

## WHAT IS IT TO KNOW?

THE question "What do we *really* know?" has more importance than all the encyclopedic texts summarizing modern knowledge. This importance depends, however, on whether or not the answer we give has a definite and far-reaching effect on the use we make of the knowledge we possess. A conventional approach to the question would mean compiling an inventory which separates fact from theory, the well defined from the indefinite or undefinable. This, you could say, is the Cartesian theory of knowledge, and it has served us—well, we have supposed—for about three hundred years. At present there is a strong sense that the service is flawed and may, if we continue to use it, have fatal consequences.

Michael Polanyi was a major reformer of the modern idea of knowledge. His contribution was to show that even the best thinkers live and work by ideas or principles that they do not and cannot "prove," and that science itself, for all its claims of "objectivity," depends for its life and continuity on just such undemonstrable propositions. The practice of science, Polanyi said, rests on recognition of value, and values are unprovable by the methods of science. They give the methods their meaning, and so are prior to and untouchable by them.

What then is thinking—real thinking? From Polanyi's point of view it is no more than elaboration of value in its endless applications to the facts and experiences of life. This means that when we run into trouble, we have either misconceived the meaning and application of our values or we have defined or identified poorly our facts. One might also say that facts have a chameleon quality which changes with our stance and our feeling about value.

Practically all good writing, today, is devoted to matters of this sort—seeing where we have

been blinded by devotion to fact, or supposed fact, and restoring awareness of values that have been made invisible by neglect. Such a comparison is effectively made by Joseph Wood Krutch in *If You Don't Mind My Saying So* (1964):

A very popular concept today is embodied in the magic word cybernetic—or self-regulating. "Feedback" is the secret of our most astonishing machines. But the famous balance of nature is the most extraordinary of all cybernetic systems. Left to itself it is always self-regulated. The society we have created is not, on the other hand, cybernetic at all. The wisest and most benevolent of our planning requires constant attention. We must pass this or that law or regulation, then we must redress this balance of production and distribution, taking care that encouraging one thing does not discourage something else. The society we have created puts us in constant danger lest we ultimately find ourselves unable to direct the more and more complicated apparatus we have devised.

A really healthy society, so Thoreau once wrote, would be like a healthy body which functions perfectly without our being aware of it. We, on the other hand, are coming more and more to assume that the healthiest society is one in which all citizens devote so much of their time to arguing, weighing, investigating, voting, propagandizing, and signing protests in a constant effort to keep a valetudinarian body politic functioning in some sort of pseudo-health that they have none of that margin for mere living which Thoreau thought important.

There is material here for arguments that could go on for weeks, but also enough obvious truth in what Mr. Krutch says for us to learn something from him immediately. If you pick up today's paper, this truth will apply to most of the stories. For example in ours on page one the lead story is headed: "Carter's Legislative Avalanche—Mended Ties on Hill ease way for LBJ-like batch of new laws." Then comes all the detail. If you get involved you begin to measure as best you can the merits of these proposed laws. If you don't let

yourself get involved, you may feel yourself to be a poor citizen. But Krutch is right. Not only will you find yourself poorly equipped for making decisions, but you will have "none of that margin for mere living which Thoreau thought important." So, like many others, you'll make a conscientious gesture toward understanding the issues and leave the rest to the experts.

But what, actually, can be expected of the experts in a democracy? No more than what their clients require and will allow. Mr. Krutch has a representative sample of these clients. A Tucson reporter told him about the questions he had asked a number of people on the city streets, almost invariably getting the same answers:

"Do you like to see more industry brought to Tucson?" "Yes."

"Do you think that would make our city a pleasanter place to live?"

"No."

"Then why do you want industry brought here?"

"Well, you can't oppose Progress, can you?"

In short, people live by their values, and Progress, if not a value, is still in tyrannical control.

These questions, of course, were asked more than ten years ago, and some people are changing their views. A better understanding of why people change seems a first step in deciding what to do to improve the human situation. Mr. Krutch has one suggestion:

When I recommend that we have a little more faith in the ultimate wisdom of nature, I am not suggesting that national parks, camping trips, and better bird-watching are the last best hope of mankind. But I do believe them useful reminders that we did not make the world we live in and that its beauty and joy, as well as its enormous potentialities, do not depend entirely upon us. "Communion with nature" is not merely an empty phrase. It is the best corrective of that hubris from which the race of men increasingly suffers.

