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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Askold Melnyczuk, whose generosity and dedication are a byword among his friends; to Alex Johnson, his partner in life and in Arrowsmith Press; and to many others whom it's been a great pleasure and benefit to read and to know: Sven Birkerts, Carroll Bogert, Deb Chasman, Jim Concannon, Dave Denison, Keith Gessen, Martha Herbert, Christopher Hitchens, Robert Irwin, M. Mark, Scott McLemee, David Mehegan, Brian Morton, Rick Perlstein, Katherine Powers, Kit Rachlis, Norman and Elsa Rush, Polly Shulman, Jim Sleeper, Ben Sonnenberg, Sue Standing, and Ella Taylor. There are a lot of people in the background of even a very modest accomplishment

"The Sealed Envelope" first appeared in *Agni* 39 (1994)

"Crowds and Culture" appeared in *The Harvard Review* (Fall 1992)

"Demos and Sophia" appeared in *Agni* (Fall 1998)

"An Honest Believer" appeared in *Agni* (Fall 1987)

"A Whole World of Heroes" appeared in *Dissent* (Summer 1995)

"A Fool for Love" appeared in *The Boston Phoenix* (5/13/86)

"Message from Room 101" appeared in *Agni* (Spring 2003)

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The Sealed Envelope

I.

A propos of Vietnam, W. H. Auden remarked exasperatedly: "Why writers should be canvassed for their opinions on controversial political issues I cannot imagine. . . . Literary talent and political common sense are rarely found together:" One sees his point. And yet the habit is incorrigible: the habit, that is, of deference to the political opinions of artists and intellectuals. It is by no means universal, of course, and is even arguably declining. But the reflex remains widespread.

Auden's remark notwithstanding, the assumption on which this deference is based is not hard to understand. As Lionel Trilling phrased it, art supposedly "makes one more conscious, more aware, more sensitive, and the more conscious, aware, and sensitive one is, the more sympathetic and responsive one is to other people." Though Trilling himself went on to question this assumption, he admitted its plausibility.

Surely it's at least plausible. The beginning of political decency and rationality is to recognize others' similarity in important respects to oneself; that is, to identify imaginatively. Which is what one does when reading fiction. Literature is, in this sense, practice for civic life. "The great instrument of moral good is the imagination," as Shelley wrote in *A Defense of Poetry.*

Besides largeness of imagination, art makes another gift to public life: fineness of discrimination, "A man with taste;' observed Joseph Brodsky in his Nobel Prize speech:

> particularly with literary taste, is less susceptible to the refrains and the rhythmical incantations peculiar to any version of political demagogy. The point is not so much that virtue does not constitute a guarantee for producing a masterpiece, as that evil, especially political evil, is always a bad stylist. The more substantial an individual's aesthetic experience, the sounder his taste, the sharper his moral focus, the freer—though not necessarily the happier—he is...

Yet Auden's complaint cannot be dismissed. A 20th-century dishonor roll of writers, including great writers, who've uttered left-wing or right-wing foolishness and even murderous rubbish could be drawn up with no difficulty. How is this possible?

The simplest answer is probably the most useful: don't trust the teller, trust the tale. Art never purveys murderous rubbish, though artists sometimes do. A few masterpieces have been disfigured by—a few even, some would argue, partly animated by—politically pernicious sentiments,

but they are so rare that they may reasonably be considered freaks, Opinions are secondary in literature; the primary effect, always benign, is upon the reader's imagination and taste.

All true as far as it goes. That's far enough, at any rate, for my purpose here, which is neither to address Lionel Trilling's objection that teaching modern literature to young narcissists usually produces not brave and humane young citizens but only more cultivated narcissists; nor to arbitrate between the engaged and the skeptical, between, say, Sartre ("although literature is one thing and morality quite another, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative") and Thomas Mann (form is "in its innermost core, indifferent to good and evil"). Instead I want only to reflect a little on the changing situation of intellectuals.

There is, after all, also a long honor roll of 20th-century writers who've articulated important and difficult truths. I'm thinking of Bourne, Russell, Orwell, Macdonald, Silone, Chiaromonte, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, among others. Some were artists, others critics, but all were literary men. Their primary training and frame of reference were the humanities, usually literature or philosophy, and they habitually, even if often implicitly, employed values and ideals derived from the humanities to criticize contemporary politics. They were generalists: they drew, from a generally shared body of culture, principles of general applicability and applied them to facts generally available. Their "specialty" lay not in unearthing generally unavailable facts, but in penetrating especially deeply into the shared culture, in grasping and articulating its contemporary moral/political relevance with special originality and force.

But many large developments have combined to reduce the influence of such generalists. The public relations industry has far outstripped the intellectuals' restricted access to the public. Formerly, propaganda campaigns like the one sponsored by the British to bring about American intervention in World War I were effective but rare. Propaganda routinized became p.r., which was soon a major ingredient in local newspapers and radio broadcasts. Serious journals, even the larger ones, could not compete with such mass outlets.

Nor could intellectuals and other independents begin to match corporate and government support for academic departments and research institutes. Ideologically congenial experts were funded and publicized, while dissidents, predictably, were not. As a result, the prestige of natural and social science was regularly enlisted behind business objectives or government policy.

Finally, authoritative interpretation of the humanities could only command moral and political influence among a populace who revered that tradition, or indeed knew of its existence. The decline of print literacy and the advent of the "electronic millennium" (Sven Birkerts' invaluable phrase)

has eroded not merely the extent but the basis of generalist intellectuals' influence.

No less important than these external developments is a change in the role or definition of intellectuals. In a classic essay on the intellectual vocation ("This Age of Conformity"), Irving Howe observed that "the intellectual is a man who writes about subjects outside his field. He has no field." in another, perhaps even more famous essay ("The New York Intellectuals"), Howe referred to "the idea of the intellectual as anti—specialist, or as a writer whose specialty was the lack of a specialty: the writer as a dilettante-connoisseur, *Luftmensch* of the mind, roamer among theories." These descriptions were especially true of the New York/*Partisan Review* intellectuals, but apply to all 20th-century "public" intellectuals, to all *politiques et moralistes*. Their breadth of reference was the source of their authority: they wrote on political and cultural matters as men and women upon whom nothing—at least nothing relevant—had been lost.

But this combination of range and authority may no longer be feasible. The cultural conversation has grown and now includes too many voices and perspectives, too much information. To be, or at any rate to seem, an expert on everything—which is implied by Howe's definition—is now not a challenge but an invitation to vertigo. To retain an active mastery of the humanities, to keep in touch with new art and new interpretations, is difficult enough. But political and social criticism has grown far more empirical, more specialized, than in the high season of the New York intellectuals. As we know from many a memoir, everyone in the City College cafeteria in the 1930s had a position on everything. Throughout the next couple of decades, everyone at *Partisan Review* meetings and Greenwich Village parties still had a position on everything. Today only Gore Vidal and Hilton Kramer seem to have positions on everything, positions usually generated simply by applying familiar rhetorical strategies to a new topic, without any complicating adjustment to new facts or perspectives. One sympathizes: the grand old anti-capitalist and anti-communist intuitions still have important work to do. And they unify the sensibility, supplying the abundant moral energy that makes both Vidal and Kramer (in spite of everything) admirable. But a unified sensibility and the critical self-confidence it bestows are, for most of us, no longer to be had.

Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* persuasively identified the financial and institutional constraints on the freelance life. The intrinsic, evolutionary pressures mentioned above may be just as much to the point. The very ideal of cosmopolitanism, of the intellectual as "anti-specialist," uniting political and aesthetic interests and able to speak with some authority about both, may be obsolescent. Though almost always decried, this is an ambiguous prospect. The culture of professionalism and expertise,

the bureaucratization of opinion and taste, are not merely mechanisms of social control or a failure of nerve. They are also in part a response to genuine intellectual progress. There's more to know now than in the '30s, and more people have joined the conversation. Perhaps the disappearance of the public intellectual and the eclipse of the classical ideals of wisdom as catholicity of understanding and of citizenship as the capacity to discuss all public affairs are evidences of cultural maturity. Intellectual wholeness is an almost irresistibly attractive ideal; but nowadays too determined a pursuit of it must end in fragmentation and superficiality.

Actually, that's not just true of nowadays. More than a century ago Matthew Arnold lamented:

> It requires in these times much more intellect to marshal so much greater a stock of ideas and observations.... Those who should be guides for the rest, see too many sides to every question. They hear so much said, and find that so much can be said, about everything, that they feel no assurance about anything.

Alas, the stock of ideas and observations relevant to political and cultural criticism has continued to increase. It might seem obvious, for example, that Reaganomics was bad for ordinary Americans —this, if nothing else, a contemporary left-wing intellectual ought to be able to affirm with confidence. Unfortunately, some undeniably honest and intelligent people affirm the contrary. One who is determined to see "all sides of every question" must then learn how to distinguish among ways of measuring median family income, job creation and job loss, unemployment, and several other economic indicators, along with the basics of monetary theory. For a literary intellectual, this is quite a chore.

Formerly a stance, a posture, a gesture, an eloquent affirmation or ironic negation was what was required of the literary-political intellectual. But as the print culture declines, eloquence is devalued. Allusions lose their resonance, rhetorical devices their effect; the habit of close, eager attention to, and the capacity to be intensely affected by, words on a page gradually dwindles.

The problem of scale is equally fundamental, The typically abstract and comprehensive political pronouncements of generalist humanist intellectuals can now no longer hope to be morally or rhetorically adequate. The phenomena in question—the state, the global or domestic political economy, the environment—are too big, and the arguments about them too many and too technical. To draw from a generally shared body of culture principles of general applicability and apply them to facts generally available is no longer possible. The relevant facts are not generally

available anymore, but must be dug for; and which principles are applicable is fiercely contested.

There is another obstacle: the very legacy of Bourne, Orwell, Silone, Camus, Macdonald, et al. The success of these intellectuals in elegantly and forcefully articulating general truths of modern political morality leaves their succession problematic. Just as the great achievements of realist and modernist fiction has bequeathed contemporary novelists a crisis of narrative form, so in a sense have the achievements of the public intellectuals of the early and mid-20th century exhausted the possibilities of the political essay. (At least in the West: Konrad, Michnik, and others seem unfazed.) Of course the truths of political morality need frequent restatement. But much of what commands attention and respect about these writers cannot be recaptured: the authoritative tone and sense of responsibility produced by their immersion in European literature; the impression of high specific gravity produced by the historical circumstances and by the fact that all literate Europe and America was their audience; finally, their sheer virtuosity. Attempts to find some contemporary equivalent of the form and voice of the public intellectuals of the '30s and '40s are futile, for all the above reasons and also because, in the history of art, once is enough. Their best essays have something of the specificity and uniqueness of art, which means that their true successors (Alexander Cockburn and Michael Kinsley, for example?) will doubtless look, superficially, very different,

Early in *Armies of the Night*, Norman Mailer reminds himself that "one's own literary work was the only answer to the war in Vietnam." Later in the book, having disregarded his own advice, he finds himself sharing a jail cell with Noam Chomsky. That most influential of intellectual opponents of the war would eventually tell an interviewer: "I've always been resistant to allowing literature to influence my beliefs and attitudes with regard to society and history." Mailer's account of their mutual respect and mutual incomprehension is amusing. Inasmuch as it can stand for a division of labor and a division of sensibility among contemporary intellectuals, it is also, in retrospect, poignant.

