

ORSON SQUIRE FOWLER

To Form a More Perfect Human

The American pursuit of perfection—of body, mind, and society—is as old as the Republic itself. At certain times in our history, most recently during the 1960s, that search has reached a fever pitch. But never has there been a more fervent searcher than Orson Squire Fowler (1809–87). A child of the Jacksonian era, his enthusiasms ranged from phrenology and the reform of sex to vegetarianism and the construction of the ideal house—which could only be octagonal, in Fowler’s humble opinion. As Dwight L. Young suggests, this forgotten reformer is a reminder of something eternal in the American character.

by Dwight L. Young

His name was Orson Squire Fowler. In his day, it was a name to be reckoned with, a name that garnered notice—and in some cases tributes—from many of his triple-monikered contemporaries: Julia Ward Howe, Henry Ward Beecher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Edgar Allan Poe, to name a few.

He is largely forgotten now. He was buried just over a century ago in an unmarked grave in the Bronx, and there is no monument to his memory or his varied achievements. But there are many reminders of him from coast to coast, some of them in fairly surprising places.

Browse through a second-hand store, for instance, and you may come across a white plaster bust, one with the skull marked off in little numbered spaces. It’s just a curiosity now, quaint and mildly amusing, but more than a century ago it was one of the most important tools of Orson Squire Fowler’s trade. Or if you

happen to be in a rare book store and chance upon that slim first edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* from 1855, notice the publisher’s name: Fowlers & Wells. One of those Fowlers was our man Orson. And that is not all he left us. Driving through the countryside on a Sunday lark, you may catch a glimpse through the trees of an odd-looking farmhouse, octagonal in shape. Whoever built that house most likely got the idea from, you guessed it, Orson Squire Fowler.

For a time during the mid-19th century, the Fowler “Cabinet” in lower Manhattan was an attraction rivaled in popularity only by P. T. Barnum’s American Museum. Fowler himself was a renowned lecturer, and his books and journals sold by the thousands. He made a significant, if somewhat quirky, contribution to the field of domestic architecture. He championed any number of reform causes with admirable and selfless zeal.

In this cynical age it would be easy to dismiss Fowler as a harmless eccentric or, at the other extreme, a forerunner of to-

day's miracle-diet charlatans and prime-time evangelists. But he was neither of those. As the historian James C. Whorton writes, Fowler was one of a host of 19th-century "crusaders for fitness" who believed, with characteristic American optimism, that the "ideal society will arise from the physical renovation of all individual citizens." Among other crusaders were vegetarians such as Russell Trall, "Christian physiologists" such as Sylvester Graham (best remembered as the inventor of the Graham cracker), and "muscular Christians" such as George Windship, the Charles Atlas of the 19th century. Individual reform, they were convinced, would lead to social progress. And unlike their descendants, today's holistic health enthusiasts and others, Fowler and his contemporaries did not seek a return to Eden. The "kingdom of health" that they envisioned was in Whorton's apt phrase, "a city, not a garden."

What makes Fowler most interesting, however, is the fact that he crusaded for much more than fitness. The years from 1820 to the outbreak of the Civil War saw the introduction of almost all of the staple subjects of humanitarian reform that were to preoccupy crusaders for the next century—labor, housing, temperance, women's rights, education—and Fowler threw himself into many of them. Like Benjamin Franklin and the other great American "Renaissance men" of the previous century, Fowler believed that better ways of doing almost everything could be found. Like his contemporaries, he was secure in the faith that the best way to lead people to a morally superior plane was by teaching them a practically superior way of living.

