a single "substance," and this, nothing outside of the cosmos, is what we call "God." We are each part of God insofar as we are "modifications" of that one infinite substance.

This got Spinoza into trouble, of course. The feeling of virtuous separateness in possessing unique truth was the basis of seventeenth-century religion, even the "reformed" religion, and the philosopher was punished for his daring. Yet countless thousands have been uplifted and inspired by his conceptions, as Solomon says. That was Spinoza's great gift to posterity. Einstein, for one, was his admirer. The writer concludes:

We are all part of a single grand concern—Spinoza sometimes calls it "life"—and our differences and disagreements are not cause for antagonism or suspicion but rather the bonds of concern that draw us together.

And today, on Spinoza's 349th birthday [Nov. 24, 1981] that is a lesson worth remembering.

FRONTIERS "Corpses Of Meaning"

FRONTIERS" emerge in various ways. In *Psychology Today* for last July, Bruno Bettelheim, writing about the dull uniformities of the "readers" used in the schools for the early grades, declared that "our children are treated like idiots." Choosing a particular book as an example, he said: "Reading should stimulate thinking, but this reader can't stimulate thinking." He blames the publishers, and they, when asked why their children's texts are so uninteresting, so artificial, so endlessly commonplace, blame the school boards around the country; and the school boards, of course, blame the parents, who might object to the unorthodoxies of a little imagination.

Bottom-line economics is also involved. Bettelheim says:

It takes up to \$20 million to prepare these terribly expensive series, and in order to recoup their investment, publishers must sell all over the country. But boards of education are always afraid of criticism. If there's not a bond issue, there's a school board election. So what happens? You include something that pleases each group and you get a reader that pleases nobody.

That, surely, defines some kind of frontier, and its wider outline is sketched by Celeste West in an article in the December-January *North Country Anvil*, "Where Have All the Publishers Gone?—Gone to Conglomerates Every One." Complete with aggressive text and revealing tables, this writer tells which big publishers have been bought by conglomerates and names the publishers that own or have recently bought other publishers—there have been over three hundred publishing mergers during the past 20 years. "The Census Bureau," Miss West says, "figures only 50 publishers are actually making 70 per cent of all book sales; the Association of American Publishers says 50 to 75 per cent." But industry experts think that more like thirty publishers "control the industry." Since the Association, the writer says, "is run for and by the publishers who

are either parts of conglomerates themselves, like Fortune-500 Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, McGraw, Doubleday, and Macmillan," she probably prefers the experts' estimate. The Association minimizes the merger trend, and in disgust, she reports, two independent publishers have withdrawn.

Why is all this important? Because, Miss West says—

Sprawling conglomerates like International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT), Gulf & Western, and Litton, as well as mass-media entertainment cartels and newspaper chains like CBS, Warner and Hearst are swallowing up book publishers and squeezing out the independents. The conglomerates' crop is canned, mass-market fare for widest sales. They merchandise it for fast turnover in the bookstore chains. . . . Like fast-food franchises, the chains are automated for volume turnover of bestseller fare. The average shelf life for a book here is ten days. Then, if it doesn't move, it's off to the shredder. This new breed of bookseller concentrates on what one of their managers calls "books for non-readers—repair handbooks, cookbooks, and paperbacks that have simultaneous multi-media appeal." The chains' buying clout with publishers is immense. They use it to encourage more schlock saga, regency romance, and nonfiction devoted to sex, dieting, and money. Their clout is seen in the better discounts they get from publishers than do independent stores.

Why don't we hear more about such things? Because, you could say, the conglomerates control the media. The independent papers have described it all—all their independent writers can find out—but the voice of independents of every sort is faint by comparison with the mass media. One needs to read papers like the *Progressive*. Doesn't *Publishers Weekly* say anything? Xerox owns the PW now, and Miss West says that this centenarian "voice of the book industry," while it prints the news of mergers, "trots out one apologist after another to reassure us that takeovers don't harm publishing."

But they do:

Remember, publishing is a glamour industry, and its "creative" people don't like to think of themselves as company hacks. Those who do

recognize the dangers of working for the "Literary-Industrial Complex" are not eager to be quoted on it. Herbert Mitgang, who writes the incisive "Bookends" column for the *New York Times* says frankly, "you're not going to get many top editors or publishers to admit that the heat is on from the conglomerates. But it is. The fear is there at the top. I've seen it. Nor do agents say much; they don't want to spoil a deal. But it's common knowledge that group-owned houses are increasingly interested in blockbusters, and it is harder to place the "average book.

The basic indictment:

The splendor of book publishing is that it is often founded on a personal moral commitment with passion for truth, culture, and social responsibility. The motivation of a faceless conglomerate is simply top cash—not communication.

In brief, ideas are being treated as merchandise, and when this happens, they *become* merchandise. They become, in Erich Kahler's phrase, "corpses of meaning."

One prescription might be, "Stay out of the chain bookstores." Go to the quaint little shops where booklovers are heroically trying to survive in business. Another would be, "Read the independent press." The counsel to writers might be to adopt a spartan life and either publish your books yourself—already being done by a few with some success—or take Coleridge's advice and don't ever expect to make much of a living by writing. This seems a way of saying that good writing is without price, and that's what the writer should train himself to expect. The argument would be that everyone should be paid for his labor, but not for his inspiration and his art. While few prescriptions could have less palatable appeal, this one would nonetheless vastly reduce the number of unnecessary books.

One more quotation from Celeste West, who says: "Our values, opinions, tastes, and voting habits are much in the hands of very few corporations who control them." One response to this claim might be modeled on what Gandhi said (in *Hind Swaraj*) to a militant Indian patriot in 1909: "The English have not taken India; we have

given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them."

Miss West might agree, but point out that she wants to be more successful than Gandhi was in reforming the character and outlook of Indians. She urges a vigorous First-Amendment defense of independent publishing in America and advocates antitrust laws for slowing down mergers among publishers. Her book is *The Passionate Perils of Publishing*, available for \$6.00 postpaid from Bootlegger Press, 555 28th Street, San Francisco, Calif. 94131.