II.

In my favorite communist manifesto, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Oscar Wilde writes: "To the thinker, the most tragic fact in the whole of the French Revolution is not that Marie Antoinette was killed for being a queen, but that the starved peasant of the Vendee voluntarily went out to die for the hideous cause of feudalism." Before and since then, the masses have fairly consistently disappointed their well-wishers, including me. Savage enthusiasm for the First World War among the supposedly gentle and kindly English people astonished and permanently embittered Russell, Shaw, and Lawrence. Wittgenstein renounced his wealth and his career in

order to teach children in rural Austria, only to conclude that peasants and children alike were as vile as Cambridge dons. The failure of the European proletariat to become a revolutionary subject hurt Gramsci, Lukacs, and Adorno into magnificent Marxist poetry. The American electorate's embrace of Ronald Reagan and George Bush— unaffected by almost daily news reports of procurement waste and fraud, failure to enforce environmental, occupational-safety, and consumer-protection regulations, the Executive Branch's continual usurpation of Congressional prerogative, the appointment of young and inexperienced but ideologically congenial judges, and plenty of straightforward sleaze—has all but broken my own heart.

Of course the people aren't always wrong. They made the Velvet Revolution. Danish and Scandinavian trade union members appear to be astonishingly enlightened. A large minority of American voters did, after all, vote against Reagan, and a majority (eventually) against Bush. Nevertheless, the problem for the utopian and the radical democrat (both of which I still consider myself, though on fewer days of the week than formerly) is what to make of the typically great gulf between the people's vision, or lack of vision, and our own.

There are at least two rationales for despair. One is the reproduction of culture, the ways political attitudes and beliefs are transmitted in each generation. The study of this process is a signal achievement of recent social science, from feminists on child-rearing (and innumerable other practices) to Stuart Ewen, Jackson Lears, and others on the historical roots of consumerism to Frances Fitzgerald on American history textbooks to Mark Crispin Miller and Todd Gitlin on television advertising to Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman on the "manufacture of consent" through the news media, along with very much other fruitful work. The upshot of all these investigations is, from one point of view, entirely predictable: who pays the piper calls the tune. Donors, sponsors, stockholders, and trustees—in nearly all cases, businessmen or government officials—set the framework of critique, usually not by outright suppression or censorship, but indirectly, by declining to support work that calls into question, even implicitly, their prerogatives, interests, or values. There is nothing in the least conspiratorial or hypocritical about this, once it's granted that people ought to be able to do whatever they like with "their" money. Now at bottom it is a critical, skeptical attitude, a lack of automatic deference for official or corporate pronouncements—anything that reduces lethargy, passivity, credulity—which threatens the reproduction of social and political orthodoxy. A generalization therefore emerges: work which receives significant institutional or commercial support is likely to be mediocre, conformist, or esoteric. This is as true of popular culture as of academic social science.

The left's discouraging achievement consists in laying bare how subtly this control is exercised and how far it reaches. Considering the disparity of resources between right and left—and I don't mean between Republicans and Democrats—I can't see that a case for, say, the democratic control of production and investment will get a hearing in my lifetime. It would take tens of billions of dollars to mount an effective ideological challenge to contemporary industrial authority relations (a mouthful, that last phrase, but "capitalism" is no less difficult to specify nowadays than "socialism"), since this would include having formulated and if possible tested an alternative, Have-nots haven't got that kind of money.

The other case is less rigorous, but in a way even more troubling. It is the argument for elitism: that most people will always be incapable of the energy, imaginative range, sensual and familial detachment, and inner poise required for citizenship in a republic. There is no disgrace in this; most of us are not gifted musicians or mathematicians and feel no shame about it. It is not, obviously, a precise analogy: fellow citizens influence and sometimes govern us, musicians do not. But in another respect the analogy may be valid and actually encouraging. Mathematical and musical ability can be fostered, up to a point, especially if the effort begins in childhood. And generations of what might be called equal early-environmental opportunity may level differences in aptitude. Might a similarly benign civic pedagogy produce a similarly vast rise in the general level of republican virtue?

Once again, conservatives without imagination will wearily or indignantly object that civic pedagogy on a mass scale—any effort to produce rather than merely permit social virtue—must end in totalitarianism. Conservatives (and liberals and radicals) without imagination are always numerous and influential enough to be worth arguing with. Some other time, though; what haunts me most keenly are not Isaiah Berlin's and Leszek Kolakowski's pontifications nor the grandiloquence of the *nouveaux philosophes*, but rather, for example, these sadly, quietly authoritative observations of Ortega y Gasset:

> The most radical division that it is possible to make of humanity is that which splits it into two classes of creatures: those who make great demands on themselves, piling up difficulties and duties; and those who demand nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be every moment what they already are; without imposing on themselves any effort toward perfection; mere buoys that float on the waves.... As one advances in life, one realizes more and more that the majority of men—and women—are incapable of any other effort

> than that strictly imposed on them as a reaction to external compulsion. The few individuals we have come across who are capable of a spontaneous and joyous effort stand out isolated.... These are the select men, the noble ones, the only ones who are active and not merely reactive, for whom life is a perpetual striving.

Any number of objections will doubtless spring to a generous mind, but one that can hardly do so is that the distinction Ortega proposes is not "the most radical division that it is possible to make of humanity:' If humanity will always be a mass of dough leavened sporadically by a yeast of heroes, then why talk of "radical democracy"? Capitalist democracy requires only consumers, fermented occasionally by entrepreneurs. The result is not very nutritious, but a lot more so than Stalinist or pre-modern brands. And if Ortega is even roughly right, what other kind of democracy is possible?

I've found two paths leading, if not altogether out of despair, at least toward endurance and a provisional hope. One is renunciation – always an attractive option for the beleaguered leftist. What has recently made this, for me, a live option is the example of Richard Rorty—whom I consider an (perhaps the) exemplary contemporary intellectual. Rorty has associated himself, far more often and more explicitly than most of his philosophical peers, with a humane, egalitarian politics. And so my reflexive resistance is suspended when he urges, delicately and persuasively, that

> the sweet dreams of perpetual progress notwithstanding, we may have to concede to Nietzsche that democratic societies have no higher aim than what he called "the last men"—the people who have "their little pleasures for the day and their little pleasures for the night." But maybe we should just make that concession, and also concede that democratic societies do not embody anything, and cannot be reassured by anything, larger than themselves (e.g., by "rationality"). Such societies should not aim at the creation of a new breed of human being, or at anything less banal than evening out people's chances of getting a little pleasure out of their lives. This means that citizens of those societies who have a taste for sublimity will have to pursue it in their own time, and within the limits set by *On Liberty*. But such opportunities might be quite enough.

The other path, or tactic, is a frankly tenuous, even willful, faith in the utopian visionary tradition. As with all the other problems I've touched on

in this essay, I've dealt scarcely at all in evidence, almost exclusively in quotidian impressions. And this not solely for brevity's sake. The perennial philosophical questions, the immemorial answers, may gradually fade away, as Rorty and I hope and expect, or may at any rate mutate into now unimaginable forms. A good reason to think so is that now, as always, one argues about them by opposing a single idiosyncratic (though, one hopes, somehow persuasive) vision to another. Ortega himself splendidly disdains evidence: "As one advances in life, one realizes more and more..." To his distressingly plausible pessimism I can only oppose the (to me) hearteningly plausible utopias of Wilde and William Morris. In *News from Nowhere*, there is virtue and (infrequent) transgression, happiness and (infrequent) grief, but no mechanical miracles; it is undeniably heaven, but undeniably no more than human; and there is no distinction between an inert "majority of men" and a few heroes "for whom life is a perpetual striving." Life for all is an exquisite balance of striving and rest. *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* is less graphic and less convincing, but Wilde's rhetoric is nearly irresistible; and he almost seems to have anticipated Ortega when he redefines socialism as "Individualism": "It is the differentiation to which all organisms grow... the perfection that is inherent in every mode of life, and towards which every mode of life quickens." Where Ortega saw fixity, Wilde saw evolution. I agree—I want to agree—with Wilde.

For quite a while, it appears, the question may be moot. Even the most fervent faith in the heroic capacities of ordinary people may need to be passed on "in a sealed envelope," as Rilke says of love between selfish lovers. Class stratification, sometimes violently enforced, and ethnic or religious civil wars are the immediate human prospect, for which no intensive pedagogy will be required to enlist most ordinary people.

In a sealed envelope, then, along with many of the values adumbrated by the writers I most admire, whose works are a small flotilla bearing that envelope towards other generations, less and more enlightened than ours, who will make their own unforeseeable use of its contents.

Crowds and Culture

This spring I spent two weeks in Italy. According to guidebooks and friends, April should have been ideal: after the rains, before the summer heat and the tourist season. In the event, it rained every day, and the churches, museums, markets, gardens, ruins, and temples were thronged with tourists. Disappointment makes one philosophical. Since it's hard to philosophize for very long about the weather, I soon began to reflect on the crowds.

I had prepared for the trip by reading *Twilight in Italy* and *Sea and Sardinia* by D. H. Lawrence and *Old Calabria* by Norman Douglas. Lovely books all and written, apparently, just before the Flood. Trains and boats were crowded in these books, but with Italians (the authors traveled second or third class), not tourists. Cultural sites and picturesque scenery were not, as now, overrun. Only artists and the upper or upper-middle classes either wanted to or could afford to visit; and as a result, those who came found what they were looking for. Unlike me.

In 1930 Ortega y Gasset published *The Revolt of the Masses*, whose opening pages announced a momentous phenomenon, which he called "plenitude" but might have called "crowdedness." For the first time in Europe, Ortega wrote:

> Towns are full of people, houses full of tenants, hotels full of guests, trains full of travelers, cafes full of customers, parks full of promenaders, consulting-rooms of famous doctors full of patients, theaters full of spectators, and beaches full of bathers. What previously was, in general, no problem, now begins to be an everyday one, namely, to find room.

Ortega was ambivalent about all this. No one, he admitted, could begrudge the people more pleasures or better medical care. But culture was another matter. He thought that while formerly most travelers were prepared, by training or inheritance, to appreciate art and historic places, the new crowds were not. The latter had come to assert themselves rather than submit themselves; or else – most often, in fact – for no definite purpose. The masses "have decided to advance to the foreground of social life, to occupy the places, to use the instruments, and to enjoy the pleasures hitherto reserved for the few." Though this sounds unexceptionable, "it is evident that these places were never intended for the multitude, for their dimensions are too limited, and the crowd is continuously overflowing …"

I must confess to similar retrograde feelings, especially about tour groups. Swarms of Spanish and Swedish high-school students pinned my

companion and me against the wall at the summit of St. Peter's. Everywhere we turned in the Boboli Gardens, we encountered chattering clumps of Italian junior-high-school students. We dashed from room to room in the Pitti Palace, trying to stay ahead of a German group with a very loud (and very pedestrian) guide. The mosaics at Sicily's Piazza Armerina were splendid even in the rain – but only because the many groups present were mostly sheltering in the gift shop and cafeteria. And so on, everywhere.