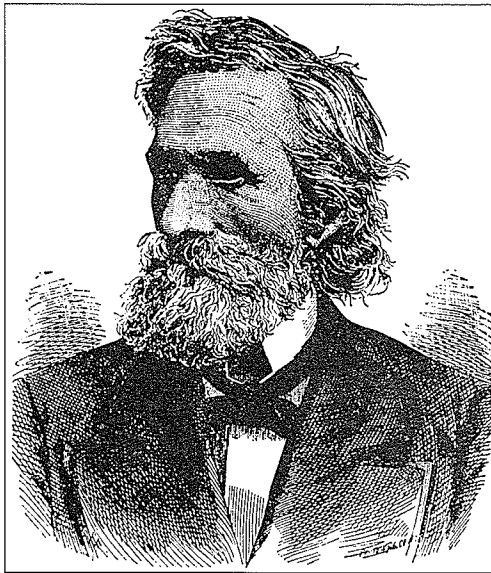
It should not be surprising that this son

of staunch Congregationalists from upstate New York—his father was a farmer and church deacon—at first set out to be a preacher. But while a student at Amherst College during the early 1830s, Fowler was introduced to the field which was to be his life's work: phrenology. This new science took its name from two Greek words meaning "discourse on the mind." It was born in Vienna (not its only similarity to Freudian psychoanalysis) in the late 18th century. Its founder, Dr. Franz Joseph Gall, postulated that the shape of a human skull could reveal the shape of the mind and, ultimately, the character. Moreover,

Gall developed the notion that the brain was made up of a great many separate organs (the supposed number varied over the years from 35 to 43), each serving as the seat of a particular character trait. Most attractive of all to Americans, with their perpetual interest in self-improvement, these organs were capable of being strengthened through proper mental exercise.

When Johann Spurzheim, one of Gall's most ardent disciples, brought the doctrine of phrenology to the United

States in 1832, his American audiences at once took him and his phrenological charts to their bosom. Harriet Martineau, the noted English writer who was visiting the United States at the time, reported that "the great mass of Americans became phrenologists in a day, wherever he appeared." And why not? Phrenology held out the promise of human self-redemption, a notion that was bound to appeal to a people so deeply convinced of the perfectibility of man. As one writer put it, "There need be merely a universal examining of heads to arrive at a universal omniscience."



"Allowed to choose my own name," Fowler wrote, "it would be, Nature's Apostle."

This was the crusade upon which the 25-year-old Orson Squire Fowler embarked in 1834, and by all accounts he was practically an overnight success. With his younger brother Lorenzo, himself a skilled phrenological proselytizer, Fowler hit the lecture trail. In rented halls all over the eastern United States, the Fowlers perfected their spiel, explaining the basic tenets of phrenology and offering hands-on analyses of volunteers' heads.

The lectures (which were free) and examinations (which were not) drew large crowds and more than a few celebrities. Sculptor Hiram Powers and actor Edwin Forrest had their heads examined, as did John Tyler, Brigham Young, John Greenleaf Whittier, and the famous Siamese twins, Chang and Eng. A painfully shy 15-year-old Clara Barton was examined by Lorenzo, who urged her anxious mother to "throw responsibility upon her." Some time later, according to biographer Madeleine B. Stern, Orson analyzed the skull of a bearded, strong-faced man from Massachusetts, telling him, "You are too blunt and free-spoken—you often find that your motives are not understood." The subject was John Brown.

Feeling the need for a permanent base from which to spread his gospel, Orson set up an office in Philadelphia in 1838. It closed a few years later, but the Phrenological Cabinet which Orson and Lorenzo established in New York became one of the city's premier showplaces. A visitor to the Fowlers & Wells emporium on Nassau Street—so named when the brothers' sister Charlotte and her husband, Samuel Wells, joined them—could easily spend a full day there. He could attend lectures on any of a number of topics or receive private instruction in phrenology. (Orson himself is said to have offered his services free to lady visitors.) The visitor might well spend an instructive hour or two studying the enormous collection of busts, casts, skulls, and paintings representing racial types and "persons of eminence in talent and virtue, and . . . those

who were notorious for crime." He could also, of course, submit himself to an actual phrenological examination for a fee ranging from \$1 to \$3. Finally, as a souvenir of the visit, what could be more fitting than a life-size plaster bust "showing the exact location of all the Organs of the Brain," available for a mere \$1.25?