For an example he naturally turns to Thoreau:

Thoreau's return to nature was a return to the fatal fork, to a road not taken, along which he hoped that he and others after him might proceed to a better future. . . . But man of the present day is more and more inclined to feel that mere survival or preservation is all he can hope for in the immediate future. If he is indeed granted a second chance to discover a genuinely good life, it may require him to go far back to that point where the road not taken branched off from the dubious road we have been following for so long and which we more and more stubbornly insist is the only right one because it takes us further and further away from the nature out of which we arose.

What is Mr. Krutch counseling? It seems to be some sort of "act of faith" that neither he nor anyone else can define, while offering Thoreau as proof of its benefits. But this is not an act which means "doing something," but rather an act simply to get one's bearings, to find one's way.

There's not much difference, really, between what Michael Polanyi says about the moral foundation of all science and what Krutch proposes as the foundation for the good life. You have to get your bearings, clarify your values, and then choose the direction for what you do. Everything you know or think you know depends upon such acts of faith.

We have some paradox here. Thoreau's idea of health is illustrated by having "a healthy body which functions perfectly without our being aware of it." But a good human life seems to be different. It requires awareness. And what is Mr. Krutch campaigning for, if not for greater awareness of the way we make up our minds? Or is he saying simply that if we get the right basis for making up our minds, our bodies—even our corporate political bodies—will take care of themselves? He may be saying exactly that. Humans need consciousness, and bodies don't, in other words. A doctor might argue that he has to be conscious of how bodies work, or he couldn't try to heal them. More paradoxes. We have opposed morality to technique, but the doctor's area of professional morality requires illumination from technique; he has to know how things work.

Socrates was concerned with getting people to become more aware of their assumptions, of their first principles and deepest beliefs. You are a soul, he said, and the health of the soul results from looking after it. The body is a monopole organism, but the soul is bi-poled. It can go either way. It can mix itself up or be harmonious. People have to think; they can't just "do what comes naturally."

Ultimately, we have to decide for ourselves. This is the meaning of being human. Yet, at the same time, we have all those dependencies on others—the people who, through their mass behavior, as statisticians plainly show, set many of the conditions of our lives and narrow our options severely. And, as an eminent scientist suggested, "Except for our specialties, we all belong to the masses." Well, there are avenues of freedom which, given some time, may be widened. Meanwhile, what is the rate of change for the better in mass behavior? We know very little about this rate of change, or how it takes place—practically nothing, in fact.

We are not speaking here of behavior modification, which is some kind of manipulation of the status quo, but of actual change *from within*.

What happens in a "change from within"? One account is given by Eugene Gendlin in a paper published several years ago. He speaks of an activity of "reflective attending," a kind of "dwelling" on a question or problem. Sometimes this leads to a *shift* in the way one sees and feels. As Dr. Gendlin says:

At such a time the individual may exclaim "Oh! . . . well before he has had time to formulate words for the shift which has occurred in felt concreteness. After a few seconds he may employ many words. It is one bit of felt shift yet thereafter, many details of what he was wrestling with will appear different, new facets will now seem relevant different things will occur to him. . . . When such a felt experiential concreteness is carried forward so that it shifts or eases even slightly, all these thousands of implicit facts have changed.

There is another description of philosophical awakening in Plato's seventh epistle, in which he says that "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 here speaks of a rare sort of perception, to which, he says, it is hardly possible to help anyone "except in the case of some few who are capable of discovering the truth for themselves with a little guidance." There is a general similarity in the account given by Plato with every sort of realizing discovery, whether in the area of moral insight, philosophic meaning, or even practical invention. What, it might be asked, is the right preparation for such a sought-for change?

It is here that the entire question is endangered by resort to platitudes, or what seem platitudes. As Plato put it, counseling against an attempt to "explain" this sort of personal discovery or development: in the case of those who cannot find their own way explanation "would excite in some an unjustified contempt in a thoroughly offensive fashion, in others certain lofty and vain hopes, as if they had acquired some awesome lore." There are indeed those who imagine that human progress is a matter of learning the right technique, or inventing some ingenious key that will open the lock of understanding. Yet the real explanation is probably simplicity itself, and as guileless as the concluding idea of Arthur Morgan's brief essay on "The Pursuit of Reality":

We constantly think of our daily experiences as being of small import, as being only a mantle which hides from us the great importance which we call reality. I believe we should be nearer right in considering the day's experience as being a phase of reality itself. If the day's experience is not important, then nothing in all creation, nothing in time or space, in heaven or hell, nothing in the phenomenal world or the noumenal world, is important.