All this may sound so commonplace, so predictable, so taken-for-granted a travel hazard that there's not much point complaining about it. Actually, I'm not sure, on reflection, that I want to complain. Perhaps the crowd is even a cause for – guarded – celebration, for a muffled cheer. In theory, after all, the cultural landmarks of Europe are everyone's heritage. Better a single confused, brief, distant glimpse of them than yet another generation of ignorance for half the population or more. Many of the crowd will have come for no reason they can articulate; but for others, out of a daily round of routine labor and consumption, the trip may be a shy, wistful homage to the higher life. And even if barren for the traveler, the trip may have a residual effect, may water a seed, blow on a spark, transmit a message to a child, neighbor, or co-worker.

In any case, isn't the increasing activity of the masses – even if painfully inept at first – virtually the definition of political progress? To a democrat and egalitarian, can this publicizing of culture, this subversion of elite privilege, be anything but good? And isn't this large-scale economic and cultural democratization what made possible my own pilgrimage, the child and grandchild of poor, uneducated southern Italian immigrants?

True … and yet. Something's not right. It's not a happy match; the places themselves are, in a sense, frustrated. A half-empty theater or sports stadium is a waste; when they're full, both performers and audience are exhilarated. But the Farnese Gardens, the Cappella Palatina, the Greek temples of Sicily can only work their magic on a few visitors at a time. And no doubt they would prefer some visitors to others: erudite old friends and ardent neophytes rather than the dutiful, the acquisitive, the ignorant, or the naively curious.

It doesn't matter, I tell myself; such distinctions are politically invidious, even when made by great monuments (or their imagined spirits). The culturally well-prepared are disproportionately the socio-economically advantaged. Even if it were feasible, as of course it's not, would I really want to penalize the disadvantaged, to compound injustice by restricting their access to "the best places, the relatively refined creations of human culture" (Ortega)?

No, I guess not. Anyway, my purpose here is not to propose a policy, which is a complicated and detailed matter, but merely to sort out my feelings. Am I glad or not that those crowds were there; or better, why am

I ambivalent about them? I'm glad that – to put it crudely – the masses are being made aware of culture. But I'm sorry that this awareness is first awakened through the medium of advertising and therefore perceives culture, at least at first, as an object of consumption. Whether active (i.e., reading their guidebook) or passive, few tourists seemed (I'm speculating, I admit) to recognize that there might be any other qualification for being where they were – in the holy places of European culture – than having paid.

I've quoted Ortega's complaint that the "places hitherto reserved for the few" are now being occupied by "the multitude." Ortega was a Nietzschean conservative and had his own, non-partisan idea of who such places ought to be reserved for:

> The most radical division that it is possible to make of humanity is that which splits it into two classes of creatures: those who make great demands on themselves, piling up difficulties and duties; and those who demand nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be every moment what they already are, without imposing on themselves any effort toward perfection; mere buoys that float on the waves.

Is this a valid distinction? Yes, I believe it is. Ortega's mistake – what made him a conservative – was his assumption that this distinction between high-quality and low-quality human beings, between creative and critical people on the one hand and passive consumers and conformists on the other, was a metaphysical distinction, was just a fact of human nature. He never considered that increasing the number of the responsible, the cultivated, the noble from generation to generation might be possible through a supreme effort of democratic pedagogy. He went, that is, only part of the way with William Morris and Oscar Wilde toward the loftiest conception of socialism yet devised.

If such a pedagogy is feasible – alas, the experiment will not be made in our lifetime, gentle reader, and probably not in our grandchildren's – there may be just as many visitors on an average day then as now to the great artistic shrines and historic places, or even more. But they won't be crowds.

Demos and Sophia:

Not a Love Story

Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* has met with enormous popular, though not much critical, success. At least four major reviews – by Martha Nussbaum in the *New York Review*, Alexander Nehamas in the *London Review*, George Levine in *Raritan*, and Benjamin Barber in *Harper's* – have suggested persuasively that Bloom's understanding of classical thought is deficient, his account of modern intellectual history implausible, and his willingness or ability to argue his opinions, rather than merely announce them, no better than intermittent. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, David Rieff was less polite: *Closing*, he concluded, is "a book decent people would be ashamed of having written." But inasmuch as half a million Americans have not been ashamed to read, or at any rate buy, Bloom's book, it seems worth considering why *Closing* has spoken so compellingly, if misleadingly, to so many. Even a mediocre book may ask excellent questions.

Closing has two strains: contemporary culture criticism, based largely on Bloom's observations of college students and including a long *maledizione* directed at the Sixties; and underlying the first, though at a great distance, a disjointed meditation on the history of political philosophy. The culture criticism, which undoubtedly accounts for most of those half-million buyers, is often shrewd, but just as often glib, even mean-spirited. Occasionally Bloom sounds like Christopher Lasch, who is, surprisingly, not mentioned in *Closing*. But Lasch is a vastly more discriminating (as well as profound and original) critic, incapable of such simplifications as: "The bad conscience they [i.e., the "radicals in the civil rights movement"] promoted killed off the one continuing bit of popular culture – the Western" or "*All* literature up to today is sexist" or "As I have said many times and in many ways, most of the great European novelists and poets of the last two hundred years were men of the Right" or "The July 14 of the sexual revolution was really only a day between the overthrow of the Ancien Regime and the onset of the Terror." (The "Terror" is feminism.) My favorite Bloomism: "I cannot forget the Amherst freshman who asked in naïve and good-natured bewilderment, 'Should lwe go back to sublimation?' I was charmed by the lad's candor but could not regard him as a serious candidate for culture." This is harmless, almost engaging malice; not so amusing are Bloom's references to "the Nietzscheanization of the American left" during the Sixties, meaning that a new existentialism discourse of "commitment," "will," and "values," allegedly displaced the traditional radical language of rights, justice, and equality. To anyone familiar with the theory and practice of participatory

within the New Left, or who has read its founding document, the Port Huron Statement, Bloom's notion is a half-truth, all the more irritating for his condescension toward so much honest, earnest confusion.

Still, there is much insight and even pathos in Bloom's characterization of students at elite universities, who often arrive jaded at adolescence, for whom "survivalism has taken the place of heroism as the admired quality" and who display the early, poignant effects of what Lasch has called "the narcissistic personality of our time." In particular, *Closing* contains a fine evocation of naivete as a desirable educational disposition. Bloom points out that the capacity to be transformed by new knowledge is not a constant capacity, automatically triggered by encounters with great books, but is a fleeting and easily developmental stage. Premature exposure to advanced ideas, like too-early exposure to sexual or emotional complexities, may generate defenses against hyperstimulation. The typical form of this defense is a flattening of affect, manifested at present, according to Bloom, in a too-easy tolerance, an unreflective cultural relativism – what he calls "openness" and describes ironically as "our virtue."

It is not, he acknowledges, that such openness is not valuable, but only when earned by living down one's prejudices. And prejudices presuppose myths, which enlightened educational theory proscribes. Bloom's argument about education is parallel – though he seems unaware of it – to a now-familiar psychoanalytic one: ¡just as emotional maturity requires the mastery of illusions about an internalized omnipotent father, so intellectual maturity requires gradual emancipation from inherited political and religious myths. In both cases, eliminating these painful struggles also eliminates the possibility of depth, emotional or imaginative. Bloom's extrapolation of his observations about education to marriage and family life, contemporary literature, attitudes toward death, and practically every other aspect of present-day American culture is a little indiscriminate, even reckless. But here, too, *Closing* has its moments. For example, concluding a paragraph of otherwise simplistic anti-feminism, Bloom asks: "What substitute is there for the forms of relatedness that are dismantled in the name of the new justice?" It is clear that Bloom himself will be no help in answering this question; yet it is an urgent question, and could hardly be formulated better.

Now, it is not obvious that the argument considered above actually has the conservative political implications generally drawn from it – for Christopher Lasch, among others, the reverse is true. One reason for this disagreement among cultural conservatives may be methodological: while Lasch provides a subtle, synthetic account of the rise of narcissism and its relation to mature capitalism, dense with historical detail and analytic interconnections, Bloom insists that the source of the cultural relativism he deplores "is not social, political, psychological, or economic, but

philosophic." Bloom himself claims, dubiously, to be not conservative but antipolitical: the root of all contemporary troubles, he contends, is our neglect or misunderstanding of the wisdom of the Greeks. Only they rightly understood "the relationship of the philosopher to the political community."; and this relationship is the really important thing, the alpha and the omega of political theory.

For Plato and Bloom, the ideal form of this relationship is straightforward enough: "Unless philosophers rule as kings, or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize … there is no rest from ills for the cities … nor, I think, for human kind" (*The Republic*). Since this fortunate or unfortunate condition never has been or will be realized, the responsibility of intellectuals is to look out for themselves:

> The toleration of philosophy requires its being thought to serve powerful elements in society without actually becoming their servant. The philosopher must come to terms with the deepest prejudices of men always, and of the men of his time. The one thing he cannot change and will not try to change is their fear of death and the whole superstructure of beliefs and institutions that make death bearable, ward it off or deny it. … Changing the character of his relationship to [other men] is impossible because the disproportion between him and them is firmly rooted in nature. … [I]n antiquity all philosophers had the same practical politics, inasmuch as none believed it feasible *or salutary* to change the relations between the rich and poor in a fundamental or permanently progressive way.
>
> (*Closing*, 282, 289, italics added)

Neither, it appears (despite much hedging), does Bloom. It would be interesting to know whether Saul Bellow, who wrote an admiring Foreword to *Closing*, and Secretary of Education William Bennett, who has championed the book, also endorse these profoundly illiberal – indeed, downright un-American – sentiments.

*

Epithets, however richly deserved, are not arguments. To dismiss Bloom out of hand as elitist, authoritarian, antidemocratic, regressive, and a crank would be, in a way, to repeat the error of our noble democratic and modernist forebears, the citizens of fourth-century Athens. Bloom is

indeed all those unpleasant things; so was Socrates.* But by making a clever and influential, though specious, case against popular sovereignty, they offer its defenders an opportunity to refine and deepen the case for equality.

By now, if not already by the fourth century B.C., it is apparent that refinements are necessary. For modernity has not turned out altogether well. To the pioneers of Enlightenment, it appeared that false certainties and artificial hierarchies were the chief obstacles to general happiness. To many the suspicion has by now occurred that there are no true certainties and no natural hierarchies, yet also that individual and social well-being require *some* certainties, some hierarchies. The rapid increase in mobility and choice, in sheer volume of stimuli that followed the erosion of traditional ways of life and thought has taxed, and occasionally overwhelmed, nearly every modern man or woman. This no longer seems, even to the most optimistic partisans of modernity, merely a phenomenon of transition. It may be that just as in any generation there are broad limits to physical and intellectual development, so also there are psychological limits, which likewise alter slowly. "Human nature," in short, though in an empirical rather than a metaphysical sense; not eternal and immutable, but with enough continuity – inertia, to be precise – to generate illusions of essence and a need for roots.