Fowlers & Wells quickly became a center of agitation for reform in a bewildering variety of fields. In the pages of Orson's *American Phrenological Journal* and in dozens of books and pamphlets, the Fowlers reiterated their ultimate aim: "Society must be reformed, and this science, under God, is destined to become the pioneer in this great and good work." They were determined that no wrong should go unrighted, no panacea unproclaimed.

As early as the 1840s, the Fowlers assailed the inadequacies of the American educational system. "A Child is more valuable than any other human being," they declared. Elsewhere they trumpeted, "The training of children is at the very foundation of society" and, "We hear much of 'Human Rights,' 'Man's Rights' and 'Women's Rights,' but Children's Rights are almost entirely unrecognized." Among the rights to which every child was entitled, of course, was the right to have phrenology form the basis of his or her education. The Fowlers therefore must have derived tremendous satisfaction from the pronouncement by Horace Mann, the noted school reformer, that he was "more indebted to Phrenology than to all the metaphysical works I ever read."

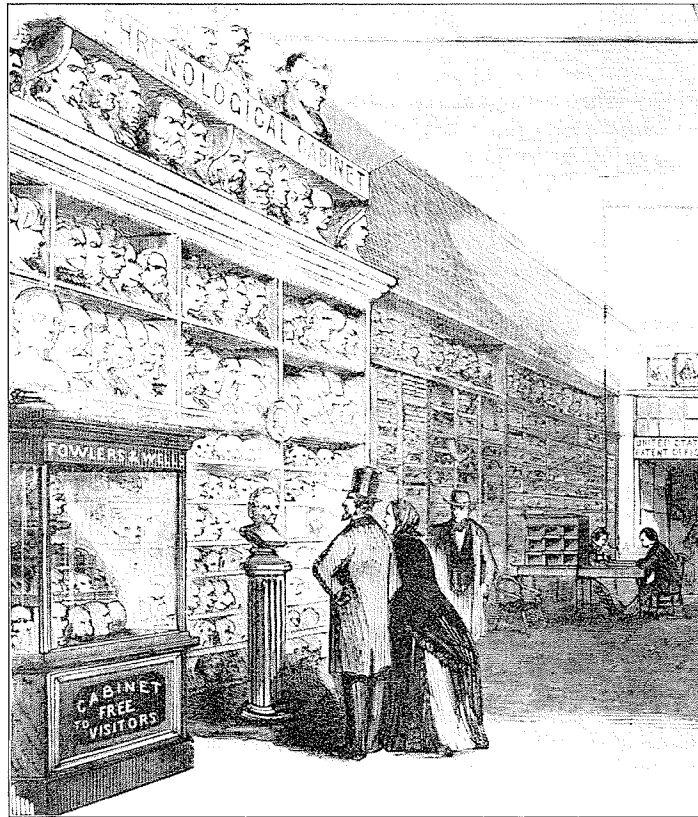
Education was only one of Orson's many causes. He was an early and lifelong advocate of equality for women. His words have the staccato clarity of a suffragette's placard: "Women's sphere of industry should . . . be enlarged till it equals that of men What but 'female suffrage' can save our republic? Women's wages should equal men's for the same work." In addition to casting off their social and political chains, women were exhorted to free themselves from the tyranny of fashion, particularly the tight-laced corset. In publi-

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cation after publication, Orson and Lorenzo condemned tight lacing as "gradual suicide," adopted the slogan "Natural Waists, or No Wives," and urged their female readers to exchange "the shackles... of fashionable libertines" for "the garb of natural beauty."