To give maximum value and significance to the experiences of the day, maximum significance and

value in consideration, not of today alone, but of all the days that are to come—that is morality.

Morgan's words are so simple, so unpretentious, that they may seem lacking in leverage, coming perilously close to the platitudes toward which Western man has been disdainful for centuries. Yet a change of stance, giving what he says a deeper meaning than of something that we *ought* to do, might provide another light. What if, instead of being conceived as a means, this kind of behavior were recognized as the end in itself? Mistaking means for ends and ends for means is certainly the ill of our civilization. So of course, as Plato said, there is no point in offering this explanation, so lacking in glamor, so prosy in content. The truth is safe from the opportunists.

Again, what do we *really* know?

Thoreau offered "communion with nature" as the means to self-discovery—how vague, how impalpable! we might say. Yet if you read *Walden* to determine what this man who took his own advice found out, its substance was far from negligible. And he often became quite precise in reporting the facets of his discovery.

The part played by stance—the feeling and attitude one has toward the world and those in it—in "knowing" is often overlooked for the reason that its effect enters into all conclusions, becomes a constant in all wondering, all speculation. The contrast drawn by Lafcadio Hearn between two poets of the last century illustrates this. In a lecture on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, he quotes two poems on the sound produced by a sea-shell. The first is by Lee Hamilton, who concludes:

We hear the sea. The sea? It is the blood  
In our own veins, impetuous and near,  
And pulses keeping pace with hope and fear,  
And with our feelings' ever-shifting mood.

Lo! in my heart I hear, as in a shell,  
The murmur of a world beyond the grave  
Distinct, distinct, though faint and far it be.  
Thou fool; this echo is a cheat as well,—  
The hum of earthly instincts; and we crave  
A world unreal as the shell-heard sea.

Rossetti muses on the same resonances:

Listen alone beside the sea,  
Listen alone among the woods;  
Those voices of twin solitudes  
Shall have one sound alike to thee:  
Hark where the murmurs of thronged men  
Surge and sink back and surge again,—  
Still the one voice of wave and tree.

Gather a shell from the strewn beach  
And listen at its lips: they sigh  
The same desire and mystery,  
The echo of the whole sea's speech.  
And all mankind is thus at heart  
Not anything but what thou art:  
And Earth, Sea, Man, are all in each.

Both poets have some knowledge of the world, both have skill with language, but stance is the absolute determinant of what they feel to be the truth—what they must finally, each in his own way, live by.

Hearn comments on Rossetti's poem:

In the last beautiful stanza we have a comparison as sublime as any ever made by any poet—of the human heart, the human life, re-echoing the murmur of the infinite Sea of Life. As the same sound of the sea is heard in every shell so in every human heart is the same ghostly murmur of Universal Being. The sound of the sea, the sound of the forest, the sound of men in cities, not only are the same to the ear, but they tell the same story of pain. The sound of the sea is a sound of perpetual strife, the sound of the woods in the wind is a sound of ceaseless struggle, the tumult of a great city is also a tumult of effort. In this sense all the three sounds are but one, and that one is the sound of life everywhere. Life is pain, and therefore sadness. The world itself is like a great shell full of this sound. But it is a shell on the verge of the Infinite. The millions of suns, the millions of planets and moons, are all of them but shells on the shore of the everlasting sea of death and birth, and each would, if we could hear it, convey to our ears and our hearts the one same murmur of pain. This is, to my way of thinking, a much vaster conception than anything to be found in Tennyson, and such a poem as that of Lee-Hamilton dwindles into nothingness beside it, for we have heard all that man can know of our relation to the universe, and the mystery of that universe brought before us by a simile of incomparable sublimity.

Did Rossetti, then,—and Hearn—know something hidden from Lee-Hamilton by reason of their stance? Well, yes, but Lee-Hamilton knew something, too. He knew the pain, but from the inside only, while Rossetti had both an inside and an outside view.

But is this really "knowing"? It is as real, at least, as the dubious certainties we all of us act upon, the ground of our ultimate wagers and anxious calculations. The seminal essence in all our knowing, whether confined to sense or reaching out to the stars, is the same as the stuff of our longing, hoping, visioning. The settled realities we no longer dream about are only the floor of our existence, made of the yesterdays of human thought and action. The *movement* of our lives comes from our imagining.

Thoreau had his communion with nature, and Rossetti his, while Hearn gathered together the tones of confirming harmonies.