Bloom repeatedly invokes Nietzsche, whose lifework was a supremely effective demonstration that humankind – most of us, at any rate – cannot bear very much reality. Like Socrates, Nietzsche believed that only those who could endure complete disillusionment ought to rule. But since, like virtually every other modern thinker, he could not take Socratic/Platonic metaphysics seriously, he assumed that Socrates was motivated by spite, by resentment of aristocratic exuberance, which could dispense both with democratic solidarity and with metaphysical mysticism. To this perennial exuberance of the few, incarnated henceforth in the warrior/artist/statesmen/seer, Nietzsche ascribed political sovereignty, warning that self-rule by the unheroic, uninspired many must result in universal mediocrity. "The happiness of the last man" (a prosaic contemporary translation might be "the welfare of the average citizen") was Nietzsche's name for the goal of democratic regimes, which social tolerance, rough material equality, and other policies designed to minimize suffering and risk. But though suffering and risk may crush ordinary natures, they stimulate great natures; and the latter alone produce culture, which makes life worth living.

* For the sorry truth about Socrates, see I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (Little, Brown, 1988)

Equality or excellence: what sounds like the stale formulation of educational bureaucrats was an anguished dilemma for Tocqueville, Carlyle, Nietzsche, even John Stuart Mill. If it is now no longer a live question, that is only because belief in equality has triumphed completely in the United States, has become what Bloom would call a democratic dogma, along with our near-reflexive cultural relativism. It is thus open to gadflies to gibe that the question has been buried, not answered. Apart from pointing out that (with a few glorious exceptions, like classical Athens) democracy is a rare and recent experiment, fully entitled to the benefit of doubts like Bloom's, what can a non-dogmatic democratic reply?

He or she might reply with Shelley that the moral and the aesthetic or theoretical faculties have the same source: "Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. … A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. … " (*A Defense of Poetry*, I). A passionate democrat, Shelley would have denied the incompatibility, which Bloom assumes, between creativity and happiness as cultural imperatives, between the needs of the philosopher and the needs of the many. In this Shelley was relying on the eighteenth-century doctrine of "sympathy": that fellow-feeling is innate, grounded (by mechanisms still imperfectly understood) in human physiology. As expounded by Ferguson, Hume, Adam Smith, and others, this doctrine seems to me true and its implications egalitarian.

But suppose Socrates, Nietzsche, and Bloom are right, and the truth about our moral psychology is less benign? Suppose that solidarity does inhibit sublimity? Democrats must face this possibility; fortunately, one of the greatest already has. Around the time Nietzsche was writing *This Spake Zarathustra*, throwing down the gauntlet to democratic humanism, Walt Whitman wrote *Democratic Vistas*, which met the challenge:

> America … must, for her purposes, cease to recognize a theory of character grown of feudal aristocracies, or form'd by merely literary standards, or from any ultramarine, full-dress formulas of culture, polish, caste, &c., and must sternly promulgate her own new standard, yet old enough, and accepting the old, the perennial elements, and combining them into groups, unities, appropriate to the modern, the democratic, the west, and to the practical occasions and needs of our own cities,

> and of the agricultural regions. Even the most precious in the common.

The genius or splendor of the few may afford the rest of their society a sense of participation in infinity and immortality. But if the maturation of a people requires the sacrifice of this vicarious experience for the direct experience by the many of their own, more limited individuality, then such an exchange should – with a proper sense of the genuine loss that maturation always involves – be accepted. Growing up (remember Kant's definition of Enlightenment: "humankind's emergence from its self-imposed minority") has its compensations. Whitman describes those of democratic society with incomparable verve:

> I can conceive a community, to-day and here, in which, on a sufficient scale, the perfect personalities, without noise, meet; say in some pleasant western settlement or town, where a couple of hundred best men and women, of ordinary worldly status, have by luck been drawn together, with nothing extra of genius or wealth, but virtuous, chaste, industrious, cheerful, resolute, friendly and devout. I can conceive such a community organized in running order, powers judiciously delegated – farming, building trade courts mails, schools, elections, all attended to; and then the rest of life, the main thing, freely branching and blossoming in each individual, and bearing golden fruit. I can see there, in every young and old man, after his kind, and in every woman after hers, a true personality, develop'd, exercised proportionately in body, mind, and spirit. I can imagine this case as one not necessarily rare or difficult, but in buoyant accordance with the municipal and general requirements of our times. And I can realize in it the culmination of something better than any stereotyped *éclat* of history or poems. Perhaps, unsung, undramatized, unput in essays or biographies – perhaps even some such community already exists, in Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, or somewhere, practically fulfilling itself, and thus outvying, in cheapest vulgar life, all that has been hitherto shown in best ideal pictures.

And in an essay written shortly before the appearance of Bloom's book, a contemporary democrat with a sensibility that could hardly be more different from Whitman's, the incomparably subtle Richard Rorty, dotted the last I and crossed the last t:

> From Plato through Kant down to [Habermas and Derrida], most philosophers have tried to fuse sublimity and decency, to fuse social hope with knowledge of something big. … My own hunch is that we have to separate individual and social reassurance, and make both sublimity and *agape* (though not tolerance) a private, optional matter. That means conceding to Nietzsche that democratic societies have no higher aim than what he called "the last men" – the people who have "their little pleasures for the day and their little pleasures for the night." But maybe we should just make that concession, and also concede that democratic societies do not embody anything, and cannot be reassured by anything larger than themselves (e.g., by rationality"). Such societies should not aim at the creation of a new breed of human being, or at anything less banal than evening out people's chances of getting a little pleasure out of their lives. This means that citizens of those societies who have a taste for sublimity will have to pursue it in their own time, and within the limits set by *On Liberty*. But such opportunities might be quite enough.

Plato is a peerless philosopher-poet. But Whitman is a better poet; and Rorty, though less of a genius, is a better philosopher. Their efforts, seconding and supplementing each other (which is a fitting relation for democratic thinkers) can help emancipate the rest of us from Plato's and Bloom's radical doubts about our capacity for autonomy and solidarity. Bloom would "open" a few American minds by chilling a great many American hearts. Unfortunately, a great many Americans, including some very influential ones, appear to be tempted by this proposition. That is a reminder – and here is the chief value of Bloom's book – that democracy really is still an experiment.

An Honest Believer

Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit …. Therefore, by their fruits you will know them. (Matthew 6:16-17, 20)

I never knew a Protestant or, with one exception, a Jew until I went to college. East Boston, the ethnic, inner-city, working-class community where I grew up, was as Catholic in the 1950s and early 60s as southern Italy, where most East Bostonians or their parents or (in my case) grandparents had come from. I only learned about the existence of non-Catholics from a discussion in the *Baltimore Catechism* of the conditions under which they could be saved.

While in college I joined Opus Dei, the contemporary equivalent of the sixteenth-century Society of Jesus, with all the latter's pristine Counter-Reformation rigor. Like most other members of the order, I acquired a papal certificate in Thomistic philosophy and began theological studies. But rashly, I also majored in modern European intellectual history, which meant continual exposure to heresy. Today many Catholic students – and clergy – seem able to bend to the modern gale without straining the tendons of conscience. But I could not. Living as I was the *consilia evangelii*, vetting each course reading assignment against the Index of Forbidden Books, always mindful of the conclusion of Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*, which condemned the proposition that "the Roman Pontiff can and should harmonize himself with progress, with liberalism, and with modern civilization," the choice for me was orthodoxy or apostasy, *sacrificium intellectus* or *sacrificium fidei*.

I sacrificed faith. For all the usual reasons – and one that may be idiosyncratic. I decided that I had never encountered, in life or in print, a Catholic at once intelligent, honest, and fully modern. Let me explain: I ruled out Maritain and Gilson; they were primarily technical philosophers and anyway lived in the mental atmosphere of earlier centuries. "Existential" Catholics, mainly French novelists and poets plus Graham Greene, didn't count either: they were uninterested in arguments and ceded them all to unbelievers. Evelyn Waugh was a comic genius but intellectually trivial and politically mean-spirited.

Cardinal Newman and G. K. Chesterton came closest. But I couldn't entirely trust Newman after reading his controversy with Kingsley. Vastly cleverer, Newman won the debate on points; but Kingsley's original claim – that "truth, for its own sake, has never been a virtue with the Romish clergy" – if unproven, was not quite refuted either. Polemically, no one could lay a glove on Chesterton, but only because he never stood still. In

my exasperation, I exulted over T. S. Eliot's unjust judgment about GK: "He has a mind that swarms with ideas. I see no evidence that it thinks."

"By their fruits you will know them"; but I didn't know a single Catholic thinker who had wrestled with the angel of modernity and retained his or her orthodoxy for reasons I could respect. I felt I had virtually a scriptural warrant for irreligion. I still do, on the whole; though now my doubt is troubled, there is a thorn in the side of my unbelief. I've discovered, to my discomfort, a modern Christian I admire: C. S. Lewis.*

Lewis is probably best known for his children's series, *The Narnia Chronicles*, which I haven't read. But I may be the only atheist who has read every word of his voluminous Christian apologetics. "The key to my books," he wrote, "is Donne's maxim, 'The heresies that men leave are hated most.' The things I assert most vigorously are those that I resisted long and accepted late." The heresies Lewis left were those I embraced; and since the orthodoxies that men leave are also hated most, my relation to his writings could only be, or begin as, fascinated antipathy.

What particularly got under my skin was his conception of evil. Lewis was a connoisseur of evil. Not in Sadean detail, but in depth: his idea, reiterated and refined from book to book, was that insistence on autonomy is our original sin; to call one's soul one's own was his definition of damnation. In our will is our unpeace. Lewis argued relentlessly, and more plausibly than I could bear, that philosophical nihilism – the natural terminus of the modern rejection of metaphysics – is not an innocent or even a stable position, that it must lead to anomie and the war of all against all – that is, to Hell. Recall Kant: "What is Enlightenment? It is humankind's emergence from its own, self-imposed minority." When I encountered Kant's affirmation, I thought it the most inspiring thing I had ever read; I was proud to be modern. Lewis puts that pride in question. We all learn eventually about the dark side of enlightenment, but it's hard to forgive the one who first points it out to us.

Lewis's phenomenology of evil attained its apotheosis in Wither, archfiend of *That Hideous Strength*, the conclusion of his theological science-fiction trilogy. Wither was a philosopher-bureaucrat, whose mode of operation – almost a mode of being – was to blur distinctions. Now, a short definition of modern intellectual history might be: the progressive undermining of all firm distinctions, metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical. In recent years, no one has carried on this dissolution more subtly or rigorously than Richard Rorty, perhaps the most respected living Anglo-American philosopher. I revere Rorty, but thanks to Lewis, I have

* Although Lewis was Anglican rather than Catholic, his writings are undoubtedly far more orthodox, from the point of view of the Roman Curia, than those of, say, Hans Kung or Teilhard de Chardin.

never been able to leave off mentally comparing him to Wither. And when I heard Rorty lecture for the first time, the physical resemblance I saw – or fancied – between him and Wither made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. That's how it feels when mentor and tormentor meet inside one's head.

