

missing from the work of Robert Frost and Ezra Pound. The three writers are played off of one another in an instructive fashion. Frost is for Montgomery the great equivocator; and Pound a strange variety of liberal utopian—at least until he discovered that knowledge was not enough, that the Renaissance was flawed at its core, had invested too much of human hope in the image of a salutary city. Montgomery's overviews of these two poets are persuasive. Moreover, for some of us they help to clear away difficulties. Frost as public man often affected more than guarded epiphanies, even recommending something close to Christian orthodoxy to his friends. But for Montgomery, Frost is usually a poet like Edgar Allan Poe—the “modern autonomous and alienated man.” Frost fights shy of asking too much of his metaphors and of reaching toward those meanings that the heart desires to find. Montgomery believes he is too Socratic. His reservations recall the early comment of Yvor Winters on Frost as “spiritual drifter.” They do not account for everything Frost wrote, but do point to a difficulty with his characteristic strategy. Concerning Montgomery's assessment of Ezra Pound, even a small caveat is inappropriate. For Pound was always an American who had no home-place in his country—a defender of the great traditions of the West who could not participate in most of them. Like most moderns, he invested too much of himself in an imaginary future.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is the absolute antitype of Pound. The Russian novelist, following the established Orthodox tradition, condemns the prideful effects of Renaissance and Enlightenment progressivism on the West, their glorification of man and his ability to solve his own problems. Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn, as in his 1978 speech at Harvard University, denigrates reason as a false idol and the worship of science as alchemy—an infernal magic, dangerous to the souls of those it touches. In experiencing Communism from Lenin to Stalin to Andropov, the Russians, Solzhenitsyn believes, have had a chance to reach the bottom and to see how empty is the modern spirit: that it is a measure of where related statist arrangements will tend, once they have run their course. In an extraordinary essay Montgomery

compares Solzhenitsyn to the Nashville Agrarians who came together in *I'll Take My Stand*. The analogy is perceptive. For reasons that have to do with why Richard Weaver, Solzhenitsyn, and Donald Davidson all appear on his list of prophets, Montgomery reacts as he does to Cleanth Brooks, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, and Eric Voegelin. For Montgomery is, in all of his openness, a fierce traditionalist and no part of the secular right, despite his deep suspicion of omniscient government. There is some evidence that, like Solzhenitsyn, he is more concerned with the harm that may be done by a secular American right than he is with Marxist ingenuity still functioning in the civilized world.

After warning against the attractions of mere repose, mere submission to what is providential, Marion Montgomery concludes his tribute to those who have educated him on a pious, accepting note, thankful for the givens in his life. The imagination of the artist feeds on providential things; but he reminds us that it is by choice that we defend or neglect particular positions, respecting what others have achieved by protecting their “self-ordering” and the “substance” it reveals: what will come of it once we have appropriated its excellence in what we do.

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Beyond Victimology

by James P. Degnan

The Content of Our Character

by Shelby Steele
New York: St. Martin's;
175 pp., \$15.95



Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character*, a collection of essays, is mainly an attack on affirmative action, black separatism, and other such programs, policies, and trends that flourish in American universities and that Steele opposes, first of all, because he regards them as racist. By virtue solely of race, these programs reward blacks and other minorities and punish whites

—for example, by awarding jobs and university admissions to blacks, while denying them to whites. Race, Steele believes, should never be “the source of power, privilege, status, or entitlement of any kind.”

But Steele contends further that such programs are counterproductive. Generated by white guilt, by the desire of whites to redeem themselves from the imaginary guilt of participating in the long, sad history of the oppression of blacks by whites, these programs, he argues, derive from the notion that because blacks have suffered, because they are “victims,” they are therefore “different,” “special,” and “unique” beings for whom “normal standards and values do not automatically apply.” “With lower test scores and high school grade point averages than whites,” blacks are admitted to universities and, once there, are accorded privileges that university administrators would never allow white students. “Administrators would never give white students a racial theme dorm where they could be ‘more comfortable with people of their own kind,’” Steele writes; yet this is the sort of concession administrators routinely grant to demanding black students. And to what end? After twenty years of affirmative action programs and black separatist policies, of “Black studies departments, black counseling programs, Afro-houses, black theme dorms, black homecoming dances, black graduations, and ethnic food in the cafeterias,” blacks in American universities are worse off than before the programs and policies began. “Black students have the highest dropout rate (70 percent nationally) and the lowest grade point average of any group in American universities,” according to Steele. And despite extraordinary efforts to recruit black students into the universities, black enrollment has dropped considerably since the mid-1970's. “There are more young black men in prison than in college,” Steele reminds the reader.