What is it to know, for a species halfway between ignorance and knowledge?

## *REVIEW*

### A CASE FOR REGIONALISM

TOWARD the end of a *Nation* (May 28) review of Pétrement's life of Simone Weil, Fernande Gontier speaks of Simone Weil's idea (in *The Need for Roots*) that human beings ought to preserve their local traditions:

This need for roots should not, in her view, be mistaken for the dangerous concept of nations. She advocated smaller units in a larger context, somewhat like a federation with regional identities. France, for example, could be divided into many regions all of which are part of a larger and unified Europe. A Frenchman would then have one unmistakable root, his region, and one clear allegiance—Europe. Her main concern, however, remains her respect for human beings: "Anyone who invented a method of assembly that could avoid the extinction of thought in each of the participants would make a revolution in history comparable to the discovery of fire, or of the wheel."

Not remembering anything of this sort—although the whole of Simone Weil's book is consistent with regionalism—we searched the pages of *Need for Roots* for the material Gontier seems to be summarizing, but found only an interesting passage on the effects of policies pursued by the Vichy government in collaboration with the German invaders. The pain of being deprived of their freedom and the conditions of normal life, Simone Weil says, had restored to the French a sense of reality about their country. The French state was a defeated state, but the land remained, while the Vichy restrictions on travel made the people "far more conscious than before of local differences." Her point is that the Vichy policy had the effect of reviving regional identity:

The dividing up of France into separate portions, the censorship of correspondence, which limits exchanges of thought to a restricted area, have each played their part, and paradoxically enough, the forcible throwing together of the population has also greatly contributed to this. People have now in a much sharper, more permanent form than before the feeling that they belong to Brittany, Lorraine, Provence, or Paris. There is an element of hostility in this feeling which we should try to get rid of; just as it

is urgent also to get rid of xenophobia. But this feeling in itself ought not to be discouraged; on the contrary. It would be disastrous to declare it antipatriotic. In the atmosphere of anguish, confusion, solitude, uprootedness in which the French find themselves, all loyalties, all attachments are worth preserving like treasures of infinite value and rarity, worth tending like the most delicate plants.

That the Vichy Government should have put forward a regionalist doctrine is neither here nor there. Its only mistake in this connection has been in not applying it. Far from always preaching the exact opposite of its various battle cries, we ought to adopt many of the ideas launched by the propaganda services of the National Revolution, but turn them into realities.

In the same way, the French, because of their isolation, have come to realize that France is a small country, that shut up inside her it is stifling and they require a wider range. The idea of Europe, of European unity contributed a good deal toward the success of collaborationist propaganda in the early days. We cannot do too much to encourage, nourish such sentiments as these. It would be disastrous to create any opposition between them and patriotic sentiments.

By "patriotic sentiments," Simone Weil means a compassionate feeling for the place of one's origin, an appreciation of its peculiar excellences, and a concern for correcting its defects. When the attachment is with a regional homeland, there is a much more realizing sense of these qualities, while the nation-state is represented mainly by a set of abstractions and slogans to which human emotion is very poorly transferred. There are many arguments for regionalism, the economic claims being the most familiar, although the political ones (in behalf of local self-determination) are increasingly persuasive. Simone Weil's arguments, however, spring from the needs of the soul, and one might say that all the other claims are but enabling aspects of these essentially human requirements.

Regionalism is desirable for the reason that the nation-state deprives a large area of spontaneous human feeling of its natural content:

The State is a cold concern, which cannot inspire love but itself kills, suppresses everything that might be loved, so one is forced to love it, because there is nothing else. That is the moral torment to which all of us today are exposed.

Here lies perhaps the true cause of the phenomenon of the leader, which has sprung up everywhere nowadays and surprises so many people. Just now, there is in all countries, in all movements, a man who is the personal magnet for all loyalties. Being compelled to embrace the cold, metallic surface of the State has made people, by contrast, hunger for something to love which is made of flesh and blood. This phenomenon shows no sign of disappearing, and, however disastrous the consequences have been so far, it may still have some very unpleasant surprises in store for us; for the art, so well known in Hollywood, of manufacturing stars out of any sort of human material, gives any sort of person the opportunity of presenting himself for the adoration of the masses.

The familiar regional terrain offers opportunity for occupying one's life with activities affecting things we know about from intimate experience. We grow less vulnerable to deception, less extravagant in our longings; and, by achieving some recognizable fulfillments, learn in practical ways the difference between profession and practice, promise and performance. The relation of the circumstances of such a life to the needs of the soul is not obscure.