What I dislike most about Christianity is the doctrine of Hell; and what I like most about Lewis is that, for all his orthodoxy, he disliked it, too. Enough to compose what is surely the most humane portrait of Hell ever penned by a believer: *The Great Divorce*. Lewis did not deny, but could not quite accept, that finite turpitude merits infinite pain. So he imagined a continual commerce between saints and shades, the blessed and the damned, in which the former, like celestial psychotherapists, tempt the latter into surrendering their unreal, imprisoning will. The comparison (mine) with psychotherapy is not frivolous: in effect, if not in intention, Lewis suggests that Hell is neurosis. Which is true and tragic, though hardly orthodox.

To each shade in Lewis's fable comes a saint, linked to his or her earthly life in some way, to guide him or her toward Reality: a mentor. "Der Herr Gott ist raffiniert," Einstein conjectured: "God is wily." I hope so. Wily enough, at any rate, to put Lewis on my case after I'm damned. I can't think who else might persuade me to give up modernity for eternity.

"A Whole World of Heroes": Christopher Lasch on Democracy

"The history of modern society, from one point of view," Christopher Lasch observed in Haven in a Heartless World (1977), "is the assertion of social control over activities once left to individuals and their families." This, at any rate, is the point of view from which Lasch constructed his ambitious and provocative critique of American society. From another point of view, of course, modernity is identified with, even defined by, the rise of individualism: economic, political, and ethical. The latter perspective is the once and probably still dominant ideology of progress: of history as the story of freedom, as a narrative of individual emancipation from the trammels of communal prescription and superstition.

Whether these two points of view are antagonistic or complementary is not clear, to me at least. It may be that individual freedom and social control have, in different areas or aspects of experience, simply grown up side by side; or that they are intimately and paradoxically (that is to say, dialectically) related. Typically the left has endorsed and the right opposed individualism in the progressive or Enlightenment sense, which denotes the lessened authority of traditional beliefs and practices. But what are the political implications of non-traditionalist anti-modernism – Lasch's brand?

Lasch himself offered little help in answering that question; he was notoriously, exasperatingly wary of programmatic statement and ideological self-definition. He did, for what it's worth, affirm in response to critics (albeit fifteen years before his death):

> Once and for all: I have no wish to return to the past, even if I thought a return to the past was possible. The solution to our social problems lies in a completion of the democratic movement inaugurated in the eighteenth century, not in a retreat to a pre-democratic way of life. Socialism, notwithstanding the horrors committed in its name, still represents the legitimate heir of liberal democracy. Marxism and psychoanalysis still offer the best guides to an understanding of modern society and to political action designed to make it more democratic.

In his last decade, Lasch's alarm and disgust deepened, his tone soured, and his allegiance to socialism faltered. But although his complaints about contemporary society sometimes sounded like the neoconservatives', their origin and import was radically different. To see why – to reconstruct Lasch's intricate and wide-ranging cultural critique and connect it with the neopopulism of The Revolt of the Elites – will require a lengthy detour through the labyrinth of psychoanalytic theory.

According to Freud, a newborn infant cannot distinguish between itself and the rest of the world, and therefore between the source of its needs (its own body) and the source of its gratifications (other people, especially its mother). Hence its first mental experience is a sense of omnipotence. Inevitably, some of its needs go unmet, at which time it becomes aware, more or less traumatically, of its separation from the rest of the world. It reacts with rage against the source of its frustration (its parents), but since the source of its frustration is also the source of its gratification and the sole guarantee of its continued existence, the infant cannot tolerate its own impulses of rage and aggression, which would, if realized, annihilate it along with its parents.

This dilemma is unique in the animal world, since only humans are so helpless for so long after birth. The infant's response is fateful – indeed, virtually defines the human condition. The infant represses its rage. But repressed emotions always return. The infant's rage is converted into a variety of fantasies: the fantasy of primal union, in which the irreversibility of separation and dependence is denied; the idealization of the parents, which denies that the parents sometimes frustrate the child and also that it wishes to punish them in return; and the splitting of parental images into all-good and all-bad, which denies the incomprehensible discovery that gratification and frustration come from the same source.

These fantasies have one crucial thing in common: they are all outsized, out of scale. The infant is pictured as either omnipotent or helplessly persecuted, the parents as either perfectly benevolent or implacably threatening. And the fundamental truth of the infant's situation – its separation from and dependence on the rest of the world – arouses alternating panic and denial.

According to psychoanalytic theory, the repression of infantile rage and the fantasies that result are universal and unavoidable. It is what happens thereafter that determines the degree of the child's – and adult's – maturity or pathology. What must occur, if emotional health is to be achieved, is a gradual scaling down of the superhuman size that the parents have assumed in the infant's fantasies, as well as a gradual softening and displacement ("sublimation") of the intense, overwhelming feelings they have called forth. How?

In Lasch's account, there are several ways. First, through the child's continual experience of love and discipline from the same source, i.e., its parents. The actual experience of discipline – of limited but not token punishment – slowly breaks down the archaic fantasy that the parents' displeasure means the infant's annihilation. Next, through what Lasch called "optimal frustrations." In sharp contrast to the awkward and excessive solicitude of the contemporary over-anxious mother, the instinctive confidence of a woman immersed in a kin community or "biological stream" allows the child to experience simultaneously the

lessening of its mother's attentions and its own modest, growing mastery of its immediate environment. Then there is the child's encounter with what Lasch (following the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott) called "transitional objects": playthings, games, and other objects and activities that symbolically express unconscious attachments but at the same time provide the child with reliable links to a stable, comprehensible external world. And finally, there is everyday contact with the father, whom infants of both sexes formerly envied, hated, and feared because of his superior access to the nurturing mother. When the child is part of the father's work environment, it observes two things: first, that he is fallible; and second, that he possesses important and satisfying skills, which he is able and willing to pass on to the child, thus earning its gratitude. Both insights help reduce him to human size in the child's psyche.

To the extent that these several experiences occur, the child can overcome its archaic terror at the discovery of its separateness from the world as well as its unconscious fear and hatred of those who forced this discovery upon it. It can abandon its chief defense against those feelings: the fantasy of overcoming separateness and regaining primal, undifferentiated union with the world. In other words, it can become a self, distinct from others and comfortable with the distinction. It can grow up.

But if these maturational experiences do not occur, no secure self emerges. The growing child's unconscious mental life is still haunted by boundless rage over infantile helplessness, by the fear of parental retaliation that this rage induces, by the simultaneous idealization and demonization of the parents, and by the infant's only available defense against these impulses and fears: the fantasy of a return to oneness and omnipotence.

The result is a neurotic adult. Neurotic, Lasch asserted, in specific and predictable ways: wary of intimate, permanent relationships, which entail dependence and thus may trigger infantile rage; beset by feelings of inner emptiness and unease, and therefore ravenous for admiration and emotional or sexual conquest; preoccupied with personal "growth" and the consumption of novel sensations; prone to alternating self-images of grandiosity and abjection; liable to feel toward everyone in authority the same combination of rage and terror that the infant feels for whoever it depends on; unable to identify emotionally with past and future generations and therefore unable to accept the prospect of aging, decay, and death. This constellation of symptoms is known within psychoanalytic theory as narcissism: the lack of an autonomous, well-defined self. It is currently, as Lasch claimed and the clinical literature attests, the most common form of emotional pathology – the neurotic personality of our time.

It was not always so. The neurotic personality of Freud's time was quite different – acquisitive, fanatically industrious, self-righteous, sexually

repressed. Then the typical symptom was obsessional (an inexplicable compulsion, e.g., incessant handwashing) or hysterical (chronic excitability or, conversely, non-somatic paralysis of a limb or faculty, e.g., frigidity). These symptoms stood out in sharp relief against the background of a stable personality, something like a "bug" in an otherwise well-functioning computer program. To simplify for the sake of contrast: the Victorian/Viennese neurosis was localized and discrete; contemporary narcissism is systemic and diffuse. To simplify even more dramatically: the character of selfhood has changed, from a strong (often rigid) self, in secure possession of fundamental values but riddled (often crippled) with specific anxieties, to a weak, beleaguered self, often full of charms and wiles, and capable, but only fitfully, of flights of idealism and imagination.

Why? What can account for this subtle but immensely significant shift? Lasch formulated an answer in Haven in a Heartless World (1977), The Culture of Narcissism (1978), and The Minimal Self (1984). He posited a connection between two of the deepest, broadest phenomena of modern history: the change in personality described above; and the change from early, developing capitalism (relatively small-scale, still permeated with pre-industrial values and work practices, and largely concerned with expanding production to satisfy basic needs) to mature capitalism (dominated by huge, bureaucratic organizations, "rationalized" by the reduction of workers' initiative, autonomy, and skills, and concerned with expanding consumption through the creation of new needs). Modernization, according to Lasch, is the introduction of new, parallel forms of domination into work life and family life. In a sweeping but closely argued passage he makes the central link in his complex argument:

> The socialization of reproduction completed the process begun by the socialization of production itself – that is, by industrialization. Having expropriated the worker's tools and concentrated production in the factory, industrialists in the opening decades of the twentieth century proceeded to expropriate the worker's technical knowledge. By means of "scientific management," they broke down production into its component parts, assigned a specific function on the assembly line to each worker, and kept to themselves the knowledge of the productive process as a whole. In order to administer this knowledge, they created a vastly enlarged managerial apparatus, an army of engineers, technicians, personnel managers, and industrial psychologists drawn from the same pool of technical experts that simultaneously staffed the "helping professions." Knowledge became an industry in its own right, while the worker, deprived of the craft knowledge by which he had retained practical control of production even after the introduction of the factory system, sank into passive dependence. Eventually, industry organized management itself along industrial lines, splitting up the production of knowledge into routinized operations carried on by semiskilled clerical labor: secretaries, typists, computer card punchers, and other lackeys. The socialization of production – under the control of private industry – proletarianized the labor force in the same way that the socialization of reproduction proletarianized parenthood, by making parents unable to provide for their own needs without the supervision of trained experts.

How does industrialization produce a culture of narcissism? Lasch argued that the evolution of capitalism has affected family structure and the socialization of children in a number of ways. In reorganizing the production process, it has removed the father from the child's everyday experience and deprived him of the skills that formerly evoked the child's emulation and gratitude. This means that the child's archaic, punitive fantasies about the father persist unchecked. In encouraging geographic mobility, it has uprooted families from kin communities and replaced intergenerationally transmitted folk wisdom about child rearing with social-scientific expertise dispensed by professionals. This undermines parental confidence and replaces face-to-face authority over the child with the impersonal, bureaucratic authority of schools, courts, social-welfare agencies, and psychiatrists. In promoting mass consumption, advertisers (like social-science professionals) have convinced parents that their children are entitled to the best of everything but that, without expert assistance, parents are helpless to determine what that might be. In generating a mass culture glutted with rapidly obsolescing commodities and transient images, it blurs the distinction between reality and illusion and renders the world of objects unstable and bewildering. This makes it difficult for the child to locate "transitional objects" that would help it find its way from infantile attachments into the external world of culture and work. And in promising an endless supply of technological marvels, it evokes grandiose fantasies of absolute self-sufficiency and unlimited mastery of the environment, even while the quasi-magical force that conjures up those marvels – i.e., science – becomes ever more remote from the comprehension or control of ordinary citizens. This is a recipe for regression to psychic infancy: fantasies of omnipotence alternating with terrified helplessness.

