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Notes on Neill

A. S. Neill was a giant of twentieth century education, but I first heard of him through an essay he wrote years ago on George Bernard Shaw as educator. I was struck by Neill's essay; I recognized in him a fresh, insightful interpreter, and my appreciation of George Bernard Shaw was in turn heightened.

Only later did I realize that Neill was not only the creative architect of one of the most famous, influential pioneering schools in the world; he was an educator who saw how it was possible to fuse such disparate theoretical perspectives as those of Shaw and Freud.

As far as I know, Neill always maintained his belief in the kind of democratic socialism so eloquently expressed in the dramas and essays of Shaw. But he also maintained the early profound influence that Freudian theory had upon him.

Indeed, I can think of no experimental school anywhere else (although there may be one or more) which was deliberately constructed upon some of the basic postulates of Freudian theory. Neill, however, was able to accomplish what very few Freudians before or since have been able to do; to translate its deeper postulates into the practical, daily experiences of children living in an institutionalized educational environment.

Although, I, for one, have certain doubts about the adequacy of Summerhill either as theory or practice, and accordingly do not regard it as the model of good education to be emulated everywhere, I have no doubt that it is one of the major pioneering educational adventures of our time.

One principal reason is that Summerhill derived from and survived because of a charismatic educator. But it also rested firmly upon a groundwork of theory of which both Freud and Shaw are great exemplars.