It is to be noted that Simone Weil did not hesitate to take her examples of decentralization from the decrees of the Vichy government. That the Vichy government used the unity of Europe as a justification of the Nazi occupation did not make the unity of Europe a bad idea. The Romans claimed the same virtue for their policy of conquest. In both cases, the evil was in the conquest, not the goal. Regionalism, voluntarily sought and achieved, would make possible an appropriate European unity to take the place of a collection of jealous and warring states.

The interesting thing is that Fernande Gontier thought it worth while to pick up this brief passage in *The Need for Roots* and to give it prominence in his review of another book.

Regionalism is indeed in the air. Just as American historians are now dusting off the Articles of Confederation to find in them virtues suppressed by the Constitution, so, around the world, the distinctive advantages of small, regional associations based on ethnic and economic considerations are having an increasingly favorable press.

For example, the *May International Tribune* presented an interview with Denis de Rougement in which, speaking as a Swiss, the well-known essayist described the balances of regionalism realized by his country:

The nation-state, centralization carried to an extreme, leads in the direction of the totalitarian regime and war. The other pole is that of regionalist federalism. This is a sort of total federalism stemming from the base: small communities which are federated little by little in accordance with the scale of problems that they have to face. This gives an extremely complicated organizational system but one based on a single and simple principle: the decisionmaking level, the scope of the task at hand, and the size of the community should coincide.

The complexity, one could say, has its original and parallel in the complexity of organic function throughout nature. It is the natural and self-managing complexity of life itself, not the self-defeating complexity of an elaborate machine. M. de Rougement draws a comparison:

On the one hand you have cities like New York or Paris with 10 to 13 million inhabitants: cities which have become ungovernable and in which the individual is reduced to a number. In these cities there are perhaps a few hundred elected representatives, whereas for Switzerland with six and a half million, the number of elected representatives of the people is around 40,000. It's a striking difference. The bigger the community the fewer the number of elected representatives. At the end of the line, there is a dictator and a well-disciplined population—but this can no longer be seen as a community.

Has anyone proposed this sort of thinking in behalf of the United States? Yes, Ian McHarg. Over three years ago the Environmental Protective Agency invited him to do a plan for the

United States. While it was never published, and, according to McHarg, the EPA "hasn't paid any attention to it," the outline given in *Science* for Jan. 28 is worth repeating:

This was a proposal for a national ecological inventory to collect all the information that describes the natural systems of the United States, as well as the interaction of natural and human systems. The country would be divided into 34 natural regions—prairies, coastal plain, the Rockies and so forth—and each would have a regional laboratory. The information would all be centralized and coordinated in a national environmental institute.

Some day, perhaps, the people of these ecological regions will be as restive in their desire for local autonomy as the Bretons and the Basques are today. As Denis de Rougemont points out, people denied autonomy or local control eventually become resentful separatists:

Many Bretons and Basques now say that they wouldn't even wish to remain within a French federation, but would like to establish ties directly to Europe as a federal entity. This is because they are convinced that France will never understand the concept of federalism or the idea of regional autonomy. When I say France, I mean, of course, official France, Paris and official French policy.

When, one wonders, will unofficial France—unofficial people everywhere recognize that bigness and centralization create the enormous gap between officialdom and people?

## *COMMENTARY*

### **THE REMEDY FOR DELUSION**

IT is a question whether virtue and intelligence can survive separation from each other. In the case of the social order, the rule of intelligence for social action—doing things together—is given by Denis de Rougement. It is, he says, "a single and simple principle: the decision-making level, the scope of the task at hand, and the size of the community should coincide."

When this principle is ignored, all sorts of contradictions ensue. The needs of slum-dwellers are defined in terms of the hopes of wheat farmers. The smooth operation of General Motors becomes the model for national well-being. If the methods of the *Mafia* seem effective in the elimination of embarrassments, then big government, frustrated by the weakness and delays of bureaucratic process, may decide to use them.

Under such circumstances, what can a virtuous man do beyond saying, to everyone who will listen: "This cannot possibly work, and trying to make it work only adds public confusion to private delusion."

What do people do when, day after day, nothing seems to work any more?

What is left for them to do except look for a miracle?