One of the prime tenets of psychoanalysis is that pathology and normality are not sharply demarcated but continuous. So these secular

developments – the sundering of love and discipline in the child's experience, the invasion of family life and work life by professional and corporate elites, the blurring of distinctions by mass culture – not only produce more narcissistic individuals than formerly, but also create a new psychic environment. A world populated by rigid selves is a world of sublimation and its derivatives: aggression, greed, cruelty, hypocrisy, unquestioning adherence to inherited values and restraints. A world of weak selves is more fluid, corruptible, blandly manipulative, sexually easygoing, uncomfortable with anger and rivalry, and leery of defining constraints, whether in the form of traditional values or future commitments. The distinction between the early capitalist self and the late capitalist self is, roughly, the distinction between Prometheus and Narcissus, the Puritan and the swinger, the entrepreneur and the corporate gamesman, the imperial self and the minimal self. That these distinctions bespeak profound change is obvious; that they represent progress, less so.

For Lasch, then, modernization was not the solution but a new form of the problem – the problem, that is, of domination. This belief was the source of his longstanding quarrel with his fellow socialists and feminists. Much, perhaps most, of the left has always been convinced that industrialization, technological development, and the erosion of traditional forms of authority are intrinsically progressive. Modernization has had its costs, admittedly, but the answer to the problems of modernity was usually held to be more of the same, preferably under democratic auspices. In socialism's glorious youth, Marx called for "a ruthless criticism of everything existing"; few of his successors doubted that the decline of Christianity, patriarchy, possessive individualism, and everything else existing would be followed directly by something better. But, Lasch argued, these things have by and large declined; the result is not a radical extension of political and sexual autonomy but rather a bureaucratically mediated war of all against all.

Lasch's most intimate and intense disagreements were with cultural radicals: critics of education, sports, religion, sexuality, the family, and the work ethic, and proponents of a new, "liberated" ideal of expressiveness and self-realization. What these radicals ignore, Lasch charged, is that Christianity, competitive individualism, and the patriarchal family are already obsolescent, at least in those social strata where modernization is most advanced. These values and institutions have been undermined not by leftist opposition but by capitalists themselves, for their own purposes: to promote mass consumption and to regiment the work process. By espousing an ideal of personal liberation largely confined to leisure time and heavily dependent on the consumption of goods and services, cultural radicals have conceded defeat. Instead of adapting to industrialization and mass culture, Lasch contended, the left should oppose them. Only a change to human scale – to local, decentralized control in workplaces,

communities, and families – can halt the spread of commodity relations and the bureaucratization of the self.

But what, if anything, can motivate so drastic a reversal of the direction of modern history? The True and Only Heaven (1991), Lasch's *chef d'oeuvre*, addressed this question. In that book Lasch opposed the philosophy of "progress" to the tradition of "virtue," a universalistic moral psychology to a particularistic one, the "ethos of abundance" to the "ethos of the producer." Progressive ideology, he argued, rests on a misunderstanding of history and human nature. According to progressivism, capitalist development created an increasingly educated, militant, unified working class, whose challenge to wage labor and private ownership of the economy became more and more radical. The Russian Revolution derailed this socialist dynamic, which is currently in historical limbo. But whatever radical opposition to capitalism there's been has come from industrial workers, together with a few professionals and intellectuals, and has been oriented to the future, seeking the fulfillment of capitalism's stunted potential by new, non-capitalist institutions.

Wrong, Lasch countered. The working class and its socialist or social democratic leaders have fought hard, but never over fundamentals. The only challenge to capitalism per se – to wage labor, the factory system, and the concentration of credit – has come from movements of independent small producers threatened with extinction: farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, and others usually disparaged by socialists as politically naive or reactionary "populists." Socialist struggles were about wages and working hours; only the "reactionary" populists, rooted in a vanishing way of life, raised questions about self-management, the effect of work on the worker, or the control of investment.

Much recent historical scholarship supports this claim of Lasch's, along with another: that the political philosophy of the American Revolution was not Lockean liberalism or "possessive individualism," i.e., an ideological precursor of liberal capitalism, but an older, "republican" philosophy of civic virtue. The Revolution was less about property rights than about citizenship. And once again, it was small producers and proprietors who were the main bearers of this ideology and the source of the most effective and radical opposition.

These historical reinterpretations led on toward a deeper moral and psychological revisionism. The ideology of progress assumes that maturation involves moving away from narrow and particular affections toward abstract and universal ones. Family, ethnic, regional, and religious loyalties are something we're supposed to grow out of, or at least subsume in a wider sympathy. When such loyalties are exclusive, we call them "chauvinistic" or "fanatical"; and we usually assume that the more intense one of these particularistic commitments is, the more likely it is to be dangerously exclusive.

For Lasch, this devaluation of the local and traditional was a radical error. It is not enlightenment but memory, not breadth of sympathy but intensity of identification, that makes for inner strength. What does it mean, he asked, that the democratic movement of the eighteenth century and the anti-capitalist movement of the nineteenth, like the civil rights movement of the 1960s, were wrought not by the "universal class" of socialist theory, not by enlightened rationalists liberated from local attachments and beliefs, but by people very much committed to such attachments and beliefs, people loyal to the "archaic" creeds, crafts, and communities under attack from the forces of "progress"? Not, that is, by people looking toward the future but by people looking toward the past?

It means, he answered, that "the victory of the Enlightenment," with its unwillingness to accept limits on human aspiration and its promise that in a rational society the traditional virtues would be obsolete, "has almost eradicated the capacity for ardor, devotion, and joyous action." On moral even more than environmental grounds, "the basic premise of progressive thought – the assumption that economic abundance comes before everything else, which leads unavoidably to an acceptance of centralized production and administration as the only way to achieve it – needs to be rejected.

> Popular initiative ... has been declining for some time – in part because the democratization of consumption is an insufficiently demanding ideal, which fails to call up the moral energy necessary to sustain popular movements in the face of adversity. The history of popular movements ... shows that only an arduous, even a tragic understanding of life can justify the sacrifices imposed on those who seek to challenge the status quo.

This "tragic understanding of life," emphasizing a sense of limits, natural piety, self-discipline, self-reliance, and self-sacrifice, Lasch found in the Greek and Roman classics; in the Judaeo-Christian prophetic tradition; in early modern Protestant theology; in the thought of Carlyle, Emerson, Brownson, William James, Sorel, Niebuhr, and others; in eighteenth-century republicanism, nineteenth-century populism, and the Southern black culture from which Martin Luther King emerged. It is the ethos of the artisan, the small proprietor, the yeoman farmer; of civic virtue, civic equality, and a broad diffusion of wealth, culture, and competence. This is the "moral economy" – the character, worldview, and social relations – that mass production and political centralization have decisively undermined.

To this imposing edifice of argument, *The Revolt of the Elites* adds numerous elegant flourishes, though no new structural features. Lasch's death last year at 61 was, in the obvious sense, sadly premature; in another

sense, this posthumous collection nicely rounds off his oeuvre. Forcefully written, erudite, and topical, it achieves a public voice; while those who have followed Lasch's long and complex intellectual development will be glad of a few more clues to what, in the end, his thought comes to politically.

The title essay and its companion, "Opportunity in the Promised Land," are a critique of two pillars of progressive ideology: meritocracy and social mobility. Though frequently considered essential features of a democratic society, they are best understood, Lasch argues, as an efficient method of elite recruitment and legitimation. Meritocratic elites, he points out, are in some ways even less publicly accountable than hereditary ones. The latter usually had local roots and loyalties, and their caste ideology emphasized civic responsibility and *noblesse oblige*. Even more important, their superiority was obviously, savingly arbitrary. They were therefore far less prone to the pernicious delusion – which Lasch, drawing on the work of Robert Reich and Mickey Kaus, shows is alarmingly prevalent among the newer managerial/cognitive elites – that they deserved their relative immunity from social ills.

A high degree of upward mobility is in fact quite compatible with sharp social stratification. Nor does it have much historical connection with democracy in the United States. That anyone with enough energy, talent, cunning, and ambition could become President, or become rich, or otherwise escape the common lot is not at all what most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans meant by democracy. What "defined a democratic society, as Americans saw it, [was] not the chance to rise in the social scale so much as the complete absence of a scale that clearly distinguished commoners from gentlemen." The egalitarianism that so profoundly impressed generations of European visitors derived "not merely from the distribution of wealth or economic opportunity but, above all, from the distribution of intelligence and competence."

> Citizenship appeared to have given even the humbler members of society access to the knowledge and cultivation elsewhere reserved for the privileged classes. Opportunity, as many Americans understood it, was a matter more of intellectual than of material enrichment. It was their restless curiosity, their skeptical and iconoclastic turn of mind, their resourcefulness and self-reliance, their capacity for invention and improvisation that most dramatically seemed to differentiate the laboring classes in America from their European counterparts.

Readers who are not professional historians may wonder whether this is an idealized portrait, though enough evidence is included in *The True and*

Only Heaven and *The Revolt of the Elites* to place the burden of proof on those who would reject it. If it is even approximately accurate, it argues powerfully for Lasch's contention that we can aim either at maximum economic efficiency (conventionally defined) or robust democracy, but not at both.

Lasch's dissatisfaction with present-day political culture is intense and comprehensive. It extends to the supplanting of neighborhoods by networks and "lifestyle enclaves"; of public parks, cafes, taverns, general stores, community centers, and other informal gathering places that "promote general conversation across class lines" by shopping malls, health clubs, and fast-food chains; of schooling based on patriotic myths and stories of heroic virtue by a sanitized, ideologically innocuous curriculum "so bland that it puts children to sleep instead of awakening feelings of awe and wonder"; of the torchlight parades and oratorical eloquence, the impassioned debates before vast audiences, the scrappy, partisan newspapers and high voter turnout associated with nineteenth-century politics by the apathy and gullibility of the contemporary electorate and the intellectual and moral poverty of contemporary political speech. Of course, lots of people complain about such things. But without a plausible account of their origins, that sort of complaint merely exasperates and demoralizes. It is just because Lasch convincingly connects these phenomena with the rationalizing imperatives of the market and the state that, even though the latter seem all but irresistible, his criticism energizes.

Lots of people talk about "virtue," too. The preaching of virtue to the poor and beleaguered by such court philosophers as William Bennett, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and George Will has unfortunately done much to discredit the word among the friends of equality. Lasch's conception strikes a better balance than theirs between self-denial and self-assertion. It includes an emphatic lack of deference toward wealth, office, and professional credentials; contempt for luxury and greed; a strong preference for economic independence and for face-to-face relations in business and government; a sense of place; a lively curiosity about science, art, and philosophy; and perhaps most of all, a passion for vigorous debate and splendid rhetoric. A lot more, in short, than diligence and chastity, which seems to be mainly what the neoconservatives have in mind. Lasch's notion of virtue is strenuous and classical; his ideal of a democratic society is, in a magnificent phrase of Carlyle's that he quoted often, "a whole world of heroes."