What is to be done? We might begin, Steele suggests, by repudiating the reverse racism of affirmative action and black separatism, not only because these are unfair to whites but because they are patronizing and demeaning to blacks: “Such policies have the effect of transforming whites from victimiz-

ers into patrons and keeping blacks where they have always been—dependent on the largesse of whites.” All parties, black and white, Steele suggests, must stop regarding blacks as victims deserving of special treatment and privileges, and begin instead to think of blacks as human beings—as American citizens whose constitutional rights guarantee them fair and equal treatment, nothing more, nothing less. White administrators (and faculty members) must stop trying to exorcise their “guilt” by caving in to ridiculous black demands for segregated facilities, for separate programs, and for special standards. White administrators (and faculty members) must realize that such behavior is all but killing blacks with phony kindness. Rather, these administrators and faculty members should spend their energies in demanding that black students achieve first-rate academic performance and in helping them to achieve it.

Black students, conversely, must stop “taking comfort” in being victims, must stop blaming others for their own failure and lack of initiative, must start taking responsibility for their own actions. Black students must stop acting in ways that confirm the racist stereotype that they hate learning, that they are lazy and intellectually inferior. Black students must seek to excel in academic performance by seeking aggressively to exploit the academic opportunities universities “all but shower on them.” Rather than living as professional blacks, rather than being part of a black collective demanding special treatment and programs, black students must realize that their salvation lies in acting as self-interested individuals working toward becoming part of the mainstream in the university and in society. At the risk of being labeled “Toms” and “Oreos” by their black separatist peers, black students must have the courage to espouse middle-class values. Black students must realize that “Hard work, education, individual initiative, stable family life, property ownership—have always been the means by which ethnic groups have moved ahead in America.” “Regardless of past or present victimization,” Steele insists, “these ‘laws’ of advancement apply absolutely to black Americans also.”

Considering that so many young

blacks are educationally and economically “disadvantaged,” how, without special help, can they be expected to attend, much less excel in, the universities? Steele’s answer is that such programs are desirable if they are available not only to blacks but to all “disadvantaged” young Americans. Provide “better elementary and secondary schools, job training, safer neighborhoods, better financial assistance for college”—but don’t provide such help for poor blacks on one side of town at the expense of poor whites on the other.

A Book-of-the-Month Club selection, *The Content of Our Character* has been called a remarkable book, “powerfully original,” and it has recently won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Yet it hardly seems remarkable. Much of what it says has been said by white conservatives for years. What is remarkable is that Steele is not a white conservative. A professor of English at San Jose State in California, he is a black liberal, and as such he is able to bring to his material a point of view that converts the book’s fairly conventional conservative thought into something exciting.

It is ironic, considering Steele’s views on reverse discrimination, that were he not black his book wouldn’t probably be in print, but to say so is not to diminish the quality or the importance of his book. If good writing is clear thinking made visible, good sense in print, then Shelby Steele is a very good writer indeed. And *The Content of Our Character*, though short on specific solutions to the problems he so ably articulates, is important not only for its attack on black separatism, but for its attack on the entire “politics of difference,” of “diversity” and of “multiculturalism” that threatens to destroy the integrity of American universities. Arguing against all university programs and policies that “make of everyone on campus a member of a minority group,” Steele establishes himself in the tradition of our sanest and most distinguished critics of American higher education, of such critics as Robert Maynard Hutchins and Jacques Barzun. In articulating his belief that universities must emphasize not “diversity” but “commonality,” Steele sets himself as a new champion of an idea as old as the university itself:

namely, that the university is, by nature, an intellectual community based on values its members, as human beings, hold in common; that it is a community of individuals and specialists capable of conversing with and understanding one another (and thereby of realizing themselves intellectually as individuals) only because they are united by a common stock of ideas, a common tradition, and a common language.

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Reinventing the Wheel

by Robert A. Sirico

Religion, Wealth and Poverty

by James Vincent Schall

Vancouver: *The Fraser Institute*;
202 pp., \$14.95

Capitalism or Socialism? An Economic Critique for Christians

by Enrique M. Urena

Translated by Robert Barr

Chicago: *Franciscan Herald Press*;
256 pp., \$14.95



Two Jesuits have recently written books on social ethics, the humane economy, and on liberating the poor. I know what you’re thinking: two more liberation theologians using Marxist criteria for their analysis, and ruthlessly criticizing the free market. Think again.

Prevalent opinion traditionally associates the Society of Jesus with all forms of cabals, while a current version of this conspiracy theory identifies Jesuits with socialism and its religious expression, liberation theology. Yet, if stereotypes can be shortcuts to knowledge, they might just as easily be detours around it, and the appearance of these books by Jesuit Fathers James Schall and Enrique Urena (a Spaniard), both of which make a moral case for a free market, prove this fact. These works are made all the more relevant by the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* on May 15, the first of the papal social encyclicals, which will no doubt excite much de-