Interestingly, both Simone Weil (see Review) and Jim Hougan (see *Frontiers*) agree on where they look. They look at the competitively arranged array of "leaders" who claim to be able to do what is not possible for ordinary men. But they don't ever see these miracle-makers. Instead they see manufactured images which are, as Jim Hougan says—"second-rate deceptions"; or, as Simone Weil puts it—stars produced "out of any sort of human material."

How do people recover from reliance on miracles?

The only effective remedy is said to be disappointment.

But if we look at human history, especially our own history, it becomes evident that disappointment is not potent enough. The ignorance has to be displaced by knowledge based on experience. And that is what Denis de Rougement's "simple principle" makes possible. When "the decision-making level, the scope of the task at hand, and the size of the community" match each other, the relations between cause and effect become manifest. There is no other way to learn the facts of social life.

## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

#### NO MATTER OF PLACE

MYTHS are indispensable for dramatizing aspects of the human condition which we seldom see objectively because we are so tightly involved in them. Take the question of whether or not schools are bad places. *Of course* they are bad places, the radical observer will say, and he has no difficulty in explaining why he is right. Instead of arguing the matter, which is thankless and generally fruitless, we'll borrow from an expert myth-maker, Plato, his allegory of the cave.

There, in the cave, people sit locked in position, gazing at the moving shadows cast on the wall before them, and making learned deductions about "reality" from what they see. Then they teach—transmit elaborate explanations of the shadow phenomena to the coming generation. Their texts are treatises describing appearances, the teachers are authorities convinced of their superiority and righteousness as dispensers of knowledge.

The parallel is perfect—schools are caves. So, obviously, they are bad places. Children—people—ought to be out in the open air and bright sunlight where they are able to recognize things as they are. Anybody can see that. So, again, schools are bad places; only deluded people will believe in them and send their children there.

Well, there's more to the myth. There was this man—or maybe a woman—with small bones and Houdini talents who slipped out of his bonds and escaped into the "real world." His excitement knew no bounds. At last he could *see!* Now he was free. At the same time he still had bonds—the bonds of affection which linked him with the people in the cave. So he went back in and took his old place on the bench and bided his time—but not for long. The young people in the cave were restless and complaining. The shackles chafed their wrists and the accepted explanations of the

pain were familiar, dull, and inadequate. So the man who had been outside stood up and said: "The way to learn about the world is to go outside and *look* at it. You don't need to sit there in rows. At least let your children go out there and *see.*"

But the people didn't listen, or they couldn't even hear him. They were too busy with engrossing projects and problems. He was only an annoying interruption to people engaged in serious things. Then he raised his voice and said, "Come ye out and be ye separate!" and most of the people didn't like that at all. We know what finally happened. . . .

But today a lot of good teachers have been going back into the cave and making a stir. Some of them are regarded as wreckers and insurrectionists—especially the ones who keep saying, "Come on outside!" The parents keep saying back, "No flush toilets out there! No nice place to live, and no large buildings to use as schools near to where we might be able to settle down." Since, in a way, they are right, other returned teachers suggest having good courses on how it looks outside, along with a policy of loosening the handcuffs on the young. And since, as yet, not enough youngsters are out there where things are visible and life is free, the teachers, or most of them, stay in the cave, trying to figure out how to reflect some of the light from outside, or how to capture and bring it in in suitable containers. They wonder if a human being could make himself into some kind of storage battery of knowledge or truth, or if, on the other hand, it will all leak away when you try to put it up in cans.

Now and then a teacher appears to have unusual success in becoming a container, and the people inspired by him wonder how he does it. He may write books, but he can't really tell them. He hardly knows, and even what he does know about how to do it is always—or almost always—misunderstood. They try to copy him, which is exactly the wrong thing to do.

Meanwhile, all the way from the deep dark of the cave to the twilight near the entrance, unusual

people with bonds of affection are making what explanations they can of what it's like outside and telling why people ought to try to go see for themselves. It gets very discouraging, but they don't give up—not all of them, anyhow.

Once in a great while somebody or some group succeeds in starting a school that seems like a dream school, as though it were really outside, even though it isn't. It lives on substance brought in from the outside, and the ties are mostly bonds of friendship instead of compulsion. For example, in the Penguin educational special, *State School*, R. F. Mackenzie tells about a school located on the edge of the New Forest in South England. It was founded by a Quaker geologist who supplied enough money to buy 200 acres and pay for wooden buildings. Having taught there, Mr. Mackenzie knows exactly what went on:

The younger pupils didn't attend classroom lessons unless they wanted to. It worked. Sometimes a new pupil, transferred from an orthodox school, could hardly believe that he was really free to stay away from the classroom. He *would* stay away.