Both men and women were warned of the evils of tobacco, alcohol, and improper diet. "The noxious weed," as Orson called it, was responsible for a range of diseases from amnesia to cancer, as well as general depravity and licentiousness. As for alcohol, the brothers asserted that "two-thirds of the idiots and insane in the land" could blame their unfortunate condition on "the free use of this liquid fire." Vegetarianism likewise found zealous advocates in the Fowlers. Orson declared his own "dietetic doctrine that man should live mainly on unbolted wheat bread and fruit, or its juice," adding smugly, "Give me this diet, and you are quite welcome to all the flesh-pots of modern cookery." In due course, the American Anti-Tobacco Society and the American Vegetarian Society were organized and headquartered in the offices of Fowlers & Wells.

The brothers championed hydropathy, expressing the hope that its regimen of baths and liberal consumption of water would "soon surpass all other systems of the healing art" and free mankind from its unnatural dependence on the "drugopathic system." They extolled the benefits of mesmerism, Orson avowing that he had "cured and been cured of headache, toothache, neuralgia and other aches and pains... by this means." Their office was among the first to make use of phonography, an early system of shorthand which their publications hailed as a "most prom-



Attractions at the Phrenological Cabinet (shown here in 1860) included busts of Michelangelo, a Bengal tiger, and a woman whose abnormal organ of Veneration caused her to pray incessantly.

ising field of human progression." They published a monthly magazine, *The Prisoners' Friend*, on the subject of penal reform. They pioneered marriage counseling and a simple form of eugenics ("Those very fleshy should not marry those equally so, but those too spare and slim"). The *American Phrenological Journal* was happy to report that "husbands and wives are beginning to regulate their connubial habits, and settle their disputes... by the aid of phrenology."

For every new cause that Fowlers & Wells embraced, a new book had to be written. An impressive number came from the pen of Orson Fowler himself. It was said that "almost half a million of his various productions" were in circulation at the height of his fame, and at one time "a bookstore in which his books only were

sold" did a thriving business in New Haven, Connecticut.

Many of his books, of course, were purely phrenological in nature—*Phrenology Applied to the Cultivation of Memory*, for example, or *Phrenology versus Intemperance*, or *Life, Health, and Self-Culture, as Taught by Phrenology*—but it seemed that every subject was grist for his mill. Early on he proclaimed his commitment to "publish no work which I do not think eminently calculated to do good," and he soon became convinced that he could do the most good by writing about marriage and sex. His *Matrimony: or Phrenology and Physiology applied to the selection of Suitable Companions for Life* sold in the thousands and was soon followed by *Love and Parentage, applied to the Improvement of Offspring*. Warming to his subject, he turned out *Maternity, Manhood, and Amativeness: or Evils and Remedies of Excessive and Perverted Sexuality*.

In all, his tone was avuncular and conciliatory. "We offer pity for folly, and ointment for your self-inflicted wounds," he wrote in *Amativeness*. "So far from casting reproaches, we would put you again on the feet of self-respect, and the road of restoration." He knew that he was treading on dangerous ground in daring to write about sex, but having "seen nothing which did full justice to this subject," he could not shirk his duty. "Phrenology mounts the breach," he wrote proudly. "It points out the remedy, and the Author claims to be its expositor." At a later stage of his life he was to mount the breach more frequently, with unfortunate results.

By the end of the 1840s it seemed that the Fowlers just might reach their goal of phrenologizing America. The nationally renowned preacher Henry Ward Beecher was telling his Brooklyn flock that "the views of the human mind . . . revealed by Phrenology, are those views which have underlayed my whole ministry." Some business firms asked job applicants to undergo a phrenological examination as a prerequisite to employment, perhaps taking their cue from Horace Greeley's opinion that selecting trainmen "by the aid of phrenology, and not otherwise" was a sure way to reduce railroad accidents. Horace Mann stated that "the principles of Phre-

nology lie at the bottom of all sound mental philosophy." There were even reports of ladies dressing their hair so as to show off their best phrenological organs.