A whole world of heroes – this ideal has at least two radical implications. The first is that democracy requires a rough equality of condition. Dignity and virtue cannot survive indefinitely amid extremes of wealth and poverty; only someone with a paltry conception of virtue could believe otherwise. The second is that the democratic character can only

flourish in a society constructed to human scale. Just as modern war has made military valor more or less superfluous, a world dominated by large corporations and bureaucracies offers little scope for the exercise of civic virtue; nor even, in the long run, for psychic autonomy and integrity – i.e., for selfhood, as we currently understand it.

It may very well be, as Lasch recognized, that these and other prerequisites of full, rather than merely formal, democracy cannot be reestablished. The "assertion of social control" that Lasch identified as the thrust of modern history may not be reversible. It certainly will not be reversed unless more people begin to think as passionately, rigorously, and imaginatively about democracy as Christopher Lasch – and very few others in our time – have done.

A Fool for Love

D. H. Lawrence was born around a hundred years ago, in September 1885. When he died in 1930, E. M. Forster, protesting the generally obtuse and malicious obituary notices, wrote that he was "the greatest imaginative novelist of his generation" – a generation that included Proust, Joyce, Kafka, and Mann. Not many critics nowadays would go that far; still, Lawrence's standing as a major novelist seems secure.

The opposite is true of his reputation as a thinker. Lawrence wrote a great deal about politics, psychology, sexuality, and religion (most of it collected in the two volumes of *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers*). Insofar as his ideas on these subjects have been considered at all, it has usually been as a shadowy backdrop to the fiction, no more intrinsically significant than, say, T. S. Eliot's royalism. Lawrence's portraits of birds, beasts, and flowers, of rural life, of the growth of individual consciousness, and of the relations between modern men and women – these are widely acclaimed. But his ideas are just an embarrassment. Bertrand Russell wrote that Lawrence had "developed the whole philosophy of fascism before the politicians had thought of it." Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* labeled him "the most talented and fervid" of "counterrevolutionary sexual politicians." According to Philip Rahv, "in the political sphere … he was a fantast, pure and simple." Susan Sontag dismissed his notions about sexuality as "reactionary" and "marred by class romanticism." And so it goes: praise for Lawrence the artist, but for Lawrence the prophet, contempt or, at best, tactful neglect.

Every critical consensus contains a measure of truth. Lawrence said a great many foolish things, and there is no point in glossing over them. But there is not much point, either, at this late date, in dwelling on them – as though his ideas have, or ever had, some sort of influence or prestige that urgently needs to be countered. Like Nietzsche, whom he resembles in astonishingly many ways, Lawrence tried to diagnose and oppose an entire civilization, his and ours. He was defeated, even routed. But the attempt deserves more sympathetic attention than it has received. Karl Jaspers lauded Kierkegaard and Nietzsche for having "dared to be shipwrecked": "They are so to speak, representative destinies, sacrifices whose way out of the world leads to experiences for others. … Through them we have intimations of something we could never have perceived without such sacrifices, of something that seems essential, which even today we cannot adequately grasp." To many who are ambivalent about modernity, Lawrence also revealed something "we cannot adequately grasp" that nonetheless "seems essential"; and if he often made a fool of himself in the process, it was an indispensable, even a heroic, folly.

Lawrence's starting point was the same problem that had confronted Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: nihilism, or the "death of God." The modern age, beginning with the Enlightenment, had seemed to promise a complete liberation from traditional dogmas. Previously unquestioned loyalties – religious, political, racial, familial – were eroded by the spread of philosophical materialism and ethical individualism. But since then (to put the intellectual history of the last two hundred years into a single sentence) a question has gradually dawned in those countries where modernity has taken root: If the beliefs that formerly made life seems worth living -- beliefs about God, political authority, racial uniqueness, and sexual destiny – if these are seen to be illusions, then what *does* make life worth living?

The question is dramatized memorably in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. The young Mill fell into an intense depression because he had no sustaining illusions – or, as he put it, because "the habit of analysis tends to wear away the feelings." It is hard to think of two thinkers more different than Mill and Lawrence, yet this pithy and poignant phrase of Mill's exactly expresses Lawrence's sense of the modern predicament. Like so many nineteenth-century thinkers, Mill had discovered that criticism could liberate but not motivate. There were plenty of traditional dogmas left to criticize in his time, so he kept at criticism and made an honorable career of it. But things were different for Lawrence.

It may be difficult nowadays to appreciate just how enlightened early twentieth-century England was, at least compared with late-twentieth-century America. "Bloomsbury" is now a byword for ultra-sophistication; but it's also true that intellectual and moral emancipation were far more widely diffused – the prosperity and stability of Victorian had produced an extraordinary cultural flowering. As regards anything that deserves to be called liberation, Ursula Brangwen, Lawrence's most notable heroine, was miles ahead of most contemporary feminists; and the same relation holds between her counterpart, Rupert Birkin, and the vaunted New Male. Both are, like most of Lawrence's protagonists, like Lawrence himself, aiming neither to defy traditional values nor to resurrect them, but rather to imagine a way of life that takes their disappearance for granted.

So much has been written about Lawrence's "neo-primitivism" and "nostalgia" that it seems worth stressing how far in advance he was of most present-day progressives, at least in one respect. He saw all the way to the end of modern emancipation; and though he sometimes cursed it, he never expected, or even hoped, that we could avoid it. All he wanted was that we survive it. One of his most striking statements about the modern dilemma occurs in the unpublished prologue to *Women in Love*:

> But if there be no great philosophic idea, if, for the time being, mankind, instead of going through a period of growth, is going through a corresponding process of

> decay and decomposition from some old, fulfilled, obsolete idea, then what is the good of educating? Decay and decomposition will take their own way. It is impossible to educate for this end, impossible to teach the world how to die away from its achieved, nullified form. The autumn must take place in every individual soul, as well as in all the people, all must die, individually and socially. But education is a process of striving to a new, unanimous being, a whole organic form. But when winter has set in, when the frosts are strangling the leaves off the trees and the birds are silent knots of darkness, how can there be a unanimous movement towards a whole summer of fluorescence? There can be none of this, only submission to the death of this nature, in the winter that has come upon mankind, and a cherishing of the unknown that is unknown for many a day yet, buds that may not open till a far off season comes, when the season of death has passed away.
>
> And Birkin was just coming to a knowledge of the essential futility of all attempt at social unanimity in constructiveness. In the winter, there can only be unanimity of disintegration …

This is only a vast and vague intuition, not a fully worked-out philosophy of history. Clearly, though, it is not a lament for the old order or a call to reconstruct it. And whatever the coming "unknown" may turn out to be, the "old, fulfilled, obsolete idea" that we must, according to Lawrence, "die away" from certainly includes political and sexual subjection.

It also, however, includes – and here is the source of Lawrence's doubtful contemporary reputation – their negation: political and sexual equality, mechanically defined. Lawrence criticized equality as an ideal. But not because he wanted property and power to be distributed unequally. He wanted them abolished or, better, outgrown. For capitalist and patriarchal ideology he had only contempt. For socialist and feminist ideology he had instead fraternal impatience, precisely because they seemed to have no higher end in view than more property and power for their constituencies. The undeniable justice of this demand did not, he believed, make it any less a dead end.

Lawrence's poems and essays are full of furious invective against the dominion of money. "The whole great form of our era will have to go," he declared; and he left no doubt that this meant, among other things, private ownership of the means of production. Yet he could also write: "I know

that we had all better hang ourselves at once, than enter on a struggle which shall be a fight for the ownership or non-ownership of property, pure and simple, and nothing more." He meant that a new form of ownership is not necessarily a new form of life, and that to live and work in a mass is the death of individuality, even if the mass is well fed. Although Lawrence has been condemned as an authoritarian for saying such things, I think they are just about what William Blake or William Morris would have said (perhaps a touch less stridently) if confronted with twentieth-century social democracy.

The case of feminism is more complicated. Lawrence wrote some staggeringly wrongheaded things on this subject, and some wise things. I suspect that when he contemplated the sexual future, he saw Bloomsbury writ large – which meant, to him, the triumph of androgyny as an ideal. That was deepest anathema, for though Lawrence's lifework is a landmark in the demystification of sex, it is also a monument to the mystery of sex, which must disappear, he thought, from an androgynous world. Rilke – whom no one has ever been foolish enough to label a counterrevolutionary sexual politician – included in his *Letters to a Young Poet* several stirring passages on sexual equality but also this cautionary comment: "The girl and the woman, in their new, their own unfolding, will but in passing be imitators of masculine ways, good and bad, and repeaters of masculine professions. After the uncertainty of such transitions it will become apparent that women were only going through the profusion and the vicissitude of those (often ridiculous) disguises in order to cleanse their own most characteristic nature of the distorting influences of the other sex." Lawrence devoted much passionate writing to elaborating kindred insights. They are complex insights, and cost him a great many trials and some appalling errors. But it was a post-revolutionary, not a pre-revolutionary, world that Lawrence, like Rilke, was trying to envisage.

Just what sort of world Lawrence had in mind is difficult to know. He was a prophet without a program, not only because he died too soon but also because it's hard to be explicit about primal realities. He believed that the universe and the individual soul were pulsing with mysteries, from which men and women were perennially distracted by want or greed or dogma. Income redistribution and affirmative action were necessary preliminaries, to clear away the distractions; but if they became ends in themselves, then the last state of humankind would be worse than the first. He thought that beauty, graceful physical movement, unselfconscious emotional directness, and a sense, even an inarticulate sense, of connection to the cosmos, however defined – to the sun, to the wilderness, to the rhythms of a craft or the rites of a tribe – were organic necessities of a sane human life. He thought that reason was not something fundamental to human identity but rather a phenomenon of the surface: "I conceive a man's body as a kind of flame … and the intellect is just the light that is

shed on the things around." He thought that every free spirit revered someone or something braver or finer than itself, and that this spontaneous reverence was the basis of any viable social order. "Man has little needs and deeper needs," he wrote; and he complained that the workers' and women's movements of his time spoke chiefly to our little needs and could therefore lead only to universal mediocrity and frustration.

Lawrence did not despise socialism or feminism, but he despaired of them. It is this despair that accounts for his frequent, complementary excesses of bitterness and sentimentality. He had so few comrades, and such urgent intimations of catastrophe. "We have fallen into the mistake of living from our little needs till we have almost lost our deeper needs in a sort of madness." Whether or not you accept Lawrence's conception of our deeper needs, it is hard to deny the madness. "A wave of generosity or a wave of death," he prophesied, shortly before his own death. We know which came to pass.

Like all the other great diagnosticians of nihilism, Lawrence recognized that though the irrational cannot survive, the rational does not suffice. We live, he taught, by mysterious influxes of spirit, of what Blake called "Energy." Irrationalists make superstitions out of these mysteries, rationalists make systems, each in a futile, anxious attempt at mastery. Lawrence wanted us to submit: to give up the characteristic modern forms – possessive individualism, technological messianism, political and sexual *ressentiment* – of humankind's chronic pretense at mastery. But since that sort of submission is more delicate and difficult than self-assertion, he mainly succeeded in provoking misunderstanding or abuse.