But after a while he would show up in class, and then it was the teachers' job to hold his interest.

One pupil I remember particularly who didn't go to lessons. His name was Pat. He had one consuming passion—radio. With the help of the music teacher, keen on amateur wireless, he spent his time making sets, improving reception. Coils and batteries littered his bed and bed-space with blueprints and books on wireless. Then one day the teacher said he couldn't teach him any more because further work would involve the relationships between EMF, current and resistance, and Pat couldn't work these things out because he couldn't do long multiplication and long division. Pat said: "If I learn how to do them, will you tell me more about wireless?" The teacher said he would. Next morning Pat steamed off to the classroom and told the maths teacher his requirements. For a fortnight—morning, afternoon, and back again after tea—he spent long hours with more and more and longer sums, covering sheet after sheet of foolscap. Everybody he met he would ask: "Give me a long division sum to do, a really hard one." By the end of the fortnight he'd mastered these skills, and resumed his radio studies.

In two weeks of concentrated study he had learned more than most pupils do in longer periods.

Well, things like that happen in dream schools. A. S. Neill told similar stories about Summerhill. But the fact is that this story isn't about a dream school as much as it is about a dream *student*. Youngsters like that are exceptional—no question. They are on their way outside. They are maybe one in fifty or a hundred, like the ones talked about by Ortega in the first chapter of his book on metaphysics—the students who learn from their own intensity of purpose and who won't let anything stand in the way of finding out what they are determined to know. Not even the textbooks, which they may some day rewrite from beginning to end. The books on education by Mr. Mackenzie are just right. This is the second one of his we have read (the first was *The Unbowed Head* noticed in "Children" for June 8), and we hope to read more by him. What he writes only *seems* to be about schools. His books are really about how human attitudes are at the root of all human problems, and they explore the modes and hopes for changing them.

Naturally enough, Mr. Mackenzie speaks of the difficulty of changing the schools. It is a task beyond politics, he thinks, or comes before politics. Although he declares that "If you are going to create a new society, it is in the schools you must begin," the value of his book is hardly in what he says about schools, even dream schools. The important thing is his discussion of good teachers, how they work, what they do, and why they do it. This holds your attention. School, in other words, is only societal shorthand for the pupil-teacher and person-to-person relation. And the uselessness of thinking about changes in education in institutional terms becomes quite clear:

The experimental schools, trying out new methods, are fighting a battle on two fronts. They cannot direct all their energies into the problem of how to forge a new educational system because they have all the time to be looking over their shoulders at public opinion and the authorities. . . . The central

education authorities . . . come to us pleading for experimental work, for a new approach to education. But they will not accept the implications of experimental work, for a new approach to education. . . . Therefore, for the most part, the only experimental work done is of the innocuous kind: that is to say, work that won't invite attacks by the parents.

But that's in Scotland, someone might say. Here we try "new" things all the time. From reading Mr. Mackenzie one learns that novelty in itself has no educational virtue. The constant ingredient in all good education, in any age, any country, and known to every teacher worth his salt, is named in this book:

The quality most needed both by the administrators, hesitant and enslaved to habit, and the adolescents with their idealism and ferocity and sensitivity to rejection, is imagination. But this is above all a quality that the administrators lack and the system discourages.

## FRONTIERS

### A Misbegotten—or Misdefined—Frontier?

KEEPING track of who, among the legislators or officials in the nation's capital, is proposing what—and whom to write or wire or telephone to influence votes in a positive or negative direction—is a service conscientiously performed by dozens of newsletters or reporting services edited by non-acquisitive persons devoted to the country's good. Some of these writers and their sponsors can be classed as persons and groups having broad decentralist, libertarian, and conservationist goals. Yet the attention given to what goes on in Washington seems practically obsessive. In short, the power to do or oppose something, wherever it ought to be, is now where it shouldn't be. This makes it seem necessary for the well-intentioned to contribute to decision-making processes that in principle they believe should be abolished, or rather relocated and re-scaled. In other words, Washington, D.C., is now admitted by nearly all the opinion-shapers, both professional and amateur, to be the frontier.

Judging from the contents of both the cultural and literary magazines, this is the view adopted by the controlling majority of their readers. Articles about political figures and law-making and government administration far out-number the discussions of all other subjects. If you want to do something important, or get it done, Washington is the place to go.