Right in the middle of all this success, Orson Squire Fowler decided to take a break. He had exercised his organ of Amativeness, which he had found to be "only moderate" in an early self-examination, by taking a wife in 1835. Two children followed in due course. Eager to provide a home for his family and doubtless wearied by the long hours spent at the writing desk and on the lecture circuit, Orson decided to build a house on some land he had bought near Fishkill, New York, in the Hudson River Valley. He had some rather startling ideas he wanted to try out. His experiment in homebuilding was to trigger one of the most interesting fads of the 19th century and exert a significant influence on subsequent architectural thought.

It was no ordinary house that Fowler proposed to build. It was to be the perfect house. It was to be the answer to many questions which plagued this confirmed believer in progress and reform: "Why so little progress in architecture, when there is so much in other matters? Why continue to build in the same SQUARE form of all past ages? Is no radical improvement . . . possible?"

As usually happened when he had a new idea, Fowler immediately wrote a book about it. Published in 1848 by Fowlers & Wells, *A Home for All or a New, Cheap, Convenient and Superior Mode of Building* is a fascinating book, a good-natured, neighborly, pull-up-a-chair-and-let's-chat sort of book. Over the years (perhaps from having run his fingers over so many more-or-less-globular skulls?), Fowler had come to the conclusion that nature loves a sphere. "Nature's forms are mostly SPHERICAL," he announced. "She makes ten thousand curvilinear to one square figure. Then why not apply her form to houses?" But since building a spherical house would be next to impossible, he settled on the octagon as the next best thing.

An octagonal house, Fowler reasoned, was eminently practical. He reeled off columns of figures to prove his point that

“since a given length of octagon wall will inclose one-fifth more space than the same length of wall in a square shape, of course you can have the same sized wall for one-fifth less money, or the wall of a house one-fifth larger for the same sum.”

Besides that, an octagonal house would be good to look at. “A square house is more beautiful than a triangular one, and an octagon or duodecadon than either,” he said, because “the more the angle approaches the circle, the more beautiful.” After all, “Why is it that a poor animal, or a lean person, is more homely than the same animal or person when fleshy? Because the latter are less angular and more spherical than the former.”

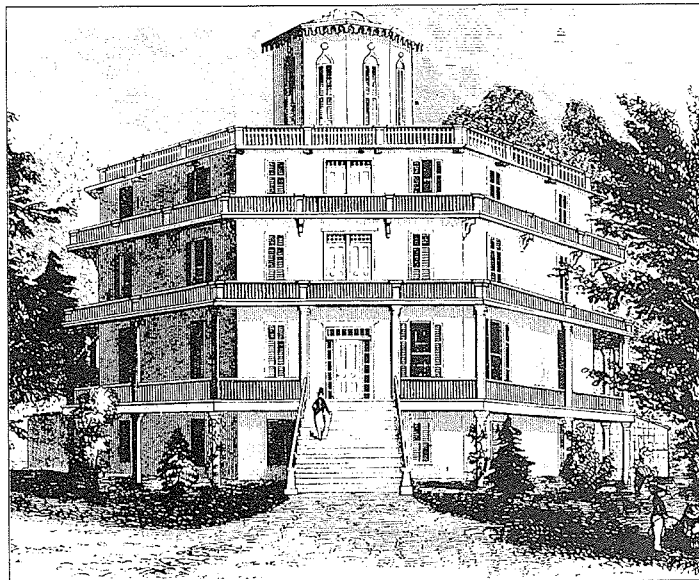
A Home for All was written while Fowler’s house was still in the planning stage. The book was already in print and actual construction on the house barely underway when Fowler made a second great discovery. On a trip to Wisconsin in 1850, he saw several buildings in the town of Milton “built wholly of lime, mixed with that coarse gravel and sand found in banks on the western prairies.” The buildings were the work of one Joseph Goodrich, who generously allowed Fowler to bash his walls with a sledgehammer. Fowler found them to be “hard as stone itself, and harder than brick walls,” and a lightbulb went on in his head.