Perhaps only other inspired fools can take his measure. In *The Prisoner of Sex*, Norman Mailer paid Lawrence this exquisite and definitive tribute: "What he was asking for had been too hard for him, it is more than hard for us; his life was, yes, a torture, and we draw back in fear, for we would not know how to try to burn by such a light."

MESSAGE FROM ROOM 101

After reading George Orwell's *1984* in high school, I would sometimes wonder what was in Room 101. For each person, remember, it was whatever unhinged you, whatever you shuddered at most uncontrollably. "Everyone knows what is in Room 101," Winston Smith is told. "It is the worst thing in the world."

I was a fairly squeamish adolescent, so a good many possibilities suggested themselves, most of them with more than four legs. But I was also devoutly religious, and the hope of Heaven was of infinite comfort, limiting the horror of even the most lurid death. Now I no longer have that faith or that hope, and the question about Room 101 again seems a live one. I think I know the answer. The pain of a severe clinical depression is the worst thing in the world. To escape it, I would do anything. Like Winston, I would – at least I might – wish it on those I love, however dearly. But that's not feasible. The only way to escape it is to inflict my death on them. That is a grievous prospect, and I hope avoidable. But I know that those who do not avoid it cannot help themselves, any more than Winston could help betraying Julia.

Why? What is so unbearable about *this* pain? The primary sources are William Styron's *Darkness Visible*, Kay Jameson's *Unquiet Mind*, the "New York" section of Kate Millett's *The Loony-Bin Trip*, and the chapter on "The Sick Soul" in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Others will someday improve on these accounts; I cannot. The most useful formulation is James's. Depression is "a positive and active anguish, a form of psychical neuralgia wholly unknown to normal life." Every word tells. "Positive and active": acute depression does not feel like falling ill, it feels like being tortured. "Psychical neuralgia": the pain is not localized; it runs along every nerve, an unconsuming fire. In an agitated depression, like mine, it burns fiercely in the solar plexus and flares elsewhere, fueled by obsessive fears, regrets, self-loathing. "Unknown to normal life": because it feels unlimited in both intensity and duration, it really is like no other pain. Even though one knows better, one cannot believe that it will ever end, or that anyone else has ever felt anything like it.

Confidence that an acute episode will last only a week, a month, even a year, would change everything. It would still be a ghastly ordeal, but the worst thing about it – the incessant yearning for death, the compulsion toward suicide – would drop away. But no, a limited depression, a depression with hope, is a contradiction. The experience of convulsive pain, along with the conviction that it will never end except in death – that is the definition of a severe depression. O'Brien tells Winston that the latter's dream of proletarian deliverance is a delusion, that his image of the future should instead be "a boot stamping on a human face – forever." The

depressive's image of the future is "me, writhing in agony – forever." Flesh on an electrified grid; a dentist's drill tearing at an exposed nerve; a raging migraine; an implacable metastasis. But never ending.

How does this nightmare happen? Through an unlucky ratio of stress to strength, circumstance to constitution. The weaker one's nerves, the less it takes to inflame them. The more fragile one's neurochemical equilibria, the less it takes to disrupt them. How much you feel the daily slings and arrows depends on how thick your skin is.

Nature cuts most of us plenty of slack. "Most people," as Styron observes, "quietly endure the equivalent of injuries, declining careers, nasty book reviews, family illnesses. A vast majority of the survivors of Auschwitz have borne up fairly well. Bloody and bowed by the outrages of life, most human beings still stagger on down the road, unscathed by real depression." We are all issued neurological shock absorbers, usually good for a lifetime of emotional wear and tear. But if you're equipped with a flimsy one, or travel an especially rough road, the ride becomes very uncomfortable.

My shock absorber seems to be exceptionally flimsy. Both my parents were depressive: constantly worried, easily discouraged, with little capacity for enjoyment and no appetite for change. Except for a brief trip over the border of the next state to visit relatives, neither of them ever travelled more than fifty miles from where they were born. They were children during the Great Depression of the 30s, so during the Great Boom of the 50s and 60s and the Great Bubble of the 80s and 90s, they left their money – not that there was much of it; they were working-class people, conscientious but uneducated and unambitious – under the mattress or rolled up in the hollow legs of metal chairs. "Chronic severe dysthymia in a severely obsessional character" is my diagnosis and would have been theirs. It simply means "born to suffer."

Still, even with worn-out shock absorbers, life in a rich country is, at least some of the time, like a ride on a freshly paved road. Thanks to undemanding day jobs and a trickle of freelance income, I've lived through the worst without institutionalization or destitution. So far. But old age looks grim. Chronic depression is very hard on lifetime earnings; and like many other people's, my retirement account is in trauma. In youth and middle age, one is supposed to store up material and psychic comfort against the years of decline. We all try to, but few people, healthy or ill, can fall back on resources like Styron's, Jameson's, or Millett's. Certainly, all three deserve their eminence, their affluence, their sympathetic friends and supportive families, their happy memories. All, as their accounts make clear, would have died without those things. There is no doubt that good fortune is the best antidepressant.

But what about the undistinguished, unloved, low-income depressed? We must suffer, and why shouldn't we? Life is unfair, after all. No talent,

no distinction; no charms, no love. Reasonable enough: how else could admiration and affection, and the comforts they entail, possibly be distributed? Even to save a depressed person's life, you cannot admire or love him at will.

Money is different, though. It is simply a claim on whatever is for sale. There is no natural way to apportion it. Perfect markets don't, cannot, and should not exist. How we produce and distribute is a political question – economics is politics all the way down. Whether our current drastic inequality is fairer and more productive than our former moderate inequality depends entirely on what we're aiming to produce – and become.

People fall ill emotionally for any number of reasons, of course. As Robert Lowell remarked, if we all had a little button on our forearm that we could press for a painless and instantaneous death, very few of us would reach old age. In some cases of severe depression, like mine, financial insecurity is central; in others, less so or not at all. There is always some way to help, and though nearly every way costs money, some would cost very little. Exercise, for example, is highly therapeutic for depression, but it is just what you cannot force yourself to do. Young people doing a year of national service could drag severely depressed people out for a vigorous walk each day, or do an hour of yoga with them. Or call them a few times a day to remind them to drink water – depressed persons nearly always dehydrate. Or drive them to a therapist – climbing the Himalayas is easier in some states of mind than getting out the front door is in others. The quantity of suffering diminished per dollar expended in these ways would be impressive.

Or you could give them money. As I slid into my most recent episode, wrung by money worries, I saw an article by Robert Reich in *The American Prospect*. He proposed exempting the first $20000 of income from the payroll tax, the most regressive of all taxes. This would save 130 million American households an average of $5000 per year. You could pay for this fully, he pointed out, by retaining the estate tax, the most progressive of all taxes, which affects only 2% of American households. Five thousand dollars a year would save a lot of ordinary people a lot of grief, and incidentally fix the economy. And it might save some lives.

Suicide, Camus wrote, is the sole philosophical problem. Perhaps; but it is also, from the depressive's point of view, a political problem. The official figure for suicides in the United States is 30,000, generally thought to be an understatement. Call it 40,000. I've read that two-thirds of these were severely depressed – say 25,000. Ten to fifteen percent of severely depressed people, it seems to be agreed, will eventually kill themselves. So – very, very approximately – each year 250,000 of your fellow citizens, one in twelve hundred Americans, will be at risk of death from the protracted indescribable pain of severe depression.

Reich's article mentions that half of the estate tax, or around $350 billion, is paid by only 3300 families. That's roughly one in 40,000 American households. If that money were simply handed over to the severely depressed, they would receive $1 million each. That would definitely save my life, and doubtless quite a few others.

In the same issue of the same magazine, another writer cites now commonplace figures on President Bush's income tax cut: $1.5 trillion over ten years, forty percent of it, or $600 billion, going to the richest one percent of taxpayers. Six hundred billion dollars over ten years works out to a little more than $200,000 for each suicidally depressed person. Once again, many lives saved, much extreme anguish averted or diminished.

Also around this time, the philosopher John Rawls died. Everything is grist for one's obsessions, it's true; but the connection with Rawls is not really so far-fetched. Standing behind Rawls's famous veil of ignorance, you face a choice. You can accept one chance in 1200 of being locked screaming in Room 101 and, at the same time, one chance in 40,000 of leaving a huge estate tax-free. Or you can escape Room 101, and perhaps help many others to escape it, by giving up a miniscule chance of leaving your heirs not colossal riches (that would still be permitted) but super-colossal riches. Rawls would have thought the right choice obvious, and I suspect most Americans would agree with him, even if Congress didn't.

Admittedly, there are other, perhaps worthier candidates for relief. Severe depression almost always ends, usually non-fatally. For many other people – a billion or so – illiteracy, malnutrition, diarrhea, infection, and other conditions far more easily preventable or curable than depression do not end. Even if these people's nerves are not on fire, Rawls might have judged theirs the more pressing claim. I think I could accept that judgment, even if for me it meant … Room 101.

Why, you may be wondering, was this long whine ever written down? It's not a memoir, not an argument – what is it anyway? The first draft – very much shorter and even more purple – was a suicide note, to be left behind on the riverbank or rooftop or night table. Emotional blackmail in a good cause, I told myself; though perhaps it was only spite, the feeble revenge of the ill on the well. In any case, I dithered. Like many other acutely depressed people I was, fortunately, too exhausted and disorganized to plan a suicide, much less compose an eloquent rebuke to an uncaring world. And then, very slowly, the fire died down. My viscera gradually unknotted, my energy seeped back, speech became less effortful, the world regained three dimensions. Blessedly, miraculously, everyday unhappiness returned.

Then why persist with the fantasied blackmail? Why risk bathos rather than keep a stoical and dignified silence? This was my third devastating depression, and probably not my last. I hope and intend to survive the coming ones, but already it seems urgent to try to salvage

something from these ordeals. The conjunction of my pecuniary panic with a large-scale transfer of our national wealth to the already rich seemed to make an occasion. The vast popularity of depression memoirs and manuals in recent years suggests that there must be tens or hundreds of thousands of others whose sufferings, as intense as mine, would also have been lessened by crumbs of that wealth. And behind them, endless legions of the merely miserable. Perhaps they would want someone to say all this, however ineptly and futilely. If so, I won't have come back from hell empty-handed.

George Scialabba was born and raised in Boston and attended Harvard College (Class of 1969) and, briefly, graduate school at Columbia University. He has been a social worker for the Massachusetts Department of Public Welfare and an assistant building superintendent at Harvard University. He contributes book reviews regularly to the Boston Globe, the Washington Post, the Nation, the Boston Review, and other publications. This is his first book.

Arrowsmith is named after the late William Arrowsmith, a renowned classics scholar, literary and fi lm critic. General editor of thirty-three volumes of The Greek Tragedy in New Translation, he was also a brilliant translator of Eugenio Montale, Cesare Pavese, and others. Arrowsmith, who taught for years in Boston University's University Professors Program, championed not only the classics and the fi nest in contemporary literature, he was also passionate about the importance of recognizing the translator's role in bringing the original work to life in a new language.

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