This belief cries out for examination. What sort of place, for example, has the Capital become? One of the editors of *Harper's*, Jim Hougan, gives his answer to this question in the July issue:

This is a city that can only be understood through anecdotes told about it. General descriptions of Washington's ways and means are bound to fail because it is impossible to say anything that's completely true, or entirely false, about a town whose *raison d'être* is compromise. The city is defined by its ambiguities, its approximations, and reasonable facsimiles. A sort of urban Wonder Bread, familiar to

all and theoretically capable of feeding millions, the capital is aglutinous and insubstantial at heart, ultimately unknowable and depressing to contemplate. It's a place where prestige is routinely confused with power when, in fact, the real power resides in the most boring process of an unreachable bureaucracy, its anonymous "transmission belts," red tape, and ringing telephones.

And yet, prestige is rewarded here, just as celebrity is rewarded in Hollywood. A *reputation* for having power is bankable. . . . And Washington resembles Hollywood in another way, too; like its sister-city on the West Coast, it's devoted to the manufacture of images—second-rate deceptions projected upon the brain pans of a citizenry which expects little and gets . . . disappointed.

It is this *reputation* for power that reinforces and continues the obsession. One could say that the power which is recognized by reputation is itself generated by the reputation. People who go to Washington hoping to "do good" are made powerless as a result. James C. Thomson, Jr., who worked for the State Department during the Vietnam War, told how this works in the *Atlantic* for April, 1968:

. . . crucial, I suppose, to government at all times . . . was the "effectiveness" trap, the trap that keeps men from speaking out, as clearly or often as they might, within the government. And it is the trap that keeps men from resigning in protest and airing their dissent outside the government. The most important asset that a man brings to bureaucratic life is his "effectiveness," a mysterious combination of training, style, and connections. To preserve your effectiveness, you must decide where and when to fight the mainstream of policy. . . . The inclination to remain silent or to acquiesce in the presence of great men—to live to fight another day, to give on this issue so that you can be "effective" on later issues—is overwhelming. Nor is it the tendency of youth alone; some of our most senior officials, men of wealth and fame, whose place in history is secure, have remained silent lest their connection with power be terminated. As for the disinclination to resign in protest: while not necessarily a Washington or even American specialty, it seems more true of a government in which ministers have no parliamentary back-bench to which to retreat. To exit is to lose even those marginal chances for "effectiveness."

The habit of going to Washington—in thought or in person—in order to get things done has had a devastating effect not only on the sort of "action" people undertake but also on the "thinking" which the action is meant to carry out. If you believe that nothing good can happen without legislative action, then you naturally scale your goals to the politically feasible, and this requires describing them in the simplest possible terms. In other words, the available political means are continually redefining (and vulgarizing) human ends. In another article in the *July Harper's* Reed Whittemore gives an account of the socio-cultural result:

Nowhere is our impoverishment more evident than in our now almost total dedication to the principle of consensus. A large number of people apparently now *believe*, aggressively or resignedly, in consensus, seeming to think that positions arrived at by consensus constitute ideological positions. The notion is that if three Americans collect, say, three ideas and stir them thoroughly, in a democratic way, in a democratic (and economic) pot, the result will be idea four. This notion is just wrong. The result of mixing three ideas thus is not idea four, but simply a (sour) mash. And though the mash may be a grand one, so grand that it is enacted into law, it is not therefore the less a mash. . . .

Yet that consensus process, in all its mindlessness, now seems to run our lives. In the media, where consensus is everything, the only truly intellectual discussions that ever occur are discussions of the consensus process itself as it works out our destiny from day to day. (. . . I keep wishing the minds in charge would occasionally lapse from their hard-headed psyching of how President Carter is psyching the electorate and Congress, and instead consider goals.) One of the results of this is that the whole notion of what constitutes knowledge, understanding, wisdom, has been modified to accommodate the blind force of consensus. Wisdom now consists of being *au courant* with the force, that is being up-to-date with the polls, the ratings, the latest state and national vote, the latest economic indicators, the latest best-sellers. And to be *au courant* all over the place—having all the indicators at one's fingertips—is the modern American way to be a "generalist."

One conclusion that might be drawn from all this is that Washington, far from needing to be ignored, needs to be cleaned up. Already there are citizens' groups, deeply committed, manifestly sincere—Common Cause is one of them—devoted to this admirable goal. But why, of all places, did they pick Washington as the place to begin? As a man from Mars would immediately point out, such efforts are a contradiction in terms.