The ideal building material, Fowler reasoned, would be “simple, durable, easily applied, everywhere abundant, easily rendered beautiful, comfortable, and every way complete.” Joseph Goodrich’s hammer-proof walls filled the bill perfectly. This was “Nature’s material,” Fowler decided. And it was ideally suited for a house designed in “Nature’s form.” When a revised edition of Fowler’s book appeared in 1853, it featured a significant change in subtitle: *A Home for All or the Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Build-*

ing New, Cheap, Convenient, Superior and Adapted to Rich and Poor.

Obviously, Orson Fowler did not “invent” the octagonal building. The Dutch built an octagonal trading post in New Jersey in 1630, for example, and Poplar Forest, Thomas Jefferson’s octagonal retreat in western Virginia, predated Fowler’s book by almost half a century. Likewise, Fowler could not—and did not—claim to have originated the “gravel wall” method of construction, which bore considerable resemblance to the *pise* (rammed earth) and “tabby” modes used by early American settlers. The idea that this form and this material could be used by the masses as a means of providing cheap, attractive, and convenient housing for themselves, however, was Fowler’s alone.

He seems to have worried not a bit about his lack of previous experience as a homebuilder, believing that every man could—indeed, should—be his own carpenter through the proper exercise of his organs of Constructiveness and Inhabitativeness. So, with the help of only a few laborers, Fowler dug out his basement, mixed the excavated soil and rock with



“A superior man, a superb villa,” was Orson Fowler’s dictum when he built his octagonal house near Fishkill. He held that a man’s home, no less than his skull, revealed his true character.

lime to build his walls, and erected the shell of his house in a week. He calculated the cost at \$79.

And what kind of house did he build? Well, for starters, it was big. It loomed three full floors above a raised basement and was topped with a large, many-windowed cupola. Every floor enjoyed access to a wide veranda which encircled the building. The exterior walls were finished with stucco "colored with indigo, lamp-black, and some other articles . . . adding some iron filings and salt, for the purpose of bringing out a rust on the surface, to make it resemble granite." There was little exterior ornament, as might have been expected on the house of a man who had said of the fashionable gimcracks and gee-gaws of his day, "For a child whose tastes are yet immature to be tickled by them, would not be surprising, but for the ELITE to be enamored with them only shows how GREEN they are."

Inside, the house had, in Fowler's words, "sixty rooms, but not one too many." The basement was given over to a warren of chambers for work and storage. Most of the main floor consisted of four large octagonal rooms which could be thrown together to create a space of more than 300 square yards, about which Fowler waxed rhapsodic: "Reader . . . did you ever see the equal of this suite of rooms for entertaining large parties?" The two upper floors featured a separate bedroom and dressing room for each member of the family, an arrangement which Fowler felt was absolutely essential for the health and satisfaction of all. Closets were everywhere, utilizing the awkward corners created by the fitting of square rooms inside an octagonal shell. Rising through the center of the house was a winding stair, lighted from above by the windows and glass roof of the cupola.

The centralized circulation pattern of the house recommended it particularly to a group whose needs were of special concern to Fowler: housewives. He made it clear that he was talking about "women and PRACTICAL HOUSEKEEPERS," not "parlor toys" or "double-exquisite LADIES who are as cordially disgusted with household duties as with common sense."

Although it was quickly labeled "Fowler's Folly" by detractors, the house gave its builder tremendous satisfaction. "No labor of my life has given me more lively delight than the planning and building of my own house," he said, and he urged others to follow his example at all costs. When a neighbor heeded his admonition, Fowler was happy to report that the finished product "so far exceeded what he anticipated . . . as to become as enchanting as a novel, and so delighted him as to interfere with his sleep at night."

While they may not have lost sleep over it, a great many other people built octagons. A definitive tally is impossible, but most historians agree that well over 1,000 octagonal houses were erected during the 1850s, mostly in the Northeast and upper Midwest. Most of them were probably the result, directly or indirectly, of the wide distribution of *A Home for All*, which went through at least nine printings.

Changing tastes and the financial panic of 1857 put an end to the octagon fad, but a surprising number of the houses remain. A modest octagon of 1857 stands cheek-by-jowl with the trendy boutiques of Union Street in San Francisco. Another graces a knoll along busy Route 1 in northeastern Maryland. Geneva, New York, has a particularly charming example with columns and railings of lacy cast iron, and a lovingly restored double octagon with Gothic Revival details stands on a side street in Columbus, Georgia. Ironically, the best-known octagon in the United States is one which Fowler probably would have derided for its lavish Moorish ornamentation: It is Longwood in Natchez, Mississippi, designed by Samuel Sloan and left unfinished when its workmen went off to fight in the Civil War.

By that time, Orson Fowler's own octagon overlooking the Hudson had fallen on hard times. Battered by the economic recession of 1857, Fowler rented the building to a New Yorker who turned it into a boarding house. The following year a number of the boarders were struck down by an outbreak of typhoid, probably caused in part by cesspool seepage through the gravel walls of which Orson had been so proud. He sold the house in 1859. Over the next four decades it passed through many

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to find himself treated like a right-wing "troglodyte." One student at the nation's leading school of journalism even wanted to know why he thought it was so bad that Nicaragua's Sandinista government had shut down the nation's leading newspaper, *La Prensa!*

It is only somewhat reassuring that Krauss admits that "10 years ago I might have been one of them myself." Yet how a self-described "left-liberal" journalist went to Central America "to help stop the next Vietnam" and came home a skeptical centrist is an interesting tale. Actually, says Krauss, his is the story of a whole "Vietnam generation" of foreign correspondents in Central America.

During the first few years of Sandinista rule in Nicaragua, when he worked for United Press International, Krauss concedes, "I reported what I wanted to see and discounted the repression." He says that he was right to stress that Nicaragua was not becoming a Stalinist state, but he missed "the most fundamental event of the

1979-81 period: the consolidation of a Leninist political and military machine."

Krauss says that his ideological blinders began to come off during three weeks he spent with leftist guerrillas in El Salvador in 1982. His hosts refused to dispute the Communist Party line that the Solidarity movement in Poland was merely a tool of American imperialists; in an otherwise pleasant Salvadoran village run according to the principles of agrarian socialism, he was disturbed to see a "personality cult" organized around a guerrilla leader. But the real turning point for his generation, Krauss says, was the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. He was surprised to find himself unwilling to condemn it automatically, and was "happy to see the downfall of the Stalinists around Bernard Coard."

Now that his generation has left Central America, Krauss says, it will be "interesting" to see what the next crop of "idealistic" youngsters has to say—and, one might add, how many years it takes them to complete their own on-the-job education.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy for Consenting Adults

"Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism" by Thomas McCarthy, in *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1990), Univ. of Chicago, 202 Wieboldt Hall, 1050 E. 59th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

"Philosophy should be kept as separate from politics as should religion," the philosopher Richard Rorty declared in 1985. That would have been an unremarkable statement had it been made by one of the analytic thinkers who have dominated Anglo-American philosophy since World War II. But Rorty, who teaches at the University of Virginia, is perhaps the foremost critic of that highly esoteric school of thought, a self-proclaimed "neo-pragmatist," and the pre-eminent heir to the politically engaged pragmatic philosophers William James and John Dewey. And like them, he writes with enough panache to make his case in popular magazines. In short, says McCarthy, a philosopher at Northwestern, Rorty has "all the makings

of a new American philosopher-hero." Why he has not become one is McCarthy's subject.

Until the late 1970s, Rorty was a highly respected member of the philosophy establishment. But then he published *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), attacking analytic philosophy's pursuit of rarefied "logical analysis of language" and its excessive reliance on models of knowledge borrowed from the sciences. Rorty favors, in McCarthy's words, "a turn to social practice to bring us . . . back to earth—that is back to the concrete forms of life in which our working notions of 'reason,' 'truth,' 'objectivity,' 'knowledge,' and the like are embodied." Rorty also joins with Jacques Derrida, Michel Fou-